

RICHARD CRASHAW

IN the year that Charles the First came to the throne, Richard Crashaw was a lad of thirteen at the Charterhouse School. He had lost his mother in his infancy, and his father—the Rev. William Crashaw, a learned theologian, eloquent preacher, indifferent poet and bitter anti-Catholic—had recently died, leaving him with slender resources, but endowed with uncommon abilities and a rare gift for making friends.

He went to Cambridge in 1631; was admitted to Pembroke College; gained a pensionership, having, as he afterwards wrote to a friend, spent all his patrimony in buying books; and graduated in 1634 when he was twenty-one. In the same year he published a book of Scripture Epigrams in Latin, memorable for the one immortal line, “*Nympha pudica Deum vidit, et erubuit,*” upon which the skill of many translators, including William Hayley, has been exercised.

To draw a true portrait of Richard Crashaw he must be presented in this University setting. For he was, pre-eminently, in modern phrase, a “Varsity man.” The advantage of life at the older universities, it has often been said, has always been found to lie as much in the friendships that common studies foster as in the studies themselves. Crashaw enjoyed both to the full. Clearly, he was a student, and lived austere, laborious days, for he became proficient in the classics, as well as in Hebrew, Italian, and Spanish, besides in acquiring some skill in music and art. And the finest minds at the University were his friends. Of these latter we learn something from the numerous elegies he composed, according to the custom of the day. They have not, it is true, the dirge-like music of Milton’s *Lycidas*, written ten years later,

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but they have a peculiar pathos of their own, as may be seen, for example, in the series *Upon the Death of the most-desired Mr. Herrys*. In 1636 he moved from Pembroke to Peterhouse, where he was elected to a fellowship. The revolt from his father's narrow Puritanism which had already begun in him, the signs of which had vexed the soul of his father's friend, Archbishop Usher, was quickened at Peterhouse. His attachment to the Laudian party was but a stage in his progress. All his friends were of that school: Lany, Master of Pembroke, who was expelled by the Puritan Commissioners in 1644; Cosin, Master of Peterhouse; Sancroft of Emmanuel, afterwards the sorely-tried Archbishop of Canterbury, who made the MS. Collection which may still be seen in the Bodleian Library, containing "Mr. Crashaw's poems transcrib'd frō his own copie before they were printed; amongst w^{ch} are some not printed"; Nicholas Ferrar, of Little Gidding; Joseph Beaumont, the poet, who was expelled from his fellowship by the Commissioners; and his "sweet friend," Abraham Cowley of Trinity. These all held to the Laudian dilemma, the impossible attempt to have the Kingdom of Christ on earth without its King, the Power and the Glory of a Visible Church without His Real Presence abiding in it ("Ah, He is fled!" cried Henry Vaughan). But Crashaw escaped from the dilemma, and died, in the end, in the Church's arms.

His intimate friendship with Cowley is remarkable because of their difference in temperament. It may take rank among historic friendships for this reason. Not only the link of common poetic pursuits united them, but, as sometimes happens, their differences may have been complementary and the one have supplied what the other lacked. Cowley, as someone has said, was "a born Epicurean," although, in his easy, indolent, self-pleasing way, he was a devoted

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Royalist and a faithful servant to the Queen. Crashaw, on the other hand, all fire and passion, and careless of bodily comfort, was made of the stuff of martyrs. Cowley was destitute of religious fervour. Crashaw was capable of ecstasy and had the fiery zeal of an enthusiast, as may be seen in his glorious *Hymn to the Name and Honour of the Admirable Saint Teresa* ("Love, thou art absolute sole lord Of life and death"), a hymn that, he tells us, was "writ when the author was yet among the Protestants," but which he afterwards re-wrote as a Catholic. Cowley was always self-contained and critical, not to say cynical, as his *Essays* (better than his poems) prove. Crashaw was all nerves and sensitiveness. Perhaps the contrast could not be presented better than by quoting two verses from their poetical duel upon the subject of *Hope*. Cowley wrote :

Hope, whose weak being ruin'd is
Alike, if it succeed, or if it miss!
Whom ill or good does equally confound,
And both the horns of Fate's dilemma wound.
Vain shadow ; that dost vanish quite
Both at full noon, and perfect night !
The stars have not a possibility
Of blessing thee.
If things then from their end we happy call,
'Tis Hope is the most hopeless thing of all.

And Crashaw replied :

Dear Hope ! Earth's dow'ry, and Heaven's debt !
The entity of those that are not yet.
Subtlest, but surest being ! thou by whom
Our nothing has a definition !
Substantial shade ! whose sweet allay
Blends both the noons of Night and Day :
Fates cannot find out a capacity
Of hurting thee.
From thee their lean dilemma, with blunt horn,
Shrinks as the sick moon from the wholesome morn.

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There is more of it, but from this specimen the reader may help to adjudicate the prize. If he gives it to Crashaw he will have Coleridge with him, but others, perhaps, will award it to Cowley. In any case it reveals their different temperaments. There is something, indeed, almost pathetic in their friendship, as is seen in a poem that Crashaw wrote, *Upon Two Green Apricots sent to Cowley by Sir* (i.e. Dominus, or Don) *Crashaw*. "It has just that note of half-wistful admiration," says Canon Beeching, "that we should expect in the complimentary verses of a don to a clever undergraduate":

in their
Defects I draw mine own dull character.
Take them, and me in them acknowledging
How much my Summer waits upon thy Spring.

His friendship with Nicholas Ferrar, the pious founder of the "Protestant nunnery" at Little Gidding, which was of quite another character, so exquisitely narrated for us by J. H. Shorthouse in *John Inglesant*, is worth mention because it probably gave occasion for the delicately-phrased *Description of a Religious House and Condition of Life* which he adapted from John Barclay's romance *Argenis*. Such scenes as these were dear to Crashaw's devout heart:

But reverent discipline, and religious fear,
And soft obedience, find sweet biding here;
Silence, and sacred rest; peace, and pure joys; . . .
The self-rememb'ring soul sweetly recovers
Her kindred with the stars; not basely hovers
Below; but meditates her immortal way
Home to the original source of Light and intellectual day.

Seven years of such friendships and poetical pursuits, of fruitful studies and austere living, and then, in 1643, the Puritan Commissioners rudely invaded Cambridge. The Master of Peterhouse and most of the Fellows, Crashaw among them,

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Royalists all, were expelled. They found a temporary shelter from the storm at Oxford, the King's headquarters, of which University also Crashaw was a Master of Arts. Cowley of Trinity, too, was among the refugees. What became of Crashaw subsequently is obscure, but when Oxford surrendered to the Parliamentary forces, and Cowley had followed the Queen to Paris, and there obtained a post as secretary to Lord St. Albans, and was managing the cypher-correspondence of the exiled royal family, he "discovered" Crashaw in Paris in great poverty, "being," as was reported, "a meer scholar and very shiftless." His friend Thomas Car, Confessor of the Augustinian canonesses in Paris, who, after his death, edited, in 1652, the second collection of his poems, entitled *Carmen Deo Nostro*, describes him in the preface as :

A very bird of Paradise. No care
Had he of earthly trash. What might suffice
To fit his soul to heavenly exercise
Sufficèd him.

Having found him, Cowley presented him as a distinguished Cambridge don to Her Majesty. Henrietta Maria was doubly sensible of the poet's claim to recognition ; firstly, because Crashaw had become a Catholic, and, secondly, because he had already sung Her Majesty's praises and those of "her numerous progeny" in "a panegyric" which was sufficiently flattering to satisfy the most exacting demands upon a Court poet. Crashaw's extravagant laudation of the beautiful daughter of Henry IV and unfortunate wife of Charles I might be worthy of a closer criticism, if one had the inclination, with a view to discovering whether the character of the poet or that of Henrietta Maria is the more evidently shown in that glowing "panegyric."

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However that may be, the Queen did a wise thing. She took counsel with her lady-in-waiting, that really noble woman, Lady Susan Feilding, sister of the Duke of Buckingham and wife of the first Earl of Denbigh. Lady Susan had known the poet when she was the leader of the Laudian party at the English Court, and one of his later poems is addressed to her, urging her to submit to the true Church. It is well known to all Crashaw-lovers, and a distinguished critic among them has said that he knows "nothing finer in devotional poetry." It is headed *To the Noblest and Best of Ladies, the Countess of Denbigh, persuading her to Resolution in Religion, and to render herself without further delay into the Communion of the Catholic Church*. There is a later version of it headed *Against Irresolution and Delay in Matters of Religion*. It is a marvellously powerful appeal. If Crashaw had written nothing else, this alone would surely place him among the immortals. No wonder the lady surrendered to it and became a Catholic. Listen to a few lines from it, taken from the later version of 1653 :

What Heaven-besiegèd heart is this
Stands trembling at the Gate of Bliss :
Holds fast the door, yet dares not venture
Fairly to open and to enter ? . . .
Ah ! linger not, loved soul : . . .
What magic-bolts, what mystic bars
Maintain the Will in these strange wars ?
What fatal, yet fantastic, bands
Keep the free heart from his own hands ? . . .
When love of us called Him to see
If we'd vouchsafe His company,
He left His Father's Court, and came
Lightly as a lambent flame,
Leaping upon the hills, to be
The humble King of you and me . . .
Yield then, O yield, that Love may win
The Fort at last, and let Life in.

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These two great ladies, whose names have been immortalized by his genius, befriended the straitened poet. The Queen gave him letters of recommendation to Italy ; and the Countess, to whose " Goodness and Charity " he owes, he says, " immortall obligation," provided the necessary means. This latter portion of his history is to be gathered only from more or less doubtful fragments of information from various sources, pieced together. At Rome he became secretary to Cardinal Palotta, who described him later as " a man of angelical life." Dr. John Bargrave, Canon of Canterbury, who was at Peterhouse with him, states in his book on *Pope Alexander the Seventh and the College of Cardinals* that he saw Crashaw in Rome, with three other " Fellows of Peterhouse, revolvers to the Roman Church," and adds, " Mr. Crashaw infinitely commended his Cardinal, but complained extremely of the wickedness of those of his retinue, of which he, having the Cardinal's ear, complained to him. Upon which the Italians fell so far out with him that the Cardinal, to secure his life, was fain to put him from his service, and procure him some small employ at the Lady's House of Loretto ; whither he went on pilgrimage in summer-time, and over-heating himself, died in four weeks after he came thither, and it was doubtful whether he was not poisoned."

That last suggestion is exceedingly doubtful. It has been ascertained, however, from the register at Loretto, that he was admitted to a benefice there on April 24, 1649, through the influence of Cardinal Palotta, then Protector of the *Santa Casa*, and that a new appointment was made, the benefice being void, on August 25 in the same year. The evidence, therefore, seems to show that Crashaw died a Canon of Loretto in 1649, in the thirty-seventh year of his age. And Father Thomas Car confirms

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this in his poetical preface to *Carmen Deo Nostro* in 1652 :

Thus dying did he live, yet lived to die
In th' Virgin's lap, to whom he did apply
His virgin thoughts and words, and thence was styled
. . . the chaplain of the Virgin mild.

It remains to add a few words about Crashaw as a poet. It must be remembered that he was peculiarly a man of his generation. His poetry reflects the pageant of his day, as in the reference to Spain in the second *Hymn to St. Teresa*, but it reflects still more its mannerisms. This is merely to say that he was a poet of the Caroline type. But it was that type at its best. The standards of poetic taste change from age to age, and that which moves the hearts of men in one generation may fail in their appeal to the next. Crashaw is not modern. He had not the eternal simplicity of Henry Vaughan, for example, who can still move you to tears. Crashaw could never do that. But the intellectual quality characteristic of the Caroline period is in his poetry, and hence his lasting influence. He is a poet's poet. Milton, Pope, and Coleridge borrowed from him. He makes his appeal to the mind rather than to the heart. Therefore he has humour, of a whimsical sort, as in his *Wishes to his (supposed) mistress*, and in some of the *Divine Epigrams*. His spiritual force is great—at times, indeed, supremely great—but he must always be read "with the understanding also." He is a religious teacher, but the idle and the unsympathetic reader will never know it. That his work is uneven, like Wordsworth's, and sometimes almost intolerably affected, may be true. It depends largely upon our mood. But it is also undoubtedly true that, at his best, (the quotation is inevitable) he "ascends the brightest heaven" of a poet's inspiration.

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