



# Time and Drama in Richard Crashaw's Selected Poems

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*Abstract*— In this paper, four poems by Richard Crashaw have been analyzed based on Lowry Nelson's approach to the Baroque period. The selected poems are "To the Infant Martyr," "I am the Door," "On the Wounds of Our Crucified Lord," and "Christ Crucified." Although, Nelson has used his approaches to analyze a limited number of poets in the Baroque period, such as Milton and Donne, the novelty of this paper lies in the fact that it has extended his approaches to Crashaw's poems. Accordingly, Time and Drama become two Structural means of debates in Crashaw's selected poems. In conclusion this paper will demonstrate that Crashaw has manipulated time to make a new understanding of the world for the reader. This new understanding can change reader's attitude from a materialistic to a spiritual life and from a passivity to God's power which are Baroque's code. Crashaw has also made a rhetorical situation in which the interaction between audience and speaker makes the poem dramatic. This dramatic situation helps Crashaw to convince the reader to change their attitude and awaken them of the limitations of human beings and the illusion of earthly life.

*Keywords:* Time, Drama, human limitations, Passivity, The Experience of Contradiction, Richard Crashaw, Lowry Nelson



## 1. Introduction

Baroque is the “dominant style in European literature from the last decades of the sixteenth century to the last decades of the seventeenth” (Wanke 1). One eminent poet of the Baroque period is Richard Crashaw. Crashaw’s selected poems in this article show a devotion to God. In investigating his selected poems, it is revealed that his endeavor to awaken the human soul and persuade people to believe in God and “Lord” is effective. Crashaw was religiously pro-William Laud. Therefore, his examination of the ways of reaching God in his poems apparently indicates his religious attitude. As Read argues, he “was writing devotional verse which expresses a profoundly sacramental imagination” (127). One aspect of Crashaw’s religious attitude is that he seeks to express a transcendent identity and thus become one with God and Christ through faith. Crashaw seeks to effectively create innovative metaphors to formulate this transcendental identity. Although “concepts born from metaphors are fundamentally false,” as the truth they contain comprises a small part of the whole (Schwinger 67), Crashaw has used metaphors in a way to convey the highest possible effect. He can persuade the reader in terms of the dramaticity of his poems. Based on Lowry Nelson’s approach, Crashaw’s selected poems, i.e. “To the Infant Martyr,” “I am the Door,” “On the Wounds of Our Crucified Lord,” and “Christ Crucified” are investigated in this essay. Nelson’s approach has introduced a new landmark in developing approaches and theories for the Baroque period. The emphasis of this approach is on a subjective and manipulative time (17) and the poet’s making a dramatic situation for the reader (87). The critical point in Nelson’s novel view is his inclusion of the presence of a readership for Baroque poetry who interact with the text of the poem, thus participating in the process of reading it. We will touch upon his theories in the next section.

### 1.1 Time and Drama

Many analysts of the Baroque time have strived to discover Baroque characteristics within areas of “imagery,” “language,” and “metaphor.” They consider these elements as a conventional formula for this period. Regardless, “since the question of fixing them historically is so vexed” (Nelson 16), this paper seeks to establish its approaches on two critical approaches towards the poems of this era i.e. Lowry Nelson and the conceits resulting from that. Nelson uses his approach to analyze poems by poets such as Donne and Milton in his seminal book *Baroque Lyric Poetry*. The originality of this paper is that it uses and applies Nelson’s approaches to Crashaw’s poems and illustrates that Nelson’s approaches can also be extended to Crashaw’s poems. This extension is valuable in developing the inadequate academic approaches for the Baroque period.

The first strategy related to Nelson’s approaches relates to “time” and the second one to the “dramaticity” and change of attitudes. To appreciate the originality of his approach, it is necessary “to note that he [Nelson] does not stress the use of time as theme or topos; nor does he consider ‘rhetoric’ in the narrower sense of imagery, figures and tropes” (Mirolo 163). As Nelson discusses in his seminal book *Baroque Lyric Poetry*:



Even contemporary verbless poems have an implied tense. And even imageless poems have an implied “dramatic” or “rhetorical” situation. But time and drama are not always made conspicuous or important sources of structure. To my mind they were first made so in the Baroque age, and for that reason their use should certainly enter into a characterization of Baroque poetic style. (17)

In the earlier era, time was deemed “immutable” and would alter only by “God’s will.” Time was, therefore, objective. Nevertheless, a “heightened awareness of time in the Baroque period” is reached. It could even be expressed that there is a trend to “conquer time” (Nelson 25). This Subjective time, according to Nelson, is applied as a “structural device” and can be manipulated (25). Nelson adds that

Particularly in many Baroque lyrics it [time] is a major source of structure. We shall see that there are patterns of tenses, form-generating progressions, distinguished and fused planes of time. We shall see that they are related to the total structure of the poems we consider and that they are therefore closely bound to the “sense.” (30)

The critical point in this approach is that time is linked with meaning, so structure and meaning are linked together. (Nelson 30).

According to Nelson's approaches, the second characteristic of the Baroque era is the "rhetorical situation" and the creation and originality beyond it (87). The complicated rhetorical situation can be investigated using "speaker, audience, and reader." Each of these members contributes intricacy to the poem. These members have interacted functions with each other in the rhetorical situation. "Since poems communicate themselves in time, the rhetorical situation must be thought of as dynamic. We may coin the word "dramaticity" (90) to show the interaction between the members. Nelson says, "Let the broadest generalization be that in the Baroque lyric there is a strong tendency which we have called dramaticity and that its most advanced form is an evolution of attitudes" (155). There are components like repetition for emphasis, taking the opposite of alternatives into account, and questions and particularizations of time and place (92). The significance of these components is their enrichment of the dramatic situation.

These approaches are highly suitable to Crashaw's poems. Modifying and driving the reader in time construct a sense of presence for the reader. The rhetorical situation also, step by step, endeavors to develop the reader's perspective toward a spiritual standpoint and not a worldly one. James Mirollo, in a review of Nelson's book's, ends that "the Baroque lyric is characterized by what he [Nelson] calls 'momentaneousness' and 'dramaticity'; in terms of both time and action, Baroque lyrics have a greater immediacy, a sharper sense of something evolving or being achieved in the reader's presence than do their less complex predecessors" (163).

## 2. Discussion

In “To the Infant Martyr,” Crashaw reveals the story of children who were "murdered" by Herod's order to make sure that infant "Jesus" would not survive (Greenblatt 1644). This poem thematically and structurally represents various Baroque codes. The inclination to represent the illusion of this world is one of the codes. In the first line,



the children's body is likened to a cage, "Go, smiling souls, your new-built cages break," which refers to this materialistic life as a prison house. Confirming the first line, the following line indicates that you can sing before being killed: "In heaven you'll learn to sing, / ere here to speak," so life in heaven is exalted. Even in one far-fetched metaphor, he says that the milky way will replace the mother's milk that these children could not taste: "The place that calls you hence is, / at the worst, Milk all the way" (lines 5-6). Thematically speaking, this expression represents the children's innocence and the tyranny of those who killed innocent children for their goals; hence, the contradiction of this world with hereafter, and the similarity of children and birds is shown. The experience of contradiction here is expressed through the Baroque confrontation of the material and the spiritual. Furthermore, the bird-like flight of children towards the sky indicates the transcendental truth of heavenly life, which could be another far-fetched metaphor in this poem.

Based on Nelson's approach, time and drama are significant in this poem. Three members, in this poem, make a dramatic situation: the persona who narrates the poem, the innocent children as the audience, and the reader who is considered to be passive. Here time is not objective. The reader can sense a journey inside time. The reader is transported between past, present and future. This is a mechanism to add to the certainty of the reader, where the narrator starts to convince the reader in this argument through the depiction of the innocent children's death. Children's flight may suggest that readers need to participate in more than ordinary and earthly life experiences. This start raises a question in the reader's mind: What is the truth? Crashaw uses the metaphor of bird and flight to persuade the reader that the absolute truth is not located in this world. So the sense of contradictions between earthly and spiritual life, and using time as a means to develop an argument in favor of convincing the reader is critical in this poem.

In can be said that Crashaw is using past and familiar experience to convey his meaning. According to Mark J. Bruhn who argues the psychological aspects of our cognition:

Each moment of cognition is, in a psychological if not a Platonic sense, a *re-cognition*.

Though we're seldom aware of it, present experience is pervasively mediated by past experience, as we literally *feel* in those surprisingly rare moments of *mis-re-cognition*, when a shadow seems a someone, or a mere noise a meaningful name. (593).

So according to his view, the present understanding always conveys past ideas and experiences. Crashaw also wants to affect the reader's mind. He provides a new dramatic understanding of a past experience to elaborate his meaning better.

Like "To the Infant Martyr," the next poem, "I am the Door," is very brief and concise. The same experience of Baroque contradiction and rhetorical situations with a tendency to master time is dominant here. A basic question in religious poetry is the way one speaks to God: "do you speak to God?" According to Walter Davis, this problem can be solved by the "stances or kinds of mediation the poet takes between his reader and subject" (107). This stance in this poem is dramatized through offering the reader the scene of Christ's crucifixion. In this poem, Christ is sent to earth by God to atone for man's sins. He is the agent of salvation: "And now th' art set wide ope, / the spear's sad art" (line 1). However, this faith must be whole-hearted and a



kind of union with God. It means a passivity in human beings. "Life as a dream" is another common code in the poetry of the Baroque period (Friedrich 53) which is depicted in most of the poems analyzed in this article. Otherwise, the poem expresses that those who have doubts cannot attain salvation: "He to himself (I fear the worst) And his own hope/ Hath shut these doors of heaven" (lines 3-5). The extended metaphor in this poem is a "door." The door's function is to open a new view to a new situation. Christ's crucifixion is introduced as the agent of salvation. Christ's crucifixion and his side's opening in the first line, "And now th' art set wide ope, / the spear's sad art," represent a door for salvation. The contradictory experience in this poem is addresses two groups: believers in Christ and non- believers. Furthermore, this poem sides with believers who can enter another spiritual world.

The time is set in the middle of the crucifixion. Moreover, the narrator directly addresses or apostrophizes Christ by saying that his crucifixion is like a door, but some people still doubt this. To put the reader in the middle of Christ's crucifixion, which is one strategy to conquer time, the speaker convinces the reader in the best way to put aside all doubts. Since he is there and seeing what Christ has done for his salvation. Alongside setting the time in the middle of crucifixion, this poem addresses Jesus. Nevertheless, the rhetorical situation is more dramatic and more convincing because some of the lines and the title, which are Jesus's words, indicate Crashaw's meticulous reading of the New Testament. For example, "I am the door" is a reflection of these words from the Bible: "I am the door; by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved" (Greenblatt 1644).

In "On the Wounds of Our Crucified Lord," written for Christ, the readers are asked to see how Christ sacrificed himself for their salvation. Like all the poems analyzed in this article, the reader is only asked to accept the argument. The reader is also a spectator of Christ's crucifixion in this poem. In the rhetorical situation of the poem, Christ is addressed directly, whose wounds are depicted as mouths and eyes "these wakeful wounds of thine! / Are they mouths? or are they eyes?" (lines 1-2). "Crashaw's disturbing, even obsessive attention to orifices, the physical operation of the mouth, mastication and consumption in particular, has a substantial precedent in Reformed polemic and Eucharistic theology" (Netzley 248). This metaphorical use of the eyes and mouth seeks to acquaint the readers better with the crucifixion of Christ and to engage their attention. By imagining Christ's crucifixion, the reader may feel the instantaneous presence and immanence of Christ, thus acknowledging him. Of course, the reader here is a passive character who is only asked to accept a truth. To elaborate on the Baroque codes in this poem, the metaphors of mouth and eyes refer to the emptiness and hardship of the world. These metaphors can show how we need salvation, and without following Christ, our life is empty. In the contradiction that has been drawn between the material world and salvation, the reader is asked to follow the spiritual world.

Alongside the rhetorical situation and the metaphors, the concept of time is also crucial in this poem. Like the earlier poem about Christ, the reader of the poem "On the Wounds of Our Crucified Lord" is located in the middle of the crucifixion and watches a drama in which the speaker is addressing Christ: "Be they mouths, or be they eyne, / Each bleeding part someone supplies. / Lo! a mouth, whose full-bloomed lips / At too dear a rate are roses." (lines 3-6). So this movement from the contemporary reader toward the past and crucifixion is



also helpful to make a presence for the reader. So by this dramaticity, the reader can better accept Christ's path, which is the right path according to Crashaw, "The difference only this appears (Nor can the change offend), / The debt is paid in ruby-tears / Which thou in pearls didst lend." (lines 17-20).

We have a similar theme in "Christ Crucified": the crucifixion of Christ. This poem is similar to all the poems analyzed in this article in terms of theme and structure. Camden says that "R. Crashaw unflinchingly links love with suffering, God's healing with his harm" (257). So for Crashaw, it is useful to show Christ's suffering to bring the reader closer to God. Here again, there is a similar rhetorical situation with three members. The reader is brought to look at Christ's crucified body: "THY restless feet now cannot go/ For us and our eternal good" (lines 1-2). The speaker addresses Christ's body as the audience (or object) of the poem, thus saying that it has been sacrificed for man's salvation. Furthermore, he provides the reader with the metaphor of Christ's hands and feet crucified for man's virtue: "For us and our eternal good" (line 2). Of course, the necessary contradiction expressed at the poem's end is between restraint and freedom. The limitation of faith in the poem is caused by freedom itself: "Thy hands to give Thou canst not lift, / Yet will Thy hand still giving be; / It gives, but O, itself's the gift! / It gives tho' bound, tho' bound 'tis free!" (lines 4-8). Here, freedom means a release from the shackles of a life that is limited. In a way, it expresses the experience of the transcendence of an earthly being.

The tendency to conquer time, Nelson's first approach (25), i.e., temporal progression, is also evident in this poem. The poem progresses from crucifixion to the contemporary time of the reader, which establishes a more dramatically temporal aspect and a greater sense of immediacy. All the poems examined so far suggest that salvation can be achieved only by following faith without which this world is empty of meaning, and our death is meaningless. Nevertheless, by abiding in the truth, one can transcend the limitations of life and conquer time.

### 3. Conclusion

In the end, this paper concludes that time and Drama have an essential function in Crashaw's poems. Dislocating the reader in the past, present, and future is crucial in constructing an actuality and presence. This insight of presence can assist in changing the reader's mind and attitude toward Crashaw's final arguments. Another baroque characteristic applied in this paper is Drama. Crashaw uses worldly metaphors in his dramatic situation, such as the transience of earthly life and the permanence of the hereafter, to change the reader's mindset. Thus, the paper ends that Nelson's approaches can also be extended to Crashaw's poems. Additionally, conceits are another means for changing the reader's attitude. Conceits like human beings as passive creatures who need guidance or faith in our lives are represented in these poems. Crashaw has used them to show how human beings live in a contradictory time.



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