

DOI: 10.2478/aa-2019-0002

A quest for unification with the divine: Crashaw's Teresa Poems "A Hymn to the Name and Honour of the Admirable Saint Teresa" and "The Flaming Heart"

Kübra Baysal

Having graduated from Hacettepe in 2008, Kübra BAYSAL gained her MA in English Language and Literature at Atatürk University in 2013. She earned her PhD in the same subject from Hacettepe University in January, 2019. She works at Ankara Yildirim Beyazıt University, School of Foreign Languages, as a lecturer. Her main fields of interest are the English novel, climate fiction, apocalypse fiction, Doris Lessing, feminism and environmental studies.

Abstract

As a metaphysical poet, Richard Crashaw (1613-1649) is recognized for his stylistic experimentation and deep religious faith. In the course of his short life, he became a fellow at Cambridge, was later introduced to Queen Henrietta Marie, Charles I's wife, in France after his exile during the Interregnum, converted to Catholicism from Anglicanism and was highly influenced by Baroque poetry and the martyrdom of St. Teresa of Avila in his style and themes. He is a poet with a "most holy, humble and genuine soul" and in the last six years of his life, which coincided with a period of great crisis in both personal and professional spheres, he worked intensively on the religious phase of his literary career (Shepherd 1914, p. 1). He reflected his devotion to St. Teresa and to God in his religious poems. Within this context, this study analyses Crashaw's two Teresian poems, "A Hymn to the Name and Honour of the Admirable Saint Teresa" and "The Flaming Heart" featuring the themes of the quest for divine love and unification with the divine along with Crashaw's divergence from other metaphysical poets, his affection for the European style(s), and his religious views concerning both his country and other countries in Europe.

Richard Crashaw is regarded as the odd one out among the metaphysical poets and criticized for his tendency towards European/Baroque poetry and art. His use of religious themes and devotion in his poems is not an innovation in metaphysical poetry. However, his Baroque style, his references to the Virgin Mary and St. Teresa, and "his obsession with bodily fluids" (Philips 1999, p. 43) are some elements that make him unique among other metaphysical poets. With this in mind, Crashaw's poetry reflects a synthesis of matters having emerged in the wake of

the Reformation. He was influenced by Aquinas and Ignatius “in his use of the emblematic aesthetic” on the one hand, and was highly interested in music as seen through his use of “musical idiom” on the other, which brought about a “composition of place” producing a sense of the present and “now” (Graham 1971, pp. 5-6). The combination of the allegorical and musical qualities enabled the flourishing of Crashaw’s poetry aesthetically. Then again, despite his use of metaphysical conceit in his poems, his mere focus is not directed towards the conceit, but rather to the emblematic reflections and symbolizations of the general idea that formed the conceit(s) in the first place. His style displays “imagistic extremes, intense and unfamiliar use of metaphor, repetition of certain phrases or symbols, and a curious musical quality” (Horn 2008, p. 412).

In the Baroque tradition, Crashaw elaborately combines opposites or controversial issues under the umbrella concept of transubstantiation, which can be explained as the conversion of Eucharistic elements into something completely different as in the wine and bread in Catholic sacrament symbolizing Christ’s blood and flesh. In other words, especially in his Teresian poems, Crashaw focuses on the theme of transubstantiation, or substance conversion through “the controversies of natural and artificial wit, of form and style, of truth or simply of how to make one thing become another” within his Baroque style (Graham 1971, p. 6) which once again marks his difference from the other metaphysical poets. Likewise, through his constant reference to bodily liquids and “his [general] obsession with liquids” (Philips 1999, p.144) in his poems “A Hymn” and “The Flaming Heart” through blood, sweat, tears and balsam, the reader is informed of his knowledge about humours and his novelty in making use of them in his work. This is a natural outcome of Crashaw’s fascination with St. Teresa for he describes the process of reading Teresa as a transfusion of blood from one heart to another (Woods 2012, p. 27). At this point, in Philips’s words, “[h]is foreignness, or otherness, is crucial to an understanding of Crashaw’s obsession with liquids, with mother and child, and ultimately, to an understanding of the poetry itself” (1999, p. 144). With a similar perspective, Crashaw creates a perfect harmony of all the literary, historical and religious sources he was influenced by in his poetical career. In addition to the “Mannerist, the Baroque, the Meditative, and the Metaphysical poetry and Donne traditions”, the great impact of the “‘New’ science” and “Counter-Reformation”, he shows pure devotion to Catholic saints such as “St. John of the Cross, St. Ignatius Loyola, St. Francis de Sales, and [most importantly] St. Teresa” (Sundararajan 1970, p. iv).

With respect to Crashaw’s style observed in his Teresian poems and other religious poetry, it is requisite to pay attention to the fact that aside from other traditions, Crashaw was also

influenced by the courtly love tradition of the Renaissance period. He succeeded in bringing “love poetry from its earthly dimension and return it to the heavenly one” (Johnson 2015, p. 125) in his quest for the idea of the divine and unification with the divine. Accordingly, one common point in both “A Hymn” and “The Flaming Heart” is the repetition of the image of “dart” and “heart,” which indeed seems to signify Crashaw’s use of the Platonic love tradition through his religious themes, reminiscent of images such as Cupid’s arrow and the pierced heart. Within this context and through the utilization of the lives of saints and divine figures in his poetry, Crashaw represents the heavenly “truth beyond all form or substance” (Graham 1971, p. 5).

In a similar fashion, Crashaw’s Teresian poems reflect his keen interest in St. Teresa as a mystic and her death as a martyr. St. Teresa seems to have left an immense impression on him in his poems “A Hymn” and “The Flaming Heart” centred on her life story, death and her love wounds as a martyr of divine love. In fact, it is acknowledged that in Crashaw’s conversion to Catholicism and his subsequent religious poetry including the Teresian poems, “Spanish mystical writings” are the “determining factor” (Shepherd 1914, p. 7). In line with this, through his literary profile as a “counter-Reformation” poet and his constant interest in the mystics, Crashaw’s poetic style can also be classified as “Medievalist” (Graham 1971, p. 20). From a different vantage point, the idea of the union with the divine possibly describes the poet’s desire to unite with the sovereign, which places his poetry “within the context of early modern politics” (Yeo 2012, p. 72) and confutes the general notion that Crashaw’s poetry is solely religious.

The first Teresa poem in the focus of this study, “A Hymn”, from *Divine Epigrams*, is one of the poems composed on St. Teresa of Avila’s life and death as a personage of divine love. The poem not only depicts St. Teresa’s human life-span but also imagines how she compromised her earthly life for heavenly eternity, emerging as a model for the whole of humanity to follow in their search for the divine. In relation to this, the poem is written on both St. Teresa’s individual body and the collective body of mortality in the readers, through which the poet presents the possibility of acquiring divine love by representing the figure of St. Teresa to his readers (Wilson 2015, p. 9). With the depiction of her childhood years, St. Teresa emerges as an innocent girl seeking the divine truth as seen in the following lines:

Nor has she e’er yet understood
Why, to show love, she should shed blood;
Yet, though she cannot tell you why,

She can love, and she can die.
Scarce has she blood enough to make
A guilty sword blush for her sake;
Yet has a heart dares hope to prove
How much less strong is death than love... (21-28)

Despite her naïve nature and weak body, Teresa has a strong heart wishing to die for the sake of divine love. In that respect, it is reminded that certain female figures like the “Virgin Mary, Saint Teresa, Saint Mary Magdalene [in “The Weeper”], and the Queen” are represented as the “embodiment of all virtues, purity and salvation” similar to the case with St. Teresa in “A Hymn” (Philips 1999, p. 147). Furthermore, in the poem, St. Teresa wishes to pay the price of divine knowledge and divinity with her dear mortal life as follows:

She’ll to the Moors, and trade with them
For this unvalued diadem;
She offers them her dearest breath,
With Christ’s name in’t, in charge for death:
She’ll bargain with them, and will give
Them God, and teach them how to live
In Him; or, if they this deny,
For Him she’ll teach them how to die.
So shall she leave amongst them sown
Her Lord’s blood, or at least her own. (33-42)

Teresa is ready to trade “her breath, language, [knowledge] or body” to the Moors in exchange for an “unvalued diadem,” her reign in Heaven and to experience the *jouissance* of martyrdom (Wilson 2015, p. 10). In addition, she is to teach the Moors the way of living as well as dying for the divine truth. Moreover, it is recounted that after her decision to live with the Moors and teaching them, St. Teresa’s life is wasted and she moves towards the joy of suffering as a martyr: “O how oft shalt thou complain/ Of a sweet and subtle pain!/ Of intolerable joys!/ Of a death, in which who dies/ Loves his death, and dies again” (55-59). The ecstatic joy received from suffering for the divine love and also from “[t]hose delicious wounds” (66) appears to prove that Crashaw places Teresa’s body into another space “localized in the wound—where language is intimately connected to the body as a source of pleasure and of

possibility” (Wilson 2015, p. 9) which explicates the possibility of his intention to provide the reader with pleasure through his emblematic poetry. Entering into his readers’ hearts through his poetry, Crashaw conveys the thematic message of the unification with the divine truth.

Towards the end of the poem, St. Teresa’s martyrdom is the pivotal point and her place among the celestial beings and angels is depicted in perfect detail: “The moon of maiden stars, thy white/ Mistress, attended by such bright/ Souls as thy shining self, shall come,/ And in her first ranks make thee room” (81-84). After her death, St. Teresa is to be served by angels in the first rank in heaven and she is depicted in bright colours, which in reality calls forth the descriptions of St. Teresa of Avila’s fellow nuns having witnessed “her [image] with glowing features, writing as if at a heavenly dictation” (*Saint Teresa* 1957, p. 16). Finally, after her “constellation” in the sky (100), St. Teresa is praised by the speaking persona of the poem as she is a model for the whole of humanity in its search for divine truth and love: “Which who in death would live to see,/ Must learn in life to die like thee” (140). Thus, through her death and martyrdom, St. Teresa embodies the “capacity of the properly disciplined human sign to participate in the unfolding narrative of Christian history” (Perry 2015, p. 315). Similarly, through these final lines of the poem Crashaw openly sends the message that to live heavenly after death, one is supposed to die like St. Teresa. In other words, he reflects his “own mystical experiences” with “the pattern of St. Teresa’s mystical experiences” (Sundararajan 1970, p. 100).

This said, the second poem, “The Flaming Heart upon the Book and Picture of the Seraphical Saint Teresa” is an ekphrastic poem from *Carmen Deo Nostro*, which is a nice example of apostrophe. Opening with the depiction of St. Teresa’s painting, the poem pictures a speaking persona discontent with this depiction addressing the reader and “trad[ing] out the roles of the two protagonists, giving Teresa the angel’s darts (and the masculine gender that accompanies them), and the angel, her monastic veil” (Yeo 2012, p. 75). Besides, as previously stated, in addition to the repetitive images of heart and dart in these poems posited within the Platonic love tradition, the concept of the flame and “flamma amoris” originates from Ovid and later Petrarch (Casanova 2002, p. 50). Especially considering the poem’s direct reference to St. Teresa’s picture and the poem itself laden with multiple images, the fact that Crashaw was led towards an emblematic style through his interest in religion seems hardly surprising. Thus, his poetic style not only derives from Ovidian, Platonic, Petrarchan love traditions, or Baroque style but also shows indebtedness to the “Jesuit emblem books” (Graham 1971, p. 20) Crashaw had the chance to study in the later years of his life. Finally, when the motif of picture is studied within “the wider Catholic European context” and in “Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s [...] sculpture

depicting the ecstatic Teresa,” it is estimated that Crashaw was following Bernini’s work in development (Woods 2012, p. 9).

“The Flaming Heart” starts with the speaking persona directly addressing the reader and guiding them in their interpretation of the poem. He calls them “[w]ell-meaning” (1), in other words, learned readers to whom he advises not to make “too much haste t’admire/ [t]hat fair-cheek’t fallacy of fire” (3-4). As is the case with the previous poem, “A Hymn”, in this poem the speaking persona draws attention to the poetry itself and warns the reader not be caught up with the title in haste, “which sets up an emblematic mood” from the very beginning (Casanova 2002, p. 50). Openly stating his dissatisfaction with the way in which the painter represents Teresa, the poet clarifies the right way to read his poetry while interpreting St. Teresa’s picture: “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!” (11-14). Hence, he changes the position of the saint and seraph/im. He provides poetic interpretation through the “pictorial device” and comments on “how one should interpret the woodcut of Teresa and the Angel holding the piercing dart” (Horn 2008, p. 422). Likewise, references to the book and picture in the title as two opposites and alternatives may be interpreted as the poem’s role in underlining the issues of “presence and audience” (Cohen 2015, p. 22) in Crashaw’s efforts to earn fame as an accomplished poet. In the following lines of the poem, the speaking persona intends to correct the notion that Teresa is not a suppressed, inferior female saint: “Why man, this speaks pure mortal frame;/ And mocks with female frost Love’s manly flame./ One would suspect thou meant’st to print/ Some weak, inferior, woman saint” (23-26) possibly referring to St. Teresa’s profile in his first Teresian poem, “A Hymn” which bears an intertextual quality in that respect (Casanova 2002, p. 51). On the contrary, St. Teresa is a seraphim figure with striking qualities:

Fire from the burning cheeks of that bright Book
Thou wouldst on her have heap’d up all
That could be found seraphical;
Whate’re this youth of fire wears fair,
Rosy fingers, radiant hair,
Glowing cheek, and glistening wings,
All those fair and flagrant things,
But before all, that fiery dart
Had fill’d the hand of this great heart. (28-36)

She is a radiant beauty holding a “fiery” dart in her hands to pierce the hearts and inflame them with divine love. In other words, through “dart, shoots, seraphim (Cupid), [and] Wound” the poem foreshadows the wounds of divine love and closes with the final vision of “the wounding of the heart” (Casanova 2002, p. 53). The speaking persona later informs the male seraph/im that he can take everything back including the “glowing cheeks”, “glittering wings”, “rosy hand” and “radiant dart” but only to leave Teresa “the flaming heart” (67-69) as she needs a heart wounded by divine love, suffering and yet taking joy in suffering for the divine: “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” (71-74). As observed in these lines, Teresa is both the wounded and the wounding heart as she is inflamed by divine love and she is inflicting her flame on mortal hearts for divine love as a heavenly saint.

Finally, the ending of the poem is ornamented with red-hot flame images, which is interpreted by some critics to be “the poet’s exclusive mystical experience” (Cohen 2015, p. 21). Crashaw expresses his desire to be isolated from his own “self” to be able to devote himself fully to the divine in the poem as follows: “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” (105-110). The poet wants to be free of his self and read St. Teresa’s life to take her as a good model in his quest for unification with the divine and embracing death peacefully (Sabine 2006, p. 1).

In conclusion, Richard Crashaw is an extraordinary metaphysical poet with his distinct style adopted from various literary traditions going back and forth between the Classical period and the 17th century whereas his themes are interestingly taken from a European background and Spanish mystics. Despite his short life, he produced multiple works of emotional intensity and easy-flowing, emblematic as well as musical style, which puts him in a special place among other metaphysical poets as can be observed in his poems “A Hymn to the Name and Honour of the Admirable Saint Teresa” and “The Flaming Heart”.

Works cited:

Primary sources:

- Crashaw, R. 1900. “A Hymn to the Name and Honour of the Admirable Saint Teresa” *English Poems*. (ed. John Ramsden Tutin), pp. 85-92. Michigan: Tutin Press.
- , 1900. “The Flaming Heart” *English Poems*. (ed. John Ramsden Tutin), pp. 95-97. Michigan: Tutin Press.

Secondary sources:

- Casanova, J. 2002. “Crashaw and the Emblem Revisited” *Sederi*. Vol. XI, pp. 49-56.

- Cohen, S. 2015. “‘Love-Slain Witnesses’: Apostrophe and Audience in Richard Crashaw’s ‘The Flaming Heart’” *Ramify*. Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 20-34.
- Graham, P. T. 1971. “The Mystical and Musical Realism of Richard Crashaw” *The Emporia State Research Studies*. Vol. XX, No. 1, pp. 5-49.
- Horn, M. 2008. “A Safe Space for the Texted Icon: Richard Crashaw's Use of the Emblem Tradition in His Devotional Lyrics” *Exemplaria*. Vol. 20, No. 4, pp. 410-429. London: Routledge.
- Johnson, B. L. 2015. *Chastity in Early Stuart Literature and Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Perry, N. 2015. “Turning the Tables: Richard Crashaw Reads the Protestant Altar” *Studies in Philology*. Vol. 12, No. 2, pp. 303-326. North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Philips, B. 1999. “Opening the Purple Wardrobe: A Psychoanalytic Approach to the Poetry of Richard Crashaw (1613-1649)” *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses*. Issue 12, pp. 143-148.
- Sabine, M. 2006. “Crashaw and Abjection: Reading the Unthinkable in His Devotional Verse” *American Imago*. Vol. 63, No 4, pp. 423-443.
- Saint Teresa of Ávila: The Life of Saint Teresa*. 1957. (trans. J.M. Cohen). Middlesex: Penguin Classics.
- Shepherd, E. 1914. “Introduction” *The Religious Poems of Richard Crashaw*. London: Manresa Press.
- Sundararajan, P. K. 1970. “A Reading of Richard Crashaw”. M.A. Thesis. Simon Fraser University.
- Wilson, S. 2015. “The Bitten Word: Feminine Jouissance, Language, and the Female Vampire.” M.A. Thesis. University of California, Santa Cruz.
- Woods, C. 2012. “Reading the Catholic Mystical Corpus in Seventeenth-Century England” M.A. Thesis. Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee.
- Yeo, J. M. 2012. “Imagining Unity: The Politics of Transcendence in Donne, Lanyer, Crashaw, and Milton” PhD Thesis. Rice University, Houston, Texas.

Kübra Baysal

Ankara Yildirim Beyazit University

School of Foreign Languages

Ankara Yildirim Beyazit Universitesi

Yabancı Diller Yüksekokulu Ayvalı Mahallesi

Gazze Caddesi No:7

06010 Etlik /Keçiören

ANKARA/TURKEY

kbaysal@ybu.edu.tr / kbrbaysal@yahoo.com