"Spell it wrong to read it right":
Crashaw's Assessment of Human Language

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S ince Mario Praz first gave it life, a number of critics have attempted to argue down Richard Crashaw's tenacious reputation as a poet of curiously European tastes and Counter-Reformation proclivities. The poetry, Thomas Healy argues, fails to support this claim: most of it was written during Crashaw's tenure at Cambridge and contains little that Laudianism cannot account for.[1] To be sure, the qualities that first led critics to think of Crashaw as a Catholic poet may well be the same qualities that led Colonel John Hutchinson to call Peterhouse, where Crashaw officiated at Cambridge, "Popish."[2] But trading "Catholic" for "high-church Anglican" merely moves the poet from one pigeonhole to another. Paul A. Parrish recommends instead granting Crashaw his due eclecticism and reading that eclecticism as evocative of England's tempestuous seventeenth century, "a time of separation and synthesis."[3]

Ultimately, Crashaw's ecclesiastical associations may prove less useful to the critical study of his poetry than an investigation of the singular impulses and inclinations that produced those associations. C. A. Patrides suggests, for instance, that Crashaw responded to Catholicism's accommodation of "normally exclusive states such as the mystical and the rational."[4] Indeed, Crashaw was powerfully attracted to the capacity of

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[1] Healy, *Richard Crashaw* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986), p. 4.

[2] Quoted in Austin Warren, *Richard Crashaw: A Study in Baroque Sensibility* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1939), p. 32.

[3] Parrish, *Richard Crashaw* (Boston: Twayne, 1980), p. 33.

[4] Patrides, *Figures in a Renaissance Context*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), p. 148.

Catholic mysticism to "[ascend] beyond the literal in terms of the literal, and [wing] above the physical by means of the physical."[5] That attraction stems from a guiding interest in an abstract formula by which the limitations of a deficient category furnish the means of its transcendence. Call it what you will—Stanley Fish calls it "dialectical"[6]—this formula provides a hermeneutic for not only Crashaw's religious but also his poetic thought.

Without compromising his singularity, this essay presents Crashaw as one of several prominent English religious writers concerned with the role of reason in faith during the intellectually turbulent years after Bacon and before the Civil War. Like William Chillingworth, who made room for reason in faith with a scholastic distinction between metaphysical and moral certainty,[7] and Thomas Browne, whose *Religio Medici* (1642) balances the two with a reason that reveals divine mysteries it cannot solve, Crashaw writes to engage religious questions and doubts, not to inoculate them with doctrine. Questions characterize his poetry, often providing in an opening line the impetus for the rest of the poem: "Lord, what is man?"; "Know you faire, on what you looke?"; "Is she a FLAMING Fountain, or a Weeping fire?"[8] And poems such as "A Hymne of the Nativity" and "Hymn to the Name of Jesus" stage an epistemological drama analogous to, but distinct from, the Brownian pursuit of an *oh altitudo*[9] as poetic personae learn the limits of their art by overshooting them.

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[5] Patrides, p. 148.

[6] See Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), esp. pp. 1–3.

[7] Robert R. Orr, *Reason and Authority: The Thought of William Chillingworth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 45–70.

[8] *The Complete Poetry of Richard Crashaw*, ed. George Walton Williams (New York: Norton, 1974). All citations of Crashaw's poetry, parenthetical hereafter, refer to this edition.

[9] "I love to lose my selfe in a mystery to pursue my reason to an *oh altitudo*. 'Tis my solitary recreation to pose my apprehension with those involved ænigma's and riddles of the Trinity, with Incarnation and Resurrection. I can answer all the objections of Satan, and my rebellious reason, with that odde resolution I learned of *Tertullian, Certum est quia impossibile est*" (*Sir Thomas Browne: The Major Works*, ed. C. A. Patrides [Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1977], pp. 69–70).

Crashaw carves out his own territory in this context by engaging a very specific set of religious questions in a very particular fashion. As if provoked by Bacon's call to arms against the Idols of the Marketplace in the *Novum Organum* (1620), Crashaw turns language in upon itself, employing poetry as a means of dramatically assessing the limits of human language in matters of divinity. This assessment is inseparable from his ambivalent valuation of humanity itself, in which he alternatively sees greatness and nothing at all. By examining the one through the other, I attempt to resolve one of the great complexities of Crashaw's sacred verse: its marked vacillation between hope and despair with regard to human language.

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Richard Crashaw's sacred poetry swings between two widely divergent poles in its valuation of humanity. From the negative pole, the poet sees human beings as dust, flies, nothing, or next-to-nothing, and so belittles their works as to make the reader wonder what possible stake he could have in poetry:

> Why shouldst thou bow thy awfull Brest to see
> What mine own madnesses have done with me?
> <div style="text-align:center">("Charitas Nimia," 33–34)</div>

Ironically, the driving point here is that God *does* bow and see. In this poem and others, Crashaw invokes the vast gulf between the greatness of God and the relative inconsequence of humanity and human works in a mode of negative praise. He establishes a simple function of love that maximizes God through the diminution of humanity: as "man" approaches nothing, God, who loves "man," approaches the infinite. The flaws of the creation thus glorify the flawless creator. "Charitas Nimia" begins with an echo of the Psalms[10] and their articulation of what was for Crashaw a pressing question: "Lord, what is man?" The poet answers this question variously, copiously, and decisively. "Man," he tells us, is "a thing of nought" (4), "sorry merchandise" (7), "wormes" (10), "froward

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[10]Psalms 8:4, "What is man, that thou art mindful of him?," and 144:3, "Lord, what is man, that thou takest knowledge of him!" (King James Version).

Dust" (29), "a peice [sic] of peevish clay" (31), a "foolish fly" (43)—all of which adds up to nothing. Yet this nothing paradoxically produces something, namely, a vision of God's glory and a means of redemption:

> O my SAVIOUR, *make me see*
> How dearly thou hast payd for me;
>
> That lost again my LIFE may prove
> As then in DEATH, so now in love.
> (63–66; my emphasis)

With its methodical diminution of humanity, "Charitas Nimia" grants the reader the vision that the poet here begs for himself. It "makes us see" how dearly God has paid by thoroughly establishing the worthlessness of the "merchandise" in question. At the same time, however, this study in humility contradicts itself by functioning as a negative expression of the redemptive love of God, which lifts us up out of our naughtiness and ultimately transforms us from dust to spirit. The better we understand our own baseness, the more ennobled we are by that love. Crashaw thus reconciles humility and artistic endeavor with a poem that falsifies its own humble claims in the making. By telling us what we are, "Charitas Nimia" makes us something else.

"Death's Lecture," a funerary poem, performs the same characteristic inversion. The poet writes to silence "the lowd Boasts of poor Mortality" (26) and, as in "Charitas Nimia," to make "man" see his own "true face" (24):

> Come man;
> Hyperbolized NOTHING! know thy span;
> Take thine own measure here: down, down, and bow
> Before thyself in thine idæa; thou
> Huge emptynes! contract thyself; and shrinke
> All thy wild circle to a Point. O sink
> Lower and lower yet; till thy leane size
> Call heavn to look on thee with narrow eyes.
> Lesser and lesser yet; till thou begin
> To show a face, fitt to confesse thy Kin,
> Thy neighbourhood to NOTHING.
> (10–20)

This passage describes the attainment of self-knowledge as a transition from hyperbolized nothing to nothing itself. It proposes a paradoxical epistemology by which knowledge of the self requires the annihilation of the self. When "man" can reduce his idea of himself "to a Point" and, "lower yet," "lesser yet," to something so near nothing as to make Heaven squint, then and only then will humility shed the light of truth upon the path to redemption. At that point and in that humble posture, low stands up to become high:

> This posture is the brave one; this that lyes
> Thus low, stands up (me thinkes,) thus and defies
> The world. All-daring dust and ashes! only you
> Of all interpreters read Nature True.
>
> <div align="right">(29–32)</div>

Crashaw openly advertises the inversion by employing the vocabulary of diminution in the rhetoric of encomium. Dust and ashes appear heroic, and humility is celebrated for its unique access to truth. The knowledge of human limitations leads beyond the limitations of human knowledge.

Finally, "To [Mrs. M. R.] Councel Concerning her Choise" fills out the negative pole by extending its pessimistic assessment of human beings and human works to human language. As the speaker attempts to redirect his reader's attention from "this lower sphear / Of froth and bubbles" (8–9) to the superlunary realm of constancy, familiar language appears in new litanies of depravity. The opening question of "Charitas Nimia" ("Lord, what is man?") reappears in this poem as the persuasive advice of a friend:

> Say, gentle soul, what you can find
> But painted shapes,
> Peacocks and Apes,
> Illustrious flyes,
> Guilded dunghills, glorious LYES.
> Goodly surmises
> And deep disguises,
> Oathes of water, words of wind?
> TRUTH biddes me say, 'tis time you cease to trust
> Your soul to any son of dust.
>
> <div align="right">(10–17)</div>

We have seen these flies and this dust before, but what sets this passage apart is its emphasis on deception. What had been latent in the "Hyperbolized NOTHING" of "Death's Lecture" emerges fully in the "painted shapes" of these lines, in their vainglorious peacocks and mimicking apes, and most of all in their lies, disguises, "Oathes of water," and "words of wind." The last of these suggest that the lower world deceives through language, an idea that the speaker makes unmistakably clear later in the poem, when Crashaw presents "this world of Lyes" (37) as a foil for "Him who never will deceive ye" (40), the world of words yielding to the Word made flesh. Here as elsewhere, the poet defines the high through the low. Our idea of heaven depends upon comparatives such as "braver" (20), "higher" (22), "purer" (35), "more pretious" (35), and "more worthy" (36). Moreover, the expression of that idea depends upon a language that the poet himself distrusts as inconstant and unreliable, a language that gives us water and wind where we would prefer the solidity of stone. Thus, in addition to employing the diminution of humanity as the means of human redemption, the Crashavian inversion in this poem bears the added burden of employing fallen language as the means of its own redemption. The "one good word" (6) that the poet attempts to speak is a self-condemning word, a word that confesses its own insufficiency.[11] But if that word succeeds in turning the thoughts of the reader (whether Mrs. M. R. or ourselves) from the low world to the high, then it will have redeemed itself and falsified its own self-condemnatory claims by speaking true.

This most impressive inversion leads us at last from the negative to the positive pole. Crashaw finds most hope in "man" where he finds him

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[11]A note of the postmodern here may tempt us to press it too far. R. V. Young has read Crashaw's sense of "the final inadequacy of any particular form of signification" in the expression of the divine as anticipatory of the claims of deconstruction, with important qualifications: "Crashaw seems to have known—always already—what the deconstructionists would tell us: signification can only be generated by differences, and signifiers necessarily indicate the absence of what they signify. Yet Crashaw would maintain, contrary to Derrida, that it is only the divine presence, the fullness of Being, that makes difference possible in the first place: only the presence of the Creator—even if deferred or displaced—gives creatures a ground on which to enact their differences" (*Doctrine and Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Poetry: Studies in Donne, Herbert, Crashaw, and Vaughan* [Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000], pp. 75–76).

writing and redeeming fallen language; that is, he veers furthest away from pessimism when he takes a literary tack. The humility expressed so amply in "Charitas Nimia" gives way to greatness when he writes, for instance, on George Herbert and Robert Shelford. Like "Charitas Nimia," the dedicatory poem "On Mr. G. Herberts Book, The Temple" begins with a question: "Know you faire, on what you look?" This question, like the other, suggests that things in the sublunary sphere are not as they seem and that the object in view, a small book, must be explained over against its appearance. But whereas "Lord, what is man?" initiates in the other poem a methodical deflation of the hyperbolized bloat of humanity, this question and its answer—"Divinest love lyes in this booke" (2)—initiate an enlargement and elevation of Herbert's book that ultimately transports it from the natural to the supernatural realm. The speaker describes the book as an angel that will daily carry the reader to heaven

> To take acquantaince of the spheare,
> And all the smooth faced kindred there.
>   (13–14)

Herbert's book proves that human language, when properly handled, can transcend human limitations to capture, contain, and communicate to its reader something of the divine. Like an angel, it mediates between God and humanity.

Crashaw invokes this angelic process of mediation with reference to another writer in "Upon the ensuing Treatises of [Mr. Shelford]." Shelford was a former sizar at Peterhouse[12] and a vocal Laudian. His *Five pious and learned discourses* notably promotes a "holinesse beseeming Gods house,"[13] charity above the other cardinal virtues, and specifically charity toward Rome in its final chapter, "shewing the Antichrist not to be yet come." Crashaw's dedicatory poem, included in the front matter of the volume, attests to its transcendent greatness. Like Herbert, Shelford transcends the sublunary sphere—whose "blots" (3) and "dark sinnes" (4) have "betrayd" religion to "dust"—by achieving and presenting to his readers a vision of religion "Such as . . . / Heav'n set [her] down new

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[12]"Robert Shelford," in *Dictionary of National Biography*.

[13]Shelford, *Five pious and learned discourses* (Cambridge: 1635), p. 17.

drest" (4–5). Human language again achieves supernatural status in the right hands, and the speaker of the poem imagines angels dressing their wings in the pages of the *Discourses*: "and in that garb shall go / If not more glorious, more conspicuous tho" (25–26).

"Ode on a Prayer Book" sets the two poles of Crashaw's valuation of humanity in direct opposition. Military language stages a battle between the true God and the "god of flyes" (51) in which the Book of Common Prayer serves as "an armory of light" (21) for the defense of humanity. With remarkable consistency, the poem begins by distinguishing yet again essence from appearance: "Lo here, a little volume, but great Book!" The diminutive size of the Book of Common Prayer belies the greatness of its contents:

> It is, in one choice handfull, heaven; and all
> Heav'n's Royall host; incamp't thus small
> To prove that true, schooles use to tell,
> Ten thousand Angels in one point can dwell.
>   (11–14)

In its proof of this scholastic postulate, the book reveals the gulf between the "Spheare of sweet and sugred Lyes" (56) and the superlunary sphere of truth and constancy—a gulf that human language at its best can bridge by capturing, containing, and communicating the divine, as this passage describes with another reference to mediatory angels. Human language in the Book of Common Prayer provides a man-made "fortresse of defence" (18) against sin and Hell. "Here is a freind [sic] shall fight for you" (32), the speaker tells us in an unequivocal statement of faith in human works and words. For Crashaw, the Book of Common Prayer is but one of several fighting friends, among whom he also numbers the works of Shelford, Herbert, and St. Teresa of Avila. These books give him hope as a Christian for the value of human works and encouragement as a Christian poet for the promise of his artistic enterprise.

"Lord, what is man?" was for Crashaw both a pressing religious question and a source of persistent doubt. The weight of that doubt upon his mind can be measured by its pervasive influence upon his employment of language. His vacillation between dusty humility and giddy enthusiasm for the angelic potential of human language yields a

poetic attitude that is at once doubtful and hopeful or (in a precise if precious formulation) doubtfully hopeful and hopefully doubtful. If Crashaw believes that language can mediate between the sublunary and superlunary spheres, he also understands that such effects often require language to work against itself. The linguistic form of the Crashavian inversion permits language to lie, to fail, and to expose its own insufficiency. Just as the greatness of God shines through the baseness of humanity in "Charitas Nimia," so elsewhere divine mystery finds suitable expression in language that utterly fails to contain it. But this approach accounts for only one extreme. Not surprisingly, Crashaw vacillates in his assessment and employment of human language just as he does in his valuation of human beings. As we shall see, vacillations of both types often occur within the same stanza. The remainder of this essay pursues Crashaw's uses and abuses of language in three steps progressing from doubtful hope (careful use) to hopeful doubt (deliberate abuse). The first of these addresses his use of language as narrative account; the second, his deliberate abuse of language in sacred paradoxy; and the third, his deliberate abuse of language in expressions of ineffability.

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The first three stanzas of "A Hymne of the Nativity" entreat the shepherds Tityrus and Thyrsis to provide a narrative account of the birth of Christ, which they have witnessed during the night. These stanzas, spoken by a chorus, employ the verb *tell* four times both to introduce the poem as a recounting of events and to express the urgency and importance of the shepherds' story. A tension underlies these stanzas between the seemingly straightforward role of the poet as chronicler, who simply *tells* what he has seen in literal language[14] and the

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[14]By "literal language," I generally mean language that pursues a more or less direct and stable correspondence between word and thing. Crashaw often makes hopeful gestures toward literal language with reference to names and naming, as in "A Hymn to the *Name* and Honor of the Admirable Sainte Teresa," its description of Christ writing His name upon the heavens for all to see and praise, and in an ironic sense, as we shall see, in the "Hymn to the *Name* of Jesus." This "straightforward" mode of language, used to provide a record or account of, for instance, the Nativity ("We saw thee in thy baulmy Nest") or the life of St. Teresa ("She'l to the Moores"), is to be distinguished from other

impossibility of reproducing in such language the miracle of the Nativity. It is a tension implicit in the disparity of speaker (shepherd) and subject (miracle) and one right at home in Crashaw's sacred poetry, where speaker and subject often stand at opposite ends of a metaphysical gulf. As the chorus urges the two shepherds on—

> Tell him, Tityrus, where th'hast been
> Tell him, Thyrsis, what th'hast seen
> (15–16)

—there is a sense, intensified by the paradoxical introduction of the subject ("love's Noon in Nature's Night" [2]) and the inherent preposterousness of the proposed audience (the sun), that this story, which must be told, resists telling. We must have an account, and it must be imperfect. So the poem begins in doubtful hope.

This doubtful hope for the ability of human language to provide a literal account of the miraculous or the divine comes across in the Nativity hymn and elsewhere in notes of humility and resigned simplicity. In the "Apolgie" for the "Hymn to St. Teresa," the poet expresses remorse for having set the saint in his "weak and worthlesse song" (4). His attempt to provide an account of her life leads to another crippling disparity of speaker and subject, but her story, like that of the Nativity, nevertheless demands telling:

> O pardon if I dare to say
> Thine own dear bookes are guilty. For from thence
> I learn't to know that love is eloquence.
> That hopefull maxime gave me hart to try
> If, what to other tongues is tun'd so high,
> Thy praise might not speak English too.
> (6–11)

The "Apologie" provides the account behind the account presented in the "Hymn to St. Teresa," reminding us that every account speaks double. After all, the shepherds' account of the Nativity is both the story of the birth of Christ and the story of their experience of it, and the

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modes, such as paradoxy, which compromise the relationship between word and thing in pursuit of other effects.

"Hymn to St. Teresa" recounts both the life of the saint and Crashaw's experience of it through her writings. Every account implies both a story and a storyteller who values that story in some regard; in other words, every account relays both fact and faith. Crashaw's inability to translate the fact of St. Teresa from Spanish to English and to write with an eloquence that transcends both language barriers and national borders (15–20) forces him to take stock in faith instead. The fact of Teresa yields to the faith of the poet, who, as her reader,

> feels his warm HEART hatch'd into a nest
> Of little EAGLES and young loves, whose high
> Flights scorn the lazy dust, and things that dy.
> <div align="center">(26–28)</div>

Having failed, by his own admission, to communicate Teresa directly and to "speak heaven" (22–23), he must be satisfied to speak English, honoring the saint indirectly through his experience of her writings, which, in a concession to the worldly terms he had hoped to transcend, he compares to Spanish wine (29–46).

Similarly, in the Nativity hymn, after so many stanzas of strained paradox and over-reaching, the chorus steps in for Tityrus and Thyrsis and makes peace with a humble welcome and an imperfect account:

> Welcome, though not to those gay flyes.
>   Guilded ith' Beames of earthly kings;
> Slippery soules in smiling eyes;
>   But to poor Shepheards, home-spun things:
> Whose wealth's their flock; whose witt, to be
>   Well read in their simplicity.
> <div align="center">(91–96)</div>

It is enough that language can provide an account at all and perhaps proper that it be simple: love is eloquence. Yet as both hymns and the "Apologie" indicate, Crashaw prefers to dramatize this point, arriving at simplicity only after trying the other route first. If, as trial proves, literal language cannot perfectly reproduce the Nativity, then we must resign ourselves to something less and be satisfied with "home-spun things" and a humility befitting of Christ. If Teresa's "full day / Scarse dawnes" (5–6) in verse, we must be satisfied that it dawns at all. If we cannot have the

Virgin's "self" ("Hymn in the Assumption," 47) after "she is call'd" (1), we must be satisfied with her "name" (46):

> And while thou goest, our song and we
> Will, as we may, reach after thee. . . .
> . . . .
> Thy pretious name shall be
> Thy self to us
>   (42–43, 47–48)

Crashaw's doubtful hope strikes a balance between "as we may" and "pretious." He acknowledges with chagrin the limits of human language, yet sees within those limits sufficient space for divinity in some degree, and any degree is "pretious." "Live in these conquering leaves" (77), he beseeches of Teresa in "The Flaming Heart." The leaves may be hers or his or both; in any case, the confidence of his exhortation springs from "all of HIM we have in THEE" (105)—that is, the degree of Christ that Teresa has captured, contained, and communicated in her own account, which is more than enough: "'Tis heav'n that lyes in ambush there" (24), claims the "Apologie" of her writings.

Crashaw's doubtfully hopeful celebration of language shares something with his famous predilection for tears. Tears embody feelings and faith in poems such as, most obviously, "The Weeper," accommodating complex abstractions like grief and love with a simple physical counterpart or sign. They emerge from within, mediating between the inner and outer selves as the language of Herbert and Shelford mediates between the sublunary and superlunary spheres in Crashaw's dedicatory poems. Crashaw understands and describes Mary Magdalene's tears as he does the "leaves" of Shelford's *Discourses*:

> Waters above th'Heavens, what they be
> We'are taught best by thy TEARS and thee
>
> Every morn from hence
> A brisk Cherub somthing sippes
> Whose sacred influence
> Addes sweetnes to his sweetest Lippes.
>   ("The Weeper," IV–V)

These tears, like the pages of the *Discourses*, capture, contain, and communicate "something" of the divine. Both also double-speak, providing at once an account of heaven and an embodiment of their authors' faith. The same mediatory angels that decked their wings with the pages of Shelford's book in the dedicatory poem here sip on Magdalene's tears. And as tears can never fully express Magdalene's love and grief, confessing their insufficiency with a ceaseless flood in "The Weeper," so a verbal account of Teresa's love or the Nativity must suffice without ever sufficing. Words and tears alike grapple "upward" (IV) after the divine "as they may" because they must.

   "A Hymn to the Name and Honor of the Admirable Sainte Teresa, Foundresse of the Reformation of the Discalced Carmelites, both men and women; A WOMAN for Angelicall heighth of speculation, for Masculine courage of performance, more than a woman. WHO Yet a child, out ran maturity, and durst plott a Martyrdome" seems to concede with its very title the futility of any attempt to provide a full account of St. Teresa's love and life in human language. Despite this implicit awareness, the speaker hopefully proclaims in the first lines his intention to prove love the "Absolute sole lord / Of LIFE and DEATH" (1–2) by telling Teresa's story. In doing so, he follows Teresa herself, who redeemed fallen language into a history of love:

> Those rare WORKES where thou shalt leave writt
> Love's noble history, with witt
> Taught thee by none but him, while here
> They feed our soules, shall cloth THINE there.
>   (155–158)

Human language once again achieves supernatural status in this passage, serving as food for souls on earth and clothes for souls in heaven. More remarkable, however, is the idea that Teresa, who teaches and inspires Crashaw to write, has herself been taught and inspired to write by God. Though less immediately apparent than the work of mediatory angels in other poems, human language mediates between the sublunary and superlunary spheres in this hymn through a chain of writers, readers, and accounts.

   Crashaw makes a pen of the notorious dart with which the cherubim pierced Teresa:

> A Dart thrice dip't in that rich flame
> Which writes thy spouse's radiant Name
> Upon the roof of Heav'n; where ay
> It shines, and with a soveraign ray
> Beates bright upon the burning faces
> Of soules which in that name's sweet graces
> Find everlasting smiles.
>   (81–87)

The implicit overlap of body and word at play in "The Weeper" is here made explicit. The cherubim dips Christ's dart into Teresa as a pen into an ink-well and records His name "Upon the roof of Heav'n," providing an account of divine glory for faithful souls to read forevermore. But this act also generates another account, for which Teresa provides not only the ink but also the page:

> Thy wounds shall blush to such bright scarres
> As keep account of the Lamb's warres.
>   (153–154)

The stratified accounts accounted for in the hymn require sorting out. Teresa has for her model a God who records His name upon the roof of heaven with her blood. The account speaks double with message and medium, proclaiming the glory of God through His name and the love and faith of Teresa through the ink of her blood. Crashaw in turn has for his model St. Teresa, whose body and works "keep account of the Lamb's warres," embody her love and faith, and testify to the ability of human language to transcend human limitations. Finally, the reader has in Crashaw's hymn the account of God's and Teresa's accounts and an embodiment of the poet's own love and faith—a tear falling upward.

Diana Treviño Benet, among other scholars, has also noted the pen imagery implicit in the dart and argues that in having both Teresa and Christ "impart their temporal and eternal illumination through the same medium . . . [t]he power Crashaw attributes to the written word could hardly be greater."[15] Yet by making a monolith of "the written word," this

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[15]Benet, "Crashaw, Teresa, and the Word," in *New Perspectives on the Life and Art of Richard Crashaw*, ed. John R. Roberts (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990), p. 143.

claim overlooks the stratified nature of Crashaw's nest of models and implies equation rather than correspondence between its levels. Christ provides an ideal model of the literal account by writing His own name upon the roof of heaven in language that captures, contains, and communicates Him in an eternal and "soveraign ray" (84); but plenty gets lost between that model and Crashaw's second-hand copy of it. By his own admission in the "Apologie," when he strives for the ideal, attempting to do for Teresa what Christ does for Himself, he misses his mark: "'tis to thy wrong / I know" (3–4). His language fails to communicate Teresa to eternity with a sovereign ray and instead miscommunicates her to an English audience that reads "Spaniard" where he has written "Saint." Doubtful hope in Crashaw produces a narrative in which the poet sees and strives beyond the limits of human language until he crashes into them, forced like Teresa among the moors to give his own blood where he cannot give his Lord's ("Hymn," 55–56). To move beyond these limits requires forgoing simplicity and pushing past the point where human language falls apart.

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"Christian paradoxes, in an ultimate oxymoron, are always orthodox."[16] Rosalie Colie thus admirably makes clear a difficult distinction between sacred and secular paradoxy. Secular paradoxes such as John Donne's "A Defence of Womens Inconstancy" delight with a cogent argument that runs "contrary to received opinion or belief."[17] Setting logic and custom at odds, such paradoxes force the reader to choose between faith in deductive reasoning and faith in moral instinct. Christian paradoxes, however, never give the reader a choice; they are, as Colie has it, "always orthodox." The opposition they stage between formal logic and the tenets of Christian faith ends before it begins. It is a fixed fight, serving only to indicate the insufficiency of logic or language to accommodate divine mystery. Christian paradox, of which the Crashavian inversion is an instance, expresses the greatness of God through the baseness of human works and language. It speaks, as Colie

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[16]Rosalie Colie, *Paradoxia Epidemica: The Renaissance Tradition of Paradox* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 32.

[17]*Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. "paradox," n., A.1.a.

indicates, orthodoxy through paradoxy, forcing an inversion of language in which the only way to tell the truth is to lie. Within the humble limits of literal language, an account can be given of, say, the Nativity ("We saw thee in thy baulmy Nest" ["Hymn in the Holy Nativity," 31]); but to express the nature of God requires transgressing those limits:

> The BABE look't up and shew'd his Face;
>   In spite of Darknes, it was DAY.
>   (19–20)

This verbal expression of day in darkness, under ordinary circumstances an ontological impossibility, compromises the integrity of literal language as a vehicle of truth. Falsehoods appear not to trouble it in the least; it lies just as readily as it tells the truth. These are the selfsame "words of water" from which Crashaw warns Mrs. M. R., but their miraculous object, one of unquestionable truth to any believing Christian, defends them from suspicion. As with human beings, human language must utterly humble itself, expose its shortcomings, and confess its lies to be redeemed. Ascent requires descent; the expression of the divine requires the sacrifice of language.

That the expression of the divine and faith in the divine creates a need for paradox was readily acknowledged by Christians in the seventeenth century and had been a commonplace of Christian writing since St. Augustine. Ralph Venning demonstrates as much in his *Orthodox paradoxes* of 1647. The extension of the work's title, *A believer clearing truth by seeming contradictions*, earnestly proclaims Venning's overarching idea that the elucidation[18] of religious truth requires the employment of paradoxes or "seeming contradictions." Venning organizes his book into chapters with headings like "Concerning Election" and "Concerning Creation," each of which offers a numbered list of themed paradoxes accompanied by citations of their sources in scripture. The third chapter, "Concerning God the Son," expresses the Christian's faith in his messiah as only paradoxy can:

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[18]The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers this definition of the verb "clear": "5. To make clear or plain to the mind; to free from obscurity or ambiguity; to explain, elucidate."

15 He believes that in Christ there be two natures; and yet he believes that Christ is uncompounded.
16 He believes that Christ is not *God* and *a man*; and yet that he is *God-man*.[19]

Even paradox puts the point awkwardly, which is as it should be, for the gap between human language and divine mystery is the gap between humanity and divinity. The Christian's traffic in paradoxy begins here with the centermost mystery of Christian faith, and its "ultimate paradox,"[20] the Incarnation.

Two years before Venning penned his paradoxes, an anonymous text entitled *The Character of a believing Christian* made a similar argument for the Christian's dependence upon paradoxy. "A Christian," the author claims, "is one that believeth things his reason cannot comprehend."[21] These "things" are the enigmas and riddles that drove Thomas Browne to his *oh altitudo*, and chief among them are the Trinity and the Incarnation, the three-fold nature of God and the two-fold nature of Christ:

> He believeth three to be one, and one to be three . . . three persons in one nature, and two natures in one person. . . . He believeth him to be shut up in a narrow roome, whom heaven and earth could not contain. . . . He believeth him to bee a weake childe carried in armes, who is the Almighty.[22]

The character of a believing Christian is in part a product of confidence in the fact that language speaks most truth when it contradicts or speaks against itself and its literal ideal, saying *three* when it means *one* and *one* when it means *three*. Furthermore, it is a product of a tension between the awareness of the inability of human language to accommodate the divine and the absolute necessity of proclaiming one's faith.

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[19]Venning, *Orthodox paradoxes, or, A believer clearing truth by seeming contradictions* (London: 1657), p. 3.

[20]Patrides, p. 151.

[21]*The Character of a believing Christian. Set forth in Paradoxes and seeming Contradictions* (London: 1645), p. 1.

[22]*The Character of a believing Christian*, pp. 1–2.

John Cosin, one-time member of the Arminian Durham House group (which included Laud) and master of Peterhouse during Crashaw's fellowship there in the 1630s, included in his controversial[23] work *A Collection of Private Devotions* (1627) a prayer from St. Augustine that articulates this tension. Crashaw undoubtedly would have known the prayer and shared Cosin's admiration of it as he shared his nostalgia for the early church ("O that it were as it was wont to be!" ["Hymn to the Name of Jesus," 197]). "What art Thou, O my God?"[24] the prayer begins, recalling the opening of "Charitas Nimia." The question, for Augustine, is a linguistic one:

> And what shal I say, O my God, my life, my joy, my holy deare delight? Or what can any man say, when he speaketh of thee? And woe bee to them that speake not of thee, but are silent in thy praise: for even they who speake most of thee, may bee accounted to be but dumbe.[25]

Better to speak than to be silent in praise. Yet Augustine recognizes with this prayer that to speak of God, who is "never new and never old . . . ever in action, and yet ever quiet," is to speak against language. In 451 AD, just a few decades after Augustine's death, this idea was made doctrine at the Council of Chalcedon. The council resolved centuries of Christological debate with an edict of paradoxy defining Christ as "[t]he Same perfect in Godhead, the Same perfect in manhood, truly God and truly man. . . . to be acknowledged in two natures without confusion, without change, without division, without separation."[26] In effect, the Chalcedonian Creed formally establishes an incompatibility between the nature of God and the human means of understanding and expressing that nature: *two* is *one*, and *one* is *two*, it declares. This creed filters down through the centuries to inform the equally paradoxical Christology of

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[23]Regarding it as a Popish challenge to the Book of Common Prayer, the Commons unsuccessfully called for the burning of the *Collection* (see "John Cosin," in *Dictionary of National Biography*).

[24]Cosin, *A Collection of Private Devotions*, ed. P. G. Stanwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 293.

[25]Cosin, p. 294.

[26]Norman Anderson, *The Mystery of the Incarnation* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1978), pp. 50–51.

the *Thirty-Nine Articles*, where Crashaw would have encountered it: "two whole and perfect Natures, that is to say, the Godhead and manhood, were joyned together in one person, never to be divided, whereof is one Christ, very God and very man."[27] In the Anglican church, as in the early church it so eagerly identified itself with, the character of the Christian begins with Christ, with the Incarnation, and with paradoxy.

Crashaw begins there in his "Hymn in the Holy Nativity." The shepherds, Tityrus and Thyrsis, overshoot their literal account of the Nativity with paradoxical volleys at the nature of the miracle it entails. Each shepherd's first stanza dramatizes a shift between these two modes of language:

> *Tityrus.* Gloomy night embrac't the Place
>   Where The Noble Infant lay.
> The BABE look't up and shew'd his Face;
>   In spite of Darknes, it was DAY.
> . . . .
> *Thyrs.* WINTER chidde aloud; and sent
>   The angry North to wage his warres.
> The North forgott his feirce Intent;
>   And left perfumes in stead of scarres.
> By those sweet eyes' persuasive powrs
> Where he mean't frost, he scatter'd flowrs.
>   (17–20, 24–29)

The first two lines of each of these stanzas give us nature and language as we know them. These are familiar characters: "Gloomy night," who embraces the world diurnally, and chiding "WINTER," who seasonally wages his wars through the onslaught of the "angry north." But this familiarity ends with the birth of Christ, which effects a supernatural shift requiring for its expression Chalcedonian language that accommodates divinity at the expense of its own literal integrity. For it is not simply the case here that night becomes day or that winter turns to spring any more than it is true to say, as certain early sects had it, that the Incarnation made God a man. Rather, the shepherds, who see Christ by his own light ("We saw thee by thine own sweet light" [36]), see the

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[27]Church of England, *Articles Whereupon it was agreed by the Archbishops and Bishops of both Provinces, and the whole cleargie. . . .* (London: 1616), sigs. A2r–v.

world by it too and describe a paradoxical state of affairs in which it is day "In spite of Darknes" and winter snows are springtime flowers. When "heaven itself lies here below" (61), language must adapt by calling two one and one two. The full chorus joins in this effort:

> *Full Chorus. Wellcome, all* WONDERS in one sight!
>   Aeternity shutt in a span.
>   Sommer in Winter. Day in Night.
>   Heaven in earth, and GOD in MAN.
>   Great little one! whose all-embracing birth
>   Lifts earth to heaven, stoopes heav'n to earth.
>   (79–84)

These lines strive toward the divine through paradox, anticipating with the sacrifice of literal language the moment presaged in the final lines of the poem:

> Till burnt at last in fire of Thy fair eyes,
>   Our selves become our own best SACRIFICE.
>   (107–108)

Christ's eyes and their "persuasive powrs" provide humanity with a new view of the world, which human language cannot accommodate without sacrificing itself.

For Crashaw, the mystery of the Incarnation and the Chalcedonian language that its expression requires stand at the center of Christian faith and sacred verse. The Virgin Mary, of course, shares in this mystery directly, which Crashaw acknowledges by limning her in the language of the Nativity hymn. He describes her in the "Hymn in the Assumption" as "a peice of heavenly earth" (3) and "The holy mirth / of heaven; the humble pride of earth" (64–65). Like Christ, Mary is paradoxically both-and: both "of heaven" and "of earth," both human and superhuman. Crashaw's employment of paradox in his portrayal of her serves to reveal her stock in the Incarnation and nearness to Christ. The Teresa poems do the same for Teresa. In the "Hymn," Crashaw describes the saint's life of passion as "a still-surviving funeral" (77) and praises her "delicious wounds that weep balsom to heal themselves with" (108–109). These conflations of life with death and injury with cure arise from and allude to the second great paradox of Christ, the Resurrection. Thus, while

Crashaw praises Teresa directly, his means of praise, paradoxy, praises her indirectly with the implicit suggestion that she shares something of the paradoxical nature of God the Son. "The wounded is the wounding heart" ("The Flaming Heart," 74) makes the same allusion and the same connection, giving voice both to Christ, who lives by dying, and to Teresa, whose mystic wounds wound her reader, and through paradoxy insinuating a connection between the two.

The *Divine Epigrams* are filled with like paradoxes—down as up ("On the Blessed Virgins bashfulnesse"), birth as death ("Our Lord in his Circumcision to his Father"), mother as son ("Luke 11. *Blessed be the paps*"), death as life ("Math. 16:25")—all of which see the world by the "sweet light" of Christ. Whereas the heaven which Teresa speaks is lost in translation, the paradoxy of these Latin epigrams comes through clearly, often more vividly and with sharper contrast ("'Twas once *looke up*, 'tis now *looke downe* to Heaven" ["bashfulness," 8]), in Crashaw's English translations of them. The currency of paradoxy is not limited to Latin or vernacular, to Spanish or English. It transcends these worldly boundaries, providing an ecumenical Christian perspective on human language. Additionally, it represents for Crashaw a linguistic middle ground between the doubtful hope of the literal account and our next stop, the hopeful doubt of his expressions of ineffability. Paradoxy pushes human language toward the realm of the divine by sacrificing its literal integrity. For all its abuses, however, meaning still comes through. While, for example, "Great little one" may constitute a failure of literal language, as a paradox it succeeds in communicating something of divine mystery. If, with its reason-offending conjunction of opposites, it fails to help us understand God, it is hardly speechless and goes further than literal language can toward helping us understand why we cannot understand God. It says something that literal language cannot. Beyond it lies the ineffable, where language strives and says nothing at all.

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Any reader of "To the Name Above Every Name, the Name of Jesus: A Hymn" will be surprised to discover that the name in question never appears in the poem. Certain readers, in fact, may find themselves anticipating the name, keeping an eye out for any word that might set up the rhyme, and reading on the edges of their seats, only to be

disappointed. Such a "conspicuous" omission must be accounted for. Whether we choose to theorize the name indicated in the title as an "originary" source of being that transcends différance[28] or as a logocentric myth,[29] the fact remains that that name goes unspoken. A poem that so deliberately fails to fulfill the promise of its title and opening lines necessarily makes that failure thematic. For Crashaw, the poet's failure to speak "the Name Above Every Name" is a dramatic expression of the insufficiency of any human word or name for God. By postponing indefinitely the moment of naming, the poem becomes one long articulation of divine ineffability. Crashaw takes the occasion of the Feast of the Holy Name[30] to write a poem deeply doubtful about the capacity of human language to accommodate the divine, thus glorifying God through the diminution of humanity.

The first line of the poem sets up a paradox that the second line appears to resolve:

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[28]See Young, *Doctrine and Devotion*, pp. 158–166. For a rich discussion—in the context not of post-structuralism but rather of Lope de Vega, Fray Luis de León, and the Spanish Golden Age—of the accommodation of the human and the divine, the speakable and the unspeakable, in the name "Jesus," see Young, *Richard Crashaw and the Spanish Golden Age* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), pp. 127–132.

[29]See Gary Kuchar, *Divine Subjection: The Rhetoric of Sacramental Devotion in Early Modern England* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2005), pp. 126–127. In his innovative study of Crashaw's sacramental rhetoric (93–149), Kuchar investigates how the conventionally logocentric form of that rhetoric is complicated by Crashaw's feminization of God.

[30]Eugene Cunnar presents naming the ineffable as a hymnic trope and proposes two sources for Crashaw's treatment of that trope in this poem: the liturgical Feast for the Name of Jesus and the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite ("Crashaw's Hymn 'To the Name above Every Name': Background and Meaning," in *Essays on Richard Crashaw*, ed. Robert M. Cooper [Salzburg: Institut fur Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1979], pp. 109–111, 113). Following Louis Martz, Young identifies the occasion of the hymn as the feast of the Circumcision (*Crashaw and the Spanish Golden Age*, pp. 138–142).

> I Sing the NAME which None can say
> But touch't with An interior RAY.
>
> (1–2)

Yet while these lines clearly assert that the "touch't" poet can sing the name of Jesus, the fact that the name goes unsung in them leaves it unclear whether our poet is touched or not. They rather introduce the poem as a kind of test of his "interior ray." If touched, he will sing the name that only the touched poet can sing; if not, he will remain trapped in the paradox of the first line and sing not the ineffable (the name which none can say) but ineffability ("the NAME which None can say"). As it happens, the test ends long before the poem does. By the sixth line, after several attempts at definition through apposition (calling Jesus "our New PEACE; our Good: / Our Blisse" [3–4]), the poet cries out for help: "Hearken, And Help, ye holy Doves!" The gap between name and thing stops him up in the fourteenth line as he attempts to discuss his own soul ("if such thou be, / And That fair WORD at all referr to Thee" [13–14]). He looks within and finds himself and his language insufficient:

> O thou art Poore
> Of noble POWRES, I see,
> And full of nothing else but empty ME,
> Narrow, and low, and infinitely less
> Then this GREAT mornings mighty Busyness.
>
> (19–23)

Crashaw orchestrates yet another problematic disparity between speaker and subject, which the poet characteristically expresses in terms of verticality ("low") and dimension ("infinitely less"). In this first, short section of the poem the poet declares his intention or "Busyness"—to "Sing the NAME which None can say"—and then, almost as quickly, declares himself unfit for the job, "Poore / Of noble POWRES," and evidently untouched with an interior ray. The tone of his admission recalls Donne:

> One little WORLD or two
> (Alas) will never doe.
>
> (24–25)

How much more than one little world—that is, how much more than man—will be required to name God is a question for the rest of the poem to answer in detail. But the poet hints at the answer in his segue: "We must have store" (26).

Taking a new approach to a familiar trope, the opening of the hymn honors God's greatness through the baseness of humanity, which lacks the ability to sing the savior's name. The next section of the poem honors God's greatness by calculating all that would be required to grant humanity that ability. As the list grows more and more preposterous, the breach between the sublunary and superlunary spheres grows wider and wider to the glorification of God. Singing the name will require nothing less than absolute dominion over Nature and Art. From Nature, the poet requires control of the spheres, whose music "dull mortality more Feeles than heares" (31). From Art, he requires the music of every musical instrument—"each severall kind / And shape of sweetnes" (37–38)—but he soon augments this request to include

> All Things that Are,
> Or, what's the same,
> Are Musicall
>   (56–58)

For all of his clarity, one can imagine snipping scissors and sweeping brooms joining in the refrain. Or perhaps "All Things that Are" overlooks the bounds of Art to include chirping crickets and croaking bullfrogs. Perhaps, as more and more the case seems to be, the hymn, when it finally begins, will require the participation of everyone and everything under the sun. Yet not even this will suffice, for the poet quickly expands his invocation above the sun to include "All [the] LUTES and HARPS of HEAVEN and EARTH" (74). Like its subject, the hymn must be "unbounded" (91), "All-imbracing" (85), and "deathlesse" (85). The only song truly expressive of God must be, like the life-size map of the Borges fable, conterminous with its subject—a replica and, as such, an impossibility.

The poet eventually steps back from his hyperbolic invocation to address this impossibility directly, confessing the inferiority of mortal lyres (102). He argues, however, that mortal "Murmurs have their Musick too" (103) and that if human song cannot approximate or

appropriate that of the "ORBES" (104) or the "SERAPHIM" (106), its message is no less precious to God (105–108). That message testifies to the faith of the poet with the impossible height of the song's target and to the glory of God with its failure to hit it. The end of the second section of the hymn brings the poet back to St. Augustine with the idea that "low Wormes" (109) have as much right—indeed, as much obligation—as angels to sing God's praises, even if they lack angelic means. Having reached this Augustinian resolve between insufficient language and an irrepressible urge to praise, the poet can finally begin his hymn. Satisfied that he cannot achieve heaven, he forgoes his earlier efforts at approximation and appropriation and instead begs heaven to descend to him and the name to reveal itself: "Come, Lovely NAME!" (115). The hymn finally begins ("Lo, where Aloft it comes!" [151]) when the poet relinquishes the impossible ideal of song-as-replica for the music of murmurs.

Crashaw stages the breakdown of language again in "The Weeper." The question that introduces the poem ("Is she a FLAMING Fountain, or a Weeping fire?") also introduces the problem of accurately describing Mary Magdalene with language. Following "Hymn to the Name" and other poems, such as "Ode on a Prayer-book," the poet attempts definition through apposition, calling the saint five names in the first four lines alone. Where one name won't do, he tries one hundred. In thirty-one stanzas, he describes his subject in terms of springs, streams, crystal, food, snowy hills, the heavens, stars, seeds, cream, dew, a sunset, pearls, balsom, medicine, grapes, wine, the seasons, rain, doves, wells, fountains, baths, oceans, mines, mints, beads, clocks, drums, gates, children, and gems. Yet this dizzying accretion and mutation of appositives and (often mixed) metaphors ultimately expresses only its own insufficiency. The poet's driving desire to say Mary better and more truly will not be satisfied, and the awareness of this fact twice leads him to curb the desire, settle for simplicity, and say just what he means:

> Still spending, never spent! I mean
> Thy fair eyes, sweet MAGDALENE!
>
>   (I)

> Then, and only then, she weares
> Her proudest pearles; I mean, thy TEARES.
>
>   (VII)

Though the narrative is not overarching in "The Weeper" as it is in "Hymn to the Name," each of these stanzas presents in miniature the linguistic transition from grand (or grandiose) designs to resigned simplicity. Crashaw sustains in these lines the idea that if the poet cannot always say what he means, at least he can mean what he says. At his most doubtful, Crashaw understands that in the expression of the divine, human language only works when it breaks. For the poet who knows the insufficiency of language and sings anyway—who sings not in hopes of hitting upon the unbounded name of God, but rather in the face of the knowledge than he cannot—understands that murmurs have their music, too. If the thirty-one stanzas of "The Weeper" fail to capture, contain, and communicate Mary Magdalene, they do not fail to strive. And striving has a music of its own.

This idea of striving delivers Crashaw from his most doubtful assessment of human language to a point of equilibrium between hope and despair. To end with the analogy that began this essay, I return once more to William Chillingworth. Robert R. Orr observes in *Reason and Authority* that Chillingworth struck a similar balance between human aspirations and limitations with his concept of "honest endeavour." Recognizing the limitations of humanity, Chillingworth's moral God could not justifiably expect human beings to discover truth on their own, but only to search relentlessly for it.[31] To claim that "Murmurs have their Musick too" is at once to achieve the knowledge of human baseness essential to redemption and to posit a God who mercifully bridges the gap between human limitations and the world above the moon. The music of murmurs is a self-contained Crashavian inversion, in which the failure to sing the name which none can say succeeds in summoning the object of that name and earning His love. It is a common if inconstant resolution of the tension between hope and despair in the sacred verse of Crashaw and a workable poetic through which to view that body of work. Crashaw's portraits of writers such as St. Teresa, Robert Shelford, and George Herbert establish a linguistic ideal that his own poetry never achieves. Yet that ideal permits him to present again and again the drama of striving and failing in articulation of the idea that murmurs have their music too, that human striving is as dear to God as angelic song. Herein lies Crashaw's contribution to the dialectic of reason and faith: a reason

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[31]Orr, p. 63.

that humbles humanity through an unattainable poetic ideal and a faith that strives toward that ideal in pious futility.

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