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More Than "Pretty Conceptions": Richard Crashaw and the Abundant Conceit

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> All that regards Design, Form, Fable, (Which is the Soul of Poetry) all that concerns exactness, or consent of parts, (which is the Body) will probably be wanting; only pretty conceptions, fine metaphors, glitt'ring expressions, and something of a neat cast of Verse, (which are properly the dress, gems, or loose ornaments of Poetry) may be found in these verses. [Crashaw is among those writers who] should be consider'd as Versifiers and witty Men, rather than as Poets."
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> —Alexander Pope to Henry Cromwell (1710)[1]

Most critics of Richard Crashaw's poetry throughout the past three hundred fifty years have judged its craft, its music, and its sincerity favorably. They have not, however, been as kind about its subject matter, its rhetoric, its wit, and its imagery, or about the poet's psychological health and religious beliefs. Often these judgments reflect religious prejudice or an individual taste that refuses to take seriously the principles of Crashaw's style, such as his use of profane language to speak of sacred subjects. To read the whole of Crashavian criticism makes manifest . . . not only the degree to which

[1] *Letters of Mr. Pope. And Several Eminent Persons. In the Years 1705, &c. to 1717* (London: Printed for J. Roberts, 1735), pp. 145-46.

> critics are influenced by trends of their own age, but also the degree to which they often settle for the popular cliché."
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> —Lorraine M. Roberts and John R. Roberts, "Crashavian Criticism: A Brief Interpretive History"[2]

The poetry of Richard Crashaw has often fit rather uneasily when his works have been considered alongside those of most of his contemporaries. Long before H. J. C. Grierson's significant 1921 edition of *Metaphysical Lyrics & Poems of the Seventeenth Century: Donne to Butler*, readers and critics would frequently offer a qualified judgment of his accomplishment, tempering their praise with a recognition that it was somehow, and to varying degrees, different.

Some of those observations, as the summary remarks of Roberts and Roberts suggest, are rooted in Crashaw's religious conversion, especially comments found in the 17th and 18th centuries.[3] The author of "The Life of Richard Crashaw" (1753) believes that Crashaw "seems to have been a very delicate and chaste writer; his language is pure, his thoughts natural, and his manner of writing tender," but as to his conversion to Rome the "conduct of Crashaw can by no means be justified." George Gilfillan (1857) describes Crashaw as a "true and transcendent genius"; reminiscent of Shelley is his "soaring imagination, in gorgeous languages, in ardent enthusiasm, and in extasy of lyrical movement," but he notes that his conversion reveals the "supra-superstitious tendencies of his nature." He explicitly aligns Crashaw's poetry with his religion by saying that by identifying him as a Catholic, "we have stated at once the source of his poetic weakness and strength."

Edmund Gosse (1883), sounding rather like Gilfillan, notes that Crashaw's poetry offers us the "only important contribution to English

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[2] In *New Perspectives on the Life and Art of Richard Crashaw*, ed. John R. Roberts (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990), p. 1.

[3] Especially for comments of earlier readers, I have been greatly assisted by John R. Roberts's *Richard Crashaw: An Annotated Bibliography of Criticism, 1632-1980 (*Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985). For "The Life of Richard Crashaw" (1753), see p. 30; for Gilfillan, see p. 66; for Gosse, see p. 86; for Brégy, see pp. 114-15; and for Hutchinson, see p. 125.

literature made by a pronounced Catholic, embodying Catholic doctrine, during the whole of the seventeenth century." For Gosse, Crashaw's poetry is characterized by "fervour" and "ecstasy," and he notes that, while at times admirably musical, it is also given to excess: "it would scarcely be unjust to say that Crashaw was the first poet who allowed himself to use a splendid phrase when a simple one would have better expressed his meaning." Early in the 20th century, Katherine Brégy views Crashaw's Catholicism as a distinctive plus, praising him as "the Catholic laureate" and finding in his poetry "the enchanting beauty of his religious emotion." Conceding that there may be some excesses in his poetry, Brégy nonetheless defends them as "flashes of a mind rushed on by the whirlwind of boundless imagination."

To be sure, many commentators say very little about Crashaw's religious conversion but nonetheless associate his verses and his metaphorical language with the ecstatic, the mystical or, more negatively, the excessive, the exaggerated, the hyperbolic. F.E. Hutchinson's summary comments (1911) are not unrepresentative of many earlier readers. He, like others, finds Crashaw's poetry very uneven but praises its musical quality. He finds, on the one hand, that Crashaw's "passionate outbursts, with their flaming brilliancy, and the quick-moving lines, are hard to parallel in the language," but he also judges that his poetry often offends "by an outrageous conceit, by gaudy colour, by cloying sweetness or by straining an idea which has been squeezed dry."

Grierson's 1921 edition and Eliot's companion review influenced for years following how we talked about early seventeenth century poetry, but a careful reading of Grierson's comments on Crashaw suggests that in important ways his reading of Crashaw was a continuation of themes, critiques, and praise we see earlier.[4] A major development in Grierson's edition is that we are asked, more than ever before, to read Crashaw and other seventeenth-century poets as they are measured against Donne. Donne is, as it were, *the* metaphysical poet, and while neither Grierson

[4] *Metaphysical Lyrics & Poems of the Seventeenth Century: Donne to Butler* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1921). Eliot's influential essay "The Metaphysical Poets," was published in *TLS*, October 20, 1921, pp. 669-70. Eliot offers only passing mention of Crashaw, though he does say that he is "sometimes more profound and less sectarian than the others."

nor Eliot goes so far as to identify a "school of Donne," they nibble around the edges of such a designation.[5] Some of what Grierson says about Donne might, if separated from the subject, be seen as equally apt for Crashaw, at least in the minds of his unenthusiastic readers—e.g., poetry sometimes "packed with tasteless and extravagant hyperboles."[6] But in the main Crashaw is, once again, seen as different in large part because he is a "Catholic poet," one who exhibits a "radiant spirit" and whose "long odes give the impression at first reading of soaring rockets scattering balls of coloured fire."[7] This is, says Grierson, "the accent of the convert to Romanism, the joy of the troubled soul who has found rest and a full expansion of heart in the rediscovery of a faith and ritual and order which give entire satisfaction to the imagination and affections."

No doubt the major effort to identify the "different" in Crashaw is the judgment that he is less Metaphysical than Baroque, or perhaps both Metaphysical and Baroque.[8] The studies that advance this view are numerous, and in many ways they provide an approach that allows us to identify qualities in Crashaw's verse—sensuousness, abundance, luxuriousness—that were identified by his earliest readers and associate them within a larger poetic and artistic tradition. The most influential early study, though not the first, is Austin Warren's *Richard Crashaw: A*

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[5] In his compilation and edition of Eliot's Clark Lectures (1926) and Turnbull Lectures (1933) in *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993), Ronald Schuchard describes Eliot's plan, ultimately abandoned, to write a book on *The School of Donne* (pp. 19-23).

[6] Grierson, p. xxv. Grierson also describes, in words that remind us of some critical observations about Crashaw, how "the final effect of every poem of Donne's is a bizarre and blended one; but if the greatest poetry rises clear of the bizarre, the fantastic, yet very great poetry may be bizarre if it be the expression of a strangely blended temperament, an intense emotion, a vivid imagination" (p. xxii).

[7] Ibid., p. xlvi.

[8] Some forty years ago (*Richard Crashaw* [Boston: Twayne, 1980]) I approached Crashaw's poetry with an eye toward its varied styles and influences, finding in some poems a "Renaissance Classicism," in others, examples of the "Metaphysical Tradition," and in still others a "Baroque Sensibility." My aim then was to counter the sometimes reductionist attempt to label Crashaw as Baroque, as seen in the observation at the end of this paragraph.

Study in Baroque Sensibility, and there have been many others that read Crashaw in the context of artistic developments we call the Baroque.[9] The association of Crashaw with the Baroque reached its apex in Douglas Bush's argument that the simplest definition of the Baroque is "poetry like Crashaw's."[10]

Much that I have said thus far would be familiar to readers of Crashaw. Among both admirers and detractors there has been a largely consistent theme: reading his poetry alongside that of other seventeenth-century poets there is something—a quality, an emphasis, a sensibility—that sets him apart. This recognition has, in my judgment, led too often to opinions at the extreme, with Crashaw—or at least some of his conceits and images—being judged as far-fetched, as bizarre, as in bad taste or, more simply, bad poetry. It has led readers to find the distinctiveness of his verse to lie in his conversion to Rome or in the Baroque qualities found sparingly, or not at all, in his contemporaries. In short, these associations have been used, sometimes instructively, sometimes not, to enhance our understanding of Crashaw's metaphorical language, grounded as it often is, in metaphysical conceits and Baroque sensuousness.

II

In the remainder of this essay, I want to read Crashaw primarily in the context of more recent studies that ask us to rethink what metaphors mean and how metaphors work, as outlined especially in the work of the linguist George Lakoff and his scholarly partners. In their

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[9] Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1939. See also Mario Praz, *The Flaming Heart: Essays on Crashaw, Machiavelli, and Other Studies in the Relations between Italian and English Literature* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1958) [the essay on Crashaw was originally published in 1925]; Robert T. Petersson, *The Art of Ecstasy: Teresa, Bernini, and Crashaw* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, (1970); Marc Bertonasco, *Crashaw and the Baroque* (University: University of Alabama Press, 1971); Louis L. Martz, *From Renaissance to Baroque* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1991); as well as, more recently, Robert Hudson Vincent, "Baroco: The Logic of English Baroque Poetics" (*MLQ* [80,3: 2019]: 233-59.

[10] *English Literature in the Earlier Seventeenth Century, 1600-1660*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1962), p. 147.

1980 study, *Metaphors We Live By,* Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue for a deeper understanding of metaphors in everyday life, and they explicitly challenge the notion that metaphor is an "add on," a device that poets might use to prettify or merely enhance the intended meaning.

> Metaphor is for most people a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish—a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language. Moreover, metaphor is typically viewed as characteristic of language alone, a matter of words rather than thought or action. For this reason, most people think they can get along perfectly well without metaphor. We have found, on the contrary, that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.[11]

Lakoff and Johnson review a wide range of the uses of metaphor in everyday language—e.g., orientational metaphors, ontological metaphors, personification, metonymy, and others—leading to their conclusion that "metaphor pervades our normal conceptual system. Because so many of the concepts that are important to us are either abstract or not clearly delineated in our experience (the emotions, ideas, time, etc.), we need to grasp on them by means of other concepts that we understand in clearer terms (spatial orientations, objects, etc.). This need leads to metaphorical definition in our conceptual system."[12]

Before saying more about the argument for an understanding of cognitive metaphors, I want to turn back to Crashaw and his use of metaphor and the conceit. On the one hand, there are the many commentators who offer variations on Pope's view of Crashaw's poetry: that it is mainly "only pretty conceptions, fine metaphors, glitt'ring expressions, and something of a neat cast of Verse, (which are properly the dress, gems, or loose ornaments of Poetry)." In other words, Crashaw's language is sometimes creative, even ingenious— "pretty," "glitt'ring," and ornamental—but not often profound. On the other hand, there are those who more readily see meaning in what Crashaw

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[11] Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, p. 3.
[12] Ibid., p. 115.

says and does but who find him going to extremes, taking metaphors that may indeed have their origin in more commonly held and more readily accessible associations and elaborating on them to such an extent that their initial grounding is lost in exaggerated, even embarrassing, pronouncements. The most infamous example is, certainly, "The Weeper," with Mary Magdalene's tears seen as "two faithfull fountains; / Two walking baths; two weeping motions; / Portable, and compendious oceans."[13] There are, to be sure, many studies of Crashaw that offer positive insights into his verse; in what follows, however, I want to look more closely at a cognitive understanding of metaphorical language and to see whether it allows, even encourages, a rethinking of what has often been deemed the weaknesses of Crashaw's poetry—its witty but shallow ornamentation, its emotional excess, its sometimes far-reaching and unattainable conceits.

In the afterword to *Metaphors We Live By*, written more than 20 years after the original publication, Lakoff and Johnson suggest that most of their "key ideas" have been "either sustained or developed further by recent empirical research in cognitive linguistics and in cognitive

[13] Crashaw's epigram on Luke 11 ("Suppose he had been Tabled at thy Teates") no doubt rivals the lines from "The Weeper" for those who are looking for what they deem as the outrageous or grotesque in Crashaw. Perhaps the most cited of the negative comments about the lines from "The Weeper" is Robert M. Adams's observation that they are an example of the "bad taste" to which Crashaw sometimes succumbs. See "Taste and Bad Taste in Metaphysical Poetry: Richard Crashaw and Dylan Thomas," *Hudson Review* 8 (1955), 60-77. A more recent (and more historically sympathetic) reading is offered by Robert Hudson Vincent, who sees these and surrounding lines as operating in the context of Renaissance *copia*, or hyperbolic variations, which he views as fundamental to the literary baroque. Nonetheless, he acknowledges the baths, motions, and oceans to be "fantastic images": "The realization of these hyperbolic figures in the mind—the attempt to render them actual—is a prospect as fantastic as it is far-fetched. 'The Weeper' is full of poetic variations like these, so perplexing and intricate that most readers cannot help but reduce them to the absurd—that is, they cannot help but call them baroque" (252-53). For all citations to Crashaw's poetry, I am using George Walton Williams, ed. *The Complete Poetry of Richard Crashaw* (1970; rpt. New York: Norton, 1974).

science generally."[14] The admittedly most controversial assertion is also perhaps its most fundamental one: "the existence of *conceptual* metaphor."[15] An equally important claim, one that I hope to show is relevant to an understanding of Crashaw, is that conceptual metaphors are at once universal and subject to "cultural variation" (274). That is, they draw from commonly held assumptions and associations while admitting variations growing out of cultural differences or culturally different emphases.

Following the groundbreaking work of *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Mark Turner extend and focus the direction of the earlier study in *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor*.[16] As in *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Turner argue against a peculiarly poetic understanding of metaphor:

> It is commonly thought that poetic language is beyond ordinary language—that it is something essentially different, special, higher, with extraordinary tools and techniques like metaphor and metonymy, instruments beyond the reach of someone who just talks. But great poets, as master craftsmen, use basically the same tools we use; what makes them different is their talent for using these tools, and their skill in using them, which they acquire from sustained attention, study and practice. . . . Far from being merely a matter of words, metaphor is a matter of thought—all kinds of thought: thought about emotion, about society, about human character, about language, and about the nature of life and death. It is indispensable not only to our imagination but also to our reason.
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> Great poets can speak to us because they use the modes of thought we all possess. Using the capacities we all share, poets can illuminate our experience, explore the consequences of our beliefs, challenge the ways we think, and criticize our ideologies. To understand the nature and value of poetic creativity requires us to understand the ordinary ways we think.[17] (xi-xii)

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[14] Lakoff and Johnson, p. 272.
[15] Ibid., p. 273.
[16] Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.
[17] Ibid., xi-xii.

What poetic metaphor can do, moreover, is take us beyond the ordinary or familiar through what Lakoff and Turner call extension, elaboration, or combination. In many respects, each of these speaks to what has often been seen as characteristic of Metaphysical poetry and, certainly, the poetry of Crashaw—the capacity to extend or elaborate on a basic metaphor or to combine metaphorical expressions to lead to a new understanding of the truth the metaphor seeks to reveal. One is reminded of Eliot's observation that one feature of Metaphysical poetry is "the elaboration (contrasted with the condensation) of a figure of speech to the furthest stage to which ingenuity can carry it."[18]

III

So how might we approach a poem like "The Weeper"? On the one hand, I want to argue, as I have before, that although it is among the most remembered and anthologized of Crashaw's verse, it is not his best poetry nor is it accurate to call it "typical" of Crashaw.[19] But it is nonetheless a poem that is often cited by readers who indict Crashaw for various kinds of poetical and metaphorical excesses. The most frequent criticisms of "The Weeper" are that the images are too consistently at the extreme and thus ineffective or that there is no

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[18] "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921; reprinted in Arthur L. Clements, ed. *John Donne's Poetry* 2nd ed. [New York: Norton,1992], p. 158.)

[19] *Richard Crashaw*, pp. 109 ff. "The Weeper" has not been without its defenders, though it is fair to acknowledge that they are the exceptions. See, for example, Stephen Manning, "The Meaning of 'The Weeper,'" *ELH* 22 (1955): 34-47; Leland Chambers, "In Defense of 'The Weeper,'" *Papers on Language and Literature* 3 (1967): 111-21; Marc Bertonasco, "A New Look at Crashaw and 'The Weeper,'" *Texas Studies in Language and Literature* 10 (1968): 177-88; and my reading of the poem in *Richard Crashaw,* pp. 109-17. Relatedly, scholars such as Mario Praz and Louis L. Martz have cited the many historical examples, in poetry and in prose, of what has sometimes been viewed as Crashaw's distinctive hyperboles. See Praz's *The Flaming Heart,* pp. 218-26 and Martz's *The Poetry of Meditation: A Study of English Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century*, rev. ed (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), pp. 201-03. To be clear, these two studies do not offer a "defense" of the poem as a whole (Praz is particularly harsh in his overall assessment), but they do remind us that the images of Crashaw, even the apparently "far-fetched" ones, are not created out of whole cloth.

meaningful progression in the poem, no sense in which the *order* of the poem ties the whole together in a way that truly fits. Influenced by an understanding of cognitive metaphors and embodied cognition, I hope to show that the language and metaphors of a poem like "The Weeper"—language that might otherwise be viewed as "only pretty conceptions, fine metaphors, glitt'ring expressions"—are grounded in a deeper understanding of religious experience and that in their variety and even a kind of poetic proliferation they connect in a profound and intimate way to their subject.[20]

I want to use as a taking off point the observations of John Peter, who writing more than 60 years ago, works hard (and even generously) not to be dismissive of Crashaw's "excess" or "extravagance," remarking about the early stanzas of "The Weeper" that we have a "general feeling" of "guarded—perhaps 'apprehensive' would be better—admiration."[21] That initial admiration, however, is tempered—as admiring comments about Crashaw so often are—as Peter proceeds through the poem. "We are obliged to admit," he says,

> that the eyes and tears of the weeper have in the poem the function almost of pretexts, that their connection with the imagery lavished upon them is at best a tenuous one, and that in consequence the effect is to direct us, not to a relation or fusion (which might be profound or revealing), but simply to the imagery *per se*. Crashaw's persistent returns to his point of departure, the eyes or the tears, would seem to indicate an awareness on his part that the gap between tenor and vehicle had somehow to be closed, and the imagery forced into some kind of dependence. . . . The fact is simply that . . . in so many passages in the poem we have been too involved in something

[20] My comments below focus on the revised version of "The Weeper," published in the 1648 volume of *Steps to the Temple*, a version reprinted with minimal alterations in *Carmen Deo Nostro* (1652). Readers such as Praz have found little to commend in the revised version ("A comparison of the various versions of the poem would not suggest that it has gained by growing from twenty-two to thirty-one stanzas" [229], but I have argued that indeed the revised version reveals a conscious aim to provide a central focus and ordered arrangement much more consistently than is present in the original ("Crashaw's Two Weepers," *Concerning Poetry* 10.2 [1977]: 47-59.)

[21] "Crashaw and 'The Weeper,'" *Scrutiny* 19 (1952-53): 258-73; 266.

> quite different and even inconsonant. . . . And that something, we realize was mere ingenuity—an ingenuity which is the more distracting for regarding itself (as it plainly does) as adroit and rather brilliant.[22]

Peter's comments here are striking and suggestive for several reasons. They are, in essence, not much different from the words of Alexander Pope more than 300 years ago: "All that regards Design, Form, Fable, (Which is the Soul of Poetry) all that concerns exactness, or consent of parts, (which is the Body) will probably be wanting; only pretty conceptions, fine metaphors, glitt'ring expressions, and something of a neat cast of Verse, (which are properly the dress, gems, or loose ornaments of Poetry) may be found in these verses." Both acknowledge forms of ingenuity—"pretty conceptions," ornamentation, "adroit and rather brilliant" conceits—but these exist apart from a serious connection to the primary subject. For Peter, following the language of I.A. Richards, there is a "gap between tenor and vehicle," what, in the realm of cognitive metaphors, would be seen as a distinction between "surface language" and "cognition" or target and source.[23] A central question, then, is not whether Crashaw loads his poem with image after image—a claim that is virtually undeniable—but whether that loading is purposeful rather than pretentious. Can we, in other words, view Crashaw's conceits as at "once universal *and* subject to 'cultural variation'"? To say it more plainly, would Crashaw's audience understand how and from where his language arises, even as they might see in it a "variation" or distinctiveness that pushes at the extremes.

The opening distich and the accompanying image focus on the "WOUNDED HEART" of the Magdalene and her "Bleeding EYES" that align images of water and fire, a "FLAMING Fountain" and a "Weeping fire." Clearly, though, as the title itself makes evident, the poem is most concerned with images of water, specifically tears. As early as the first stanza, the emotion and lushness of imagery are present but there is a progression, a coherent if not specifically logical development, as the eyes of the Magdalene ("sister springs!") yield the tears imagined as "sylver-footed rills," "Ever bubling things," tears emanating from the

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[22] Ibid., p. 270.

[23] See, for example, Earl R. Mac Cormac, *A Cognitive Theory of Metaphor* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), p. 2.

penitential warmth ("FLAMING . . .fire") that thaws the wounded heart. Highly imaginative and even ingenious, perhaps, but firmly connected to the primary subject and the iconographical image of the weeping Magdalene.

Stanzas two to five initially maintain the focus on the falling tears emanating from the "Heavens" of the "fair eyes" but hint at a coming dislocation by imagining them as "ever-falling starres" that seed the earth with a luminescence that creates a "counter shine" to the stars themselves. Almost immediately (st. 3), the tears as falling stars yield to the stars as upwardly rising tears ("Upwards thou dost weep"), which then leads to a resituating of the poem in heaven, not on earth ("It is not for our earth and us / To shine in Things so pretious"). "Heavn's bosome drinks the gentle stream," "milky rivers," "Waters above th'Heavns"—all maintain the focus on images of liquefaction, as does the "brisk Cherub" who "sippes" from these creamy waters with a kind of enduring sweetness.

A central question, then, is whether these images are simply too far-fetched, leaving a reader to at best to appreciate their inventiveness and at worst to find them ill-conceived and embarrassing. Said differently, do they stand apart from their source—the tears of the penitent Magdalene—calling attention only to themselves? Or are they ultimately grounded in that very subject and image?

Years ago, Mario Praz offered convincing evidence that many of Crashaw's conceits with regard to the weeping figure of the Magdalene are not, in and of themselves, original with him. Praz's objections to the poem, which are often severe, have less to do with a view of the images as artificial, exaggerated, or silly as with his belief that there is no meaningful or consequential logic in the sequence of images. Even the "much ridiculed conceit" of the weeping eyes as "two faithfull fountaines; / Two walking baths; two weeping motions; / Portable and compendious oceans" (st. 19) has notable precedents, especially in Latin poetry. It is, Praz notes, "far from being a grotesque invention" of Crashaw but is, rather, evident in such writers as Tesauro, Hugh, Cabilliau, and Sarbiewski (224). The iconographical image of the weeping Magdalene might be said to be universal in the world in which Crashaw lived, and its attendant images of excessive liquefaction a specific instance of "cultural variation." Saying so is also to admit that readers unaware of traditions and precedents from which Crashaw drew

might indeed—and have indeed—found some of his conceits, notably the ones cited here, to be evidence of Crashaw's greatest weakness as a poet.

Praz, like others who follow after him, nonetheless finds that the organization and progress of "The Weeper" is too arbitrary to be meaningful. The poem, he says, is

> little more than a rosary of epigrams or madrigals clumsily linked together, without progression: the stanzas might be arranged in a different order . . . and the poem be augmented indefinitely, or reduced (as it has been not improperly in many of the anthologies which have included it): the unit is not the poem, but the stanza, the madrigal, the epigram . . . .[24]

> *The Weeper* has an air of unbearable luxuriance like certain works of Southern baroque architecture, in which the design is obscured by stuccoed stalactites and a glitter of glassy ornaments: works which so resemble the impermanent creations of a mirage, that a breath of air seems sufficient to dispel them.[25]

With regard to establishing its historical and poetical contexts, "The Weeper" can, of course, be seen as flawed just as its antecedents might be flawed, but the existence of such poetic exemplars calls into question an easy dismissal of Crashaw's purportedly implausible conceits. But the other most frequent objection, identified by Praz and repeated by other readers, is the absence of meaningful progression, an absence that would deny a purposeful order, an organization that gives meaning to the poem as a whole.[26]

I return to the poem to argue, as I have before, that we are wrong to ask for or expect an inevitably logical progression, a stanza-by-stanza progression, which is far from Crashaw's aim. But we do see in the poem meaningful image clusters that do, overall, form a coherent and

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[24] Praz, pp. 218-19.

[25] Ibid., p. 229.

[26] Because readers often tend to be dismissive of (or uninterested in) the integrity, the unity of the poem as a whole, there are comparatively few analyses of the entire poem, but see the critics cited in n. 15.

satisfying whole. And throughout the poem, I will argue, the images only enhance, not detract from, the primary aim to represent the tears of the Magdalene as a profound example of Christian penitence.

Following the heaven-centered images of stanza five, the face of the weeping Magdalene is recast as an earth-bound image of sorrow in stanzas six and seven, but the association only serves to confirm the superior presence and power of the earthly weeper:

> When sorrow would be seen
> In her brightest majesty
> (For she is a Queen)
> Then is she drest by none but thee.
> Then, and only then, she weares
> Her proudest pearles; I mean, thy TEARES.

The transition from heaven to earth through the medium of an allegorized Sorrow is accentuated in stanzas eight through seventeen, as they repeatedly demonstrate the exemplary authority of Mary's tears. The dew will readily leave the primrose or lily to be a tear (st. 8); the "med'cinable teares" of the "balsom-sweating bough" are unnecessary because of the tear, "a deaw / More sovereign and sweet from you" (st. 9). Before continuing to demonstrate the greater worth of the tears, the poet pauses in stanza ten to allow the inferior watery images to proceed; they have no wider effect, but their "weeping" may bring a kind of solace to themselves. Subsequent images, all with a familiar action or object as their foundation, cast the tears as potent and effectual, as "richer wine" (sts. 11 and 12), as a silver stream more opulent than the "golden stream" of the river Tagus (st. 13), as "kinder" April showers that yield May's "faithfull flowres" (st. 14).

The conjunction of April and May, showers and flowers leads to a series of "kind contrarieties" (st. 16) that ultimately take us back to the image and distich that open the poem. With a firm focus on Mary's face and tears, we are also made to see the love that encourages the admittedly luxurious display of weeping:

> O sweet Contest; of woes
> With loves, of teares with smiles disputing!
> O fair, and Friendly Foes,
> Each other kissing and confuting!

While rain and sunshine, Cheekes and Eyes
Close in kind contrarieties.

In lines that anticipate the "flaming heart" of St. Teresa, Crashaw here joins the tears ("fair Flouds") and the wounded, flaming heart of the Magdalene in a profound recognition of the power of love:

But can these fair Flouds be
Friends with the bosom fires that fill thee!
Can so great flames agree
Æternall Teares should thus distill thee!
O flouds, o fires! O suns o showres!
Mixt and made friends by loue's sweet powers.

There is no question that Crashaw lingers over the tears, producing multiple images and metaphors to invoke and call our attention to the weeping Mary. But they are not, as images, merely repetitive but instead underscore through their multiplicity the exemplary nature of Mary's penitence, as made most concretely evident in her tears.

The focus on the weeper shifts beginning in stanza eighteen, as the poem moves meaningfully—even logically, I might say—to answer the question arising out of such profoundly encompassing images of tears, of weeping: why and for whom? We are reminded that the tears by no means exist in isolation nor can they be separated from their intended object. The "well-pointed dart" of the "lamb" is the ultimate cause of the "wounded HEART" that has made its "way into these weeping Eyn" (st. 18). We then encounter the lines that have seemed to so many excessive, embarrassing, or otherwise indefensible: the "Two walking baths; two weeping motions; / Portable, and compendious oceans" (st. 19). It is important, I think, that these images, no doubt the most immoderate of the series of images we have seen in the poem thus far, come in that section of the poem (stanzas 18-22) that brings Mary and Jesus together as they have not been seen before. It is as if, in other words, the visible presence of Jesus prompts the even more effusive outpouring of penitential tears. Only here do we see Jesus as the biblical figure moving among his people and his adversaries ("And now where're he strayes, / Among the Galilean mountains, / Or more unwellcome ways") and here we see most profoundly his effect on Mary.

Throughout this section we do not lose sight of the wandering Jesus (the "King") and his faithful follower, with stanza twenty-two confirming the extent of Jesus's transforming effect. Images that are ordinarily negative are here signs of Mary's virtue: she is the "pretious Prodigal!," a "Fair spend-thrift" whose extravagance reveals her singular devotion to her lord and whose tears essentially define whom she has become: "All places, Times, and objects be / Thy teare's sweet opportunity."

The penultimate section of the poem (stanzas 23-27) reaffirms the superiority of the tears as a measure of what is important. Time figures prominently in each of these stanzas, but the rhythmic falling of the tears is the decisive measure—over "night or day" (st. 23) or as a means to "keep faithfull time" (st. 24). Time itself ("Each winged moment") is controlled by the falling tears ("By thine Ey's tinct enobled thus / Time layes him up; he's pretious") (st. 25). The controlling image of grieving, of weeping, of tears is most pronounced in stanza 26, as it becomes the distinctive dimension of the Magdalene's life:

> Not, so long she lived,
> Shall thy tomb report of thee;
> But, so long she grieved,
> Thus must we date thy memory.
> Others moments, months, and years
> Measure their ages; thou, by TEARES.

The final four stanzas consist of a questioning address to the tears (stanzas 28-29) and their answer (stanzas 30-31). The poet here poses more explicitly questions that are implicit in earlier sections of the poem: why the tears? For what purpose are you weeping? The worth of the tears, shown repeatedly in the poem, calls into question their most obvious destination—the "sordid earth," the undeserving "dust" (st. 29). In keeping with the pronouncements made throughout the poem, earthly sites are not the intended destination ("The darlings of Auroras bed, / The rose's modest Cheek," "the violet's humble head," st. 30), nor those whom the world would find worthy ("The Fortune of inferior gemmes" on a "proud face" or "pertch't upon fear'd Diadems," st. 31). In sum, "Crown'd Heads are toyes" compared to the "worthy object," "our lord's FEET."

IV

My reading of Crashaw's repeated insistence on the primacy of tears in "The Weeper" and the way in which he figures this mode of corporeal representation (weeping) of a spiritual reality (penitence) is aligned with other studies that insist on the importance of physical embodiment in Crashaw. Richard Rambuss's study of "sacred eroticism" seeks to stress the importance of the erotic, the sexual, the bodily representations in his readings of devotional verse, with particular attention to Donne, Herbert, Crashaw, and Traherne. Citing Samuel Johnson's well-known objection to the excesses of metaphysical poetry ("heterogeneous ideas . . yoked by violence together," thoughts that cause a reader to wonder "by what perverseness of industry they were ever found"), Rambuss points to charges that are particularly apt for Crashaw—"excess," "indecorousness," "queerness," [27] and he later notes that

> Crashaw's devotional verse displays little propensity to leave the body behind, to recuse the flesh from the operations of redemption. Crashaw's poetry instead insists upon the corporeal, intent on exploring its many expressive possibilities.[28]

"The Weeper" receives only passing attention in Rambuss's study, as he cites it as one of several examples of a poem that reveals "extraordinary, even immoderate, figures of liquefaction," as when, in stanzas four and five, the penitential tears are transformed into "milky rivers," the "cream," and "Waters above th'Heavns." Because he is concerned with the erotic and the homoerotic in devotional verse, Rambuss gives more attention to other Crashaw poems focusing on gender and ecstasy, especially the poems on St. Teresa. The point I wish to emphasize here is that throughout his study Rambuss resists the metaphorizing and spiritualizing instincts that often attend readings of devotional literature, emphasizing instead, its corporality

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[27] *Closet Devotions* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), pp. 17-18.
[28] Ibid., p. 34.

and, of particular significance for Rambuss, "the homoerotic vectors of Christian devotion."[29]

Kimberly Johnson's "Richard Crashaw's Indigestible Poetics" reads a number of Crashaw poems on or related to the Eucharist, problematizing the recognition of the "substantial presence of Christ's flesh beneath the accidents of bread and wine."[30] Much as Rambuss finds an "irreducible physicality" in the devotional poems he interrogates, so Johnson finds Crashaw resisting any easy temptation to read eucharistic items as merely metaphorical or symbolic. "The reader of Crashaw's eucharistic poems," she asserts,

> must confront language whose irreducible physicality works to veil the spiritual principle it represents, a poetic strategy that replicates the challenge of discerning Christ's body through the representational veils of bread and wine.[31]

Johnson begins with the epigram on Luke 11: "Blessed be the paps which Thou hast sucked":

> Suppose he had been Tabled at they Teates.
> Thy hunger feeles not hat he eates:
> Hee'l have his Teat e're long (a bloody one)
> The Mother than must suck the Son.

The short poem has received more than its share of critical outrage ("a nasty twist to the spiritual-carnal relation," a "wide variety of sexual perversions," and other forms of transgression), and for Johnson the physicality of the poem is inescapable: "interpretive access to the eucharistic principle signified by Mary's sucking Christ's bloody 'Teat' is utterly impeded by the insurmountably extraritual physicality of the image."[32] In other words, she adds, "although the sacramental scheme of the poem would sublimate the physical body into ritual significance, 'suck' and 'Teat' assert themselves outside the sacramental system; too

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[29] Ibid., p. 133.
[30] *MP* 107.1 (2009): 32-51; 34.
[31] Ibid., p. 35.
[32] Ibid., p. 36.

real in their presence, they refuse to give way to spiritual analogues."[33] Perhaps, she further concludes, "the documented failure of most of Crashaw's readers to spiritualize the physical is a consequence not of their ritual unpreparedness but rather of the poem's insistence on language that refuses to give way to the spiritual."[34] This characteristic of Crashaw's eucharistic poems, a "pattern of physically disrupted sacramentalism,"[35] Johnson finds evident in poems directly on or implicitly about the eucharist. For Johnson, Crashaw's emphasis on the corporeal is less a celebration of the body and more an awareness that he is apprehensive "about the body's tendency to distract from the operations of the spirit, a concern expressed in the very effrontery of the poetry's obdurate physicality."[36]

I want to be careful not to conflate the efforts of Rambuss and Johnson, and I do not mean to suggest that my readings of physical embodiment in "The Weeper" have the same aim as their studies reveal. Although both Rambuss and Johnson are concerned with the presence of the physical in Crashaw, they view that presence differently. Johnson's reading of corporeality in the eucharistic poems presents a challenge to what she sees as Rambuss's "assessment of Crashaw's exuberant physicality."[37] To Johnson, Crashaw is uneasy about the intrusion of the body as it threatens to efface the spiritual. My interest here is not so much to settle the question of Crashaw's interest in the corporeal but to add "The Weeper" to the discussion.[38]

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[33] Ibid., p. 37.
[34] Ibid., p. 38.
[35] Ibid., p. 41.
[36] Ibid., p. 51.
[37] Ibid., p. 49.
[38] Individual poems will surely reveal different examples Crashaw's sensibility regarding the conjunction of the physical and the spiritual, whether exuberant or troubled or something between. At the very least, a number of poems on women, including those on St. Teresa, demonstrate the ease with which Crashaw views the spiritual in terms that evoke the physical, sensual, and even sexual—what Roberts and Roberts noted, in the epigraph to this essay, as "his use of profane language to speak of sacred subjects." See, for example, Rambuss, pp. 39-42; Eugene R. Cunnar, "Crashaw's 'Sancta Maria Dolorum': Controversy and Coherence," in John R. Roberts, ed. *New Perspectives on the Life and Art of Richard Crashaw* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990), pp.

As with the poems Rambuss and Johnson discuss, the physical representation of the spiritual presence of redemption, seen not only in the tears of Mary Magdalene but in the many physical re-presentations of the tears, encourages our understanding of how those tears are at once spiritual in their meaning and grounded in the body. "The Weeper," through its multiple representations of Mary's tears, reminds us of the extraordinary importance Crashaw attaches to the capacity of the body to be an intimate participant in the actions of the spirit.

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99-126; and my "The Feminizing of Power: Crashaw's Life and Art" in Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth, eds. *"The Muses Common-Weale": Poetry and Politics in the Seventeenth Century* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press,1988), pp. 148-62; and "Writing About Mother: Richard Crashaw and the Maternal Body," in Barbara C. Ewell and Mary A McCay, eds. *Performance for a Lifetime: A Festschrift Honoring Dorothy Harrell Brown* (New Orleans: Loyola University New Orleans, 1997), pp. 223-35.