

“Love-Slain Witnesses”: Apostrophe and Audience in Richard Crashaw’s “The Flaming Heart”

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The public nature of Richard Crashaw’s poetry is an indisputable hallmark of his work. This seventeenth-century Metaphysical poet expected his poems to be read, and certainly meant for them to astonish. As R.V. Young points out,

A convergence of intimate, even mystical experience with the traditions of public worship is the crowning achievement of Crashaw’s mature hymns. This bridging of the individual and the communal, this embedding of personal devotion in the continuity of theological and liturgical tradition, gives Crashaw’s poetry a surprising significance amidst the continuing onslaught of current literary theory.¹

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¹ R.V. Young, *Doctrine and Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Poetry*, 158.

Young's goal is to take "the continuing onslaught of current literary theory"—principally, Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist apparatus—to task in his discussion of Crashaw's invocation of presence in the sacraments, specifically the Eucharist. Hymns, of course, are the natural place for the critic to locate public aspects of Crashaw's poetry, but the "bridging of the individual and the communal" will be considered in an alternate poem here: namely, "The Flaming Heart," focused on a painting of St. Teresa. This ekphrastic poem—the final one in Crashaw's 1652 *Carmen Deo Nostro's* Saint Teresa trilogy—provides a unique opportunity for examining the communal because of its predominant use of apostrophe. The various figures invoked in "The Flaming Heart" and Crashaw's gathering of persons culminate in a spiritual celebration in which the summoned are invited to partake in the litany of "red-hot images"² provided at the poem's conclusion. Some Crashaw critics, however, hold that the final lines of the poem represent the poet's exclusive mystical experience. For example, Paul A. Parrish says, "Christ works on Teresa who, in turn, directs her response upward toward Him and downward toward others. The poet responds to her example by praising both her and Christ and thus confirms the value of her life and death and the efficacy of her action and Christ's."³ Parrish's assessment of Teresa's active and passive roles is spot-on, but his implied argument that her action's "efficacy" works solely on the poet does not do justice to the poem. Though Crashaw uses the first person at the close of "The Flaming Heart," at *no point* in the poem does he dismiss his gathered apostrophized audience. The poem accordingly ends with collective universal participation. This paper will argue that Teresa's mystical ecstasy is not presented for Crashaw's private and selfish gratification alone, but rather is an offering to his audience, so that they too might experience the "darts" of Christ's love.

I. "THE FLAMING HEART": A CONVENING TITLE

Deneen Senasi states that "Crashaw's unconventional conception of the title is a spatial representation that insists the reader tarry in unfolding

² Mario Praz, *The Flaming Heart*, 262.

³ Paul A. Parrish, *Richard Crashaw*, 164.

its meaning.”⁴ Senasi is right. Consider the title’s unfolding meaning in its entirety:

THE
FLAMING HEART
UPON THE BOOK AND
Picture of the seraphicall saint
TERESA,
(AS SHE IS USUALLY EX-
pressed with a SERAPHIM
bisode her.)⁵

Such a verbose and playful title, as Senasi goes on to say, “brings together the two principal modalities of representation that will concern Crashaw in the poem, that is the book and the picture, as each one is used to represent the same.”⁶ Moreover, these two modalities also foreshadow the poem’s emphasis on presence and audience. First, “TERESA”—singly heralded in all capital letters in the center—is coupled with her *Vida*, which implies the autobiography’s readership, since “BOOK” matches her name in prominent uppercase. The “Picture,” mostly relegated to the diminutive lowercase—as if it did not deserve to be part of the title’s more august company—similarly suggests yet another type of audience, viewership. However, Crashaw caustically clarifies this “Picture” in parentheses: “(AS SHE IS USUALLY EX- / pressed with a SERAPHIM / bisode her).” The word “USUALLY” denotes the imperfect, habitually repeated action of “EX- / pressed,” thereby insinuating that the visual artist is going to be subjected to scrutiny in the poem. On this note, the title’s grammar is especially revealing: Crashaw’s epithet of Teresa being “the” —definite article, sole “the”—“seraphicall saint” is pitted against the humdrum, indefinite “a”—of an impersonal seraphim next to her. Already Crashaw is playing with his readers’ perceptions in the title, preparing them for reevaluations of those persons in the poem to follow. His focusing our

⁴ Deneed Senasi, “A Matter of Words: Aesthetics of Reading and Embodiment in the Poetry of Richard Crashaw,” 8.

⁵ All Crashaw citations come from George Walton Williams’s *The Complete Poetry of Richard Crashaw*.

⁶ A Matter of Words, 14.

visual attention on the capitalized "FLAMING HEART," "BOOK," and "TERESA" will take on greater significance as we proceed.

II. THE READERS: A "FIT AUDIENCE"

How suddenly and flatteringly Crashaw calls us into his poetic embrace!

Well meaning readers! you that come as freinds
And catch the pretious name this peice pretends;
Make not too much hast to' admire
That fair-cheek't fallacy of fire.
That is a SERAPHIM, they say
And this the great TERESIA.
Readers, be rul'd by me; and make
Here a well-plac't and wise mistake,
You must transpose the picture quite,
And spell it wrong to read it right;
Read HIM for her, and her for him;
And call the SAINT the SERAPHIM (1-12).

This masterful beginning deems us, the "readers," worthy of the task at hand because we, without having had our credentials scrutinized, are immediately trumpeted as "[w]ell meaning." Thus, Crashaw's praise elevates us from remote, passive readers to ones who have "come as freinds" to assist the poet in his enterprise. Walter R. Davis's point is well-taken here: "[The Flaming Heart'] starts with a strong persona and a deliberately intense modal relation with the reader, who is addressed directly and brought into the speaker's confidence."⁷ Now that Crashaw has cleverly put us on his side, he just as promptly warns us not to fall for "this peice" —with the demonstrative pronoun indicating presence, as in *this piece of artwork, right here*. The poet concedes its allure and how one would naturally be inclined to admire the seraphim in all his "fair-cheek't" glory, but nonetheless such admiration is a "fallacy." Lest we fall for *that* artist's visual sophistry, it would behoove us to be "ruled by" our poet who will compassionately teach us the correct way to "read" the painting. Crashaw is asking us to take a leap of faith here: to make the paradoxical "wise mistake" of reversing the figures in the painting.

⁷ Walter R. Davis, "The Meditative Hymnody of Richard Crashaw," 112.

Presently the title's subjects stir to life in the poem, as "TERESIA," "SAINT," and "SERAPHIM" are once again all in uppercase. These figures will subsequently be transposed in the poem, and by capitalizing them all, Crashaw has already embarked on that process.

Crashaw's initial use of apostrophe in the poem is quite shrewd, for he obsequiously calls *us* to attention first, as opposed to the painter. As a result, our active participation will ratify his forthcoming correction of the painting. Again, he has us on his side. While the poet does use the imperative voice with his audience of readers at the onset, the tone is not a bullying one. Rather, it indicates the urgency of someone who truly wants to make a wrong a right. And we, those "[w]ell meaning readers," who have been called forth to read properly, are inspired to rise to the occasion of such a noble task.

III. THE REBUKED PAINTER

Most art lovers are familiar with the artist Gian Lorenzo Bernini's sculpture of St. Teresa in ecstasy in the Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome, and the image is often depicted alongside Crashaw's "The Flaming Heart." But as George Walton Williams dryly suggests, "it is unlikely that Crashaw ever saw that statue, and the saint was 'usually expressed' in the editions of her works as a rather dumpy nun, sensational in no way."⁸ In his prized novel *The Wit of Love*, Louis L. Martz makes a persuasive case for studying "The Flaming Heart" in tandem with a frontispiece that he provides by the Flemish Baroque artist Gerhard Seghers: "I have thought for many years that the key to this poem might well lie in discovering some particular painting of St. Teresa which Crashaw is using as the basis for this Baroque meditation."⁹ Martz has ample evidence to support his claim, but Parrish, who is more convincing on this point, states, "We do not require outside pictorial aid to discover what the usual portraits revealed, for the poem makes the essential features abundantly clear."¹⁰ Parrish's position is stronger because, surely, Crashaw would not have expected his readers to be familiar with any one "particular painting" that Martz has in mind, especially if one takes into account the "USUALLY EX- /

⁸ *The Complete Poetry of Richard Crashaw*, 61.

⁹ Louis L. Martz, *The Wit of Love*, 124.

¹⁰ *Richard Crashaw*, 161.

pressed" images of Teresa alluded to in the poem's title. But more importantly, by providing so many nuanced visual descriptions, the poet pressures his readers to work harder, imaginatively speaking, and thereby keeps their attention—and participation—constantly active.

Crashaw's tone is still a significant point of focus as we shift our attention to the "poor-spirited" painter of "this peice":

Painter, what didst thou understand
To put her dart into his hand!
See, even the yeares and size of him
Showes this the mother SERAPHIM.
This is the mistress flame; and duteous he
Her happy fire-works, here, comes down to see.
O most poor-spirited of men!
Had thy cold Pencil kist her PEN
Thou couldst not so unkindly err
To show This faint shade for HER.
Why man, this speakes pure mortall frame;
And mockes with female FROST love's manly flame.
One would suspect thou meant'st to paint
Some weak, inferiour, woman saint.
But had thy pale-fac't purple took
Fire from the burning cheeks of that bright Booke
Thou wouldst on her have heap't up all
That could be found SERAPHICALL;
What e're this youth of fire weares fair,
Rosy fingers, radiant hair,
Glowing cheekes, and glistering wings,
All those fair and flagrant things,
But before all, that fiery DART
Had fill'd the Hand of this great HEART (13–36).

We have already established that the poet's imperative voice commanding his readers in the first apostrophic invocation was not badgering; here, likewise, we can observe that his tone with the painter is not hostile. In truth, the rebuke is more of a slap-to-the-head '*What were you thinking?*' than a vitriolic smearing. Crashaw takes the painter's hand, so to speak, and pedantically walks him through the painting,

showing him where he went wrong and then pointing out to him, as though he were a child, who exactly is who: “*See, even the yeares and size of him / Shows this the mother SERAPHIM. / This is the mistress flame*” (my emphases). The poet’s voice then becomes pleading as he creates a series of contrary-to-fact conditions; for example, “*Had thy cold Pencil kist her PEN [which you obviously didn’t do] / Thou couldst not so unkindly err / To show This faint shade for HER [which you wouldn’t have done, but, alas, you actually did do].*” Then, the tone softens into a gentle hush as the poet practically loses himself in the reverie of what the painter should have done had he read the *Vida*, “that bright Booke,” correctly. Namely, all the colorful majesty that he wasted on the seraphim could have been given to revitalize the visually frigid Teresa. To be sure, by deliberately putting the remainder of this section in the conditional, Crashaw gives the artist an opportunity to re-imagine his own painting the right way; there are no commands as of yet. Stephen Guy-Bray makes a convincing argument on this topic: Crashaw’s “point in ‘The Flaming Heart’ is not ... that the picture to which he responds is not good as a picture, but that it is itself an inadequate response to the life of Teresa.”¹¹ Thus, before launching into his more dictatorial transpositions, Crashaw first allows the painter to see what he could have done had he only understood Teresa’s powers accurately. Such ‘could have/should have’ musings are brought to a thudding halt, though, with the strongly masculine-rhymed and capitalized final clang of the last couplet: “*But before all, that fiery DART / Had fill’d the Hand of this great HEART.*” We are jolted back to attention acoustically and visually here—and for good reason too, because Crashaw is about to give a litany of corrective instructions.

IV. JOIN US: THE PAINTED SERAPHIM, *VIDA* READERS, AND A HEAVENLY ARMY

Before the most action-heavy part of the poem, where Crashaw’s apostrophes substantially increase, let us take stock of his audience thus far. The poet began by summoning his readers to look at the painting, petitioning us to “spell it wrong to read it right.” He next called up the painter and forced him to consider his own visual catastrophe. Thus, *we*

¹¹ Stephen Guy-Bray, “Pulchrum Spargitur Hic Chaos: Crashaw’s Meta-Commentary,” 153.

all—poet, readers, painter—are, imaginatively, standing before the painting looking on together as the poet provides his visual cues. Crashaw has built a museum-like scene here in which he, of course, is the docent. Most strikingly, nobody has been given permission to leave. Keeping these thoughts in mind, let us now return to the aforementioned bevy of imperatives:

Doe then as equall right requires,
Since HIS the blushes be, and her's the fires,
Resume and rectify thy rude design;
Undress thy Seraphim into MINE.
Redeem this injury of thy art;
Give HIM the vail, give her the dart.
Give him the vail; that he may cover
The Red cheeks of a rivall'd lover.
Asham'd that our world, now, can show
Nests of new Seraphims here below (37–46).

In the first part of the excerpt above, Crashaw is clearly continuing to address the artist personally: "Resume and rectify thy rude design; / Undress thy Seraphim into MINE. / Redeem this injury of thy art." As we saw earlier, he is not banishing the painter, but rather, granting him an opportunity for redemption. The apostrophic audience of readers will *also* have to heed the ensuing set of directions because we are still present at Crashaw's imagined museum scene. No doubt this dual summoning is the reason why the next section does not have a specific addressee, and thus Crashaw repeats the previous line—for he wants *both* painter and readers alike to "give [the Seraphim] the veil." Let us progress with his further instructions:

Give her the DART for it is she
(Fair youth) shootes both thy shaft and THEE
Say, all ye wise and well-peirc't hearts
That live and dy amidst her darts,
What is't your tastfull spirits doe prove
In that rare life of Her, and love?
Say and bear wittnes. Sends she not
A SERAPHIM at every shott?

What magazins of immortall ARMES there shine!
Heaven's great artillery in each love-spun line.
Give then the dart to her who gives the flame;
Give him the veil, who kindly takes the shame (47–58).

In almost Pygmalionesque fashion, he remarkably asks the “fair youth” seraphim—expressly, the seraphim *in* the painting—to come to life and hand his dart over to Teresa because she is the real shooter. Some readers might take the “fair youth” to be the painter in this passage, but there has been no mention of the painter’s age thus far, whereas the seraphim has already been described as “fair-cheek’t.” Moreover, one of the main problems of the painting is that the dart is in the wrong hand, viz., the seraphim’s and not Teresa’s. Thus, there is little evidence to support the conclusion that the “fair youth” would be the painter instead of the seraphim.

Turning to the very next line, he summons all her *Vida* readers, those “wise and well-peirc’t hearts,” whether dead or alive, to come forth and “say and bear wittnes” to his claim that she is in fact the shooter whom he just extolled. And none amongst that loyal crew would dare disagree, for he rhetorically demands, “Sends she not / A SERAPHIM at every shott?” This “tastfull” crowd of readers can now testify to the heavenly troop that rises from “each love-spun line” in her *Vida* because a whole army of seraphim, “magazins of immortall ARMES,” are invoked from the darts, or “shott[s],” of Teresa’s lines. That is, for every struck reader, there is a corresponding angel of fire shot out from “Heaven’s great artillery.” With one fell swoop, Crashaw handily increases his audience tenfold. Our imagined museum audience has grown so exponentially that we can no longer even attempt to visualize it. Still, all of us in this prodigious crowd are subjected to the now quite solemnly repeated command: “Give then the dart to her who gives the flame; / Give him the veil, who kindly takes the shame.” Here, such injunctions are meant to be universal; as in, *anybody* who reads Teresa’s *Vida* should know that she, “who gives the flame,” should be the dart’s wielder, and *anybody* who does not think so should be given the veil to hang his or her head in “shame.”

Lest we accuse Crashaw of reckless adynata in the prior section, mark how its last somber couplet dovetails nicely into the subsequent section’s rather serious meditation:

But if it be the frequent fate
Of worst faults to be fortunate;
If all's praescriptin; and proud wrong
Hearkens not to an humble song;
For all the gallantry of him,
Give me the suffring SERAPHIM.
His be the bravery of all those Bright things,
The glowing cheekes, the glistening wings;
The Rosy hand, the radiant DART;
Leave HER alone THE FLAMING HEART.
Leave her that; and thou shalt leave her
Not one loose shaft but love's whole quiver.
For in love's feild was never found
A nobler weapon than a WOUND.
Love's passives are his activ'st part.
The wounded is the wounding heart.
O HEART! the aequall poise of love's both parts
Bigge alike with wounds and darts.
Live in these conquering leaves; live all the same;
And walk through all tongues one triumphant FLAME.
Live here, great HEART; and love and dy and kill;
And bleed and wound; and yeild and conquer still.
Let this immortal life wherere it comes
Walk in a crowd of loves and MARTYRDOMES.
Let mystick DEATHS wait on't; and wise soules be
The love-slain witnesses of this life of thee (59-84).

Crashaw's set of instructions and apostrophic climax has given way to a more private and subdued observation of what the painter's—and our—"praescriptin" would yield. If we switch everything around, Teresa's "humble song" will outshine "all the gallantry" of the angel. Thus, our poet martyrizes himself by offering to take "the suffring SERAPHIM" so that Teresa can be left with her "FLAMING HEART." The "right" painting and appropriate response to the saint, then, is simplicity, because her heart alone symbolizes the grammar of love: "Love's passives are his activ'st part / The wounded is the wounding heart." Active and passive love is suffering, and the truth that wounds other people is the wounded heart itself. Such an understanding of moral

agency suggests that Teresa's incorrect visual depiction has become moot—because passiveness is her “nobler weapon.” The painting fails not just because it is “wrong”; it fails because it will never be able to express what St. Teresa wrote in her *Vida*. Diana Trevino Benet interprets this section beautifully:

As immortal, the book's capacity to create divine loves, martyrdoms, and mystic deaths in its readers is immeasurable. Usually, of course, immortality in praising poems is claimed for the poetry itself so that the poet's personal fame is inextricably bound with (and greater than) that of his subjects. But since it is Teresa's written word rather than the poet's that lives, acts, and saves, it is only appropriate that she be praised.¹²

Yes, St. Teresa's art is “the preeminent art” in the poem, but Crashaw could easily have said that in the first place.¹³ Instead, he constructs his poem by gradually building an audience so that everyone can be privy to Teresa's kind of mystical love. In the forthcoming grand crescendo, Crashaw's public voice—public because he made it so—enables us to celebrate together as “love-slain witnesses.”

V. ST. TERESA: PERIPHRASTIC EULOGIZING

As we move towards the poem's conclusion—where Crashaw intimately addresses Teresa in the first person—the importance of audience cannot be overemphasized. Crashaw's apostrophes in the last section gathered an assembly that now includes not only his own readers and the artist, but also a figure lifted out from the painting, all of Teresa's *Vida* readers, a heavenly troop of angels, and, at last, St. Teresa herself. Accordingly, the painting is no longer Crashaw's concern because he has begun to address the very source of visual and poetic inspiration. Even though the poet is shifting to the first person, this grammatical change does not indicate a change in audience. We are all still present; nobody has been dismissed. What will change is place: we will no longer be in a museum-like setting, but rather a more holy place worthy of this Carmelite mystic who is an exemplar of the best kind of Christian. Our task of assisting the poet with his transpositions has been completed; and, even though it

¹² Diana Trevino Benet, “Crashaw, Teresa, and the Word,” 154.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 156.

was an exercise in futility—futile because no painting, even Crashaw’s reimagined one, could ever capture Teresa—we will still be awarded a front row seat at Crashaw’s mimesis of Teresa’s transverberation. Make no mistake though, we are not uncouth voyeurs here, for the poem’s atmosphere has become congregational as Crashaw takes on a more priestly role, desiring to speak to his audience as a representative of God. Gone are his earlier semi-mocking and dictatorial voices and in their place is a more tutelary and inspired one.

The final twenty-four lines of “The Flaming Heart” —“the richest fiery shower of Baroque imagery found anywhere in Crashaw’s poetry,” or even “one of the greatest passages of poetry found anywhere in the seventeenth century”¹⁴—were added in the 1652 *Carmen Deo Nostro* edition. Crashaw has already called Teresa forth—“O HEART!”—and his imperatives in no way whatsoever command her; he is beseechingly wishful. Here, the poet ventures to render himself up for the kind of mystical union with the divine that Teresa achieved. A visionary goal of illumination by divine fire can have an erotic dimension to it, but his mystical experience is meant to inspire love:

O sweet incendiary! shew here thy art,
Upon this carcasse of a hard, cold, hart,
Let all thy scatter’d shafts of light, that play
Among the leaves of thy larg Books of day,
Combin’d against this BREST at once break in
And take away from me my self and sin,
This gracious Robbery shall thy bounty be;
And my best fortunes such fair spoiles of me.
O thou undaunted daughter of desires!
By all thy dower of LIGHTS and FIRES;
By all the eagle in thee, all the dove;
By all thy lives and deaths of love;
By all thy larg draughts of intellectual day,
And by thy thirsts of love more large than they;
By all thy brim-fill’d Bowles of feirce desire
By thy last Morning’s draught of liquid fire;
By the full kingdome of that finall kisse

¹⁴*The Flaming Heart*, 130, 131.

That seiz'd thy parting Soul, and seal'd THEE his;
By all the heav'ns thou hast in him
(Fair sister of the SERAPHIM!)
By all of HIM we have in THEE;
Leave nothing of my SELF in me.
Let me so read thy life, that I
Unto all life of mine may dy (85–108).

Teresa's periphrastic apostrophes—"O sweet incendiary!", "O thou undaunted daughter of desires!", "Fair sister of the SERAPHIM!"—are full of verve and ecstatic salute. Note also how "HIM" (Christ), "THEE" (Teresa), and "SELF" (the poet) are all capitalized to form a visual trinity at the end of the poem that perfects the title that we began with. Crashaw's extravagant display of sensual imagery forcefully conveys wonder, and the poem ends in an aesthetic crashing wave. Punchy heroic couplets that have swept us up all along with the strength of Crashaw's expressions pick up speed in this last accruing of images, culminating in a kind of mystical explosion. As Martz explains, this exhibition is characteristically Baroque: "The Baroque tries, by multiplication of sensory impressions, to exhaust the sensory and to suggest the presence of the spiritual."¹⁵ We are no longer in Teresa's transverberation, but a prayer for Crashaw's own interior change, and successfully so, for he has poetically achieved "the death of self in an affirmation of a universal absolute—mystical union with the deity."¹⁶ But Crashaw is not alone, for we all the while have been spectators who have shared in his submission to Christ's love in our own subjective experiences.

VI. CONCLUSION: A CELEBRATORY LITANY

Scholars such as Walter R. Davis and George Walton Williams have linked the ending of "The Flaming Heart" to the Litany from the *Book of Common Prayer*. Consider the following lines from the 1552 edition:

By thyne agonye and bloody sweate,
by thy crosse and passion,
by thy precious death and buriall,

¹⁵ Ibid., 131.

¹⁶ Richard Crashaw, 45.

by thy gloryous resurrecyon and ascensyon,
and by the cumming of the holy gost
*Good Lorde, deliver us.*¹⁷

The anaphora correspondences are evident, underscoring the poem's public nature and shared expression. Further, "like all acts of the litany and other kinds of prayer, wherein particular desires are offered in community," Crashaw creates a brotherhood with his audience at the end of the poem.¹⁸ That is, his allusion to congregational call-and-response conveys active reverence, ordering, contemplation, and submission amongst the members of a spiritual community. Through his masterful use of apostrophe—his gathering of a multitudinous audience—throughout "The Flaming Heart," Crashaw has achieved a holy celebration that ends in participatory universal prayer.

¹⁷ Wohler, 1552 *Book of Common Prayer*.

¹⁸"The Meditative Hymnody of Richard Crashaw," 114.

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