John Donne Journal
Vol. 20 (2001)

Devotio and *Ratio* in Richard Crashaw's "On Hope"

Andrew Sean Davidson

> The poet only asks to get his head into the heavens. It is the logician who seeks to get the heavens into his head. And it is his head that splits.
>
> —G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*

While Chesterton's *Orthodoxy* has its roots in the early twentieth century, it bears an important relation to the devotional context of the seventeenth century, embodying the seemingly irreconcilable perspectives of "*Crashaw*" and "*Cowley*" in Richard Crashaw's poem "On Hope."[1] In an early chapter of *Orthodoxy* entitled "The Maniac," Chesterton considers the nature of poetry by playing on the commonplace distinction between sanity and madness. "There is a notion adrift everywhere," he says, "that imagination, especially mystical imagination, is dangerous to man's mental balance. Poets are commonly spoken of as psychologically unreliable; and generally there is a vague association between wreathing laurels in

[1]"On Hope" is, in fact, a collaborative poem written by Crashaw and Cowley during their school days at Cambridge. However, since it was first published in Crashaw's *Steps to the Temple* (1646), I will refer to Crashaw as the primary author of the poem. For more on the circumstances of production and publication, see Thomas O. Calhoun, Laurence Heyworth and J. Robert King, eds., *The Collected Works of Abraham Cowley*, Volume 2: *Poems (1656)*. (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 1993), pp. 186-89; L.C. Martin. ed. *The Poems of Richard Crashaw*, second edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), pp. xxxiii-iv; and Arthur H. Nethercot, *Abraham Cowley, The Muses Hannibal* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1931), pp. 44-45.

your hair and sticking straws in it."[2] As we would expect, this kind of thinking is anathema to Chesterton. For him, the suggestion that poetry begets lunacy is not only a lie, but is also a complete inversion of the truth. "Imagination," he argues, "does not breed insanity. Exactly what does breed insanity is reason. Poets do not go mad; but chess-players do. Mathematicians go mad, and cashiers; but creative artists very seldom" (17). Chesterton is not always so forthright in this chapter. At one point, he seems to retreat entirely, conceding that poets do occasionally succumb to madness. However, with tongue in cheek, he insists that a poet's lunacy has little to do with the nature of poetic art. Quite the opposite, poets have gone mad precisely because they "had some weak spot of rationality on the brain." "Poe really was morbid," he says; "not because he was poetical but because he was specially analytical." Cowper went mad; not because he consulted the muse, but because he clung, almost helplessly, to "the ugly and alien logic of predestination." In fact, for Cowper, poetry was the last refuge. Only through his poems could he "forget the red and thirsty hell to which his hideous necessitarianism dragged him."

We can clearly see the rhetorical strategy at work here. Beginning with the familiar antitheses between sanity and madness, logic and poetry, Chesterton juxtaposes them and then deliberately cross-combines them so that logic becomes a sign of madness and poetry a sign of mental health. While we could understand this strategy as an effort to deepen the conventional opposition between poetry and reason or simply amuse an audience through imaginative play, it is also, and perhaps more importantly, an attempt to emphasize two very different habits of mind: one that incapacitates the self through ratiocination and the other which liberates the self through symbolic action.[3] According to Chesterton's calculus of terms, the logician is

---

[2]G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy: The Romance of Faith* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1908; rpt. New York: Doubleday, 1990), p. 16.

[3]While "symbolic action" has a wide variety of uses in contemporary criticism, I use it to signify a fundamentally "pragmatic" approach to literature. See Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*, Third Edition (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1967), p. 89: "[Symbolic action] assumes that a poem's structure is to be described most accurately by thinking always of a poem's function. It assumes that the poem is designed to 'do something' for the poet and his readers and that we

worded sequence. He makes possible a situation of Miltonic "obedience." In Raphael's terms, Crashaw's language enables ontological "improvement," and frees up the self of the incomplete "now" to become "improved by the tract of time," to "turn all to spirit" through active participation in the hypothetical "not yet."[16]

The same is true of every other imagistic transformation in the poem. Where hope, for Cowley, is a "Vain Shadow" that "doth vanish quite / Both at full noone, and perfect night," it is a "Faire cloud of fire" for Crashaw (ll. 5-6, 15). It does not vanish in the absolute presence or absence of light. Rather it is "both shade, and light, / Our life in death, our day in night" (ll. 15-16). The transformation of terms here is particularly poignant. While Cowley disparages hope because of its paradoxical nature, Crashaw upholds it on the same grounds. At the same time, he alters the structure of the paradox. He agrees with Cowley that hope vanishes at "full noone" and "perfect night," but he goes on to assert that hope encompasses both "night" and "noone." Instead of helplessly shifting between two extremes, Crashaw integrates the extremes so that the seemingly incompatible orders of light and dark, life and death become two parts of one process. What we are left with is a situation of reciprocity between these orders of experience. Crashaw does not simply theorize the nature of hope. He also enacts it, enabling the reader/writer to lay aside a complete though imperfect "is"-self and put on an incomplete though perfect "ought"-self. He contrives a metaphoric sequence that unfolds through time with an upward thrust, redeeming the self through the writerly act of its unfolding.[17]

---

[16]Trotter argues along similar lines. He contends that Crashaw "initiates the abandonment of self-love which enables the believer to transcend the play of chance and necessity." Instead of functioning as "the endless postponing of fulfilment," it "operates along the vertical axis of experience, as the *rite de passage* between one level of being to another." See Trotter, 74. I am interested to show that Crashaw not only theorizes this process but also enacts it through his use of language.

[17]Roland Barthes asserts that "evaluation finds ... precisely this value: what can be written (rewritten) today: the 'writerly' (*le scriptible*). Why is the writerly our value? Because the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text.... Opposite the writerly text is its countervalue, its negative, reactive value:

insane because his thinking engenders a psycho-spiritual incapacity. There is little doubt that his "explanation of a thing is always complete and often in a purely rational sense satisfactory." But since his "mind moves in a . . . narrow circle," his theory cannot explain things in a "large way." Ultimately, his goal of "logical completeness" results in "spiritual contraction." While he desires to know all things, he ends up enclosing himself "in the clean and well-lit prison of one idea" (22). The poet, on the other hand, is sane because he attends to the complexity of the world with ludic assent, recognizing that "there is something cleaner and cooler outside the suffocation of a single argument." Like the mystic, he emphasizes movement of being over clarity of perception. He cares little for epistemological precision. Instead, he strives at every turn for spiritual buoyancy. He does not long after the comfort of a predictable existence. Nor does he attempt to reduce the world to manageable proportions. Rather, he embraces the insoluble mystery of life and asks for nothing more than "exaltation and expansion, a world to stretch himself in" (17).

One of the most significant aspects of Chesterton's poetic theory is the continuity that it bears with his literary *praxis*. Chesterton does not merely tell us about a poetic principle; he also performs it at the point of signification. Instead of following an analytical method, thereby submitting to the authoritative voice of the semantic norm, he breaks out into the expansive space of the mystic/poet, advancing himself and his reader forward and upward through metaphoric subterfuge. The epigraph at the beginning of this essay is a good example of Chesterton's technique. While implying a connection between "head" and "heavens" through phonetic correspondence, Chesterton draws out the various meanings of both terms and then strategically plays them off one another, initiating a dialectical movement from one order of experience to another. As one mind ruptures under cosmic strain and the other rises expansively into the heavens, we encounter more than the delight of a well-disposed conceit. Moving through the metaphoric sequence, we become participants in an ontological process. Chesterton's language functions

---

can make the most relevant observations about its design by considering the poem as the embodiment of this act."

as a symbolic act, enabling a paralyzed and impoverished self to chart a new course of identification.

We find a similar transformation in Chesterton's closing comments on Cowper's madness. Having thrown together a series of unlikely images, he pares down his argument to a simple juxtaposition: "He was damned by John Calvin; he was almost saved by John Gilpin" (17). Again, the phonetic correspondences are obvious here as is the antithesis between Calvin the demon and Gilpin the redeemer. But as we bear witness to this clash of sound and sense, our readerly selves remain unsatisfied. Chesterton refuses to flatter our expectations. Instead, he would persuade us of a remedy by infecting us with a style. He does not *eliminate* inadequate ideas or exchange one absolute truth for another. On the contrary, he carries out a dialectical process from one order of experience to another, thereby equipping his reader for redemptive action. Where the madman would supply the mind with more arguments, Chesterton gives it room to move, enabling the completed and contracted self to escape its "circular rut" through a "voluntary, vigorous and mystical act" (22).

Given its twentieth century context, *Orthodoxy* may seem like an unusual starting point for considering Crashaw's "On Hope." I have begun here, however, because the distinction between the poet/mystic and logician/madman is heuristic for considering the dialectical structure of voicing in Crashaw's poem. Throughout the critical history of "On Hope," readers have associated Cowley's voicing with secular thinking and Crashaw's with religious truth. Cowley is typically understood as a "worldly philosopher" who argues "his case against hope in a methodical and systematic way" and whose verses are "analytical and logical, dependent on analogy, hypotheses, and syllogistic reasoning to advance a conclusion that seems inevitably to follow from the evidence" (Miller 69; Parrish 101). Crashaw, on the other hand, is thought of as a "Christian philosopher," whose "exuberant and enthusiastic verses" aim at "presenting the position of hope among the hierarchical virtues of faith, hope, and love" (Parrish 101). While this distinction is integral to the poem, I would like to suggest that Crashaw does more than merely argue "the value of hope" or present "the position of hope" among a hierarchy of other theological terms. What he does is advance the rhetoric of the Chestertonian poet. Where Cowley reduces his subject to rational-

empirical dimensions, Crashaw expands it into a wider sphere, placing the emphasis on artifice, action and ontology.[4] The irony of Cowley's method is striking. He begins with the premise of logical consistency in order to prove that hope is inconsistent, but what he ends up doing is undermining the figurative "inconsistencies" of his own rhetoric. That is, throughout the poem Cowley deploys various tropes and figures in order to deprecate the imaginative casuistry of hope, but he ends by undermining the figurative "inconsistencies" of his own rhetoric. Crashaw avoids this line of thinking altogether. He refuses to capitulate to the demands of logical consistency or rational-empirical proof and instead proceeds according to the principle of symbolic action. While he manages to prove little about the nature of hope, he succeeds in dramatizing the activity of hope through his own language use. In other words, Crashaw argues *demonstratively*. Unlike Cowley, he consolidates his theory and poetic *praxis*, so that his definitions of hope become hopeful acts that enable ontological movement within an encompassing devotional process.

While Crashaw's perspective on hope is privileged in the poem, Cowley's position is equally important since it forms the backbone for Crashaw's own response. Cowley launches his polemic in stanza one, claiming that hope is "weake" because it suffers ruin alike "if it

---

[4]David Trotter makes a similar distinction, associating Cowley's polemic with "propositional truth" and Crashaw's with "locutionary truth." See David Trotter, *The Poetry of Abraham Cowley* (London: MacMillan Press, 1979), p. 4. Trotter defines "propositional truth" as arguments derived "from 'the thing itself, or from the principles of natural reason'" and "locutionary truth" as arguments derived from "'the authority, and good opinion we have, of him that hath said it.'" While this distinction is helpful for understanding the perspectives of Cowley and Crashaw, it is also somewhat limiting. Crashaw shows little concern for the "authority" or "good opinion" of his language. What he seems most interested in is the practice of hope itself. In this sense, he is not merely expressing opinions or beliefs. Instead, he is inscribing the action of hope into his language, enabling himself and his reader to transcend an imperfect "now" by enacting a desirable "not yet." I would like to suggest that this process of writing *through* rather than writing *about* is fundamentally ontological in orientation; ultimately, it enables the reading self to move beyond what is merely plausible and become what it is not.

succeed, and if it misse" (ll. 1-2).[5] His thinking runs as follows: if hope manages to achieve the thing hoped for, it destroys itself because it cannot exist in the realm of fruition; and if it fails, it shuts itself away in a tightly sealed tomb, the object of delight remaining perpetually beyond reach. What we are left with is an insoluble contradiction. Hope either subverts itself through success or becomes an absence in search of an unattainable presence. The logic here is so flawless that it is easy to overlook the subtext. Cowley's argument rests on both mimetic and rational-empirical assumptions. Hope fails not simply because it is self-effacing, but because it lacks a substantive aspect and thus the potential to render up a situation of actuality, whether it be "Good" or "Ill." The end of hope is the happiness of heaven. But instead of reifying a heavenly *Telos* where happiness resides, hope drifts across our path as a phantom or "Vaine shadow" that "vanish[es] quite / Both at full noone, and perfect night" (ll. 5-6). At every turn, hope holds out the promise of happiness, but it either fails to make good on its promise or undermines its own existence. From this perspective, hope is not only an illusion, but also a harmful distraction. In fact, as Cowley suggests, it is "the most hopelesse thing of all" (l. 10).

In the third stanza, Cowley continues this line of thinking, focusing specifically on the preemptive aspect of hope and the way that it brings foreclosure to true happiness. While hope pretends to be "a bold taster of delight," it goes too far and "devour'st it quite" (ll. 21-22). It pretends to "bring'st us an estate" but in the end "leav'st us poor," "clogging it with Legacies before" (ll. 23-24). The idea here is that hope, while conveying the sign of success, offers too much of an imperfect thing, satisfying the soul with the semblance of happiness rather than happiness itself. Again, the subtext is easy to overlook. By arguing against hope in this way, Cowley implies the need for a situation of absolute completion. That is, in order to take legitimate pleasure in our "joyes" (l. 24), we must be able to wed them entirely.

---

[5]Richard Crashaw, *The Poems of Richard Crashaw*, ed. L.C. Martin, second edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), p. 143. For a complete rendering of "On Hope" as printed in the 1957 Oxford edition, see Appendix I. All quotations from Crashaw's poem will correspond to Appendix I and will be indicated by line number(s) in the text of my essay.

The difficulty with hope is that it prevents this consummation and plays pimp to our joy. Instead of suspending the self in marital bliss, it delivers "deflour'd virgins to our bed" (l. 26). There is little doubt that hope imports "Good fortunes," but Cowley insists that such fortunes are all "without gaine" because they are ephemeral and subject to change (l. 27). What we require is an immediate and encompassing joy like "Wine" that is "kept close" when newly opened (l. 29-30).

Cowley expands this perspective in stanza five, defining hope according to the imagery of absence and emptiness. Hope's promises are like a "hundred blankes" in a "Lotterie" with one prize (ll. 41-42). Hope itself is like a "Fond Archer, who tak'st [his] aim so far" that he is unable to hit the target and so the target lies bare (l. 43). By using this kind of imagery, Cowley anticipates a distinctly post-structural habit of mind. Hope, like metaphor, is unable to cross the gap between itself and the Thing of Promise.[6] As a result, those who entrust themselves to it become bound up in a situation of *aporia*, pointing here and there but never enjoying the satisfaction of closure.[7] Cowley himself makes the connection between metaphor and hope by associating the latter with "fancie":

> Thine empty cloud the eye, it selfe deceives
> With shapes that our own fancie gives:
> A cloud which gilt, and painted now appears,
> But must drop presently in teares. (ll. 45-48)

Cowley's poetics are clear. Since hope is nothing more than an "empty cloud" that we fill with "shapes that our own fancy gives," we require a method of seeing that is based on reality, a poetic that will lend itself to linguistic determinacy. As he contends in the Preface to his *Poems*, "There is not so great a Lye to be found in any Poet, as the vulgar

---

[6]Metaphor, claims Derrida, is supplementary to what is actually present and must therefore "count with a determined absence." See Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1982), 241.

[7]Of course, Cowley's perspective differs from the post-structuralists' in that it implies the possibility of a closure.

conceit of men, that Lying is Essential to good Poetry."[8] What we need, he says, is a poetry of truth, for "Truth is truest posie" (243). We must cast out "the confused antiquated dreams of senseless Fables and Metamorphoses" and replace them with images drawn directly from the "Kingdom of God" (13). If we fail to achieve such a vision, we will find ourselves sailing by "*ignes fatui*" rather than "North Starres" (l. 50). If we allow hope's "false beames" to prevail "o'er Reason," we will become "Chymicks" and "Lovers" who are led "insensibly on, / With strange witchcraft of *Anon*" (ll. 49, 64-66). We must take our cues from "Reason" so that we may root ourselves firmly in reality. We must write our story according to truth rather than "fancie."

What this amounts to is a kind of Chestertonian madness. Cowley's argument is certainly complete, but, like his vision of the world, it is also contracted. He pretends to liberate the self through demystification, but ends up incapacitating it according to the same principle. The illusion is an attractive one. Reality is thought of as having objective dimensions and categorical fixity. The goal is to apprehend the object, distinguish the categories and thereby comprehend the reality. But as Chesterton points out, such a project ultimately fails. Our effort to know the thing-in-itself imprisons us within the stifling dimensions of one thing. To sail by "North Starres" does not bring us any closer to the truth. Rather, it brings our prison walls nearer and forces us to bow before a pernicious idol that we call "Truth."

Paradise Lost provides a useful counterpoint here. Cowley's thinking throughout "On Hope" is characteristic of Milton's Adam just prior to his fall. When Raphael comes to speak with Adam in the bower, Adam's sole desire is to know "full relation" of things:

> sudden mind arose
> In Adam, not to let the occasion pass
> Given him by this great conference to know
> Of things above his world, and of their being
> Who dwell in heaven, whose excellence he saw
> Transcend his own so far, whose radiant forms

---

[8]Abraham Cowley, *Poems*, ed. A.R. Waller (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1905), p. 13.

> Divine effulgence, whose high power so far
> Exceeded human, and his wary speech
> Thus to the empyreal minister he framed. (ll. 5.452-60)[9]

Aspiring to an authoritative ratiocination of the cosmos, Adam engages Raphael in conversation in order to "know / Of things above his world," entreating him to compare their earthly feast with "heaven's high feasts" (l. 5.467). But Raphael does not answer him directly. In fact, he circumvents Adam's line of questioning all together, steering the conversation away from strictly scientistic matters and imparting the divine warning of continued obedience which was "entrusted to him by God" (ll. 5.234-45). Raphael places the emphasis on action and ontology, suggesting that Adam and Eve "may at last turn all to spirit, / Improved by tract of time" if they remain obedient to God and "retain / Unalterably firm" his love (ll. 5.469-72, 501-3). He does not care about the precise nature of heavenly or earthly feasts. Nor does he try to satisfy Adam's question in the way that it is formulated. His desire is to provide Adam with knowledge that is useful for sustaining his happiness in God. He wants Adam to realize that his desires have an ontological bearing and that they can be satisfied only through the cultivation of virtue.

Adam mistakes Raphael's meaning entirely. He answers his "propitious guest" by commending his knowledge of natural processes, regarding Raphael's words as having the capacity to mirror the cosmos:

> Well hast thou taught the way that might direct
> Our knowledge, and the scale of nature set
> From centre to circumference, whereon
> In contemplation of created things
> By steps we may ascend to God. (5.508-12)

He then indicates positivistic motives by assuming that the world is wholly objective and the self ontologically stable. This is most

---

[9]John Milton. *John Milton: A Critical Edition of the Major Works*, eds. Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991). All quotations from Milton's poem will be indicated by book and line number(s) in the text of my essay.

apparent when he asks Raphael what he means by, "If ye be found / Obedient?":

> Can we want obedience then
> To him or possibly his love desert
> Who formed us from the dust, and placed us here
> Full to the utmost measure of what bliss
> Human desires can seek or apprehend? (5.514-18)

Adam cannot see that virtue and knowledge are interwoven in God's economy. Nor does he notice the irony of his epistemic desire. Indeed, Eden is "Full to the utmost measure of what bliss / Human desires can seek," but Adam is clearly not "full"—he hungers after a bliss that exists outside of what his desire can attain.

By disparaging hope as weak and contradictory, Cowley falls into the same difficulty as Milton's Adam. Through an effort to understand "the thing in itself," he ends up limiting both himself and his reader to a cosmos of mere things. Moreover, he precludes the possibility of positive moral action. For Cowley, reality and the self are categorically fixed and so he places the emphasis on the "the way things are" throughout the poem. However, moral action or what Raphael calls "obedience," participates in the "not yet." It brings us into contact with a hypothetical future, opening up the possibility of ontological improvement. The underlying premise for Cowley is that reality is limited to the world of understanding and the self of the present. What this ultimately leads to is the imprisonment of the world and an incapacitation of self. By contrast, Raphael expands the perspective of the "now" to include the "not yet" and, in the process, frees Adam and the reader to pursue the good and so become good.

Crashaw responds to Cowley by completely circumventing his line of reasoning, engaging him in the manner that Raphael and Chesterton do their manic and maniacal interlocutors. Instead of fitting himself inside Cowley's "small and cramped eternity" (Chesterton 20), he pushes out the boundaries in every direction and testifies to what is possible from within. He is not interested to provide his reader with more arguments, thereby intensifying Cowley's maddening analysis. Rather, he attempts to give us ontological buoyancy, to persuade us that there is a more abundant life beyond the prison-like dimensions of a well-constructed syllogism. And he

does this by shifting our attention from a proto-Enlightment epistemology to an ethically oriented ontology. Where Cowley argues that hope has a "weake being" because it is unable to reify the heavenly goal, Crashaw claims that it has the "surest being" because it gives definition to our "Nothing." Hope does not render up a Thing. Nor does it helplessly defer to No-thing. On the contrary, it is a mode of life that gives form to an imperfect reality and an incomplete self.

Crashaw goes on in stanza eight to link the ontological benefits of hope with the imagination. He concedes to Cowley's charge that hope is fanciful and entails imaginative deception. But he suggests that the deception is spiritually advantageous. The fact that hope "deceives / With shapes that our owne fancie gives" does not render it useless or even detrimental. On the contrary, we experience hope as a "*kind* cheat" and "*faire* fallacy" and this is because it enables an ontological process that is otherwise denied to us in the "actual" world (l. 76, italics mine). Through hope "Wee are not where, or what wee bee, / But what, and where wee would be" (l. 79).[10] By speaking of hope in this way, Crashaw runs against the rational-empirical grain. He is not interested to chart out a theology or advance a doctrinal truth. In fact, from the perspective of the doctrinal purist, he comes very close to undermining the legitimacy of hope by associating it with falsehood. Crashaw is ultimately interested in living the Christian life and, for him, this entails the convergence of form, action and ontology.

The chief significance of Crashaw's view of hope, like Chesterton's poetics, is the continuity it bears with his literary *praxis*. Where Cowley undermines his poetic language through a rational-empirical reduction, Crashaw makes his poetic language productive. He does not merely convey a vision of hope, but also enacts it symbolically. We see this most clearly in the dialectical structure of the poem as a whole. While the alternating pattern of voicing in "On Hope" suggests an opposition of views, Crashaw refuses to exclude Cowley's perspective. Instead, he folds it into his own poetic act, thereby recreating it as one

---

[10]Crashaw's view of hope in this passage echoes Sir Philip Sidney's claim that poetry "borrow[s] from nothing of what is, hath been, or shall be; but range[s], only . . . into the divine consideration of what may be and should be": *A Defence of Poetry*, ed. J.A. Van Dorsten (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), p. 26.

stage in an unfolding process. Numerous critics have commented on Crashaw's transformative technique in the poem. For example, Clarence Miller claims that "Crashaw transforms Cowley's human hope into the traditional theological virtue of hope." Instead of dividing out sacred and secular styles, Crashaw "presents a series of parallel arguments drawn from nature and grace [and] . . . embodies these arguments in a matching series of profane metaphors which are transformed into sacred symbols."[11] In this way, he "seeks not so much to harmonize as to exploit the tensions between the secular and the sacred, the human and the divine" (70). That is, he does not meet "Cowley's arguments but transcends them." Austin Warren argues along similar lines. Like Miller, he claims that Crashaw's "defense of 'Hope,' takes its ten-line stanza and most of its images and figures from its Cowleyan model." The chief difference between Cowley and Crashaw, from Warren's perspective, is that "the latter's characteristic parisons, oxymora, and alliterations have no warrant from the former."[12] Parrish also foregrounds Crashaw's transformative technique. "What Crashaw creates, he says, "is an entirely different perspective, a new context in which the matter of hope can be reconsidered." And this context "is not one where logic, reason, and nature govern; it is a context where belief and its attendant virtues are accepted *a priori*."[13] According to Parrish, "Crashaw does not answer argument with argument." Rather, "he answers argument with enthusiastic affirmation and a multiplicity of images, a kind of baroque fullness, that persuade through their very abundance." Unlike Cowley, he "speaks as a representative of the Word and thus takes us beyond individual moments, individual circumstances—in a very important sense, even beyond time" (105).

While these perspectives are important for directing our attention to Crashaw's transformative method, they are somewhat problematic because they place an undue emphasis on doctrine and theological truth. According to these critics, Crashaw transforms human hope into

---

[11]Clarence H. Miller, "The Order of Stanzas in Cowley and Crashaw's 'On Hope,'" *Studies in Philology* 61 (1964): 73.

[12]Austin Warren, *Richard Crashaw: A Study in Baroque Sensibility* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1939), p. 99.

[13]Paul A. Parrish, "Cowley and Crashaw on Hope," *John Donne Journal* 4:1 (1985): 102.

a theological virtue, a profane metaphor into sacred symbol, a proof into belief, and time into eternity. The idea here is that Crashaw propounds a standard Christian view by capitalizing on the terminology of secular language and thought. But Crashaw's transformation of terms is not chiefly doctrinal. Rather, it embodies a devotional exercise of hope.[14] For instance, by transforming hope's "weake being" in stanza one to its "Subt'lest, but surest being" in stanza two, Crashaw refuses to dismiss weakness. Instead, he upholds the continuity between weakness and surety through the intermediary term, "Subt'lest."[15] In this way, he contrives a dialectical sequence that allows a progression from the former to the latter. According to this perspective, Crashaw does not merely describe the nature of hope. Indeed, he provides definitions and indicates that it is important to forget "those things which are behind, and [reach] forth unto those things which are before" (Phil. 3:13). But he also enacts hope itself, allowing his reader to forget and reach forth through a

---

[14]My distinction here is similar to the one that Kinereth Meyer and Rachel Salmon make between devotional and theological language: "The language of theology talks about its object in an attempt to define its essence, while the language of devotion ... attempts to make something happen." Meyer and Salmon acknowledge that "devotional modes such as prayer and meditation ... function to specify meaning," but they also suggest that such modes are designed "to bring about change." Devotional language "does not merely, or even primarily, point to meaning, but itself acts." See Kinereth Meyer and Rachel Salmon, "The Poetry of Conversion as Language Act: Gerard Manley Hopkins and T.S. Eliot," in *Gerard Manley Hopkins and Critical Discourse*, ed. Eugene Hollahan. (New York: AMS, 1993): 235.

[15]The word "subtlety" has an ambiguous history. Nearly all of its meanings have relevancy here:

Of persons, the mind, its faculties or operations: Acuteness, sagacity, penetration: in modern use chiefly with implication of delicate or keen perception of fine distinctions or nice points.

Skill, cleverness, dexterity.

Craftiness, cunning, esp. of a treacherous kind; guile treachery.

An ingenious contrivance; a crafty or cunning device; an artifice; freq. in an unfavourable sense, a wily stratagem or trick, something craftily invented. (OED)

I refer to "Subt'lest" as a bridging term because it combines the weakness of aesthetic contrivance and the surety of perceptual clarity.

A similar transformation occurs at the end of the second stanza. From Cowley's perspective, hope harms "both the hornes of Fates dilemma," but for Crashaw the "dilemma" is "thinne" and "Shrinkes, like the sick Moone at the wholesome morne" (ll. 4, 19-20). Again, Crashaw capitalizes on paradox while modifying its Cowleyan arrangement. Instead of allowing hope to remain subject to the Fates, Crashaw configures it as the dominant trope. According to this reversal, the Fates are no longer jeopardized by hope; quite the opposite, they run the risk of undermining hope's ascendant position. And yet, Crashaw declares that such a situation is impossible: the "Fates cannot find out a capacity / Of hurting" hope (ll. 17-18). This is because hope embodies both the Fates. The "thinne dilemma . . . Shrinkes" because the opposing poles have been fused together in an encompassing trope. Crashaw himself performs this fusion through the image of "the sick Moone" fading "at the wholesome morne." The contrasting orders of sickness and health and "Moone" and "morne" are not completely opposed to one another in this passage. On the contrary, they form a continuous sequence. Hope allows the "sick Moone" to merge with the "wholesome morne." From a strictly semantic perspective, this kind of continuity is illegitimate because it undermines the principle of categorical fixity. Health, according to the linguistic bureaucrat, has no part in sickness. But from a devotional perspective, it is essential. Ultimately, it allows hope to have its desired effect; it enables a moonstruck sick-self to live through the wholeness of morn and become something other than what it is.

Crashaw's transformative technique continues throughout the poem. Where hope clogs our estate "with Legacies before," it becomes "Loves Legacie under lock of key" (ll. 24, 31). And where it brings "deflour'd virgins to our bed," it becomes a "distant" and "chaste kisse" that "wrongs no more joys maidenhead, / Then Spousall rites prejudge the marriage-bed" (ll. 26, 38-40). In stanza six, Crashaw builds on Cowley's use of wine imagery and suggests that "generous

---

what can be read, but not written: the readerly (*le lisible*)." See *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 4. By using the term "writerly" to signify the unfolding of Crashaw's dialectic, I am suggesting that an active reader/writer is required for the dialectic to unfold. Crashaw's language resists consumption and encourages hermeneutic collaboration.

wine with age growes strong, not sower" (l. 53). Although "Wine kept close doth better taste," it does not waste away "If it take ayre before" (ll. 29-30). Rather, like "*Time*," it becomes "taster to Eternity." Hope's

> golden head never hangs downe,
> Till in the lap of Loves full noone
> It falls, and dyes: oh no, it melts away
> As doth the dawne into the day:
> As lumps of Sugar lose themselves, and twine
> Their subtile essence with the soule of Wine. (ll. 55-60)

Crashaw also builds on Cowley's use of alchemical and love imagery. While hope, for Cowley, "blows the Chymicks, and the Lovers fire," leading them "insensibly on, / With the strange witchcraft of *Anon*," Crashaw transforms it into "a wise and well stay'd fire / Temper'd twixt cold despaire, and torrid joy" (ll. 64, 65-6, 82-3). Instead of tempting its devotees with "fond desire," abandoning them to Nature's "endless Laborinths," hope rises up like a "glorious Huntresse" and gives "chase" to "The God of Nature in the field of Grace" (ll. 63, 68, 89-90).

In each of these instances, Crashaw plays the role of dialectician, moving himself and his reader through a process that embodies the action of hope. Indeed, he tells us much about hope, but his purpose is not to grasp a Thing. He is not interested to stretch his mind across the rational-empirical Real. Rather, he aspires to live with, in, and for Christ. That is, he strives to participate in the ongoing, redemptive transaction of taking off the old self of sin and death and putting on the new self of life and love. His poetics are embodied in "The Author's Motto" to the *Steps*: "Live Jesus, Live, and let it bee / My life to dye, for love of thee" (Crashaw 78). Crashaw uses language for the purpose of living and relating. Instead of repeating the familiar forms of "truth," he overturns them and enacts a Christly paradox, thereby freeing the reading and writing selves to become what they would be rather than what they are.

McMaster University

Appendix I

On Hope,
By way of Question and Answer, betweene
A. Cowley, *and* R. Crashaw.

Cowley.

Hope, whose weake being ruin'd is
Alike, if it succeed, and if it misse.
Whom Ill, and Good doth equally confound,
And both the hornes of Fates dilemma wound.
Vaine shadow ! that dost vanish quite
Both at full noone, and perfect night.
The Fates have not a possibility
Of blessing thee.
If things then from their ends wee happy call,
'Tis hope is the most hopelesse thing of all.

Crashaw.

Deare Hope ! Earth's dowry, and Heavens debt,
The entity of things that are not yet.
Subt'lest, but surest being ! Thou by whom
Our Nothing hath a definition.
Faire cloud of fire, both shade, and light,
Our life in death, our day in night.
Fates cannot find out a capacity
Of hurting thee.
From thee their thinne dilemma with blunt horne
Shrinkes, like the sick Moone at the wholesome morne.

Cowley.

Hope, thou bold taster of delight,
Who, in stead of doing so, devour'st it quite.
Thou bring'st us an estate, yet leav'st us poore,
By clogging it with Legacies before.

The joyes, which wee intire should wed,
Come deflour'd virgins to our bed.
Good fortunes without gaine imported bee,
So mighty Custome's paid to thee.
For joy, like Wine kept close doth better taste :
If it take ayre before, its spirits waste.

Crashaw.

Thou art Loves Legacie under lock
Of Faith : the steward of our growing stocke.
Our Crown-lands lye above, yet each meale brings
A seemly portion for the Sons of Kings.
Nor will the Virgin-joyes wee wed
Come lesse unbroken to our bed.
Because that from the bridall cheeke of Blisse,
Thou thus steal'st downe a distant kisse,
Hopes chaste kisse wrongs no more joyes maidenhead,
Then Spousall rites prejudge the marriage-bed.

Cowley.

Hope, Fortunes cheating Lotterie,
Where for one prize an hundred blankes there bee.
Fond Archer Hope, who tak'st thine ayme so farre,
That still, or short, or wide thine arrowes are.
Thine empty cloud the eye, it selfe deceives
With shapes that our owne fancie gives :
A cloud, which gilt, and painted now appeares,
But must drop presently in teares.
When thy false beames o're Reasons light prevaile,
By *ignes fatui*, not North starres we sayle.

Crashaw.

Faire *Hope* ! our earliest Heaven ! by thee
Young *Time* is taster to Eternity.
The generous wine with age grows strong, not sower ;

Nor need wee kill thy fruit to smell thy flower.
Thy golden head never hangs downe,
Till in the lap of Loves full noone
It falls, and dyes : oh no, it melts away
As doth the dawne into the day :
As lumpes of Sugar lose themselves, and twine
Their subtile essence with the soule of Wine.

Cowley.

Brother of Feare ! more gaily clad
The merrier the Foole o'th'two, yet quite as mad.
Sire of Repentance ! Child of fond desire,
That blows the Chymicks, and the Lovers fire,
Still leading them insensibly on,
With the strange witchcraft of *Anon.*
By thee the one doth changing Nature through
Her endlesse Laborinths pursue,
And th' other chases woman, while she goes
More wayes, and turnes, then hunted Nature knows.

Crashaw.

Fortune alas above the worlds law warres :
Hope kicks the curl'd heads of conspiring starres.
Her keele cuts not the waves, where our winds stirre,
And *Fates* whole Lottery is one blanke to her.
Her shafts, and shee fly farre above,
And forrage in the fields of light, and love.
Sweet *Hope* ! kind cheat ! faire fallacy ! by thee
Wee are not where, or what wee bee,
But what, and where wee would bee : thus art thou
Our absent presence, and our future now.

Crashaw.

Faith's Sister ! Nurse of faire desire !
Feares Antidote ! a wise, and well stay'd fire

Temper'd 'twixt cold despaire, and torrid joy :
Queen Regent in young Loves minoritie.
  Though the vext Chymick vainly chases
  His fugitive gold through all her faces,
  And loves more fierce, more fruitless fires assay
    One face more fugitive then all they,
True *Hope's* a glorious Huntresse, and her chase
The God of Nature in the field of Grace. 90