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The Reflexive Turn in Early Seventeenth-Century Poetry

A reflexive turn is a figure of speech that involves something in paradoxical self-referentiality, usually through comparison or metonymic association and usually with the use of reflexive pronouns or of “own.” In “Its own resemblance,” Christopher Ricks shows the extraordinarily refined use to which Marvell puts “self-inwoven comparison,” and finds the same sort of turn not only in Marvell’s contemporaries but also in the poets of another society torn by civil strife, the Ulster of the 1970s.¹ I do not wish to question Ricks’s demonstration of Marvell’s figurations of unity in self-division or the striking similarities he finds with the Ulster poets’ practice. My aim is to show that reflexive turns (a term I prefer to “self-inwoven comparisons”) are used rather widely in the seventeenth century for celebration or deprecation; that especially with Crashaw they are cultivated with artistic sophistication by poets who show little of the divided mind we might suppose attends civil war; and that the self-referential involutions that Ricks notes in Marvell’s use of the turn go rather specially with Marvell’s own ironic consciousness of self.

Ricks begins with Empson’s observation of self-inwoven comparison in Shelley: “With mighty whirl the multitudinous orb / Grinds the bright brook into an azure mist / Of elemental sublety like light” (Prometheus Unbound, IV).

“The matter is so highly informed, so ethereal,” says Empson, “that it can be compared to the Pure Form of which it is the matter. . . . The Form is its own justification: it sustains itself like God, by the fact that it exists. Poetry which idolizes its object naturally gives it the attributes of deity.”²

Empson criticizes this practice as short-circuiting comparison: “Shelley seldom perceived profitable relations between things, he was too helplessly excited by one thing at a time, and that one thing was often a mere notion not conceived in action or an environment” (p. 161). Taking up William Keach’s answer to Empson on this point, Ricks finds that Marvell’s reflexive turns act “as verbal representations” of the “process of reflective imaginative projection,” by dramatizing sometimes “a self inclosed psychic experience,” sometimes “the mind’s involuted descent into depths of its own reflexiveness.”3 He shows how this is so particularly in his analysis of lines from Marvell’s “On a Drop of Dew”: “But gazing back upon the skies, / Shines with a mournful light, / Like its own tear” (ll. 11–13).4

But enchanting and quizzical self-enfoldings such as come out here and elsewhere in Marvell are by no means the rule with reflexive turns. Empson’s remark on poetry’s deifying its object points to a more general way in which the turn functions in the early seventeenth century. It was used as a flourish to suggest that what it was talking about was absolute or complete in itself and so beyond comparison except with itself.

A twentieth-century example of this celebratory use of reflexiveness is in Yvor Winters’ poem “To Edwin V. Mackenzie,” which concludes with the salute, “Yourself the concept in the final hour.”5 Through persistence and firmness and clarity of mind, alone among a cloud of false witnesses and a hysterical public opinion baying for blood, the lawyer for the defense of someone accused of murder comes to represent an ideal civic tradition. In both theme and expression this is characteristic of Winters, the human and mortal individual attaining something of deathless mind. But at the same time Winters had studied the poets of the early seventeenth century carefully and his adoption of the reflexive turn for his own celebratory ends is true to the spirit of the earlier poets’ use of it. Winters’ reflexive turn is not, by the way, a comparison but a sort of half-fledged personification by metonymy: the lawyer realizes the spirit of the law which he practices; the just man justices; the agent assumes the identity of the human tradition he acts for and personifies it.

In a similarly absolute gesture Donne urges his friend Sir Henry Wotton to consider the snail and “Be thine own palace, or the world’s thy gaol.” He is counselling his friend to be king of himself in the stoic vein, absolute in himself and so not confined by the world. And in this case the reflexive turn does work with comparison: there is a comparison between the splendor of a palace and the inner splendor of a man who is master of himself, so that the palace may stand as a metaphor for the man. Although Donne only rarely makes use of such figures in his verse, and as Ricks observes (p. 118), usually without realizing their possibilities, this is a rather fine specimen of the ways a reflexive turn may exalt its object and grandly exile the rest of the world.

Marvell uses this figure to compliment Charles II gracefully at the end of “Last Instructions to a Painter”:

But this great work is for our Monarch fit,
And henceforth Charles only to Charles shall sit.
His master-hand the ancients shall outdo,
Himself the painter and the poet too. (ll. 945–48)

There is nothing very subtly self-referential here. Self-portraits in verse or paint are not teasingly paradoxical. Even the idea that Charles as poet should instruct himself in what to paint is fairly straightforward. And still Marvell is making use of the reflexive turn to suggest that only majesty should represent itself; all other representations are impertinent. Marvell’s own representation of Charles, although deferring most flattering to his statecraft to show up the rascally politicians who serve him, nevertheless subjects him to some delicious raillery with the vision of the naked virgin who comes to his bed but eludes his embraces—Charles “divined ’twas England or the peace” (l. 906). Marvell’s final turn will among other things contain an apology for having transgressed the sacred boundary between subject and monarch. Possibly it may also contain an innuendo that only Charles could explain what he is up to. The turn is not comparison or metonymy or personification, and yet as a piece of flattery, perhaps ironic, it can scarcely be said to be meant literally. Still, it shows that self-reflexiveness without further embellishment was sufficient to grace its object as a nonpareil. So Adam walking naked to meet Raphael goes “without more train / Accompanied than with his own complete /

Perfections, in himself was all his state” (*Paradise Lost*, V, 350–53). It is enough that he is himself and not another thing. That is the flourish of true majesty.

Since reflexive turns tend to celebration, even those in which the reflexiveness is more in the words than in the idea seem nevertheless to have performed a gesture, half swagger, half curtsey. One of Clement Paman’s poems on Edward King, “On his Death,” recalls how the apostles were sailors:

> Peter from the main  
> Rose like the sun and there goes down again  
> In our apostle here [i.e. King], who at his fall  
> Was text and preacher at’s own funeral. (ll. 93–96)

King’s death and burial at sea with the sinking of the ship make a new text in the acts of the apostles, “which we / May prove and feel the world’s mortality” (ll. 97–98), and his devotions as the ship went down are his own funeral sermon, himself his own text. Paman may be recalling the last lines of Donne’s “Hymn to God my God, in my Sickness”: “And as to others’ souls I preached the word, / Be this my text, my sermon to my own, / Therefore that he may raise the Lord throws down” (ll. 28–30).

And that may have been reinforced by what people, according to Walton, said of “Death’s Duel,” that in it Donne preached his own funeral sermon. Speaking from beyond the grave is a frequent motif in Donne, an expression of a “transcending humour” and strained sense of not being in the world. But that stretch of spirit is absent in Paman’s version of the paradox. Paman simply wants to cast King’s drowning in the form of a triumphant completion and makes use of a voguish turn, not without a certain fantastic charm.

II

In something of the same spirit but with more dash, Cleveland’s “Upon the death of M. King drowned in the Irish Seas” inquires,

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Could not . . .  
    some new Iland in thy rescue peep,  
To heave thy resurrection from the deep?  
That so the world might see thy safety wrought  
With no lesse miracle then thy self was thought. (ll. 21–26)\(^\text{11}\)

The reflexiveness is vestigial here. Fancying a miracle in nature, Cleveland wrenches in the compliment that King was thought a miracle of learning and virtue (later he will become a university beneath the waves). “Then thy self was thought” means little more than “than you were thought,” “self” coming in only to intensify, as in “you yourself.” Even so, as an intensifier, “self” rhetorically conveys the specialness of King and suggests that, being a miracle in himself, a miracle would be appropriate for him.

It is curious that Cleveland does not make more use of reflexive turns in a more fully formed shape. He writes celebratory poems worked up to the most fantastic degree of hyperbole, in which the object of his praise becomes a divinity. In “The Hecatomb to his Mistresse,” his ineffable love can only be spoken of, like God, by negative comparisons, “for what perfections we to others grant, / It is her sole perfection to want” (ll. 37–38). Prince Rupert, with the help of other theological and metaphysical ideas, comprises in himself all heroes, past, present, or future, and yet transcends all that he includes. He is both a comprehensive man and more than a man:

    Whatever man winds up, that RUPERT hath:  
    For nature rais’d him on the Publike Faith,  
    Pandora’s Brother, to make up whose store,  
    The Gods were faine to run upon the score. (“To P. Rupert,” ll. 73–76)

The gods ran into debt in making him. In “Upon Phillis walking in a morning before Sun-rising,” Phillis “antidates the day” (l. 32). The garden she walks in springs to life and attention as if she were the sun. But she inspires greater devotion than the sun can and retires in case she should disturb the seasons. Here for once there is a full reflexive turn, but it celebrates Phillis only indirectly:

    The Plants whose luxurie was lopt,  
    Or age with crutches underpropt;  
    Whose wooden carkasses were grown

Even trees, so old that they are their own coffins, revive in Phillis’ presence. This turn works metonymically. The trees are so decrepit that they remind one of the end of decrepitude and of something else wooden—coffins. I do not think we are being invited to marvel at the strange persistence of life in death, of trees decaying seemingly never to be decayed. The marvel lies elsewhere. The tendency to deification present in the reflexive turn is transferred to Phillis and her wonderful attractions. Even here, in a full-blown self-reflexive turn, Cleveland tilts it away from its immediate reference.

Similarly, he avoids conventional versions of what Empson, in an interesting discussion of how Renaissance poetry decentralized the idea of deity, calls a Logos figure. Some man or woman such as Elizabeth Drury is seen as the sustaining idea of the world. There is an example of this sort of conceit in Cleveland’s elegy “On the Archbishop of Canterbury,” where, after Laud’s death,

There is no Church, Religion is growne
From much of late, that shee’s encreast to none;

The Lyturgie, whose doome was voted next,
Died as a Comment upon him the Text.
There’s nothing lives, life is since he is gone,
But a Nocturnall Lucubration. (ll. 19–28)

But otherwise Cleveland generally prefers to improvise on other metaphysical themes to arrive at his blazons. Even Phillis is a goddess, a rival of Venus or the sun, rather than a version of the Logos. When he writes about Charles’s return from Scotland, he plays on ideas of the omnipresence of the King in his kingdom. When he writes about the King’s disguise, he plays on one of his favorite themes of one person consisting of more than one nature, except in this case the disguise is so vile that he calls for “a State-distinction to arraigne / Charles of high Treason ’gainst my Soveraigne” (ll. 5–6). This is a self-inwoven contradiction rather than

13. In “My Phillis brake from out her East; / As if shee’d made a match to runne / With Venus Usher to the sunne” (ll. 2–4), Venus is the morning star as well as, in a graceful compliment to Phillis, the goddess of love.
a self-inwoven comparison. It is as if Charles, the most exalted image of the divine on earth, had subverted the whole analogical system on which turns like the Logos conceit and reflexiveness implying a kind of deification depended:

Such is the Sacriledge of thine Attire
By which th’art halfe depos’d, thou look’st like one
Whose looks are under Sequestration.
Whose Renegado form, at the first glance,
Shews like the self-denying Ordinance. (ll. 34–38)

The comparison to the “self-denying ordinance” associates Charles’s defacing “of the Royall stamp” (l. 12) with the measure his enemies took to secure better generalship against him but also plays on the words that name it to suggest that Charles has abolished himself. The disguise through which he abolished himself must also be intensified:

Is’t not enough thy Dignity’s in thrall,
But thou’lt transcribe it in thy shape and all?
As if thy Blacks were of too faint a die,
Without the tincture of Tautologie. (ll. 13–16)

The King was apparently wearing black in mourning for his captivity, but Cleveland asks whether that ordinary black was sufficient to express his sense of departure from himself and whether it was for this purpose he had recourse to the blackness, moral as much as physical, or his disguise, which as the blackness of blackness, the tautological essence of blackness itself, might better fit his plight. Cleveland does not formulate this notion as a reflexive turn. Indeed the word “Tautologie” would threaten to expose the absurdity of the turn. What is the blackness of blackness but blackness? The way that the words seem to divide black from itself to assert an essence or identity is tautological or purely verbal. And reductively examined, personifications and even the sort of deifications we have been looking at are verbal entities. In this poem, then, reflexiveness, which ought to be a royal flourish, has not just been repressed and not allowed full expression; it has been turned to expressing a feeling of absurdity.

That is another expressive possibility of self-reflexive turns. Instead of conveying through paradox a self-sufficiency, a god-like, self-sustaining being in itself, their paradoxical form may be used disparagingly or derisively to convey a self-cancelling self-involvement. So when Herbert writes in “Misery” of man as “A sick tossed vessel, dashing on each thing; /
Nay, his own shelf: / My God, I mean myself” (ll. 76–78), his paradox of the man who is at once ship and rock uses a reflexive turn because in Herbert’s religion the self is the enemy of God. The self that aspires to self-sufficiency founders in the face of God, the only self-sufficient being. Cleveland’s absurd play on the borders of self-reflexivity is more complicated. Still the King is his god-term and it is the undoing of the King that is the source of self-contradictory absurdity.

Self-contradiction figures in other poems by Cleveland. In “Upon an Hermaphrodite,” it takes a playfully encomiastic form. The hermaphrodite is perfect in combining male and female: “Thus did natures mintage vary, / Coyning thee a Philip and Mary” (ll. 65–66). However playfully, Cleveland manages to set a royal stamp on this image of completeness in itself. With the enemies of King Charles, by contrast, he develops self-contradiction satirically:

Nor is it all the Nation hath these spots;  
There is a Church as well as Kirk of Scots:  
As in a picture, where the squinting paint  
Shewes Fiend on this side, and on that side Saint. (ll. 53–56)\footnote{For an explanation of the trick painting alluded to, see my “Cleveland’s ‘squinting paint’ and Cowley’s ‘folded picture,’” Notes and Queries, n.s., 47.2 (2000), 182–83.}

That consisting of two opposite natures in one resolves itself easily as the Civil War in Scotland between good Royalists and evil Covenanters. But Cleveland is soon after more sweeping execration. The Scots “defie / This or that Place, Rags of Geographie. / They’re Citizens o’th World; they’re all in all, / Scotland’s a Nation Epidemical” (ll. 67–70). The Scots, that is, are not a nation since they are everywhere, like a diabolic imitation of God or an epidemic. “Smectymnuus, or the Club Divines” and “Upon Sir Thomas Martin” are elaborate games played with the monstrous or chimerical unions of more than one identity under one name. And “The Mixt Assembly” discharges volleys of incongruity at the confused identity of the Westminster Assembly:

And all th’Adulteries of twisted nature  
But faintly represent this ridling feature  
Whose Members being not Tallies, they’l not own  
Their fellowes at the Resurrection. (ll. 33–36)

Heterogeneous things yoked by violence together are here not an expression of a troubled interiority, as they are in Donne or Marvell, but a
means to characterize a world upside down and, more than that, to pretend at least that the theological and metaphysical ideas that seemed to underpin the order of Church, State, and universe now take parodic and abortive forms.  

III

With Crashaw, although his Laudian “little contenfull kingdom” collapsed, the supernatural kingdom, which was the matter of his poetry, remained unshaken. The supernatural order might make itself felt in miracle, suspension of the order of the world, extravagant artificiality, or grotesqueness. But these turnings of the world upside down are extravagant expressions of religious feeling, not responses to the Civil War. The reflexive turn, frequent in some of his poems, fairly clearly takes the form of variations on its celebratory mode or derivations of it, not half-formed or askew as if the whole notion of sovereignty or self-sustaining self-sufficiency were itself agitated by the violent self-divisions of the country.

Some of Crashaw’s reflexive conceits are perhaps little more than exercises in preciosity. Ricks dismisses Crashaw by singling out for invidious comparison with Marvell’s “Upon a Drop of Dew” lines from “wishes To his (supposed) Mistresse”: “Each Ruby there, / Or Pearle that dare appeare, / Bee its owne blush, bee its owne Teare” (ll. 52–54).  

One can certainly agree that here there is none of the strange, mournful self-mirroring to be found in Marvell’s dewdrop that is like its own tear. Ricks goes further: “Instead of Marvell’s fluid windows, we are handed something which crystallizes as cleverness” (p. 112). That is to take too severe a line with Crashaw’s playfulness. Crashaw is calling up in imagination how he would have his mistress’ hair so shining that it would put out any gems scattered in it. In consequence pearls should weep and rubies blush with shame, or at least modesty. In Crashaw’s

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17. All quotations of Crashaw’s poetry are taken from The Complete Poetry of Richard Crashaw, ed. George Walton Williams (New York, 1970).

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artificial poem-world, the jewels themselves take on what he sees as the feminine designs of vanity and appropriately chastened feelings of shame. Here the reflexive formulation, like Cleveland’s trees that are their own coffins, reflects not so much upon the jewels themselves, as upon the glory of the blazoned woman set above not only jewels but the errors of her sex. Amidst her hair, the proud splendor of her gems should redound upon itself in self-conscious shamefastness, and this is to make them trophies of her splendor. The woman herself is to be the cynosure and self-sufficient source of all true beams, or as Crashaw puts it, she should have “Lookes that oppresse / Their richest Tires but dresse / And cloath their simplest Nakednesse” (ll. 39–41). She should be her own adornment.

Religious subjects were perhaps even more congenial to Crashaw’s self-enclosed art than secular ones. At any rate, the preciosity of “The Teare” is more highly turned than in “Wishes.” It is an essay in the tears of Mary Magdalene, resembling in places “The Weeper,” but much shorter. It focuses all its thoughts and feelings on one “moist spark” (l. 3) fallen from Mary’s eye. The second stanza declares, “O ’tis not a Teare” but a star; the third declares,

O ’tis a Teare,
Too true a Teare; for no sad eyne,
How sad so e’re
Raine so true a Teare as thine;
Each Drop leaving a place so deare,
Weeps for it selfe, is its owne Teare.

Nothing could be more tearful for a tear than to fall from Mary’s eye. The difference between this and Marvell’s dew drop, “Like its own tear,” is that Crashaw is more playfully absurd. In Marvell, the self-inwoven simile divides the drop of water into self-mirroring. In Crashaw, the self-inwoven turn is so worked into a fanciful explanation of why it is a true tear that a feeling of self-division in identity never develops. What happens is rather an eroticizing of the tear. Originally it was a tear of Mary’s repentance. Fallen from the heaven of her eyes, it is said to weep itself, tear from tear, for its fall. This might just be called a metaphor. But the point of the reflexiveness is the salute to Mary rather than self-inwoven comparison. We understand that it is she that is being adored by the self-involution of the tears and their melting feeling. Crashaw is a master of such transferences or fetishizings of objects. In “The Teare,” the tear
becomes disengaged from its source and context. In succeeding stanzas, he says that he will send it on a pillow to heaven, where, among other orbs, it will become a singing eye, although probably it would prefer to return and shine in Mary’s eye.\textsuperscript{18}

In “‘Mirth in Funeral’: Crashaw and the Pleasures of Grief,” Coburn Freer notes that Crashaw’s poetry, unlike Donne’s and Herbert’s, is not “I”-centered and as a result not apparently focused on the self and its relation to God. All the same, according to Freer, Crashaw’s reflexive turns have a way of investing the intensely meditated objects of his poetry with interiority. I agree with this if Crashaw’s interiority consists in an unanguished conversion of desire into an appetite for God.\textsuperscript{19} In “The Teare,” Mary is desirable and her love of Christ and the deliciousness of her repentance inflame a similar desire in the reader. We are drawn into an emotional and sensual field where repentance becomes a pleasure. Everything is focused on the tear and its fairy-tale adventures, longings, and levitations. The rules of the world we ordinarily live in are miraculously suspended so that the tear moves according to supernatural operations. The reflexive turn here has the effect, not so much of self-involution, as of self-abolition. The tear is devoted to the saint that produced it, and its weeping for itself concentrates feelings of adoration. A harsh judgment on Crashaw’s art here would be that it is maudlin. A sympathetic one would be that Crashaw’s derangement of objects and feeling and sensation dissolves in a sort of religious levity the profound difficulty of a return upon the self in repentance.

A more obvious example of the way in which Crashaw may use a reflexive turn to abolish its object in the face of the adorable and divine occurs at the end of “An Apologie for the fore-going Hymne.” Here the carnal feelings etherealized are not erotic but drunken. Crashaw must be one of the great topers of English verse: drinking and being drunk (in both senses) are motifs he keeps returning to. In the section of divine tipsiness that concludes the “Apologie,” Crashaw calls for “Bowles full of richer blood then blush of grape / Was ever guilty of” (ll.33–34), urges his companions or readers to “Drinke . . . till we prove more, not lesse, then men”\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{18} Tears of repentance rise upward also in “The Weeper” because repentance is divine. See also Herbert, “Praise” (3): “I have not lost one single tear: / But when mine eyes / Did weep to heav’n, they found a bottle there / (As we have boxes for the poor) / Ready to take them in” (ll. 25–27).

\textsuperscript{19} Essays on Richard Crashaw, ed. Robert M. Cooper, Salzburg Studies in English Literature, 83 (Salzburg, 1979), pp. 83ff. Freer, however, argues that these turns transform grief into joy.
(l. 36), and cries up the virtues of the wine: “That can exalt weak EARTH; and so refine / Our dust, that at one draught, Mortality / May drinke it selfe up, and forget to dy” (ll. 44–46). The notion of being too drunk to remember to die is certainly a charming one. It figures perhaps a sort of undoing of the platonic notion that the draught of Lethe brought the soul to forget its immortality when it was born.20 Mortality drinks itself up by complex synecdochic and metonymic equivocation. Mortality, meaning human beings who will die, may drink mortality (in the sense of the wine of Christ’s dying) and so overcome the mortality of their own deaths. It is the wine of divine love that triumphs in this reflexive turn; the mortality that drinks itself up simply disappears.

Crashaw may use the reflexive turn to criticize a refusal of the divine. We have seen how Herbert exploits the potential absurdity of reflexiveness to expose a self at enmity with God, the one self-sustaining center of self in his theology. That Crashaw actually learned to use reflexive formulations in this sternly anti-celebratory way from Herbert seems to me unlikely. He makes ample deprecatory use of them in his “Letter to the Countess of Denbigh,” but his deprecation is gentle. In urging the Countess to convert to Rome, Crashaw is courting her for God. In trying to seduce her (although not for himself), he makes out that she is refusing what she really desires and only a strange perversity of self-denial prevents her from yielding. This allows him to remonstrate warmly, while condemning her resistance inoffensively—after all, a woman was supposed to deny herself and her lover:

What Magick-Bolts, what mystick Barrs
Maintain the Will in these strange Wars?
What Fatall, yet fantastick, Bands
Keep the free Heart from his own Hands?
Say, lingring Fair, why comes the Birth
Of your brave Soul so slowly forth?
Plead your Pretences, (O you strong
In weaknesse) why you chuse so long
In Labour of your self to ly,
Not daring quite to Live nor Die.
So when the Year takes cold we see
Poor Waters their own Prisoners be:
Fetter’d and lock’d up fast they lie

In a cold self-captivity.
Th’astonish’d Nymphs their Floud’s strange Fate deplore,
To find themselves their own severer Shoar. (ll. 11–26)\textsuperscript{21}

An earlier remonstration of the same sort may be found in the rather less delightful “Epithalamium,” where Crashaw archly scolds the pride of the bride’s maidenhead in the second stanza:

\begin{quote}
within the shade
of its owne winge
it sate and played
a self crownd King.
\end{quote}

The Countess, like this maidenhead, has to yield her “self-shutt cabinet” (l. 29) to “Allmighty Love” (l. 29).\textsuperscript{22} The analogy between the frozen lake or stream and the Countess’ reluctance to convert to Rome is the occasion for three reflexive comparisons, each at least superficially complimentary to the Countess’ chastity, the third especially so with the mythological personification of water as Naiads, already a sort of reflexive doubling of water in the spirits of water. But the celebratory impulse of the reflexive turn is countered by the analysis of self-paralysis. Above all in the “strange Fate” of the nymphs, compliment and absurdity are felicitously combined. The nymphs are cut off from their natural flowing, and coldness divides them from themselves. By contrast there is the womanly power to give birth, a theme that Crashaw always treats warmly. Like Spenser’s Charissa, the Countess is to give birth to a regenerate soul, except that the soul is her own. This is a beautiful figure for the labor of self-renewal, but prompts the question why she should “chuse so long / In Labour of yourself to ly.” “Chuse” makes her labor, which should be a triumphant coming through, absurd in its protraction, while suggesting that the coming through is inevitable all the same.

\textsuperscript{21} Compare “In labour of your self to ly” with Lovelace’s “That to thine own self hast the midwife play’d,” “To my dear Friend Mr. El[dred] R[evett], on his Poems moral and divine,” l. 43 (1659 / 60), in The Poems of Richard Lovelace, ed. C. H. Wilkinson (Oxford, 1930), and Crashaw’s reflexive turns for frozen water with Eldred Revett’s “Rivers that chide upon their shelves / Caught, are made fetters for themselves,” “Winter” (1657), in Selected poems, Humane and Divine, ed. Donald Friedman (Liverpool, 1966). Ricks cites the lines from Lovelace and Revett without making any connection to Crashaw (pp. 131–32).

\textsuperscript{22} “The self-shutt cabinet” and “Allmighty Love” come from the 1653 version taken from the 1652 version of “A Letter to the Countess of Denbigh”; my other quotations are from the 1653 version.
Robert Ellrodt remarks that Crashaw’s extravagance is humorless.\(^\text{23}\) I would not argue that Crashaw’s adaptations of erotic and drinking verse are comic, but they are certainly playful and smiling. His use of the reflexive turn is complex and both adroit and assured in its tone. In the “Letter to the Countess of Denbigh,” he manages the absurdity of the turn with tact and warmth to urge the Countess to make up a mind notoriously incapable of decision. Nevertheless, Crashaw has a straightforward use of paradoxes of reflexiveness. He celebrates the divine in reflexive figures to convey its miraculous self-completeness. His epigrams on religious subjects frequently come to a point in formulations involving “self” or “own.”\(^\text{24}\) Some of these are trivial. But “On our crucified Lord Naked, and bloody” manages the turn with a certain splendor:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Th’have left thee naked Lord, O that they had;} \\
\text{This Garment too I would they had deny’d.} \\
\text{Thee with thy selfè they have too richly clad,} \\
\text{Opening the purple wardrobe of thy side.} \\
\text{O never could bee found Garments too good} \\
\text{For thee to weare, but these, of thine owne blood.}
\end{align*}
\]

This exclamation of grief, love, and wonder is prompted by imagining one aspect of the crucifixion. The point of the epigram is emotional, not intellectual. The “purple wardrobe” is a bizarre but not a homely metaphor. The Master of the Wardrobe was a post at court, and the “purple wardrobe” is more than kingly—it is imperial.\(^\text{25}\) The garment of purple is inexpressibly rich and good, as befits the ruler of the universe. It is too rich and too good because of what it costs, and here Crashaw’s phrasing expresses tenderness for the naked and wounded body. The reflexive turns


\(^\text{24}\) Ellrodt, I, 379, n. 8, “On remarqua en revanche, la fréquence de l’adjective “own.” . . . Shelley est, . . . le seul poète qui ait employé si fréquemment cette tournure, si favorable, semble-t-il, à l’élan lyrique. Mais il est peut-être a cette rencontre une autre raison que le rythme. En certains cas, ce renforcement du possessif semble accentuer la conscience aiguë, amoureuse, d’une existence autre que l’existence du poète: ‘Thyself our sun, though thine own shade.’ Shelley use de l’expression pour s’envirer de sa propre existence, immédiatement ou par l’effet de la sympathie. Il arrive à Crashaw de s’envirer aussi de sa propre jouissance, mais de la jouissance qu’il goûte à se perdre: ‘Our selves become our own best SACRIFICE.’”

\(^\text{25}\) Cf. Donne, “So, in this purple wrapped receive me Lord, / By these his thorns give me his other crown,” “Hymn to God my God, in my Sickness,” ll. 26–27.
express also a primitive horror that the blood streaming from Christ is himself. And behind that is a religious feeling of awe that the spear has inadvertently revealed a divine richness that could not clothe itself in anything but the too much expense of itself. The reflexive turn, as Empson remarks of Shelley’s use of it, arises in poetry that “idolizes its subject and naturally gives it the attributes of deity.” But when the intensely contemplated image is divine, a self-inwoven comparison may, as here, be employed with an effect not so much of short-circuiting as of elevating beyond comparison.

In the “Hymn in the Holy Nativity,” the infant Christ is similarly divinized by reflexive turns. The shepherds say, “We saw thee by thine own sweet light” (l. 36). Perhaps this is meant literally. The child is frequently pictured lit up by his own glory and the shepherds have already said that when “The Babe look’t up and shew’d his Face; / In spite of Darknes, it was DAY” (ll. 19–20). But there is also a good deal of figuration involved here, perhaps even sufficiently intellectual to involve the notion that the mystery of the incarnate Word could only be understood in the light of itself. At the very least there is an idea in play that the divine brings with it its own light and such a light as expels all other illumination. A similar celebration of divine self-sufficiency occurs in these gnomic yet lilting lines:

The Phaenix builds the Phaenix’ nest.
Love’s architecture is his own.
The Babe whose birth embraves this morn,
Made his own bed e’re he was born. (ll. 46–49)

Only the God of love could make a fit habitation for himself, however odd that fitness might look in the eyes of the world. “Love’s architecture is his own” is not fully reflexive: it does not mean that the babe was his own architecture but looks back to the “cold, and not too cleanly, manger” of the preceding stanza and also his bed between the breasts of the Virgin in the following ones. But it does imply that the “Great little one” (l. 83) is more than he seems to be, that what he ordains as a palace (“architecture” surely implies a splendid building) is answerable only to himself and his laws of love. Besides, “Love” is not just a name for God and the infant. It is also a personification, and love may be known by its effects: love in that way is its own architecture and finds its own loveliness. In a similarly self-sustaining way, that the “Babe” “Made his own bed e’re he was born” means that in some sense he contains himself and
makes his own conditions of existence. The Phoenix is in part a figure of such self-completeness; unique and self-begotten, its life contains its own end and arises from its own ashes.

But the Phoenix will also be a figure of self-immolation. Christ died first to His heavenly existence in the Incarnation and secondly in the crucifixion. He is the supreme example of voluntary sacrifice in Crashaw’s universe. St. Teresa and Mary Magdalene may imitate his death to himself in their adoration. But he is the supreme example and the one true object of self-immolation for others. Consequently, when the shepherds vow to bring offerings to Christ, “Till burnt at last in fire of Thy fair eyes, / Our selves become our own best SACRIFICE” (ll. 107–08), they are answering to a divine pattern. The reflexive turn both allows a certain paradoxical triumph of self-completion and reflects glory on the perfect sacrifice that is the object of their sacrifice.

IV

Crashaw brings out, more than other poets we have looked at, the potential for divinity in reflexiveness, or for enclosing oneself against it. But even Cleveland’s hoverings on the edge of reflexiveness go with the use he makes of theological ideas, however contorted or satirical. The paradoxes of self-reference may be used for the sublime or the absurd, to celebrate or to deplore. All the examples we have looked at carry that positive or negative charge, even if in quite deflected ways. How is it then that Marvell’s reflexive turns and those of some of his contemporaries, as Ricks explains them, float away from this pattern?

Lovelace’s “The Snail,” in fact, is quite strongly connected to the pattern I have made out. The celebratory charge of the reflexive turn is involved in a twofold irony. There is first of all ironic praise. Lovelace’s snail poems are mock encomiums, exalting something not base but trivial. The reflexive turn is a figure of sublime praise: “Wise emblem of our politic world, / Sage snail, within thine own self curl’d” (ll. 1–2). But in the midst of this sprightly play, which mockingly exalts the self-completeness of the snail, there is a second irony that entertains the snail’s involution as an emblem of how to live rather along the lines of Donne’s advice to Wotton. But this is too definite. It would be better to say that Lovelace is making playful thought pictures of the sort of self-sufficiency he would need if he were to live so that “Stone walls do not a prison make, / Nor iron bars a cage” (“To Althea from
Prison”). His high spirits and high spirit revolve around how the mind may be its own place. Both as mock encomium and as a reflection of a self-sufficiency he must make his own, the poem works within the celebratory mode, although irony and indirectness give it an interior scope.

Marvell takes the ironizing and internalizing of the reflexive turn further. We have seen how the conclusion of “Last Instructions to a Painter” flatters the King with an air of finesse. That example, however, remains clearly within the range of praise of a sovereign being. In Marvell’s more personal poetry, reflexiveness becomes more oddly involuted, as in “The Garden”:

How vainly men themselves amaze
To win the palm, the oak, or bays,
And their incessant labours see
Crowned from a single herb or tree. (ll. 1–4)

The oaks, palms, and bays are crowned by themselves. In vegetating, they are in possession of the self-completion that men pursue in mazes of social competition. They should therefore be sorts of deities. And much in “The Garden” supports that view. Marvell himself claims to have arrived by means of the platonic ladder at a state of vegetable bliss that is on the way to the divine. But this is a parody, a joke whose extravagance allows him to give full rein to his feeling for a non-human green flourishing and at the same time display its absurdity as a human possibility. As in “The Definition of Love,” the claim to “so divine a thing,” to a state of perfection beyond the human state of want or striving, seems to awaken a rueful doubt. And similarly, the idolizing that goes with the self-reflexive turn and its claim to self-completeness are subjected to a corroding self-knowledge. The self-crowned trees are a gentle joke on the striving world of men, but also on themselves. Ricks makes a similar point about Marvell’s dew drop that is “like its own tear.” The fine absurdity there carries a certain fear of an abyss of self-involvement and mournful self-mirroring. In Marvell, the self-reflexive turn goes with a critical consciousness of the psychology of retreat into divine self-completion, and it is clear from “Upon Appleton House” that he was curiously aware of the complications as well as the charms of the mind retiring into its own happiness.

26. Lovelace was imprisoned in the Gatehouse in 1642 for his part in the Kentish Petition and again in 1648 in Peterhouse. Since it did not appear in Lucasta (1649) along with “To Althea from Prison,” “The Snayl” was presumably written later (published in Lucasta. Posthume Poems [1659 / 60]).
The reflexive turn, self-contradictory and paradoxical, is always a playful figure. Even in his most straightforwardly sublime uses of it, Crashaw carries it off with an air of doing the impossible with dash. What Marvell does is to turn some of the flaunting glance upon reflexiveness itself so that, where others use it as an extravagant expression of praise or deprecation, he uses it to express an ironic consciousness of self-involution or an oddly reverberating hesitation about it with an air of gaiety.