

MYSTICISM IN RICHARD CRASHAW'S POETRY

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Abstract: It deals with Crashaw's mysticism. There are many questions about the nature of a mystical experience, answered only in every general term, to this day. Even granting that all the definitions of the word 'mystic' are acceptable, surely no one poet can be regarded 'mystical' in every sense of that word. Is Crashaw mystical, and if he is, in what sense is he a mystic? A study of Crashaw's mystical poems reveals the pattern or the ordering of the mystical experience. At the same time, the quality and intensity of Crashaw's mystical remains his very own, and in this regard, it is unique any of his contemporary mystics, say, Thomas Traherne or Henry Vaughan. I attempt to show that contrary to current opinion that Crashaw only reflects secondarily the mystical experience of Saint Teresa, the Saint's mystical experience is a starting point of the poet's own mystical perception. Crashaw's mystical poems show a carefully ordered structure of a mystical experience. Apart from this, the special quality of his mysticism seems to be the 'ecstasy' frequently expressed in his poetry. In fact, it would be appropriate to call Crashaw mystical in the sense of ecstatic, in the same sense in which Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" contains a partial mystical experience.

Keywords: Death, Divine, Ecstasy, Mysticism, Religious.

Introduction: The term 'mysticism' eludes sharp definition. Like many terms in literary criticism, it is wholly dependent on the interpretation a critic chooses to give it. The difficulties in defining 'mysticism' are increased by two factors at least. It belongs primarily to the domain of religion, and its associations with religion which is an intensely personal thing even when organised under a church, account of its vagueness as well as its uniqueness. When the term 'mysticism' is applied to literature, the most natural associations are religious. Secondly, the term describes an area of experience rather than historical process or literary phenomenon.

'Mysticism' is persistent in criticism that regards Crashaw as mystic. What exactly do we mean when we say Crashaw's poetry is mystical? There is a long tradition of mysticism behind the seventeenth-century metaphysical poetry in general and in particular in Crashaw who knew the Spanish as well as the mediaeval mystics. He must have been greatly influenced by his acquaintance with the Spanish mystics. It is fair to say that Crashaw acquired his spiritual discipline from the Spanish mystics, and channelled his intensely personal mystical experience into the pattern of that discipline. This can be brought up the 1960s with no significant shift in critical opinion on Crashaw's mysticism. (Warren 135-155).

Crashaw is undoubtedly one of the greatest religious poets of his time. The greatness of his religious feeling lays not so much in the quantity of his poetry devoted to religious themes but rather in the intensity with which he expresses his religious fervour. His conversion from rigorous Protestantism to Roman Catholicism, an event which cannot be lightly treated in the context of his sensitive nature, must have been prompted by the habit of intense religious feeling. Whether he had doctrinal dissatisfaction with Protestantism or not, is not an important question. (Warren 143). But it is important that as a Catholic he displays the singular loyalty and devotion of the convert in his admiration for the Catholic saints. The Catholic habit of regarding experience imagistic ally rather than philosophically (like St. Augustine) must have greatly appealed to Crashaw, and the intensity of his religious fervour is in turn a product of that habit.

The earnestness of Crashaw's faith and the intensity of his religious experience account for the first traces of mysticism in his poetry. Crashaw experienced a religious emotion with such intensity that at its point of saturation as it were, his intensity touched mystic heights. For instance, in a Divine Epigram on "Matthew 8. I am not worthy that thou should 'not come under my roof'" Crashaw begins by expressing a common religious experience, similar to other experience in the Divine Epigrams:

Thy God was making hast into they roofe,
Thy humble faith and feare keeps him aloofe:
Hee'l ble thy Guest, because he may not be,
Hee'l come - into thy house? No, into thee. (Williams p.13)

The development of the experience is progressively intense until the experience touches mystical heights in the last three words of the epigram, “no, into thee”. When such is the quick pulsation of his religious experience in a divine epigram, the longer poems like “A Hymn to Sainte Teresa” leave ample scope for the progression of a religious experience to culminate as a mystical experience. “A Hymn to Sainte Teresa”, which begins with an account of Teresa’s embrace of religion early in life, reaches the lyric heat of mystical experience when Crashaw describes the nature of St. Teresa’s mystical experiences.

Thou art love’s victim; and must dy
A death more mystical and high.
Into love’s armes thou shalt let fall(...)
So spiritual, pure, and fair
Must be the immortal instrument
Upon whose choise point shall be sent
A life so lov’d; And that there be
Fitt executioners for Thee,
The fair’st and first-born sons of fire
Blest SERAPHIM, shall leave their quire
And turn love’s soldiers, upon THEE
To exercise their archeries.(Williams p. 56)

One may pause for a moment and look at the statement of the mystical experience in ‘a death more mystical and height’. As Robert Collmer has pointed out the death here referred to is not physical death but ‘death of the soul’. After stating the mystical nature of the death, Crashaw describes love’s piercing of St. Teresa’s heart so that on account of love’s piercing dart, her death follows as a natural consequences. The love spoken of here is the spiritual love of the soul for God. In mystical terms, the soul is the bride and through and contemplation of God, the soul loses itself in the embrace of the Divine Lover. The uniqueness of the mystical union of the soul with God is indicated by the extravagance of Crashaw’s imagery. The use of rich flame, radiant name, and ray bright, burning faces together with spiritual, pure, fair indicates that the experience he is talking about is a uniquely illuminated experience. The passage is followed by an elaborate description of the ‘death more mystical and high’ of line 76. Death is a common expression used by Christian mystics to describe a state of intercommunication of divine essence and the human soul which is a mystical experience. From Bernard of Clairvaus (1091 -1153) to Madame de Guyon(1648 – 1717) all Christian mystics describe the stages of mystical experience in terms of Purgation, Illumination and union. Describing the supreme experience of the mystic, St. Bernard speaks in terms of death:

I am justified... in calling the bride’s
Ecstasy a death... I long to die(If I
may use the term) the death that angels die,
the death by which the soul passes beyond
awareness of the present and is completely
stripped not only of desire for corporeal
things but also of all images derived from
them, and enters into a pure communion with
those who bear the image of purity itself.
Such is , in my opinion, that exodus from
self, which is generally known as contemplation (Robert p.376)

St. John of the Cross emphasises the similarity between the love union in the spirit, and death: (The soul in ecstasy) lives while yet dying, (...)remains dying of love, and dies the more seeing that it cannot wholly die of love. (Allison p.53). St. Teresa also describes a mystical experience as the marriage of the soul and the Dvine Lover, and the consummation: Even in loving, it is able to love, it cannot understand how or what it is that it love, (...)still life enough to be able to breathe.(Allison p.248).Considering the extent of the mystical interpretation of death, it is clear that Crashaw by talking about love and death is describing the mystical experience of St. Teresa. Any trace of doubt as to the mystical nature of the experiences is wiped out by the contrarities of the following lines savouring death, meditating on the pleasurable and painful aspects of death, expressing paradoxically that this death is life:

O how oft shalt thou caomplain

Of a sweet and suble PAIN
 Of intolerable JOYES;
 Of a DEATH, in which who dyes
 Loves his death, and dyes again.
 And would for ever so be slain.
 And lives, and dyes; and knows not why
 To live, But that he thus may never leave to Dye.(Williams 56)

The mingling intensity of pain and joy is an essential aspect of a mystical experience. Crashaw's 'sweet and subtle pain' and 'intolerable joyes,' are due to the experience of the mystic. St. Teresa describes the excruciating nature of the pain, hard to describe, but always recognisable. In Crashaw mystical experience is expressed through the excessively sensuous imagery of the baroque poet. The height of the mystical experience is sustained through the following line 105 to 128:

How kindly will thy gentle HEART
 Kisse the sweetly -killing DART!
 When these thy DEATHS, so numerous,
 The MOON of maiden stars, thy white
 MISTRESSE, attended by such bright
 Soules as thy shining self, shall come
 And in her first rankes make thee room;
 Where 'mongst her snowy family
 Immoral welcomes wait for thee.20(Williams 56-57)

On the contrary, the mystic contemplates the 'delicious wounds' of the piercing dart of love. Contemplation of the wounds of the dart of love is a common mystical experience. The wound of love is an advanced mystical state in which God pierces the soul with such darts of fire that pain and joy are simultaneous and of equal strength: joy, because God loves the soul and longs for it and visits it; pain, because the soul cannot love God as He deserves, because God's visitations are temporary succulence succeeded by drought, because the body cannot endure the strain put upon it by intense spiritual states, because the soul longs for death and perfect union with its Spouse. A commingling in equal intensity of pain and joy: a special figure, the oxymoron, rhetorically corresponds to the wound of love and is the inevitable expression of its as the paradox.

A good part of "A Hymn to Sainte Teresa" thus describes a mystical experience. By virtue of its intensity the mystic's experience is brief and short-lived. A comparison of the last lines of the hymn with the foregoing passage in which Crashaw expresses an intense mystical experience proves the point. It can be seen how Crashaw's own experience in the poem is mystical, and that the passage is not mystical because of the borrowed glory of the mystic, St. Teresa:

Thou shalt look round about, and see
 Thousands of crown'd soules throng to be
 Themselves thy crown. Sons of thy vowes,
 And with them all about thee bow
 Stepps, walk with HIM those ways of light
 Which who in death would live to see,
 Must learn in life to dy like thee (Williams 28)

While the passage is rich in its religious emotion, it does not attain to the level of intensity of lines 97-111, describing the mystical death of St. Teresa. Its rich symbolism with the 'rosy love' 'sparkling with the sacred flames' does not convey the intensity of the 'sweetly-killing dart' and 'the delicious wounds that weep balsom to heal themselves with'.(Allison p.295). Throughout the first section of the poem, the poet's concentration is increasingly intensified. From regarding the picture of the Saint and the Seraphim, Crashaw passes on to a meditation on the functions of the Saint and the Seraphim. The meditation is narrowed down to the flaming heart in line 68. From that point, the metaphysical sophistication of the earlier part of the poem is, as it were, completely forgotten.

The passion of St. Teresa expressed as the 'draught of liquid fire' of line 100 is contrasted with the 'carcasses of a hard, cold, hart' of line 86. The lines express the process of conversion of the cold heart into a flaming heart of

passion as a mystical experience. The mystic's vision is expressed through the religious symbols of the eagle and the dove of line 95. The 'desires' of the Saint are the passion for the bridal union with the Divine. (compare Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn") The Lights and Fires are the components of the mystical state of illuminating. The deaths of love are the mystic deaths, the use of plural signifying that it is a recurrent process, and that the poet is not thinking of the final death. The description of the Saint's mystic glory ends in Crashaw's own experience of the ultimate in mystical experience. He will so read her life that he 'unto all life of mine may die'. Unlike "A Hymn to Sainte Teresa", "The Flaming Heart" concludes at this high pitch of a mystical experience. The 'song' appended to the Teresa poems brings the high pitch of the intensity of the mystic's experience to the level of religious feeling which characterises the conclusion of "A Hymn to Sainte Teresa".

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