

## PARADOX AS AN ELEMENT IN POETIC CONTEMPLATION

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POETIC CONTEMPLATION is the gaze of the mind which gives emotional expression to truth through the medium of language. Paradox then, or apparent contradiction, is a natural, an almost necessary quality of Christian literature. The finite mind of man, brought face to face with the infinite mysteries of the faith, is stopped short by apparent contradiction. Unable to comprehend what he believes or to express his religious experience adequately, man is forced to juxtapose ideas which in his own natural order are incompatible and which, because they represent a sublime truth, evoke admiration and wonder. That which in itself is most true and consistent is given expression in inadequate and apparently contradictory language. Thus for example the Church frequently couches the doctrines of the Holy Trinity and of the Incarnation in terms of paradox: "*Deum verum, unum in Trinitate et Trinitatem in Unitate, venite adoremus.*"<sup>1</sup> (Come, let us adore the true God, one in Three and Three in one.) The doctrine of the Incarnation inspired St. Thomas Aquinas to write:

Verbum supernum prodiens  
Nec Patris linquens dexteram. . . .<sup>2</sup>

(The heavenly Word going forth, yet not leaving the right hand of the Father.)

Contemplation in general is a simple gaze of the intellect with an emotional overflow. Or as Father Garrigou-Lagrange defines it: "contemplation . . . is a simple, intellectual view of the truth, above reasoning and accompanied by admiration."<sup>3</sup> This definition fits

<sup>1</sup> Invitatory at Matins, Feast of the Most Holy Trinity, *Dominican Breviary*. All liturgical quotations will be made from the *Dominican Missal and Breviary*.

<sup>2</sup> Hymn at Lauds, Feast of Corpus Christi.

<sup>3</sup> Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., *The Three Ages of the Interior Life, Prelude of Eternal Life*, tr. by Sister M. Timothea Doyle, O.P., 2 vols., St. Louis and London (Herder), 1948, II, 309.

Father Garrigou-Lagrange has derived his definition from St. Thomas Aquinas:

That contemplation is a simple view of the truth, ". . . *contemplatio pertinet ad ipsum simplicem intuitum veritatis*," *Summa Theologiae*, IIa IIae, q. 180, art. 3, ad 1,

the contemplation of the philosopher—Christian or pagan, of the theologian, of the poet, of the saint, and of the poet-saint. Here we are concerned with the contemplation of the poet, of the saint, and of the poet-saint.

Poetry is the adequate expression of the contemplative gaze of the mind, the embodiment of thought in language so that an appropriate emotion is evoked and the reader shares the experience of the writer. Poetry thus defined is the fine art of literature and is obviously broader than verse or metrical language, with which it is often confused. It is not only broader than verse, since it includes great prose; it also excludes much verse. In other words only some, not all, verse and prose are true literature.

The term "poetic contemplation" signifies the gaze of the mind which results in the production of poetry. It is another term for the act of literary composition, and it is used here to emphasize that this act of composition is a type of contemplation, that it is a simple gaze which gives emotional expression to thought or composes poetry. This emotional expression must be at least mental, or the contemplation cannot be called poetic; it may also be verbal or written. For example, Wordsworth composed "Tintern Abbey" in his mind while on a walking tour through the Wye valley. He did not write the poem down until he returned home.

Christian poets have always found paradox an effective tool to express what they see in the contemplative gaze of their minds. It is a most ancient tradition, going back to the usage of Christ Himself. Our Lord, of course, made use of the natural devices of human speech to convey His message. His doctrine, far exceeding the powers of men, was expressed in compact and simple language, simple in that it often contained an infinite mystery in a few words and did not split it up into parts analytically. This simplicity was often paradoxical. To quote one well-known example: ". . . he that will save his life, shall lose it; and he that shall lose his life for my sake shall find it."<sup>4</sup> The paradox here depends of course on the use of a word—"life"—in two different meanings. Thus in order to draw attention to His doctrine, Our Lord deliberately locked its infinite treasures in a minimum of words, making use of paradox to surprise and shock his hearers. He left His disciples to resolve the apparent contradiction of

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that it is an intellectual view or operation, ". . . *operatio intellectus, in qua contemplatio essentialiter consistit . . .*" *Ibid.*, art. 6,

that it is accompanied by admiration, ". . . *admiratio est actus consequens contemplationem sublimis vertatis.*" *Ibid.*, art. 3, ad 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Matthew*, 16, 25.

simultaneously saving and losing one's life from the context, from His own life of self-sacrifice, and from the inspirations of the Holy Ghost.

In Christianity the mysteries of our Redemption, not the more fundamental mystery of the Trinity, are most prolific in paradoxes. What is the reason for this? One reason is undoubtedly the means which God chose. He turned evil into good by using evil in our redemption, by using the punishment of sin—suffering and death—as the means of redeeming us and of bringing justice and mercy together. The excess of God's love and mercy are revealed to us in His passion and death, and since they are closer to our experience than any of the other mysteries, the thought of them more easily evokes in us emotions of admiration, wonder, gratitude, love. Furthermore, the cross of Christ, a stumbling block to the Jews and a folly to the gentiles, but actually a triumph and a glory, is the most startling and apparently contradictory article of the faith. What seems more opposed to the order of nature than victory through suffering, what more amazing manifestation of divine love than the death of a God-Man, what more foolish than for us to desire and seek suffering in order to be united to Him?

St. Paul dwells upon these mysteries with special love. One might even say he dwells upon the curiosity of the doctrine he is preaching—our redemption and incorporation in Christ through suffering. He inevitably uses paradoxical expressions: “. . . so now also shall Christ be magnified in my body, whether it be by life or by death. For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.”<sup>5</sup> The paradoxes of dying as gain and of Christ living in the individual Christian run through St. Paul's writings as he entreats his disciples not to make void the cross of Christ. “. . . I live, now not I, but Christ liveth in me.”<sup>6</sup> He brings out the paradox of the humility of God and the triumph of the cross in exhorting the Philippians to follow Christ as their model: “He humbled himself . . . for which cause God hath also exalted him. . . .”<sup>7</sup> Throughout a long and famous passage on the folly of the cross as wisdom, St. Paul makes use of paradox to shock the Corinthians out of their natural, human mode of thought, concluding with “. . . the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”<sup>8</sup>

In St. Paul's teaching then, death is gain, we do not live but

<sup>5</sup> *Philippians*, 1, 20-21.

<sup>6</sup> *Galatians*, 2, 20.

<sup>7</sup> *Philippians*, 2, 8-9.

<sup>8</sup> *I Corinthians*, 1, 25.

Christ lives in us, we are exalted through humiliation, foolishness is wisdom, and weakness is strength. These are but a few of the paradoxes inspired by the usage of his Divine Master and necessitated by the doctrine which he preached.

Spiritual writers in attempting to express the inexpressible experiences of infused contemplation also makes use of paradox. For example, "the dark night" and "the great darkness" are commonly used to signify the dazzling brightness of the life of God as it invades the soul. Speaking of the night of the spirit, Blessed Angela of Foligno says: "I see nothing and I see all; certitude is obtained in the darkness."<sup>9</sup>

More striking and compact paradoxes are to be found in the poetry of St. John of the Cross: as, "Oh, sweet burn! Oh, delectable wound!"<sup>10</sup> Here the attempt at paradox is deliberate and the paradox might be called antithetical, for the epithets "sweet" and "delectable," which seem to contradict their substantives were deliberately chosen to make the thought startling in its contrast and compact in expression. The rhetorical figure produced is known as oxymoron.

In "Verses of the soul that craves to see God," St. John of the Cross states in his introduction a paradox which is the basis of the whole poem, a paradox reminiscent of St. Paul's "to die is gain."<sup>11</sup>

I live, yet no true life I know,  
And, living thus expectantly,  
I die because I do not die.<sup>12</sup>

The last line of the above introduction, with slight variations, is repeated as a refrain throughout seven stanzas, the eighth and last stanza ending with another but contrasting statement of the Pauline paradox:

Ah, God, when shall this body fail,  
That I may gladly, truly cry:  
Now live I and no longer die!<sup>13</sup>

In these verses the antithesis is very intricate. It is balanced, for part corresponds to part. Parts of the introductory verses are opposed to

<sup>9</sup> Garrigou-Lagrange, *op. cit.*, II, 14.

<sup>10</sup> "Living Flame of Love, Stanzas of the Soul in the Intimate Communication of the Love of God," *The Complete Works of Saint John of the Cross, Doctor of the Church*, translated from the critical edition of P. Silverio de Santa Teresa, O.C.D., and edited by E. Allison Peers. 3 vols., Westminster, Md., The Newman Press, 1949, III, 18.

<sup>11</sup> *Supra*, n. 5.

<sup>12</sup> *Works*, II, 450.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 451.

each other: "I live" is opposed to "no true life I know," and "I die" to "I do not die." In the last line of the introduction, "I die" is also opposed to "I live" of the first. Thus not only the parts of lines but the lines themselves are in contradictory opposition to each other. Finally the poem is tied together and concluded with a further intricate paradox: the last line of the whole poem, "Now live I and no longer die," which is a reference to real death, contradicts the refrain or last line of each preceding stanza, "I die because I do not die," which refers to the metaphorical death of this life.

A master of balanced paradox, whose thought naturally fell into this form, was St. Augustine. One example alone will suffice to illustrate the compact precision of his nicely opposed ideas. In commenting on the text in *John* 12:25, "He that loveth his life shall lose it. . . ." he says: "*Si male amaveris, tunc odisti: si bene oderis, tunc amasti.*"<sup>14</sup> (If you have loved badly, then you have hated; if you have hated well, then you have loved.)

The liturgy also contains many equally striking and polished balanced paradoxes. Again as we should expect, the mysteries of our Redemption seem most productive of this type of expression. The liturgy of Holy Week and Easter abound with them. We shall analyze only a few of the best. One of the most celebrated, a simple paradox, occurs on Holy Saturday during the blessing of the paschal candle. The author of this beautiful passage, in attempting to express his own feelings and move our hearts at the thought of the divine love, utters a hyperbolic exclamation, an oxymoron, "*O felix culpa,*" (O happy sin), as a description of the sin of Adam. The paradox of "*felix*" as an epithet applied to "*culpa,*" is immediately explained by the context—"*. . . quae talem ac tantum meruit habere Redemptorem.*" (which merited to have such and so great a Redeemer.)

In the sequence of the Mass for Easter there is a perfect balance in the antithetical and paradoxical epithets "*mortuus*" and "*vivus*" which are applied to the resurrected Christ: "*Dux vitae mortuus regnat vivus.*" Here there is a double paradox; for it is as apparently contradictory for the Ruler of life, the Creator, to have died at all, as it is for Him, having died, to reign living. This brilliantly balanced paradox occurs in a poem which opens with the ideas of offering a sacrifice of praise to the Paschal Victim and of the Lamb redeeming the sheep. As the most polished expression in the first half of the

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<sup>14</sup> *Tractatus 51 in Joannem.* Eighth lesson at Matins in the common of a martyr not a bishop.

poem, it is the fitting climax of a passage in which the paradox of the Redemption is the theme.

In the Preface of the Mass for Easter, the traditional paradox of God's destroying death by submitting to death is expressed in highly polished balanced clause: "*Qui mortem nostram moriendo destruxit, et vitam resurgendo reparavit.* (Who by dying has destroyed our death, and by rising again has restored our life.) In this masterpiece of condensation "*moriendo*" is opposed to "*mortem . . . destruxit*" in an antithetical paradox. There is also an exact correspondence of part to part, or perfect balance, for "*vitam*" is balanced against "*mortem*," "*moriendo*" against "*resurgendo*," and "*reparavit*" against "*destruxit*." The alliteration of "*mortem . . . moriendo*" binds this part of the sentence together and contrasts it to its opposing parallel part, "*resurgendo reparavit*," which in turn is bound together by the alliterating "r's."

The mercy of God revealed in a particular mystery of His Passion, the crowning with thorns, is praised and adored by the Dominican Order on April 24. The office of the Feast of the Most Holy Crown of Thorns of the Lord is a treasure of medieval religious poetry preserved in the Dominican Breviary. Matins in particular is rich in paradox.

The basis of the paradox in this feast is the mystery of God's submission to a brutal, painful, sacrilegious practical joke, to being ridiculed in His Kingship. It is the mystery of God's using this humiliating ridicule to pay the price of the very sin of this ridicule. It is the mystery of bringing glory out of shame, good out of evil.

This thought moves the poet to exclaim in oxymoron, "*Felix Spina . . .*"<sup>15</sup> (O happy thorn), and again "*O quam felix punctio, quam beata Spina . . .*"<sup>16</sup> (O how happy the piercing, how blessed the thorn). In the first stanza of the hymn at Lauds, he uses another favorite paradoxical expression of the liturgical poets, the combination of a contradictory verb and subject: ". . . perit perditio." Through these thorns perishes perdition, perishes ruin, destruction, hell.

In order to express his own emotion and arouse ours, the poet also makes use of other devices less organic to the thought: meter and rhyme giving stanzaic form, and alliteration and assonance, as in the second stanza of the hymn at Vespers:

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<sup>15</sup> Response at Vespers.

<sup>16</sup> Third antiphon at Lauds.

Coronat Regem omnium  
 Corona contumeliae  
 Cujus nobis opprobium  
 Coronam confert gloriae.

(A crown of insult crowns the King of all things, whose disgrace confers upon us a crown of glory.)

Here the very thought provokes emotion. The thought of Christ crowned with insults for our glory pierces the heart with sentiments of pity, gratitude, wonder. And the form given to the thought intensifies these sentiments. The stanza is divided neatly in half at the end of the second line, the first half dealing with Our Lord's crown of contumely. The second, dealing with our crown of glory, is balanced against it. Through this balance of "*coronam gloriae*" against "*corona contumeliae*" the form brings out the paradox of the very thought that the King of all should wear a crown of insult, that this crown of disgrace should remove our sins and gain for us a crown of glory. The alternating rhyme, *abab*, is particularly effective here, for it binds together the two halves of the stanza and pleases the ear as well. The alliteration of the "c's" and assonance of the "o's" throughout the stanza have the same double effect of binding and pleasing.

In this stanza, then, the poet uses many devices of his craft—meter, rhyme, alliteration, assonance, and balance—to provide an adequate emotional medium for his thought, which is already organically emotional. The effect of this heightened expression is a deeper contemplation on the part of the reader—a more piercing intellectual gaze and a more intense admiration for God's mercy and love.

A similar effect is obtained by the same means in the first response at Matins. It is a beautiful stanza of poetry in which the play on words—wit—is especially to be noted.

Spina carens Flos spina pungitur  
 Per quam culpae spina confringitur:  
 Spina mortis spinis retunditur,  
 Dum Vita moritur  
 Alleluia.

Per hoc ludibrium hostis deluditur:  
 Mortis dominum per mortem tollitur.

(The Flower lacking thorns (sin) is pierced by thorns (the sins of the soldiers), through which the spine (back) of sin is broken. The thorn (prick) of death is blunted by thorns, while Life dies, alleluia. Through this mockery the enemy is mocked: the rule of death through death is abolished.)

It must be confessed that a certain play on words and unusual

association of ideas is characteristic of all paradox in Christian literature from the time of Christ and of St. Paul on down. But in the above stanza there is such a deliberate and obvious stress on the form of expression as to justify the term "wit" in reference to it. This form of expression or wit provides a pleasing surprise, a freshness to the ancient theme of God's mercy revealed in His Passion. It is accomplished principally through the use of words in a double or even triple meaning. The most important word in the passage of course is "spina," which is used literally to mean thorn, but also more broadly by extension to mean point or prick, spine or back, and even error or sin. Thus throughout the stanza there are always at least two meanings simultaneously, the literal and figurative, material and spiritual: e.g., the Flower lacking a thorn signifies Christ lacking sin.

In addition two other brilliant strokes of the poetic art are also to be noted: the divine irony of mocking the devil through his own mockery, and the paradox—new only in its expression—of the rule of death being broken through death. The second lesson, taken from St. Cyril of Jerusalem, contains a parallel thought and contributes to the unity of the office. In it St. Cyril makes the point that in removing original sin God uses the very thorns with which he cursed the earth for Adam and his posterity.

In the second response and versicle of Matins the use of sense imagery is noteworthy. And it is witty imagery, paradoxical imagery.

Coronat Regem omnium Judaea Serto spineo:  
 Stat inter spinas lilium vernans cruore roseo,  
 Spinarum culpae nescium,  
 Spinae punctum aculeo,  
 Alleluia.  
 Sub decore fulget purpureo  
 Corpus nitens candore niveo.

(Juda crowns the King of all with a thorny garland: among the thorns stands the Lily blooming with a stream of rosy blood; the One not knowing the fault of sin (is) pierced by the prick of thorns. Beneath the purple beauty shines forth the body glistening with snowy whiteness.)

The interesting thing in this stanza is the paradoxical metaphor of the lily blooming with a stream of blood in the midst of thorns. In the purely natural, sensible order, it is an impossible, incongruous, even repulsive image, both because of the thorns and the blood. But as an image impregnated with doctrinal meaning, as a symbol, it is deeply contemplative and poetic. It is a highly intellectual image, depending on the light of faith for its creation and full appreciation. It

is a doctrinal image. In it the poet does not rely on any appropriateness in or appeal of the sensible elements, but yokes together these elements—the lily, thorns, and blood—by the power of his intellect and depth of his religious devotion. The image is successful because it perfectly fuses thought and emotion in a concrete representation. It has the quality of the greatest art: it is organic. It contains within itself various levels of meaning. Beneath the sense level of the thorns, lily, and blood, lies the gold of symbolism. The lily obviously represents Christ Himself, and also His infinite holiness, His blamelessness, His perfect unselfish love giving itself totally. The blood of course is the Precious Blood of our Savior and need not symbolize anything, but it can and does. It represents His sacrifice, His total gift of self, His infinite merits poured out for us through His Sacred Humanity. The thorns surely stand for something beyond the mere spikes of plants that pierced our Lord's Head. They represent all the pain and sorrow of His Passion, the curse and the sins he took upon Himself, the bitter foreknowledge that many for whom He was suffering would scorn Him and be lost forever. Each element of the image is a perfect symbol: the blooming lily of fruitful holiness, the blood of sacrifice, the thorns of suffering. They are unified by the power of the imagination and faith of the poet.

The lines beginning "Beneath the purple beauty . . ." are an appropriate continuation of the thought of the image of the lily. In them the poet makes effective use of vivid colors as symbols, the white and red of the image of the lily. The royal purple of the Precious Blood is beautiful despite the hideousness of the Passion, because it is the price of our salvation. Beneath this frightful suffering shines forth the whiteness of the pure, unselfish, totally disinterested love of God.

The type of poetry represented by the office of the Crown of Thorns is intellectual rather than sensuous. It depends for its emotional effect on the tightness of its thought structure rather than on an appeal to the senses. Since it is religious poetry, its thought arouses emotion by its very nature even when it is not expressed in a sense image. Delighting in paradox and wit, this poetry often makes use of strange, ingenious, fantastic imagery to express its paradoxes. Such an image, exemplified by the lily amid thorns, is known in literary parlance as a conceit (from Middle English *conseyte*, a thought or concept). The conceit is intellectual rather than imaginative or sensuous; it is an odd, fanciful, witty, or ingenious expression. In the conceit the elements of the figure—e.g., the lily, blood, thorns—have no apparent relation to one another or may seem completely contra-

dictory. They depend upon the imaginative power of the poet to be fused and made appropriate. When successful the conceit is striking and startling because of its daring ingenuity; when unsuccessful it is equally startling in its bad taste. It may be ludicrous or even disgusting. But good or bad, in Christian religious poetry it is usually an attempt to express the basic paradoxes of Christian doctrine and religious experience.

Richard Crashaw,<sup>17</sup> an English Catholic poet of the seventeenth century and a member of the metaphysical school, illustrates the conceit at both its best and its worst. Here we shall confine ourselves to only a few of his most successful attempts.

But first a brief explanation of the term "metaphysical" as applied to a school of poetry. Since the days of Dryden and Johnson this term has been used to designate certain poets whose style is fantastic, ingenious, witty, whose imagery is drawn from science or strange, obscure lore, whose style is closely knit and unified by ratiocination resembling that of a scholastic thesis. In this literary context then, the term "metaphysical" connotes that which is learned, abstruse, subtly reasoned, fanciful.

Mr. T. S. Eliot has reduced the essence of metaphysical poetry to what he calls a unified sensibility, or the feeling of a thought "as immediately as the odour of a rose," the making of a thought an "experience."<sup>18</sup> By this he seems to mean the fusing of thought and emotion in a perfectly adequate sense image, the combining of thought and imagery in a unity in which the image announces the thought, rather than the separating of thought and imagery in different parts of the poem. This is one of the highest forms of poetic contemplation.

It is a characteristic of the poetry of Richard Crashaw as well as of the poetry of the breviary. Crashaw was a master of antithetical paradox and of the conceit. Many fine examples of both appear in his Christian pastoral poem, "In the Holy Nativity of Our Lord God, a Hymn Sung as by the Shepherds." A paradoxical conceit in the opening lines perfectly expresses the grace of the Incarnation:

<sup>17</sup> Born a high church Anglican (1613), educated at Cambridge, exiled to the continent by the Puritans during the civil war, Crashaw became a Catholic in France and from there went to Rome, where he was secretary to Cardinal Palotto. Shortly after he moved to Loretto as a lay canon of the Holy House, he died of a fever in 1649.

<sup>18</sup> "The Metaphysical Poets," *Selected Essays*, New York (Harcourt, Brace, and Co.), 1950, p. 247.

The major English metaphysical poets in addition to Crashaw are John Donne (1573-1631), George Herbert (1593-1633), Andrew Marvell (1621-1678), and Henry Vaughan (1622-1695).

Come we shepherds whose blest Sight  
Hath mett love's Noon in Nature's Night . . .<sup>19</sup>

In this one compact image how strikingly are contrasted the glory of the Christ Child and of the angels to the physical darkness of the night, the light of God's love and grace in the Incarnate Word to the darkness of fallen human nature, of a corrupt Jewish nation, of a pagan world! Another paradoxical conceit—"Not to ly cold, yet sleep in Snow"<sup>20</sup>—pictures the Christ Child lying on His Mother's breast and represents the burning love and heavenly purity of Mary Immaculate. Crashaw makes best use of paradox, however in the full chorus of shepherds:

Wellcome, all Wonders in one sight!  
Aeternity shutt in a span.  
Sommer in Winter, Day in Night.  
Heaven in earth, & God in Man.  
Great little one! whose all-embracing birth  
Lifts earth to heaven, stoopes heav'n to earth.<sup>21</sup>

A very successful conceit occurs in Crashaw's poem "To the Noblest & best of Ladyes, the Countesse of Denbigh." In this ingeniously reasoned poem, Crashaw urges the countess to embrace the Catholic Faith without delay. He calls her "strong in weakness" and wonders at

What magick bolts, what mystick Barres  
Maintain the will in these strange warres!  
What fatall, yet fantastick, bands  
Keep the free Heart from it's own hands!  
So when the year takes cold, we see  
Poor Waters their owne prisoners be.  
Fetter'd, & lockt up fast they ly  
In a sad selfe-captivity.<sup>22</sup>

The unusual thing about this image which makes it a conceit is that the frozen waters represent the unyielding stubbornness, the "self-captivity" of a will that is afraid to move. The ice does not connote the coldness of the heart; such an image would be ordinary and conventional. Instead Crashaw makes the solidity of the waters represent the yet unyielding will of the catechumen, the self-imprisonment of

<sup>19</sup> *Steps to the Temple, Delights of the Muses and other poems*, ed. A. R. Waller, Cambridge: at the University Press, 1904, p. 201.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190-191.

pride and fear. The poem, full of logical entreaties and witty paradoxes, ends with Crashaw's urging Lady Denbigh to surrender: "'Tis cowardise that keeps this feild" against "love's seege," and "want of courage not to yield." He warns her in a concluding paradox:

This Fort of your fair selfe, if't be not won  
He is repulst indeed; But you are undone.<sup>23</sup>

The greatest passage of poetry written by Crashaw and one of the greatest in English is the conclusion of "The Flaming Heart, upon the Book and Picture of the seraphicall saint Teresa, (as she is usually expressed with a Seraphim beside her.)" The poem is paradoxical from its opening lines. Crashaw argues that the painter has confused his two figures—the seraphim and Teresa:

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.<sup>24</sup>

After so witty a beginning the poem builds up to a climactic flight of lyrical ardor, to an explosion of feeling in its concluding lines. Here the intensity of the poet's devotion so perfectly and passionately expressed, blinds one at the first reading to the paradoxes which form the very substance of his thought. Later one notices the lives and deaths, the eagle and the dove, the thirst and draughts which convey the paradoxes that are as old as the Gospels:

O thou undanted daughter of desires!  
By all thy dowr of Lights & Fires;  
By all the eagle in thee, all the dove;  
By all thy lives and deaths of love;  
By thy larg draughts of intellectuall day,  
And by thy thirsts of love more large then 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  
That seiz'd thy parting Soul, & 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;

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 274.

Leave nothing of my Self in me.  
 Let me so read thy life, that I  
 Unto all life of mine may dy.<sup>25</sup>

Such an inspired passage shows Crashaw to have been a great poet writing in a great tradition. His use of the conceit—that is, of ingenious sense imagery—and of antithesis to express the basic paradoxes of Christianity, places him in the Catholic poetic tradition. His paradoxical style was of course the result of his own natural bent as well as of literary tradition.

His mastery of this tradition is evident in "A Song," a brief poem of only sixteen lines. The last stanza in particular shows how perfectly he adapted balanced and antithetical paradox to English verse. The breviary and the poems of St. John of the Cross contain no more tightly woven stanza as an emotional expression of contemplation. Here in the simplest of stanza forms Crashaw gives classical expression to the ancient Pauline paradox of life as death and death as gain.<sup>26</sup>

Lord, when the sense of thy sweet grace  
 Sends up my soul to seek thy face.  
 Thy blessed eyes breed such desire,  
 I dy in love's delicious Fire.

O love, I am thy Sacrifice  
 Be still triumphant, blessed eyes.  
 Still shine on me, fair suns! that I  
 Still may behold, though still I dy.

Though still I dy, I live again;  
 Still longing so to be still slain,  
 So gainfull is such losse of breath.  
 I dy even in desire of death.

Still live in me this loving strife  
 Of living Death & dying Life.  
 For while thou sweetly slayest me  
 Dead to my selfe, I live in Thee.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 276-277.

<sup>26</sup> *Supra*, n. 5, 12, 13.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 277.