

Dinner with Richard Crashaw, Metaphysical Poet

What I propose for our Crashaw discussion today is a feast. The main course naturally will be Crashaw's poem "The Flaming Heart," written in honor of St. Teresa—though there will be appetizers and dessert as well. "The Flaming Heart" is savory cuisine, not only for understanding what Crashaw was doing with his poetry, but what Crashaw *thought* he was doing with his poetry, and even what T. S. Eliot thought Crashaw was doing with his poetry (T. S. Eliot being one of the more formidable literary persons to comment on the subject). And since these three questions also happen to be what I want to ruminate on during our discussion, I think that serving up several lines from "The Flaming Heart" will give us abundant food for thought, even for those of us with more than two stomachs.

Before the main course, however, we must have appetizers. Not all of Crashaw's poems stand four inches high and eight wide on the plate. Some are hardly bigger than popcorn shrimp, and if we are not already keen for the feast ahead, they will certainly help with priming our digestive systems. The handful of shrimp that we find on our plates turns out to be a series of short reflections on the life of Christ, as we can tell by the titles:

On the Water of Our Lord's Baptism

Each blest drop, on each blest limb,
Is washed itself in washing him:
'Tis a gem while it stays here,
While it falls hence 'tis a tear.

Matthew 27: And He Answered Them Nothing

Oh mighty *Nothing!* Unto thee,
Nothing, we owe all things that be.
God spake once when he all things made,
He saved all when he *Nothing* said.
The world was made of *Nothing* then;
'Tis made by *Nothing* now again.

"I Am the Door"

And now thou art set wide ope, the spear's sad art,
Lo! Hath unlockt thee at the very Heart:
He to himself (I fear the worst)
And his own hope
Hath *shut* these doors of Heaven, that durst
Thus set them *ope*.

The first piece of shrimp in this handful is probably the simplest to digest. The breaks in the lines correspond evenly with the breaks in the thought (as opposed to "I Am the Door," where one thought twists through several lines without regard for either the breaks or punctuation). The meaning of the first poem is also fairly easy to work out, although it contains a curious reversal of our expectations. The opening lines about the water *being* washed is exactly backwards of how we usually look at baptism. We expect the water to be the thing that "washes" the person being baptized, whether literally or metaphorically; but here it is the baptized Person who washes the water. We suspect that Crashaw has chosen this striking reversal of our expectations on purpose to

make us notice the “blest-ness” of Christ’s person in a way that we would not have noticed it if he just said, “The blessed Christ was baptized.”

The second poem about “Nothing” also surprises us with a curious reversal, although the logic behind it is more difficult to work out. For one thing, Crashaw uses “nothing” positively, as if the Nothing were a being with a specific existence. He then employs his reversal tactic and credits Nothing with the existence of everything. He is, of course, playing with Genesis 1. In Genesis 1 God says something and creates the world “out of nothing.” In contrast to this, Crashaw says that Christ remakes the world “by Nothing”—that is, by *not* saying something during his trial. Instead of creating by the agency of a word, He now creates by the agency of the lack of a word. Crashaw thus reverses our usual perception of Christ’s silence in much the same way as he reversed our perception about the baptism.

We notice another similar reversal tactic in our last little piece of popcorn shrimp, though it is a little harder to chew on account of the tangled sentence structure. A number of odd things stand out to us about the poem. First, of course, is the image of the “door” in the title. The first line tells us that the door “has been set wide ope(n).” What door, we wonder? A few further lines tell us that this door has been unlocked by means of a spear. Now we begin to suspect that “the door” is a rather unusual image describing Christ’s physical side, where the Roman centurion pierced Him. However, just as soon as we get comfortable with this notion, Crashaw surprises us again: “the door” is not just Christ’s side, but the door to Heaven itself. The door to Heaven was “set wide ope(n),” of course, by the death of Christ. With some thought, we decide that Crashaw means that the spear “opened up” Christ in grotesquely literal sense, while Christ’s death “opened” the doors of Heaven in a spiritual sense. The double meaning of “opening,” however, provides Crashaw with yet another opportunity to reverse our expectations *again*. The spear-bearer who “opens” Christ (and thus the doors of Heaven) in fact “closes” those doors to himself (i.e., is damned for piercing Christ’s side). With this ironic and concise observation, Crashaw ends the poem.

Now that we have eaten our shrimp and are sitting back in our chairs as the waiter clears off the plates, we have some time to think about what we have digested up to this point. Crashaw clearly likes to use irony, the technical term for his reversal of our expectations. He likes to look at things “backwards” and enjoy the unusual effect. He also seems to like complicated grammar and a complicated sort of logic, as we noticed with our last two pieces of shrimp. And in the last poem, he managed to associate two things that we usually do not think of having much to do with each other—Christ’s side and an open door. (The image, the more we think about it, is more and more troublesome. How exactly is a spear piercing the skin like a key opening a door? Doors usually have keyholes and hinges... where were the keyholes and hinges in Christ’s side? As we wipe our mouths and take a quick sip of water, we wonder if Crashaw did not intend us to ask quite *these* questions.)

While we are still in the midst of our ruminations about the shrimp, the waiter finally arrives with a gargantuan platter. On the china is a steaming, daunting selection from the “Flaming Heart,” one of Crashaw’s two major poems about St. Teresa of Avilla. As we pick up our knives, we notice that Crashaw’s introduction to the poem states that it is about “the book and Picture of the seraphical Saint Teresa, (as she is usually expressed with a Seraphim beside her).” *Usually*, we immediately think, is a key word. As Crashaw proceeds to point out in the opening lines of the poem, we should beware of this *usual* depiction of St. Teresa. His argument is that the painter has got it wrong. And at this point we plunge in our knife and fork:

“WELL meaning readers! you that come as
 friends
 And catch the precious name this piece
 pretends;
 Make not too much hast to’ admire
 That fair-cheeked fallacy of fire.
 That is a Seraphim, they say
 And this the great Teresia.
 Readers, be ruled by me; and make
 Here a well-placed and wise mistake.
 You must transpose the picture quite,
 And spell it wrong to read it right;
 Read Him for her, and her for him;
 And call the Saint the Seraphim.
 Painter, what didst thou understand
 To put her dart into his hand!
 Redeem this injury of thy art;
 Give Him the vail, give her the dart.

BUT if it be the frequent fate
 Of worst faults to be fortunate;
 For all the gallantry of him,
 Give me the suffering Seraphim.
 His be the bravery of all those Bright things.
 The glowing cheeks, the glistening wings;
 The Rosy hand, the radiant Dart;
 Leave Her alone The Flaming Heart.

Leave her that; and thou shalt leave her
 Not one loose shaft but love’s whole quiver.
 For in love’s field was never found
 A nobler weapon then a Wound.
 Love’s passives are his activ’st part.
 The wounded is the wounding heart.

O thou undaunted daughter of desires!
 By all thy dower of Lights and Fires;
 By all the eagle in thee, all the dove;
 By all thy lives and deaths of love;
 By thy large draughts of intellectual day,
 And by thy thirsts of love more large than
 they;
 By all thy brim-fill’d Bowls of fierce desire
 By thy last Morning’s draught of liquid fire;
 By the full kingdom of that final kiss
 That seiz’d thy parting Soul, and seal’d thee
 his;
 By all the heav’ns thou hast in him
 (Fair sister of the Seraphim!)
 By all of Him we have in Thee;
 Leave nothing of my Self in me.
 Let me so read thy life, that I
 Unto all life of mine may die.

As the critic T. S. Eliot once remarked, after the intensely emotional ending of this poem we do not much feel like devouring a second course of poetry, or even analyzing what we have already swallowed down. But analyze we must, or our main course has been served up in vain.

We begin by noticing the three parts of the poem. The last part, beginning with “O thou undaunted daughter” is by far the most intense and the most imaginative, in the sense that Crashaw strings together a whole series of beautiful images, and keeps stringing them until we feel emotionally overwhelmed. As Eliot himself remarks, “they are fused beyond analysis and perfected beyond criticism. This is the ultimate literary expression of the religious feeling of that strange period of sensual religious intensity” (180).

Besides the emotion (a subject to which we will return), we also notice something which was perhaps true of the earlier poems, but which we did not see so clearly: Crashaw uses a good deal of parallelism, even when he is not reversing our expectations. Parallelisms, in fact, seem to constitute not only the sauce but the meat of the last part of the poem. Every line sets different elements in parallel, whether or not they might seem to go together. “Seized thy parting soul” and “sealed thee his,” for example, are action statements which complement each other (notice even the alliteration of the *s*-sounds). In the same way, “all the heavens thou hast in him” compactly echoes “all of Him we have in thee.” “Lights” complements “fires” in relation to the “dower.” Parallels that reverse our expectations—or parallels between things that do not seem to belong together—include the pairing up of “eagle” and “dove,” or the “lives” and “deaths” of love. We do not usually expect

“large draughts of intellectual day” (*draught* and *day* again alliterate) to be followed by “thirsts of love,” any more than we expect large gulps of iced tea to be followed by a parched throat. Yet Crashaw strings the opposite sensations together as if they were twin gems. The most reversed parallelism, of course, is Crashaw’s final plea that Teresa’s “life” might teach him to “die” to himself.

This concluding part of the poem, of course, follows the middle section of the poem, where Crashaw engages in a curious meditation. The meditation is curious because it follows on the heels of the first part of the poem, where Crashaw emphatically states that the painter has made a mistake: he ought to have painted St. Teresa like a flaming seraph, not like a mere mortal. The golden dart (“Cupid’s arrow,” so to speak) especially should have ended up in Teresa’s hand as opposed to the seraph’s, for Teresa is the seraph’s superior and is the one who really inspires love. Crashaw advises the painter to correct this error. After this admonition, however, Crashaw becomes intellectually sidetracked and begins to ask himself what the consequences would be if the painter does *not* correct his error. What if this perverse painter just leaves the golden dart with the seraph, and leaves Teresa nothing but her “flaming heart”? Crashaw’s musings wax almost philosophical, in the sense that he begins to borrow his vocabulary from Aristotle:

Love’s passives are his activ’st part.
The wounded is the wounding heart.

That a “passive part” should be an “active part” is of course strict nonsense according to Aristotle, since “passive” is the opposite of “active,” and a thing cannot be both itself and its opposite in the same way at the same time. But Crashaw, who is happily writing poetry and not philosophy, can afford to be nonsensical as long as he can make his image (the “wound”) carry across his main idea. The reversal of “passive” into “active” is not to be taken literally but—the correct word fails us—poetically. We might paraphrase it by saying that the person who has fallen in love is the person who most inspires others to love. The “wound” again is a slightly unusual image that Crashaw introduces to make this point. We are perhaps used to poets talking about “wounded lovers,” but how often do we find a poet describing love simultaneously as a *wound* and a *weapon*—and on the *battlefield* of love? Crashaw is back to his old trick of pairing up images that do not seem to belong together.

After seeing what Crashaw is up to in the middle part of this poem, we finally turn in good conscience to what he is up to in the *first* part of the poem. (If you were wondering why we started with the end and worked backwards, I unfortunately have no answer, except that we are reading Crashaw, and he likes to do things in reverse.) In the first part of the poem, Crashaw introduces the problem of the picture, as we briefly outlined above. The painter has got his picture wrong. He portrayed St. Teresa the way he should have portrayed the seraph, and the seraph the way he should have portrayed St. Teresa. We decide to rehearse his words to the reader (who, in this case, turns out to be us) to aid in further digestion:

Readers, be rul’d by me; and make
Here a well-plac’t and wise mistake.
You must transpose the picture quite,
And spell it wrong to read it right;
Read Him for her, and her for him;
And call the Saint the Seraphim.

This compelling advice, besides making us look at the painting of St. Teresa in a new way, now begins to make us wonder whether Crashaw wrote this passage only as an interpretation of St.

Teresa. “Transposing the picture” sounds much like “reversing the picture,” and “spell it wrong to read it right” sounds suspiciously like what we have already had to do with quite a few passages out of Crashaw’s own poetry. Perhaps, we begin to think, this passage is a clever little clue into what Crashaw himself has been doing as a poet. The key suggestion is that, in order to get the picture “right,” we must read it “backwards” and think of it in the opposite of the common manner. We must see the apparent paradox that lies in the heart of things. St. Teresa is the true seraph. Christ’s “Nothing” is the origin of everything. The spear that opens the door also closes it. The “paradox” in each case, of course, is something true that is hiding behind something quite common, and it is the “transposition” (or reversal) of the common appearance that captures our attention and makes us see the truth in a new way. This reversal is Crashaw’s own masterfully “wise mistake.”

Having now made good progress in digesting what Crashaw is up to in his poetry, we decide it is time to follow up “The Flaming Heart” with an equally substantial dessert. In our case we find the waiter serving up heaping bowlful of melt-in-your-mouth literary criticism, iced with all sorts of comparisons to other poetry. With the very first spoonful of this criticism, we find ourselves savoring more technical terminology. The most important term is what critics call the “metaphysical conceit.” We are not surprised that Crashaw uses *metaphysical conceits* in his poetry, since he himself is classed as one of the greatest *metaphysical poets* of the seventeenth century. What it means to be a metaphysical poet, of course, is not so easy to work out. The literary critic T. S. Eliot expends a good deal of energy on the question in several lectures (published in one volume, called *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*), and at the end he works out what is probably a good definition of metaphysical poetry & metaphysical poets. For the moment, however, all we have room for is a decent dessert, not another seven-course dinner on metaphysical varieties. So, leaving aside the definition “metaphysical poet,” and also leaving aside the individual meanings of the words “metaphysical” and “conceit,” we choose the “lite dessert” option of learning by example.

When critics say that a poet is using a “metaphysical conceit,” they usually mean that he (1) is describing a thing by using an image that is very unlike it, and (2) stretches the usefulness of that image to the snapping point by teasing its logic *almost* out to absurdity. When Crashaw uses the image of a key unlocking a door to describe the spear piercing Christ’s side, he is using a metaphysical conceit. When he continues to play with this image and remark that the centurion closed the doors of heaven to himself by opening the Door of heaven (Christ), he is carrying the image out to the point of paradox. In his essays, Eliot makes the argument that this kind of image-play in fact distracts the reader from the real subject matter of the poem. And with this observation, we realize we have reached the moment of dessert when we can no longer avoid a direct confrontation with T. S. Eliot. The best way to dish up a distinguished literary personage like T. S. Eliot, of course, is to quote lavishly and somewhat haphazardly from what he actually said.

“One cannot conceive,” states Eliot concerning Crashaw’s metaphysical conceits, “the state of mind of a writer who could pen such monstrosities. The only way is to repeat the stanza to oneself until its odd beauty comes out... for, I repeat, it has beauty... There is, I am sure, not only some amount of intellectual labour performed in preparing such a freak as this imagery is, but there is a certain intellectual ingredient in the enjoyment. It is as if you destroyed the natural connections between sense and thought, and built up some quite arbitrary connection out of the fragments” (172).

Alongside these encouraging remarks, Eliot has some further things to say about the heart of Crashaw’s poetry in general:

“With Crashaw,” he states, “emotion is split up into emotions; instead of one emotion informing the whole poem, you have emotion piled on emotion, as a man drinks when he is afraid of becoming sober (169)... Observe the tendency to a *sequence* of emotions, each in a separate image, rather than to any *structure* of emotion” (170).”

A rather heavy chocolate sauce, we think, for the tail end of our dessert. The first quotation is almost understandable—it is, in fact, a fairly common way of talking about “metaphysical conceits” themselves. What makes the conceits so striking, both in Crashaw’s poetry and in other places, is precisely the fact that the image and its object are *so* unrelated. The second quotation, however, leaves us with a good dose of fudge for thought. What is this business about Crashaw’s poetry not having a *structure* of emotion? T. S. Eliot provides us with one example of what he means. He quotes a Latin hymn that has a simple English translation, and then he compares it to Crashaw’s own translation:

Simple Literal English Translation

“The royal banners forward go;
The Cross shines forth in mystic glow
Where he in flesh, our flesh who made,
Our sentence bore, our ransom paid.”

Crashaw’s Translation

Look up, languishing Soul! Lo where the fair
Badge of thy faith calls back thy care,
And bides thee ne’re forget
Thy life is one long debt
Of love to Him, who on this painful Tree
Paid back the flesh he took for thee.

It goes without saying that Crashaw takes a few liberties with translation. *Which* liberties he takes are probably important to notice. Eliot points out first of all the introduction of the “languishing soul” to the poem (in Crashaw’s time, he notes, “souls readily languished and swooned”). Second, and more importantly, Crashaw brings in “the distracting conceit of the debt and the repayment” (170). The language of our debt to Christ does not appear in the “simple” translation at all. Nor, we think, does it make much sense if we look at it too closely in Crashaw’s translation. The debt is supposed to be what *we* owe to *Christ*, but the last lines make it sound as if *Christ* was paying a debt that *He* owed. Crashaw says that Christ “paid back the flesh he took for thee”—as if Christ had gone into debt when he took a body, just like taking a loan out of a bank, and had settled his accounts by “paying back” His body when he died. (To whom did He pay it, we wonder? And doesn’t that mean the balances are equal? So how would the logic of this poem result in *us* owing a debt to *Him*?) And yet, when we stand back and read the poem merely for its effect, its illogicality has a strange power on us. *Somehow* the feeling runs true.

This may be part of what Eliot means by his criticism, or so we think as we set our forks down. But even this does not go a long way toward explaining what Eliot might mean when he says that Crashaw’s emotions have no *structure*. Isn’t there a structure to his translation? In fact, doesn’t it have a more complicated structure than the simple literal translation? We have the odd feeling that we need another example—maybe half a dozen—before we can really grasp what Eliot might mean by *sequence* and *structure* in Crashaw’s poems, and whether he is right. So, for our after-dinner mint, we turn to another Latin hymn that has at least *three* English translations. One is simply literal, one is a verse translation by H. Mills, and one is Crashaw’s own. So with our mints in one hand and toothpicks in the other, we lean back to consider the differences between these different works of poetry.

An Assortment of Mints and Toothpicks: Translations of the *Stabat Mater*

Stabat mater dolorosa
Iuxta crucem lacrymosa,
Dum pendebat filius.
Cuius animam gementem,
Contristantem et dolentem
Pertransivit gladius.

O quam tristis et afflicta
Fuit illa benedicta
Mater Unigeniti!
Quae moerebat et dolebat,
Et tremebat, dum videbat
Nati poenas inclyti.

Quis non potest contristari,
Matrem Christi contemplari
Dolentem cum filio.

...
Pro peccatis suae gentis
Vidit Christum in tormentis
Et flagellis subditum.

*The sorrowful mother stood weeping beside the cross while
her son hung there. A sword went through her groaning,
sorrowing, and mourning soul.*

*O, how sorrowful and afflicted was that blessed mother of
the Only-Begotten! She mourned and sorrowed and
trembled because she saw the punishment of her renowned
Son.*

*Who could not mourn with her? Who could not
contemplate the mother of Christ mourning with her Son?
... She sees Christ subjected to torments and whips for
the sins of her own people.*

Near the Cross was Mary weeping,
There her mournful station keeping,
Gazing on her dying Son.
There with speechless grief oppressed,
Anguish-stricken and distressed,
Through her soul the sword had gone.

Who upon that Sufferer gazing,
Bowed in sorrow so amazing
Would not with His mother mourn?
'Twas our sins brought Him from heaven;
These the cruel nails had driven;
All His griefs for us were borne.

In shade of death's sad TREE
Stood Doleful SHE.
Ah SHE! Now by none other
Name to be known, alas, but SORROW'S
MOTHER.

Before her eyes
Her's, and the whole world's joys,
Hanging all torn she sees; and in his woes
And pains, her pangs and throes.
Each wound of His, from every part,
All, more at home in her own heart.

What kind of marble then
Is that cold man
Who can look on and see,
Nor keep such noble sorrows company?
Sure even from you
(My Flints) some drops are due
To see so many unkind swords contest
So fast for one soft Breast.
While with a faithful, mutual flood
Her eyes bleed TEARS, his wounds weep BLOOD.

O costly intercourse
Of deaths, and worse,
Divided loves. While son and mother
Discourse alternate wounds to one another;
Quick Deaths that grow
And gather, as they come and go:
His Nails write swords in her, which soon her heart
Pays back, with more than their own smart;
Her SWORDS, still growing with his pain,
Turn SPEARS, and straight come home again.