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# *Book Reviews*

## English Crashaw?

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*The English Poems of Richard Crashaw*, ed. Richard Rambuss, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013. lxxxvi + 450 pp.

The appearance of a new edition of Crashaw's poems after all the earlier editions have so long been out of print can only be an occasion for celebration. Scholars and devotees of Crashaw's poetry may further rejoice in the painstaking editing and commentary provided by Richard Rambuss as well as his substantial and often insightful introduction. My reservations about this book arise from questions about the suitability of modern spelling editions of seventeenth-century works in general and specifically about the advisability of publishing Crashaw's English poems without also including the Latin poems. Finally, I have some doubts about Professor Rambuss's adherence to a particular fashion in Crashaw criticism and his placement of the poet in the literary landscape of his time. Nevertheless, this volume is an admirable work of scholarship for which students of the early modern period ought to be grateful.

The text of Crashaw's poetry confronts an editor with challenges comparable to Donne's. The only volume that the poet could have seen through the press is the first edition of *Epigrammatum Sacrorum Liber* (1634), which does not figure in the present collection of exclusively English poems. By the time *Steps to the Temple: Sacred Poems, with Other Delights of the Muses* was published in London in 1646 and in

an enlarged and revised version in 1648, Crashaw had fled to the continent to escape the puritan consequences of the Parliamentary triumph in the Civil War. When Thomas Car brought out *Carmen Deo Nostro* in Paris in 1652, Crashaw had been dead for three years, and the publication of the pamphlet version of "A Letter from Mr. Crashaw, to the Countess of Denbigh" in London—in 1653 according to a handwritten note on the title page of the unique surviving copy—remains mysterious. In addition, a number of his poems appeared in print and manuscript miscellanies and in manuscript collections of uncertain provenance. Like Donne, Crashaw left behind no autograph collection of his poems.

Both versions of *Steps to the Temple*, *Carmen Deo Nostro*, and the London pamphlet contain overlapping material but with significant expansions and revisions within the individual poems. In his (very useful) 1970 edition, George Walton Williams arranged the poems according to category: those in foreign languages, those translated from a foreign language, those in one version, and those in two. Translations and alternate versions were given on the facing pages to facilitate comparison and contrast.

Professor Rambuss has chosen to return to the chronological arrangement of L.C. Martin's Clarendon Press edition (1927, 1957): "Reproducing the volumes as volumes makes available to modern readers the sequences and juxtapositions that may have occupied Crashaw (or his publishers) and presents the works as they appeared to his early modern readers" (p. xiv). Since Professor Rambuss is not reprinting poems in Latin or providing the original texts of Crashaw's translations, thus reducing substantially the opportunities for comparison, his decision to revert to chronological order makes sense. One may question, however, whether contemporary readers are seeing Crashaw's poems "as they appeared to early modern readers"; for Professor Rambuss also says, "In addition to modernizing spelling, I routinize capitalization and remove most italics."

This procedure falls in with the editor's goal of providing "a critically updated edition of Richard Crashaw's English poetry with modern spelling to take its place next to similar editions of other major seventeenth-century English poets" (p. xiii). This by now standard practice, commonplace as it is, raises the issue of the target audience for such editions.

Most of Professor Rambuss's undergraduate students at Brown may well be more literate and generally better prepared than most of those at North Carolina State, where I taught for more than four decades. They would have to be better by several orders of magnitude, however, to have the slightest interest in—or be able to benefit from—a volume of poems by *any* early modern poet (I am tempted to say *any poet at all*). In my experience, at least, the potential readers of poetry among the millennial generation, even among English majors, have become a vanishingly small cadre.

Of course, it is not inconceivable that there are a few "general readers" (surely they have a place on the endangered species list?) who may be interested in seventeenth-century poetry, but in all likelihood those interested in Crashaw would have an equally deep commitment to his contribution to Christian devotion. For them, the secular poems, the scholarly apparatus, the opportunity to compare volume with volume would seem to be wasted.

It is, then, a safe surmise that the only substantial readership for a new edition of Crashaw's poetry comprises scholars—graduate students and literature department faculty—with an interest in early modern poetry. It is difficult to see how this group is served by a modern-spelling text or by the omission of the Latin poems. Most English poets of the early modern period were steeped both in classical and continental Latin literature (and often French, Italian, and Spanish as well); no one can aspire to a complete grasp of the English poets without some knowledge of their sources and analogues in other tongues. The foreign language poems of an English poet provide an especially powerful entrée to Renaissance Neo-Latin, the submerged part of the iceberg of early modern literature. While it must be conceded that a diminishing number of students are able to read this literature in the original, this state of affairs would seem to call for an editor of a new a edition of Crashaw to offer fresh translations of the Latin poems. Furnishing such translations was one of the many useful features of the Williams edition of 45 years ago, but many of these translations would benefit from revision.

After decades of the Protestant Poetics fashion of pretending that none of the English meditative poets, apart from Crashaw, were subject to any significant Catholic influence—not even Donne—the newest critical phenomenon is to propose that even Crashaw was not

really Catholic and would never have converted had not his weak character succumbed to the stress of the Civil War and to dire physical necessity. Among modern critics this canard began with Austin Warren's generally admirable biography, *Richard Crashaw: A Study in Baroque Sensibility* (1939), and was elaborated in Husain's *The Mystical Elements in the Metaphysical Poets* (1948). The notion was picked up again by Thomas F. Healy in *Richard Crashaw* (1986). With the turn of the new century a flurry of critics have pushed the view that since most of Crashaw's poetry was evidently written before his conversion and echoes language from the Book of Common Prayer, when he was happily ensconced in the ceremonial liturgical atmosphere of the Laudian movement at Cambridge, his entering the Church of Rome was the fortuitous result of his circumstances in exile.

Professor Rambuss pushes this thesis repeatedly, not to say relentlessly, throughout his lengthy introduction to Crashaw's poetry. "I have no taste for reintegrating Crashaw into English literary and religious history," he writes, "at the cost of banally discounting the startling weirdness of his writing" and avers, "Crashaw rates among the queerest of devotional authors"; nevertheless, he adds, "Crashaw's verse bespeaks not deviancy but, rather, the hyperbolism of a profoundly affective strain of Christianity" (pp. xxi, xxii). It turns out that wounds, effusions of "bodily fluids," penetrated flesh, and so on are merely the ordinary accoutrements of Laudian worship and devotional literature: "Religious rapture, after all, could hardly be said to be the sole province of the Roman Church, then or now" (p. xxxi).

Professor Rambuss then proceeds to call our attention to a crucial difference between Crashaw and his Laudian Royalist friends, some of whom were also subjected to an official investigation of "idolatrous" religious practices at Cambridge in 1641:

> Cited along with Crashaw in this Parliamentary inquest was his Peterhouse co-religionist, Joseph Beaumont, who, it should be noted, never went over to Rome. There may seem to have been a fine line in the 1640s between being so very High Church and converting to Catholicism. But there was a line nonetheless. Beaumont didn't cross it; nor did Crashaw's other Cambridge intimate, Cowley. Neither did Cosin, master of Peterhouse, who would later make no secret of his sense of betrayal at Crashaw's Catholic turn.

> Nor need we take Crashaw's own conversion as having been ever but a foregone conclusion.
>
> (p. li)

Precisely. Crashaw had to make a decision, which came at considerable personal cost.

The dubious authority of Anthony à Wood is invoked to suggest that Crashaw was driven into the arms of Rome because of a lack of fortitude in the face of "the unlimited fury of the Presbyterians," and the poet's autograph letter from Leiden to suggest that he was "grappling with the question of conversion," indeed felt a "disinclination to do so" (p. li), presumably suggesting insincerity or at least an absence of genuine Catholic commitment. A more sympathetic and reasonable interpretation would be that such a moral and emotional struggle would require firm intellectual conviction, that Crashaw would not abandon friends and country and familiar habits on a whim; and the evidence of the poetry affirms this surmise.

Professor Rambuss attempts to discount the seriousness of Crashaw's conversion by suggesting that his opening poem of *Carmen Deo Nostro*, addressed to the Countess of Denbigh, "Persuading her to resolution in religion, and to render herself without further delay into the communion of the Catholic Church," is equivocal:

> "To the Noblest and Best of Ladies, the Countess of Denbigh" is, however, a curious stab at Roman Catholic proselytizing. Its sixty-eight lines say nothing of either that Church or the English one, much less the tenor of their differences. Nor is there anything about the poem's devotional or theological expression that stands out as denotatively Romanist. What the poem is, with its arsenal of florid conceits and Cavalier carpe diem urgency, is a work of sacred seduction in which the poet serves as the Lord's pander.
>
> (p. lvi)

Tucked away in an end note, the editor further asserts, "A longer, significantly different version of this poem, which makes no mention of the Roman Church, was separately published a year later in London . . ." (p. lxxxii, n. 76).

Now this is rather sly. While there is nothing "denotatively Romanist" about the poem's "theological expression"—there is little *theology* or *doctrine* in the poem at all—its devotional tone is thoroughly Catholic. There is nothing really comparable to Crashaw's "arsenal of florid conceits" in, for instance, Beaumont or Cowley. The only English poet who comes close to Crashaw's devotional tone is Robert Southwell (Q.E.D.). Most telling, however, is the second version of the poem, which suggests that Crashaw realized that he had not made the argument sufficiently, since it provides, so far as a poem can, a contrast between Catholic and Protestant notions of grace and free will—a point that I have already argued in some detail (*Doctrine and Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Poetry*, 2000).

The solemn observation that this second version "makes no mention of the Roman Church" is risible in context. It was published in *London* in *1653*, when a certain John Milton was still Secretary for Foreign tongues in the service of the Cromwell government, a job that included supervising the publication of books. Nine years earlier he had famously championed unlicensed printing in *Areopagitica* with a notable exception: "I mean not tolerated popery, and open superstition. . . ." Since the Countess was already a devout Anglican widow when Crashaw knew her, there can be little question about what he was persuading her to *convert to*, and little prudence in mentioning it openly. The wonder is not the failure to mention the Catholic Church in the pamphlet, but rather that the pamphlet was published at all.

A satisfactory assessment of *The English Poems of Richard Crashaw* is thus difficult to attain. It is a painstaking endeavor performed with diligence by Professor Rambuss, and the availability of Crashaw's poetry in a new edition is surely desirable. Still, questions remain about who will be able to make the best use of this volume. Moreover, despite the editor's best intentions, his critical biases, in my view at least, depict Crashaw as a somewhat parochial figure of less intellectual and moral vigor than he actually wielded. Perhaps what an edition such as this most poignantly illustrates is the problematic status of our older literature at a time when an assumption of general cultural literacy, even among university students, is doubtful.

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