

THE ENGLISH HYMN IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY:

AN HISTORICAL AND CRITICAL STUDY

by

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I declare that this thesis has been composed entirely by myself.

DEDICATED TO MY MOTHER

## ABSTRACT

The hymn as a literary form has been much neglected by literary historians and critics. For various reasons, it is regarded as not having the same imaginative possibilities as other literary genres. However, close study of the hymn reveals a unique and important form of imaginative verse, which undergoes significant transformation and development. During the eighteenth century the English hymn, as designed specifically for congregational singing, originates and becomes established as a complex and imposing literary mode.

Chapter one of this study gives a brief history of the evolution of the English hymn to 1707. Chapters two to six examine in detail the hymns of Isaac Watts, Charles Wesley, Anne Steele, Christopher Smart, and William Cowper, respectively, these being the most innovative hymn-writers who, each in turn, actively and deliberately fashion the concept of the hymn as literature. Appendix A discusses other hymn-writers of the century, thus providing a more comprehensive picture. Appendix B collects and assesses eighteenth-century responses to these hymn-writers. In conclusion, it is suggested that such literary phenomena as the exploration of the self, the conscious exclusion of current poetic diction, and the liberal experimentation with technical form and genre (phenomena usually credited to the Romantic period), are prevalent in the hymn-writing of the century.

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## INTRODUCTION

The hymn as a literary form has been much neglected by literary historians and critics. To some it simply lacks the imaginative possibilities common to other genres. To others it is a semi-literary curiosity to be treated with reverent tolerance. To others still it is just not literature, though what exactly it is remains undisclosed. Significantly, however, the few critics who have briefly looked at the hymn invariably suggest that it does indeed possess literary and imaginative dimensions; they strongly lament the fact that the hymn has not been given close study. While the place and importance of the hymn is not sufficiently recognized, critical views of eighteenth-century literature remain incomplete.

Though the late nineteenth century saw the appearance of numerous catalogue-commentaries on hymns,<sup>1</sup> it is not until early in the twentieth

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<sup>1</sup> Though these are mainly nothing more than catalogues, some are very impressive. Daniel Sedgwick's Comprehensive Index of Names of Original Authors and Translators of Psalms and Hymns (1860) and Josiah Miller's Singers and Songs of the Church (1869) are examples, in the latter of which Miller quotes a representative line or two from each author. Some degree of critical judgement is implied in James King's Anglican Hymnology. Being an Account of the 325 Standard Hymns of the Highest Merit According to the Verdict of the Whole Anglican Church (1885). Although King classifies hymns into first, second, and third ranks, however, there is nothing said of the criteria that were apparently applied to them. Samuel Willoughby Duffield supplies one of the earliest catalogues of biographical sketches of hymn-writers (English Hymns: Their Authors and History, 1886). Lyric Studies: A Hymnal Guide (1891) by I. Dorricott and T. Collins also gives brief biographical sketches as well as brief notes on the origin, doctrine, and popularity of each hymn. The crowning achievement of nineteenth-century hymnology appeared in 1892: John Julian's Dictionary of Hymnology... discloses the origin, doctrine, history, and reputation of virtually every hymn and hymn-writer known up to that time. Also in its 1600 pages are a list of hymnal manuscripts, an index to English, French, German, Latin, and other hymns, and several other useful directories. Following this was John Brownlie's The Hymns and Hymn-writers of the Church Hymnary (1899), Arthur Gregory's The Hymn-book of the Christian Church (1904), and Louis F. Benson's massive book, The English Hymn:

century that a literary study of hymns appears. Henry S. Bett's The Hymns of Methodism in their Literary Relations (1913) is less important for its critical merit than for the fact that it attempts to be a literary study, though a limited one. Concentrating on the hymns of the Wesleys, Bett picks out every possible allusion, reference, echo, and borrowing (conscious or not) from the Bible, the Church Fathers, and Greek and English poets. He concludes that many of Wesley's hymns are a mere collage of allusions. The major problem with the book is that many of the alleged borrowings and influences are uncertain, some very dubious indeed. However, although Bett's study is restricted to the tricky phenomenon of literary influence, it is a good beginning to the study of an important literary dimension of hymns: their overwhelmingly allusive quality. This suggests what is later taken up by Donald Davie: that hymns are able to draw upon a kind of standard collective consciousness in their readers.

In 1924 Jeremiah Bascom Reeves publishes what would seem to be a serious start to the investigation of hymns as literary phenomena. The Hymn in History and Literature, which contains a section entitled "The Hymn as Literature", begins with this comment:

The hymn as the most ancient type of literature and as a most pervasive and powerful kind of poetry has not had its just dues from the critics. They have not so much frowned upon the hymn as they have given it a sort of deferential toleration, exempting it from its liabilities as well as its rights in the realm of letters. Of the scores of books about hymns not one, so far as I know, has sought definitely to bound and describe the hymn as the small but rich province of poetry that it is.<sup>2</sup>

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Its Development and Use in Worship (1915). Benson looks at how hymnody has developed from its ancient origins up until about 1900, and shows how the hymn has fit into church worship through the centuries. This, along with Benson's The Hymnody of the Christian Church (1927) and his Studies of Familiar Hymns (1923) is valuable to the church historian and hymnologist. F. J. Gillman also traces The Evolution of the English Hymn (1927).

<sup>2</sup> J. B. Reeves, The Hymn in History and Literature (London, 1924), Preface.

This claim is followed by Reeves's definition of the hymn as "a lyrical composition expressive of religious aspiration, petition, confession, communion, or praise; a song devoted to the fellowship of souls and the worship of God".<sup>3</sup> Reeves not only wants to see hymns as poetry, but as a definite and distinct type of poetry: "Its boundaries as regards both form and content are plainly and narrowly laid down. It is of all types of literature perhaps the most rigorously limited".<sup>4</sup> Reeves defines the hymnal measures (long, common, short, and doubles), outlining their prosodic and technical possibilities and limits, and then looks at several hymns. Although he passes over the eighteenth century rather quickly, and his book is devoid of any close analysis, it nevertheless makes strong claims for the serious study of the hymn.

Unfortunately, there were no follow-up studies to the isolated attempt of Reeves for the next two decades. The promising title of T. B. Shepherd's Methodism and the Literature of the Eighteenth Century (1940) leads one into a rather disappointing book. Shepherd focuses on the writings of the Wesleys, but mainly the theological ones. When he does consider their hymns, he does so almost exclusively for their doctrinal content. Similarly, one feels that Hoxie Neale Fairchild could have given more attention to the hymn in his extensive Religious Trends in English Poetry (1942). Fairchild draws attention momentarily to the presence of hymn-writers in eighteenth-century literature, but curiously adds that "not one religious poet of real merit flourishes between 1740 and 1780".<sup>5</sup> Apparently he would not value Wesley, Steele,

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>5</sup> Hoxie Neale Fairchild, Religious Trends in English Poetry, vol. II (New York, 1942), 76.



Smart, or Cowper. Fairchild offers no readings of hymns, and his book is little more than a compendium of everyone who wrote about God in the eighteenth century.

In the following year, however, George Sampson publishes an Oxford lecture in which he argues that when studying the eighteenth century we leave out a crucial dimension if we forget about writers like Watts and Wesley. Sampson points out that the eighteenth century was not destitute of religious writers; it was full of them. Yet "this extraordinary outburst of religious poetry is ignored in most histories of English literature and treated as if it had never existed".<sup>6</sup> Though the pamphlet is too short to admit of any readings or analyses of hymns, it makes several perceptive statements, the final one of which is paramount: "The poetic diction of Pope and his imitators was not the language of the eighteenth century.... To find the real language of the age we must turn to the hymn-writers, who spoke the language of the people, who affected many more thousands than the fashionable writers ever reached...".<sup>7</sup>

Whether stimulated or not by Sampson's pamphlet, W. T. Cairns publishes "The Constituents of a Good Hymn" in 1946.<sup>8</sup> Cairns alleges that a hymn must say something well-defined and concrete; it needs to say it with simplicity, reverence, and fervour, and it should be closely scriptural. He quotes from several of the most popular hymns and applies his criteria to them. He devotes only a few pages to the eighteenth

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<sup>6</sup> George Sampson, The Century of Divine Songs (London, 1943), p. 25.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>8</sup> This essay appears in his book, The Religion of Dr. Johnson and other Essays (London, 1946). See pp. 58-80.

century; but this is understandable, given the length of the article, which is valuable in its reading of hymns as good or bad literary expressions, and in its focusing upon the hymn as a definite literary genre.

Another valuable though brief look at hymns occurs in Donald Davie's Purity of Diction in English Verse (1952). Davie argues that Charles Wesley is a poet in exactly the same sense that Alexander Pope is a poet: both draw on sources that their audiences know — the Bible in Wesley's case, the Classics in Pope's — and both use similar literary devices such as oxymorons, puns, Latinates, paradoxes, and allusions. Davie's study begins by saying that a large body "of the best verse of this period goes unregarded altogether. I mean the hymns of Cowper and Charles Wesley and John Newton, not to mention the rather earlier achievements of Doddridge and Watts".<sup>9</sup>

In 1955 an article appears entitled "Christian Hymns as Literature", but argues that the "hymn is not primarily a literary form".<sup>10</sup> G. H. Vallins shows that the hymn is not represented in anthologies of English, Christian, or religious verse<sup>11</sup> and emphasizes "the difference between poetry and the hymn": "Demanding little of the mind, they are designed to go straight to the heart; and in as far as they do that, as hymns they are not to be despised. That they are not in any sense 'literature' is irrelevant". The present thesis disagrees. Hymns can be and often are literature in a real way. Vallins continues by saying that very

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<sup>9</sup> Donald Davie, Purity of Diction in English Verse (London, 1952), p. 70.

<sup>10</sup> G. H. Vallins, "Christian Hymns as Literature", London Quarterly and Holborn Review, 180 (1955), 255.

<sup>11</sup> Donald Davie's recent anthology (1981), however, is the exception. See page 9 below. Vallins seems not to have considered The Oxford Book of Eighteenth-Century Verse, ed. D.N. Smith (Oxford, 1926), which contains several hymns.

few poets "have written hymns as distinct from poems". The present thesis examines five hymn-writers who are also poets. Vallins, it would seem, is trying to separate hymn and poem; and though he is anxious to say that the hymn is not literature, he is unable to say what exactly it is. His article provides one view of the hymn-literature issue.

A more careful look at this issue is undertaken by Christopher Driver. In "Poetry and Hymns" Driver lists some qualities which hymns must possess, and says that hymns are not quite the same as poetry and therefore must be judged by different standards. Hymns attempt "the difficult task of marrying verse to theology", and though they may not need poetic vision, they are technical achievements of a very high order. His conclusion suggests that although hymns do not need to be poetry, they can be: "The intention of this paper has been to show that although hymns are properly described as 'didactic verse' rather than as 'poetry', nevertheless the poetic imagination has an important place in the writing and singing of them".<sup>12</sup>

That hymns are literature is the adamant claim made by the most important hymnologist of this century. Eric Routley has written several books on hymns, and though some are not always valuable to the literary critic, his Hymns Today and Tomorrow (1964) is. Routley begins with the proposition that hymn-writing is poetry under strict discipline; it is the act of forcing a poetic gift through an odd and narrow channel. He is concerned to look at certain images that are common in hymns (father, shepherd, rock, dove) and to show how some are scripturally correct and others are not. He alleges that there is "a true poetry

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<sup>12</sup> Christopher Driver, "Poetry and Hymns", Congregational Quarterly (1957), 339.

of Scripture" and that hymns should keep all imagery perfectly true to scripture. Allegory should also be Biblically authoritative. Finally, Routley describes how a hymn should be written: it should be built outward from argument, not inward from imagination. Though the present thesis disagrees with this final claim, Routley's book is recognized nevertheless as a perceptive look at the images, allegory, and language of several hymns.

Two years later Martha Winburn England publishes Hymns Unbidden, a series of essays, in some of which she compares the work of Charles Wesley and William Blake. England argues that their poetry is prophetic and Evangelical, and that their messages are intensely personal and are aimed at reforming a social order by changing the heart of the individual. Her comparisons are illuminating, though at times strained. England's essays also contain a concise description of the hymn as a literary genre, and a short history of the transformation of metrical psalm to hymnal lyric. The underlying principle in her essays seems to be that hymns are indeed poetry, and deserve to be read with close critical attention.

Patricia Spacks agrees with this principle in her brief comments on the hymn in The Poetry of Vision (1967). Spacks says that hymns are visionary poems that have all the complexity of non-hymnal poetry. She understandably devotes only a few pages to eighteenth-century hymns, but by giving them penetrating readings she shows that there is a great deal to be done.

Evidently, however, D. B. Morris disagrees. In The Religious Sublime: Christian Poetry and Critical Tradition in the Eighteenth Century (1972), Morris is concerned with sublimity, not hymnody: "Throughout the century, a few basic kinds of sublime religious poems

reappear with frequency. These are the biblical paraphrase, the eschatological poem, poems on the attributes of God and other 'Seatonian' subjects, and poetry of imaginative devotion".<sup>13</sup> He dismisses the hymn as being "often characterized by a regular quatrain structure and a chastity of style which permit only infrequent opportunities for the sublime. It rarely complicates direct expression with any sort of literary sophistication...".<sup>14</sup> Morris does not offer any evidence for dismissing a genre so perfunctorily, and while his book may otherwise be informative, it ignores a body of literature which could have added other important dimensions to his study.

Sister M. Pauline Parker believes that the hymn deserves attention, though perhaps not as a literary form in the conventional sense. Her article, "The Hymn as a Literary Form" (1975), argues that "the hymn is a literary form in its own right, and that it must be judged by different criteria from those of other poems on religious or moral themes".<sup>15</sup> She begins by defining the hymn as "a congregational song addressed to God as the listener", and then discusses some qualities that the hymn needs to possess: it must echo common experience, instantly convey a meaning, have simple vocabulary and relatively natural word order and rhythm. She looks at several popular hymns, but her argument in general seems to rest upon the assumption that a hymn is just a hymn, and a poem is something altogether different.

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<sup>13</sup> D. B. Morris, The Religious Sublime: Christian Poetry and Critical Tradition in the Eighteenth Century (Lexington, 1972), p. 104.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 105.

<sup>15</sup> Sister M. Pauline Parker, "The Hymn as a Literary Form", Eighteenth Century Studies, 4 (Summer, 1975), 396.

The present thesis argues that the hymn can and often does have poetical dimensions, and that a good hymn is often a good poem as well.

That the hymn has indeed been neglected is the charge that Donald Davie brings against literary critics in A Gathered Church: The Literature of the English Dissenting Interest, 1700-1930 (1978). This is a study of the history of Dissent and its literature, and accordingly Davie is not concerned specifically with the hymn. When he does consider hymns, however, he is emphatic: "we look in vain through our literary scholarship for any considered assessment of their intrinsic virtues and their historic significance...".<sup>16</sup> Literary critics have failed in their duty. One consequence, Davie says, "is that the eighteenth century is thought to have produced little lyric poetry".<sup>17</sup> Yet it is the great age of hymnody. Davie's New Oxford Book of Christian Verse (1981), in fact, is full of hymns, and the most thoroughly represented writers are Watts, Wesley, Smart, and Cowper. In his introduction he claims that scholars must recognize the congregational hymn as a form of Christian poetry.

In "The Language of the Eighteenth-Century Hymn" (1980) Davie says that hymn-writers such as Watts, Doddridge, Wesley, and Cowper aimed at an unprecedented clarity of expression, and "imposed upon themselves the same self-denying ordinance that after them William Wordsworth was to observe when he wrote his Lyrical Ballads".<sup>18</sup> In

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<sup>16</sup> Donald Davie, A Gathered Church: The Literature of the English Dissenting Interest, 1700-1930 (London, 1978), p. 47.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> This paper was read at a Clark Library Seminar on 5 March 1977. It is published in English Hymnology in the Eighteenth Century, by Donald Davie and Robert Stevenson (Los Angeles: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 1980).

The Victorian Hymn (1981) J. R. Watson studies "the way in which the words of a hymn behave under the particular conditions of the form, and the relationship of the hymn form to poetry".<sup>19</sup> Both Davie and Watson look closely at several hymns, pointing out their literary virtues and idiosyncrasies.

From the comments made by the few critics who have sojourned into hymnal criticism, it is clear that an important and unexplored field awaits attention. To date there is no historical and critical study of the English hymn in the eighteenth century, the formative century, during which it underwent significant transformations and a complex maturing process. In attempting to contribute such a study, this thesis is not concerned with the musical settings for the hymns; the intention is to study the written texts of the hymns as poetry.

This thesis begins by tracing in outline the history and evolution of the English hymn from the Reformation to the publication of Isaac Watts's Hymns and Spiritual Songs (1707). It is suggested that a complex interaction of several important historical factors resulted in England adapting a rather uneasy attitude toward hymns for church worship. England was influenced by Luther and Germany's wealth of hymnody, but also by the clerical opposition to hymnody as propagated by the Genevan Reformation under Zwingli and Calvin. England steered the more cautious course, and restricted its church song to metrical psalms. These held reign until the late 1600's when certain churchmen began adapting devotional poetry into hymnody, and writing their own hymns, albeit so close to scripture as to be merely paraphrase. To sing or not to sing hymns became an issue toward the close of the seventeenth

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<sup>19</sup> This paper is an inaugural lecture, delivered at the University of Durham on 12 February 1981, and then published in pamphlet form.

century, and the metamorphosis of metrical psalm into scriptural hymn and then into "Hymn of meer Human composure" was not completed until Isaac Watts's bold publication in 1707.

This volume contains many scriptural hymns in which Watts does not keep strictly to the Bible, as do his predecessors, but often embellishes, rewrites, and subverts the intended meaning of Biblical verses in order to cast them into a new light and make them freshly appealing. This volume is also the first to contain hymns of original composition, not relying solely upon scripture. Watts was a poet before he was a hymn-writer; but, with an eye toward the hymnal controversy, he is concerned not to be too imaginative in his hymns. He sees hymnody and poetry as separate entities, and tries, at times rather ineffectively, to mix the two. Watts's imaginative figures tend to sit uncomfortably on his hymn rather than infuse themselves into it. His tone is unwaveringly affirmative, his point of view omniscient and distant. In effect he writes miniature theological treatises with some poetical colour superimposed. On occasion Watts does produce a hymn that has poetical dimensions, though many of his hymns resemble static mozaics of Christian experience, devoid of movement, life, and visionary depth. But Watts's contribution to hymnody is that he is essentially the first to write hymns in his own words rather than the Bible's, and to attempt to give the hymn poetical dimensions.

Charles Wesley, who wrote in a somewhat more relaxed atmosphere than Watts — as far as the acceptance of hymns is concerned — could afford to be more experimental. Wesley's Methodist doctrines gave him a different view of religious experience; thus his scriptural hymns are often emotional, conversational responses to Biblical verses



rather than versions of them. For Wesley Christianity is a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, rather than an awesome reverence for an omnipotent creator. His original hymns are invariably passionate discourses, arguments, pleas, and debates with Jesus as the concerned, friendly listener. Wesley is more skilful with imaginative figures, though his are nearly all from scripture. His tone wavers: it is often initially despairing, though ultimately the hymn always ends on a note of hope. His point of view is that of an individual, struggling Christian; his hymns are concerned with man's response to God rather than God Himself, and man's response to Christian living rather than Christian living itself. Where Wesley is unprecedented is in his limitless metrical and stanzaic versatility, using more forms than any other eighteenth-century poet. This, and the fact that he makes the hymn a personal expression of faith, is his great contribution. Like Watts, Wesley is concerned about the literary nature of his hymns, always trying to make them poetical, but in ways unlike Watts's.

Both Watts and Wesley never doubt that their hymns are adequate and effective praises of God. But Anne Steele, who suddenly calls the very act of hymn-writing into question, does. In her occasional verse she laments the inefficacy of language in its attempt to depict or do justice to the infinite phenomenon of God. In her scriptural hymns, then, she simply paraphrases the scripture, though at times she even calls her own paraphrases into question. Significantly, her original hymns are deeply concerned with their own inability to be hymns: they continually point to their own inadequacy and to the severely handicapped nature of language. Figuratively, her hymns are spare. They focus on themselves rather than God, and they are written from the point of view of a self-defeated hymn-writer. Thus, they are often poetically introspective and complex to a greater extent

than much other religious writing of the time. At times these self-probing poems are also excellent hymns, though perhaps not in the traditional sense. Seemingly unwittingly, Steele writes hymns which harbour significant poetical and visionary depth.

Christopher Smart is more concerned with his own sublime vision. His Psalms, Hymns, and A Song to David (1765) is quite unlike anything written in the century. Unlike the other hymn-writers, Smart writes hymns on certain topics of the Christian calendar year. He takes more poetic liberties with his psalms than did his predecessors and contemporaries; and his hymns, a kaleidoscope of brilliant images and metaphors, are his imaginatively heightened vision of all creation. Rather than meet the reader on his own territory, Smart prefers to take the reader into his fantastic world of visionary rapture, and to show that anyone can share in this vision. Like the psalms, the hymns in the volume are linked epanastrophically, suggesting that praise and divine contemplation are the continuous activities of the human imagination, having no limits. These two sections of the volume coalesce into the third, A Song to David, which is a kind of epiphany of Christian praise wherein Smart introduces himself as the new David, the new sublime praiser of God for eighteenth-century England. Smart's tone throughout the volume is ecstatic, his point of view is that of an enraptured hymnal poet, and he is evidently unconcerned to design his work expressly for liturgical purposes. With Smart the hymn is fashioned into visionary poetry designed for a celestial rather than earthly congregation.

Though these four writers all make the hymn a literary as well as liturgical experience, they do not do so uniformly. Watts and Wesley are greater hymn-writers than imaginative poets; Steele and Smart

are greater imaginative poets than hymn-writers. But William Cowper is the first to blend the two vocations in perfect solution. He wanted his hymns to be completely practical for congregations, yet at the same time could not avoid infusing them with deep undercurrents which often contradict the surface smoothness. At the time he composed his hymns Cowper was moving toward his major mental collapse, one which took the form of religious despair. Therefore he was seeing more deeply into Christian experience than he perhaps cared to see, and could not avoid subtly revealing what he perhaps did not want to reveal. Cowper's scriptural hymns have a smooth, pious surface, beneath which, however, he reveals the inapplicability of the scripture to his own life. His deceptively simple original hymns are also multi-dimensional: on the surface they suggest contentment and spiritual confidence, but underneath they reveal currents of doubt, terror, and despair. Cowper's are at once great hymns and great poems; they possess surface quietude and visionary depth. Evidently having learned from other hymn-writers of the century, Cowper showed to the fullest extent the literary and liturgical possibilities of the hymn.

All five of these writers, ~~are dissenters;~~ though deeply religious, they find themselves outside contemporary religious orthodoxy. To each, however, the hymn is an important mode of literary as well as liturgical expression, and each fashions the hymn into a quite different phenomenon in order to satisfy these ends as they perceive them. More than any other hymn-writers of the century, these five seem particularly concerned with the literary qualities of the hymn, which becomes for them a unique poetical experience, and in some cases, experiment. Through them the English hymn becomes an important, complex, and mature literary form.

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<sup>15</sup> The view taken is different to that of John Butt in The Oxford History of English Literature, vol. 8 (Oxford, 1979).

## CHAPTER ONE. HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH HYMN TO 1707

In his Prayers and Meditations Samuel Johnson writes of his momentary encounter with a poor young girl on Easter Day 1764: "I... gave her privately a crown, though I saw Hart's hymns in her hand".<sup>1</sup> To someone unfamiliar with the history of the hymn, the sentiment in this utterance seems curiously awry. But it is symptomatic of the controversial and ambivalent reputation of hymns, even as late as the mid-nineteenth century. Unlike the sermon, prayer, or mass, the congregational hymn is a relatively new phenomenon in church worship in England, and its history is fraught with debates which often turn on scripture-splintering technicalities. This chapter sketches the history and development of the English hymn from the Reformation to the time of Isaac Watts. It is neither a close historical analysis, nor can it hope to encompass the innumerable complexities and compendious data that a thorough account would need to consider. What this chapter aims to do in presenting a general historical sketch is to follow the evolution of the hymn, to point to some of the reasons for, and effects of, the controversial nature of hymns, and to develop the background for Watts and the later hymn-writers.

### I German Origin and Genevan Opposition

The Reformation is a suitable place to begin looking at the history of the hymn, because although English hymns had been written for several centuries before, there is little evidence that they were composed for the purpose of congregational singing. In order to understand the place of hymnody in the English Reformation, however, it is necessary

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Johnson, Prayers and Meditations, "Easter Day 1764". Cited in Samuel Johnson; Diaries, Prayers, and Annals (New Haven, 1958), p. 79.

to look at two major forces which gave shape to English attitudes toward hymnody: the German origin of the congregational hymn, and the opposition to the hymn as propagated by Geneva.

Two primary concerns of Martin Luther in his attempt to reform church worship were to establish a vernacular liturgy and to produce a copious vernacular hymnody, the latter concern being just as much the product of Luther's love of music as a liturgical necessity. As early as 1523 he wrote in the preface to the Formula Missae et Communionis pro Ecclesia Wittenbergensis: "I also wish as many of the songs as possible to be in vernacular, which the people should sing...".<sup>2</sup> He later writes: "I wish we had more hymns which the people could sing during mass or to accompany the Gradual, the Sanctus, and the Agnus Dei".<sup>3</sup> To his colleagues Luther suggested that they should "compose German songs for the German people so that God's Word may resound in the singing of the people. We are seeking poets and musicians everywhere for this purpose".<sup>4</sup> When his friend Speratus complied, Luther himself began composing hymns specifically designed for congregational singing.

The earliest hymn-book of the Reformation was published in 1524 at Wittenberg. Luther's Achtliederbuch contained four hymns by himself, and of the other four at least three were by Speratus.<sup>5</sup> Three of Luther's are based on psalms, and one, 'Nun freut euch, lieben Christen g'mein', though a personal religious experience, is nevertheless pilloried  
expressed in

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<sup>2</sup> Cited in Horton Davies, Worship and Theology in England, vol. 1 (Princeton, 1970), 378. Hereafter referred to as Davies.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Paul Nettl, Luther and Music (Philadelphia, 1948), p. 38.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>5</sup> Leonard Woolsey Bacon, The Hymns of Martin Luther (London, 1884), p. xvi.

into sturdy general terms, as are most of Luther's hymns. The Enchiridion followed in the same year, containing fourteen hymns by Luther along with his earlier four. In 1525 Luther's friend, the composer Ioanne Walthero, published his Gesangbuch, to which Luther contributed six hymns and a preface, clearly revealing his position on hymnody: "I am not of opinion that all sciences should be beaten down and made to cease by the Gospel, as some fanatics pretend; but I would fain see all the arts, and music in particular, used in the service of Him who hath given and created them".<sup>6</sup> Many more hymn-books followed, the prefaces of which emphasize the appropriateness and even necessity of the congregational hymn as a part of Christian worship.

Germany produced many hymn-writers after Luther: Paul Eber, Nicholas Hermann, Hans Sachs, and Justus Jonas are a few of the more prominent ones. Generally, German hymns seem to possess the qualities of simplicity, chiselled solidity, and spiritual forthrightness; they are closely scriptural and unemotional presentations of ideal Christian experiences. By the middle of the sixteenth century the hymn was an integral part of the church service in Germany, and though the pervasive influence of German hymnody was to be felt in England, it was to be overshadowed by another influential force.

While Luther carried out his reform in Germany, a parallel reformation movement was taking place in Switzerland under Zwingli, who, in his lectures on the New Testament in 1519, attacked the concepts of Purgatory, the Invocation of Saints, and later the Pope, the Sacrifice of Mass, and other Roman cornerstones.<sup>7</sup> As far as the church service was concerned, "Zwingli eliminated everything sensuous from

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. xxi.

<sup>7</sup> "Zwingli", in The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, ed. F.L. Cross (London, 1974), p. 1514. Hereafter referred to as Cross.

worship. Music, vestments, incense, ritual gestures, and images — all were of no avail to man precisely because his faith, the only reality",<sup>8</sup> had nothing to do with the senses. Zwingli died in 1531, but his reforms were carried on by John Calvin.

Calvin agreed at first in principle with Zwingli's opinion of the place of music in worship, but when he visited Strasburg and heard the "splendid chorale", he became instantly convinced of the necessity of congregational song.<sup>9</sup> Specifically, it was necessary to present "words which the people could understand, cast in a form in which they could without undue difficulty read or memorize them; and...music of a type which they would be able to sing".<sup>10</sup> But, partly because of his reverence for Zwingli and partly because of his own belief in the total depravity of man, Calvin restricted what was to be sung exclusively to the psalms: Christians could sing — but only the psalms of David; nothing else would be acceptable to church authority or to God.

Consequently, in 1539 Calvin published a small volume of psalms in metre with the title Aulcuns Pseaulmes et Cantiques / mys en chant. A Strasburg 1539. This contains eighteen psalms in metre: five by Calvin and the rest by the French poet Clément Marot.<sup>11</sup> After Marot's death Calvin persuaded Theodore Beza to continue the work, until the entire

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<sup>8</sup> Charles Garside, Zwingli and the Arts (New Haven and London, 1966), p. 178.

<sup>9</sup> W. T. Whitley, Congregational Hymn-Singing (London, 1933), p. 57.

<sup>10</sup> Millar Patrick, Four Centuries of Scottish Psalmody (London, 1949), p. 3. Hereafter referred to as Patrick.

<sup>11</sup> O. Douen, Clément Marot et le Psautier Huguenot (Paris, 1878-79), I, 302-305.

Psautier Huguenot appeared in 1562. Calvin believed that to depart from this kind of musical worship was presumptuous;<sup>12</sup> his attitude toward metrical psalms as aids to worship is best expressed in his preface to the Genevan edition of Marot's Fifty Psalms on June 10, 1543: "Nous ne trouverons meilleures chansons ne plus propres pour ce faire, que les pseumes de David, lesquels le saint Esprit luy a dictez et faits".<sup>13</sup> The French Psalter of 1562 was well received, and modern critics are in general agreement as to its high literary quality. Millar Patrick writes, for example, that there "is nothing in other Psalters to compare with this deliberate ingenuity in using every kind of structural device to render impossible the monotony so characteristic of...Psalms".<sup>14</sup> Genevans, and Calvinists in other places, became congregational psalm-singers, actively opposing the German tradition of the congregational hymn.

The English Reformation proceeded much along the same lines as did the German under Luther, at least as far as the call for a vernacular liturgy was concerned. Archbishop Cranmer wrote in the preface to the 1549 Book of Common Prayer that there is "ordeyned nothyng to be read, but the very pure worde of God, the holy scriptures, or that whiche is evidently grounded upon the same; and that in suche a language and ordre, as is moste easy and plain for the understanding, bothe of the readers and hearers".<sup>15</sup> He believed that worship should be the comprehensible act of the people and pertain to the people, as

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<sup>12</sup> Davies, I, 380.

<sup>13</sup> Cited in Rowland Prothero, The Psalms in Human Life (London, 1904), p. 185. Hereafter referred to as Prothero.

<sup>14</sup> Patrick, p. 19.

<sup>15</sup> Cited in E.C.S. Gibson, The First and Second Prayer-Books of King Edward the Sixth (London, 1910), p. 3.



well as to the priest.<sup>16</sup> The first major step toward achieving this was the publication of the prayer-book in 1549 and its revised version in 1552.

But religious reformers in England did not follow Luther's recommendation on the topic of hymns, or even on music in general. The prayer-book of 1549 required that eight items be sung; the version of 1552 required that only one item be sung.<sup>17</sup> What is more significant is that there were no hymns in either prayer-book. And when in 1531 Myles Coverdale unveiled the first hymn-book produced in England, his Goostly Psalmes and Spiritual Songes — which were nearly all adaptations and translations of German hymns and psalm-renderings<sup>18</sup> — Calvinist feeling ran so hard against it that King Henry VIII prohibited its sale.<sup>19</sup> It became official that hymns were not allowed in English worship; only metrical psalms could be sung. England had chosen the Genevan model on the topic of church singing, and had opposed the German model: while Germany sang hymns, England sang psalms.

Reading the standard accounts of the history of the hymn, one wonders why England would have chosen to follow Calvin's lead instead of Luther's: why did England choose to restrict its singing to metrical psalms and exclude hymns? C. S. Phillips answers that Calvinism itself was simply powerful enough in England to overshadow Lutheranism.<sup>20</sup> This

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<sup>16</sup> Davies, I, 166.

<sup>17</sup> Davies, I, 382-3.

<sup>18</sup> Coverdale's hymns are discussed by John Julian in his Dictionary of Hymnology... (London, 1892), p. 916. Hereafter referred to as Julian.

<sup>19</sup> Louis F. Benson, The English Hymn: Its Development and Use in Worship (New York, 1915), p. 25. Hereafter referred to as Benson.

<sup>20</sup> C. S. Phillips, Hymnody Past and Present (London, 1937), pp. 123-24. Hereafter referred to as Phillips.

seems only to rephrase the question. Louis F. Benson offers no explanation; he simply states that psalms became the effective obstacle to the creation of hymns.<sup>21</sup> Even Horton Davies, in his extensive Worship and Theology in England (1970), stresses only one tentative reason: that the high artistic quality of the music of the French Psalter "carried the Calvinistic theology into the hearts of the people...".<sup>22</sup> While this is doubtless a valid reason, it seems more probable that, like most historical events and phenomena, there is a cluster or assortment of interrelated or unrelated, independent or mutually catalytic, causes or conditions that animate this topic.

Along with the cause mentioned by Davies, there seem to be at least four other causes or conditions that led England to choose psalmody over hymnody. The first is quite simply that, owing perhaps to an intrinsic difference in poetic and musical sense between Germany and England, German hymns just did not have the same artistic appeal to England as did the excellent French psalms of Marot and Calvin, and the very popular English ones of Sternhold and Hopkins (1562). Coverdale in 1531 had made the attempt to adapt and introduce German hymns into English, and to pattern his own after Luther, but with a sad result. The German language possesses, among other things, a phonic huskiness and a rough cadence that no English translation can capture; and Coverdale's attempt reveals this. As far as both artistic taste and comprehensibility is concerned, the metrical psalms were the better choice for England. Another reason was the condition of church music, which had fallen into such a decadent and confused state that the Council of Trent (1545-47) wanted to exclude music altogether from the

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<sup>21</sup> Benson, p. 22.

<sup>22</sup> Davies, I, 385.

Roman Catholic service.<sup>23</sup> Music and choral singing often mixed unrelated themes and melodies in counterpoint.<sup>24</sup> Again, the excellent music of the French Psalter and the simple, easily memorized measures of the English one would have made psalms a safer choice. A third reason could be the fact that Luther had alienated himself from Henry VIII, and therefore the English people, by replying obnoxiously to Henry's Defense of the Seven Sacraments with his Contra Henricum Regum Anglicum (1522).<sup>25</sup> Another factor to consider is that there was no choosing both psalmody and hymnody: since Zwingli and Luther had disagreed at the Colloquy of Marburg (1529),<sup>26</sup> there appeared and quickly widened a rift in Protestant solidarity that made some Lutheran and Calvinist principles opposed rather than allied. At any rate, whether because of these conditions, or these and others, England settled into a long period of psalm-singing, and the metrical psalters became the standard and exclusive musical and "poetical" elements in the church service.

## II The Metrical Psalters

It is a curious coincidence that the three standard accounts of the history and evolution of the hymn similarly view the phenomenon of the metrical psalter as an obstacle to the creation of hymns, a phase in religious writing that kept England from catching up with Germany's wealth of hymnody. Louis F. Benson writes: "The Metrical

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<sup>23</sup> See Patrick, p. xxii.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. xxi.

<sup>25</sup> Cross, p. 848.

<sup>26</sup> The Colloquy of Marburg was called by Phillip of Hesse with a view to unifying Saxon and Swiss Reformers. At this meeting Luther and Zwingli disagreed on the topic of the Eucharistic Presence. See Cross, pp. 868 and 847.

Psalm was thus the substitute for the Hymn in England and Scotland, and became the effective obstacle to the production and use of English hymns".<sup>27</sup> C. S. Phillips, suggesting that the hymn crept in the back door by being appended to psalters, laments that the "Jacobean and Caroline periods were hardly less barren in the sphere of hymnody than the Elizabethan...".<sup>28</sup> And F. J. Gillman suggests that when the English liturgy and metrical psalters began to emerge, the latter "meant quite a needless impoverishment of our worship-song for at least two hundred years...".<sup>29</sup> These writers betray a tinge of historical insensitivity in assuming somewhat anachronistically that hymns ought to have developed in England as they did in Germany, were it not that the metrical psalters intervened. To think in this way is to begin with the finished product, the hymn, and to look backward over the years in hopes of catching a glimpse of the embryonic hymn struggling to be born. Perhaps a more historically accurate way to look at this topic would be to begin at the beginning with the metrical psalms and to look at how they developed (or did not develop) into hymns at a later time. Metrical psalters were not an obstacle to the creation of hymns, nor were they a substitute for them. Rather, the hymn grew out of the metrical psalm, bearing the same conceptual relation to it as a flower does to its stem. And one should not lament the impoverishment of hymnody when there was such a wealth of psalmody in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The Protestant metrical psalm had its beginning in France when in

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<sup>27</sup> Benson, p. 22.

<sup>28</sup> Phillips, p. 155.

<sup>29</sup> Frederick John Gillman, The Evolution of the English Hymn (London, 1927), p. 141. Hereafter referred to as Gillman.

1536 the poet Clément Marot was encouraged by King Francis I to render the psalms into French.<sup>30</sup> His book was pronounced heretical by the Sorbonne, so he fled to Geneva in 1543 where he met and collaborated with Calvin on the above-mentioned Genevan Psalter.<sup>31</sup> Marot died in 1544, so it was not until 1562 that, with the help of Theodore Beza, the complete psalter was published. This psalter was used in France, Germany, Switzerland, Holland, and Denmark, and it had a pronounced effect on England.

Though Wyatt, Surrey, Spenser, and other poets had experimented with metrical psalmody, and Coverdale had published his soon-prohibited Goostly Psalmes and Spiritual Songs in 1531, there were no significant English writers of metrical psalms until Thomas Sternhold who, in his aim to supplant the "amorous and obscene" songs of the people, was apparently overheard singing psalms by the child Edward VI, and was encouraged to publish them.<sup>32</sup> Sternhold's first edition, which is undated, contained nineteen psalms and was published before 1549.<sup>33</sup> The publishing history and authorial contributions in later and larger editions are too complex to follow here,<sup>34</sup> but the first complete version of the psalms in metre was published in 1562. This psalter, the work of many hands,<sup>35</sup> bore the title, The Whole Booke of Psalmes, Collected into English Metre by T. Sternhold, John Hopkins, and others:

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<sup>30</sup> Thomas Young, The Metrical Psalms and Paraphrases (London, 1909), p. 15. Hereafter referred to as Young.

<sup>31</sup> See above, p. 19.

<sup>32</sup> Julian, p. 857.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> The interested reader should see Julian, pp. 857-866.

<sup>35</sup> Henry Alexander Glass, in The Story of the Psalters (London, 1888), lists the contributors and the number of Psalms ascribed to each. See pp. 18-24. Hereafter referred to as Glass.

Conferred with the Ebrue, with apt notes to sing them withall..., and has become traditionally known as the "Old Version". Though it has suffered abuse and invective at the hands of its contemporary and later critics, its astounding popularity made it virtually canonical for nearly 150 years.

From a poetical point of view, much of the "Old Version" is pendulum-like doggerel. Psalm 16 is an example:

Lorde keepe me for I trust in thee,  
and do confesse in deed:  
Thou art my God and of my good,  
O Lord thou hast no neede. 4  
I geue my goodnes to thy Saintes,  
that in the world do dwell:  
And namely to the faythfull flocke,  
in vertue that excell. 8

They shall heape sorowes on their heads,  
which runne as they were mad:  
To offer to the Idol Gods,<sup>36</sup>  
alas it is to bad... . 12  
[numbering mine ]

In this sample, as in many others, the reader is continually aware of Sternhold's difficulty in forcing rhyming words into their positions. Among other obvious problems in these lines, line 1 begins clumsily with two long stresses, "Lorde keepe"; lines 3 and 4 are awkward in their rapid fire of monosyllables; lines 9 and 10 are unclear grammatically; lines 10 and 12 are totally unscriptural — they are forced into the stanza in order to provide the necessary metrical feet; and in lines 9 to 12 one nearly loses the meaning which, before it was forced into inappropriate metre, was simply that those who choose another God multiply their sorrows.

Many of Hopkins's psalms have similar problems. For example, in Psalm 48 there is an evident struggle to materialize all the necessary

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<sup>36</sup> Thomas Sternhold and John Hopkins, The Whole Booke of Psalms, Collected into English Metre... (London, 1577 edition), p. 8.

details and to establish geographical accuracy:

Great is the Lord and with great praise,  
to be aduanced still:  
Within the Citie of our Lord,  
upon this holy hill.  
Mount Syon is a pleasant place,  
it gladdeth all the land:  
The Citie of the mighty king,  
on her northside doth stand.<sup>37</sup>

When the Psalmist David describes the terror with which kings were filled in the face of this Mount Syon, he says in a simple simile that they experienced anguish as would a woman in travail. Hopkins, for the sake of rhyme and metre, has to dismember David's tight expression into clumsy components of doggerel:

Great terror there on earth did fall,  
for very woe they cry:  
As doth a woman when she shall,  
goetrauaile by and by.

Interspersed with psalms like these, however, are some which are better poetically, such as Psalm 1, which describes the "blessed man":

He shal be like the tree that groweth  
fast by the riuer's side:  
Which bringeth forth most pleasaunt fruite,  
in her due tyme and tyde.  
Whose leafe shall neuer fade nor fall,  
but florish still and stand:  
Euen to all thinges shall prosper well  
that this man takes in hand.<sup>38</sup>

In this Psalm the poetry has a more natural flow, the expression seems more sincere; the "metricality" is less noticeable than in many others. Psalm 18, another good version, creates a vivid and sublime vision:

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

The Lord descended from aboue,  
and bowed the heauens hye;  
And underneath hys feete he cast,  
the darknes of the skye.  
On Cherubs and on Cherubines,  
full royally he rode.  
And on the winges of all the windes,  
came flying al abroad.<sup>39</sup>

Historians, critics and poets have been rather heartless in their remarks on the Old Version. Thomas Fuller in The Church History of Britain (1655) writes that "two hammers on a smith's anvil would make better music".<sup>40</sup> Edward Phillips, the Cavalier poet, describes someone singing "Like a crack'd saints' bell jarring in the steeple / Tom Sternhold's wretched prick-song for the people".<sup>41</sup> The Earl of Rochester muses that, were David to read Sternhold and Hopkins, "'twould set him mad"!<sup>42</sup> And the comments of modern hymnologists and critics are no more complimentary.<sup>43</sup> But if the Old Version is not poetic, it certainly is a version of the psalms that is more conducive to memorizing than any other would ever be. Its unforgettable phraseology caused it to be to the Renaissance reader what the King James Bible is to some modern readers: not the most accessible piece of writing in terms of comprehensibility and immediate clarity, but an excellent

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Fuller, The Church History of Britain (London, 1655), 4 Parts, IV, 73. As cited in Phillips, p. 134.

<sup>41</sup> Cited in Davies, I, 387.

<sup>42</sup> Thomas Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, Poems (London, 1926 Edition), p. 166.

<sup>43</sup> Benson, Gillman, Phillips, and Davies all pass the Old Version off as rather embarrassing doggerel which held the attention of the English people for too long.



aid to worship.

This is indeed how the Old Version was received in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and early eighteenth centuries. Between 1562 and 1579 at least twenty different editions of the Old Version were produced, and between 1590 and 1599 there were forty-five.<sup>44</sup> Before 1700 there were over 300 editions of the book,<sup>45</sup> which was unsurpassed in popularity and authority. Stories and anecdotes describing how thousands of people sang these psalms in the streets are too numerous to recount, but when all is said and done concerning the metrical psalms of Sternhold and Hopkins, Samuel Johnson's comment, though somewhat opaque and airy, provides a balanced assessment of the real value of the Old Version as perceived by a cultured and religious eighteenth-century mind: "To have made men sing in concert, in the streets, or at their work, and merry or sad, on all occasions to tickle the ears with rhyme and touch the heart with emotion, was betraying no deficient knowledge of human nature".<sup>46</sup>

The Old Version was the great stimulus for the creation of more metrical psalms. Between 1562 and 1696 no less than 26 versions of the psalms, done by different writers, appeared.<sup>47</sup> This does not mean that the people had all of these versions from which to choose: the version of Sternhold and Hopkins was the only authorized version; the others tended to slide rapidly into oblivion. In fact, when Francis

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<sup>44</sup> These figures are from E.B. Schnapper, The British Union Catalogue of Early Music Printed Before 1801 (London, 1957), II, 818-828.

<sup>45</sup> See Young, p. 20.

<sup>46</sup> Cited in Glass, p. 8.

<sup>47</sup> Glass discusses or at least mentions most of the metrical psalters published in England. He devotes a great deal of space to the versions that appeared between those of Sternhold and Hopkins and Tate and Brady.

Rous published his version in 1643, it was taken to the House of Commons and Assembly of Divines, where it was edited very drastically.<sup>48</sup> Even when it was finally sanctioned it got a very cool reception. The tyranny of the Old Version was pervasive in the hearts of the people.

Eventually, however, the educated sectors of society grew to dislike the doggerel and dullness of the Old Version, so a new version was commissioned. It appeared in 1696. The authors of A New Version of the Psalms of David, Nahum Tate and Nicholas Brady, dedicated it to William III, who allowed its production under his order. This "New Version" was recommended by eminent divines such as the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of London.<sup>49</sup> But the common people thought differently. A maid in Tate's brother's house is quoted as having said: "If you must know the plain truth, Sir: as long as you sung Jesus Christ's psalms, I sung along with ye: but now that you sing psalms of your own invention, ye may sing by yourselves".<sup>50</sup> Dr. Samuel Wesley, father of Charles and John, told his curate at Epworth that "they must be content with their grandsire Sternhold" for the sake of the people, "who have a strange genius at understanding nonsense".<sup>51</sup> For the populace, the Old Version had nothing less than a divine authority; this they believed in spite of protestations from more educated people that the New was poetically far superior.

The protestors were correct. The psalms of the New Version are much more melodious and psalm-like than those of Sternhold and Hopkins.

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48 See Young, pp. 68-74. Young shows how extensively Rous's version was altered by the "editors".

49 Phillips, p. 142.

50 Ibid., p. 143.

51 Ibid.

One can profitably compare, for example, the Old Version of the opening of Psalm 16, quoted above,<sup>52</sup> to that of Tate and Brady:

PRotect me from my cruel Foes,  
And shield me, Lord from harm;  
Because my Trust I still repose  
On thy Almighty Arm.  
My Soul all Help but thine does slight,  
All Gods but thee disown;  
Yet can no Deeds of mine requite,<sup>53</sup>  
The Goodness thou hast shown.

Simply stated, these lines are more readily comprehensible and more closely resemble natural speech than do the twisted and Procrustean-bed lines of the Old Version. In the opening of Psalm 48 Tate and Brady use natural speech and at the same time capture more of the rhetorical power that the actual psalm contains; it is quite different from the above-quoted wooden rhyme of the Old Version:

THE Lord is great, and o'er the Gods  
Sublimely to be prais'd;  
In Sion, on whose happy Mount  
His sacred Throne is rais'd.<sup>54</sup>

And the intense fear of the kings is more succinctly stated and vividly realized:

God in her Palaces is known.  
His presence is her Guard.  
Confed'rate Kings withdrew their Siege,  
And of Success despair'd.  
They view'd her Walls, admir'd and fled,  
With Grief and Terror struck... .

Tate and Brady seem to have taken more liberty and have freed themselves from the chains of scriptural literalness that restricted Sternhold and Hopkins. The New Version may be somewhat less accurate scripturally,

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<sup>52</sup> See page 25.

<sup>53</sup> Nahum Tate and Nicholas Brady, A New Version of the Psalms of David, Fitted to the Tunes Used in Churches (London, 1696), p. 24.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

but it is of a higher literary caliber than the Old.

A close comparison of the literary virtues and failings of the Old and New Versions is not within the range of this chapter. What is important to notice here is that the Old Version was preferred by the common people and therefore by their church leaders. The reason for this preference could be simply that because the Old Version had been so integral a part of the church service for nearly 150 years, it had become a part of the religious consciousness of the people. Generations had lived and died under the Old Version, and suddenly to discard the book that was virtually as authoritarian as the Bible must have seemed a preposterous suggestion.

The metrical psalms had a long and virtually absolute reign in England from the 1560's until as late as 1707. But the two authorized versions were not alike, and in a few of their general differences can be seen the beginnings of the evolution from metrical psalm to hymn. The New Version has a freer lyrical spirit and is less true to scripture than the Old. This, along with the fact that a few "hymns" were beginning to be appended to psalters in the seventeenth century, points perhaps to a subtle dissatisfaction in the minds of some people to repeating scripture, and to the feeling that different versions of a scriptural text, whether psalm or otherwise, can furnish excellent material for church song. The New Version experiments with more metrical forms than does the Old, the implication being that Biblical verses can be rendered in different forms with equal success. The hymn was at first essentially nothing more than the flowering out of the metrical psalm into a form which embraces other biblical texts, and the metrical psalm was the stimulus that caused writers to expand their metrical territory to other passages of scripture. That England was inundated

with, and faithful to, metrical psalms for so long makes apparent two contradictory historical phenomena: one, when certain authors began to write and publish hymns they were not accepted by church authorities; two, once the hymn began to be allowed, however timidly and restrictively, it suddenly flowered into a widespread and widely divergent liturgical form. Writers began not only producing their own hymns, but began to gather up and adapt the religious poems and devotional utterances that had hitherto seemed too personal and too far from scripture for common worship.

### III Devotional Poetry and Adaptations

No account, however brief, of the history and development of the English hymn, can afford to ignore the devotional poets of the seventeenth century, some of whom have contributed substantially to English hymnody. Yet the standard accounts all but ignore these important writers. Louis Benson's six-hundred page history devotes one paragraph to seventeenth-century poets and concludes that their work "did not either in intent or in result mark the beginning of an English Hymnody".<sup>55</sup> C. S. Phillips simply lists the most popular adaptations in two pages, and F. J. Gillman is equally cursory, devoting two paragraphs to these poets. While the present account cannot furnish a close examination of seventeenth-century religious poets and their influence upon hymnody, it is suggested in looking very briefly at a few of them that their work should be considered, like the metrical psalms, as one of the sources out of which the English congregational hymn was to grow.

When George Herbert published The Temple: Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations (1633), he did not intend the poems to be used for public

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<sup>55</sup> Benson, p. 67.

worship. However, in spite of their complex stanzaic and metrical patterns and their rich symbolic possibilities — or perhaps because of them — an anonymous writer chose to adapt some of them into hymns. Select Hymns Taken Out of Mr. Herbert's Temple (1697) is an attempt to set Herbert's poems into hymnal metre so that they could be sung by "Private Christians...in their Closets or Families",<sup>56</sup> though they were also used later by Christian assemblies.

As with all adaptations, some are very successful and others quite contrived and bad. 'Trinitie Sunday' appears in Herbert's Temple as follows:

Lord, who hast form'd me out of mud,  
And hast redeem'd me through thy bloud,  
And sanctifi'd me to do good;  
  
Purge all my sinnes done heretofore:  
For I confesse my heavie score,  
And I will strive to sinne no more.  
  
Enrich my heart, mouth, hands in me,  
With faith, with hope, with charitie;  
That I may runne, rise, rest with thee.<sup>57</sup>

The adaptation is rendered thus:

Thou'st fram'd me out of Mud,  
Redeem'd me with thy Blood,  
And sanctifi'd me with thy Grace,  
And all to do me good.  
  
My Sins done heretofore,  
Purge, for that heavy score  
I do confess, and hate, and I  
Will strive to Sin no more.  
  
My Heart, Mouth, Hands in me  
With Faith, Hope, Charity  
Enrich, O Lord, that so I may  
Rise, run, and rest with Thee.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Anonymous, Select Hymns Taken Out of Mr. Herbert's Temple, 1697 (Los Angeles: Augustan Reprint Society, 1962), Preface A<sub>2</sub> recto.

<sup>57</sup> George Herbert, The Temple, 1633 (Menston: Scolar Press Ltd., facsimile reprint of first edition, 1968), p. 59.

<sup>58</sup> Anonymous, Select Hymns, p. 14.

The adaptor has limited the more fluid and melodious nature of Herbert's utterance by encasing it into Short Measure (6.6.8.6.). Because of the addition of a fourth line to each stanza, the symbolic triplicate is destroyed, and the numerological significance (important to Herbert) of three stanzas of three lines, each stanza containing one thought and the three stanzas coalescing into one overall thought, all of this is lost. However, though this adaptation is an inferior poem, it is, because of its short lines, an easily memorized song of praise. And though this is a representative example of the quality of the hymns in this volume, it and the volume itself were very popular. Simon Browne, a clergyman interested in hymns, wrote in 1720 that this book, an "attempt to turn some of Mr. Herbert's poems into common metre", was one of the most widely used "either in private families, or Christian-assemblies".<sup>59</sup> The volume was one of the pioneering forces in the transformation of poems into hymns, and the introduction of hymns into religious praise.

Though the popularity of Select Hymns suffered a decline in the eighteenth century, Herbert's association with hymnody became more important when John Wesley began to adapt Herbert's poems for his own hymnaries. On his trip to Georgia in 1735 Wesley compiled a collection of hymns from two main sources: George Herbert and the German poets. After publishing this in 1738, Wesley produced a far more important book, Hymns and Sacred Poems (1739). This contained forty-two poems "altered from Herbert".<sup>60</sup> Later editions also included Herbert, and in

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<sup>59</sup> Cited in the Introduction to Select Hymns, p. 1.

<sup>60</sup> See the article by F. E. Hutchinson, "John Wesley and George Herbert" in The London Quarterly and Holborn Review (1936), pp. 439-455.

the Collection of Moral and Sacred Poems of 1744 Wesley included Herbert's longer poems "Providence" and "The Church Porch" "as Herbert wrote them, save for the omission of some stanzas".<sup>61</sup> Once again, however, the adaptation interferes with Herbert's intent. Herbert's 'Discipline', for example, begins:

Throw away thy rod,  
Throw away thy wrath:  
O my God,  
Take the gentle path.

For my hearts desire  
Unto thine is bent:  
I aspire  
To a full consent.<sup>62</sup>

By lengthening syllabically these lines from 5,5,3,5, to 6,6,8,6, Wesley loses the sharpness and spare immediacy of the ejaculatory utterance:

O throw away thy Rod,  
O throw away thy Wrath!  
My Gracious Saviour and my God,  
O take the gentle Path.

Thou seest, my Heart's Desire  
Still unto Thee is bent:  
Still does my longing Soul aspire  
To an entire Consent.<sup>63</sup>

The transformations of "O my God" to the very different "My Gracious Saviour and my God", the simple declaratory "I aspire" to "Still does my longing soul aspire", and the addition of the repetitive "O" and "Still", give Wesley's version a flavour of melodrama that is absent from the genuine plea of Herbert.

For better or worse Herbert found a place in hymnaries of the

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 447.

<sup>62</sup> George Herbert, The Temple, 1633, p. 173.

<sup>63</sup> Cited in Hutchinson's article (see note 60) p. 451.



eighteenth century, and several of his adaptations have won wide popularity.<sup>64</sup> Elsie Leach, a modern critic, has looked closely at Wesley's adaptations of Herbert and has concluded that Wesley kept the poetry of Herbert alive in an age where metaphysical complexities and startling images had to be brought up to the neoclassical standard.<sup>65</sup> But whether or not Herbert was improved by Wesley is less important than the fact that some hymn-writers thought Herbert's verse a suitable basis upon which to formulate hymns.

Another seventeenth-century devotional poet who enters into hymnody is Richard Crashaw, whose Steps to the Temple (1646) is very much like its mentor, Herbert's Temple. Six years later Crashaw published Carmen Deo Nostro te Decet Hymnus, Sacred Poems, in which there are several hymns, some original and some translated. Crashaw's poems and hymns were not adapted nearly so widely as were Herbert's, perhaps because of their imagery, which is at times clumsy and contrived. In 'Verilla Regis: The Hymn of the Holy Cross', for example, Crashaw makes the cross a tree, which is conventional enough; but Christ's breast is a "nest" from which flows "an amorous flood/ Of water wedding blood".<sup>66</sup> The puzzling conception of a flood flowing from a nest becomes impossible to ignore when Crashaw goes on to say that "with these [water and blood] He wash'd thy stain, transferr'd thy smart,/ And took it home to His own heart". Crashaw's hymnal verse is different when he relaxes his obsession with contriving images and lets the

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<sup>64</sup> Phillips, p. 156.

<sup>65</sup> Elsie Leach, "John Wesley's Use of George Herbert", Huntington Library Quarterly (1953), XVI, 202.

<sup>66</sup> Richard Crashaw, Carmen Deo Nostro te Decet Hymnus, Sacred Poems (London, 1897 edition; first published in 1652), p. 46.

images suggest natural corollaries, as in 'A Hymn Sung as by the Shepherds':

Come, we shepherds, whose blest sight  
Hath met Love's noon in Nature's night;  
Come, lift we up our loftier song,<sup>67</sup>  
And wake the sun that lies too long.

The problem with this otherwise good hymn is that it later breaks into dialogue with choral apostrophes, making it rather too complex to be a hymn in the congregational sense. Of course, Crashaw did not intend it to be one, but though his poetry did not find its way into hymnaries as Herbert's did, a few of his hymns were adapted: John Austin, for example, published thirty-nine hymns, two of which were Crashaw's, in 1668.<sup>68</sup>

More extensively sought after by adaptors was Henry Vaughan, from whose Silex Scintillans (1655) a considerable number of hymns have passed into hymnaries. John Julian lists at least eleven which were still in use in churches at the time of his writing in 1892.<sup>69</sup> Vaughan's most popular hymn, though not designed for congregational song, was easily adapted and is quite suitable:

My Soul, there is a Countrie,  
Far beyond the stars,  
Where stands a winged Centrie  
All skilfull in the wars,  
There above noise, and danger  
Sweet peace sits crown'd with smiles,  
And one born in a Manger  
Commands the Beauteous siles,  
He is thy gracious friend,  
And (O my Soul awake!)  
Did in pure love descend  
To die here for thy sake,  
If thou canst get but thither,  
There growes the flowre of peace,

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>68</sup> Benson, p. 69.

<sup>69</sup> See Julian, pp. 1205-6.

The Rose that cannot wither,  
Thy fortresse, and thy ease;  
Leave then thy foolish ranges;  
For none can thee secure,  
But one, who never changes,  
Thy God, thy life, thy Cure.<sup>70</sup>

This hymn, though written for private use, possesses characteristics that are typical of congregational hymns a century later: it has neatly chiselled images which are at once imaginative and subdued, it presents itself clearly and is simply stated, and it operates deliberately and obviously on two levels. Though several of Vaughan's poems in the Silex Scintillans are like this one, there are also some which possess greater visionary power and sublimity, such as 'The World', which opens:

I Saw Eternity the other night  
Like a great King of pure and endless light,  
All calm, as it was bright,  
And round beneath it, Time in hours, days, years  
Driv'n by the spheres  
Like a vast shadow mov'd, In which the world  
And all her train were hurl'd...<sup>71</sup>

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The poems suitable for adaptation from the Silex did indeed contribute to hymnody; but even those that were unsuitable, like 'The World', influenced later writers, whose hymns attempt to move away from the literal and simply allegorical, toward the visionary and enigmatic.

Several other poets of this period contributed to the beginning of an English hymnody. In Robert Herrick's Noble Numbers (1647) there is hymnal material that was used at a later date: his carols for Christmas, New Year, and the Circumcision were all sung before King Charles at Whitehall.<sup>72</sup> Ben Jonson published three hymns in Underwoods

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<sup>70</sup> Henry Vaughan, Silex Scintillans: or Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations, 1650 (Menston: Scolar Press Ltd., facsimile reprint of first edition., 1968), p. 47.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>72</sup> Julian, p. 348. Though the musical setting need not have been in the style of the congregational hymn, these were probably sung as occasional pieces.

(1640) and one of them, 'Hymn on the Nativity of my Saviour', was adapted and is, according to Benson, still sung.<sup>73</sup> John Donne wrote hymns, and Izaak Walton says of 'Wilt Thou Forgive' that Donne "caused it to be set to a most grave and solemn tune, and to be often sung to the organ by the Choristers of St. Paul's Church in his own hearing; especially at the Evening Service...".<sup>74</sup>

Although the devotional poets did not specifically design their writings for congregational use, a considerable number of their poems and hymns were adapted to this end. This, and the fact that they had a pronounced effect on later hymn-writers, makes them, like the metrical psalm, a source out of which the hymn grew. As adaptations, and poetry suitable for adaptation, grew more plentiful, and as the metrical psalters began to encompass more than just psalms, hymns began to emerge from many hands. But while some churchmen were prepared to accept the hymn late in the seventeenth century, there were others who deliberately fomented controversy and opposition.

#### IV "Controversie of Singing": Hymn-writers and Their Opponents

Psalters of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries usually had a few, sometimes several, hymns appended, but these were invariably used for private devotion rather than public worship. Church opinion was so set against the practice of hymn-singing that when Myles Coverdale published his psalm-book in 1531 Henry VIII prohibited its sale because it had a small number of hymns at the end. Even many non-conformist religious groups disallowed hymns: John Smyth the Se-Baptist went so

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<sup>73</sup> At least until 1915, when Benson's book was published. See p. 64.

<sup>74</sup> Izaak Walton, The Complete Angler; and the Lives of Donne, Wotton, Hooker, Herbert, & Sanderson (London, 1901 edition), p. 221.

far as to write in 1608 that when singing psalms, let alone hymns, "it is unlawful to have the book before the eye in time of singing...".<sup>75</sup> Though this exact policy was not held in other sects, equally staunch attitudes toward hymns were held in the Church of England and in the Roman Catholic Church. Yet there were a few writers within the folds of several churches who believed that congregational hymn-singing was a God-ordained but unjustifiably maligned practice.

One such was George Wither, whose Hymnes and Songs of the Church (1623) has been described as "the earliest attempt at an English hymn-book".<sup>76</sup> Wither introduces each hymn with a brief paraphrase of its scriptural context: for example, a brief discussion of the topic of "The First Day of Lent" is followed by a hymn, as is "The Anunciation of Mary", "Palm Sunday", "Pentecost", and so on. Wither, on good terms with King James I, obtained a patent which said that his hymns were to be inserted into "every English Psalm book in metre". James gave "full and free license, power and privilege" to Wither "for the term of fifty and one years...".<sup>77</sup> However, the Company of Stationers, who considered their privileges invaded by the patent (and who held the monopoly for printing Sternhold and Hopkins) rose so loudly against Wither, accusing him of greed and self-importance, that the patent was soon nullified. Wither later wrote that he had been "scornfully jeered, and maliciously persecuted"<sup>78</sup> by churchmen and critics for his hymns which, he alleges in The Scholar's Purgatory (1624), are

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<sup>75</sup> Cited in R. Barclay, The Inner Life of the Religious Societies of the Commonwealth (London, 1876), p. 106.

<sup>76</sup> Phillips, p. 157.

<sup>77</sup> The King's Patent to George Wither, cited in Edward Farr's edition of Wither's Hymns and Songs of the Church (London, 1856), p. xii.

<sup>78</sup> George Wither, Haleviah, or, Britain's Second Remembrancer (Manchester, facsimile reprint of first edition, 1873), p. 4.

simply "parcels of the Canonical Scriptures...".<sup>79</sup> Wither believed that the "tedious" metrical psalms, "which are perpetually iterated in the same words",<sup>80</sup> were simply "unpleasing" and dull. But churches in England were simply not ready for hymns early in the seventeenth century.

Undaunted, Wither gave England another chance by publishing Haleviah, or, Britain's Second Remembrancer in 1641. Alluding to the death of his first book Wither writes an amusing yet seriously-intended couplet in his table of contents: "One woe is past, the second, passing on;/ Beware the third, if this, in vain be gone".<sup>81</sup> Cleverly and obliquely, Wither says that these hymns are "to be Sung in Families, &c...",<sup>82</sup> instead of clearly stating, as he did in his first book, that they are to be sung on "Occasions observable in the Church of England".<sup>83</sup> Haleviah contains hymns on nearly every imaginable domestic circumstance: 'When Harvest is Come Home', 'When a Woman hath Conceived', 'For time of extreme Drought', 'At Sun-setting', and the list continues for 111 hymns. This book was received slightly more warmly, perhaps because Wither had retreated to the safer ground of hymns designed for private devotion, making his hymns no different than those regularly appended to psalters.

It was twenty years later when the question of to sing or not to sing hymns was formally considered by an assembly of divines at the Savoy Conference of the Church of England. Charles II wrote in his

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<sup>79</sup> Cited in Farr's edition of Wither (see note 77) p. xvi.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. xviii.

<sup>81</sup> George Wither, Haleviah, table of contents.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> George Wither, Hymns and Songs of the Church (London, 1623), title page.

Warrant for the Conference that one important issue would be to "review" the Book of Common Prayer, to "make such alterations therein as shall be thought most necessary", and to add "some additional forms in the Scripture phrase" which would be "suited to the nature of the several parts of worship...".<sup>84</sup> Richard Baxter proposed that there should be singing of hymns and more singing of psalms in the service. The Bishops replied coldly: "Singing of Psalms in metre is no part of the Liturgy, and so no part of our commission".<sup>85</sup> They refused even to consider hymns. Still not disheartened, the ministers who favoured hymns made a desperate plea that the Bishops explain and justify their position:

We hope you make no question, whether singing Psalms, and Hymns, were part of the primitive Liturgy, and seeing they are set forth, and allowed to be sung in all Churches of all the people together, why should they be denied to be part of the Liturgy? We understand not the reason of this.<sup>86</sup>

The ministers were left not understanding. After the conference the kinds of "hymn-books" that were published were the same as before. In 1664 Samuel Crossman of the Church of England published The Young Man's Monitor..., a manual of private devotion which has appended to itself The Young Man's Meditation, or, Some Few Sacred Poems upon Select Subjects, and Scriptures. These sacred poems are nothing more than metrical scriptures; even one of the more innovative poems, 'Christ's Future Coming to Judgement', for example, (which is based on Revelation 1:7)

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84 The King's Warrant for the Conference at the Savoy, cited in E. Cardwell Conferences...connected with the Revision of the Book of Common Prayer (Oxford, 1840), p. 299.

85 The Answer of the Bishops to the Exceptions of the Ministers, cited in Cardwell's Conferences (see note 84) p. 342.

86 The Grand Debate Between the Most Reverend the Bishops, and the Presbyterian Divines, Appointed by his Sacred Majesty, as Commissioners for the Review and Alteration of the Book of Common Prayer, &c... . (London, 1661), p. 79.

begins:

BEhold! he comes, comes from on high;  
Like lightning through the flaming skie.  
The Saint's desire, the Sinner's fear,  
Behold! that solemn day draws near.<sup>87</sup>

And Revelation 1:7 reads: "Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him".

Another hymn-book of this time was the Roman Catholic John Austin's Devotions, in the Ancient Way of Offices: with Psalms, Hymns, & Prayers; for Every Day of the Week, and Every Holiday in the Year, 1668. This book, whose title outlines quite thoroughly its contents, was, as might be expected, intended for private devotion, not for the church. The books of Crossman and Austin are prime examples of the attempt to make hymns practically useful and to design them for individual rather than corporate use.

While the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England wanted nothing to do with hymns, neither, it seems, did other sects such as the General Baptists and the Society of Friends. In Christianismus Primitivus (1678) the General Baptist spokesman Thomas Grantham argues that if one is to sing in church, "it must be the Word of God"<sup>88</sup> only; Grantham says that although there are "some who are zealous for promiscuous Singing...it's but of Mans device"<sup>89</sup> and is therefore to be avoided. George Fox, a leader of the Society of Friends, was not opposed to the act of singing itself: he describes one meeting when people "were much exercised by y<sup>e</sup> power of y<sup>e</sup> Lorde in songes & Hymms & made melody &

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<sup>87</sup> Samuel Crossman, The Young Man's Meditation, or, Some Few Sacred Poems upon Select Subjects, and Scriptures (London, 1664), p. 12.

<sup>88</sup> Thomas Grantham, Christianismus Primitivus (London, 1678), p. 109.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 112.



rejoyced: & y<sup>e</sup> life was raised thereby & refreshed in many: in y<sup>t</sup> meetinge...".<sup>90</sup> But the snag that Fox emphasizes is that while singing is scripturally warranted, there is no warrant for congregational singing; one can sing alone but not with a group. Fox was against corporate "prayings, and singings, which stood in forms without power...".<sup>91</sup> The opponents of congregational hymn-singing tended to marshall all the possible scriptural evidence they could, and to make the line between psalm-singing and hymn-singing a solid one, on adjacent sides of which the proponents and opponents clearly stood.

Unlike the members of either side, however, William Barton chose to stand with one foot in each sector. Rather than defend versified psalms or freely composed hymns, Barton proposed the idea of congregational hymns based on scripture. Barton's work is somewhere between psalm and hymn: though he uses Biblical texts, he modifies and combines them into new forms. His preface to Six Centuries of Select Hymns (1688), a bold and clear-headed defence of hymn-singing, begins by quoting Colossians 3:16: "Let the word of Christ dwell richly in you, in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in Psalms and Hymns and spiritual Songs, &c". Barton writes that hymn-singing is "no innovation or induction, but a renovation and reduction (rather) to Primitive use and Order",<sup>92</sup> and therefore it has excellent instructive use. After quoting from the writers of the "ancient Churches", the Classical poets, and even contemporary churchmen, Barton concludes by significantly calling his songs "Psalm-Hymns": they are hymns based on psalms and other scriptures as well.

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<sup>90</sup> Cited in The Journal of George Fox, ed. from the MSS by Norman Penney (Cambridge, 1911), II, 326.

<sup>91</sup> Cited in Thomas Hodgkin, George Fox (London, 1896), p. 35.

<sup>92</sup> William Barton, Six Centuries of Select Hymns (London, 1688), sig. 5.

One innovation of Barton's is his combining of different scriptures into one hymn. Hymn 18, for example, begins:

Luke 2. 13.

Glory to God in Highest Place,  
On Earth be peace, to Men free grace.  
We praise, we bless thee, we adore  
And glorifie thee evermore.

Rom. 11. 17.

We thank thee for thy glory great,  
Lord God, that hast the Sovereign seat:  
O heavenly King, and God alone,  
The Father, the Almighty One.

John 1. 14, 29. Acts 2. 36.

O God the true begotten Word,  
Son of the Father, Christ and Lord,  
O Lamb of God, that tak'st away  
The worlds great sin, thy grace display...<sup>93</sup>

And it continues in three more stanzas which combine six scriptures.

Another innovation is that he begins with one scripture and expands it. For example, 1 John 3:16 reads: "Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren". Barton's hymn on this scripture begins by paraphrasing it:

The love of God well know we thus  
Because He lost his life for us,  
And for our brethrens sake should we  
Lay down our lives, if need should be...,

but it goes on to discuss the fate of those who do not obey this injuncture:

And this uncharitable Train  
Shall pack away to endless pain,  
But then the righteous (ye must know)  
Into Eternal life shall go.

All glory to the Holy One  
That sits upon the Sovereign Throne,  
And to the Lamb of God therefore  
Be praise and honor evermore.<sup>94</sup>

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93 Ibid., p. 26.

94 Ibid., pp. 308-9.

This first stanza, though based to a degree on scripture, seems to be Barton's own view of the necessity of brotherly compassion. The last stanza is his own conclusion to the hymn. By combining and expanding upon scriptures, Barton became the point of transition between the metrical psalm and the hymn. His book was not accepted by the Church of England, but the Independents liked it and used it for a long time thereafter.<sup>95</sup>

Two other proponents of hymn-singing who helped to effect the transition from metrical psalm to hymn were Richard Baxter and Thomas Ken. Baxter's Paraphrases on the Psalms of David, in Metre, With Other Hymns (1692) has 260 pages of psalms and 12 pages of hymns, a balance that would have suited church leaders. Baxter is concerned to versify passages of the New Testament, and is also concerned to a degree about the poetic competence and musical versatility of his songs. These concerns can be seen in 'Angels Doxologie, Luke 2. 14':

Glory be to the glorious God,  
Whose [dwelling's] in the heavens high;  
Let Peace abound on earth below,  
To men [Divine] benignity.

Or,

Glory be to our glorious God,  
Whose [dwelling's] in the highest heaven;  
Let Peace come down on earth below,  
[Love and] good will to men be given.

Or,

Glory to the Eternal God  
In heav'n [which is] his glorious place;  
Let Peace on earth make her abode,  
Let men receive his [love and ] grace.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Benson, p. 62-3.

<sup>96</sup> Richard Baxter, Paraphrases of the Psalms of David in Metre, with other Hymns (London, 1692), p. 236.

Baxter wants to capture all the meaning of the scripture and to be sure that his hymn can be sung to Long Measure (8.8.8.8.) or, by omitting the bracketed words, to Common Measure (8.6.8.6.). For Baxter the important thing is not whether the hymn fits the scripture, but whether the scripture fits the hymn. Baxter aims to make his hymns musically versatile, semantically correct, and, to an extent, poetically pleasing.

Bishop Thomas Ken published in 1695 A Manual of Prayers For the Use of the Scholars of Winchester College, to which he attached "Three HYMNS, for Morning, Evening, and Midnight".<sup>97</sup> These hymns are actually prayers in the sense that they were meant for private use; yet Ken, probably not without reason, chooses to call them hymns. Not simply paraphrases of scripture, they are scripturally based, though quite personal:

Lord, lest the Tempter me surprize,  
Watch over thine own Sacrifice;  
All loose, all Idle Thoughts cast out,  
And make my very Dreams devout.<sup>98</sup>

And each of the three hymns ends with a doxology which later became very well known and widely sung:

Praise God from whom all Blessings flow,  
Praise him, all Creatures here below;  
Praise him above, ye Heavenly Host,<sup>99</sup>  
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

What is significant about Ken's writing of these hymns is that, being Bishop of Bath and Wells, he is one of the very few high-ranking churchmen who implicitly advocated, however timidly, the use of hymns.

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<sup>97</sup> Thomas Ken, A Manual of Prayers For the Use of the Scholars of Winchester College (London, 1715 edition; first published with the hymns in 1695), title page.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 137.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

Interestingly, however, there is an advertisement affixed to the back page of Ken's volume saying:

Whereas at the End of a Book lately Publish'd call'd, A Conference Between the Soul and Body, there are some Hymns said to be writ by Bishop Ken, who absolutely disowns them, as being very false and uncorrect; but the Genuine ones are to be had only of Charles Brome, Bookseller...<sup>100</sup>

This advertisement gives an indication of just how controversial the topic of hymns had become as the seventeenth century drew to a close.

As various sects disagreed on the issue of hymn-singing, there were some sects in which the members differed amongst themselves. In 1692 a heated battle between two Baptist ministers became the focus of attention for the eyes of all other religious groups. At the Baptist General Assembly in 1692 those in charge were shocked to find that some of their churches were singing the songs of William Barton. This discovery brought proponents and opponents face to face. In Tropes and Figures (1692) and earlier in Treatise on Baptism (1689), Benjamin Keach had urged congregational hymn-singing.<sup>101</sup> Isaac Marlow had disagreed in A Brief Discourse Concerning Singing in the Publick Worship of God in the Gospel Church (1690) and Keach had replied in 1691 with The Breach Repair'd in God's Worship or, Singing of Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs proved to be an Holy Ordinance of Jesus Christ. Keach concludes his scripture-splintering argument by firmly asserting: "You have found that Singing is not only sweet and raising to the Spirit, but also full of Instruction...".<sup>102</sup> Marlow had again replied, accusing

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>101</sup> Benson, p. 98.

<sup>102</sup> Benjamin Keach, The Breach Repair'd in God's Worship or, Singing of Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs, proved to be an Holy Ordinance of Jesus Christ (London, 1700 edition; first edition 1691), p. 192.

Keach of "unjust Reflections; as likewise with misrepresenting his Words, and contradicting himself...".<sup>103</sup> The General Assembly rebuked both sides and called for charity and peace, but Marlow could not resist having the last word, so he published in 1696 his Controversie of Singing Brought to an End, a treatise which is simply an emphatic restatement and elaboration of his earlier position. This open battle in the 1690's was only the tip of the iceberg: The "Controversie of Singing" found voices in every major religious sect. General Baptists deplored hymns while some Particular Baptists sang them; the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church would not allow them; the Independents tolerated them while the Society of Friends would not sing them congregationally. At the beginning of, and well into, the eighteenth century, congregational hymn-singing was a very touchy issue for church leaders and church goers alike.

In summary, partly because of the Genevan opposition to congregational hymn-singing in England, and partly because of the near monopoly of metrical psalters in churches, hymns were, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, rather rare and only succeeded in fomenting controversy in many religious sects. Yet at the same time, partly because of the widespread musical appreciation and enjoyment of the sung psalm, and partly because of the wealth of devotional poetry — from which two sources the hymn grew — several religious thinkers and churchmen were beginning, in spite of opposition, to move cautiously from the metrical psalm to the metrical scripture and toward the hymn as an expression of Christian experience that is usually, though not necessarily, based somehow on scripture. In spite of the "Controversie

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<sup>103</sup> Cited in S.W., J.C., and J.L., Lovers of Truth and Peace, Truth Vindicated; or, Mr. Keach's Sober Appeal Answered. Wherein he is Cleared... From the Unjust Accusation of Mr. Isaac Marlow (London, 1691), sig. A<sub>2</sub> recto.

of Singing", or perhaps because of it, there was a loud call for hymn-books at the turn of the century (1700).<sup>104</sup> But the hymns were, like those looked at here, very careful scripturally and were hardly free expressions of the religious consciousness. Into this scene in 1707 emerges Isaac Watts, who was concerned to extend officially the territory of the hymn from the Old Testament to the New, to allow free composition instead of just versifying scripture, and to permit, to an extent, the perceptions and attitudes of the writer to be expressed. In Watts's hands the hymn receives more dignity and respect as a literary form: it is transformed into a poetic, as well as religious, experience. Instead of simply being God's versified Word to man, the hymn becomes man's poetic word to God.

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<sup>104</sup> See Charles Higham's Priced Catalogue of the Whole Stock of Theological Books, etc... (London, 1878).

CHAPTER TWO. "SIGHT THRO' A GLASS": ISAAC WATTS

As the young Isaac Watts walked home one day in 1694 from the Independent Meeting-House at Southampton, he complained to his father, a deacon, about the dull metrical psalms and Bartonian "hymns". His father answered by challenging him to mend the situation, so Watts brought his first hymn to the next service a week later.<sup>1</sup> He produced numerous hymns during subsequent weeks, and, wanting to reform Christian worship both within the church and without, began working also on a new version of the metrical psalms and on a volume of religious verse. This chapter begins by looking briefly at Watts's Horae Lyricae (1706) and The Psalms of David Imitated... (1719), and then it closely examines his Hymns and Spiritual Songs (1707).

I

It seems that Isaac Watts was destined to be a nonconformist. His father had been imprisoned in Southampton at the time of Isaac's birth in 1674, and in 1685 was compelled to hide in London for two years because of his dissenting religious views. The young Watts distinguished himself in grammar school in Southampton, and then took his turn at standing up for dissent: Dr. John Speed, a local physician, offered to send Watts to Oxford or Cambridge; but since the youngster preferred "to take his lot among the dissenters", he went instead in 1690 to an academy run by Thomas Rowe at Stoke Newington.<sup>2</sup> Here he met other dissenters, some of whom encouraged the poetically-inclined

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<sup>1</sup> This anecdote can be found in nearly every account of Watts's life. See Edwin Paxton Hood's Isaac Watts; His Life and Writings, His Homes and Friends (London, 1875), p. 90. Hereafter referred to as Hood.

<sup>2</sup> Harry Escott, Isaac Watts, Hymnographer: A Study of the Beginnings, Development and Philosophy of the English Hymn (London, 1962), pp. 16 - 18. Hereafter referred to as Escott. See also "Isaac Watts" in the Dictionary of National Biography, p. 979.





Watts to write scriptural paraphrases and poems. Shortly after 1690 he began a new version of the psalms in order to rescue "the noble Psalmist out of the butcherly hands of Sternhold and Hopkins".<sup>3</sup> He left the academy in 1694 and spent two years at home, during which time "he composed his hymns at least [sic] great part of them ...".<sup>4</sup> After tutoring for a wealthy family at Stoke Newington, Watts succeeded on 18 March 1702 to the pastorate of Mark Lane Chapel, the meeting place of an aristocratic dissenting congregation. Between the duties of pastoring and the miseries of chronic illness, Watts found time to prepare a volume of religious lyrics, a version of the psalms, and a book of hymns, all three of which projects were innovative and well-received.

When publishing his religious lyrics, Horae Lyricae, Watts told his friend Thomas Gibbons that he sent the Horae into the world first so that "if these were accepted with mankind they would be in a favourable disposition to receive his hymns, but that if the brighter and best productions of his Muse in his Lyric Odes did not meet with success it might be prudent in him to withhold"<sup>5</sup> the hymns or somehow modify them. But as well as acting as a decoy for his later production, Horae Lyricae is Watts's attempt "to reform the poetry of his day, to add new forms, to revitalize its content. Seeing the spiritual poverty of Neo-classic poetry, he tried to renovate it with an infusion of the evangelical strain".<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Letter from John Hughes to Samuel Say (n.d.) Cited in Arthur P. Davis, Isaac Watts: His Life and Works (London, 1948), pp. 15-16.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Gibbons, Memoirs of the Rev. Isaac Watts (London, 1780), p. 254.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 255.

<sup>6</sup> Arthur P. Davis, Isaac Watts: His Life and Works (London, 1948), p. 159.

In his preface Watts laments that many churchmen now see poetry and religion not only as distinct, but opposed: "It has been a long Complaint of the virtuous and refined World, that Poesy, whose Original is Divine, should be enslav'd to Vice and Profaneness; that an Art inspired from Heaven, should have so far lost the Memory of its Birth-place, as to be ingaged in the Interests of Hell. How unhappily is it perverted from its most glorious Design!"<sup>7</sup> He goes on to list those who in the history of divinity have used poetry, and then claims that even today "the Christian Preacher would find abundant Aid from the Poet, in his Design to diffuse Virtue, and allure Souls to God".<sup>8</sup> The Horae, though intended primarily as a book of private devotion, "written to assist the Meditations and Worship" of Christians, was also Watts's opportunity to introduce some hymns, originally intended for the hymn-book, that were "too bold to please the weaker Christian...".<sup>9</sup>

Several of the pieces in the Horae seem rather bold even for devotional poetry, let alone for inclusion in a hymn-book. The sensuality in 'A Sight of Christ', for example, is distracting:

My joyful Heart high leaping in my Breast  
With Transport cry'd, This is the CHRIST of GOD;  
Then threw my Arms around in sweet Embrace,  
And clasp'd, and bow'd adoring low, till I was lost in him.<sup>10</sup>

'True Learning' is infused with visionary power; it is reminiscent of Milton's "vast abyss":

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<sup>7</sup> Isaac Watts, Horae Lyricae, Poems Chiefly of the Lyric Kind, in Three Books (London, 1731 edition), p. A<sub>2</sub>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. xxi.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. xxii.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 116.

The LORD grows lavish of his heav'nly Light,  
And pours whole Floods on such a Mind as this:  
Fled from the Eyes she gains a piercing Sight,  
She dives into the Infinite,  
And sees unutterable Things in that unknown Abyss.<sup>11</sup>

And in many of the poems a personal voice comes through: 'The Atheist's Mistake', for example, is Watts's view of the stupidity of the "Prophane" who "swell and burst/ with bold Impiety".<sup>12</sup> After eight stanzas of chastising the atheist's frame of mind, Watts finishes with a personal and severe declaration:

Hence, ye Prophane, I hate your Ways,  
I walk with pious Souls;  
There's a wide Difference in our Race,  
And distant are our Goals

As well as containing some poems with a personal note, some with visionary power, and some with sensuality, the Horae also contains several poems that are very much like hymns, in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth-century sense. That is to say, they are rigidly Biblical, emotionally staid, figuratively spare, and affirmative in tone and outlook. The first stanza of 'The Universal Hallelujah' is typical of the state of the hymn around 1700:

Praise ye the LORD with joyful Tongue,  
Ye Pow'rs that guard his Throne;  
JESUS the MAN shall lead the Song,  
The GOD inspire the Tune.<sup>13</sup>

Horae Lyricae is Watts's attempt to blend, within the covers of one book, some colourful religious poetry and some conservative and pious hymns, and to suggest with quiet tact that poetry is, and should be, a valid aid to worship. In his volume of hymns he will attempt to

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

blend these two ingredients — poetry and religious praise — within a single literary form. The Horae served its dual purpose as a devotional manual and as a prelude to Watts's hymns, which were published in the following year.

Before looking at the hymns, some attention will be given to The Psalms of David Imitated, a work which, though not published until 1719, was started before the hymns and was an ongoing project. Watts's preface to this work carries the subtitle, "An ENQUIRY into the right Way of fitting the Book of PSALMS for Christian Worship",<sup>14</sup> and if he is here only implying that the psalms have never been properly rendered, he certainly emphasizes this in the course of his preface. Watts's goal in imitating the psalms was to "accomodate the Book of Psalms to Christian Worship: And in order to this 'tis necessary to divest David and Asaph, &c, of every other Character but that of a Psalmist and a Saint, and to make them always speak the common Sense and Language of a Christian".<sup>15</sup> It is a mistake, says Watts, for modern worshippers to use Old-Testament language: "Why must we be bound up to such Words as can never be address'd to God in their own Sense?"<sup>16</sup> There is no reason to "sing with cold Devotion, and perhaps in Darkness too, without Thought or Meaning".<sup>17</sup> Watts believes that not all the psalms are applicable to modern life, nor should a literal translation be the desired end. He declares, therefore, that he has "chosen rather to imitate than to translate; and thus to compose a Psalm-book for Christians after the manner of

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<sup>14</sup> Isaac Watts, The Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament, and apply'd to the Christian State and Worship (London, 1719), p. A<sub>2</sub>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. xvi.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. xiv.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. xv.

the Jewish Psalter".<sup>18</sup> This choice is, Watts admits, unprecedented: all his predecessors strove for more or less literal translations. Watts has chosen not "to express the antient Sense and Meaning of David, but have rather exprest myself as I may suppose David would have done, had he lived in the Days of Christianity".<sup>19</sup> This is a typically eighteenth-century literary attitude: imitation was becoming a particularly important genre, and Watts was doing for David what Pope was doing for Horace, what Johnson was to do for Juvenal, and what Cowper was to do for Homer.

A quick look at a few psalms reveals that Watts is indeed an imitator rather than a translator. Psalm 150, as David left it, is simply a repetition of the phrase "praise him", followed by the names of various musical instruments: "Praise him with the timbrel and dance: praise him with stringed instruments and organs. Praise him upon the loud cymbals: praise him upon the high sounding cymbals", and so it continues. Watts chooses to omit the Old-Testament instruments and instead claims, in typically New-Testament fashion, that one should praise God by doing good works:

Let all your sacred Passions move,  
While you rehearse his Deeds;  
But the great Work of saving Love  
Your highest Praise exceeds.<sup>20</sup>

The concept of "saving Love" here makes Watts's Psalm 150 almost opposite in meaning to Psalm 150 itself: David says that we must praise God in every way we can; Watts here implies that our praise is ultimately not needed because God loves us anyway, and if we "rehearse his Deeds" then that is praise enough. Going beyond this

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. xix.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. xix.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 398.

in Psalm 47, he not only transfers the psalm from an Old to New-Testament context, but from the setting of Israel to Britain: Jehovah becomes "Jesus Christ" and the Holy Land becomes "The British Islands". In numerous other psalms Watts's language is more conversational and deliberately contemporary than that of other renderers of the psalms. For example, one can compare the opening of Psalm 48 as rendered by Sternhold and Hopkins or Tate and Brady (see chapter one, pages 26 and 30) to this:

[GREAT is the Lord our God  
And let his Praise be great;  
He makes his Churches his Abode,  
His most delightful Seat.

These Temples of his Grace,  
How beautifull they stand!  
The Honours of our Native Place,  
And Bulwarks of our Land.]<sup>21</sup>

Wanting to reform praise in church as well as at home, Watts produced an innovative volume of religious verse and a novel approach to the presentation of metrical psalms. But concerning his greatest work, his hymns, Watts harboured doubts as to whether or not to publish. As early as 1700 his brother Enoch had urged him to publish his hymns: he wishes that "for the satisfaction of the public" Watts would consent to publish, because Sternhold and Hopkins were now ancient, Mason is like "yawning indifferency, and honest Barton chimes us asleep. There is, therefore", he says, "a great need of a pen, vigorous and lively as yours, to quicken and revive the dying devotion of the age...".<sup>22</sup> The importuning continued, and finally in 1707 churches and church-goers received Watts's Hymns and Spiritual Songs, a book which was

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 126.

<sup>22</sup> Letter from Enoch Watts to Isaac, March, 1700. Cited in Hood, pp. 84-5.

to introduce a new concept of what a "hymn" should be.

## II

Watts's preface to his hymns is a clearly articulated broadside against the custom of restricting sung worship to the metrical psalms. He begins:

While we sing the Praises of our God in his Church, we are employ'd in that part of Worship which of all others is the nearest a-kin to Heaven; and 'tis pity that this of all others should be perform'd the worst upon Earth. The Gospel brings us nearer to the heavenly State than all the former Dispensations of God amongst Men: And in these last Days of the Gospel we are brought almost within sight of the Kingdom of our Lord; yet we are very much unacquainted with the Songs of the New Jerusalem, and unpractis'd in the Work of Praise. To see the dull Indifference, the negligent and the thoughtless Air that sits upon the Faces of a whole Assembly, while the Psalm is on their Lips, might tempt even a charitable Observer to suspect the Fervency of inward Religion; and 'tis much to be fear'd that the Minds of most of the Worshippers are absent or unconcern'd. Perhaps the Modes of Preaching in the best Churches still want some Degrees of Reformation, nor are the Methods of Prayer so perfect as to stand in need of no Correction or Improvement: But of all our Religious Solemnities Psalmodie is the most unhappily manag'd. That very Action which should elevate us to the most delightful and divine Sensations, doth not only flat our Devotion, but too often awakens our Regret, and touches all the Springs of Uneasiness within us.<sup>23</sup>

Watts goes on to suggest that this sad situation exists because of the "Matter and Words to which we confine all our Songs". He writes that Old-Testament psalms are foreign "to the present Circumstances of Christians", and that church ministers have only "wish'd rather than attempted a Reformation". Therefore, Watts says, at "their

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<sup>23</sup> The text used is the edition of Selma L. Bishop, Isaac Watts: Hymns and Spiritual Songs, 1707-1748 (London, 1962), p. li. This edition collates the variants of all the editions published in Watts's lifetime.

importunate and repeated Requests I have for some Years past devoted many Hours of leisure to this Service".<sup>24</sup> Describing the content of the book, he says that the hymns in part one are based on "particular Portions of Scripture", those in part two are "of meer Human Composure", and those in part three celebrate the Lord's Supper. The greater portion of the book, therefore, — and this is unprecedented in hymnody — consists of freely-composed hymns. He goes so far as to suggest that those readers of "a more refin'd Taste and polite Education" would enjoy this part more than part one.<sup>25</sup> Watts's only hesitation seems to be that some poetic expressions might be too bold and magnificent; therefore he notes that "in all the longer hymns, and in some of the shorter, there are several stanzas included in crotchets, thus, [ ]; which stanzas may be left out in singing, without disturbing the sense. Those parts are also included in such crotchets, which contain words too poetical for meaner understandings, or too particular for whole congregations to sing".<sup>26</sup> Given the dubious reputation and controversial nature of hymns in the first decade of the eighteenth century, Watts's major difficulty, aside from simply getting the book accepted by churches, was to keep poetic elements to a minimum while at the same time allowing his poetic talents some freedom. Essentially he gives birth to the hymn as a literary form which possesses an artistic integrity of its own. Yet he is continually careful not to let the hymn become "too poetical".

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. lii.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. lv.

<sup>26</sup> This note appeared in the second edition of 1709.



The hymns in the first part of the volume, those that are ostensibly paraphrases of scripture, are unlike earlier versified versions of scripture. 'A Vision of the Kingdom of Christ Among Men'<sup>27</sup> is a paraphrase of Revelation 21: 1-4. But after vividly depicting the final dissolution of this world and the glorious arrival of the New Jerusalem, Watts is moved to plead with God: "How Long, dear Saviour, oh how Long/ Shall this bright Hour delay?"<sup>28</sup> He has taken the liberty here, as he does in many others of the scriptural hymns, to add a response to the scripture that has been paraphrased. In 'The Works of Moses and the Lamb' (42) he takes another liberty. This hymn is a paraphrase of Revelation 15:3, yet Watts's stanzas 3 to 6 are not scriptural; they are his own catalogue of God's blessings upon His chosen people: he recounts how God fed them manna, how "Th' Egyptian Host was drown'd", how Christ "invites us to his Flesh", and how we, and not Moses, can enter the promised land. Watts is continually expanding and expounding upon the verses he paraphrases, either by interjecting a reaction to God's actions, by elaborating on a scripture, or simply by providing additional detail. He sees no point in simply versifying verbatim, as can be seen in 'The rich Sinner dying' (24), where, instead of ending the hymn by paraphrasing Psalm 49, he simply states, "The rest referr'd to the 49th Psalm". At several other times he does this. For example, he evidently wanted a hymn on Psalm 1, but probably could

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<sup>27</sup> All quotations from Watts's Hymns and Spiritual Songs are taken from Selma L. Bishop's edition of 1962. This edition has collated, and gives variant readings for, all 16 editions published in Watts's lifetime. The page number of all hymnal quotations is given in parentheses in the text.

<sup>28</sup> In the fourth edition this line ended with an exclamation mark rather than a question mark. This alteration, however, could have been the printer's.

not see any way to improve upon that psalm, so his hymn reads:  
"Referr'd to the 1st Psalm" (32). Rather than work for the scriptures,  
Watts is concerned to have the scriptures work for him.

He not only adds, responds, and refers the reader, to scriptures;  
he also combines Old and New-Testament verses and attempts to impose  
onto these his own imaginative figures. In 'Original Sin: or, the  
first and second Adam' (50), a poetical discussion of man's first  
disobedience and subsequent depravity, the first of the three  
scriptural bases of the hymn is Romans 5:12, which reads: "Wherefore,  
as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so  
death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned...". Watts  
renders it thus:

- 1 Backward with humble Shame we look  
On our Original.  
How is our Nature dash'd and broke  
In our first Father's Fall!
- 2 To all that's Good averse and blind,  
But prone to all that's Ill;  
What dreadful Darkness veils our Mind!  
How obstinate our Will!

Watts transforms the flat, categorical Biblical statement into an  
effective image of man looking back over his history, and follows  
this with a rhetorical exclamation which springs from the implied  
comparison of man's pre-lapsarian and post-lapsarian states of being.  
In stanza 2 Watts boldly outlines man's moral state and again ends  
the stanza with exclamations punctuated by alliteration. The net  
effect of all this artifice is to make rhetorically effective and  
artistically memorable a dully expressed and spiritually depressing  
scripture.

The next scripture that this hymn uses is Psalm 51:5: "Behold,  
I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me".

Watts injects into this declaration imagery that is graphic and demonstrative, therefore finding it necessary to enclose stanzas 3 and 4 in crotchets:

- [3 Conceive'd in Sin, (O wretched state!)  
    Before we draw our Breath  
    The first young pulse begins to beat  
    Iniquity and Death.
- 4 How strong in our degenerate Blood  
    The old Corruption reigns,  
    And mingling with the crooked Flood,  
    Wanders thro' all our Veins!]

Watts magnifies the act of being conceived in sin in lines 1, 2, and 3, and looks at its two stages: stage one is the actual conception (punctuated with an exclamatory interjection); stage two is the unborn baby beginning to pulsate. By doing this Watts subtly underlines his view of both the inevitability of one's entrance into this world in a state of sin, and the paradox that as one begins to live, one begins to die, because to live is to sin, and sin results in death, both spiritual and then physical. Stanza 4, a grim physiological image of sinful or poisonous blood flowing through the body, suggests that every part of the human body is not only corrupt and sinful, but is perpetually nourished by a deluge of sin that only ceases when the body ceases to exist.

The third scripture Watts uses is Job 14:4: "Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? not one". Upon this simply-answered question he constructs, in crotcheted stanzas, two more figures: one of the impossibility of a "deadly Tree" producing "living Fruit", and one of a "vital Stream" not being able to come from "an infected Spring". The hymn ends suddenly with the glorious assertion that God can "make our Nature clean" and therefore we should sing "Hosanna to that Sov'reign Pow'r" in gratitude for our newly found cleanliness.

This affirmative, happy ending is typical of Watts, and this is one of his typical scriptural hymns: it glosses the scriptures with imaginative figures. But these are bold and obvious ones which, partly because encased in crotchets, can be lifted out of the hymn with little loss to its meaning. The figurative language is too apparent and is imposed onto the hymn rather than allowed to grow out of the hymn. But Watts is at least taking the scriptural hymn away from literal paraphrase and is allowing his poetical talents some play, even though at times the result seems somewhat contrived.

An example of the frequent clumsiness of Watts's imaginative figures can be seen in 'A Morning Hymn' (78). He begins by describing the sun, which, "without Weariness or Rest/ Round the whole Earth he flies and shines". Using a simile Watts wishes to liken himself to the sun:

3 O like the Sun may I fulfil  
Th' appointed Duties of the Day,  
With ready Mind and active Will  
March on and keep my heavenly Way.

The problem with this simile is that the sun is inanimate and has an inevitable orbit; Watts is a human being whose very existence is animated by his mind and will. Yet he implies here that the sun, which obviously has no "ready Mind and active Will", is an inspiring ideal after which man should pattern his mind and will. The logic is puzzling at best. As if this sun/Christian simile was not questionable enough, however, he confuses it:

[4 But I shall rove and lose the Race,  
If God my Sun should disappear,  
And leave me in this World's wild Maze  
To follow every wand'ring Star.

Suddenly God, rather than Watts (or the speaker in the hymn), is the sun. What is more confusing is his suggestion that the sun could disappear, when in fact he spent the opening eight lines emphasizing

the sun's reliability and eternal presence. After this Watts abandons this figure and simply asks God to give his "Counsels", so that he could be made wise and achieve bliss. His asking for counsel and for God's "clean and pure" commands is scriptural (Psalm 19: 5,8; 73: 24, 25) but the rest of the hymn — the odd figurative stanzas — are of his devising. He has taken the liberty, as he often does, of attempting to achieve a fusion of scripture and poetic imagination, but the result tends rather to confuse.

Another liberty Watts takes is to interpret scripture for the reader. 'Life the Day of Grace and Hope' (86) is based on Ecclesiastes 9: 4-6, 10: "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest". This passage, which goes on to advise people to "live joyfully" in the days "of thy vanity", is part of the theme of "eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die", that underlies the book of Ecclesiastes. Watts paraphrases the verses closely:

5 Then what my thoughts design to do,  
My Hands, with all your Might pursue,  
Since no Device, nor Work is found,  
Nor Faith, nor Hope beneath the Ground.

But he has already prefaced this stanza with his own interpretation of what kinds of works and devices one should be involved with during earthly life:

1 Life is the Time to serve the Lord,  
The Time t' insure the great Reward;  
And while the Lamp holds out to burn  
The vilest Sinner may return.

[2 Life is the Hour that God has giv'n  
To 'scape from Hell and fly to Heav'n,  
The Day of Grace, and Mortal's may  
Secure the Blessings of the Day.]

The preacher in Ecclesiastes tells people to do what they desire to do before they are consumed by inevitable death. Watts is telling

people what they ought to do in order to avoid death. The preacher emphasizes the futility of everything under the sun; Watts emphasizes the hope and usefulness of every good thing under the sun. Watts has dressed these bleak Old-Testament verses in conspicuously New-Testament, even Puritan, garments.

When one considers the number of hymns based on Ecclesiastes in Watts's book, it becomes evident that he seems to prefer unusual scriptures. 'Youth and Judgement' (87) is based on the obscure verse of Ecclesiastes 11:9: "Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgement". Watts's paraphrase is more specific, and pejorative in its overtones:<sup>28A</sup>

YE Sons of Adam, vain and young,  
Indulge your Eyes, indulge your Tongue,  
Taste the Delights your Souls desire,  
And give a loose to all your Fire.

Pursue the Pleasures you design,  
And cheer your Hearts with Songs and Wine,  
Enjoy the Day of Mirth; but know  
There is a Day of Judgement too.

Rather than conclude here, however, as the scripture does, he goes on to recount that God "beholds your Thoughts", "records your secret Faults", and that God's "Vengeance" will "strike your Hearts" for "your Follies". After this sermonizing he asks God to counteract the whole phenomenon of sinful youth:

Almighty God, turn off their Eyes  
From these alluring Vanities;  
And let the Thunder of thy Word  
Awake their Souls to fear the Lord.

Again, Watts has altered the intent of the scripture, and the result is a meaning quite opposed to the Biblical one. The preacher in Ecclesiastes emphasizes that youths may as well experience what

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<sup>28A</sup> But there is the possibility of irony in "Rejoice" in the Biblical text.

pleasures they can because youths are youths , but there is nevertheless judgement later. Watts, however, desires that the natural impulses in youth be subverted: he seems to wish that youth were not youth but could be changed into something else. The preacher is not saying, fear the Lord and therefore do no evil, as is Watts; he is simply saying, do what you will, but know that judgement awaits.

As if Watts could not resist illuminating this shady verse with the inner light of Puritan morality, he devotes his next hymn to it also. Once again he preaches to young men, telling them to "Avoid the Fury of his Eye,/ And flee before his Face" (88). Bewildered by the predicament of being a fallen person trying to please a perfect judge, Watts concludes:

How shall I bear that dreadful Day,  
And stand the fiery Test?  
I give all mortal joys away  
To be forever blest.

This is typical of the overly simplistic solutions that Watts offers for fundamental problems in Christian experience, an example of the fact that Watts always maintains his affirmative tone and spiritual confidence. Here he is asking one of the most awesome questions in Christianity, and is answering it with the declaration that he renounces all mortal joys: he simply will not sin.

Another difficult issue to which Watts addresses himself, but this time in a more satisfying way, is that of 'Faith of Things unseen' (114). This hymn is based on four verses in Hebrews, the most important of which is Hebrews 11:1: "NOW faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen". Watts introduces this scripture with a neatly paradoxical and enigmatic image:

FAith is the brightest Evidence  
Of Things beyond our sight,  
Breaks thro' the Clouds of Flesh and Sense,  
And dwells in heavenly Light.

This image is double-edged: does faith work outward from the individual and illuminate for him a realm beyond? Or does it work into the individual from outside and illuminate the interior of that individual with heavenly light? That is to say, does faith break through and into, or through and out of, the "Clouds of Flesh and Sense"? He continues:

It sets Times past in present View,  
Brings distant Prospects home,  
Of Things a Thousand Years ago,  
Or Thousand Years to come.

Faith evidently illuminates that which is outside of the individual, setting "Times past in present View"; and it also illuminates and brings within the individual "distant Prospects". Yet faith can also illuminate nothing — it can deliberately leave one in the dark: "Abraham to unknown Countrys led/ By Faith obey'd the Lord", and

He sought a City fair and high,  
Built by th' Eternal Hands;  
And Faith assures us, tho' we dye,  
That heavenly Building stands.

Abraham did not see the promised land. His faith did lead him, but it did not lead him to anything, though he was (and the reader is) assured that this unseen promised land does exist. This short hymn is an example of Watts using a poetic figure and evocative language in a sophisticated way. The hymn, revolving around an enigmatic figure, is at once epigrammatic and extensive in meaning, while written in simple yet suggestive language. Watts has looked at the concept of faith and has led the reader to the conclusions that faith can illuminate what is within or without, or it can illuminate nothing and simply lead the individual; but in any case it is a sure guide.

Watts seems to prefer the difficult and relatively ignored scriptures. Out of 150 scriptural hymns, at least 30 are based on



Ecclesiastes, Revelation, and the Song of Solomon. Some contain very sensuous language. The pulsating metre, subtle repetition, and suggestive diction in 'The Church the Garden of Christ' (71), for example, based on the Song of Solomon, conjure up an inescapable sexual mood:

[Let my Beloved come, and taste  
His pleasant Fruits at his own Feast.  
I come, my Spouse, I come, he crys,  
With Love and Pleasure in his Eyes.

Such stanzas abound in the volume. Evidently Watts wants to focus upon the more suggestive and difficult passages in the Bible in order to show that there is nothing there that cannot be made spiritually edifying, nor is there any part that should be avoided in hymnody. He believes that every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God — no matter what man may think of it — is worthy of being read and sung:

Kind is thy Language, Sovereign Lord,  
There's heavenly Grace in every Word:  
From that dear Mouth a Stream divine  
Flows sweeter than the choicest Wine (75).

If Watts believes that God's language to man is "choicest Wine", he also believes that man's language to God, in the form of hymns, is a valid means by which to understand scriptures. In part one of his volume, Watts bases his hymns upon scriptures, but he takes several liberties that other writers do not: he varies the amount of detail, imposes his own imaginative figures, and interprets the scriptures. But in breaking new ground, however, he also creates problems. First, his figures are often quite contrived and awkward: they are affected rather than natural. Second, his interpretations of various scriptures often run contrary to what the scripture really means to say, and though this can be seen as a positive feature, Watts

does state that in these hymns he has "borrow'd the Sense" of the scripture. Third, Watts's affirmative endings and tone of invincible spiritual confidence tend to rob the hymns of the sincerity, depth, and fervour that they perhaps could have achieved. Nevertheless, he has made some fundamental changes in the art of writing scriptural hymns. He begins with the scripture rather than ending with it, he works with it rather than toward it, and thus offers some novel scriptural hymns which serve as a provocative prelude to his free compositions in part two and three of his volume.

### III

The concept of a freely-composed hymn designed specifically for congregational worship, though somewhat ambiguous, is original with Watts. By the phrase, hymn "of meer Human Composure", Watts meant to give himself more freedom from scriptural paraphrase: for Watts a hymn should discuss some aspect of Christian experience; it should spiritually edify its reader; it could appeal to scripture if it wishes to do so; and it should possess some degree of poetic competence. In examining Watts's freely-composed hymns, and in examining the hymns of the other writers in subsequent chapters of this thesis, the strategy taken, for the sake of clarity and for facility in comparing the different writers, is to consider the hymns in the light of their tone, their imaginative figures (image, metaphor, symbol, simile) and their point of view — and this includes the subject matter upon which the author primarily focuses. Where important, some of the technical and rhetorical devices are considered. The overall poetical quality of the hymns is assessed, often by offering close readings of entire hymns; usually ones that were quoted, in part, elsewhere in the respective chapter, so that one sees the context in which the stanzas discussed operate.

It is tempting to say that what primarily distinguishes Watts's hymns from those of any other writer is his positive outlook on Christian experience, the consistently affirmative tone that later writers tend to lack. For Watts, Christian experience is not characterized by spiritual struggle and effort, but rather by victory and contentment. At times his confidence seems to approach hyperbole, as in 'Salvation in the Cross' (157), where, after asserting that he has no fear, that neither "Tyrants" nor "Hell" can frighten him, and that even if "worlds conspire [sic] to drive me thence,/ Moveless and firm this Heart should lie", he asks God to calm his fear and protect him: "But speak, my Lord, and calm my Fear;/ Am I not safe beneath thy Shade"? His answer indicates that the question was not necessary: "Yes, I'm secure beneath thy Blood,/ And all my Foes shall lose their aim". This hymn seems, in one sense, a contrived exercise in spiritual triumph, as does 'Doubts scatter'd; or, Spiritual Joy restor'd' (240). After telling "sad Thoughts" to "be gone", and remembering what "Immortal Joys" he felt when Jesus "told me, I was his,/ And my Beloved, mine", he admits that no doubt has ever really bothered him since he knew Jesus:

In vain the Tempter frights my Soul,  
And breaks my Peace in vain,  
One Glimpse, dear Saviour, of thy Face  
Revives my Joys again.

According to Watts the conflict between good and evil, or God and Satan, is one that the forces of light cannot lose. In 'Flesh and Spirit' (314) this conflict is presented, but Watts divests it of any dramatic tension by repeatedly affirming that the victory is always predictable:

So Darkness struggles with the Light  
Till perfect Day arise;  
Water and Fire maintain the Fight  
Until the weaker dies.

And "Thus will the Flesh and Spirit strive", but with Christ's help the believer will certainly see "Sin for ever cease" within himself. Certainty is the keynote in Watts's view of man's coming glory. In 'Freedom from Sin and Misery in Heaven' (255) he does not pray or hope for heaven; rather he asserts constantly that the Christian shall obtain glory — there is no question of, or reason for, doubt: "Death shall land our weary Souls/ Safe on the heavenly Shore... No Sin shall clog our winged Zeal... There shall we sit... For ever his dear sacred Name/ Shall dwell upon our Tongue...". The verb "shall", used in every stanza in this hymn, occurs throughout Watts's hymns.

Even hymns about death and backsliding have an affirmative tone and ending. 'Death and Eternity' (186) implies that the latter state necessarily follows the former. In another he categorically states the "Death is the Gate of endless Joy", ignoring the possibility of the wider gate to damnation. And in a hymn about "Backslidings" and the "Inconstancy of our Love" (176) it is the return to bliss and a state of salvation that is stressed: "...my dear Lord returns again/ He flies to my Relief". Watts cannot even discuss "spiritual Sloth" without pushing it out of view and claiming ecstatically that God will never let us become slothful — He will motivate us, and "With Hands of Faith and Wings of Love/ We'll fly and take the Prize" (183). It seems to be that in hymns such as these Watts is offering only the rhetorical skimmings of very complex and important religious issues. He is allowing his unwavering tone to keep him from probing into these issues and to keep his attention on other issues such as salvation, earthly bliss, and heaven.

Salvation, earthly bliss, and heaven are for Watts certainly glorious and gloriously certain; Christianity is not open to questioning and doubt. 'The Excellency of the Christian Religion' (303) reveals clearly

Watts's outlook on religious experience, and it captures Watts's tone. It begins by praising God, whose "Hands have brought Salvation down,/ And writ the Blessings in thy Word". It goes on to say that even "if we trace the Globe" around, "There shall be no Religion found/ So Just to God, so safe for Man". According to Watts there is no need to fear, deliberate, question, or doubt. Even a superficial reading of these lines raises the questions of why the Christian religion is "Just to God", and how it is "safe for Man"; but these questions do not seem to have occurred to Watts, who is asserting rather than investigating. A later stanza shows graphically the extent of Watts's confidence and tone:

How well thy blessed Truths agree!  
How wise and holy thy Commands!  
Thy Promises how firm they be!  
How firm our Hope and Comfort stands!

The flurry of exclamations and repeated words here emphasize that for Watts God is in His heaven, or, more precisely, man is in his heaven, and all's right with the Christian world. Affirmative declarations such as these and this buoyant tone are found to a much lesser degree, sometimes not at all, in later hymn-writers, whose tones tend to be very different.

Along with, or perhaps a part of, Watts's singularly happy tone is his belief that the Christian can and does praise God in suitable ways. That is to say, there is no impassable gulf between Creator and creature; man's praises do reach God. In 'Praise to God for Creation and Redemption' (194) Watts illustrates that just as God acts with love toward man (He "form'd us by a Word") so also man acts with love toward God by praising Him:

.....  
But our loud Song shall still record  
The Wonders of thy Praise.

We raise our Shouts, O God, to thee,  
And send them to thy Throne  
All Glory to th' UNITED Three  
The Undivided One.

In 'Christ's Intercession' (195) he traces the route of man's praises even more closely:

Now may our joyful Tongues  
Our Maker's Honour sing,  
Jesus the Priest receives our Songs,  
And bears 'em to the King.

Man's songs are not only heard by God, but God responds to them in a favourable way: "He (dearest Lord) perfumes my Sighs,/ And sweetens every Groan" (197). Watts is certain that man and God are brought together by songs of praise: "While Jesus shines with quickning Grace,/ We sing and mount on high..." (202).

'Christ's Sufferings and Glory' (202) begins with an invocation: "Awake, my Voice, in heavenly Lays,/ Tell the loud Wonders he hath done". He wishes to "Sing how he left the Worlds of Light/ And the bright Robes he wore above...". Immediately he begins the song, the suggestion being that he can sing of God's wonders and "bright Robes" because they are visible to his sight. That the Christian can praise God and be heard may seem a normal and expected phenomenon, but it is one that later hymn-writers do not take for granted. What is more significant in Watts's case is that anyone can see the immortal glories of God if only he wishes to do so:

Lift up your Eyes, ye Sons of Light,  
Up to his Throne of shining Grace,  
See what immortal Glories sit  
Round the sweet Beauties of his Face.

Watts's outlook on religious experience is that it is the gateway to endless joy. Christianity is characterized by "joy unspeakable" and heaven on earth. Thus the tone in Watts's hymns is one of confidence and affirmation, even to the edge of hyperbole and of

skimming over issues that could have been carefully scrutinized. This tone has a double effect. On the one hand, it makes the hymns read like detached utterances that have spoken themselves into being, rather than having been created and articulated by a human speaker. One suspects a degree of insincerity or at least disinterestedness in the author, thus making the hymns seem less like literature and more like stylized religious propaganda. On the other hand, like huge, boldly-lettered placards which arouse spiritual assurance and joy, they are, and were, excellent for stirring congregations and making them actively respond to Christian praise. This points to the distinction between the hymn as literature and the hymn as hymn. This distinction comes into play continually in Watts and later writers; it is not always easy to make, and the best hymns, even of Watts, attempt to blend imperceptibly the hymn and the poem. 7

Perhaps because of the attitudes toward hymns that were current in Watts's time, however, he found it expedient to try to keep hymn and poem either separate or, if they were mixed, they were done so carefully and separably. This can be clearly seen when one examines the imaginative figures in Watts's hymns. Most of the time, the figures sit uncomfortably on the surface of the hymn and are contrived and awkward; but occasionally they can be artistically effective and an organic part of the hymn.

That Watts puts square brackets, or crotchets, as he terms them, around most of his figures, makes them seem contrived and imposing enough, but a close look shows many of them to be slightly odd at best and completely unworkable at worst. In 'A Morning Song' (159) he crotchets this image:

[On a poor Worm thy Power might tread,  
And I could ne'er withstand:  
Thy Justice might have crush'd me dead,  
But Mercy held thine Hand.

The action of treading is usually done with one's foot, as Watts implies in the first two lines. However, in lines 3 and 4 he implies that the crushing would have been done by a hand rather than a foot. This confusion in the precision of the image gives it a questionable and diffuse character rather than a sharp and vivid one.<sup>28B</sup> Another confusion occurs in 'Parting with Carnal Joys' (165). This hymn begins by likening the lewd "Joys of Earth" to a "smooth deceitful Sea". When describing his salvation from this smooth sea, however, Watts suddenly refers to it as "those treacherous Seas". Is there one sea or more than one? Is the sea of this world smooth or treacherous? Or is it treacherously smooth? Precision of metaphorical detail does not seem to matter to Watts, who, in this hymn, is destined for the "shining Realms above":

There from the Bosom of my God  
Oceans of endless Pleasure roll,  
There would I fix my last Abode,  
And drown the Sorrows of my Soul.

It is odd enough that Watts would use the same symbol (seas or oceans) for heaven as he does for hell and for the earth. What is more puzzling is his desire to "fix" an abode on or in an ocean. He emphasized the qualities of changeability and lack of solidity of earth and hell as seas, yet, whether he realizes it or not, is faced with the same problem with his heavenly sea. The question of how one fixes an abode on a sea is one that Watts seems not to have considered; the figures in this hymn are meant only to be read, not thought about.

Watts evidently thought about his figurative language in 'Hardness of Heart Complain'd' (269), however, because he genuinely attempts to build the hymn around one metaphor. But he runs into difficulty.

He begins:

MY Heart, how dreadful hard it is!  
How heavy here it lies,

---

<sup>28B</sup> Though in this case the two dead metaphors, juxtaposed, might come half alive.



Heavy and cold within my Breast  
Just like a Rock of Ice!

In stanza two, however, his heart is first called a "flinty Throne", then it is called a "Heart of Stone". Is it ice or stone? One can help Watts out of this difficulty by saying that it is a heart of stone which is flint-like in hardness and which is like a rock of ice in its coldness. But whether rock or ice, he wishes the metaphor to dissolve (literally) in the last stanza:

Dear Saviour, steep this Rock of mine  
In thine own crimson Sea:  
None but a Bath of Blood Divine  
Can melt the Flint away.

It is unclear what is intended here; the metaphor confuses rather than clarifies.

In fact Watts's figures often confuse more than they clarify; they provoke questions when they should answer them. The images in the crotcheted stanzas of 'The Divine Perfections' (336) are typical:

[The Great Invisible! He dwells  
Conceal'd in dazzling Light;  
But his All-searching Eye reveals  
The Secrets of the Night.

Those watchful Eyes that never sleep  
Survey the World around;  
His Wisdom is a boundless Deep  
Where all our Thoughts are drown'd.]

Of the first image the question arises, does something "Invisible" need to be "Conceal'd"? Or, more precisely, how can something invisible be concealed? Of the latter stanza the question arises, if something is "boundless", is it necessary to say that it is "Deep"? And what are the implications of "all our Thoughts" being "drown'd" in God's "Wisdom"? Does this mean or imply that we have no thoughts of our own but rather have God's wisdom? Or does God's wisdom drown our thoughts and leave us with nothing? Watts's hymns are replete with figures which, if not somewhat incompetent, at least invoke a degree of

wonderment and confusion. They are cliché-figures and dead metaphors carelessly strung together.

Sometimes, however, Watts achieves clear and effective meaning through figures; and on rare occasions they seem to have been born with the hymn rather than set into it. In the famous hymn known by the line, "When I survey the wond'rous Cross" (353), the figures are simple, natural, visually sharp, and iconographically memorable:

See from his Head, his Hands, his Feet,  
Sorrow and Love flow mingled down;  
Did e're such Love and Sorrow meet?  
Or Thorns compose so rich a Crown?

[His dying Crimson like a Robe  
Spreads o're his Body on the Tree,  
Then I am dead to all the Globe,  
And all the Globe is dead to me.]

'The Humble Worship of Heaven' (233) contains examples that are not only sharply conceived, but are meaningfully paradoxical as well:

[There all the Heavenly Hosts are seen,  
In shining Ranks they move,  
And drink Immortal Vigour in  
With Wonder and with Love.

Then at thy Feet with awful Fear  
Th' adoring Armies fall;  
With Joy they shrink to NOTHING there  
Before th' Eeternal ALL.

In the first stanza the "Ranks" are pictured as full of "Vigour" and immortality, yet in the next this vigour is all channelled into the incongruous activity of falling down and shrinking to nothing. This symbolizes neatly the Biblical paradoxes that real strength is actually humility, that to efface oneself is to enlarge oneself in God's sight, and that love is the mightiest of conquering forces in heaven and on earth. Watts is more successful as a poet when, as in these two hymns, he lets the figures create themselves, rather than when he constructs and delivers them with contrived deliberation.

One of Watts's innovations, as far as imaginative figures is concerned, is his willingness to create the unusual and unexpected. He describes hell and Satan in such specific and vivid terms:

[Eternal Plagues, and heavy Chains  
Tormenting Racks and fiery Coals,  
And Darts t' inflict immortal Pains  
Dy'd in the Blood of Damned Souls.]

[There Satan the first Sinner lies,  
And roars and bites his Iron Bands;  
In vain the Rebel strives to rise  
Crush'd with the weight of both thine Hands] (204).

Equally unusual are such explicit biological references as these:

[He spoke, and strait our Hearts and Brains  
In all their Motions rose;  
Let Blood, said he, flow round the Veins,  
And round the Veins it flows.

While we have Breath or use our Tongues  
Our Maker we'll adore;  
His Spirit moves our heaving Lungs  
Or they would breathe no more] (175).

Even on the occasions when Watts uses figures effectively, however, he crotchets them as if to apologize for their presence, or to indicate, even if unintentionally, that they are poetical impositions. They tend to evoke questions, curiosity, and confusion, and seem often like an awkward addition. But Watts is attempting, not without some success, to make the hymn an imaginative literary form rather than leave it as versified dogma and formulaic praise.

Some of Watts's imaginative power can be seen if one considers the point of view in his hymns, and what the subject matter is that he focuses upon. Watts is not only an omniscient and omnipresent speaker, but he sees and speaks about the whole universe, from before its creation to its end; and he often tries to do this in a single hymn. But in order to make his scenes panoramic he is forced to break them into single pictures that are cemented together to form a mozaic of Christian experience.

'The Creation, Preservation, Dissolution and Restoration of this World' (167) is a good example of the mozaic-like quality of the typical hymn by Watts:

- 1 Sing to the Lord that built the Skies,  
The Lord that rear'd this stately Frame,  
Let half the Nations sound his Praise,  
And Lands unknown repeat his Name.
- 2 He form'd the Seas, and form'd the Hills,  
Made every Drop and every Dust  
Nature and Time, with all their Wheels,  
And push'd them into Motion first.
- 3 Now from his high Imperial Throne  
He looks far down upon the Spheres,  
He bids the shining Orbs roll on,  
And round he turns our hasty Years.
- 4 Thus shall this moving Engine last  
Till all his Saints are gather'd in,  
Then for the Trumpets dreadful Blast  
To shake it all to Dust again!
- 5 Yet when the Sound shall tear the Skies,  
And Lightning burn the Globe below,  
Saints, you may lift your joyful Eyes,  
There's a New Heaven and Earth for you.

Stanza 1 is an invocation, stanzas 2, 3, 4, and 5 the creation, preservation, dissolution, and restoration respectively. Each stanza is a huge painting done in bold, monochromatic strokes. The result is not so much one large vision, but rather four pictures put together into a mozaic of Christian history. In addition, there is no action in any of the scenes. They are static frescos rather than moving, living scenes: in stanza 2 the action has been done — it is in the past perfect tense; stanza 3 is in the present tense but the actions are passive ("looking" and "bidding"); in stanza 4 the earth is existing; and stanza 5 is in the future tense. This hymn looks at the entire history of the universe by breaking that history into a collection of huge pictures.

Hymns such as this abound in the volume. In 'Christ is the Substance

of the Levitical Priesthood' (166) Watts looks in the same way at Christian history. In stanza 2 he depicts the Old-Testament sacrifice of the "bleeding Lambs" and "Incense and Spice"; in stanza 3 "Aaron must lay his Robes away" to make room for Christ; in stanza 4 Christ "took our mortal Flesh" and "paid his Life" for us; and in stanza 5 the concepts of redemption and forgiveness enter into Christian experience. Again the scenes are stylized and static.

'The Evil of Sin visible in the Fall of Angels and Men' (180) seems even more ambitious in what it tries to depict than either of the two hymns just considered. It tells the whole story of the Bible from before creation to the apocalypse: stanza 1 is a picture of God creating the world; stanza 2 depicts Satan, "a tall Arch-angel", sitting on his throne; stanza 3 depicts him "sunk in Darkness", lying in hell; in stanza 4 "our two first parents stood"; in stanza 5 sin "Spoil'd six Days Labours of a God"; in stanza 6 the Christian trembles, and stanza 7 concludes the hymn by asking for victorious shouts of praise to God. Again, as emphasized, the verbs tend to connote inactivity. Watts strives to achieve an emblem-like quality in his pictures. He is presenting a series of tableaux rather than a moving scene or story. And his collection of emblematic scenes attempts to cover huge areas of Christian history in a single hymn.

In several of his hymns he goes so far as to produce a series of pictures of God's attributes. After praising God in the opening stanza of 'God's Condescention to Humane Affairs' (206), for example, he proceeds to write six more stanzas, each of which is a picture of God in some posture which stands for a particular divine act. Each of these emblemizes one of His great attributes. Stanza 3 depicts God's condensation even to look at this world:

[God that must stoop to view the Skies,  
And bow to see what Angels do,  
Down to our Earth he casts his Eyes,  
And bends his Footsteps downward too.

As usual, the scene is one of still life rather than movement, though it is large in conception.

Watts, then, focuses upon all of Christian experience in his hymns. And just as there is no limit to the immensity of what he looks at, so also is there no limitation to his point of view: he is an omnipresent and omniscient speaker, a voice from everywhere in general and nowhere in particular. It is not unusual for Watts as speaker to be a saint in heaven, as in 'The Examples of Christ and the Saints' (311), where the speaker addresses other saints: "I ask them whence their Victory came...". In many hymns Watts is quite at ease giving a physical description of heaven: he says in 'A Prospect of Heaven makes Death easy' (230) that in heaven there are "never-withering Flowers" and "Sweet Fields beyond the swelling Flood" in "living Green". In 'Spiritual and Eternal Joys' (242) Watts sums up succinctly the possibilities and limits of his vision:

FRom Thee, my God, my Joys shall rise,  
And run Eternal Rounds,  
Beyond the Limits of the Skies,  
And all created Bounds.

Of what Watts focuses upon and of his point of view the best and most typical example is probably 'God's Eternal Dominion' (231), which is a huge framed series of paintings (the opening and closing stanzas are identical) and which focuses upon the largest issues in Christian experience: "God", "Nature", "Time", "Eternity", "our Lives", and the relations between God and man. In reading this hymn it is instructive to note once again the size of the pictures, the boldness yet colourlessness of the strokes, and that these pictures form a mozaic:

1 Great God, how Infinite art Thou!  
What worthless Worms are we!

*Sweet fields  
than I survey  
crimson*

*Watts*

Let the whole Race of Creatures bow,  
And pay their Praise to thee.

- 2 Thy Throne Eternal Ages stood  
E're Seas or Stars were made;  
Thou art the Everliving God  
Were all the Nations dead.
- 3 Nature and Time quite naked lie  
To thine Immense Survey,  
From the Formation of the Sky  
To the great Burning-Day.
- 4 Eternity with all its Years  
Stands present in thy View;  
To thee there's nothing Old appears,  
Great God, there's nothing New.
- 5 Our Lives thro' various Scenes are drawn,  
And vex'd with trifling Cares;  
While thine Eternal Thought moves on  
Thine undisturbed Affairs.
- 6 Great God, how Infinite art thou!  
What worthless Worms are we!  
Let the whole Race of Creatures bow,  
And pay their Praise to thee.

Though large in conception, this hymn has flaws. There is a problem with rhyme ("stood" rhymes with "God", "made" with "dead"), a problem with metre ("Nature and Time"), a pleonasm ("worthless Worms"), and a curious expression, "how Infinite art thou", as if there are degrees of infinity. Watts's hymns in general seem to have these recurring problems.

One of the more obvious ones is his difficulty with rhyme. His bad rhymes are far too numerous to list, but a few examples can illustrate the extent of the problem. In one hymn he rhymes "Hills" with "Wheels", and "Dust" with "First". On another occasion he rhymes "Skys" with "Praise", "Word" with "adored", "Throng" with "sung", and "sat" with "State". On yet another occasion he rhymes "Fears" with "Snares", and "Road" with "God". Though this is perhaps not so serious a problem, it is noticeable and distracting.

Another recurrent problem is his tendency toward pleonastic

expressions. He begins one hymn by crying out, "Rise, rise my Soul, and leave the Ground" (172). He goes on to say of God that "His boundless Years can ne'er decrease". Using the same language he says on another occasion, "How boundless is our Father's Grace/ In Heighth, and Depth, and Length" (334)! Another example is the opening stanza of 'God the Avenger of his Saints' (288):

High as the Heavens above the Ground  
Reigns the Creator-God,  
Wide as the whole Creation's Bound  
Extends his awful Rod.

Line 1 here is pleonastic, lines 1 and 2 together could have been said more succinctly, lines 2, 3, and 4 say the obvious — that God rules what he created. Watts uses many words to say very little in this awkward stanza. One further example of this awkwardness occurs when he speaks thus of God's longevity: "Infinite Years his Life prolong..." (337). What is an infinite year? How can a succession of infinite years prolong a life? <sup>28C</sup> Questions about Watts's intent arise throughout the reading of his book.

Just as it is not difficult to find recurring faults in Watts's hymns, however, so also is it not difficult to see the virtues and some very good hymns. Perhaps Watts's best known hymn, referred to above, is 'Crucifixion to the World by the Cross of Christ' (353), more commonly known by its opening line:

- 1 WHen I survey the wond'rous Cross  
On which the Prince of Glory dy'd,  
My richest Gain I count by Loss,  
And pour Contempt on all my Pride.
- 2 Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast  
Save in the Death of Christ my God;  
All the vain things that charm me most  
I sacrifice them to his Blood.
- 3 See from his Head, his Hands, his Feet,  
Sorrow and Love flow mingled down;  
Dide're such Love and Sorrow meet?  
Or Thorns compose so rich a Crown?

---

<sup>28C</sup> However, Wesley might simply be compressing "an infinite number of years" for the purposes of his metre.



- [4 His dying Crimson like a Robe  
Spreads o're his Body on the Tree,  
Then I am dead to all the Globe,  
And all the Globe is dead to me.]
- 5 Were the whole Realm of Nature ming,  
That were a Present far to small;<sup>29</sup>  
Love so amazing, so divine  
Demands my Soul, my Life, my All.

This hymn is literally and symbolically structured around the image of Christ bleeding on the cross. The language is simple and meaningful, the figures natural and vivid. The internal action is significant: the speaker begins in stanza 1 by looking out at the cross; in stanza 2 he looks into himself; in stanza 3 he looks out again at the symbolic cross; in stanza 4 the looking outward and inward are combined, and only after this does he see "the whole Realm of Nature" in a new light. Paradoxes operate throughout the hymn also: gain becomes loss, charming things are sacrificed, thorns compose a rich crown, the speaker dies to the world and therefore lives, all of nature is too small for him, and love and sorrow are the different yet not discordant emotions in Christ's sacrifice. Structurally, love and sorrow are the centre of the hymn, just as they are the centre of Christian experience. Stanzas 1 and 2 lead up to, and 4 and 5 away from, the central image which cuts deeply into the onward flow of the hymn, making it seem like an iconographic cross. In short, this simply written hymn possesses significant poetic dimensions.

Another highly literary hymn is 'Look on him whom they pierced, and mourn' (266):

- 1 INfinite Grief! amazing Woe!  
Behold my bleeding Lord:  
Hell and the Jews conspir'd his Death,  
And us'd the Roman Sword.

---

<sup>29</sup> In editions 1, 3-12, and 14-16 the word "to" reads "too".

- 2 Oh the sharp Pangs of smarting Pain  
My dear Redeemer bore,  
When knotty Whips, and ragged Thorns  
His sacred Body tore!
- 3 But knotty Whips and ragged Thorns  
In vain do I accuse,  
In vain I blame the Roman Bands  
And the more spiteful Jews.
- 4 'Twere you, my Sins, my cruel Sins,  
His chief Tormentors were;  
Each of my Crimes became a Nail,  
And Unbelief the Spear.
- 5 'Twere you that pull'd the Vengeance down,  
Upon his guiltless Head:  
Break, break my Heart, oh burst mine Eyes,  
And let my Sorrows bleed.
- 6 Strike, mighty Grace, my flinty Soul  
Till melting Waters flow,  
And deep Repentance drown mine Eyes  
In undissembled Woe.  
[italics mine]

Certain phrases are emphasized in order to show the effectiveness of repetition in this hymn. It seems almost as if the speaker's thoughts and feelings are outrunning his ability to articulate them and he is therefore filling up emotional and real space on the page by repeating these words and phrases. Yet the repetition seems to lack feeling nonetheless; Watts is near sentimentality. But he is never sentimental; and the figurative breaking of the heart and bursting of eyes — and drowning of eyes — are deeply felt by the reader. In this the hymn is strangely prophetic of the kind of hymn that Wesley would write and perfect in the decades to come. The hymn is well written: the imaginative figures are spare and controlled, the metre and rhyme unusually good, and the language has a driving force that is lacking in almost every other hymn by Watts.

The two hymns just considered are Watts at his best, and the hymn is given new direction. But the fact remains that virtually all of Watts's hymns are similar in the characteristics outlined in this

discussion. 'Christ's sufferings and glory' (202) is a representative example:

- 1 NOW for a Tune of lofty Praise  
To great Jehovah's equal Son!  
Awake, my Voice, in heavenly Lays,  
Tell the loud Wonders he hath done.
- 2 Sing how he left the Worlds of Light  
And the bright Robes he wore above,  
How swift and joyful was his flight  
On Wings of everlasting Love.
- [3 Down to this base, this sinful Earth  
He came to raise our Nature high;  
He came t' atone Almighty Wrath;  
Jesus the God was born to die.]
- [4 Hell and its Lions roar'd around,  
His precious Blood the Monsters spilt,  
While weighty Sorrows prest him down,  
Large as the Loads of all our Guilt.]
- 5 Deep in the Shades of gloomy Death  
Th' Almighty Captive Prisoner lay,  
Th' Almighty Captive left the Earth,  
And rose to everlasting Day.
- 6 Lift up your Eyes, ye Sons of Light,  
Up to his Throne of shining Grace,  
See what immortal Glories sit  
Round the sweet Beauties of his Face.
- 7 Amongst a thousand Harps and Songs  
Jesus the God exalted reigns,  
His sacred Name fills all their Tongues,  
And eccho's thro' the heavenly Plains.

In tone, this hymn has the positive attitude and affirmative voice from which Watts never deviates. The Christian experience is filled with "immortal Glories" that are available to all believers. The figurative language, some of which is again crotcheted, seems to jar against the rest of the hymn — it seems not to fit into the organic fibre of the whole, and even its language is in a different key from that in the other stanzas. The figures in stanza 4 seem inconsistent, or at least somewhat discordant: first the lions are spilling Christ's blood, then Christ is suddenly being depressed by sorrow — one

figure is active and violent, the other is passive and contemplative; read together they are perplexing. Concerning point of view, Watts is, as usual, omnipresent and omniscient. And he focuses upon a huge aspect of Christian history: God's coming, death, and glory; and again each stanza seems a complete picture. This hymn is a mozaic of static scenes, collected and described by a narrator who is very much outside of the hymn. It is framed: it begins with a voice singing "in heavenly Lays" and ends with all voices singing God's praises. Yet the voice is a voice from nowhere, singing a hymn that seems already to exist, not one that is in the process of being created. Watts is seldom personally involved, nor does the reader get involved, in the hymns; it is as if there is a glass between Watts and his hymn, and between the hymn and the reader. He says in 'Sight thro' a Glass':

I Love the Windows of thy Grace  
Thro' which my Lord is seen,  
And long to meet my Saviour's Face  
Without a Glass between (316).

But Watts could never meet God without a glass between; he could never fully involve his imagination and poetic talents in his hymns and was always careful to maintain a distance from his controlled material. It was up to Charles Wesley to meet the Saviour "Without a Glass between", to write hymns that embody real human emotion, and to infuse to a greater extent the human imagination and poetic talents more directly and imperceptibly into the hymnal form. Watts had, however, essentially transformed the hymn from simple and pedantic scriptural paraphrase into a literary form that is quite novel and artistically interesting in spite of its shortcomings and limitations.

Watts's contemporaries were quick to recognize that he was

attempting to forge a new literary form. In 1780 Thomas Gibbons writes that "I might from his Hymns... collect in a large and lovely variety Metaphors, Allegories, Periphrases, Comparisons, lively and glowing Descriptions, Personifications, ...".<sup>30</sup> Gibbons realizes that these elements are unusual in hymns, and that Watts is the first to attempt to make them work. Samuel Johnson notices that Watts's "imagination... was vigorous and active", his "ear was well-tuned", and concludes that it is "sufficient for Watts to have done better than others what no man has done well".<sup>31</sup>

Many nineteenth-century critics wrote "appreciations" of Watts's work. These are too numerous and, as a rule, too ephemeral to discuss, save for two important articles. T.H. Gill in The Congregationalist (1874) lists Watts's main strong points as a hymn-writer: he uses a wide range of themes; he depicts God in history; his hymns are informed with thought; and his presentation is clear and strong.<sup>32</sup> Though vague and general, these points are largely true of Watts. This is the first real attempt to look at what qualities Watts's hymns possess. E.P. Hood writes perceptively of Watts in 1875 when he says that there is "an intense and immediate objectiveness about Watts's hymns" and that Watts gives "praise and honour to the objects themselves...".<sup>33</sup> Watts depicts objects in his hymns, but he never looks at man's response to the objects, whether the cross, the crucifixion, the Lord's Supper, or God Himself. Hood is perhaps unknowingly touching on Watts's quality of detachment, and on the fact

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<sup>30</sup> Gibbons, pp. 231-2.

<sup>31</sup> Samuel Johnson, The Lives of the Poets... (London, 1761), pp. 290-91.

<sup>32</sup> T.H. Gill, "Isaac Watts", The Congregationalist (July 1874), pp. 422 - 433.

<sup>33</sup> Hood, p. 112.

that there seems to be no human speaker in his hymns, which are a prepared collection of objects and scenes.

Twentieth-century criticism of Watts has noticed the largeness of Watts's vision. In The Hymns of Wesley and Watts (1942) Bernard Manning says that in Watts's hymns there "is a sense of the spaciousness of nature, of the vastness of time, of the dreadfulness of eternity...".<sup>34</sup> He quotes the line, "Were the whole Realm of Nature mine", and says: "no thought, no expression is more characteristic of Watts" who "you constantly find... 'surveying' the whole realm of nature". Manning simply praises this aspect of Watts, saying that he therefore has "a greater mind, the wider outlook", than Wesley.<sup>35</sup> He concludes that Watts is the great eighteenth-century hymn-writer: "To Watts more than to any other man is due the triumph of the hymn in English worship. All later hymn-writers, even when they excel him, are his debtors...".<sup>36</sup> What Manning does not seem to notice, however, is that Watts's particular idea of a hymn is deliberately modified by Wesley and later writers: as will be seen, Wesley has different goals and ideas for hymnody altogether.

Other critics have noted Watts's propensity for seeing the hugeness of the Christian universe and the immensity of time. Ernest Payne writes in 1948 that it is "the great cosmic drama of man's redemption that occupies Watts's mind and draws out his praise and adoration".<sup>37</sup> J. D. Figures echoes this in 1957 when he says that

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<sup>34</sup> Bernard L. Manning, The Hymns of Wesley and Watts (London, 1942), p. 83.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>37</sup> Ernest A. Payne, "The Theology of Watts as Illustrated in his Hymns" Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland Bulletin (Oct. 1948), 54.

Watts's dominant theme is the "awareness of the greatness of the universe as the setting for human life, with the great contrast between the cosmos and the smallness and futility of men on earth".<sup>38</sup> Figures's phraseology is important: Watts does emphasize the "setting" of human life rather than human life itself, and the "smallness and futility" of man rather than man himself. Figures does not go on to discuss Watts's total objectivity and lack of presence; he just praises this aspect of Watts's writing as if it is unquestionably desirable.

Alongside the numerous critics who praise Watts, there are some who are severe in their critical assessment. Harry Escott writes that Watts appears more as a popularizer of the liturgy than as a creative artist, and that his act of making a system of Christian praise is his real claim to merit.<sup>39</sup> Henry S. Bett notes that Watts is a poor rhymers.<sup>40</sup> Bonamy Dobrée admits that Watts's hymns "occasionally drop into something perilously near doggerel", but that "they also sometimes attain an intensity rare in the poetry of the period".<sup>41</sup> And Erik Routley writes that Watts had an infinite capacity for writing doggerel and walking on the edge of bathos. He goes on to say that Watts shows reckless adoration in his hymns; he leaps to his vision and never polishes his verse: he simply hurls

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<sup>38</sup> D. J. Figures, "Isaac Watts and His Position in the 18th Century", Congregational Quarterly, xxxv (1957), 347.

<sup>39</sup> See Escott, pp. 220-221.

<sup>40</sup> Henry S. Bett, "Free Church Father of English Hymnody", British Weekly (25 March, 1948), 3.

<sup>41</sup> Bonamy Dobrée, English Literature in the Early Eighteenth Century: 1700-1749 (Oxford, 1959), p. 155.

it onto paper.<sup>42</sup> Some of these observations are helpful, even acute, but none offers a detailed study of how Watts attempts to transform the English hymn into a literary, as well as liturgical, mode of expression.

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<sup>42</sup> Erik Routley, Isaac Watts (London, 1961), p. 15.



CHAPTER THREE. "I SEE THEE FACE TO FACE": CHARLES WESLEY

AND can it be that I should gain,  
An interest in the Saviour's blood?  
Died he for me who caused his pain!  
For me! who him to death pursued:  
Amazing love! how can it be:  
That thou, my God, shouldst die for me?<sup>1</sup>

In dramatic intensity and fervour this stanza is as typical of Wesley's hymnody as it is of his Methodism. Though some critics have noticed that the hymns of Watts and Wesley are different, they invariably claim that the hymns of one are "greater" than the hymns of the other, as if both writers were writing the same kind of hymn. What goes unnoticed is the fact that Watts wrote for Christians while Wesley wrote for Evangelical Christians, or Methodists. Wesley's Methodism, which has little use for Watts's panoramic view of all creation and Christianity, consists rather in an immediate, "face to face" relationship with Jesus Christ. Wesley deliberately modifies the hymn in order that it may suit his religious as well as poetical purpose. The first section of this chapter gives a very brief sketch of the origin of Wesleyan Methodism; section two looks at how critics have responded to Wesley's hymns; section three studies his scriptural hymns; and four his freely-composed hymns.

I

After having been educated at Westminster School, Charles Wesley went to Christ Church, Oxford, where, besides studying the Classics, he helped to form the "Holy Club", of which group his brother John writes: "In November, 1729, four young gentlemen of Oxford...began to spend

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Wesley, A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists (London, 1782, 3rd edition corrected), p. 197. There is an authoritative edition of this volume being prepared by Oxford University Press. However, it was not available at the time of the submission of this thesis.

some evenings in a week together in reading chiefly the Greek Testament".<sup>2</sup> In this same year appeared William Law's Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life, a work which profoundly influenced the Wesleys' group. Law proclaims that "either reason and religion prescribe rules and ends to all the ordinary actions of life, or they do not; if they do, then it is as necessary to govern all our actions by those rules, as it is necessary to worship God".<sup>3</sup> The Holy Club asked: "By what rules ought a Christian to regulate his life"?<sup>4</sup> And thus they began to methodize Christian living by setting aside times for religious activities such as prayer, hymn-singing, and study. One jeerer at Oxford was heard to say, "Here is a new sect of Methodists",<sup>5</sup> and "the name", says John Wesley later, in Sermon at the Foundation of City Road Chapel (1777), "clave to them immediately".<sup>6</sup>

Though Methodism began as a practical approach to Christianity, it soon acquired a dimension of mystery and enthusiasm. Charles had gone with John in 1735 to Georgia to preach and to act as secretary to the Governor, and on his return met Peter Böhler, a Moravian.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> John Wesley's Journal for November, 1729. Cited in G.R. Balleine, A History of the Evangelical Party in the Church of England (London, 1908), p. 3. Hereafter referred to as Balleine.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Balleine, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> The original Methodists were a school of French Calvinists in the seventeenth century. There was also a small sect of this name during the Commonwealth. See F.L. Cross (ed.), The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church (Oxford, 1957), p. 908. See also Balleine, pp. 4-5.

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Balleine, pp. 4-5.

<sup>7</sup> In theology the Moravians have always distrusted doctrinal formulae. They stand for a simple and unworldly form of Christianity, and subscribe portions of the Bible for daily guidance. See F.L. Cross (ed.), The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, p. 938.

Böhler, unlike the Wesleys, believed in "sudden conversion": "Our way of believing is so easy to Englishmen, that they cannot reconcile themselves to it: if it were a little more artful, they would much sooner find their way into it".<sup>8</sup> To both John and Charles, belief in God was complex and ratiocinative; it was "a firm assent to all the propositions contained in the Old and New Testaments".<sup>9</sup> This they maintained until 24 May 1738 when John was converted. His journal entry for this day records the experience: "I felt my heart strangely warmed... . I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation, and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death".<sup>10</sup> Charles's conversion followed immediately, and so the two brothers began emphasizing the miracle of Christ's salvation of the individual believer.

Using the Sermon on the Mount as a precedent, the Methodists began open-air preaching in April 1739. Lay preachers were appointed, and societies which met during the week for prayer, praise, and fellowship, sprang up in many places. Though all Methodists agreed on stressing the Gospel of salvation, they were divided on the topical Calvinist concept of Election, which says that God elects some for salvation and all others are incorrigibly damned: every life is pre-determined. The Wesleys were anti-Calvinist in theology, therefore anti-Election, while later Evangelical hymn-writers such as John Newton and William Cowper espoused Calvinist Election. Another important split that developed in the group was that some drifted

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<sup>8</sup> Letter printed in the Wesleyan Magazine, 1854. Cited in Balleine, p. 23.

<sup>9</sup> Cited in Balleine, p. 23.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Balleine, p. 24.

away from the Church of England and others remained loyal though disagreeing. The former are generally called Methodists, the latter Evangelicals; Methodists tended to travel as itinerant preachers, whereas Evangelicals were concerned to minister to a parish.<sup>11</sup>

Charles Wesley is an exception. He was itinerant from 1739 until 1756, and yet was called Methodist and Evangelical. But even though he claimed the whole world as his parish, Charles always stressed to his followers the importance of loyalty to the church. He writes in his journal on 18 September 1756: "I did not forget to confirm the brethren in their calling, that is, to live and die in the Church of England".<sup>12</sup> His journal is full of warnings to follow the church and, more importantly, to follow Jesus Christ. Christianity had become, for Charles, no longer a set of propositions or rituals, but a dynamic inter-personal relationship between the believer and Christ. Isaac Watts's theology and poetic vision had, on the contrary, focused upon the great God and his "whole Realm of Nature". While Watts's God is an aloof, magnificent Creator, a kind of unapproachable engineer, Charles Wesley's God is a personal friend, a "human form divine".<sup>d</sup> Wesley's theology, therefore, led him to focus on the active relationship between Creator and creature. Watts speaks about God while Wesley speaks to Him. Just as Methodism stresses one's friendship with the person of Jesus Christ, so Charles's hymns stress dramatically all the possible dimensions of this friendship.

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<sup>11</sup> See Balleine, pp. 1-20. See also C.J. Abbey and J.H. Overton, The English Church in the Eighteenth Century (London, 1878).

<sup>12</sup> Cited in Balleine, p. 43.

II

Whether because of their dramatic fervour, their more appealing doctrine, their literary quality, or simply their quantity, Charles Wesley's hymns have elicited more critical commentary than the hymns of all other hymn-writers combined. Although the hymns are invariably discussed in the biographies of Wesley, they did not receive extensive attention until this century. In the first study, The Hymns of Methodism in their Literary Relations (1913), Henry S. Bett admirably picks out all the allusions, echoes, and borrowings from Wesley's sources as they appear in the hymns, but he does little else. In 1927 J.E. Rattenbury writes in Wesley's Legacy to the World that most "writers on English verse give no attention to Wesley beyond a patronizing smile", but now "literary critics are making the discovery that Charles Wesley was a poet, and a great writer of a certain sort of English lyric".<sup>13</sup> Rattenbury agrees with others that the emphatic "personal note" in the hymns is their strength as well as their weakness, and that in general they are "too subjective, too self-centralized" to benefit congregations.<sup>14</sup> Rattenbury followed this book with two more that are concerned primarily with doctrine. In The Evangelical Doctrines of Charles Wesley's Hymns (1941), however, he notices that the hymns are threaded through with scripture, and that Wesley uses a greater variety of metre than any other English poet.<sup>15</sup> He studies the effectiveness of these metres, but then makes the dubious statement that between Watts and Wesley "the contrast, whether from a literary

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<sup>13</sup> J.E. Rattenbury, Wesley's Legacy to the World (London, 1927), p. 267.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 263.

<sup>15</sup> J.E. Rattenbury, The Evangelical Doctrines of Charles Wesley's Hymns (London, 1941), p. 33. He does not remark on Herbert's The Temple.

or spiritual standpoint, is all in favour of Wesley. Watts has none of his metrical variety and mastery; he lacks his vitality; he does not in any like degree plumb the depths or scale the heights of religious experience".<sup>16</sup> This comparative judgement is not entirely fair. The difference between Watts and Wesley is one of kind, not degree. It was suggested in chapters one and two that Watts's religious outlook, and the adverse historical conditions that surrounded hymnody in the opening decade of the eighteenth century, were in part responsible for his hymns being the theologically robust yet artistically shaky phenomena they are. When Wesley wrote, hymns were more tolerated, and his metrical variety can be seen as a function both of this new freedom in hymnal expression and of the nature of Methodist doctrine itself. Watts does not write about personal religious experience so much as about God and religion itself. Perhaps it is this stressing of personal "experience" in the hymns, rather than the hymns themselves, that makes Wesley's more appealing to the modern critic.

Other critics emphasize Wesley's metrical versatility and the scripturalness of his hymns. F.L. Wiseman says that nearly "any hymn taken at random will serve to show how scriptural language and thought is the warp and woof of the texture of his poetry".<sup>17</sup> B.L. Manning agrees that if we "study Wesley's use of metaphors and similes, we shall note that a very large proportion of them come directly from Holy Scripture or are reminiscences of Holy Scripture".<sup>18</sup> He goes on, however, to compare Wesley's metaphors to those of nineteenth-century

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 58-9.

<sup>17</sup> F.L. Wiseman, Charles Wesley, Evangelist and Poet (London, 1932), p. 210.

<sup>18</sup> B.L. Manning, The Hymns of Wesley and Watts (London, 1942), p. 37.

hymn-writers and concludes rather hastily that because the metaphors of later hymn-writers are not directly from scripture, as Wesley's are, they are somehow inferior. Manning does not seem to consider the very likely possibility that the later writers may have seen the function of hymnal metaphors in a light different from that of Wesley. Manning also praises unguardedly Wesley's constant use of repetition, ignoring the possibility that this device can sometimes be monotonous and ineffective. In fact, Manning's praise of Wesley is unequalled and controversial: speaking of Wesley's "Large Hymn-Book" of 1780 (his final and greatest collection) Manning writes:

This little book...ranks in Christian literature with the Psalms, the Book of Common Prayer, the Canon of the Mass. In its own way, it is perfect, unapproachable, elemental in its perfection. You cannot alter it except to mar it; it is a work of supreme devotional art by a religious genius.<sup>19</sup>

Critical praise of Charles Wesley, though of course not always as encomiastic as this, is a common occurrence. Edmund Gosse writes that "the sacred songs of Charles Wesley...reach at their noblest the highest level of Protestant religious poetry in this country since George Herbert".<sup>20</sup> George Saintsbury claims that Wesley is more poetical than most of the profane.<sup>21</sup> And W.J. Courthope describes him as "the most admirable devotional lyric poet in the English language".<sup>22</sup> Even fairly recent book-length criticism is loudly appreciative, as if trying to waken the critical world from its two-hundred-year neglect of Wesley. G.H. Findlay's Christ's Standard Bearer (1950), for example, praises various aspects of Wesley's writing,

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 14

<sup>20</sup> Edmund Gosse, History of Eighteenth-Century Literature (London, 1891), p. 230.

<sup>21</sup> George Saintsbury, History of English Prosody, vol. II (London, 1923), 501.

<sup>22</sup> W.J. Courthope, History of English Poetry, vol. V (London, 1905), 343.

such as his use of repetition and exclamation, but does little else. The greater part of the book studies the doctrinal content of the hymns.

Frank Baker's book, Charles Wesley's Verse (1964), however, is a perceptive literary analysis of the hymns. Baker discusses Wesley's Latinisms, allusive dimensions, repetition, metre, his use of rhetorical tropes such as epistrophe and epanastrophe, and the elaborate formal structure of the hymns. The thesis of Baker's book is that because Wesley was so thoroughly trained as a classicist, these devices and tropes were natural for him to use, and that Wesley's hymns, therefore, are a compendium of applied classical rhetoric. His conclusion is succinct: Wesley's verse is the result of a tension between classical restraint and deep and high emotion; "These emotions burst the fetters of conventional verse, demanding expression in a rich and daring variety of lyrical forms".<sup>23</sup> Though perhaps too eager to place Wesley within classical boundaries, Baker does a clear-headed job in examining Wesley's hymns.

If books on Wesley's hymns are unusually plentiful, articles are even more so. But many of these focus on minute aspects of Wesley's verse. Henry S. Bett (1938) points to a few "Latinisms in the Wesleys' hymns";<sup>24</sup> O.A. Beckerlegge (1944) classifies some of Wesley's metres;<sup>25</sup> G.H. Findlay (1952) studies "First and Last Words" in some Wesleyan lines,<sup>26</sup> and later (1955) Wesley's "Six-eights".<sup>27</sup> Paul Ellingworth (1963) looks at "'I' and 'We' in Charles Wesley's Hymns",<sup>28</sup> pointing

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<sup>23</sup> Frank Baker, Charles Wesley's Verse (London, 1964), p. 103.

<sup>24</sup> London Quarterly, vol. 163 (1938), 308-319.

<sup>25</sup> London Quarterly, vol. 169 (1944), 219-227.

<sup>26</sup> London Quarterly, vol. 177 (1952), 123-128.

<sup>27</sup> London Quarterly, vol. 180 (1955), 138-142.

<sup>28</sup> London Quarterly, vol. 188 (1963), 153-164.



out their personal appeal. These articles are useful if read collectively; singularly, they are limited in scope.

Other articles look intelligently at Wesley's hymns, and underline the fact that Wesley should be considered seriously as a poet. In the fifth chapter of Purity of Diction in English Verse (1952) Donald Davie says that Wesley "could expect his congregations to know Scripture as Johnson and Pope could expect their readers to know Virgil and Horace".<sup>29</sup> Wesley's verse is similar to Johnson's in the sense that in both "the blunted meaning or the buried metaphor comes sharp and live again ...".<sup>30</sup> Wesley, like Johnson, is a classical poet concerned "not to create a distinctive style, but to contribute to a common stock, to safeguard a heritage and to keep it as bright as new".<sup>31</sup> Whether or not one agrees with Davie is less important than to notice that Wesley is being evaluated alongside Johnson, not as his equal in degree, but certainly in kind, for both are poets. T.S. Gregory (1957) is also concerned to "measure Charles Wesley's greatness as a poet", but says oddly that in order to do so "we need, in a sense, to forget that he was an evangelist and to put aside our familiarity with his Christian speech...".<sup>32</sup> Though Gregory does not explain why one needs to do this, he is right in wanting to examine Wesley as a significant eighteenth-century poet.

Curiously, critical interest in Wesley seems to have all but died in the last fifteen years. Only a few significant articles have appeared, and these are concerned primarily with bibliographical matters.

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<sup>29</sup> Donald Davie, Purity of Diction in English Verse (London, 1952), p. 73.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>32</sup> London Quarterly, vol. 182 (1957), 256.

Edward Houghton (1979) in "John Wesley or Charles Wesley"?<sup>33</sup> tries to prove that John, and not Charles, wrote "And can it be?", the hymn that has become the hallmark of Charles's hymnody, in its personal and exclamatory manner. Houghton assembles various criteria that are characteristic of the brothers' hymns respectively, and concludes that this hymn has a greater probability of being John's. Frank Baker disagrees by pointing out that "features of John's style...are often features of Charles's style also".<sup>34</sup> Though Houghton's article is not too convincing, it is a useful shorthand enumeration of the qualities of Charles's style as a hymn-writer. Another article that attempts to set the bibliographical record straight is Norman Goldhawk's checklist of all Wesley hymn-books (1980).<sup>35</sup> Perhaps this exhaustive checklist will act as a stimulus for investigation into Wesley's hymns.

### III

It was stated in chapter two that Watts introduced several innovations into the scriptural hymn. In spite of these innovations, however, he still stays close to the scripture, only straying from it occasionally. According to Wesley, however, the ideal of a scriptural hymn is not to versify the scripture, but rather to respond to it. He begins by just writing out the scriptural text, which becomes the starting point for the hymn.

Some of his scriptural hymns are not unlike those of Watts, but in the main they are transformations of the Wattsian ideal. Wesley effects three major innovations: one, he responds in a very personal

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33 The Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland Bulletin (Sept. 1979), 93-99.

34 Ibid., p. 94.

35 The Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland Bulletin (Sept. 1980), 170-175.

way to the scripture; two, he translates all scriptures, whether Old-Testament or New, into a thoroughly Evangelical context; three, he creates symbols and symbolic stories and applies them to the scripture, often giving it a very different meaning to the one intended.

Wesley's act of responding to, rather than versifying, scripture, can be seen in his opening hymns on Genesis:

In the beginning GOD created the heaven and the earth. — Gen. i. I.

BY faith we know, the world was made  
Formless at first and void:  
We know, the Universe decay'd  
Shall be by fire destroy'd:  
But soon the co-eternal Son  
We shall in glory view,  
JEHOVAH sitting on his throne,  
Creating all things new.<sup>38</sup>

Wesley changes a factual utterance into a personal one: the important thing for him is that we know by faith the world was made by God and we shall see the Son in glory at the end of it all. Of marginal, if any, importance is the declaration that in the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. He continues by dissecting Genesis and providing his own responses to it:

The earth was without form, and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep. — i. 2.

SUCH is my soul, confus'd and void,  
With darkness palpable o'er-spread...(3).

Again, the fact of creation is less important to Wesley than the analogy with his own soul. It is as though the scriptures are simply stimuli for Wesley's own immediate, Evangelical responses.

At times Wesley's responses to the scriptures are so spontaneous

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<sup>38</sup> Charles Wesley, Short Hymns on Select Passages of the Holy Scriptures, 2 volumes (Bristol, 1762), I. 3. All further citations from this text are given by page reference in the text of the chapter. When volume II is referred to, this is indicated in the parentheses also.

that they seem overly casual and colloquial:

Forgive, and ye shall be forgiven. — vi. 37.

FORGIVE my foes? it cannot be:

My foes with cordial love embrace (II, 215)?

Only after twenty lines of asking God to "tame the tiger's force" within him does he finally say, "An angry thought I cannot know,/ Or count mine injurer my foe". Wesley has taken a simple command of Christ's and turned it into a subject for debate. On another occasion his response seems self-righteous to the point of unintended irony:

Thou shalt not commit adultery. — v. 27.

CAN a true follower of thine

Such horrid crimes commit (II, 136)?

On yet another occasion he goes so far as to answer a question contrary to the way the Biblical character answers it:

Is thine heart right? x. 15.

IF mine were right, it could not be,

Good GOD, so contrary to thee,

So prone to every sin:

It must remain an evil heart...(187).

This scripture is from II Kings 10:15 where Rechab asks Jehonadab, "Is thine heart right"? to which Jehonadab answers, "It is". With no regard for Biblical support, Wesley is responding to the verses in an immediate, intuitive manner, as if the scriptures selected have no context.

Wesley not only responds to the verses in his own way, he responds to his own interpretation of the verses. In this passage from the Song of Solomon, God speaks about his church: "I found Him whom my soul loveth"; yet Wesley quotes it and responds as if it is himself speaking about Jesus:

I FOUND him — crucified for me,

My love, whom all true hearts adore!

Ah, nail me, Saviour, to that tree,

And I shall never lose thee more (296)!

Here he seems to want only to adopt the scripture for his own sentimental purpose. A similar instance occurs in one of his New-Testament hymns. At one point in Matthew's Gospel Jesus chastises the scribes and Pharisees and proclaims, with the intent of evoking deep fear, "How can ye escape the damnation of hell"? Wesley inappropriately puts a convenient answer into their mouths, as if to undercut Jesus's threat completely:

BY turning now to thee our Lord,  
Tho' to the brink of Tophet driven,  
We all may 'scape the dreadful word,  
We all may fly from hell to heaven (II, 183).

Instances of Wesley personally responding to, and even redirecting, the scriptures are numerous in the book. The important consideration for an Evangelical is not what scripture says, but what it means to the individual believer, and how it affects his life. In order to make the scripture relevant to the Christian of his own day, Wesley, like Watts, translates Old-Testament verses into a New-Testament context. But Wesley goes further than Watts: he translates verses, either Old or New-Testament ones, into Evangelical terms: he makes even obscure Old-Testament utterances seem as though God were speaking them to the individual at an open-air Evangelical meeting.

Writing about the tree of knowledge in this hymn on Genesis 3:6, for example, he transforms the tree into Jesus Himself:

JESUS, thou art a Tree  
That makes the foolish wise,  
And safely we may feed on thee,  
And feast both heart and eyes...(6).

The context and meaning are totally transformed: in Genesis one is not to feed on the tree because it is God-forbidden; here, however, believers are exhorted to feed on the tree of Jesus in order to be saved. This transformation of context occurs in his hymn about Jacob's

ladder:

WHAT doth the Ladder mean,  
 Sent down from the Most-high?  
 . . . . .  
Jesus that Ladder is,  
 Th' incarnate Deity...  
 He stands, and man unites to GOD,  
 And earth connects with heaven (27).

Again, just as Jesus is the centre and circumference of Evangelicalism, so also is He the Proteus-like symbol that can take any shape in any context. In its proper context the ladder symbolizes the effort that Jacob would need to expend in order to follow God and lead his people toward the promised land. Typologically, the rungs on the ladder represent the Commandments: one comes to God by righteous and obedient living. But according to Wesley the ladder is Jesus, the goal and the means to the goal.

In virtually every Old-Testament hymn the context is transformed to that of eighteenth-century Evangelicalism. In the hymns based on Exodus, for example, Egypt symbolizes sin, and the Jews are modern man; and while it could be argued that this is a legitimate typological reading, Wesley takes it a step beyond by never letting God be God — God is invariably Jesus Christ, and the way to salvation is not through obedience and fear, but through a close friendship with Jesus. Even the well-known and fearful verse in Numbers is carried over onto Evangelical ground:

Be sure your sin will find you out. — xxxii. 23.

MY sin will find me out, unless  
 I first find out my sin, and mourn...(83).

After focusing here on repentance and implied forgiveness rather than inexorable judgement, Wesley goes on to say that he will not have to worry about sin finding him out because

My City of defence is sure,  
 To which I now by faith repair,  
 I dwell in Jesu's wounds secure.  
 And sin shall never find me there (83).

Even a simple statement like, "I kill, and I make alive" (Deut. 32:39) is made into an Evangelical prayer:

THY killing and thy quick'ning power,  
Jesus, in me display,  
My life of nature, from this hour,  
My pride and passion slay...(109).

Wesley evidently sees nothing wrong with ignoring the Biblical characters in the verses and replacing them with ones that suit his Evangelical stance. The tenth chapter of Joshua tells of a battle, at the end of which "Joshua smote them, and slew them" (Joshua 10:20). Wesley makes the believer Joshua, and the conquered are their sins: "JESUS, now on sin we tread,/ But still we look to thee..." (120). In I Samuel 18:4 "Jonathan stripped himself of the robe which was upon him, and gave it to David". In Wesley's hymn Jonathan becomes Jesus and David becomes the believer:

OUR Prince and Friend enthron'd above  
Did thus his zeal for man express,  
He stript himself of all but love,  
To cloathe us with his righteousness...(153).

Hymns such as this <sup>involve more than</sup> ~~go beyond~~ typological reading; this is a thoroughgoing translation of the scripture into Wesley's preferred context.

In the New-Testament hymns, which are more easily seen in an Evangelical light, Wesley is not content simply to leave the scripture to be interpreted; he often introduces himself into the hymn, and draws attention to his own personal faith:

They that be whole need not a physician, but  
they that are sick. — ix. 12.

I HAVE need of a physician;  
Jesus, my physician be:  
Help me in my lost condition,  
Sin's severe extremity...(II, 154).

On another occasion:

Thy Father which seeth in secret, shall

reward thee openly. — vi. 18.

LET heathens mock what God enjoin'd,  
Or fools explain away,  
I find it good, I soon shall find  
It glorious, to obey... (II, 143).

Wesley transforms scriptural context to a greater extent than did Watts. Old-Testament verses are transformed beyond a New-Testament context and into an Evangelical one. New-Testament verses are responded to in a very personal manner by Wesley, who becomes the persona for the modern believer.

In addition to this, Wesley often creates his own symbols and symbolic stories. At one point in the book of Judges, Ehud, a messenger, visits Eglon, King of Moab, and says, "I have a message from God unto thee", whereupon he kills him with his dagger. Wesley writes on this obscure passage:

I have a message from GOD unto thee. — iii. 20.

JESUS, thine efficacious word  
(If thou with the deliverer art)  
Comes, as a message from the LORD,  
A dagger to the faithless heart:  
But when it hath the sinner slain,  
It brings the dead to life again (126).

In Wesley's version of the story, the dagger symbolizes God's word, God is Jesus, Ehud is the responsive Christian, and the story ultimately signifies life instead of death. Wesley's symbolic interpretations are esoteric, and his favorite book for inventing these stories seems to be Isaiah, from which he takes something as concrete and technical as a sickle and builds a symbolic story around it:

Behold, I will make thee a new sharp threshing-  
instrument. &c. — xli. 15, 16.

THEE will I wield by grace renew'd,  
A weapon for my use design'd:  
Go, thou sharp, iron-flail of GOD,  
And thresh the loftiest of mankind,



The stubbornest and strongest beat  
With violence of resistless zeal,  
And separate from the sacred wheat  
And chase the cursed chaff to hell...(337).

Wesley's symbolic readings reach back to Genesis. Using the scripture of Eve taking and eating the fruit, Wesley not only makes her action symbolizes everyone's sin, but he extends the symbolism to include man's redemption and salvation:

When the woman saw that the tree was good  
for food, she took of the fruit thereof,  
and did eat. — iii. 6.

SHE saw; she took; she ate;  
Death enter'd by the eye:  
And parlying in a tempted state,  
We lust; consent; and die!  
But all mankind restor'd  
Their Eden may retrieve:  
And lo, by faith we see our LORD,  
We touch, and taste, and live (6)!

Wesley makes the two situations of Eve and "us" eating perfectly analogous by his use of similar metre and triplicates in lines 1, 4, and 8. His symbolic readings extend throughout Genesis: the literal nakedness of Adam and Eve symbolizes modern man's spiritual nakedness; Adam blaming Eve for the fall symbolizes man blaming other men for his own evil, and in this manner the story continues. Seldom does Wesley versify the scripture and let it stand on its own.

At times one wonders what Wesley intends with his symbols, which often turn out to be esoteric and specialized in application. One example is an obscure scripture from II Chronicles:

Uzziah was a leper unto the day of his death.  
— xxvi. 21.

YE upstart priests, your sentence know,  
The marks you can no longer hide,  
Your daring deeds too plainly shew  
The loathsom leprosy of pride;  
And if ye still your crime deny,  
Who lepers live, shall lepers die (207).

The connection between Uzziah the leper and priests is unclear, since Uzziah was not a priest himself. Wesley is making leprosy symbolic of a disease of behaviour; and thus Uzziah inappropriately stands for the corrupt priests of Wesley's day. In this hymn he goes beyond responding to the scripture with his own symbolic reading and twists the meaning into a nearly unrecognizable shape.

On one level, twisting scriptural meanings could be singled out as one of the problems in Wesley's scriptural hymns. On many occasions the response he gives is unlike that intended by the Biblical writer. In one hymn he discusses post-lapsarian childbirth:

In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children, and  
thy husband shall rule over thee. — iii. 16.

EAGER alas, for sensual good,  
Indulging thy ambition vain,  
What findest thou in that pleasant food,  
But bitterness of shame and pain?  
The punishment for the offence  
How just! how suitably applied  
Anguish to mortify thy sense,  
Subjection to chastise thy pride (10).

Here Wesley is implying that the act of sex, rather than disobedience, is the primal sin. Sex seems also to be humankind's punishment. Nowhere in the Bible is sex within marriage reprehensible, yet this hymn implies that it is such. On many occasions Wesley perverts the Biblical intent. In II Samuel 6:22 David says, "I will yet be more vile", and hereafter has Uriah slain so that he can commit adultery with Uriah's wife, Bathsheba. Wesley quotes this scripture and then says that, unlike David, he is "more zealous, more determin'd I/ Hold fast the faith, and keep the word..."(159) In this instance Wesley ignores the scripture and its context completely.

Indeed, Wesley's hymns are often so far from the scripture that they are puzzlingly elliptical:

Saul spared Agag. — xv. 9.

HOW fond the self-deceiver's hope,  
By partial righteousness,  
By giving grosser evils up  
An holy GOD to please!  
Our vulgar sins we slay in vain,  
And every lust beside,  
If still we suffer self to reign,  
Or spare the life of pride (152).

Here the only link between the obscure scripture and the thoroughly Evangelical hymn is the use of the verb "spare". Though Wesley may be interpreting the scripture, the imaginative leap between it and the hymn is too great to be made with any degree of convenience or understanding. Many other hymns are elliptical in this way. For example:

The LORD hath said unto him, curse David.  
— xvi. 10.

LORD, I adore thy righteous will,  
Thro' every instrument of ill  
My Father's goodness see,  
Accept the complicated wrong  
Of Shimei's hand, and Shimei's tongue,  
As kind rebukes from thee (163).

In his scriptural hymns, Wesley is often concerned to present his response to the scripture, moreso than even the scripture itself. He responds subjectively and often emotionally, translating scripture into an Evangelical context, and he frequently invents his own symbolic readings. In these innovations, however, he creates a few problems, the main one being that at times he seems to provide only obscure links between the scripture and the hymn. At other times he twists scripture into such an odd and personal context that it does not resemble its intended meaning. But in spite of these problems, Wesley's scriptural hymns are innovative. They point to the fact, central to eighteenth-century Evangelicalism, that what really matters in Christianity is the individual believer's response to the Word of God, even more so than the Word of God itself. By writing hymns on virtually every book of the Bible, Wesley, in effect if not in intent, rewrites the

Bible for eighteenth-century Evangelicals. In addition, his great variety of metre and stanzaic form shows the versatility of his imagination and the immediacy of his responses to scripture. But Wesley's real artistic virtuosity is most clearly and consistently seen in the original hymns he wrote throughout his lifetime.

#### IV

After the Wesleys began their itinerant ministry, it became evident that they would be in need of hymns for their followers. The first volume was published in 1737 by John Wesley in Charlestown, U.S.A.; this contained mainly the hymns of Isaac Watts and a few others. Hymns and Sacred Poems (1739), the next collection, contained many adaptations from George Herbert, and after this several small volumes followed which contained original hymns by Charles Wesley. It soon became clear, however, that the Wesleyan ministry needed a large volume of original Evangelical hymns; hence Charles collected several of his own original hymns from his earlier editions and wrote some new ones, thus producing in 1749 his Hymns and Sacred Poems. Later, in the 1770's, the same problem again arose, so in 1780 John and Charles published A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists. With these publications there is a transformation of the hymn by Charles Wesley, in tone, point of view, and figurative language.

One of the important transformations is that of tone. In Watts it is always affirmative and confident. In Wesley the tone is ultimately affirmative and confident, but it is seldom so initially. For Watts, Christian experience is not characterized by spiritual struggle, but by contentment. Wesley's hymns, however, stress the joys and sorrows, the victories and difficulties of having a close

personal relationship with Jesus Christ; yet always at the end of the hymn Christ stands waiting to receive the anxious sinner. Doubts and uncertainties are laid at the foot of the cross; but the fact that Wesley presents doubts, uncertainties, and difficulties indicates a movement away from Watts's outlook of undisturbed confidence. Unlike Watts, Wesley writes many hymns on darker topics such as "Hymns for one Convinc'd of Unbelief", and "In Temptation". And while Christ waits at the end of the hymn, it is the Christian who struggles during its course.

'Desiring to Love', for example, is a Christian's direct discourse with God; it begins by asking God to "Come, and supply mine only Want,/ Fill all my Soul with Love", and then:

Accurst without thy Love I am,  
I bear my Punishment, and Shame,  
And droop my guilty Head,  
Unchang'd, unhollow'd, unrestor'd,  
I do not love my bleeding LORD;  
No other Hell I need (52).<sup>39</sup>

Lines like these are seldom found in hymns by Watts, yet they occur throughout the Wesleyan canon. But even in this hymn the tone is not unwavering; typical of Wesley are the next lines which suggest that in spite of man's spiritual struggle, God is always ready to help:

O conquer this rebellious Will,  
(Willing Thou art, and ready still,  
Thy Help is always nigh)  
The Stony from my Heart remove... .

Come then, dear LORD, thy Right assert,  
Take to Thyself my ransom'd Heart,  
Nor bleed, nor die in vain (52-3).

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<sup>39</sup> Citations from Wesley's original hymns are given as follows. All citations from Charles Wesley's Hymns and Sacred Poems, 2 vols. (London, 1749), are given by page reference in parentheses in the text. If volume two is being cited from, this is indicated. All citations from A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Methodists (London, 1782, 3rd edition corrected), are given in parentheses in the text by dated (1782) and page number. / Called

Even when Wesley seems to be at his spiritual nadir, God is always ready to hear him. In one hymn he cries out:

AH! Woe (eternal Woe) is me  
To Sin and Satan join'd!  
What shall I do, or say to Thee  
Preserver of Mankind (84)?

He goes on to repent of his "Sins redoubled Load", and the hymn ends with the speaker and Christ again face to face:

If CHRIST at last his Mercy shew,  
And whisper I am His;  
One Ray of Heavenly Light impart,  
Before I hence remove,  
And speak Himself into my Heart  
The GOD of Pardning Love (86).

In most of Wesley's hymns the ultimate affirmation of Christ's mercy and the inevitability of the Christian's salvation are emphasized, even though a spiritual struggle is often the substance of the hymn.

In one hymn he begins:

O WHAT an evil Heart have I,  
So cold, and hard, and blind,  
With Sin so ready to comply,  
And cast my GOD behind (162)!

He even goes so far as to doubt that God hears his prayer: "Oft have I ask'd for Help, afraid/ Lest God my Voice should hear..."(163).

But the realization soon comes that God is omnipresent and bestows grace upon everyone, hence his struggle is ultimately illusory — here he expresses anti-Calvinist sentiment in every line:

Thy Sovereign Grace to All extends,  
Immense and unconfined  
From Age to Age it never ends,  
It reaches All Mankind.

Throughout the World its Breadth is known,  
Wide as Infinity,  
So wide, it never pass'd by One,  
Or it had pass'd by me (163).

Similarly, on another occasion Wesley discusses his "Bosom-Fire" and how he has been "laid...low" and "wounded Mortally" by the devil;

yet the emphasis is on the fact that

CHRIST my King is over all,  
And I with Him shall reign.  
.....

More than Conque'ror now I am,  
Sin, the World, and Hell defy  
In JESU'S powerful Name (168).

And just as the end of a spiritual struggle is always victory for Wesley, so also at the end of human life, after "Walking over Life's rough Sea",

I shall never quit the Skies,  
I shall never fall again,  
Pure as the Atoning Blood,  
Stedfast as the Throne of GOD (167).

Wesley is, of course, not without hymns that have an affirmative tone throughout. In some he seems almost to surpass Watts in the degree of his confidence:

Not all the Powers of Hell can fright  
A Soul, that walks with CHRIST in Light;  
He walks, and cannot fall:  
Clearly he sees, and wins his Way,  
Shining unto the perfect Day,  
And more than conquers all (213).

No task is too large for the Christian: "Whate'er I want, whate'er I claim/ Is mine thro' Faith in Jesu's Name". Living a perfect Christian life may be an impossibility, but through belief it can be done:

Faith asks Impossibilities,  
Impossibilities are given;  
And I, ev'n I, from Sin shall cease,  
And live on Earth the Life of Heaven;  
I dare believe thro' JESU'S Power,  
That I, ev'n I, shall sin no more (II, 166).

Despite any struggle that the Christian undergoes, God is always ready and willing to save him. Though Wesley's tone embodies the modulations of struggle and uncertainty, it eventually meshes into the confidence and assurance of God's ultimate grace. In one hymn, for example, he presents himself "Shut up in unbelief I groan,/ And blindly serve a

God unknown... (1782, 117). Yet this incarceration is illusory:

But if on thee we call,  
Thou wilt the benefit bestow,  
And give us hearts to feel and know,  
That thou hast died for all (1782, 118).

And since the opening lines of this hymn are "AUTHOR of faith, to thee I cry,/ To thee who wouldst not have me die...", then logically the real struggle must end in victory.

In Wesley's hymns the speaker exercises his faith, and just when it seems that the reaching out will embrace nothing and the effort will be wasted, God is reached and the struggle ends in victory. Like Watts, Wesley believes that "God's in His Heaven", but unlike Watts he discusses man's struggle to believe it. In short, Wesley depicts Christian experience while Watts tends to idealize it.

Where Watts stood out as a hymn-writer from his predecessors was in his willingness to create imaginative figures. The result was rarely successful, but nevertheless the hymn began to acquire poetical dimensions. Wesley uses figures in his hymns, but while they are more skilfully deployed, they are invariably taken directly from the Bible.

In one hymn there is the metaphor of a "Heart of Stone". In stanza 1 he simply asks God to "Turn unto Flesh my Heart of Stone" (57), and to "Turn into Flesh my Heart". Speaking of his whole self in stanza 2 he asks God to "soften my unyielding Clay/ And mould it into Love". In 3 and 4 he refers to "this cold Heart of Mine!", and to his wish that God would soften "this Heart of Stone". In this hymn of 42 lines, 6 present the metaphor of God melting the heart of stone into a heart of flesh and love. The metaphor is extended but unobtrusive, and adds to the meaning of the hymn without unduly attracting attention to itself. Watts's figures tend to be gaudy,



while Wesley's tend to be neat, seldom distorting the hymn's meaning.

Wesley is adept at creating an extended metaphor:

ROCK of everlasting Love,  
Into thy Clefts I flee,  
Never, never to remove  
I build my House on Thee... (II, 25).

Two stanzas later:

Lo! the Rains descend, o'erflow,  
And to a Deluge spread,  
Winds, and Storms, and Tempests blow  
And beat upon my Head:  
Satan drives the furious Blast,  
Floods of Wickedness assail,  
Stands my House on JESUS fast;  
That Rock can never fail.

He then speaks of the "Torrent" rising higher, but that he stands "the general Shock" because he is "Built, and 'stablished on The Rock/ Of everlasting Love". Again, though the metaphor is recurrent, it facilitates meaning, rather than drawing attention to itself unduly.

In another hymn Wesley introduces the symbolism of light and darkness. In the opening stanza the speaker requests that "One bright celestial ray dart down,/ And cheer thy sons beneath" (1782, 88). After asking God to open his eyes, he prays: "Now let our darkness comprehend/ The light that shines so clear", in order that by this light he can "in Jesus see thy Face...". Light in this hymn symbolizes knowledge of God, and darkness symbolizes ignorance. The symbol is conventional and unsophisticated, but it meshes neatly with the simple monologue that constitutes the hymn. There are numerous examples of Wesley creating extended metaphors and symbols. Unlike Watts's, which are often distracting, Wesleys are functional and unobtrusive.

As well as creating extended figures, Wesley also uses short forms of metaphor and symbol. For example:

Shorten the Days of Inbred Sin,  
Speak to raging Passions Peace,

Allay this Hurricane within,  
Bid all my inward Conflicts cease (72).  
[italics mine]

This has two meanings. The hurricane symbolizes the raging doubt which destroys the edifice of faith. A hurricane moves in a circular fashion around a still centre, the suggestion here being that doubt exacerbates doubt unless the calm of the Christian's inner peace is allowed to expand and dispel the adverse forces. An alternative contemporary meaning of hurricane was a "large and crowded assembly of fashionable people at a private house" (O.E.D.). Hence the hurricane can also be a host of voices impinging upon the Christian's mind, representing the temptations of the passions.

Another effective figure reads:

Accepting my Pain,  
I no longer complain,  
But wait 'till at last I the Haven obtain;  
'Till the Storms are all o'er,  
And afflicted no more  
On a plank of the Ship I escape to the Shore (80).  
[italics mine]

Sea and land, or precariousness and security, are joined tenuously by the metaphor of the single plank, the suggestion being that to escape from the one to the other is necessary but dangerous.

Another example occurs in 'After a Recovery':

If now the stricken Rock relents,  
And Waters of Contrition flow,  
My Heart again to Sin consents  
And closes with the Tempting Foe... (157).  
[italics mine]

One contemporary meaning of "relent" was that of melting into liquid form. This image of the rock melting into water depicts the Christian consciousness unnaturally melting away and returning to the ways of sin. Once again the figure is simple in conception, Biblical, and brief, yet it gives added meaning to the hymn at that point.

Wesley's use of figures can be complex in other ways. At times

he uses a succession of graphic images:

As listed on Abaddon's side,  
They mangle their own flesh and slay:  
Tophet is moved, and opens wide  
Its mouth for its enormous prey;  
And myriads sink beneath the grave,  
And plunge into the flaming wave (1782, 415).

The figure of Abaddon's children killing each other is a synecdoche for man destroying his fellow man in general; the monster Tophet is a personification for hell; his devouring of man is a metaphor for man's consumption by the devil; and the "flaming wave" is a surreal image of fire behaving like water, this suggesting the abominable unnaturalness of hell, and the horror of being swallowed up there.

Another hymn again shows Wesley creating different kinds of figures, and stringing them together:

CHRIST, whose glory fills the skies,  
That famous Plant thou art!  
Tree of Life eternal, rise  
In every longing heart!  
Bid us find the food in thee,  
For which our deathless spirits pine;  
Fed with immortality,  
And filled with love divine (1782, 494).

Here the tree of life is a symbol for Christ; Christ and the tree grow metaphorically in the Christian's heart; and Christ, or Christaan living, becomes food for man. Metaphorically, Christ is a plant, a tree, and also food. There are numerous hymns where Wesley uses different figures which are in no way obstacles to the ongoing flow of the hymn, but which contribute meaning. Generally, Wesley's figures are more natural and varied than those of Watts; but they are always Biblical. Later hymn-writers in the century strive for more poetic freedom by working with figures that are not so closely scriptural, and by letting their imaginations, rather than the Bible, lead the way.

The most obvious difference between the hymns of Wesley and Watts can be seen in their point of view. The stanza quoted at the beginning of this chapter serves as the hallmark of Wesley's hymnody:

AND can it be that I should gain,  
An interest in the Saviour's blood?  
Died he for me who caused his pain!  
For me! who him to death pursued:  
Amazing love! how can it be:  
That thou, my God, shouldst die for me (1782, 197)?

The speaker ponders the miracle of salvation. The exclamations and questioning, even the confusion, are typical of the enthusiasm of Evangelical worship, the focus of which is rarely away from the human soul and the experiences it undergoes. Wesley speaks here not as an omniscient surveyor, but as an individual Christian, focusing on his own relationship with the Saviour.

Unlike Watts's hymns, Wesley's are written mainly in the first-person. The voice is immediate and impassioned:

OUT of the Iron Furnace, LORD,  
To Thee for Help I cry,  
I listen to thy Warning Word,  
And would from Egypt fly.

.....

Hast Thou not surely seen my Grief?  
Hast Thou not heard me groan?  
O hasten then to my Relief,  
In pitying Love come down (43).

The questioning of God in a direct manner would have been unacceptable to Watts. But this is typical of Wesley, and an Evangelical commonplace. This point of view of the individual Christian is characteristic, and often dramatic:

Whither, ah! whither should I go?  
Nothing is worth a thought below;  
Yet while on Earth I stay,  
O let me here my Station keep,  
And wash my Feet with Tears, and weep,  
And weep my life away.

To Thee I lift my mournful Eye,  
Why am I thus? O tell me why  
Cannot I love my God?  
The Hindrance must be all in me,  
It cannot in my Saviour be,  
Witness that Streaming Blood (53)!

The phrase "all in me" describes succinctly the Wesleyan point of view and the focus: unlike Watts, who sees everything, Wesley sees only the soul and its relationship to Christ. While Watts stresses God and His great attributes, Wesley is concerned to stress what God can do for man. In one hymn the speaker describes himself as "wretched, and distress,/ Feeble, and faint, and blind, and poor...", but it is Jesus who "alone canst heal":

A Touch, a Word, a Look from Thee  
Can turn my Heart, and make it clean,  
Purge the foul Inbred Leprosy,  
And save me from my Bosom Sin (89).

He goes on: "I know Thou canst this Moment cleanse,/ The deepest Stains of Sin deface", and at the end it is "according to Thy Word"; the believer is presumably cleansed and sanctified. In another hymn Wesley declares:

GET Thee behind me, Fiend! no more  
To Flesh or Thee I credit give;  
The Snare is broke, the Charm is o'er,  
In JESUS I at last believe;  
Whate'er I want, whate'er I claim,  
Is mine thro' Faith in JESU'S Name (II, 166).

Wesley's hymns, then, are invariably emotional and extended conversations with God. As such they are not broken up into parts and pictures as are the hymns of Watts, but rather are continuous utterances wherein the speaker unburdens himself of his spiritual cares and joys. The point of view is that of an individual Christian who focuses on the soul, the emotions and feelings that come into play in the relationship with Christ.

In one respect, the hymns of Watts and Wesley are very similar.

It was noticed in studying Watts's hymns that the Christian can and does praise God in a suitable way through his hymns. The gulf between Creator and creature is bridged: man's praises reach God. This is true in Wesley's hymns also. In fact, it is emphasized.

Lines like these are common:

GLORY to CHRIST be given  
By All in Earth and Heaven!  
CHRIST, my Prophet, Priest and King,  
Thee with Angel-Quires I praise,  
Joyful Hallelujahs sing,  
Triumph in thy sovereign Grace (312).

The Christian's hymnal praise, like that of angels, reaches God. Wesley goes even further by suggesting that man's praise can rival that of the angels:

REJOICE, and sing,  
(The Lord is King)  
And make a chearful Noise,  
To GOD your ceaseless Praises bring,  
Again I say, Rejoice.

Ye Sons of Grace,  
Your Voices raise,  
And rival those above,  
Delight in your Redeemer's Praise,  
And dwell upon his Love (258).

He is often confident:

Then let us in his Praises join,  
Triumph in his Salvation,  
Glory ascribe to Love Divine,  
Worship, and Adoration:  
Heaven already is begun,  
Open'd in Each Believer;  
Only believe, and still sing on,  
Heaven is Ours forever (II, 255).

Wesley seems to believe in the power of praise to an even greater extent than does Watts. He sees hymn-singing at times as the zenith of Christian experience:

What a rapturous Song,  
When the glorified Throng  
In the Spirit of Harmony join  
Join all the glad Quires

Hearts, Voices, and Lyres,  
And the Burthen is Mercy Divine (II, 314)!

Such confidence in the power of hymnal praise may seem commonplace; but this changes in the hymns of Anne Steeles.

Wesley's work is of uneven quality, but of his better work there are only a few recurring problems. One is with metre. A typical example is this line of nine syllables: "I am banish'd from JESUS his Face" (125). The "his" is inserted to fill a beat that an apostrophe and an "s" would not quite fill. In another hymn he ends each stanza with a seven-syllable line such as "Let me now thy Glory see" or "Reach my everlasting Home"; but the last line in the last stanza is short by one beat: "Bid me get up, and die" (II, 71). On other occasions he can be seen shuffling words into their metrical positions, and the result is often an awkward line like "Would He you to Life Invite" (1782, 14)? In defence of Wesley, however, it could be argued that metrical problems tend to increase with the amount of metre written.

Wesley's personal excitement in the hymns often leads him into another problem: his work tends at times to deflate into bathos as he attempts to become intensely emotional. In one hymn the bouncy rhythm is too fragile to withstand the heavy emotional tenor:

See, Sinners, see  
He dies for me,  
For You his Life he pours.

.....

Come catch the Blood,  
And Life of GOD,  
And lose your guilty Fears,

.....

He prays, and cries!  
He bleeds, and dies!  
Appeas'd by sacred Gore...(254).

This problem recurs. Sometimes it is a poor choice of diction that deflates the intensity of the hymn:

Canst Thou forget  
Thy Blood Sweat,  
Thy Agony of Passion,  
Thy extended Hands and Feet,  
Thy dying Exclamation (256)?

"Exclamation" seems too cumbersome a word for such a simple moment of emotional pitch. It jars against the simple diction in the rest of the stanza, and in addition it does not rhyme properly with "Passion". Again, Wesley could perhaps be defended by saying that since Evangelicalism stresses intense emotional involvement, then this is bound to occur. But this problem, like the others, is recurrent and distracting.

Wesley's most recurring problem, repetition, has been praised by critics as one of his most effective poetical devices. No hymn-writer repeats words, phrases, and lines so much as Wesley does. While it is true that often this repetition is used effectively, often it is monotonous and ineffective. This stanza, for example, seems to lose meaning from the fourth line onwards:

O that with humbled Peter I  
Could weep, believe, and thrice reply  
My Faithfulness to prove,  
Thou knowst (for All to Thee is known)  
Thou knowst, O LORD, and Thou alone  
Thou knowst that Thee I love (59).

The intended fervour and certainty are present, but to say in so many words what could have been said in far fewer is to misuse a literary device. Wesley may be alluding to the triple denial of Christ by Peter here, but if so, the effect is, it seems, contrary to the intent: Peter denied knowledge of Christ, while Wesley wants to affirm his. At best, the device mildly perplexes. At times the classically trained Wesley tries to force repetitive patterns upon



his stanzas:

Nothing less will I require,  
Nothing more can I desire;  
None but CHRIST to me be given,  
None but CHRIST in Earth, or Heaven.  
O that I might now decrease!  
O that all I am might cease!  
Let me into Nothing fall,  
Let my LORD be All in All (II, 165)!

Wesley's more obvious poetical shortcomings, then, are his inaccurate metre, his descent into bathos, and his misuse of repetition. But, more often than not, he uses these and other devices effectively. What follows is a reading of three effective and typical hymns which are among the better examples of the hymn as literature in the first half of the eighteenth century.

According to tradition, this is the first hymn that Charles Wesley wrote:

- 1 WHERE shall my wondering soul begin?  
How shall I all to heaven aspire!  
A slave redeemed from death and sin,  
A brand plucked from eternal fire;  
How shall I equal triumphs raise,  
Or sing my great Deliverer's praise!
- 2 O how shall I thy goodness tell!  
Father, which thou to me hast showed,  
That I a child of wrath and hell,  
I should be called a child of God!  
Should know, should feel my sins forgiven,  
Blest with this antepast of heaven!
- 3 And shall I slight my father's love?  
Or basely fear his gifts to own?  
Unmindful of his favours prove?  
Shall I, the hallowed cross to shun,  
Refuse his righteousness t' impart,  
By hiding it within my heart?
- 4 No, though the antient dragon rage,  
And call forth all his host to war;  
Though earth's self-righteous sons engage;  
Them and their god alike I dare:  
Jesus the sinners friend proclaim;  
Jesus, to sinners still the same.
- 5 Outcasts of men, to you I call,  
Harlots, and publicans, and thieves!

He spreads his arms to embrace you all,  
Sinners alone his grace receives:  
No need of him the righteous have;  
He came the lost to seek and save.

6 Come, O my guilty brethren, come!  
Groaning beneath your load of sin,  
His bleeding heart shall make you room,  
His open side shall take you in;  
He calls you now, invites you home,  
Come, O my guilty brethren, come!

7 For you the purple current flowed,  
In pardons from his wounded side,  
Languished for you the eternal God,  
For you the prince of glory died,  
Believe, and all your sin's forgiven,  
Only believe, and yours is heaven (1782, 34-5)!

This hymn is at once simple and intricate. The tone undergoes a subtle change. In stanzas 1, 2, and 3, the speaker, uncertain of his position in God's world, questions what he can do for God and for himself: the tone is one of agitation, excitement and uncertainty. In stanza 4 he quells the world's dragon with the proclamation that Jesus is the sinner's friend. Stanzas 5, 6, and 7 are his declaration of Christ's love to all humanity. The suggestion in this changing tone is that uncertainty and bewilderment possess the Christian's mind only until he realizes simply that because Jesus is his friend, he must proclaim Him in spite of uncertainty and timidity. Then he can turn outward, and in spreading abroad God's glory he is really doing what he thought himself unable to do. The tonal pattern begins with uncertainty, reaches a crux, and ends with certainty; the voice of agitation and perturbation changes into one of self-assured confidence. Wesley seems to be saying that although the Christian experience is fraught with difficulty, simple actions can quell the "dragon" of religious struggle. Christian experience is a development of one's thinking; it is a dynamic process, not a fixed state of thinking or acting.

The imaginative figures in this hymn are typical of Wesley in that they are unobtrusive, but nonetheless vivid. In stanza 1 the "brand plucked from eternal fire",<sup>40</sup> is well chosen: a brand burns internally as well as externally, the suggestion being that hell has an all-permeating effect on the Christian's whole being. The symbol of the "antient dragon" looms large and mythical against what quells it: "Jesus the sinner's friend" — the small entity overcoming the huge one itself symbolizes the Christian paradox of meekness inheriting the earth. The icon in stanza 5, "He spreads his arms to' embrace you all...", neatly expresses the paradox of Christ spreading his arms on the cross, and simultaneously embracing all of mankind. Christ's "open side" in stanza 6 is also paradoxical: for Christ it is the injury that kills, for man it is that which heals and gives life, just as the flowing of the "purple current" in stanza 7 is not the loss of life-blood, but rather the giving of life-blood through its loss.

The focus in this hymn is also important. In stanzas 1, 2, and 3, Wesley looks into himself; in stanza 4 he looks at himself and Jesus, and only when he does this can he look out into the world in order to help others in stanzas 5, 6, and 7. In addition, the stanzaic numerology of this scheme is 3, 1, and 3: he looks at God — or the trinity — in one way before he realizes that he must proclaim Jesus, the one true God, and in another way after; the whole hymn depicts a perfect Christian experience in a Biblically perfect number of seven stanzas.

Other literary devices in this hymn include the pronounced rhythm in stanzas 5 and 6, conveying the speaker's new excitement and conviction, the repetition in stanzas 6 and 7, illustrating

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<sup>40</sup> 1 Zech. 3:2 and Amos 4:11.

his zeal, and the irony in the last three lines of stanza 3, showing that the speaker is a simple and, at the same time, complex thinker. Finally, the hymn is prophetic of Wesley's career as an Evangelist.

The following hymn is probably Wesley's most famous, and is still widely sung:

- 1 O For a thousand tongues to sing  
My dear Redeemer's praise!  
The glories of my God and King,  
The triumphs of his grace!
- 2 My gracious Master and my God,  
Assist me to proclaim;  
To spread through all the earth abroad  
The honours of thy Name.
- 3 Jesus, the name that charms our fears,  
That bids our sorrows cease:  
'Tis music in the sinner's ears;  
'Tis life, and health, and peace.
- 4 He breaks the power of cancelled sin,  
He sets the prisoner free:  
His blood can make the foulest clean:  
His blood availed for me.
- 5 Hear him, ye deaf: his praise, ye dumb,  
Your loosened tongues employ;  
Ye blind, behold your Saviour come,  
And leap ye lame for joy!
- 6 Look unto him, ye nations, own  
Your God, ye fallen race;  
Look and be saved through faith alone,  
Be justified by grace!
- 7 See all your sins on Jesus laid:  
The lamb of God was slain,  
His soul was once an offering made  
For every soul of man.
- 8 Awake from guilty nature's sleep,  
And Christ shall give you light;  
Cast all your sins into the deep,  
And wash the AEthiop white:
- 9 With me your chief ye then shall know  
Shall feel your sins forgiven;  
Anticipate your heaven below,  
And own that love is heaven (1782, 7-8).

In spite of its simple surface, this is an artistically dense hymn.

The tone never wavers from confidence and pulsating zeal, and the figurative language is spare but meaningful. The speaker, who has one tongue, desires a thousand: he desires the Christian miracle of turning one praiser into multitudes. The intended irony is that the hymn is the miracle: his tongue becomes a thousand tongues, and the lines that follow are indeed "spread through all the earth around", as many sing this hymn. The metaphor of "blood" making "the foulest clean" is conventional yet demonstrative, and the metaphors of sleep becoming light, and sin whiteness, are unobtrusive allusions to the important Pauline act of being reborn into light and purity and leaving the death of sin.

This hymn is complex in its focus. In the early stanzas the speaker praises his Redeemer in several different terms before focusing on Jesus's name; the focus narrows to the single word "Jesus". After this it begins to widen: the stanzas that follow look at what Jesus does generally, His effect on people, His effect on whole nations, and the closing stanzas look at all mankind. The focus, then, seems to narrow from infinity and then it widens to infinity, the crossing point being Jesus. The point of view is of one joyous singer who, paradoxically, becomes a thousand singers by the very existence of the hymn. The quiet suggestion in all of this is that while Jesus is the centre of all experience, he is also the circumference: he infuses all of experience when His name is proclaimed to everyone.

Technical devices are used effectively also. The repetition in stanzas 4 and 6 conveys his fervency; and the metre, particularly in stanzas 5 and 6, aptly conveys his excitement and confidence. Finally, the hymn has a deliberately ambiguous ending in the last two lines. Either mankind "below" is meant to anticipate the heaven

above, or the heaven "below" is to be seen as heaven, or love. Wesley's suggestion is that heaven can be above or below (or both), depending upon the existence of love.

The third hymn to be looked at is famous, and has already been quoted in part:

- 1 AND can it be that I should gain,  
    An interest in the Saviour's blood?  
Died he for me who caused his pain!  
    For me! who him to death pursued:  
Amazing love! how can it be:  
That thou, my God, shouldst die for me?
- 2 'Tis mystery all: the Immortal dies!  
    Who can explore his strange design?  
In vain the first-born seraph tries,  
    To sound the depths of love divine:  
'Tis mercy all! let earth adore;  
Let angel-minds inquire no more.
- 3 He left his Father's throne above,  
    (So free, so infinite his grace!)  
Emptied himself of all but love,  
    And bled for Adam's helpless race:  
'Tis mercy all, immense and free,  
For, O my God, it found out me!
- 4 Long my imprisoned spirit lay,  
    Fast bound in sin and nature's night:  
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray;  
    I woke; the dungeon flamed with light:  
My chains fell off, my heart was free,  
I rose, went forth, and followed thee.
- 5 No condemnation now I dread,  
    Jesus, and all in him, is mine:  
Alive in him, my living head,  
    And clothed in righteousness divine,  
Bold I approach the eternal throne,  
And claim the crown through Christ my own (1782, 197).

This hymn catches the reader unawares. It begins by presenting the deepest mystery and the loftiest excitement in Christian experience in the most personal and spontaneous terms. The tone is of astonishment blended with joy. In stanza 3 the speaker then focuses upon the central event in Christianity, and in 4 and 5 experiences new freedom and joy, this time unadulterated with astonishment or mystery. The

paradoxical suggestion in this tonal structure seems to be that in order to rid oneself of astonishment and to de-mystify oneself about Christianity, one needs to focus upon the central mystery of Christianity and realize that it is a mystery. Oddly, to realize the incomprehensibility of the mystery is to become de-mystified, because this realization calms one's spirit and lets one accept the mystery rather than an explanation of it.

The metaphor of Christ emptying Himself of all but love suggests that everything Christ lost man gained, and even what Christ did not lose man gained also. Christ's loss of blood signifies mankind's new life-blood. In the fifth stanza, when the speaker imagines himself living in Christ and clothed in righteousness, he knows that he can approach the throne and claim his crown. While the figures in this hymn are elementary, the real complexity is in terms of feeling, in the modulations of excitement, mystery, and joy. At the end one is left with a perplexing vision: has the speaker really resolved anything, or does the powerful opening stanza still register as the hymn ends? The suggestion seems to be that in Christian experience one's goal should be less one of becoming excited about understanding Christianity, than getting excited about Christianity. That the hymn begins with "And", invites the suggestion that the speaker may return to this point, that this process of feeling and understanding is recurring and thus self-renewing. For Wesley Christianity is a personal relationship with Jesus Christ; while it leads one to heaven, the road to heaven can never be fully understood. And although this is the case, the Christian has every reason to rejoice and be assured of eternal life, because God responds to his praise and prayers, and is present, face to face, in life:

My prayer hath power with God; the grace  
Unspeakable I now receive;  
Through faith I see thee face to face;  
I see thee face to face and live;  
In vain I have not wept and strove;  
Thy nature, and thy name is Love (1782, 139).



Praise, a tribute ah how poor!  
 Language, what is all thy store,  
 My boundless obligations to display?  
 Bid the earth-born reptile try,  
 Looking upward to the sky,  
 To count the blessings of the source of day,

Faint are all the notes I raise,  
 Lord, accept my wish to praise!  
 To thee my heart, to thee my all belongs:  
 Thy inspiring grace impart,  
 Teach the breathings of my heart  
 To praise thee better than my feeble songs!<sup>1</sup>

The hymnody of Anne Steele is built around the central problem that religious experience transcends the possibilities and limits of language. True religious expression is a "breathing of the heart", rather than a series of hymns. This problem surfaces repeatedly in Steele's hymns, which are often exercises in the act of hymn-writing, or, from another angle, self-proclaimed failures in the act of hymn-writing. After looking briefly at Anne Steele's life in the light of Baptist history, and at the scant commentary she has received, this chapter looks at her hitherto unnoticed occasional verse, then at her original hymns, and finally at her scriptural hymns.

Anne Steele was born in 1717 into a family who had for several generations been Particular Baptists.<sup>2</sup> Like other Reformation and

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Steele (pseudonym "Theodosia"), Poems, on Subjects Chiefly Devotional (Bristol, 1780), 3 volumes. II, 13. All quotations from Steele's poems, hymns, and prose meditations are taken from this edition and are hereafter given by volume and page number in the text. This is the only complete edition of Steele's work.

<sup>2</sup> This and the next two paragraphs are indebted to the following studies: R.G. Torbet, History of the Baptists (London, 1960). T. Armitage, A History of the Baptists, Traced with their Vital Principles and Practices, from the Time of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, to the year 1886 (London, 1888). F.L. Cross, ed., The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church (Oxford, 1957). Champlin Burrage, The Early English Dissenters in the Light of Recent Research (1550-1641) (Cambridge, 1912). These studies are hereafter cited by giving the author's surname and page number.

post-Reformation groups such as Lutherans, Zwinglians, and Calvinists, Baptists reacted against the authority of the papacy and sought to recover the Apostolic zeal and spirituality of church worship. In broad terms, Baptists were at first theologically not unlike Calvinists. The General Baptists came to believe that Christ died for all, and thus anyone can be saved, whereas the Particular Baptists believed in limited atonement and in the Calvinist concepts of Election and Predestination. Both groups believed adamantly in baptism by immersion rather than by the conventional sprinkling of water.

The formal history of English Baptists essentially begins with John Smyth (c. 1554-1612), who, after graduating M.A. from Cambridge, was elected lecturer in the city of Lincoln on 27 September 1600, but was prosecuted on 13 October for having "approved himself a factious man in this city by personal preaching, and that untruly against divers men of good place".<sup>3</sup> Smyth fled to Amsterdam where he attracted a following, including his successor, Thomas Helwys, before he died in 1612.

When Helwys returned to London with his followers early in 1612, the first General Baptist churches were organized. From these a number of other churches sprang up during the Stuart and Commonwealth periods, and when in 1633 the adoption of believers' baptism by a group of Calvinistic London Separatists took place, the Particular Baptists had their beginning. Their solidification took place when in 1644 "fifteen Particular Baptist ministers... incorporated a definition of baptism by immersion in a Confession of fifty articles of faith to which they affixed their signatures".<sup>4</sup> Solidarity brought with it persecution, but when under William and Mary the Act of Toleration was

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<sup>3</sup> Cited in Burrage, I, 227.

<sup>4</sup> Torbet, p. 43.

passed in 1689, the Baptists were free to organize themselves more fully and to evangelize. By 1753 there were roughly 5,000 Particular Baptists in 121 churches;<sup>5</sup> evangelism continued throughout the eighteenth century, and it is in this dense atmosphere of Baptist expansion and solidarity that Anne Steele wrote her poetry, prose, and hymns.

Anne was the eldest daughter of William Steele, a timber merchant, who, as a lay preacher, conducted services in the Broughton Baptist Church for 60 years. When Anne was three her mother died, and her youth and later life were marred by consumption and general ill health. About 1737 she became engaged to a young man named Elscourt of Ringwood, Hampshire, but on the day before the wedding he drowned in the river Avon.<sup>6</sup> Anne never married, and this event cast a shadow on the rest of her life. Confined to her room much of the time because of her continual infirmity, Anne had begun writing verse at a young age, and in the 1750's turned her attention seriously to the writing of hymns. Her father's diary entry for November 29, 1757 reads: "This day Nanny sent part of her composition to London to be printed".<sup>7</sup> The rest soon followed, and in 1760 two volumes appeared entitled Poems on Subjects Chiefly Devotional, by Theodosia. After her death in 1778 a new edition was published (1780) with an additional volume of occasional verse and prose. In these volumes there are 144 hymns, 34 psalms in verse, and about 30 short poems. Her work has been reprinted only

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<sup>5</sup> John Collett Ryland, pastor at Warwick in the Midlands, gathered statistics in 1753 for the Particular Baptists. See Torbet, pp. 70-1.

<sup>6</sup> J. R. Broome, ed., Hymns by Anne Steele (London, 1967), pp. xviii-xix.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in S.W. Duffield, English Hymns: Their Authors and History (New York, 1886), p. 537. Hereafter referred to as Duffield.

twice.<sup>8</sup>

It is perhaps not so odd that Anne Steele has received virtually no attention as a literary figure, but it is curious that she is all but ignored by hymnologists. There is no biography, book, study, or even article on Anne Steele, save one three-page factual tribute in the Baptist Quarterly, 1966. But some of the comments she has received indicate that she deserves close study. S.W. Duffield discovered as he compiled a list of English Hymns: Their Authors and History in 1886 that Anne Steele "stands fourth or fifth in the list of contributors to English hymnody, being outnumbered, usually, by Watts, Doddridge, and Charles Wesley; and occasionally, by Newton".<sup>9</sup> Duffield found that Steele's hymns are "in the books used by every denomination of Christians".<sup>10</sup> Louis F. Benson looks at Steele's hymns in 1915 and notes that many of them "remain in common use, and Miss Steele is still regarded as the foremost Baptist hymn-writer".<sup>11</sup> Benson claims that "she gave us the Hymn of Introspection and of intense devotion to Christ's person, expressed in fervid terms of heightened emotion. Composing under the shadow of affliction and ill-health, she added to English Hymnody the plaintive, sentimental note".<sup>12</sup> Hoxie Neale Fairchild later says that Steele "displays some literary self-consciousness", and goes on actually to look at Steele's verse, albeit briefly. He summarizes:

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<sup>8</sup> The two republications are: Hymns, Psalms, and Poems by Anne Steele, with Memoir by John Sheppard, ed. Daniel Sedgwick (London, 1863); and Hymns by Anne Steele, ed. J.R. Broome (London, 1967). Neither of these editions is complete: Broome's edition, popular rather than scholarly, is a commemoration of the 250th anniversary of Steele's birth, and Sedgwick's reprint of 1863 omits the prose meditations.

<sup>9</sup> Duffield, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 537.

<sup>11</sup> Louis F. Benson, The English Hymn: Its Development and Use in Worship (New York, 1915), p. 214.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

Though by no means a genius, she may be described in athletic parlance as the holder of two records: she is the best purely devotional poet of her sex in the 1740-1780 period, and she is the all-time champion Baptist hymn-writer of either sex. Her hymns, several of which are still sung, were in their own day immensely popular in America as well as in England.<sup>13</sup>

"Immensely popular" is no exaggeration. In 1808 a collection of hymns was published in Boston for American congregations: of 152 hymns, 59 were by Anne Steele.<sup>14</sup> Her fame in America as a hymn-writer was nearly unsurpassed. In England she was widely read and sung also: even Wesleyan and Methodist churches included her in their services.<sup>15</sup> Anne Steele should be evaluated as a hymn-writer, and as a serious poet.

## II

As well as casting a valuable light on her hymns, Anne Steele's occasional verse is worthy of consideration in that it shares imaginative concerns similar to those in the poems of William Collins and Thomas Gray — both contemporaries of Steele. It is not within the scope of this chapter to offer readings of these poets' work, but it is pointed out that just as Collins and Gray exhibit a profound, though not always obvious, fear or awe of sublimity, and a frustration at their being somehow inadequate at genuinely inspired writing, so also does Steele repeatedly insist that her poetry can never match the task set before her: to praise God and contemplate His wonder and magnitude

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<sup>13</sup> Hoxie Neale Fairchild, Religious Trends in English Poetry, (New York, 1942), II, 111.

<sup>14</sup> See Ronald W. Thomson, "Anne Steele, 1716-1778" in Baptist Quarterly, vol. 21 (1966), 370.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. "In England, in 1854, the Rev. John Kirk published a catalogue of favorite hymns sung in Wesleyan and Methodist Churches. He includes 769 hymns, 59 by Watts, six by Doddridge and the rest, with three exceptions, by Charles or John Wesley. The exceptions are three by Anne Steele."

in language. With Collins and Gray the concern is secular; true sublimity, or the "grace beyond the reach of art", eludes them (or so they think); therefore they believe their poetry forever fated to be a faint approximation or distant shadow of what they really want to say. With Steele the concern is religious: truly inspired religious and hymnal writing eludes her continually, she insists. But where Steele goes further than Collins and Gray is in her suggestion that language, rather than she, is the problem.

Many of Steele's occasional poems are simply about her inability to write poetry. She begins 'To LYSANDER' by saying that her muse is "unskill'd", and that she is attempting an "artless lay". In the middle of the poem she looks indignantly at what she has written: "But say, Lysander, can such notes as these/ Amid politer scenes expect to please" (I, 190)? She continues in lines reminiscent of Collins's 'Ode on the Poetical Character' (1747):

Say, can these untaught airs acceptance find  
Where Milton, wonderous bard! divinely sung?  
Or yield a taste of pleasure to the mind  
That raptur'd soars with Hervey or with Young?

Steele's answer would be that her lays are unacceptable because her muse is either ineffective or not present. In 'The ABSENT MUSE' she claims that in her childhood her muse "Deign'd oft on my call to attend", but now "Shall the scene be a desart, o'ershaded with night,/ Which was sunshine and Eden before" (I, 232)? The poem ends with her realization that she must not hope for her muse's return because the muse never really attended her:

How vain the dear hope! — She despises the lays  
Which I once fondly thought she inspir'd:  
Unfetter'd, transported, with Hervey she strays,  
Applauded, belov'd, and admir'd (I, 233).

Many of Steele's poems are disputes between herself and her absent muse. In 'The INVOCATION' she devotes eight stanzas to trying to get

the muse to assist her so that she can begin her poem. Her language is fervent and sincere, but the underlying suggestion is that it can never be inspired because the muse never arrives:

Say, wilt thou ne'er return?  
And must I ever mourn?  
And must I ever tune in vain  
The dull unanimated strain?  
O come, the languid notes inspire,  
Once more awake the sacred lyre,  
And teach my song on stronger wings to rise.  
Unmindful of her heavenly birth,  
My groveling soul sinks down to earth;  
And while she tries  
In vain to rise,  
Clouds interpose, and veil the distant skies (II, 2).

Just as there are many poems which concern themselves with the act of trying to begin an inspired poem, so also are there poems in which the author, after having written, casts her eye back over her verse only to find that her energy has been wasted. In 'The PROSPECT' she proposes to describe heaven, but "Dim is the eye of sense" (II,20). She wants to believe, however, that "faith supplies/ (Inspir'd by heaven) what feeble sense denies". Significantly, her description is in terms of negation: she speaks of "boundless pleasure", "boundless glories", "Unfading honours", "the immortal mind", "wealth unknown", "an immortal feast", "a boundless river", "unfading verdure", a place where "Nor pain, nor care invade", and which is "Without a cloud"; and then she realizes that she has been describing what heaven is not, rather than what it is:

No mortal ear has known, no mortal eye,  
No stretch of human thought can e'er descry,  
Nor faith with heaven imparted ardour trace  
The endless glories of the blissful place (II, 20).

The dilemma is that one's human powers cannot be of help in describing heaven, but nor — and this contradicts what she says earlier — nor can faith be of help. The poem is abandoned at this point and it becomes instead a prayer. Steele gives up many of her poems in

imaginative despair like this. After writing 33 lines on 'RECOVERY from SICKNESS' for example, she admits, "But ah, my voice unequal to my wishes,/ Forbids the attempt, and damps the rising ardour" (II, 63). Her conclusion, a recurrent one, is that "The highest notes a mortal voice can raise/ Must fall"! Nevertheless Steele never ceases "Desiring a thankful Devotion to God" and is always asking God to "aid my wish to praise". But the attempt is doomed to failure. Only angels can praise God; human poets are best advised to abandon the presumptuous task and remain silent:

And shall a reptile of the dust, aspire  
To join with angels in their high employ?  
Lord, at thy feet, I lay my trembling lyre  
In silent awe, yet mix'd with humble joy (III, 57).

Then how is God praised? One way, Steele believes, is non-verbally. God is praised by the phenomena of nature. In 'An EVENING MEDITATION' she claims that "every tree", "every plant and flower", "zephyrs", the "silver wave", the "lofty mountain", "whole nature joins/ To speak the wonders of creating skill" (I, 192) [italics mine]. When looking at natural phenomena she perceives that "All own the sovereign Architect divine,/ And in their different language speak his praise" [italics mine]. Nature praises naturally; the song is "Harmonious all and fair"! But when she attempts to praise God she realizes that the act will "Demand the tribute of my noblest song" (I, 193), and that God will have to "Instruct my heart, and raise my humble thoughts" even in order "to meditate thy praise", let alone actually to praise. The poem ends at this point, with nature singing and the poet in humble silence. Several poems convey this idea and end in this fashion. The ending of 'The PLEASURES of SPRING' puts the whole matter very directly:

The parts of nature in their just proportion,  
Uniting, harmonizing, blend to form



One perfect system; truth and beauty smile,  
Inviting contemplation upward still,  
From step to step, till at last their glorious source  
Arriv'd, the soul in low prostration bends,  
Adoring, with submissive, silent awe  
The Great Unsearchable, the wonderous name,  
Which creature praise can never, never reach (I, 225).

At several points in her prose meditations Steele reveals this dichotomy between nature singing in harmony and the human being remaining in "submissive, silent awe". In 'ALL THY WORKS PRAISE THEE' she writes:

The glory of God is the end of creation. To this the vegetable and the animal world in their various orders and different capacities contribute, and render their humble praise to their almighty author. The sun and moon, and all those glittering luminaries which deck the trackless azure, proclaim the glorious source of light, from whence they derive their lustre, and with fervid blaze, mild beam, or twinkling ray, reflect their maker's praise. The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament sheweth his handy work. The changing seasons, as they roll, display the divine perfections, and the shorter revolutions of day and night, with alternate voice repeat the constant, the universal theme. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge (III, 156).

Whatever nature uses to praise is some unknown kind of language; human language is inappropriate for the task:

But man, the master-piece of this lower creation, the finishing stroke of almighty skill, man, distinguished with the godlike faculty of reason, and endowed with superior abilities to display his Maker's praise, alas, how fallen! What ruin has sin occasioned! the lowest reptile, the minutest insect answer the end of their creation better than man! humbling thought — ah, let me never boast of a distinction so inverted, a capacity so sadly misimproved (III, 156-7)!

One way, then, that God is praised, is through the incomprehensible effusions of natural phenomena. Another way, she seems to believe, is through the enraptured utterances of inspired poets; utterances which, paradoxically, are not linguistic praises in themselves, but rather which act as bridges to the non-verbal realms of religious ecstasy. One such poet is James Hervey:

On reading Mr. HERVEY'S MEDITATIONS.

HAPPY the man, whom grace divine has taught  
To raise to nobler scenes the flying thought;  
Beyond the bounds of sense and time to soar,  
And awful immortality explore (I, 211).

To take one "Beyond the bounds of sense and time" is to take one, via language, beyond language. Hervey does not describe the heavenly scenes; nobody can. He simply leads one to them: "To realms of life he points the radiant way" (I, 212). It is up to the reader to let Hervey's language lead him to the world beyond: "While all our powers obey the soft controul,/ To beauty's source he leads the enraptur'd soul..." (I, 213). But even Hervey's language and poetical ability, though the earthly best, is ultimately nothing like true "heaven-taught" language. In 'On the DEATH of Mr. HERVEY' Steele writes:

Now, the celestial flame that warm'd thy breast,  
And through thy heaven-taught page resplendent shone,  
Exalted, joins the transports of the blest,  
In language, ev'n to thee, on earth unknown (II, 71).

The language that praises God is unknown on earth. Earthly writers are "confin'd to these low scenes of night" until death. Only the truly inspired poets such as Hervey, Young, and Milton obtain "A living ray from heaven's immortal choir":

But aim not, my ambitious song,  
To rise with Milton, or with Young,  
To whom Urania brought celestial fire;  
A living ray from heaven's immortal choir,  
That darted through the solid veil of night:  
Inspiring ray, that bade them soar  
Where mortals never rose before,  
While nature wonder'd at the daring flight.

Unequal to so bold a choice,  
A humbler, safer lot be mine!  
Urania, tune my trembling voice  
To subjects less exalted, yet divine (III, 43-4)!

Though Steele evidently admires these inspired poets and their "living ray", she believes that one ray is not enough to light the mansion of religious experience. Human poets, no matter how deeply

inspired and no matter how skilfully they lead one to the unspeakable realms beyond, are confined to the limits of language. At one point Steele contemplates finite language attempting infinite tasks; this passage is both an investigation into the power of language, and a fervent prayer for God to aid her adventurous songs:

Gracious God,  
Increase my rising hope to thankful joy,  
And bid my heart with pleasing rapture trace  
The wonders of thy love: amazing theme!  
The song of angels, and the bliss of heaven!  
How shall my heart receive the vast idea,  
Or feeble words express it? Scanty power  
Of human thought — the force of language fails,  
And soaring wishes flag their strongest wing!  
The starry heavens, immeasurably high  
Are rais'd above the globe; but higher far  
Thy thoughts, thy ways, above my utmost reach.  
What finite power can ever comprehend  
The infinite extent of love divine?  
Launch'd on the boundless ocean, every thought  
Is lost in pleasing wonder! love divine!  
Created wisdom's most exalted pitch,  
Angelic force, can never sound the depth,  
The unfathomable depth! can never reach  
The immeasurable height — — (II, 97-8)!  
[italics mine]

Thus with broken rhythm ends the contemplation; she now realizes that she must simply "meditate, adoring low", the "countless glories" of creation. As she began to think more intensely on God's love, words began to give way to negations and indefinite expressions, and these in turn give way, quite suddenly, to silence. There is nothing to say because there is nothing to say in language. Her only hope is somehow to transcend language and imitate the heavenly choir:

O could I rise, one happy minute rise!  
And hear the music of the blissful choir,  
Would not my heaven-enraptur'd mind despise  
The sweetest notes that tune this feeble lyre.

Yet is the subject of their song the same,  
Not angels know a nobler theme than mine... (III, 86).

As a human poet, she knows the subject matter or theme as well as do the angels. It is not a problem of content, but of form: it

is not that angels know what to say and humankind does not; it is rather that both know what to say, but that angels know how to say the theme, and humankind does not. This is so because human beings use language, and, according to Steele, angels and natural phenomena use an incomprehensible language or an incomprehensible something other than language. And inspired poets use language only as a bridge to something extra-linguistic during their rare moments of true inspiration. Faced with this complex problem of how to say, Steele turns nonetheless to the writing of hymns.

### III

Evidence indicates that Anne Steele probably read Charles Wesley and that she certainly read Isaac Watts.<sup>16</sup> Steele admired Watts greatly, and placed him in the same exclusive category as Milton,

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<sup>16</sup> In her miscellaneous prose pieces Steele quotes lines and stanzas from Watts's work no less than nine times. She echoes Watts frequently in her hymns, and in 'Christ the Christian's Life' she openly states her admiration for Watts:

O for the animating fire  
That tun'd harmonious Watts's lyre  
To sweet seraphic strains!

Her citations of, and allusions to, Wesley are often less pronounced; but there can be little doubt that she would have been familiar with this controversial hymn-writer. Steele's line "An interest in the Saviour's blood" originally appeared verbatim in Wesley. Steele's habit of beginning a hymn in medias res, "And is the gospel peace and love" is typically Wesleyan: "And can it be that I should gain/ An interest in the Saviour's blood". And her exclamatory habit, as in

Amazing love! that stoop'd so low,  
To view with pity's melting eye  
A wretch, deserving endless woe!  
Amazing love! — did Jesus die? —

is not unlike Wesley's

Died he for me, who caus'd his pain!  
For me! who him to death pursued:  
Amazing love! how can it be:  
That thou, my God shouldest die for me?

Other Wesleyan habits are her frequent parenthetical exclamations (Amazing grace!) and the prayer-like endings to many of her hymns.

Hervey, and Young: he was a truly inspired writer whom God infused with "animating fire". But she is not so fortunate, nor are hymn-writers apart from Watts, she implies. The primary characteristic informing Steele's hymnody is an obsession with the inefficacy of hymning and praising. This obsession accounts for her peculiar tone, point of view, and imaginative figures.

Significantly, the first four hymns in Steele's work are prayers that God will give her the ability to hymn. She begins 'Desiring to PRAISE GOD' by saying that the theme "Demands my heart, my life, my tongue", and that, unaided, hers are "attempts in vain": "Then how shall mortals dare aspire/ In thought, to try th'unequal strain" (I, 2)? She concludes by asking God to accept the "humble praise" of her "grateful, though unworthy song". The opening of 'Imploring DIVINE INFLUENCE' seems a continuation of the first hymn:

MY God, whene'er my longing heart  
The praiseful tribute would impart,  
In vain my tongue with feeble aim,  
Attempts the glories of thy name.

In vain my boldest thoughts arise,  
I sink to earth and lose the skies... (I, 2-3).

Believing that God "inspires the harps above/ With harmony, and praise, and love...", she asks that His grace "guide every song" of hers.

But this is evidently too much to ask. In 'Meditating on CREATION and PROVIDENCE' she suggests that only natural phenomena can praise God adequately:

LORD, when my raptur'd thought surveys  
Creation's beauties o'er,  
All nature joins to teach thy praise,  
And bid my soul adore.

Where'er I turn my gazing eyes,  
Thy radiant footsteps shine;  
Ten thousand pleasing wonders rise  
And speak their source divine (I, 4).  
[italics mine]

"The meads", the "fruitful tree", the "sun", the "moon and stars", all "speak their Maker's praise"; but she goes on to imply that mankind in general and herself in particular have not yet praised God: "let man thy praise record" and "let my lips... make known/ Thy goodness, and thy praise". The hymn ends open-endedly with her plea, "teach me to improve" in praise. Again, the next hymn seems to follow directly from this:

COME heavenly love, inspire my song  
With thy immortal flame,  
And teach my heart, and teach my tongue  
The Saviour's lovely name (I, 7).

Yet she realizes several stanzas later that even angels would have difficulty hymning to God:

The God in heavenly strains they sung,  
Array'd in human clay;  
Mysterious love! what angel tongue  
Thy wonders can display (I, 8)?

As in her occasional verse, however, Steele believes that if anyone can compose and sing hymns to God it is the angels. As for human beings, the task is "too high for mortal thought". She begins 'The JOYS of HEAVEN' by asking God to

... warm each languid heart,  
Inspire each lifeless tongue;  
And let the joys of heaven impart  
Their influence to our song (I, 34).

She declares that in heaven "Seraph and saint his praise resound", but on earth the task is futile:

But oh! their transports, oh! their songs,  
What mortal thought can paint?  
Transcendent glory awes our tongues,  
And all our notes are faint (I, 36).

Her next hymn, again a continuation of what went before, begins with a question rather than an invocation or prayer:

GREAT King of kings, eternal God,  
Shall mortal creatures dare to raise

Their songs to thy supreme abode,  
And join with angels in thy praise (I, 37)?

The question remains unanswered as she meditates upon "how far remov'd below" man is from God. She concludes: "To him, our longing eyes we raise...". This hearkens back to the beginning of the hymn: evidently it is only appropriate to raise eyes, rather than songs, to God. Only the "brightest Seraph" dares to attempt the song.

If angels can praise God appropriately, so also can natural phenomena. "THERE is a God, all nature speaks,/ Through earth, and air, and seas, and skies" (I, 40), she says in 'The VOICE of the CREATURES'. The "sun", the "fields", the "verdant meads", the "cooling stream", all speak God's praises:

The flowery tribes, all blooming, rise  
Above the faint attempts of art;  
Their bright inimitable dyes  
Speak sweet conviction to the heart (I, 41).  
[italics mine]

Art is a shadowy replica of the reality to which it refers or seeks to imitate, just as Steele's hymns, she herself repeatedly insists, are shadowy attempts at what she would like them to say. Art is an imposition between mankind and Creator, though it does not exist between natural phenomena and Creator. In 'A RURAL HYMN' "fleecy flocks", "feathered warblers", "verdant fields", "flowers", "rivers", "winds", and "clouds" all speak "With gentle artless voice" [italics mine]. Steele laments that since mankind is of a higher order than natural phenomena, his praise should also be, but is not: "But oh! from human tongues/ Should nobler praises flow..." (I, 47). She concludes by asking God to assist her because only "Thy grace can raise/ My heart, my tongue...".

Steele believes firmly that unless God intervenes (and the indication in her hymns is that He does not), then her songs will never

be adequate. In 'Aspiring towards Heaven' she ascends on the wings of inspiration only to come just short of her goal and take a rapid descent:

Come, heaven-born faith, and aid my flight,  
And guide my rising thought,  
Till earth, still lessening to my sight,  
Shall vanish quite forgot.

But when to reach those blissful plains  
Her utmost ardor tries,  
And almost hears the charming strains  
Of hymning angels rise:

Mortality, with painful load,  
Forbids the raptur'd flight;  
In vain she means heaven's bright abode,  
And sinks to earth and night (I, 140).

To hymn like the angels is something that can only be wished for, but never accomplished. In 'Desiring a Taste of REAL JOY' she imagines:

Oh! could my weary spirit rise,  
And panting with intense desire,  
Reach the bright mansions of the skies,  
And mix among the blissful choir... (I, 112).

Only God's "presence can impart/ A glimpse of heaven to earth and night", but the indication in this and other hymns is that God is simply not present, therefore the vision remains veiled. In another hymn she admits frustration at the "veil of interposing night":

Still, must the scenes of bliss remain  
Conceal'd from mortal eyes?  
And must my wishes rise in vain,  
And never reach the skies (I, 142)?

In yet another hymn she suggests that perhaps it is more appropriate for human beings to sit in silence and wonder than to vocalize their praise:

LORD, how mysterious are thy ways!  
How blind are we! how mean our praise!  
Thy steps can mortal eyes explore?  
'Tis ours to wonder and adore (I, 131).

Human beings should silently "wonder and adore" because they are



constrained to use a language that is unfit to address itself to infinite topics. In one hymn Steele says that she would write a hymn on the topic of 'COMMUNION with CHRIST of his TABLE', but there is no point in doing so:

TO Jesus, our exalted Lord,  
(Dear name, by heaven and earth ador'd!)  
Fain would our hearts and voices raise  
A cheerful song of sacred praise.

But all the notes which mortals know,  
Are weak and languishing and low;  
Far, far above our humble songs,  
The theme demands immortal tongues (I, 176).

On the topic of 'CHRIST DYING and RISING' she exhorts saints to tune their "noblest strains" and sing like the "hymning angels". But how can they be expected to succeed at the task if even angels cannot?

Almighty love! victorious power!  
Not angel-tongues can e'er display  
The wonders of that dreadful hour,  
The joys of that illustrious day (I, 185).

Steele repeatedly faces this problem: "Then well may mortals try in vain,/ In vain their feeble voices raise...". In another hymn she boldly asks God to "Smile on my soul, and bid me sing,/ In concert with the choir above..." (III, 83). God evidently does not comply, and the hymn ends with the sober realization that the task of hymning to God is better left with the angels:

He died! — ye seraphs tune your songs,  
Resound, resound the Saviour's name:  
For nought below immortal tongues  
Can ever reach the wondrous theme.

Language cannot encompass the "wondrous theme", and neither, it seems, can human thought. Language and thought determine each other, and each is as inadequate as the other:

His love, what mortal thought can reach?  
What mortal tongue display?  
Imagination's utmost stretch  
In wonder dies away (I, 171).

Unlike Watts, who focuses on Christianity in general and God in particular, and Wesley, who focuses on the individual Christian's soul, Steele focuses on the medium between the poet and God: the hymn. A great many of her hymns are concerned with themselves rather than with anything beyond themselves; and numerous more at least refer to themselves and their own inadequacy at one point or another. For Steele the act of praise is more important than either the praiser or the phenomenon praised.

Steele writes from the point of view of an actual hymn-writer. Her hymns always seem to be in the process of being produced. One never forgets that Steele is a hymn-writer struggling to write hymns — a task that the earlier writers took for granted and did not examine. While Watts magically draws back the curtain on the "whole Realm of Nature", and Wesley probes the individual Christian's heart, Steele is fully occupied in trying to put words on a page, words that she knows can never do the job she wants them to do. Because of this, her hymns generally have a tone that is unlike that found in Watts or Wesley. For the first time hymns appear which portray, and do not resolve, doubt, and which portray a writer acknowledging defeat rather than celebrating victory. In any hymn by Watts or Wesley one ultimately sees a positive outlook on Christianity; but in Steele's hymns it is more rare because she is preoccupied in looking at the mode of outlook itself. Like Watts and Wesley, Steele writes hymns in a prayer-like tone; but unlike them her prayers are often open-ended.

In 'LIGHT and DELIVERANCE' she prays for guidance in the first six stanzas, and climactically declares: "Be all I am, and all I have, / Devoted, Lord, to thee"! Yet this is undercut as she continues:

But stronger ties than nature knows,  
My grateful love confine;

And ev'n that love, thy hand bestows,  
Which wishes to be thine (I, 20).

The final stanza portrays her waiting at God's feet, desiring "warmer love and zeal". The hymn that began with six stanzas of praise and prayer to a God who saves "weary sinners" and "bids their sorrows end", who "ransoms captive souls" and banishes sin and "all its power controuls", this hymn has ended in uncertainty. This tone is recurrent, as in 'An EVENING HYMN', where she asks God to preserve her from wandering; she desires God's "goodness measureless and free...". Yet even though God is "ready still with full supplies" to guard her footsteps, she, nevertheless, "Ungrateful, can from thee depart,/ And fond of trifles vainly rove" (I, 23). Meditating on her "vile" and "wretched heart", she ends the hymn by "pleading for pardon" rather than asserting God's guidance. Again, a hymn that began with a positive tone and outlook has turned into a song of uncertainty and concern.

Uncertainly and concern are the tonal notes of many of Steele's hymns. One hymn begins:

MY God, to thee I call —  
Must I for ever mourn?  
So far from thee, my life, my all?  
O when wilt thou return!

Dark as the shades of night  
My gloomy sorrows rise,  
And hide thy soul-reviving light  
From these desiring eyes (I, 143).

Many of Wesley's hymns begin like this; but the difference is that Wesley's invariably lead to spiritual victories and affirmations of God's nearness and willingness to help. Steele, on this occasion and on many others, goes on to say that her "comforts all decay" and her "inward foes prevail". She says somewhat accusingly to God that "If thou withhold thy healing ray,/ Expiring hope will fail". The indication

thus far is that God has been withholding His "healing ray", and the implication is that He continues to do so: she pleads, "O wilt thou hear my plaintive voice/ And grant my humble prayer" (I, 144)! After pleading three more times she concludes by saying that "if my troubles rise/ To thee, my God" [*italics mine*], then she will be freed from her own decay. The hymn ends on this note, and the seven stanzas as a whole are tonally bleak. This kind of tonal pattern, quite unknown to Wesley and Watts, recurs frequently. Even a hymn with the promising title, 'Trusting in his Mercy with Humble Submission and Hope', has an open-ended penultimate stanza:

And can my heart desire in vain,  
When he who chastens bids me sue,  
That every sorrow, every pain  
Be blest to teach, reclaim, renew (III, 72)?

There is no answer given or implied. The final stanza implies that even if she does desire in vain, hopefully God will guide her:

O yet support thy feeble child,  
Till thy correcting hand remove!  
Be all thy purposes fulfill'd,  
And bid me sing thy sparing love (III, 73).

The tone in Steele's hymns suggests that God is not the close friend that Wesley claimed Him to be. For both Wesley and Watts God is always ready to help the importuning Christian. For Steele, however, God often seems to be indifferent to the Christian's predicament. At one point she writes: "Yes, I have cause indeed to mourn,/ When God conceals his radiant face" (I, 76). She uses the word when, not if; and the use of the active verb, ascribing the act of concealing to God rather than to herself, tends to give God an insidious disposition. In this hymn she is thankful for God's occasional blessing, but sees it as lent rather than given: "But ah! how soon the blissful ray,/ With guilt o'ershaded, disappears..." (I, 75).

In fact, she is rarely sure of where she stands with this elusive God. At many points she makes conditional statements such as "My God, if thou art mine indeed", and "My God, my hope, if thou art mine, / Why should my soul with sorrow pine" (I, 116)? She asks here whether God is her God, rather than whether she is God's creature (rather than the world's or Satan's). The implication, repeatedly, is that perhaps God cares less for His unfortunate, pleading creatures than He ought to. Steele wants to believe that "Though doubt prevails, and grief complains, / Thy hand omnipotent, sustains" (II, 110). Yet the sustaining is rarely in evidence: it is generally in the future tense, if mentioned at all. Watts could see God "thro' a glass" and, at this objective remove, praise Him and appreciate His works. Wesley could see God "face to face" and live in a dynamic interpersonal relationship with Him; Steele's God, however, is invariably not even to be seen:

But ah how far from mortal sight,  
The Lord of glory dwells!  
A veil of interposing night  
His radiant face conceals (I, 156).

This "veil of interposing night" exists between the Christian and God. For Steele as hymn-writer, the veil is also, in one sense, the hymn itself: the hymn is the medium between the poet and God, but it is a medium that veils rather than clarifies. Poetry is inadequate in its task of praising God, Steele believes. Because of this belief, she seems to have little faith in imaginative figures. Steele's hymns are generally barren of figurative language: she seems to think that if plain language and direct statement cannot praise God appropriately, then so much less can poetic imagery.

Steele relies on the one basic metaphor of light and darkness. Her use of this metaphor is not complex: light is God, heaven, paradise,

and thus inspires hope, joy, and peace; darkness is the world, sin, hell, and thus inspires error, misery, and distance from God. In 'HOPE in DARKNESS' she says:

GOD is my sun, his blissful rays  
Irradiate, warm, and guide my heart!  
How dark, how mournful, are my days,  
If his enlivening beams depart (I, 126)!

In brief, this is the metaphor that runs throughout Steele's hymns, in many of which the "glorious sun" battles the "gloomy darkness":

Hope, in the absence of my Lord,  
Shall be my taper; sacred light,  
Kindled at his celestial word,  
To cheer the melancholy night (I, 126).

Many of Steele's hymns are simply prayers that God will send "love's all-powerful ray" to "chase these clouds away"; or that she be able to go to heaven, where all is perfect light: "To perfect bliss my soul aspires,/ That shines with never fading ray" (I, 104)! Christ brought the "healing ray" to earth, and this ray is mankind's only hope for salvation: "Without his life-inspiring light,/ 'Tis all a scene of gloomy night" (I, 109). God, for Steele, is "my light,/ Amid the universal night"; He is "Light, hope, and joy", and "One smile from thee, one blissful ray,/ Can chase the shades of death away" (I, 116). Where Steele's use of the metaphor is unusual is in her suggestion that the powers of darkness are more continually victors than are the powers of light. While she continually says:

This can my every care controul,  
Gild each dark scene with light;  
This is the sunshine of the soul,  
Without it all is night (III, 66)...

it is nevertheless implied that the "mournful shades" are never exorcised by the "reviving ray":

Then shall my cheerful spirit sing  
The darksome hours away,  
And rise on Faith's expanded wing  
To everlasting day (III, 66).  
[italics mine]

Too many of the hymns end with reference to a future condition.

At one point she implies that darkness is the victor in the age-old darkness/light battle:

IN vain, while dark affliction spreads  
Her melancholy gloom,  
Kind providence its blessings sheds  
And nature's beauties bloom (III, 65).

Nevertheless the battle rages throughout her hymns. The "wanderer" in "the shades of night" continually seeks "the dawn of heavenly day"; one continually waits, during "the shades of night" for "returning light"; "the shades of gloomy night" are continually assailed by "faint streaks of distant light", the "dark gulph below" by the "cheerful ray", the "gloomy wilds below" by the "beams of heaven", the "shades of woe" by "the fair dawn of heaven". In innumerable mutations the conflict appears. But unlike conventional users of the metaphor, Steele invariably puts the end of the battle somewhere in the future, in uncertainty. Her last stanzas often begin with "Then", "Then shall", "Then if", "So shall", "Till", or other similar words.

Such repetitive use of this same metaphor can be singled out as a flaw in Steele's hymnody. Hardly a hymn can be read without some mention of a "reviving ray" or some variation, and a "gloomy shade" or some variation. Critics might be tempted to argue that Steele does not possess a very fertile imagination; and though this argument could be countered with the claim that her barrenness in imagery is a function of her more profound mistrust of language, it is difficult to ignore that she does seem, in terms of imaginative figures, to be less versatile than Wesley or Watts.

On the topic of versatility, another fault comes to light. Compared to Charles Wesley, Steele uses little metrical and stanzaic variation. Of 144 hymns, 130 are in Long or Common Measure; of the

remaining 14, 4 are in Short Measure, and most of the remaining 10 in 8.8.6.8.8.6.. But again, this lack of variety could be (and probably is) a function of Steele's mistrust of poetry and language in general. If words themselves are inadequate in praising God, then the form in which they are cast can certainly make no difference.

Another possible flaw is that Steele is simply too repetitive in the words and phrases she does use. "Humble praise", "in vain", "the verdant mead", "verdant fields", "blissful choir", "raptur'd lays", "amazing", "cruel", "hymning angels", not to mention "blissful ray", "inspiring ray", "healing ray", "bright realms", and "gloomy shades", "dark scenes", "gloomy darkness" and the other light/darkness phrases looked at earlier, these words and phrases occur in nearly every hymn. When it is realized that Steele has 144 hymns as compared to Wesley's 9,000 or so, it is difficult to avoid saying that she is unnecessarily repetitive.

Another thing that one could fault Steele on is her preoccupation with the hymn itself. At least one out of every four of her hymns is concerned primarily with the inefficacy of language and hymnody, while numerous others allude and refer to this problem. On the one hand, this preoccupation makes her work interesting and significant as literature, but on the other it makes it somewhat wanting as hymnody. Almost all of Steele's hymns have now passed out of use, and this could be because she harbours too much uncertainty about the hymn itself. Again the distinction between hymn and poem is evident. As imaginative poems, many of Steele's hymns explore the possibilities of hymnody and language; they portray a devout mind struggling to praise its creator and to encompass infinite concepts with language — and painfully realizing the result. As Steele



explores the vicissitudes of praise, she tries to be religious enough to write a true hymn, yet intellectually honest enough to write a true poem in expressions that are self-revealing and that reveal the self. But poems like this, in her case at least, are usually not good hymns: they are not appropriate as shared and shareable expressions of praise and faithfulness to God. In her less intense moments Steele wrote some very good hymns, even though there is still usually the shadow of doubt cast over them. In her greatest moments she could write hymn and poem simultaneously. That is to say, she could write about her central obsession, and yet still produce a hymn that affirms God's love for man despite man's inability to praise. These hymns are examples.

Desiring to PRAISE GOD

I

ALMIGHTY Author of my frame,  
To thee my vital powers belong;  
Thy praise, (delightful, glorious theme!)  
Demands my heart, my life, my tongue.

II

My heart, my life, my tongue are thine:  
Oh be thy praise their best employ!  
But may my song with Angels join?  
Nor sacred awe forbid the joy?

III

Thy glories, the seraphic lyre  
On all its strings attempts in vain;  
Then how shall mortals dare aspire  
In thought, to try th' unequal strain?

IV

Yet the great Sovereign of the skies  
To mortals bends a gracious ear;  
Nor the mean tribute will despise;  
If offer'd with a heart sincere.

V

Great God, accept the humble praise,  
And guide my heart, and guide my tongue,  
While to thy name I trembling raise  
The grateful, though unworthy song (I, 1-2).

The tone modulates, beginning with the plea that her song be divinely

guided. But stanzas I and II are mirrored, suggesting that the writer, after 8 lines, is back where she began: her song may not "with Angels join". Stanza III, the centre of the hymn, expresses the realization that if angels cannot praise properly, then how can human beings? At the exact centre of the hymn is the expression "in vain"; the hymn seems to revolve around a centre of hopelessness. "Yet", stanza IV begins, the task is not without purpose: God listens, if the hymn is sincere. In the final stanza she abandons pleas and discussions, and begins to pray. But in spite of her prayer, the hymn ends with a recognition of her "unworthy song", words which are prophetic of the tone of most of her other hymns. The focus in this hymn is clearly on the hymn itself: her song, her tribute, her tongue, is mentioned in every stanza, often in every line. The reader is not led to any reflection beyond the hymn.

The point of view of this hymn is deliberately that of a sensitive and self-conscious hymn-writer. There are nine "my"'s in two stanzas, and the juxtaposition of exclamations, questions, and pleas reveals the emotions of the hymn's creator. Figurative language is spare indeed; this hymn of direct statement suggests that if simple diction is inadequate, then imaginative figures are even moreso. She spends the whole five stanzas, in effect, trying to get started on her hymn; therefore the realm of imagery remains a step beyond.

But the poetic quality of this hymn is considerable. It is subtle in its varying tone, clear in its diction and lack of figurativeness, yet it discusses this writer's perception of the act of hymn-writing. In one sense it is not really a hymn because it never quite begins; yet in another sense it is a hymn in its sincerity and intent. In short, it addresses the central problem in Steele's

poetic and religious sensibility, yet it seems to present itself as a hymn of praise nonetheless.

The next hymn is entitled 'PRAISE to the REDEEMER':

I

TO our Redeemer's glorious name,  
Awake the sacred song!  
O may his love, (immortal flame!)  
Tune every heart and tongue.

II

His love, what mortal thought can reach?  
What mortal tongue display?  
Imagination's utmost stretch  
In wonder dies away.

III

Let wonder still with love unite,  
And gratitude with joy;  
Be Jesus our supreme delight,  
His praise, our best employ.

IV

Jesus who left his throne on high,  
Left the bright realms of bliss,  
And came on earth to bleed and die —  
Was ever love like this?

V

Dear Lord, while we adoring pay  
Our humble thanks to thee,  
May every heart with rapture say,  
The Saviour dy'd for me.

VI

O may the sweet, the blissful theme,  
Fill every heart and tongue,  
Till strangers love thy charming name,  
And join the sacred song (I, 171-2).

In spite of its slight modulations, the tone is generally positive. It begins with an invocation, then states clearly the impossibility of the task, but then affirms that Christians should sing praises nonetheless. On this note it ends: the tone is positive in the face of the impossibility of the hymnal task. The focus is, as usual, on the "sacred song" being written, but Jesus is at the centre: stanzas I and II focus on the song and its impossibility, stanzas III and IV

focus upon Jesus, who can make all things possible, and stanzas V and VI refocus upon the song with the added exhortation to sing praises nonetheless. The implication is that if Jesus is at the centre of the song, spiritually if not literally, then it will be acceptable. The point of view is again that of a hymn-writer; this time, though the writer or singer is not more successful than in other hymns, she is at least not defeated by the task. The figurative language is again spare, with traces of the darkness/ light metaphor so central to Steele ("immortal flame", "bright realms").

Overall, the poetical quality of the hymn is high: its devices are understated but effective. Stanza I is characterized by exclamations, stanza II by questions, III and IV by declarations with Jesus at the centre, and V and VI are prayer. The writer, then, has tried several rhetorical approaches, but once contemplating Jesus gives it all up to prayer. There is a tension in this hymn between the restrictive form of Short Measure and the content, which is too boisterous to be contained. The ending is also characterized by tension: though it ends with uncertainty, the uncertainty is not too apparent. Once again, Steele has addressed herself to the central concern in her hymn writing.

The next hymn is 'Christ the Christian's Life':

I

O For the animating fire  
That tun'd harmonious Watts's lyre,  
To sweet seraphic strains!  
Celestial fire, that bore his mind  
(Earth's vain allurements left behind)  
To yonder blissful plains.

II

There, Jesus lives, (transporting name!)  
Jesus inspir'd the sacred flame  
And gave devotion wings;  
With heaven-attracted flight she soar'd,

The realms of happiness explor'd,  
And smil'd and pity'd kings.

III

Come sacred flame, and warm my heart,  
Thy animating power impart,  
Sweet dawn of life divine!  
Jesus, thy love alone can give  
The power to rise, the power to live;  
Eternal life is thine.

IV

If in my heart, thy heavenly day  
Has e'er diffus'd its vital ray,  
I bless the smiling dawn;  
But oh, when gloomy clouds arise,  
And veil the glory from mine eyes,  
I mourn my joys withdrawn.

V

Then, faith, and hope, and love decay;  
Without thy life-inspiring ray,  
Each cheerful grace declines;  
Yet, I must live on thee, my Lord,  
For still in thy unchanging word  
A beam of comfort shines.

VI

The vital principle within,  
Though oft depress'd with fear and sin,  
Can never cease to be:  
Though doubt prevails, and grief complains,  
Thy hand omnipotent, sustains  
The life deriv'd from thee.

VII

O come, thou life of every grace,  
Reveal, reveal thy lovely face,  
These gloomy clouds remove!  
And bid my fainting hope arise  
To thy fair mansions in the skies,  
On wings of faith and love.

VIII

There life divine no langour knows,  
But with immortal vigour glows,  
By joys immortal fed:  
No cloud can spread a moment's night,  
For there, thy smiles immense delight  
And boundless glory shed (II, 109-11).

Not unlike the other two hymns looked at, the tone in this one is positive but tainted with uncertainty. There are two invocations (stanzas I and III) as she prepares for the "seraphic strains";

but in stanzas IV and V she realizes the decadence of her spiritual state. In stanza VI there is a tenuous resolution, and in VII and VIII she, as usual, gives it all up to prayer. The tone wavers between confidence and doubt, peace and turbulence. Overall, however, one gets the impression that this is a hymn of praise nonetheless. In general terms, the focus is never off the hymn itself, especially as the reference to Watts hovers over the stanzas. Specifically, she focuses on the invocation in stanzas I and III; on herself and her spiritual problems in IV and V; and in VI, VII, and VIII, partly on God and partly on herself as the hymn unfolds between. The point of view is primarily that of a zealous would-be hymn-writer who desires not only to sing, but to follow God.

Metaphor is prominent in this hymn. Phrases such as "Sweet <sup>Stack/l.c.</sup> dawn", "vital ray", "smiling dawn", "gloomy clouds", "life-inspiring ray", "a beam of comfort" appear throughout Steele's work; they are part of the huge darkness/light battle that is her central poetic figure. The metaphor of the sun's rays being eclipsed and then seen is symbolic of her confidence in her own hymn-writing being now bright, now eclipsed, in oscillating fashion. This fusion of figurative language, direct statement, and sentiment makes this an effective hymn which examines its own nature.

It seems to be no accident that in the centre of this hymn she sees that the "gloomy clouds" "veil thy glory from mine eyes". This "veil of interposing night" is at the heart of Steele's poetic and religious consciousness. Her original hymns are particularly concerned with the problems of hymn-making, and are generally concerned with the problem of verbal expression itself. It remains to be seen how Steele addresses herself to the concept of scriptural

hymns.

IV

While Watts and Wesley take a scripture and expand, condense, respond to, colour, twist, and rewrite it, Steele is nowhere near so bold: being timid enough about her ability to write a hymn, and lacking confidence in the efficacy of language — and having a great reverence for the ~~Word~~ — she restricts herself deliberately <sup>Bible</sup> to presenting the scripture in poetic form, perhaps expanding it somewhat, and offering a prayer to end the hymn. Where she is innovative is that so many of her scriptural hymns, like her original ones, are concerned with the topic of hymn-writing itself.

Like writers before Watts, such as Barton, Baxter, and Ken, (and unlike Watts and Wesley) Steele is concerned to present the scripture in a form as close as possible to the Biblical in meaning. This she sees as her primary function as a scriptural hymn-writer. Her secondary functions are to expand it and make it palatable and provocative, and to use the scripture as a prelude to a prayer which usually ends the hymn. Her hymn entitled 'The GREAT PHYSICIAN' begins:

YE mourning sinners, here disclose  
Your deep complaints, your various woes;  
Approach, 'tis Jesus, he can heal  
The pains which mourning sinners feel (I, 15).

This is a poetical paraphrase of Luke 6:19: "And the whole multitude sought to touch him: for there went virtue out of him, and healed them all". In the next four stanzas she likens physical diseases to spiritual ones, speaking of the "fatal leprosy of souls", the "fever of the mind", and "freezing palsy". Stanza VII begins: "Dear Lord, we wait thy healing hand...", and this and stanza VIII are a prayer for

spiritual healing for all "dying sinners". Similarly, 'WEARY SOULS invited to REST' begins: "COME weary souls with sin distrest,/ The Saviour offers heavenly rest..." (I, 27), which is a rendering of Matthew 11:28: "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest". Steele goes on to elaborate upon how "Divine Compassion" can "cleanse your guilt" in stanzas II and III, and stanzas IV and V which begin, "Lord", and "Dear Saviour", are prayers for guidance. This pattern is repeated in the next hymn, 'THIRSTING after GOD', where the scripture is given in one stanza, an elaboration in successive stanzas, and stanzas V and VI, the first of which begins, "O may I thirst for thee, my God", constitute the closing prayer. Many of Steele's scriptural hymns are constructed according to this program with little variation: in the first stanza the scripture is paraphrased, in the next two or three stanzas there is an elaboration of it, and in the last two or three there is a prayer for guidance or blessing. (me)

At times, however, she deviates slightly from this program and makes a modest attempt at figurative expansion of the scripture, once it is paraphrased. 'The transforming VISION of GOD' begins:

MY God, the visits of thy face  
Afford superior joy,  
To all the flattering world can give,  
Or mortal hopes employ (I, 32).

This is a modified paraphrase of Psalms 17:15: "As for me, I will behold thy face in righteousness: I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness". In subsequent stanzas she prays that God will let her soul see "happier scenes above" where "Jesus reigns", and she begins to speculate in a visionary fashion about "endless day", "perfect life", and "bliss without alloy"; yet by the ninth stanza she realizes that all this is "bliss too high for mortal thought",



therefore her vision is illusory. The closing stanzas are, as usual, her prayer that she "shall awake to bliss", implying that since she has been asleep, her vision was nothing more than a dream. At the end she says, "I sink in death's cold sleep", and a hymn that held promise at one point of being an edifying visionary rapture has now fallen off into melancholy illusion. Similarly, in 'CHRIST the PHYSICIAN of SOULS' the scripture is given and then she attempts to expand it by using vivid figurative language, a practise she engages in very rarely:

Sin like raging fever reigns,  
With fatal strength in every part;  
The dire contagion fills the veins,  
And spreads its poison to the heart (I, 63).

She then speaks of Christ's "heavenly smiles" as the "sovereign balm", and his "dying blood" as the "sacred flood" that will "ease thy pain, and heal thy woe". But this language, though vivid, is not unconventional, and again the reader is left with the thought that Steele could have given freer reign to her imagination, but has timidly held it in check.

This timidity could be the product of her obsession with the thought of being unable to write hymns which praise God in a proper and efficacious fashion. Even in scriptural hymns she is unsure that her use of language conveys the scripture adequately. She continually asks that

While golden harps, and angel tongues  
Resound immortal lays,  
Great God, permit our humble songs  
To rise and mean thy praise (I, 66).

Though she sees it necessary that "humble souls, approach your God/  
With songs of sacred praise..." (I, 89), she invariably goes on, as she does in this hymn, to say:

Great God, to thy almighty love,  
What honours shall we raise?

Not all the raptur'd songs above  
Can render equal praise.

She sees it a pompous claim that a human being should even speak to God at all: "AND can my heart aspire so high,/ To say, 'my Father God'" (III, 132)! Yet the attempt is made, even though it is destined to failure.

Steele, perhaps unknowingly, emphasizes the failure more than the attempt. She begins 'The INCARNATE SAVIOUR' by exclaiming: "AWAKE, awake the sacred song,/ To our incarnate Lord..." (I, 85), yet by the end she realizes that though man owes this debt to God, he can never pay it:

What glory, Lord, to thee is due?  
With wonder we adore;  
But could we sing as angels do,  
Our highest praise were poor (I, 86).

As in the original hymns, in the scriptural ones it is better, it seems, simply to adore God's Word and remain in reverent silence:

THE loving kindness of the Lord,  
(Delightful theme!) demands my lays:  
Thou, worthy to be lov'd, ador'd,  
O teach my heart to sing thy praise!

In vain my heart with pleasure tries,  
My God, to count thy mercies o'er;  
So numerous and so bright they rise,  
I gaze, I wonder, I adore (III, 77)!

Silence seems preferable to language, because language is a fallible and clumsy instrument. In another poem Steele had written:

Praise, a tribute ah how poor!  
Language, what is all thy store,  
My boundless obligations to display (II, 13)?

And in her hymn 'The FAITHFULNESS of God' she echoes this:

ALMIGHTY Sovereign, gracious Lord,  
How full, how firm, thy royal word!  
Thy love, how condescending and how kind!  
Nor can the power of language more,  
With all its force, with all its store,  
Confirm the sacred deed, or more securely bind (II, 84).

Just as Steele's original hymns are concerned with her inability to write original hymns, so also are her scriptural hymns concerned with her inability to write scriptural hymns. This problem is right at the heart of her hymnody, and very often finds clear expression, as when she begins to write a hymn on Haggai. ii. 7 and stops midway to observe the futility of this task:

How should our songs, like those above,  
With warm devotion rise!  
How should our souls, on wings of love,  
Mount upward to the skies!

But ah! the song, how cold it flows!  
How languid our desire!  
How faint the sacred passion glows,  
'Till thou the heart inspire (I, 77)!

And the indication throughout Steele's hymnody, as in her poetry, is that God does not "the heart inspire". In fact, unlike Wesley's God, who is an ever-present friend, and Watts's, who is an omnipresent but distant phenomenon, Steele's God seems to be an ever-absent and only vaguely perceptible being. Watts could see God "thro' a glass"; Wesley could see God "face to face"; but Steele thinks it necessary to "die to see thy face":

But ah how far from mortal sight,  
The Lord of glory dwells!  
A veil of interposing night  
His radiant face conceals (I, 156).

"For by the grace of God I am the Reviver of  
ADORATION among ENGLISH-MEN".<sup>1</sup>

A religious enthusiast familiar with the hymns and liturgy of his time, Christopher Smart wanted to reform worship in the Church of England. But he saw as equally important the necessity of presenting his visionary praises of God. Unlike Steele and Cowper, Smart rarely doubted that he was saved, and he believed as a corollary that his songs of praise were sincere and acceptable to God. For Smart the act of writing a hymn is that of putting into words and stanzas his imagery and sensations of God's divine world. He writes: "For my talent is to give an impression upon words by punching, that when the reader casts his eye upon 'em, he takes up the image from the mould which I have made".<sup>2</sup> After looking briefly at Smart's life, this chapter examines the hymns in the neglected volume entitled A Translation of the Psalms of David, Attempted in the Spirit of Christianity, and Adapted to the Divine Service. Hymns and Spiritual Songs for the Fasts and Festivals of the Church of England. A Song to David (1765).

I

Christopher Smart was born on 11 April 1722 at Shipbourne, Kent. His father, steward to William Viscount Vane's estate, died in 1733 and young Christopher was sent to Raby Castle near Durham, where he was cared for by the Vanes, and to Durham Grammar School.<sup>3</sup> At Raby

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Smart, Jubilate Agno. The Poetical Works of Christopher Smart, vol. 1, ed. Karina Williamson (Oxford, 1980), 63. All quotations from Jubilate Agno are from this edition.

<sup>2</sup> Jubilate Agno, ed. Williamson, I, 69.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Hunter, ed., The Poems of the Late Christopher Smart, M.A. (Reading, 1791), pp. vi-vii.

Castle he met Henrietta, Duchess of Cleveland, a frequent visitor who was so impressed by Smart that she gave him a stipend of £40 a year in order that he might continue his education.<sup>4</sup> In October 1739 he entered Pembroke College, Cambridge, as a sizar. During the next few years he was "the pride of Cambridge, and the chief poetical ornament of that university...".<sup>5</sup> He graduated B.A. in 1742, won the Craven Scholarship for Classics in 1743, was made Fellow of his college in 1745, and was given his M.A. in 1747.

During his years at Cambridge, Smart had fallen into habits of drunkenness and debt, so in 1747 Cambridge warned him,<sup>6</sup> and soon he was divested of his post. He left on respectable terms in the spring of 1749<sup>7</sup> and went to London to begin his newly chosen career as a writer. Between 1750 and 1753 Smart contributed to various magazines, and submitted poems to Cambridge for the Seatonian Prize,<sup>8</sup> which he won four out of five times between the time of its installation in 1750, and 1754.<sup>9</sup> Aside from these successes, and his secret marriage

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<sup>4</sup> G.J. Gray, "A Bibliography of the Writings of Christopher Smart, with Biographical References", Transactions of the Bibliographical Society, No. 6 (1903), 269.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Anderson, ed., A Complete Edition of the Poets of Great Britain (London, 1793), vol. XI, 117.

<sup>6</sup> See Paget Toynbee and Leonard Whibley, eds., The Correspondence of Thomas Gray (Oxford, 1935), I, 273-275.

<sup>7</sup> In 1748 Smart had returned to Cambridge. He left again in 1749, this time with the sanction of his college.

<sup>8</sup> An advertisement prefixed to the 1792 edition of *Musae Seatonianae* describes the Seaton Prize. The objective is to write an essay on "one or other of the perfections or attributes of the Supreme Being, and so the succeeding years, till the subject shall be either Death, Judgement, Heaven, Hell, Purity of Heart, &c. or whatever else may be judged... most conducive to the honour of the Supreme Being and recommendation of virtue". The Seaton Prize was first offered in 1750.

<sup>9</sup> Rolland B. Botting, "Christopher Smart in London", Research Studies of the State College of Washington, VII, (March, 1939), 8.

in 1753 to Anna Maria Carnan,<sup>10</sup> the years "1752 through 1756 were comparatively poor ones for Smart",<sup>11</sup> and his penchant for drunkenness and disorderly behaviour had moved Thomas Gray to prophesy in a letter to Thomas Warton: "All this, you see, must come to a Jayl, or Bedlam, and that without any help, almost without pity".<sup>12</sup>

Gray's prophesy proved true. Late in 1755 Smart became mentally disoriented and was confined by his family, probably at home. The exact dates and duration of his confinement in asylums are uncertain, but the Committee Book for St. Luke's says that the certificate for admission of Smart was read "on 18 March 1757; and that after some delays he was brought up for examination and admitted on 6 May".<sup>13</sup> From 1756 to 1763 he was variously confined, either in St. Luke's, at his friend John Newbury's house, at home, or in other asylums.

The precise nature of Smart's mental infirmity is unknown. However, the behavioural oddities are documented by Smart and others. Samuel Johnson writes to James Boswell: "My poor friend Smart showed disturbance of his mind by falling upon his knees and saying his prayers in the street or in any other unusual place".<sup>14</sup> Mrs. Thrale says that Smart's madness "shewed itself only in a preternatural excitement

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<sup>10</sup> Though Smart probably married Anna in 1753, the exact date is not known. However, in the Gentleman's Magazine of July 1754, Smart contributed a verse invitation to a Mrs. T "to dine upon a Couple of Ducks on the Anniversary of the Author's Wedding Day". Christopher Devlin in Poor Kit Smart (London, 1961), p. 65, says that Smart married in 1752, but admits that "a certain mystery still surrounds the exact time and place of the event".

<sup>11</sup> Sophia B. Blaydes, Christopher Smart as a Poet of His Time (The Hague, 1966), p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> Cited in Devlin's Poor Kit Smart (see note 10), p. 40. Hereafter referred to as Devlin.

<sup>13</sup> Cited in Devlin, p. 88.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

to prayer, which he held it as a duty not to controul or repress — taking au pied de la lettre our blessed Saviour's injunction to pray without ceasing".<sup>15</sup> Smart evidently prayed obnoxiously in public; he writes in Jubilate Agno: "For I blessed God in St. James's Park till I routed all the company".<sup>16</sup> He claims on more than one occasion: "For to worship naked in the Rain is the bravest thing for the refreshing and purifying the body".<sup>17</sup> This kind of behaviour had become the distasteful trademark of Methodists and other "enthusiastic" religious groups. Sentencing a Methodist preacher for similar behaviour in 1757, Northingham, the Lord Chancellor, said: "Bigotry and enthusiasm have spread their baneful influence far and wide, and the unhappy objects of the contagion almost daily increase. Of this, not only Bedlam, but most of the private madhouses, are melancholy and striking proofs".<sup>18</sup>

Enthusiasm, "the fact of being possessed by a god" (O.E.D.), characterizes Smart's view of himself as worshipper and poet: to him these roles were virtually synonymous. In an age influenced by Cartesian, Lockean, and Humean epistemologies, and by Deistic and Newtonian notions about the nature of God, the concept of divine frenzy and of being possessed by God was thought dangerous by the clergy and the secular arm alike. This is reflected in literature, where poets and critics feared the results of an uncontrolled imagination.<sup>19</sup>

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15

Ibid.

16

Jubilate Agno, ed. Williamson, I, 26.

17

Ibid., 67. At another point in the Jubilate Agno Smart writes: "For it is good to let the rain come upon the naked body unto purity and refreshment". Williamson, I, 102.

18

Cited in Devlin, p. 81.

19

See Donald F. Bond, "The Neo-Classical Psychology of the Imagination", English Literary History, IV, #4 (Dec. 1937), 245.

Neoclassical art results from the act of imposing a finished form upon the content of the imagination or associationist faculty of the mind. In general terms, Neoclassical writers are interested in the finished artistic product, while the late eighteenth-century poets and Romantics are interested in the psychological and imaginative processes of production. Smart is closer to this latter class: to portray the imagination as it spontaneously responds to God and His created world is an important objective in his hymnal writing.

In a poem entitled 'Reason and Imagination', Imagination, who says, "'I make and shift the scenes of thought'",<sup>20</sup> sees the necessity of marrying Reason, whose "shrewd deductions" make his "Spirits waste their strength...".<sup>21</sup> Imagination warns Reason:

You ply your studies 'till you risk  
Your senses — you should be more brisk —  
The Doctors soon will find a flaw,  
And lock you up in chains and straw.

Excess of reason, not imaginaton, leads to lunacy on this occasion. Imagination, on the other hand, leads one to "stupendous heights" of "vast conception", making one able, as he maintains in another poem, to "Confess his [God's] presence, and report his praise".<sup>22</sup>

Unlike Anne Steele, Smart believes that the poet can hymn to God and can offer praise as pure as that offered by nature or angels. In 'On the Eternity of the Supreme Being' (1750) he writes:

May then the youthful, uninspired Bard  
Presume to hymn th'Eternal; may he soar  
Where seraph, and where Cherubin on high  
Resound th' unceasing plaudits, and with them

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<sup>20</sup> 'Reason and Imagination'. In Norman Callan, ed., The Collected Poems of Christopher Smart, 2 vols. (London, 1949), I, 79. This edition is hereafter referred to as Callan.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., I, 80.

<sup>22</sup> 'On the Immensity of the Supreme Being'. Cited in Callan, I, 227.



In the grand Chorus mix his feeble voice?  
He may — if Thou. . . . .  
. . . . . deign t'assist,  
GREAT POET of the UNIVERSE, his song.<sup>23</sup>

The "GREAT POET" evidently does assist; Smart goes on to speak of the universe and God before and after creation. If God is the great poet of the universe, the worshipper is a poet, on a smaller scale, whose praises are an answering harmony to the giant symphony of the created world. In 'On the Immensity of the Supreme Being' (1751) Smart claims that his praise is inspired and harmonizes with the praise given by nature:

ONCE more I dare to rouse the sounding string,  
The poet of my God — Awake my glory,  
Awake my lute and harp — my self shall wake,  
Soon as the stately night-exploding bird  
In lively lay sings welcome to the dawn.  
List ye! how Nature with ten thousand tongues  
Begins the grand thanksgiving, Hail, all hail,  
Ye tenants of the forest and the field!  
My fellow subjects of th' eternal King,  
I gladly join your Mattins, and with you  
Confess his presence, and report his praise.<sup>24</sup>

II

In 1763 was published 'Proposals for Printing, by Subscription, a New Translation of the Psalms of David', which included samples of the new translation. Notice of this translation was also included in the small edition of A Song to David, published at this time. Michael Phillips has suggested that this separate edition may have been a form of further advertisement for a much larger work which would include the translation of the Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs, and, as its final section, A Song to David. Furthermore, he suggests

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<sup>23</sup> Callan, I, 223.

<sup>24</sup> Callan, I, 227.

that Smart intended that these three works, the Psalms, the Hymns, and A Song to David, be read together, as they comprise successive parts of a single work, integrally related in a variety of ways and aptly concluding in the epiphany of A Song to David.<sup>25</sup> However, none of Smart's editors has preserved this unity of the text. It will be seen that Smart wanted this unity, and that A Translation of the Psalms of David, Attempted in the Spirit of Christianity, and Adapted to the Divine Service. Hymns and Spiritual Songs for the Fasts and Festivals of the Church of England. A Song to David (1765) is an importantly innovative and unified artifact.

Critical reception of Smart's volume of 1765 was cold and cursory. Only two contemporary "reviews" exist. The Critical Review (Sept. 1765) lavished encomium on the psalm translations of James Merrick (who published his version at the same time Smart did) and the reviewer simply used Smart as a foil for Merrick by saying smugly that "the Psalmist is at last delivered from a crowd of wretched poets, who had overwhelmed his native grace and dignity under the rubbish of their despicable rhimes". The Monthly Review (Sept. 1765) gave six laudatory pages to Merrick, and of Smart said evasively that "Some unhappy circumstances in this gentleman's life, seem to have given his latter writings a peculiar claim to a total exemption from criticism. Accordingly, we chuse to be silent, with regard to the merit of the present publication". Neither of these reviews acknowledge the Hymns or A Song to David. Evidently, Smart's drunkenness, dissipation, and apparent insanity undermined his position as a religious writer in the eyes of many of his contemporaries. While

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<sup>25</sup> The unity of this volume of Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs, and A Song to David, was brought to my notice by Michael Phillips during the course of supervision. v. W.H. Bond's edition of Jubilate Agno (1954), p. 20; and John Butt in The Oxford History of English Literature, vol. 8 (Oxford, 1979) 140.

Merrick's work went into numerous editions, Smart's remained unknown. Dryden Leach, the printer, had Smart arrested, shortly after the appearance of the book, for a debt of £86. The book was never reprinted.

In 1791 Smart's nephew, Christopher Hunter, edited The Poems of the Late Christopher Smart. Hunter was concerned for his uncle's reputation and felt that the work he had produced while in the asylum should be omitted. Therefore, the Psalms, Hymns, and A Song to David do not appear. Of these poems Hunter writes in a footnote that they "were written after his confinement, and bear for the most part, melancholy proofs of the recent estrangement of his mind".<sup>26</sup>

Two years later Robert Anderson published Smart's works in A Complete Edition of the Poets of Great Britain. The existence of the Psalms and Hymns is not acknowledged. Similarly, in 1810 Alexander Chalmers omits the Psalms and Hymns from his edition.

In 1825 Smart's daughter, Elizabeth LeNoir, made an effort to bring the Hymns to the attention of the literary world. However, she printed only eight of them in an appendix to her own Miscellaneous Poems. She also altered the hymns, in spite of her claim in a note that they have originality and fire.<sup>27</sup>

The Romantics and Victorians rarely mention the Psalms or Hymns. In 1924, when Edmund Blunden edited Smart, only nine of the hymns were included. It was not until 1949 that the Psalms, Hymns, and A Song to David were fully printed. But the editor, Norman Callan, prints A Song to David in volume one, and the Psalms and Hymns in volume two, separating texts that originally appeared together. The

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<sup>26</sup> Christopher Hunter, ed., The Poems of the Late Christopher Smart, M.A. (Reading, 1791), p. xliii.

<sup>27</sup> MS. Montague, d. 14., fol. 710 in the Bodleian Library. Cited in Robert Brittain, ed., The Poems of Christopher Smart (Princeton, 1950), pp. 285-86. Hereafter referred to as Brittain.

reader is not informed that these three texts once comprised a single work.

In 1980 appeared the first volume of a definitive edition of Smart. In her preface Karina Williamson says that "the second volume will contain the other religious works published in the period from 1763 to 1771, apart from Smart's translation of the psalms (1765) which will appear separately in the third volume".<sup>28</sup> This means that once again the text is to be separated.

Evidently, Smart wanted these three works read together. In publishing a translation of the psalms, a new set of hymns, and A Song to David, together in this order, Smart takes Christian liturgy to a new stage. The first two parts of the book correspond to the historical and literary stages of the development of liturgical praise (psalms, then hymns), with the third part, A Song to David, intended as a new stage, an epiphany, of praise.

The evidence in support of the suggestion that Smart wanted his book of 1765 to be read as one work is substantial. First, he published the three works together in one volume; this alone should encourage critics and editors to read them as such. Secondly, the page numbers run consecutively from the beginning of the volume, through the three works, to the end; and though Smart may not have supervised the pagination, the three works were evidently treated as one. Thirdly, the Psalms, Hymns, and A Song to David were all composed at about the same time (between March 1759 and August 1760)<sup>29</sup> though

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<sup>28</sup> Williamson's edition of Smart, I, v.

<sup>29</sup> The most convincing discussion of the chronology of these works is Arthur Sherbo's "The Probable Time of Composition of Christopher Smart's Song to David, Psalms and Hymns and Spiritual Songs". Journal of English and Germanic Philology, 55 (1956), 41-57.

their publication was plagued by delays which probably encouraged Smart to publish A Song to David in 1763 in order to attract subscriptions for the projected book. Fourthly, there are common images, allusions, and references pointing back and forth throughout the three parts, that make a unified reading more rewarding than a disjointed one. Fifthly, Smart deliberately linked the poems in the book by the device known as epanastrophe: the last line, word, or idea of one poem becomes the first line, word, or idea, in some form, of the next. And in this way also the Psalms are connected to the Hymns, the Hymns to A Song to David, and A Song to David back to the Psalms.

There was no need for Smart to link the Psalms epanastrophically; their order is already determined in the Bible. In the Hymns, however, the links are made obvious. Hymn II ends, "'This is my HEIR of GRACE,/ In whose perfections I rejoice";<sup>30</sup> the next hymn begins, "GRACE, thou source of each perfection...". Hymn VIII ends, "Pure as purity refine", and hymn IX begins, "O Purity, thou test...". Hymn XV ends, "Revelation is our own,/ Secret things are God's alone"; hymn XVI begins, "If Jesus be reveal'd,/ There is no truth conceal'd...". One hymn ends by referring to God as "beginning" and "end"; the next hymn opens "ALMIGHTY Jesu! first and last...". One hymn ends with "godly rest"; the next opens with "peace". One ends with "Crowds of either sex; the next begins "MANY male and female names...". One ends with "the very world he made"; the next opens with "O MAKER! of almighty skill...". Smart is concerned to link the 35 hymns together.

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<sup>30</sup> "CIRCUMCISION". In A Translation of the Psalms of David, Attempted in the Spirit of Christianity, and Adapted to the Divine Service. Hymns and Spiritual Songs for the Fasts and Festivals of the Church of England. A Song to David. (London, 1765), p. 160. All citations from Smart's Psalms, Hymns, and A Song to David are from this edition and are given parenthetically by page number in the text, unless the hymn number is mentioned.

He is also concerned to link the three parts of the book into one. The last psalm ends with Smart exhorting mankind to praise and adore God and to appear before Christ, "To Christ's renown repair... And soar by praise and pray'r" (153). The first hymn opens, "WORD of endless adoration,/ Christ, I to thy call appear..."(159). The last hymn ends with a reference to David and the belief that praise reaches into all corners of the world:

By the hope which prophets give,  
By the psalmist, 'he shall live',  
Sav'd for a sufficient space  
To perform his work of grace.

Though the heav'n and earth shall fail,  
Yet his spirit shall prevail,  
Till all nations have concurr'd  
In the worship of the WORD. (183)

And A Song to David begins with reference to David's great praising and with the belief that his praise permeates the whole world:

O THOU, that sit'st upon a throne,  
With harp of high majestic tone,  
To praise the King of kings;  
And voice of heaven-ascending swell,  
Which, while its deeper notes excell,  
Clear, as a clarion, rings:

To bless each valley, grove and coast,  
And charm the cherubs to the post  
Of gratitude in throngs;  
To keep the days on Zion's Mount,  
And send the year to his account,  
With dances and with songs:...(187).

Collectively, the Psalms, Hymns, and A Song to David is Smart's attempt to become the new David, to fill the calendar "year" with "songs". In the volume he re-enacts the historical progression from metrical psalm to hymn, and then goes on to something new: he writes psalms that are unlike those of other translators, then hymns that are unlike those of other hymn-writers, and then a poem that is startlingly imaginative. He gives new possibilities to the psalm,

the hymn, and ultimately, to the literature of praise.

### III

Paying his debt to the liturgical and historical past, Smart begins the book by translating the psalms. It is instructive to compare briefly a typical psalm by Smart to one by his contemporary and rival, James Merrick, whose version, appearing at the same time, received the critical attention.

Merrick renders Psalm 150 as follows:

PRAISE, O praise, the Name divine;  
Praise it at the hallow'd Shrine;  
Let the Firmament on high  
To its Maker's praise reply:  
Let his Acts, and Pow'r supreme,  
To your Songs suggest a theme:  
Be the harp no longer mute;  
Sound the trumpet, touch the lute;  
Wake to life each tuneful string;  
Bring the pipe, the timbrel bring.  
Let the organ in his praise  
Learn its loudest notes to raise,  
And the cymbal's varying sound  
From the vaulted roof rebound.  
All who vital breath enjoy,  
And in one great Chorus join;  
Praise, O praise, the Name divine.<sup>31</sup>

Though Smart and Merrick had different intentions, Merrick's psalm is nothing more than a line by line, literal rendering; he has chopped the actual psalm into evenly-balanced tetrameter lines, kept his word order monotonously repetitive, and has enslaved the psalm to a rhythm that lulls rather than awakens. Psalm 150, the last in the Bible, is intended to be a lofty and sublime finale to David's poetry; Merrick's version hardly conveys this intention.

Smart's version of Psalm 150 reads:

HOSANNA! praise the Lord, and bless  
According to his holiness,

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<sup>31</sup> James Merrick, The Psalms, Translated or Paraphrased in English Verse (Reading, 1765), p. 374.

And let your praises tow'r;  
O bless him in sublimest strains,  
Where in the firmament he reigns  
Of his exalted pow'r.

The works of his Almighty hand,  
Which on eternal record stand,  
With hymns of thanks review;  
On his majestic glory dwell,  
Whose rays all excellence excel,  
And give the praises due.

The best and boldest blast be blown  
From trumpet of triumphant tone  
Abroad his praise to send;  
His name upon the lute be sung,  
With citherns to his praises strung,  
The work of joy attend.

Take up the timbrel, let the sound  
Extol him as the dances bound,  
And let the pipes conspire  
To give his praises to the wind  
And let your organ's voice be join'd  
By minstrels on the wire.

Well order'd to a just degree  
Of their most perfect melody  
With cymbals praise his name  
And let the cymbals full and strong  
Together and with all their song  
Aloud his praise proclaim.

Let all things that have breath to breathe  
From heav'n above, from earth beneath,  
To Christ's renown repair;  
O give him back your breath again,  
Put all the life into the strain,  
And soar by praise and pray'r (153).

Smart takes poetic liberties with this psalm. First, he triples its length. Secondly, he infuses it with rhetorical devices such as alliteration, pleonastic emphasis, exclamation — all of which make this sublime epiphany effective aurally. Thirdly, he embellishes the psalm with powerful adjectives, with his own coloured detail, and with a tone of inspired ecstasy. Last, he casts it into the musical 8.3.6.8.8.6. stanza, giving it an energetic yet melodious rhythm. In several ways it is a fuller imaginative experience than Merrick's version.



Unlike other translators, who harbour a certain awe for the sanctity of David's actual words, and are reluctant to tamper with them, Smart is willing to inject his own imagination into the psalms and thereby make them into something new. For other writers the object is to translate literally, into metre, David's holy words; for Smart the object is to translate by imaginatively re-creating. Smart wanted his psalms to live as poems: he is the "reviver of adoration", not simply its sustainer. In writing The Psalms of David Attempted in the Spirit of Christianity Smart takes a first step toward becoming the new innovative and sublime David.

The second step is his hymns. Though Smart's hymns have been all but neglected for nearly two centuries,<sup>32</sup> recent critics have begun to look at them. In Poems of Christopher Smart (1950) Robert Brittain comments on their poetical devices. He laments that "These poems, perhaps the most valuable of his work ~~aside~~ from the Song,  
apart have suffered almost complete neglect from the time of their publication until the present".<sup>33</sup> Brittain's analysis is succinct:

All these elements — the heavy use of material and methods derived from Hebraic poetry, the attempt to achieve in English something of the strange felicity of Horace, the baroque elaboration produced by complex arrangement of ideas, and the telescoping of images into tightly packed units — make of the Hymns and Spiritual Songs a fascinating study in poetics.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> In 1900 Thomas Seccombe remarks: "Smart also wrote a number of hymns, some of which are fine examples of devotional feeling, touched but rarely, however, with the note, almost of sublimity, which leaps from stanza to stanza of the Song to David". The Age of Johnson (1748-1798) (London, 1900), p. 258. E.G. Ainsworth and C.E. Noyes say that these "Hymns...include Smart's finest poetry, save for the great Song; But their merit has too often been underestimated. Curiously enough, the only republication of a part of them until our own day was made by Smart's daughter, Mrs. LeNoir...". Christopher Smart: A Biographical and Critical Study (Missouri, 1943), p. 150.

<sup>33</sup> Brittain, p. 285.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., pp. 291-2.

Karina Williamson notes that Smart's hymns are not characterized by simplicity and plainness of diction, as were those of his contemporaries, and she concludes that Smart did not see hymn-writing as a theological project, but rather as an exercise of creative skill; Smart's work differs from that of other evangelical hymn-writers of the eighteenth century.<sup>35</sup> Though Williamson assumes that eighteenth-century hymn-writers other than Smart were concerned to deviate as little as possible from scripture, her article does point to some of the extraordinary qualities of Smart's hymns.

Recent critics are virtually unanimous in their praise of the hymns. Sophia Blaydes claims in 1966 that "Some of Smart's better poetry is contained in this small volume... . For artistic and flawless technique the poems are second only to the Song...".<sup>36</sup> In the following year Arthur Sherbo looks at the hymns and notices Smart's "observant eye for the details of nature" and concludes that "For sheer length and sustained excellence nothing Smart had written hitherto could compare with the combined Psalms and Hymns and Spiritual Songs".<sup>37</sup> In the same year appears a short, incisive commentary on the hymns in Patricia Spack's The Poetry of Vision. Spacks notes that Smart is more concerned to illuminate than to observe, and she demonstrates that Smart's hymns are unlike others because of their visionary nature: they "gain much of their power from a vision turned freshly outward...".<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Karina Williamson, "Christopher Smart's Hymns and Spiritual Songs", Philological Quarterly, XXXVIII (1959), 421-2.

<sup>36</sup> Sophia B. Blaydes, Christopher Smart as a Poet of His Time (The Hague, 1966), p. 93.

<sup>37</sup> Arthur Sherbo, Christopher Smart: Scholar of the University (East Lansing, 1967), pp. 221-2.

<sup>38</sup> Patricia Meyer Spacks, The Poetry of Vision: Five Eighteenth-Century Poets (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), p. 165.

Moira Dearnley discusses the topical and historical allusions in the hymns, and indicates that "Smart directs all his poetic genius towards reproducing in imagery the abundant fertility of spring"<sup>39</sup> and other seasons. And Jean Wilkinson in 1973 compares Smart's festival hymns favourably to those of George Herbert and John Keble.<sup>40</sup> Her study, however, is mainly concerned with doctrinal content. Notwithstanding the brief surges of encomiastic commentary on Smart's hymns, they remain unexamined in detail.

They are innovative in many ways. Unlike others, who write scriptural hymns and hymns "of meer Human Composure", Smart writes hymns on topics in the Christian calendar year. Unlike others, who generally look outside of themselves at things as they are — "the whole Realm of Nature" in Watts's case, the Christian's "face to face" friendship with Christ in Wesley's, or the "faint attempts of art" in Steele's — Smart looks out at things as they could be, when magnified and coloured by a divinely-inspired and sensitive imagination. According to Smart, the hymn should ideally be an imaginative view of God's world of infinite possibility.

Smart writes in 'EPIPHANY':

Muse, through Christ the Word, inventive  
Of the praise so greatly due;  
Heav'nly gratitude retentive  
Of the bounties ever new.

Fill my heart with genuine treasures  
Pour them out before his feet,  
High conceptions, mystic measures,  
Springing strong and flowing sweet (160-61).

Smart's muse is his imagination, and this imagination is inspired by

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<sup>39</sup> Moira Dearnley, The Poetry of Christopher Smart (London, 1969), p. 278.

<sup>40</sup> Jean Wilkinson, "Three Sets of Religious Poems", Huntington Library Quarterly, Vol. no. 36 (1973), 203-26.

Christ, the Poet of poets. Smart sees all of creation as Christ's great poem, and he prays that he can re-create the marvellous scenes of creation in his mind, and that his muse, through Christ, can turn these "genuine treasures" into divinely inspired hymns. When his imagination is opened to the influx of both Creator and created, he can give birth to the "High conceptions" and "mystic measures" that become hymns. He prays, then, that he can be a vessel that Christ fills with imaginative perceptions of creation:

Let us pray — by self denial  
Every sense to Christ resign,  
Till we from the fiery trial  
Pure as purity refine (164).

When the hymn-writer is filled with "High conceptions", his task is not to contrive an artful and doctrinal piece, but merely to relate what is already in his imagination, to "restore" the perceptions into "measures" so that "fellow-servants of the Lord" can appreciate them:

O come, celestial watch and ward,  
As in the closet I adore  
My fellow-servants of the Lord,  
To whom these measures I restore (177).

Filled with the beauties of creation, and resigning his senses to Christ, the writer's imagination becomes the world idealized; and this world is dedicated to praising its Creator:

I speak for all — for them that fly,  
And for the race that swim;  
For all that dwell in moist and dry,  
Beasts, reptiles, flow'rs and gems to vie  
When gratitude begins her hymn (162).

The writer's imagination and God's created world must become one.

The hymn is the identification of what is within and what is without:

But if the work be new,  
So shou'd the song be too,  
By every thought that's born  
In freshness of the morn;  
Every flight of active wings,  
Every shift upon the strings (164).

When the imagination and God's creation fuse into one entity (the hymn), divine truth is the result. A hymn is adequate praise for God — contrary to what Steele maintained — and the hymn-writer does not need to concern himself with contriving hymns because he is simply reciting the truth which is within and without:

To whom the sacred penman cries,  
And as he heav'nwards lifts his eyes,  
With meekness kneels him down;  
Then what inspiring truth indites,  
His strengthen'd memory recites,  
The tale of God's renown. (168).

Smart wants his muse to infuse life into hymn and hymn into life; his imagination and God's world, if fused into a unity, constitute true "praise and pray'r":

Muse, accordant to the season,  
Give the numbers life and air;  
When the sounds and objects reason  
In behalf of praise and pray'r (169).

Though what is written must be an experience of God's world, it is inevitably an imaginatively re-created, idealized experience of God's world. Even with revision or reconsideration, this is how God's world appears:

The text is full, and strong to do  
The glorious subject right;  
But on the working mind's review  
The letter's like the spirit true,  
And clear and evident as light (170).

Smart wanted his hymns to be imaginative experiences of God's world, "true", "clear", and "evident as light". He was not concerned to construct a hymn of doctrine or of structured praise; rather, he wanted simply to offer the reader a window <sup>o</sup>/<sub>o</sub> God's world as it is recreated by the human imagination. In so doing he hoped that the reader, instead of just reading, singing, or thinking about God's wonder, could actually experience it through the hymn.

By opening his senses and sensibility to the created world, Smart

produces hymns that are full of exaggeratedly imaginative visions, particularly images and metaphors. His most recurrent figures are of three kinds: images of nature that are highly sensuous, even poly-synaesthetic; deceptively simple metaphors that are dense and compacted with meaning; and images that are visually detailed.

Many of Smart's images are so sensuous that they have a poly-synaesthetic quality. In 'ST. PHILIP AND ST. JAMES' he begins:

NOW the winds are all composure,  
But the breath upon the bloom,  
Blowing sweet o'er each enclosure,  
Grateful off'rings of perfume (168).

The "breath" appeals to the tactile sense; the "bloom" appeals to the sense of sight; the wind that is "blowing sweet" like "perfume" appeals to the senses of touch and smell. The slight breath of wind on the bloom, then, excites the visual, tactile, and olfactory senses simultaneously. Add to this the alliteration of "s" in the first line, simulating a slight breeze, and "b" in the second, simulating the sudden yet gentle breath on the bloom, and the stanza appeals also to the ear. This unlaboured stanza synthesizes the responses of several senses, as does this:

Tansy, calaminth and daisies,  
On the river's margin thrive;  
And accompany the mazes  
Of the stream that leaps alive (168).

The brilliant motley of blue, purple, yellow, white, and silver in the first line is stimulating visually. ~~In the three following lines are two conflicting images: the flowers thrive, and they float downstream, helpless and dying, on the vivacious current.~~ The "s" and "t" sounds in lines 3 and 4 allow the stream to be heard as well as seen, and the image of the soft petals bouyed smoothly and swiftly on the rushing current appeals to conflicting tactile senses — softness (the petals) and sharpness (the leaping stream). It is as

though the scene were happening, rather than being described.

Another example is:

Praise him ye flow'rs that serve the swarm  
With honey for their cells;  
Ere yet the vernal day is warm,  
To call out millions to perform  
Their gambols on your cups and bells (163).

Lines 1 and 2 have visual appeal, line 3 has gentle tactile appeal, and lines 4 and 5 excite the visual, tactile, olfactory, and aural senses at once: the "z" alliteration in "millions", "gambols", and "bells" simulates the sound of the millions of buzzing bees; the presence of "cups and bells", and the bees' closeness to them, call forth the aromatic sense; the gentle gambols of the bees on the petals focus one's attention on the gentle tactility of the scene; and the scene as a whole allows various visual possibilities.

Another example is:

Boreas now no longer winters  
On the desolated coast;  
Oaks no more are riv'n in splinters  
By the whirlwind and his host (181).

In this stanza Smart evokes sensations of cold, loneliness, stillness, movement, and implies wind and violence. Again the alliteration of "s" in lines 1 and 2 allows one to hear winter winds; the sound of the word "splinters" onomatopoeically captures the crisp coldness and the sudden violence of the whirlwind, which word itself is onomatopoeic. Though Smart's images may not match Keats's "hush'd, cool-rooted flowers, fragrant-eyed", they are highly sensuous and appeal to several senses at once. It is unusual that they are found in hymns, and that they were written more than fifty years before Keats.

It is evident in these stanzas that Smart's use of poetic language is fresh; it seems closer to the Romantics than to the Augustans. Smart's imaginative vision, as revealed in his hymns, seems not to

fit the possibilities and limits of Augustan diction conventionally used. Many of his words, "winds", "bloom", "daisies", "stream", "flow'rs", "vernal day", "Boreas", though very general, are common Augustanisms; but the way in which these are juxtaposed and interwoven with startlingly animated modifiers, predicates, and verbs, infuses them with dynamism and an immediately felt poetical appeal. The "wind" is an acutely felt "breath upon the bloom"; the "daisies" thrive "on the river's margin"; the stream "leaps alive"; the "vernal day" calls out millions of bees who perform; "Boreas" finds a new place to winter and act violently. Smart's diction itself may not be unusual, but the way in which it is used gives it an animated quality and sensuous appeal that is unusual for his time.

A second kind of figure that Smart often uses is the densely meaningful, often paradoxical, metaphor. 'EPIPHANY' begins:

GRACE, thou source of each perfection,  
Favour from the height thy ray;  
Thou the star of all direction,  
Child of endless truth and day (160).

The phrase "star of all direction" signifies that "Grace", the "source of each perfection", shines out everywhere in the universe; "GRACE" is the all-permeating source of all virtues. It also means, however, that its shine and rays direct the universe; all that exists is directed by it. Yet this all-permeating and all-directing star is the offspring of two intangible entities: "truth and day". So although it seems to be an ultimate ontology, it is actually the creation of the grander yet less identifiable entities of truth and day. It is both great and small, progenitor and offspring, directing and directed. The whole metaphor allows one to see "GRACE" symbolized as an inanimate object and as a living being, as a tangible and an intangible entity; "GRACE" is the omnipotent yet elusive source and



end of Christian experience.

Another complex and densely meaningful metaphor occurs in 'THE PRESENTATION OF CHRIST IN THE TEMPLE'. Speaking of the church, Smart says:

And yet it was not true and grand  
The Godhead to contain;  
By whom immensity is spann'd,  
Which has eternal in his hand  
The globe of his supreme domain (162).

The metaphor is of the Godhead signifying the immeasurable qualities of the universe, and it acquires its meaning and effect by being, in a sense, a non-metaphor: by imposing metaphorical outlines on immensity (spann'd) and heaven (held in his hand), the Godhead becomes so huge as to be unable to be drawn as a clear metaphor or image.

The Godhead cannot be contained because the Godhead contains everything; yet if it contains infinities then it cannot itself have limits. With no outlines there is no real figure, no clear metaphor. ~~Yet there is a daguerrotype of a surreal figure.~~ Unlike the Augustan poets, Smart is using language, in this instance, to sketch impressionistically and intuitively, rather than to create a picture with the clarity of Thomson, or to state an idea with the precision of Pope.

A similarly dense ~~and paradoxical~~ metaphor occurs in the description of the Christ child in 'THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD AND SAVIOUR JESUS CHRIST':

O the magnitude of meekness!  
Worth from worth immortal sprung;  
O the strength of infant weakness,  
If eternal is so young (181)!

Here meekness is equated with magnanimity, strength with weakness, and youth with eternity, these being the basic New-Testament paradoxes informing Christian living. "Worth from worth immortal sprung" signifies that this worthy child has sprung from an immortal Worthy, and also that its life will be characterized by one worthy act springing

from another, leading to the great worthy act that leads to immortality for himself and humankind. By eternal being young (line 4) Smart means that this eternal entity is still young, and also that eternity itself is newly born for all and grows as the child grows. This hymn ends by saying that Christ "Is incarnate, and a native/ Of the very world he made" (181). He is flesh yet spirit, a native yet the Creator, supernatural yet a natural part of the world. Smart consistently tries to get the most out of his words and figures, setting them in fresh juxtapositions and relations to each other, and showing their imaginative possibilities.

A third kind of figure deployed by Smart is the colourful and detailed image, even of seemingly purposeless phenomena:

Beeches, without order seemly,  
Shade the flow'rs of annual birth,  
And the lily smiles supremely  
Mention'd by the Lord on earth.

Couslips seize upon the fallow,  
And the cardamine in white,  
Where the corn-flow'rs join the mallow,  
Joy and health, and thrift unite (169).

In the first stanza Smart presents images of things which seem purposeless but serve a specific function and are important in the Lord's eyes. In the second, it is implied that the small harmonies of natural phenomena have their counterparts in larger and more general terms. In the next stanza it is made clear that everything, no matter how trivial, has not only its function, but its beauty:

Ev'n the hornet hives his honey,  
Bluecap builds his stately dome,  
And the rocks supply the coney  
With a fortress and a home (169).

Smart continually points to the tiniest and least conspicuous aspects of the created world and gives them energy and meaning:

Spinks and ouzles sing sublimely;  
'We too have a Saviour born';

Whiter blossoms burst untimely  
On the blest Mozaic thorn (181).

And,

Browsing kids, and lambkins grazing,  
Colts and younglings of the drove,  
Come with all your modes of praising,  
Bounding through the leafless grove (161).

The nouns in these passages represent active and energetic organisms in God's dynamic world. Beeches "shade", the "lily smiles supremely", "Couslips seize", "corn-flow'rs join", the "hornet hives", "Bluecap builds", the "rocks supply", "Spinks and ouzles sing sublimely", "blossoms burst", "lambkins" are "grazing". Smart brings together many active scenes and creatures in these stanzas: each of these phenomena is seen in action rather than described, and each is infused with a divine energy which allows it, and thus the whole created world, to continue in its impeccably ordained fashion.

In terms of the diction of nature poetry, Smart seems Augustan, yet he becomes almost Romantic in suffusing nature with an autonomous energy and dynamism. In a sense, he appears to be poised significantly between the two schools. Augustan and Romantic nature poets differ in their attitudes toward nature in that the latter are concerned with nature as it is perceived by man, the former with nature as it controlled or made perfect by man. After describing the season of spring, James Thomson writes that "Man superior walks/ Amid the glad Creation".<sup>41</sup> Alexander Pope describes the "dreary Desart and a gloomy Waste" of Windsor-Forest in "Ages past", and then rejoices in the new monarch's magical ability to transform it into an Eden where "Order in variety we see,/ And where, tho' all things differ, all agree...".<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> James Thomson, Spring. A Poem. (London, 1728), p. 11.

<sup>42</sup> Alexander Pope, 'Windsor-Forest', lines 15-16. In Pope: Poetical Works, edited by Herbert Davis (London, 1966), p. 37.

He continues: "At length great ANNA said — 'Let Discord cease!'/  
She said, the world obey'd, and all was peace!"<sup>43</sup> In Augustan verse,  
nature often culminates in man. Nature is "to advantage dress'd";  
it is a finished scene. But in Romantic poetry nature is described  
as a human mind perceives it: nature is sublime, immediate, and  
ever-changing. Standing between these two positions, Smart depicts  
nature as God has animated it for man.

Many of Smart's hymns are, in part, descriptions of nature,  
as are many Augustan poems. But the emphasis is shifted. While the  
Augustan apex of nature is man, and nature is controlled by man,  
Smart's apex of nature is God, and nature is given life by God. For  
Smart it is God, not man, who superior walks amid the glad creation  
and who has commanded that discord cease. Smart's nature is a giant  
symphony dedicated to praising God; nature, therefore, is given  
the ability actively to praise God, rather than remain a silent and  
sculptured scene:

All the scenes of nature quicken,  
By the genial spirit fann'd;  
And the painted beauties thicken  
Colour'd by the master's hand (169).

Smart gives nature this quickened energy and active presence by  
his use of sound, language, and certain poetical devices. He deploys  
alliteration, word juxtapositions, and uses conventional diction in  
new ways, giving his verse a fresh dimension.

In one hymn he writes:

Praise him thou sea, to whom he gave  
The shoal of active mutes;  
(Fit tenants of thy roaring wave)  
Who comes to still the fiends, that rave  
In oracles and school disputes (162).

In this scene the sea performs actions toward a divinely ordained  
purpose, and in so doing praises its Creator. The alliteration of

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., lines 327-328.

"s" and "o" sounds in the opening lines gives the crashing sea an effectively heard presence. The juxtaposition of "active" and "mutes" suggests that the fish praise by movement instead of sound; they are fit tenants for the roaring sea because they are so active and because they could never be heard above its roar anyway. The scene is pregnant with motion and energy: the sea "comes to still the fiends", the fiends "rave"; and the fish, though silent, are immersed in a roar. Smart's vision of the sea in this hymn goes beneath the surface to the combating elements that animate it. The scene is controlled, but the control comes through the interaction of energies rather than through the stillness of phenomena. The sea, shoal, wave, and fiends are all, in spite of their apparent discord, exhorted to praise the Creator, who made them what they are, and their praises combine into an ordained harmony.

With the Creator superior amid creation, nature appears to man as a supremely beautiful phenomenon:

Nature's decorations glisten  
Far above their usual trim;  
Birds on box and laurels listen,  
And so near the cherubs hymn.

Once again nature's energies are vividly realized, but this time in a more sedate and composed manner. The crisp alliteration in lines 1 and 3 accentuates the brilliance and beauty of the scene, and the juxtaposing of "far above" and "their usual trim", which last word already denotes a state of order and perfection, conjures by hyperbole a scene that surpasses beauty and order. Nature itself and all its minutiae exist in a beautiful harmony and listen to the hymns of the nearby cherubs. In this scene there is Smart's characteristic energy, but it manifests itself through beauty and order, rather than activity.

For Smart, nature is infused with a divine energy that makes all

its minut<sup>ae</sup> capable of contributing to the huge symphony of praise. In one stanza with characteristic alliteration, active verbs, and significant word juxtaposition in the last line (suggesting that even colour has energy and moods) he points to the beauty and grandeur of God's natural world:

Gentle nature seems to love us  
In each fair and finish'd scene,  
All is beauteous blue above us  
All beneath is cheerful green.

Describing nature in his hymns Smart revivifies the Augustan vision by making the scene live, rather than sculpturing it. He sees into the life of nature rather than just nature itself. As a visionary, Smart fills his hymns with imaginative figures: sensuous and poly-synaesthetic images, semantically concentrated metaphors, and minutely detailed images. These occur continually. Smart's hymns are imaginative visions through which he enables the reader to experience the world anew, infused with the divinity of God and with limitless possibility for His glory. Witnessing Smart's imagination in the process of perceiving the world in this way, the reader is encouraged to do so, and to share in Smart's visionary experience, thus himself becoming divinely inspired through the reading or singing of the hymn. Other hymn-writers try to write about common, shared experiences of a congregation of people; Smart, on the other hand, tries to engage others in his vision, in his perception of the divinity of every aspect of creation. Instead of applying himself to the reader's world, Smart wants to bring the reader into his world.

On the topic of point of view, then, little more need be said. Smart focuses simply on the activity of his imagination. He is not so much concerned with looking at the world, speaking about God, or thinking about or living like God; rather, he is concerned with

speaking God, thinking God, and living God. That is to say, God and the created world become alive within his imagination:

Take ye therefore what ye give him,  
Of his fulness grace for grace,  
Strive to think him, speak him, live him,  
Till you find him face to face (159).

The tone in Smart's hymns is always positive. He shows the reader an ideal world of divine beauty and perfection. He maintains that anyone can praise God adequately and can see the beauty of the created world, because anyone can use his or her imagination. Thus, to imagine is to praise, and everyone is capable of this:

Thou too gaily grave domestic,  
With whose young fond childhood plays,  
Held too mean for verse majestic,  
First with me thy Maker praise (161).

Praising God and being saved by grace are activities that are open to everyone. In fact, God acts toward man even before man acts toward God:

'Tis He that puts all hearts in tune  
With strings that never jar,  
And they that rise to praise him soon,  
Shall win the MORNING STAR (166).

This tone and attitude toward religion is never absent in Smart's hymns. This is totally unlike Steele, somewhat like Wesley, and similar to Watts but with an important difference. While Watts (and Wesley too) puts great confidence in God, Smart puts his in man. Smart never mentions man's sin, depravity, or any other flaw that the three previous writers dote upon. Smart ignores man's flawed nature because he is more concerned to imagine what man can be, rather than what he is.

Smart's hymns seem to have a few problems which could severely limit their appeal to congregations. First, there are too many difficult words: "disencumber", "embassage", "flagitious", "emulation",

"promulgate", "sempiternal", "grutching", "obstemious", "propagate", and "perdition" presumably would have been awkward for worshippers, and poetically cumbersome. From another point of view, however, such words may not constitute a problem. It was noticed earlier that Smart tries to get as much semantic and poetical value as possible from his language. These words could be further examples. He is evidently more concerned with the sounds, connotations, associations, and poetic effects of words than their status as proper diction. Smart could be suggesting that, just as there is no limit to what has divine purpose and effect in God's world, so also there is no limit to what has divine purpose and effect in God's hymns. These words may be inappropriate in terms of an ordinary congregation, but perhaps Smart is less concerned to cater to the ordinary than to challenge imaginatively the extraordinary. Smart appears to be trying to extend the boundaries of hymnal diction.

A second "problem" is Smart's practise of writing hymns of propaganda. Interspersed with the great imaginative hymns are 'KING CHARLES THE MARTYR', 'THE KING'S RESTORATION', 'THE ACCESSION OF KING GEORGE III', and 'THE FIFTH OF NOVEMBER'. These hymns are full of anti-Catholic, anti-Spanish, anti-Commonwealth invective, and pro-royalist, pro-navy, pro-British sentimentality. Lines like

Yea, the God of truth and pow'r  
Blesses Englishmen this hour... (171)

and

We thank thee for Eliza's reign,  
When to the realm thy spirit spake;  
And for thy triumphs on the main  
By Howard, Frobisher, and glorious Drake... (172)

and

Our gallant fleets have won success,  
Christ Jesus at the helm,



And let us therefore kneel and bless  
The sovereign of the realm... (178)

seem to jar with the other pieces in the volume. But in their context they are not without purpose and justification. For Smart, God's divinity lives and breathes in every aspect of the world, including Eliza, Frobisher, Drake, or Britain's gallant fleets. In writing these hymns Smart is at once following tradition and is again emphasizing that God's divinity and the domain of hymn-writing have no bounds. Hymns about George III's accession are as important as hymns about 'EPIPHANY' and 'THE CRUCIFIXION'. They are components of Smart's pantheistic view of the world.

A third "problem" is that the hymns are often too long to be of congregational use. 'EPIPHANY', one of Smart's best hymns, is seventeen stanzas long; 'EASTER DAY' is thirty-two stanzas; 'ST. PHILIP AND ST. JAMES', another good hymn, is nineteen. In fact, very few are less than twelve stanzas long. This means that a compiler of hymns would have to delete many stanzas to include a hymn by Smart. Considering the coherence of their imaginative vision, this would be to their detriment. But again, it is difficult to suppose that Smart was ignorant of the fact that his hymns were too long to be useful to congregations. It seems more likely that he ultimately did not care whether or not his hymns were actually used in the traditional way. While he probably would like to have seen his work used in churches, it seems that he liked even more the freedom to create the kind of imaginative hymns he wanted to create.

It would seem, then, that Smart can only be faulted from a practical point of view. His hymns are rarely shared expressions of a congregation; they are too imaginatively complex to appeal to general readers. But perhaps Smart was deliberately creating hymns

which he knew would have little practical use. Smart seems concerned to be the great hymnal poet, rather than the great poetical hymnist: he wants to rejuvenate hymnody, to give the hymn greater poetical liberties, rather than channel his poetical talents into the hymn as a conventional and practical genre.

Smart's type of hymn itself is a rejuvenation of something traditional. Writing hymns on topics of the Christian calendar was not initiated by Smart, but his innovation is in his portrayal of the calendar, the added dimensions that he gives to it. Other writers, when using calendar topics, focus upon the Biblical exegesis of the occasion and simply try to present it for singing. Smart goes beyond this. One way is by giving memorable poetical significance to the occasion by sketching that portion of the year as it would have been known by his readers. That is to say, if the occasion occurs in the spring, Smart devotes several stanzas to depicting that season in all its imaginative colour and divine energy, thus giving the Christian year, as a whole, a vivacity that other hymnal calendars seem to lack.

The first half of 'THE NATIVITY OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST' depicts the season of summer:

GREAT and bounteous BENEFACTOR,  
We thy gen'rous aid adjure,  
Shield us from the foul exactor,  
And his sons, that grind the poor.

Lo the swelling fruits of summer,  
With inviting colours dy'd,  
Hang, for ev'ry casual comer,  
O'er the fence projecting wide.

See the corn for plenty waving,  
Where the lark secur'd her eggs —  
In the spirit then be saving,  
Give the poor that sings and begs.

Gentle nature seems to love us  
In each fair and finish'd scene,

All is beauteous blue above us,  
All beneath is cheerful green.

Now when warmer rays enlighten  
And adorn the lengthen'd time,  
When the views around us brighten,  
Days a rip'ning from their prime.

She that was as barren reckon'd,  
Had her course completely run,  
And her dumb-struck husband beckon'd  
For a pen to write a son.

This extended description of summer serves several purposes. First of all, by describing a scene that every reader would know, and by associating it with such a distant phenomenon as John's nativity, Smart makes that incident more presently felt and realizable than a mere account of the nativity could make it. The event ceases to be a mark on the calendar and begins being associated with the natural phenomenon of summer: the event lives, rather than being regarded as long since dead. Secondly, the description of summer has suggestive symbolic dimensions. Phrases such as "swelling fruits", "inviting colours", "Hang", "casual comer", "warmer rays", "lengthen'd time", "her eggs", and "rip'ning" symbolize sexual fruition and consummation, which are what the hymn is really about: the barren woman beckons for her husband's "pen" and later gives birth to a son. The stanzas give memorable sensual dimensions to the event of John's birth. Thirdly, the words and phrases already pointed out, along with "projecting wide", "corn for plenty waving", "beauteous blue", and "cheerful green", though not serious departures from traditional diction, are placed in such close proximity to each other that they obtain a cumulative effect of pulsating energy. This kind of language of natural description makes the hymn a new and vivacious view of the occasion of St. John's nativity.

In 'THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD AND SAVIOUR JESUS CHRIST' several

stanzas are, as usual, devoted to natural description:

Nature's decorations glisten  
Far above their usual trim;  
Birds on box and laurels listen,  
And so near the cherubs hymn.

Boreas now no longer winters  
On the desolated coast;  
Oaks no more are riv'n in splinters  
By the whirlwind and his host.

Spinks and ouzles sing sublimely,  
'We too have a Saviour born',  
Whiter blossoms burst untimely  
On the blest Mozaic thorn.

Again, these seemingly digressive stanzas have several purposes.

On a practical level they, like the summer stanzas in the hymn about John the Baptist, describe what every reader is familiar with: the icy glistening of winter, its stillness and potential force. Thus the season of winter takes on additional meaning when so closely and consciously associated with Christ's birth. Secondly, the stanzas have suggestive significance. Nature glistens more noticeably than usual, birds listen to the hymn, Boreas has withdrawn his forces, spinks and ouzles sing, and blossoms burst untimely on the thorn. All natural phenomena have been awakened from their usual ways and now are preparing to move into a new scheme of things. Nature is not just nature anymore; with Christ's birth it takes on new significance. Thirdly, Smart has depicted an energetic stillness that bespeaks nature's potential power and energy which will be devoted to the "god all-bounteous, all creative" that is coming into the world at that moment.

As well as infusing the hymns with meaningful natural description, Smart infuses them, and the collection as a whole, with topical references and events. 'KING CHARLES THE MARTYR' comes between 'THE CONVERSION OF ST. PAUL' and 'THE PRESENTATION OF CHRIST IN THE TEMPLE';

'THE KING'S RESTORATION' comes between 'TRINITY SUNDAY' and 'ST. BARNABAS'; 'THE ACCESSION OF KING GEORGE III' comes between 'ST. LUKE' and 'ST. SIMON AND ST. JUDE'; 'THE FIFTH OF NOVEMBER' comes between 'ALL SAINTS' and 'ST. ANDREW'. In working these occasions into the Christian year, Smart is suggesting that they are as divinely ordained as any other event, even 'EASTER SUNDAY'. Christian experience is not something above or separate from daily living and the more earthly concerns like politics; it encompasses everything from the "Most Holy" to the "spinks and ousles".

The collection as a whole is one unbroken praise of God. As mentioned earlier, every hymn is joined to the next by epanastrophe. What is even more significant is that the collection begins: "WORD of endless adoration..." (159) and it ends "In the worship of the WORD". The collection becomes "endless adoration"; there is no beginning, no end, and no stopping point or intermission in the praising of God: one's day-to-day, festival-to-festival, and year-to-year life is praise, the never-ending activity of all living things. And this activity is sustained eternally by God: "Though the heav'n and earth shall fail,/ Yet his spirit shall prevail..." (183).

This verbal continuity urges one to consider what Smart intended in practical terms. How appropriate is it to consider that such a series of hymns should be broken up and edited for congregational use? The evidence as a whole seems to suggest that one is confronted with a consciously and deliberately arranged cycle of hymns meant to be read or sung together in the order given. Perhaps Smart wanted either the whole work used or none of it at all.

Smart's production of 1765 is quite unlike other contributions to Christian liturgy. In it he writes psalms that are quite innovative,

hymns that have unusual imaginative and poetic dimensions; and in his third project, which will be looked at briefly, he lets his psalmody and hymnody evolve into a new form of praise in which he summarizes his renovation of the liturgy and becomes the new David.

From the opening stanza of A Song to David it is evident that Smart's praising of David's ability to praise is a central concern:

I

O THOU, that sit'st upon a throne,  
With harp of high majestic tone,  
    To praise the King of kings;  
And voice of heav'n-ascending swell,  
Which, while its deeper notes excell,  
    Clear, as a clarion, rings:...

III

O Servant of God's holiest charge,  
The minister of praise at large,  
    Which thou may'st now receive;  
From thy blest mansion hail and hear,  
From topmost eminence appear,  
    To this the wreath I weave (187).

It is Smart who is weaving the new wreath of praise. He now spends at least a dozen stanzas illuminating, in a series of spotlights, David's qualities; he then illuminates the many entities about which David sang, from "The world — the clust'ring spheres", to "fishes — ev'ry size and shape". Significantly, these are very similar to the things Smart sang about in his hymns. He goes on to write stanzas full of bright and animated images, perhaps drawing attention to his ability to surpass David in terms of bombarding and intoxicating the senses with poetry:

XXII

Trees, plants, and flow'rs — of virtuous root;  
Gem yielding blossom, yielding fruit,  
    Choice gums and precious balm;  
Bless ye the nosegay in the vale,  
And with the sweetners of the gale  
    Enrich the thankful psalm.

s/ ✓

Smart, like David, is able to intoxicate the soul by perceiving divinity in everything, so that the senses are excited to the pitch of ecstasy. It is this religious and sensuous excitement, not the dogmatic writings of theologians and ecclesiastical hymn-writers, Smart insists, that enables the soul to appreciate the infinite phenomenon of God:

XLIX

O DAVID, highest in the list  
Of worthies, on God's ways insist,  
The genuine word repeat.  
Vain are the documents of men,  
And vain the flourish of the pen  
That keeps the fool's conceit.

L

PRAISE above all — for praise prevails;  
Heap up the measure, load the scales,  
And good to goodness add:  
The gen'rous soul her Saviour aids,  
But peevish obloquy degrades;  
The Lord is great and glad (191).

Smart wants David to "repeat" the "genuine word" of inspired praise through Smart, the "reviver of adoration". In every one of the next twenty stanzas Smart repeats, as he does in his hymns, that it is "for ADORATION" that everything from "rip'ning canes" to "vinous syrup cedars" to "rich almonds" exist and fulfil their own function, and in so doing praise their creator. In these stanzas the word "ADORATION" moves down through the stanza twice, occurring one line lower each time. This suggests that all ranks of being inevitably praise their God by their very existence, no matter how high or low on the chain of being. Smart has said this throughout his psalms and hymns; these stanzas become an imaginative summary, a graphic tying together, of his religious writing. At the end of this catalogue he discusses various qualities of God's universe, and when he comes to

the quality of "strength", it is the praiser of God who is the strongest: "But stronger still, in earth and air,/ And in the sea, the man of pray'r..."

Smart is suggesting that he is the chief "man of pray'r"; he soars into an unprecedented height of religious sublimity and excitement while still retaining the hymnal form:

LXXXIV

Glorious the sun in mid career;  
Glorious th'assembled fires appear;  
    Glorious the comet's train:  
Glorious the trumpet and alarm;  
Glorious th'almighty stretch'd-out arm;  
    Glorious th'enraptur'd main:

LXXXV

Glorious the northern lights astream;  
Glorious the song, when God's the theme;  
    Glorious the thunder's roar:  
Glorious hosannah from the den;  
Glorious the catholic amen;  
    Glorious the martyr's gore:

LXXXVI

Glorious — more glorious, is the crown  
Of Him, that brought salvation down... (194).

In A Song to David Smart praises the great Biblical poet and at the same time introduces himself, by virtue of what came before in the volume (new psalms and new hymns) and the new "scholar of the Lord". A Song to David is a new song, a new way of singing, for Christians: in it Smart focuses not on the rational or pious traits in the religious consciousness, as do other hymn-writers; rather he focuses on the irrational elements in the religious consciousness, on the emotions, sensations, and imaginative visions that excite and animate a praiser or poet of God. Thus Christian writing becomes the activity of the heightened and magnified human imagination, as does Christian praise. And this activity is totally acceptable to



God, and totally performable by man:

Ye that for psalmody contend,  
Exert your trilling throats;  
And male and female voices blend  
With joys divinest notes.

By fancy rais'd to Zion's top  
Your swelling organ join;  
And praise the Lord on every stop  
Till all your faces shine (167).

It remains to consider representative examples from amongst Smart's hymns. The following, which have been quoted, in part, in the chapter, are chosen in order that one can appreciate the wider context of the stanzas discussed earlier.

#### HYMN VI

##### THE PRESENTATION OF CHRIST IN THE TEMPLE

- 1 Preserver of the church, thy spouse,  
From sacrilege and wrong,  
To whom the myriads pay their vows,  
Give ear, and in my heart arouse  
The spirit of a nobler song.
- 2 When Hiero built, from David's plan,  
The house of godlike style,  
And Solomon, the prosp'rous man,  
Whose reign with wealth and fame began,  
O'erlaid with gold the glorious pile;
- 3 Great was the concourse of mankind  
The structure to review;  
Such bulk with sweet proportion join'd  
The labours of a vaster mind,  
In all directions grand and true.
- 4 And yet it was not true and grand  
The Godhead to contain;  
By whom immensity is spann'd,  
Which has eternal in his hand  
The globe of his supreme domain.
- 5 Tho' there the congregation knelt  
The daily debt to pay,  
Tho' there superior glories dwelt,  
Tho' there the host their blessings dealt,  
The highest GRACE was far away.
- 6 At length another fane arose,  
The fabrick of the poor;

- And built by hardship midst her foes,  
One hand for work and one for blows,  
Made this stupendous blessing sure.
- 7 That God should in the world appear  
Incarnate — as a child —  
That he should be presented here,  
At once our utmost doubts to clear,  
And make our hearts with wonder wild.
- 8 Present ye therefore, on your knees,  
Hearts, hands resign'd and clean;  
Ye poor and mean of all degrees,  
If he will condescend and please  
To take at least what orphans glean —
- 9 I speak for all — for them that fly,  
And for the race that swim;  
For all that dwell in moist and dry,  
Beasts, reptiles, flow'rs and gems to vie  
When gratitude begins her hymn.
- 10 Praise him ye doves, and ye that pipe  
Ere buds begin to stir;  
Ev'n every finch of every stripe,  
And thou of filial love the type,  
O stork! that sit'st upon the fir.
- 11 Praise him thou sea, to whom he gave  
The shoal of active mutes;  
(Fit tenants of thy roaring wave)  
Who comes to still the fiends, that rave  
In oracles and school disputes.
- 12 By Jesus number'd all and priz'd,  
Praise him in dale and hill;  
Ye beasts for use and peace devis'd,  
And thou which patient and despis'd,  
Yet shalt a prophecy fulfill.
- 13 Praise him ye family that weave  
The crimson to be spread  
There, where communicants receive,  
And ye, that form'd the eye to grieve,  
Hid in green bush or wat'ry bed.
- 14 Praise him ye flow'rs that serve the swarm  
With honey for their cells;  
Ere yet the vernal day is warm,  
To call out millions to perform  
Their gambols on your cups and bells.
- 15 Praise him ye gems of lively spark,  
And thou the pearl of price;  
In that great depth or caverns dark,  
Nor yet are wrested from the mark,  
To serve the turns of pride and vice.

16 Praise him ye cherubs of his breast,  
The mercies of his love,  
Ere yet from guile and hate profest,  
The phenix makes his fragrant nest  
In his own paradise above (162-3).

[stanza numbering mine]

Smart begins this hymn apparently with a view to discussing the topic of Christ's presentation in the temple. The first eight stanzas discuss the topic, but in the transition from stanza 8 to 9, Smart's imagination suddenly begins to exhort the natural world to praise God. The excited repetition of "Praise him", in succeeding imagistic and colourful stanzas, turns the hymn into a meditative chant rather than a traditional hymn. Much of the hymn is simply a collection of imaginative figures: some are highly sensuous images (stanzas 11, 13, and 14); some are metaphors, dense with meaning and somewhat abstract (stanzas 4 and 15); and some are starkly visual and detailed images (stanzas 9, 10, 13, and 15).

The focus is complex. The first scenes he focuses on are historical (stanzas 2 to 6), then he focuses on a scene of the present (stanzas 7 and 8), then suddenly expands to include the whole created world as his imagination perceives it. At the end he turns from this world and looks to the "paradise above". The hymn, then, is a kind of imaginative progress. The point of view is that of a searching poetic imagination looking out at the world. The tone is ecstatic and excited: it conveys a response to the panoramic glory of creation and the belief that every reptile and flower is loved by God and praises God. Even when Smart mentions humankind, it is a worshipping and blessed humankind he sees. Technically, the hymn is excellent: one hardly notices the rigid metre and stanzaic structure because of the colourful and wide-ranging content; the rhyme is perfect and musical; and repetition is astutely used (stanzas 5, 7, and the rest

beginning with "Praise him"). This hymn, which begins soberly and historically, and then expands into a vision of praise, is an example of how Smart imaginatively perceives the limitless possibilities of God's world.

HYMN XIII

ST. PHILIP AND ST. JAMES

- 1 NOW the winds are all composure,  
But the breath upon the bloom,  
Blowing sweet o'er each inclosure,  
Grateful off'rings of perfume.
- 2 Tansy, calaminth and daisies,  
On the river's margin thrive;  
And accompany the mazes  
Of the stream that leaps alive.
- 3 Muse, accordant to the season,  
Give the numbers life and air;  
When the sounds and objects reason  
In behalf of praise and pray'r.
- 4 All the scenes of nature quicken,  
By the genial spirit fann'd;  
And the painted beauties thicken  
Colour'd by the master's hand.
- 5 Earth her vigour repossessing  
As the blasts are held in ward;  
Blessing heap'd and press'd on blessing,  
Yield the measure of the Lord.
- 6 Beeches, without order seemly,  
Shade the flow'rs of annual birth,  
And the lily smiles supremely  
Mention'd by the Lord on earth.
- 7 Couslips seize upon the fallow,  
And the cardamine in white,  
Where the corn-flow'rs join the mallow  
Joy and health, and thrift unite.
- 8 Study sits beneath her arbour,  
By the bason's glossy side;  
While the boat from out its harbour  
Exercise and pleasure guide.
- 9 Pray'r and praise be mine employment,  
Without grudging or regret  
Lasting life, and long enjoyment,  
Are not here, and are not yet.

- 10 Hark! aloud, the black-bird whistles,  
With surrounding fragrance blest,  
And the goldfinch in the thistles  
Makes provision for her nest.
- 11 Ev'n the hornet hives his honey,  
Bluecap builds his stately dome,  
And the rocks supply the coney  
With a fortress and a home.
- 12 But the servants of their Saviour,  
Which with gospel-peace are shod,  
Have no bed but what the paviour  
Makes them in the porch of God.
- 13 O thou house that hold'st the charter  
Of salvation from on high,  
Fraught with prophet, saint, and martyr,  
Born to weep, to starve and die!
- 14 Great to-day thy song and rapture  
In the choir of Christ and WREN  
When two prizes were the capture  
Of the hand that fish'd for men.
- 15 To the man of quick compliance  
Jesus call'd and Philip came;  
And began to make alliance  
For his master's cause and name.
- 16 James, of title most illustrious,  
Brother of the Lord, allow'd;  
In the vineyard how industrious,  
Nor by years nor hardship bow'd!
- 17 Each accepted in his trial,  
One the CHEERFUL one the JUST;  
Both of love and self-denial,  
Both of everlasting trust.
- 18 Living they dispens'd salvation,  
Heav'n-endow'd with grace and pow'r;  
And they dy'd in imitation  
Of their Saviour's final hour.
- 19 Who, for cruel traitors pleading,  
Triumph'd in his parting breath;  
O'er all miracles preceding  
His inestimable death (168-9).

[stanza numbering mine]

Smart's imagination seems to have overpowered what ostensibly set out to be a discussion of St. Philip and St. James. The hymn begins with highly sensuous images and becomes an inspired vision of God's

world. It is only after fourteen stanzas of visionary rapture that Philip and James are introduced; in one sense it is almost as if Smart could have omitted the first fourteen stanzas because the last five are an adequate hymn about Philip and James. But he did not. Smart lets his imagination provide its vision of Creator and created, even if the result is a hymn that seems largely wide of its topic.

The first fourteen stanzas are filled with sensuous and dense images and metaphors, while the concluding five are more directly stated attributes of the hymn's two subjects. The point of view is again Smart's imagination looking out into the created world. The tone, as usual, is positive. Technically the hymn works well: the metre and stanzaic structure are again barely noticeable because the reader is so occupied with the beauty, colour, and sensational appeal of the imagery therein; the poetic voice strikes a neat balance between coolness and excitement (stanzas 10, 13, and 16); and on the whole the hymn seems perfectly organic and natural despite having only five out of nineteen stanzas mention St. Philip and St. James. The imagistic stanzas are a dynamic presentation of the specialized functions of natural phenomena: every thing, no matter how minute, has its function in God's design. And this is exactly true of Philip and James, "One the CHEERFUL one the JUST". In its widest application the hymn is about the thorough benevolent design of God's universe; and Philip and James are not so much holy heroes as simply divinely ordained components of the design, as are the couslips and hornets. Once again Smart has revived a religious occasion with a life and dynamism that make it imaginatively stimulating and memorable.

Christopher Smart believed himself to be the "Reviver of ADORATION among ENGLISH-MEN". Therefore he produced a book which is a unified

re-writing of the phenomenon of Christian praise. His Psalms are a re-creation of Biblical verses infused with imaginative energy. His Hymns are an attempt to take the reader into Smart's imagination and thus to share in a new divine vision. In A Song to David the reader is asked to look at David's imagination and ability to praise, through Smart's — to look at the created world through two great imaginations which become one in A Song to David, and to realize that although praise really began with David and is revived by Smart, it lives in each human imagination; thus it never ends, because the imagination, according to Smart, has an infinite capacity to see divinity in the infinite minutæ of God's world. The poems in the book are linked together, and then the end of the book is linked to the beginning: it is a unified work which suggests that praise, like the possibilities of the human imagination, has no ~~parameters~~ boundaries. i h

This heart, a fountain of vile thoughts,  
How does it overflow?  
While self upon the surface floats  
Still bubbling from below.<sup>1</sup>

The conceptual dichotomy between inner self and surface appearance finds expression repeatedly in the hymns of William Cowper. Unlike hymn-writers before him, Cowper could consistently write hymns that have a smooth surface of conventional piety, but that, at the same time, reveal contradictory and disturbing thoughts and emotions in his inner self. Smart and Steele were successful at tapping their inner selves, thus their writing excels as poetry, but is somewhat awkward as conventional hymnody; Wesley and Watts were successful at constructing religiously edifying hymns, but were not successful enough (or willing) to probe their inner selves; thus though their writing is excellent as hymnody, it is often mediocre as imaginative poetry. Cowper, however, could do both tasks simultaneously: he could write conventional hymns which are also significant poems. He can reveal the self "bubbling from below" or floating upon the surface; he can explore his own "Aching Void" as well as the "fair gospel field". After looking briefly at critical assessments of Cowper's hymns, this chapter considers the biographical circumstances that lead up to and surround the composition of Cowper's hymns. The main sections of the chapter examine the scriptural hymns and the original hymns respectively.

## I

Despite the enthusiasm with which hymnologists have greeted

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<sup>1</sup> William Cowper, 'JEHOVAH OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS', from Olney Hymns. Cited in the edition of John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, The Poems of William Cowper, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1980), p. 150. All citations from Cowper's Olney Hymns are from this edition and are given by page reference in the text of the chapter.



Cowper's contributions to the Olney Hymns (1779), literary criticism has yet to address itself to these hymns in detail. To date, only a few articles and doctoral dissertations have appeared. Even the many biographers of Cowper generally prefer to skip over the hymns to his poetry of 1782. The interest that Cowper's hymns have evoked has been historical, hymnological, sometimes biographical, but rarely literary.

Nineteenth-century biographers of Cowper have been cursory in their treatment of the Olney Hymns; some have taken a closer but impressionistic look, thus their observations are questionable at best. Thomas Taylor writes in 1833 that the "benevolent heart of Cowper was delighted in a high degree to co-operate with a man of Mr. Newton's talents and piety, in promoting the advancement of religion in his neighbourhood".<sup>2</sup> Of the hymns themselves, Taylor stresses their ability to move one to acts of holiness: "Who can read the 55th hymn, Book II. without feeling as if he could, at that moment, forsake all, take up his cross, and follow his Saviour"?<sup>3</sup> John S. Memes agrees, and says that writing hymns was one of Cowper's "pleasing occupations", and that his hymns are pious utterances indeed.<sup>4</sup> A look at biographical evidence, however, will suggest that Cowper's writing of the hymns can be seen as something quite other than a pleasing task; a close look at the hymns themselves will suggest that if they have the ability to be moving, they can just as easily move one toward imaginative concern and multi-levelled response, as toward piety.

In his biography of Cowper (1880), Goldwin Smith prefers to

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Taylor, The Life of William Cowper, Esq. (London, 1833), p. 87.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> John S. Memes, The Life of William Cowper (London, 1972), p. 126. This is a facsimile reprint of the 1837 edition.

discuss (or rather, dismiss) the hymn itself rather than Cowper's hymns. He says categorically: "Cowper's Olney Hymns have not any serious value as poetry".<sup>5</sup> He dismisses hymns as a genre, claiming that they "rarely have" any poetic value: "The relations of man with Deity transcend and repel poetical treatment. There is nothing in them on which the creative imagination can be exercised".<sup>6</sup> Another account that is difficult to accept is that of Thomas Wright (1892), who says that in the hymn 'WALKING WITH GOD', which he dates at 1771-2, Cowper is comparing his present despair in Olney with his former joy in Huntingdon in the late 1760's, and that the despair in the hymn would have "been brought on by the death of his brother John".<sup>7</sup> This is unlikely: John Cowper died in 1770; Cowper composed this hymn in a letter of 10 December 1767. Wright summarizes Cowper's hymns by saying that they "breathe of trust in God, and pious gratitude for His great favours...".<sup>8</sup> As support for this he cites 'WALKING WITH GOD', which is, it will be suggested, one of Cowper's most disturbing hymns.

Biographers of this century have been just as cursory in their treatment of the Olney Hymns. Hugh I'Anson Fausset devotes a few pages to them, but says continually that very few of the hymns "approach poetry" or are anywhere near "pure poetry".<sup>9</sup> He concludes that most of the hymns simply have "no poetic value". David Cecil and Maurice Quinlan give the hymns a few sentences, Quinlan at least noting that several of Cowper's hymns "contain a strong personal note",

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<sup>5</sup> Goldwin Smith, Cowper (London, 1880), p. 42.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Wright, The Life of William Cowper (London, 1892), p. 197.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 199.

<sup>9</sup> Hugh I'Anson Fausset, William Cowper (London, 1928), pp. 123-4.

but adding that "the prevailing tone is one of hope".<sup>10</sup>

When one turns from biographers to literary critics, the prospect is not much brighter; though individual hymns and stanzas are occasionally commented upon. Thomas Bayne points out similarities between Watts's 'Heavenly Joy on Earth' and Cowper's 'Light Shining out of Darkness';<sup>11</sup> and W.T. Lynn looks at 'God Moves in a Mysterious Way'.<sup>12</sup> In 1949 there appears "A Study of Cowper's 'Olney Hymns'". Lodwick Hartley says that the hymns should be read together in the order in which they are printed in the volume; by doing so, one can clearly see Cowper's intensely personal struggle for a faith.<sup>13</sup> The problem with this theory is that the hymns were not written in the order in which they appear in the volume; several of the later hymns were written earliest.

Aside from a few other short articles of limited significance,<sup>14</sup> the only substantial studies of Cowper's hymns are in the form of doctoral dissertations. Wendell M. Keck's Stanford dissertation of 1941 is a theological study: Keck claims that the personal tone of

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<sup>10</sup> Maurice Quinlan, William Cowper: A Critical Life (Minneapolis, 1953), p. 80. David Cecil, in The Stricken Deer, or The Life of Cowper (London, 1929), simply states that Cowper and Newton decided to write hymns.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Bayne, "Isaac Watts and William Cowper", Notes and Queries (22 Oct. 1904), p. 323.

<sup>12</sup> W.T. Lynn et al., "God Moves in a Mysterious Way", Notes and Queries (21 Jan., 25 Feb., 1911), p. 58.

<sup>13</sup> Lodwick Hartley, "The Worm and the Thorn: A Study of Cowper's 'Olney Hymns'". Journal of Religion XXIX (1949), 220-29.

<sup>14</sup> These include: George Litch Knight, "Cowper as a Hymn-Writer", The Hymn I (1950), 5-12. This article is a brief summary of critical opinion and a mention of the popularity of the hymns. Arthur Pollard, "William Cowper's Olney Hymns: A Critical Study", The Churchman LXIX, 3 (1955), 166-71, is a general but very short evaluation of the hymns; it looks mainly at the doctrine, and concludes that the hymns are sincere and effective Christian expressions. Pollard calls attention to the fact that the hymns have been ignored by literary critics. In Erik Routley's I'll Praise My Maker (London, 1951), there is a chapter on Cowper's hymns, but it is mainly concerned with the doctrine and popularity of the hymns.

the hymns is not really personal so much as it is conventional religious expression. While conventional expression does figure in the hymns, the view taken in the present study is that it figures only on the surface, beneath which Cowper's own imagination and feelings are the generating forces and undercurrents. The Pennsylvania dissertation (1972) of Edna Zapanta-Manlapaz is refreshing because it is the first close look at the hymns as poems. It looks at the hymns mainly in terms of their technical and prosodic qualities, rather than in terms of their tonal complexities and imaginative possibilities. Though this is valuable, it is not conducive to considering the hymns as whole and integrated artifacts. She concludes that Cowper is one of the great triumvirate of eighteenth-century hymn-writers along with Watts and Wesley. It will be argued here that this is misleading: Cowper is an excellent hymn-writer, but he is very unlike Watts and Wesley; he is a transformer, not a follower, of a hymnal tradition.

Cowper's hymns have not been given a close reading in the light of the biographical circumstances that lead up to and surround their composition and production, so there follows a biographical account of Cowper's mental malady and disposition before and at the time of composing his hymns. Cowper wrote most of his hymns under the close supervision of his domineering spiritual mentor and partner in hymnal production, the Reverend John Newton. He was also sliding rapidly toward his third and most severe attack of insanity as he wrote the hymns, and when it happens early in 1773, he suddenly becomes permanently unable to write hymns. A look at these years in Cowper's life is necessary if one is to understand the undercurrents of spiritual debate, pain, and despair, beneath the smooth, pious surface of the hymns.

II

A timid and delicate youth, Cowper developed signs of mental illness quite young, experiencing his first period of severe depression in 1753, at the age of twenty-two. Though he recovered and enjoyed several years of health, the malady crept up on him again in 1763 as he prepared for an oral examination which would have given him the Clerkship of the Journals in the House of Lords. This examination would have been nothing more than saying a few words and being sworn in; but Cowper had developed a neurotic fear of speaking in public, even to a few people, so his condition worsened as the examination day approached: "My continual misery at length brought on a nervous fever. Quiet forsook me by day and sleep by night. A finger raised against me was now more than I could stand against".<sup>15</sup> Despair and fever drove him to an attempt at suicide on the morning of the dreaded day. He was removed, therefore, to a mental institution, St. Albans, and was placed under the care of Dr. Nathaniel Cotton.<sup>16</sup>

Cowper remained in St. Albans for about eighteen months, during part of which time he was obsessed with the thought of his own damnation. He thought himself "guilty of the unpardonable sin",<sup>17</sup> and had many horrible dreams, one of which he interpreted as being worse than "excommunication from all the churches upon earth".<sup>18</sup> His written account of this period in his life is filled with scenes of spiritual

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<sup>15</sup> William Cowper, Adelphi. Edited by James King and Charles Ryskamp in The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper, Vol. I (Oxford, 1979), 16. Hereafter cited in this edition as Adelphi.

<sup>16</sup> Nathaniel Cotton (1705-1788), trained in medicine at Leyden, was known as being humane and sympathetic in his treatment of the insane. His hospital was often called "the College" or the "Collegium Insanorium".

<sup>17</sup> Adelphi, p. 27.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

hysteria and inevitable doom:

I felt besides a sense of burning in my heart like that of real fire, and concluded it an earnest of those eternal flames which should soon receive me. I laid myself down in bed, howling with horror, while my knees smote against each other. In this condition my brother found me; the first word I spoke to him (and I remember the very expression) was, 'Oh brother, I am damned — damned. Think of eternity, and then think what it is to be damned'.<sup>19</sup>

Describing the "horrible voices", "visions", and "strains of malice" that assailed him day and night, Cowper emphasizes that "all that remained clear was the sense of sin and the expectation of punishment".<sup>20</sup>

But he was given a respite: "The 26th July 1764", writes Newton, "was the memorable day, when the Lord brought him out of the horrible pit, and miry clay, set his feet upon a Rock and put a New Song in his mouth".<sup>21</sup> He experienced a sudden conversion to Christianity, and "immediately", Cowper says, "the full beams of the sun of righteousness shone upon me".<sup>22</sup> Dr. Cotton was alarmed at Cowper's sudden transition, so he was kept at St. Albans until 17 June 1765. He then returned to Huntingdon and met the Unwin family,<sup>23</sup> with whom he became a boarder in November of 1765.

Cowper was relatively happy as a boarder with the Unwins, but this happiness was suddenly threatened when Morley Unwin, the head

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>21</sup> Commencement of the Life of the Poet Cowper by the Rev. John Newton of Olney. McMaster MSS. Collection. Hereafter referred to as MS. Fragment, McMaster MSS. Collection.

<sup>22</sup> Adelphi, p. 39.

<sup>23</sup> Rev. Morley Unwin (1703-1767) was master of Huntingdon School from 1746 to 1762. Upon retiring he turned his full attention to his other occupation of "lecturer" (a preacher chosen and supported by a parish to give afternoon or evening lectures on religious subjects). His wife from 1742 was Mary Unwin (1726-1796). Their son William was ordained priest in 1769, and their daughter Susanna married and left the household in 1774.

of the household, died on 2 July 1767. However, since Morley had intimated to his wife Mary that Cowper might still dwell with her, should she survive him,<sup>24</sup> Mary Unwin, whose behaviour to Cowper had been, and would be, that "of a Mother to a Son",<sup>25</sup> found herself in need of a more suitable residence. Coincidentally, curate John Newton of Olney had been told of Mrs. Unwin's plight and recent bereavement, so he visited them "in the summer of the year 1767" and "invited them to remove to Olney".<sup>26</sup> This visit was the first meeting of William Cowper and John Newton.

Cowper, Mary Unwin, and her daughter Suzanna moved to Olney in September of 1767,<sup>27</sup> and after some shuffling between the Newtons' residence and the vicarage, settled into their own house at Orchard Side, Olney, on 15 February 1768. But only two weeks later Cowper complains in a letter to Mrs. Madan<sup>28</sup> that

We had no sooner taken Possession of our own House, than I found myself called to lead the Pray'rs of the Family. A formidable Undertaking you may imagine to a Temper & Spirit like mine. I trembled at the Apprehension of it, and was so dreadfully harrass'd in the Conflict I sustain'd upon this Occasion in the first Week, that my Health was not a little affected by it.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> McMaster MSS. Collection.

<sup>25</sup> Cowper to Mrs. Cowper (his cousin), 13 July, 1767. Cited in The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper, ed. James King and Charles Ryskamp Vol. I (Oxford, 1979), 171. Hereafter referred to as King and Ryskamp. See also Cowper to Mrs. Cowper, 10 July 1767, and 20 October 1766. This sentiment is expressed in several later letters also.

<sup>26</sup> McMaster MSS. Collection.

<sup>27</sup> In the MS. Fragment on the Life of Cowper, Newton writes that they came to Olney to live on 14 Oct. 1767. However, in his letter to Joseph Hill (a friend) Cowper writes on 12 Sept. 1767 of his departure to Olney, and his next letter to Hill, 21 Sept., is postmarked at Olney, as are his subsequent letters. Newton probably meant to write Sept. instead of Oct. In fact, in his pocketbook Newton has written: "Mr. Cowper, Mrs. and Miss Unwin come to reside here from Huntingdon". The date is 14 Sept. Bull MSS. Newport Pagnell; Bull folio 1.

<sup>28</sup> Mrs. Madan (1702-1781), Cowper's aunt, had been converted to Evangelicalism in 1749.

<sup>29</sup> Cowper to Mrs. Madan, 1 March 1769. King and Ryskamp, I, 191.

As it is difficult to suppose that the sensitive Mrs. Unwin saddled the neurotically bashful Cowper with this task, it is quite probable that Newton was the instigator. Newton's diary shows that Cowper was required to lead prayer meetings at the "Great House" (an unoccupied mansion that Newton had procured for his use) at this time.<sup>30</sup> In the light of Cowper's mental history, this must have been an agitating task. At any rate, for better or worse, thus began a long and close relationship between the delicate William Cowper and the militant Evangelical, John Newton; for several years Cowper was "committed to the care of such a Pastor".<sup>31</sup>

Such a pastor has attracted many biographers eager to document a life that is a paradigm for Evangelicals. Born in London on 24 July 1725, Newton was schooled at Essex, and after being impressed onto H.M.S. Harwich in 1743 spent several years at sea and became a slave-trader. His journals record the horrors and cruelties of the trade, and Newton admits in later writings to the dissipation in which he was involved with the slave-girls and the ship's abundant supply of liquor.<sup>32</sup> But these worldly ways, along with the sins of "Free-thinking" and "blasphemy",<sup>33</sup> came to an end, claims Newton, on 10 March 1748 when, during a violent storm, he was suddenly and miraculously converted.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> In the back pages of Newton's Diary, there appears a "list of people to offer prayer". Cowper is marked down for Feb. 5, March 8, Apr. 19, June 7, July 26, Sept. 13, Oct. 18, and Dec. 20 of 1768. This information is in Bull's MS. transcription of the diary: Bull MSS., Newport Pagnell, folio 4.

<sup>31</sup> Cowper to Mrs. Madan, 18 July 1767. King and Ryskamp, I, 174-5.

<sup>32</sup> Bernard Martin, John Newton: A Biography (London, 1950), pp. 86-7.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>34</sup> John Newton, An Authentic Narrative of Some Remarkable and Interesting Particulars in the Life of \*\*\*\*\*. Communicated in a Series of Letters to the Reverend Mr. Haweis... (London, 1764). Hereafter referred to as Authentic Narrative.



This conversion is related in his autobiographical Authentic Narrative (1764), along with his conviction that he is not only of the Elect, but is a deputized crusader for Christ. He writes that while some persons have dull lives, there are others whom God "seems to select in order to show the exceeding riches of his grace, and the greatness of his mighty power".<sup>35</sup> He later writes that his "case is, on the whole, unique in the annals of the church".<sup>36</sup> God's personal exemplar of sinner turned saint, Newton resigned the sea life in 1754 and decided to become a preacher in order "to show what the Lord could do".<sup>37</sup> He was ordained priest on 17 June 1764, and henceforth devoted his life to Evangelicalism.

Newton was sent to Olney in 1764, and it is evident from his correspond<sup>e</sup>nce over the next decade that he was a very forceful preacher and a determined Calvinist. In one letter Newton reveals his belief in the vanity of learning: "I truly pity those who rise early and take late rest... with no higher prize and prospect in view than the obtaining of academical honors. Such pursuits will ere long appear (as they really are) vain as the sports of children".<sup>38</sup> He continually dubs imagination a tool of Satan<sup>39</sup> and stresses the hopeless depravity

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>36</sup> Newton to William Bull, 5 March 1794. Bull MSS. Newport Pagnell, Bull folio 1.

<sup>37</sup> Authentic Narrative, p. 207.

<sup>38</sup> John Newton, Cardiphonia, or Utterance of the Heart, In the Course of a Real Correspondence. Two Volumes (London, 1781), II, 235. Much of Newton's correspondence is in these volumes. The recipients, however, are not named. Many of the letters show Newton chastizing, criticizing, and even outrightly condemning others for their behaviour and beliefs.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., I, 121.

of man:<sup>40</sup> "Surely man in his best state is altogether vanity".<sup>41</sup>  
In many of his letters Newton corrects the doctrinal beliefs of others;  
often he is blunt and headstrong. In a letter of 21 October 1775  
he criticizes his correspondent's sermons and offers his own as ideal  
examples.<sup>42</sup> In a long letter of the following month he evidently  
corrects someone on the doctrines of predestination and election.<sup>43</sup>  
A firm believer in these doctrines, Newton reacts adversely to a  
letter which must have suggested something different. Newton retorts:  
"When you desire me to reconcile God's being the author of sin, with  
his justice... your comment contradicts my feelings. You are either  
of a different make and nature from me, or else you are not rightly  
apprized of your own state...".<sup>44</sup> While Newton is evidently overbearing  
in his religious views, he is also very concerned about his friend  
Cowper; and his intentions, though at times questionable (as when  
he administers electrical shock treatment to Cowper)<sup>45</sup> were probably  
sincere. But the two very different personalities were not suited,  
and the neurotically shy Cowper did not fare well under the close  
and constant care of the fiery Evangelical.

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40 Ibid., I, 183.

41 Ibid., I, 43.

42 Ibid., I, 186.

43 Ibid., I, 194.

44 Ibid., I, 211, 214.

45 Newton's diary entry for 4 Nov. 1773 reads: "A thought of the Machine with respect to my dear friend struck me the other morning as we were walking together. Prevailed on him to let me make experiment of it today. But could not observe any sensible effect". Transcription of Newton Diary; Bull MSS., Newport Pagnell, Bull Folio 4. Josiah Bull mentions the electrical shock machine in John Newton of Olney and St. Mary Woolnoth: An Autobiography and Narrative (London, 1868), p. 187.

Close and constant their relationship was, from 1760 onwards. Their yards were conjoined, and Newton writes that "for near twelve years we were seldom separated for seven hours at a time, when we were awake and at home".<sup>46</sup> Though Newton did care deeply about his friend's depressed and worsening mental condition, he apparently subjected him to a rigorous and distressing itinerary. Entries in Newton's diary show that he made Cowper lead in prayer quite often, and took his friend on his visits to the sick and on several preaching bouts.<sup>47</sup> In addition to enduring these unnerving events, Cowper was given some written tasks. In one part of Newton's diary there is a fragmentary commentary on the first chapter of St. John's Gospel; this is evidently in Cowper's hand.<sup>48</sup> Early in 1771, Newton engaged Cowper in another task: the two Evangelicals were to write a volume of hymns. Cowper's mental state deteriorating, he embarked upon the project nonetheless.

The years 1771 and 1772 are the ones during which Cowper wrote most of his hymns. Unfortunately, there is little documentation for these years. Cowper's usually prolific and vivacious correspondence becomes scarce, and those letters which are extant are either purely

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<sup>46</sup> MS. Fragment, McMaster MSS. Collection. In his biography of John Newton, Josiah Bull (see note 45) says that they "were seldom separated for twelve hours" instead of seven hours. Bull has evidently mistranscribed this rather difficultly written passage in Newton's account of the life of Cowper.

<sup>47</sup> Cowper came to live in Olney on 14 Sept. 1767. Newton's diary shows that he immediately began taking Cowper on preaching visits: Sept. 19 at Yardley, Sept. 29 at Kettering, Oct. 5 at Winslow, etc. This continues even until 1772, when Cowper was very near his major collapse: June 10 at Collingtree; Sept. 15 at Collingtree; etc. Bull MSS. Transcription of Newton Diary; Newport Pagnell, Bull folio 1.

<sup>48</sup> This MS. cannot be located. But Josiah Bull, who evidently transcribed it, writes at the end of his brief account of its contents: "End of Cowper's writing — he evidently planned more extensive work". Bull MSS. Newport Pagnell; Bull Folio 4.

factual or are informal sermons; the tone is uniformly sombre. A letter written by Cowper's cousin reveals what this period in Cowper's life may have been like:

Newton's unguarded proposal of composing Hymns from ev'ry Text of Scripture they cou'd Collect, did infinite injury to our friend!... he pursued the proposed Task with such eagerness and avidity that it heated his Brain, Sunk his Spirits and brought on that dreadful depression, which rendered him Miserable during the Space of 7 years — only imagine a man of his Genius walking for hours by himself in that great rambling Church at Olney, composing these Hymns! he has told me that the idea never quited him night or day, but kept him in a constant fever; add to that when he left the Church, it was to attend their prayer meetings, and all the enthusiastic conversation which these meetings were sure to occasion.<sup>49</sup>

Despite the evident colouring in this account, it is not without some truth. During these years Cowper seems to have composed hymns to the exclusion of all other forms of verse. There are no translations, odes, epistles, ballads, or lyrics, all of which forms he used before 1771. Cowper's mental condition declined in 1771 and 1772, until the crisis finally came: Newton writes in his diary on 24 January 1773 that "a very alarming turn roused us from our beds, & caled [sic] us to O[rchard] S[ide] at 4 in the morning...".<sup>50</sup> This was Cowper's major breakdown, which culminated late in February in a dream "before the recollection of which all consolation vanishes".<sup>51</sup> In this dream

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<sup>49</sup> Lady Hesketh to William Hayley, 30 August 1801. British Library Addition MSS. 30803 A, folio 156.

<sup>50</sup> Bull MSS. Newport Pagnell; Bull Folio 4.

<sup>51</sup> Cowper to Newton, 16 Oct. 1785. Princeton Collection. Though Cowper had a seizure on 24 January, his dream did not take place until late in February. Speaking later of this dream in a letter of 13 January 1784, Cowper says that since the time of the dream he has spoken only of damnation: "The latter end of next month will complete a period of eleven years, in which I have spoken no other language". This puts the date of the dream late in February, about a month after the seizure.

Cowper heard the words, "Actum est de te periisti" (It is all over with thee, thou hast perished), and was thenceforth to believe himself irrevocably damned. He was never again to profess faith in God or attend church,<sup>52</sup> nor could he continue writing hymns. Perhaps seeing more deeply into his religious experience than he cared to, Cowper loses his faith and abandons hymn-writing.

After witnessing Cowper's "alarming turn" and then mental collapse in February 1773, Newton knew that he would either have to abandon the project of the *Olney Hymns* or continue it alone. As he relates in the preface to the volume, he thought himself "determined to proceed no farther without him. Yet my mind was afterwards led to resume the service".<sup>53</sup> Newton continued to write hymns, about one per week,<sup>54</sup> and the book appeared in 1779 with 280 hymns by Newton and 67 by Cowper. Newton divided the volume into three sections — one on select passages of scripture, another on occasional hymns, and a third on miscellaneous spiritual subjects — and ordered the hymns and set out the ideal of what a hymn should be:

There is a stile and manner suited to the composition of hymns, which may be more successfully, or at least more easily attained by a versifier, than by a poet. They should be Hymns. not Odes, if designed for public worship, and for the use of plain people. Perspicuity, simplicity and ease, should be chiefly attended to; and the imagery and colouring of poetry, if admitted at all, should be indulged very sparingly and with great judgement.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> At Cowper's funeral in 1800 Newton says of his friend that "the last sermon he ever heard preached was on New Year's Day, 1773".

<sup>53</sup> John Newton's preface to *Olney Hymns* (London, 1779), p. vi. Hereafter referred to as Newton's preface.

<sup>54</sup> Newton writes in his diary on 30 Oct. 1773: "...Finished a hymn on the Barren fig tree. I usually make one hymn a week to expound at the great house...". On 7 July 1774 he writes: "...I usually make a hymn weekly & sometimes it cost me so much thought & study that I hardly do any thing else". There are many such entries, showing that hymn-writing for Newton was a weekly affair.

<sup>55</sup> Newton's preface, pp. vii-viii.

Evidently believing that poetry should be the handmaid of hymnody, Newton goes on to say that the hymns of Dr. Watts are "admirable patterns in this species of writing...".<sup>56</sup>

Cowper held Watts in high regard also. He writes: "I know no greater Names in Divinity that Watts and Doddridge".<sup>57</sup> In another letter he quotes from Watts,<sup>58</sup> and in still another he admits to singing the hymns of Watts and Wesley at home.<sup>59</sup> But whereas Newton's hymns are not unlike those of Watts, Cowper's hymns are very different. They have a stylized and smooth surface, but this is because they were written under Newton's supervision, and because they were to be published as hymns for worship — and because Cowper wanted them to be neat hymns. But his best hymns are also an expression of his deeply disturbed inner self.

### III

Cowper wrote only 21 hymns "on select passages of scripture" before his breakdown, yet these are innovative in delving into the writer's own psyche. Partly because of his relentless self-examination, and partly because he intended the hymns to be useful to congregations,

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<sup>56</sup> Newton's preface, p. viii.

<sup>57</sup> Cowper to Mrs. Cowper, 18 April 1766. King and Ryskamp, I, 143.

<sup>58</sup> Cowper to Mrs. Cowper, 4 April 1772. King and Ryskamp, I, 251.

<sup>59</sup> In a letter to his friend Martin Madan of 10 February 1766 (King and Ryskamp, I, 128-9) Cowper writes: "— Unwin has furnished me with your Collection of Hymns, and bespoke the music for them. Mrs. Unwin plays well on the harpsicord, and I doubt not those Songs of Sion will sound sweetly in the ears of one so lately escaped from the thunders of Sinai". Martin Madan was an itinerant preacher who was licenced by John Wesley in 1750. In 1760 he had published A Collection of Psalms and Hymns, which were compiled chiefly from Watts and Wesley. From this and other letters, it is evident that Cowper was familiar with the hymns of Watts and Wesley.

the scriptural hymns often have an underlying meaning which is quite different from their surface meaning. They are pious and edifying as hymns, and intensely penetrating as poems. When read closely they reveal Cowper's inner self as it struggles with uncertainty and impending damnation. More often than not, his scriptural hymns betray Cowper's view of the inapplicability and fallacy of the scriptures they ostensibly represent.

One of the most popular hymns is 'WALKING WITH GOD', which is supposed to be based on Genesis 5.24: "And Enoch walked with God: and he was not; for God took him". This is an uncharacteristically glorious Old-Testament verse: Enoch never had to experience death, but rather went immediately from earthly life to heavenly glory. It is odd that Cowper would choose to write on a verse which, as the hymn will show, is so inapplicable to his own life. This hymn was composed in a letter Cowper wrote to his friend, Mrs. Madan, on 10 December 1767. In it he writes: "I began to compose them [these lines] Yesterday Morning before Daybreak, but fell asleep at the End of the two first Lines, when I awaked again the third and fourth were whisper'd to my Heart in a way which I have often experienced".<sup>60</sup>

He begins with a statement of desire:

Oh for a closer Walk with God,  
A calm and heav'nly Frame,  
A Light to shine upon the Road  
That leads me to the Lamb (139)!

On the surface this stanza seems Evangelical enough; but close reading reveals a subtle diminishing of possibilities and of hope in the successive lines: in the opening line he desires nothing less than to walk with God, presumably as Enoch did; in the second line he desires something more limited — just a heavenly order or plan for his life; in the third line he asks for something smaller still:

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<sup>60</sup> King and Ryskamp, I, 187.

a light to lead him. At the beginning, then, he wanted to be with God, but by the end he wants only a light to lead him to a God who is neither present nor visible but is (presumably) somewhere in the distance. And, by implication, he does not, at this point, have the single "light" to lead him. Instead of progressing with his desires and hopes, he pauses to lament his spiritual unrest:

Where is the Blessedness I knew  
When first I saw the Lord?  
Where is the Soul-refreshing View  
Of Jesus in his Word?

What peacefull Hours I then enjoy'd,  
How sweet their Mem'ry still!  
But they have left an Aching Void  
The World can never fill (139).

On the surface these lines seem to emphasize the blessedness and peace of seeing the Lord, and the temporary lapse from this blessedness accompanied by a desire to get back in step with God. But closer reading reveals that not only is he without "Blessedness", but also he is without a "View" of Jesus in his "Word": even a reading of the Word does not allow him to see Christ any more. All he is left with is an "Aching Void" at the centre of his spiritual consciousness, and at the centre of the hymn. What is more significant is his use of the active verb, "they have left", in the penultimate line, implying that the "peacefull Hours" have actively and deliberately left misery for him. He continues:

Return, oh Holy Dove, Return,  
Sweet Messenger of Rest,  
I hate the Sins that made thee mourn  
And drove thee from my Breast.

He is suggesting here that God is no longer a part of him, and he desires His return. Instead of seeing God answer his prayer and return, he continues by confessing the sin of idolatry:

The dearest Idol I have known,



Whate'ver that Idol be,  
Help me to tear it from Thy Throne,  
And worship Only Thee (140).

This stanza probably refers to Cowper's own life. When he wrote this hymn, his beloved Mary Unwin, with whom he lived and who behaved toward him as a loving mother, was seriously ill. Cowper was terrified of her death because he worshipped and needed her; in the same letter in which he wrote the hymn he writes: "Here lies my chief Support... . She is the chief Blessing I have met with in my Journey since the Lord was pleased to call me, and I hope the Influence of her edifying and Excellent Example will never leave me". It is not unlikely that the Idol on the throne is Mary Unwin. But whether or not this is the case, the lines still indicate that it is not God who is on the throne in Cowper's life. He seems desperately anxious to be able to worship "Only" God (this is the only time in the hymns where he capitalizes an adjective). What is more is that Cowper suggests that it will take both himself and God to remove the idol. The hymn has developed dark undercurrents: the speaker is without blessedness and peace, without the ability even to see Jesus in the scriptures; he is left with an "Aching Void" and hateful sins, and is without God. Worse still, he is ruled by an idol, and no change seems forthcoming. The hymn ends with an echo of its opening:

Then shall my Walk be close with God,  
Calm and serene my Frame,  
Then purer Light shall mark the Road  
That leads me to the Lamb.

These lines seem positive because the speaker "shall" walk closely with God. But in the light of what has gone before, and with the same diminishing possibilities as were present in the opening stanza, the "then" carries more force than the "shall". He also desires "purer Light", implying that the light which leads him now is something

less than pure. This last stanza seems merely a hastily tidy ending to a spiritually untidy hymn: it is as though the writer could not bear to see where his own hymn was headed after five progressively sinister stanzas, so he appends a version of the first stanza in order to end the hymn. Though the hymn has been said to "breathe of trust in God, and pious gratitude for his great favours",<sup>61</sup> it seems that, underneath, it is a frightening vision of a seriously disturbed Christian life. The scripture on which the hymn is based seems inapplicable in this context. The hymn entitled 'WALKING WITH GOD' is about walking without God.

Newton's hymn on the same scripture about walking with God begins very differently:

BY faith in CHRIST I walk with GOD,  
With heav'n, my journey's-end, in view;  
Supported by his staff and rod,  
My road is safe and pleasant too.<sup>62</sup>

This stanza is the spiritual contrary to Cowper's opening stanza. Newton states defiantly in the present tense that he walks with God and that his spiritual road is safe and pleasant — unlike that which Cowper evidently experiences. Newton continues by saying that though "snares and dangers throng my path", he has no need to fear, because he is victorious at every moment: "I triumph over all by faith,/ Guarded by his Almighty hand". Newton maintains "sweet converse" with God, and God "reveals his love". At the end he is seen walking away with God, "my Guide, my Guard, my Friend". Newton's hymn shows the scripture properly applied to his life, and the spiritual contentment that results from walking with God.

Several of Cowper's scriptural hymns are like 'WALKING WITH GOD'.

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<sup>61</sup> Thomas Wright, The Life of William Cowper (London, 1892), p. 199.

<sup>62</sup> John Newton and William Cowper, Olney Hymns (London, 1779), p. 5.

'THE CONTRITE HEART', for example, is based on Isaiah 57.15: "For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones". In the opening two lines Cowper presents the scripture, but goes on, as he does in most of his scriptural hymns, to apply it to his own life:

The LORD will happiness divine  
On contrite hearts bestow:  
Then tell me, gracious GOD, is mine  
A contrite heart, or no (148)?

The speaker places himself immediately in an awkward position, not knowing whether or not he is contrite. He goes on to lament his present condition:

I hear, but seem to hear in vain,  
Insensible as steel;  
If ought is felt, 'tis only pain,  
To find I cannot feel.

On one level it seems as though he is in a "hardness of heart" phase that will probably pass away, perhaps during the hymn. But on another level he is acknowledging that he is totally insensible, not only to religious experience, but to everything. Experiencing pain is perversely unpleasant because he finds himself insensible to it. He describes his spiritual dessication further:

I sometimes think myself inclin'd  
To love thee, if I could;  
But often feel another mind,  
Averse to all that's good.

This could be read as a typical statement of the fallen man's desire to follow God and his temptation to follow sin. But Cowper's choice of words gives the meaning another dimension: he "sometimes" thinks he wants to follow God; this has an air of casualty, particularly when followed by the lackadaisical "think myself inclin'd", that makes

one wonder about the speaker's depth of conviction at this point. What is more significant is the verb "if I could". Has the speaker lost his free will? The use of "often" in line 3 tends to overbalance the "sometimes" in line 1, making the act of following the "other mind" seem the probable course of action. He goes on to point out his ineffectuality and the unique hopelessness of his case:

My best desires are faint and few,  
I fain would strive for more;  
But when I cry, 'My strength renew',  
Seem weaker than before.

Thy saints are comforted I know  
And love thy house of pray'r;  
I therefore go where others go,  
But find no comfort there.

Ordinarily, when religious writers cry out to God for strength, it is given in large measure. Ordinarily, the house of prayer, as the stanza itself indicates, is a revivifying, comforting place. The Psalmist David says on behalf of all believers: "I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go to the house of the LORD" (Psalm 122.1). Cowper therefore does this, but finds no comfort. His perception of his own singular damnation, which had quite possessed him during periods of insanity, and which was creeping up with finality, can be seen in this stanza. After his major breakdown, Cowper was never to go into a "house of pray'r" again. He concludes:

O make this heart rejoice, or ach;  
Decide this doubt for me;  
And if it be not broken, break,  
And heal it, if it be (149).

His heart is neither rejoicing nor aching, and he cannot decide which, if either, it should do. The monosyllabic jaggedness of the closing two lines betrays a mind at odds with itself: Cowper has begun a hymn about a blessed contrite heart but has ended not knowing whether he is blessed or contrite, and perceiving the peculiarity of his

situation. Though it may be true that the Lord bestows happiness divine on contrite hearts, it is truer still that the Lord did not bestow it on this person's heart because he has no clear vision of his position in relation to God or to himself. Once again, though the hymn seems pious and sincerely hopeful, its deeper meaning concerns Cowper's disturbed inner life, and the inapplicability of the scripture to that life.

The hymn 'JEHOVAH OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS' is based on Jeremiah 23.6: "In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely: and this is his name whereby he shall be called, THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS". As usual, Cowper begins by applying the scripture being discussed, or rather, showing the inapplicability of it, to his own life:

My GOD! how perfect are thy ways!  
But mine polluted are;  
Sin twines itself about my praise,  
And slides into my pray'r (150).

Sin slides into every aspect of Cowper's life:

When I would speak what thou hast done  
To save me from my sin;  
I cannot make thy mercies known  
But self-applause creeps in.

Divine desire, that holy flame  
Thy grace creates in me;  
Alas! impatience is its name,  
When it returns to thee.

Even simple tasks, such as telling others of God's grace and desiring God, are impossible for the speaker here, who perceives himself as wretched and sinful:

This heart, a fountain of vile thoughts,  
How does it overflow?  
While self upon the surface floats  
Still bubbling from below.

The speaker's self, in spite of how it may appear on the surface, is nourished with vileness from deep within. Cowper's hymns in general

imply this: their centre is very different from their surface.

This hymn ends:

Let others in the gaudy dress  
Of fancied merit shine;  
The LORD shall be my righteousness,  
The LORD for ever mine.

This stanza presents the scripture, which, up to this point, has not appeared in the hymn and seems curiously out of place after such a view of the speaker's life in the other four stanzas. The final two lines are ironic and uneasy: he claims that the Lord shall be forever his, yet it seems as though the Lord has never been his (and in the light of his present condition, is not about to be); and, the Bible calls the Lord our righteousness, and the speaker here is calling Him my righteousness. He is pointing to the singularity of his case and is displaying some anxiety.

Cowper continually twists scriptures from their Biblical context into that of his own spiritual situation. 'JEHOVAH-NISSI, THE LORD MY BANNER' is based on Exodus 17.15: "And Moses built an altar, and called the name of it Jehovah-nissi". In the first three stanzas Cowper faithfully presents the scripture, adding an illustration of David subduing Goliath and of Gideon's invasion aided by God. But the closing two stanzas seem suddenly to focus on Cowper's own life:

Oh! I have seen the day,  
When with a single word,  
GOD helping me to say,  
My trust is in the LORD;  
My soul has quell'd a thousand foes,  
Fearless of all that could oppose.

But unbelief, self-will,  
Self-righteousness and pride,  
How often do they steal,  
My weapon from my side?  
Yet David's LORD, and Gideon's friend,  
Will help his servant to the end (143).

Any spiritual victory or contentment is located in the past, while

the present is filled with "unbelief", "self-will", "Self-righteousness", and "pride". And even though the closing two lines have a more positive tone, it is important to note that while these two stanzas are written using first person referents, the last two lines contain a sudden switch to the third person referent: God will help "his servant". It is as though Cowper cannot say that God will help him specifically; he has to cloak the assertion in imprecision and anonymity. In spite of what the scripture says, it seems that although the Lord can be the banner of others, He may not be the banner of the speaker here.

'PRAISE FOR THE FOUNTAIN OPENED', another of Cowper's more famous hymns, is based on Zechariah 13.1: "IN that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and uncleanness". In the opening stanza the scripture is presented:

There is a fountain fill'd with blood  
Drawn from EMMANUEL's veins;  
And sinners, plung'd beneath that flood,  
Lose all their guilty stains (154).

Immediately in the second stanza the speaker likens himself to the "dying thief" of Calvary, but claims, uncharacteristically, that he has been cleansed from his sins and that now "Redeeming love has been my theme,/ And shall be till I die". He continues:

Then in a nobler sweeter song  
I'll sing thy power to save;  
When this poor lisping stamm'ring tongue  
Lies silent in the grave.

Like Anne Steele, he seems to believe here that he can only give God proper verbal service after death. This suggests that Cowper's hymns are not as noble and sweet as he would like them to be; he is always considering his own psyche:

LORD, I believe thou hast prepar'd  
(Unworthy tho' I be)  
For me a blood-bought free reward,  
A golden harp for me!

His perception of his own unworthiness troubles him continually, even in a hopeful closing stanza such as this; and the chiasmus of "for me" serves to emphasize both the very personal nature of the hymn, and the masked desperation with which he voices this final belief. While on the surface this hymn celebrates spiritual cleanliness, there is an undercurrent of Cowper's feeling of an inability to achieve cleanliness and to express gratitude in earthly life.

'THE HOUSE OF PRAYER', a favourite topic of Cowper's, is based on Mark 11.17: "And he taught, saying unto them, Is it not written, My house shall be called of all nations the house of prayer? but ye have made it a den of thieves". In the opening two lines the speaker claims that the Christian's heart is God's impregnable home: "Thy mansion is the christian's heart,/ O LORD, thy dwelling-place secure" (156)! But the lines that follow textually do not follow logically:

Bid the unruly throng depart,  
And leave the consecrated door.

Devoted as it is to thee,  
A thievish swarm frequents the place;  
They steal away my joys from me,  
And rob my Saviour of his praise.

If the Christian's heart is indeed the Lord's "dwelling-place secure", it does not follow that a "thievish swarm" can occupy it and steal from soul and Saviour. The speaker here sees his heart not as a house of prayer and praise, but rather as a headquarters for the forces of evil:

There too a sharp designing trade  
Sin, Satan, and the world maintain;  
Nor cease to press me, and persuade,  
To part with ease and purchase pain.



I know them, and I hate their din,  
 Am weary of the bustling crowd;  
 But while their voice is heard within,  
 I cannot serve thee as I would.

He then cries out, "Oh! for the joy thy presence gives", and claims that "if" and "when" God arrives, then it "shall" become a "calm delightful house of pray'r". Once again, the hymn does seem to offer hope and to have some kind of positive resolution on the surface. But in the light of the four stanzas wherein sin, Satan, and the world flourish, the closing two stanzas seem to rest on their conditional, futuristid terms. In the actual scripture Christ chases out the thieves and restores the church's purity, but in Cowper's version the infernal traffickers prosper, while he looks hopelessly into the future for their evacuation. As usual, the hymn has more than one meaning and tends to point out the inapplicability of the scripture to the writer's life.

future |

Not all of Cowper's scriptural hymns, however, have a double level of meaning and are inwardly different than they appear on the surface. Cowper also wrote some homogeneous pieces of Evangelical devotion. The hymn 'O LORD, I WILL PRAISE THEE!' is one example of an uncharacteristically straightforward spiritual celebration. It is filled with joy and affirmation, and is a close rendition of Isaiah 12:

I will praise thee ev'ry day  
 Now thine anger's turn'd away!  
 Comfortable thoughts arise  
 From the bleeding sacrifice.

.....

JESUS is become at length  
 My salvation and my strength;  
 And his praises shall prolong,  
 While I live, my pleasant song (147).

The impeccable iambic rhythm and simple diction give the hymn a

child-like demeanor, especially the infantile "Comfortable" in the second line. In the light of knowledge of Cowper's life it is tempting to say that this hymn springs from insincerity and is simply a routine piece.

Another example is 'LOVEST THOU ME?', which has the same monosyllabic, iambic, and evenly-balanced lines:

Hark, my soul! it is the LORD;  
'Tis thy Saviour, hear his word;  
JESUS speaks, and speaks to thee;  
'Say, poor sinner, lov'st thou me?

I deliver'd thee when bound,  
And, when wounded, heal'd thy wound;  
Sought thee wand'ring, set thee right,  
Turn'd thy darkness into light (157).

What this hymn and 'O LORD, I WILL PRAISE THEE!' have in common, aside from being unusually celebratory, is that they are written in a 7.7. 7.7. stanza. Cowper only uses this stanzaic form with iambic lines in these two hymns, which have a similar nursery-rhyme quality. Perhaps this measure lulled him into harmless hymn-making. Perhaps Cowper, seeing the great hymnal task before him, simply could not allow himself to be deeply involved with every hymn, lest he hasten a mental and spiritual demise that came too soon. On the other hand, it may be that these hymns genuinely spring from joyful moments in his spiritual life. At any rate, these lighter hymns are uncommon in Cowper's work.

But they are not uncommon in the collection as a whole. After all, out of 141 scriptural hymns, 120 are by John Newton. The scriptural hymns as a whole, then, tend to be conventional, positive in tone, and forthright in their didacticism. Cowper's contributions tend to get submerged under the smooth surface of a volume which is largely Newton's. Stanzas of Newton's,

He bows his gracious ear,  
We never plead in vain;  
Yet we must wait, till he appear,  
And pray, and pray again.<sup>63</sup>

'Tis thus the LORD his love reveals,  
To call poor sinner's home;  
More than a father's love he feels,  
And welcomes all that come.<sup>64</sup>

THE church a garden is  
In which believers stand,  
Like ornamental trees  
Planted by GOD'S own hand:  
His Spirit waters all their roots  
And ev'ry branch abounds with fruits.<sup>65</sup>

How glorious he! how happy they  
In such a glorious friend!  
While love secures them all the way  
And crowns them at the end...<sup>66</sup>

these stanzas are quite unlike anything Cowper writes. Cowper does not seem to believe that "We never plead in vain", or that God "welcomes all that come", or that the church is a fruitful and satisfying place, or that God's love secures one "all the way". He wants to believe these things and write edifying and encouraging hymns about them. And on one level he does. But on a more profound level his own inner feelings inevitably come into the creation of the hymn. What is significant to notice is that all four of these Newtonian stanzas are inconsistent with Newton's Calvinism; Newton seems to push his own beliefs entirely out of the way, in order to leave a neat, encouraging scriptural hymn, while Cowper, on the other hand, seems to leave his spiritual furniture as it is.

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<sup>63</sup> John Newton and William Cowper, Olney Hymns (London, 1779), p. 132.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

Cowper's scriptural hymns, then, are unlike those of earlier hymn-writers, and very unlike those of John Newton. Unlike earlier writers, Cowper leaves Old-Testament scriptures in their Old-Testament context, rather than trying to turn them into New-Testament or Evangelical hymns. He seems, in fact, to prefer the Old-Testament God of wrath, even in New-Testament hymns. Out of 21 hymns, 15 are Old-Testament, and of the remaining 6, at least 4 characterize God as an "angry God" who threatens "everlasting pain", "griefs", and who, after selecting his "faithful servants", says, "woe be to the rest". Most important, unlike earlier writers, Cowper reveals, whether deliberately or not, the inapplicability of the scriptures to his own life. Instead of showing how a scripture can effect, explain, or renew his life, Cowper shows how far he is from the positive influence or meaning of the scripture. He believed his spiritual predicament to be unique, and the undercurrents in his hymns suggest that although the scriptures are applicable to the lives of others, they are strangely out of place in his life. This propensity to explore and reveal "the hidden life" of the self in religious experience finds even clearer expression in Cowper's original hymns.

#### IV

What primarily distinguishes Cowper's hymns from the hymns of other writers is their tone. It was noticed that in Watts and Wesley the tone is affirmative and confident; in Steele the tone is one of uncertainty and doubt, and in Smart it is buoyant and ecstatic in response to the perfection of God's world. In Cowper's hymns there is invariably a surface tone and a deeper tonal undercurrent.

The title 'THE SHINING LIGHT' seems to promise a hymn of hope.

It begins:

My former hopes are fled,  
My terror now begins;  
I feel, alas! that I am dead  
In trespasses and sins.

Ah! whither shall I fly?  
I hear the thunder roar;  
The law proclaims destruction nigh,  
And vengeance at the door.

When I review my ways,  
I dread impending doom;  
But sure, a friendly whisper says,  
'Flee from the wrath to come' (172).

In the first ten lines here the tone embodies fear and desperation at the thought of impending doom. On any level it is negative and forboding. But the last two lines offer hope: the friendly whisper implies that there is an escape from the harrowing predicament. From this point to the end of the hymn "the shining light" is visible and seems to promise an end to despair:

I see, or think I see,  
A glimm'ring from afar;  
A beam of day that shines for me,  
To save me from despair.

Fore-runner of the sun,  
It marks the Pilgrim's way;  
I'll gaze upon it while I run,  
And watch the rising day.

On one tonal level the hymn ends on a positive note: the sinful Christian sees heavenly light and is led from "terror" and "thunder" into "rising day". But there is another tonal note. Actually, the speaker only thinks he sees a "glimm'ring from afar". That Cowper would add this severe qualification reveals a profound doubt about religious guidance: the "beam of day" that would save him from despair could be an illusion. Nevertheless, he will follow it. Significantly, however, he says in the last stanza that the shining light (whose existence has been called into question) marks "the Pilgrim's way", not necessarily his way; perhaps the speaker is not

the one whom the light leads. He also says, "I'll gaze upon it while I run", not "I gaze upon it while I run". The tense is future. So even though he thinks he sees a light which will lead him from despair, at present he may not be actually following it, but rather hoping to do so in the future. On the surface level, then, the tone is dismal and despairing for the first three stanzas but it turns to shining hope in the last two. On a deeper level, however, the first three stanzas are dismal and the last two are just as dismal because the only hope, the shining light, may or may not exist; and even if it does, it may mark the way for others but not specifically for the speaker in this hymn. Furthermore, the speaker has not begun to follow it, so by implication he is still where he started in stanza one, "dead/In trespasses and sins". The shining light, then, may be a true beam from heaven or it may be an ignis fatuus: the two levels of tone offer no solutions.

Another hymn which operates on two tonal levels is 'LIVELY HOPE, AND GRACIOUS FEAR'. It begins at a spiritual nadir:

I was a groveling creature once,  
And basely cleav'd to earth;  
I wanted spirit to renounce  
The clod that gave me birth (191).

From this point the tone becomes progressively confident as the speaker grows in stature and rises in his religious experience. He recounts how God has "breath'd upon a worm" and given him "wings":

With these to Pisgah's top I fly,  
And there delighted stand;  
To view, beneath a shining sky,  
The spacious promis'd land.

Significantly and uncharacteristically, this stanza of spiritual triumph and ecstasy is in the present tense; he stands at the zenith and claims his inheritance:

The LORD of all the vast domain,  
Has promis'd it to me;  
The length and breadth of all the plain,  
As far as faith can see (192).

At this unprecedented height of religious experience he gives himself up to God. The hymn ends:

How glorious is my privilege!  
To thee for help I call;  
I stand upon a mountain's edge,  
Oh save me, lest I fall!

Tho' much exalted in the LORD,  
My strength is not my own;  
Then let me tremble at his word,  
And none shall cast me down.

On one level this is a triumphant ending: the speaker not only attains this summit of religious experience, but realizes that he owes it all to God; if he continues to "tremble at his word" then he shall not be cast down. But on another level the ending is not triumphant. For one thing, his first response to being at this summit is terror. He has been brought there by wings, yet still he fears a fall: the implication is that once one attains great heights of religious experience, the only way to go is down. His realization of the possibility of a fall is too sudden not to be somewhat disturbing. More important, he suggests that the only way he can remain at this spiritual height — or rather, the only way he can avoid a great fall — is by trembling, by becoming and remaining fearful, even terrified, of God's Word. Though this is perhaps not unreasonable, it is inconsistent with what went before in the hymn. He got safely to this summit by "the wings of joy and love". Why suddenly do these wings become fear and terror? The underlying meaning seems to be that while joy and love are important qualities in religious experience, it is really fear that is at the top: thus abideth joy, love, and fear, and the greatest of these is fear. The speaker in this hymn seems to have

been in a better state in the first four stanzas than in the "exalted" last two. In this hymn entitled 'LIVELY HOPE AND GRACIOUS FEAR' the fear is more profound than gracious, and it quite outlasts and dominates the "lively hope".

Another tonally complex hymn is 'THE NEW CONVERT'. It begins by suggesting that the "new-born child of gospel-grace" "Lifts up his blooming branch on high" (197) and experiences bliss and invulnerability:

No fears he feels, he sees no foes,  
No conflict yet his faith employs,  
Nor has he learnt to whom he owes,  
The strength and peace his soul enjoys.

Suddenly, however, the tonal descent begins:

But sin soon darts its cruel sting,  
And, comforts sinking day by day,  
What seem'd his own, a self-fed spring,  
Proves but a brook that glides away.

The speaker then refers to the story of God allowing Gideon's army to be decimated, lest they would have thought themselves solely responsible for their numerous successes. The hymn ends:

Thus will he bring our spirits down,  
And draw our ebbing comforts low;  
That sav'd by grace, but not our own,  
We may not claim the praise we owe.

The overall tone in the hymn seems positive. The new convert is blissfully happy, but only because he is unaware of fear, conflict, and the knowledge that he owes everything to God. Soon he becomes aware of these things, and though his life is no longer as simple and happy, he is in a better state because he now possesses experience and wisdom; he knows that God acts in ways that are best for his follower. On one level, then, the hymn is concerned with the divine education of the convert. But on another level the tone simply descends from its initial position of being positive. If one compares



the language in the early part of the hymn with the language in later parts, the cumulative effect carries suggestive weight. The expressions "new-born", "lifts up", "blooming", "high", and "his soul enjoys", all occurring in the opening stanzas, seem each to have a counterpart in the closing stanzas: "made his numbers [of men] less", "bring our spirits down", "ebbing", "low", and "we may not claim", respectively. In the opening stanza the new convert can do things; in the closing stanza he cannot. In short, the language suggests that this Christian's experience has gone from being completely positive to being completely negative. And at the exact centre of the hymn are the words "sinking day by day". It is as if Christian experience is a relentless descent from bliss and happiness into a state of "ebbing comforts"; and though this is supposed to be God's design and thus be ultimately good, the speaker makes no effort to draw this conclusion in the hymn: he leaves the reader to draw either this or the other possible conclusion. Once again the tone operates on more than one level: is the spiritual movement in 'THE NEW CONVERT' a rising or a falling one? Cowper offers alternatives but no certainties.

Many of Cowper's hymns have this kind of tonal complexity. 'SEEKING THE BELOVED' begins:

To those who know the LORD I speak,  
Is my beloved near?  
The bridegroom of my soul I seek,  
Oh! when will he appear (173)!

After describing the grace and love that is God, he alleges that "none can see him but his friends,/ And they were once his foes". He extends this into his Calvinistic belief that God elects some and ignores others: "Did he but shine alike on all,/ Then all alike would love". In fact, if God shone alike on all,

Then love in ev'ry heart would reign,  
And war would cease to roar;  
And cruel, and blood-thirsty men,  
Would thirst for blood no more (174).

This seems a straight-forward hymn, with Calvinistic colour, about seeking the beloved. The tone is, therefore, understandably somewhat gloomy and uncertain; there is no evidence that the eagerly-sought beloved is ever found. This is normal enough, and Calvinists would not find the tone to be particularly ominous, at least on this level. But on another level they probably would. While it is acceptable that God chooses some and ignores others, it is horrible if one senses that he is of the latter class. And the speaker in this hymn hints that he is such. At the midway point of the hymn he claims that "none can see him [the Lord] but his friends...". At the end he says, "I long to see him too". The implication is clearly that he cannot see God, so he is not a friend of God; therefore he is not of the elect. What is more is that in the last stanza he prays that God will "shine on you" and that God will be told that the speaker of the hymn has not been shone upon:

Such JESUS is, and such his grace,  
Oh may he shine on you!  
And tell him, when you see his face,  
I long to see him too.

In other words, his "seeking the beloved" has been, and perhaps will be, a vain task. And by saying that if God shone on all alike then all would love Him and war would cease, the speaker is indirectly indicating God for his favouritism and therefore destructive behaviour. In terms of tone this hymn goes beyond Calvinistic anxiety, into the angry and dejected heart of a suffering human being. He may be seeking the beloved, but the beloved does not seem to care to seek him, or even to be sought by him.

In Cowper's hymns, then, tone operates on more than one level.

Close reading often reveals a different tone from that on the surface. Cowper was trying to write hymns that would be acceptable to congregations and to Newton's volume, so they had to appear to have the same affirmative, hope-inspiring tone that Newton's had. On one level they do. But Cowper was too much the psychologically disturbed, soul-searching poet to stop at that.

Again a brief comparison with Newton is illuminating. Tone in Newton's hymns is one-dimensional; it is invariably so affirmative and confident that it pushes Calvinism off the stage completely:

SINNER, hear the Saviour's call,  
He now is passing by;  
He has seen thy grievous thrall,  
And heard thy mournful cry.  
He has pardons to impart,  
Grace to save thee from thy fears,  
See the love that fills his heart,  
And wipe away thy tears.<sup>67</sup>

Or,

CHeer up, my soul, there is a mercy-seat  
Sprinkled with blood, where JESUS answers pray'r;  
There humbly cast thyself, beneath his feet,  
For never needy sinner perish'd there.<sup>68</sup>

Even when considering his own sinfulness, Newton tends to distance his material from himself by looking outward instead of inward:

Of sinners the chief,  
And viler than all,  
The jailor or thief  
Manasseh or Saul:  
Since they were forgiven  
Why should I despair,  
While CHRIST is in heaven,  
And still answers prayer?<sup>69</sup>

Instead of taking a deep look into his own life, Newton refers to Bunyan's Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners, to Biblical characters,

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 314.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 323.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 321-2.

and clings tenaciously in simple language to his comfortable belief that God is in His heaven and all's right with John Newton. When he writes a hymn about spiritual conflict, the conflict seems invariably to be stylized, as if read from a book rather than experienced. And invariably the ending is neat:

Then I see his smiling face,  
Feel the pledge of joys to come;  
Often, LORD, repeat this grace  
Till thou shalt call me home.<sup>70</sup>

Newton prefers to write about spiritual victory and contentment. When he does write about spiritual conflict, he writes about it in general terms, never about his own inner conflicts.

The point of view in Cowper's hymns is unmistakable: one is never allowed to forget that it is Cowper writing. He speaks from his own soul, and focuses on his own soul. A good example of Cowper's point of view is 'SELF-ACQUAINTANCE'. In the opening stanza Cowper reveals clearly what the subject matter is, and who exactly is speaking, in his hymns:

Dear LORD accept a sinful heart,  
Which of itself complains  
And mourns, with much and frequent smart,  
The evil it contains (182).

He goes on to focus on the "fiery seeds" of anger, discontent, and despair within himself, and concludes typically:

Oh! cleanse me in a Saviour's blood,  
Transform me by thy pow'r,  
And make me thy belov'd abode,  
And let me rove no more (183).

The point of view in Cowper's hymns is the self. 'MY SOUL THIRSTETH FOR GOD' begins, "I thirst, but not as once I did..." (193), and ends "Or yields him meaner fruit than I" (194). It begins and ends with the self. 'LOVE CONSTRAINING TO OBEDIENCE', like many of Cowper's hymns, has the first-person referent in virtually every

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 343.

line. Speaking of sin he says, "I feel I hate it too", the double first-person emphasizing the extra depth of subjectivity in the hymn. The penultimate stanza, with its first-person referents and interrogatives, is deeply subjective:

What shall I do, was then the word,  
That I may worthier grow?  
What shall I render to the LORD?  
Is my enquiry now (194).

Cowper's goal in his hymns is bifocal: he wants to write pious songs of praise and yet also wants to explore his inner self. He has written one hymn entitled 'THE HIDDEN LIFE'; and this title is not unlike Matthew Arnold's 'The Buried Life'. In Cowper's hymn the goal is "To tell the Saviour all my wants"; in Arnold's it is to explore the "nameless feelings that course through our breast". The last stanza of 'THE HIDDEN LIFE' suggests that Cowper is intent on exploring his inner feelings, even though he may not want to do so. He is not interested in creating an ideal or imaginative world of God's grandeur, as is Smart. In fact, this stanza seems a quiet indictment of the hymns of Christopher Smart:

Trust me, I draw the likeness true,  
And not as fancy paints;  
Such honor may he give to you,  
For such have all his saints (188).  
[italics mine]

In the list of subscribers to Smart's Psalms and Hymns and Spiritual Songs (1765) appears the name "William Cowper, Esq." Cowper probably knew Smart's hymns, and it is clear from the tone and point of view that he intends his to be very different. While Smart opens the window of his imagination and looks out at the created world through a heightened poetic sensibility with a capacity for idealizing and re-creating reality, Cowper draws the shade on the outside world and turns his poetic gaze deeply inward with a great capacity for seeing

the disturbed "hidden life" as it is, but also for crafting a finished surface that makes his hymns acceptable to congregations.

Cowper also differs from Smart in his use of imaginative figures. For Smart the images, metaphors, and visionary scenes seem to have come into being almost for their own sake: they become the hymn rather than remain a part of it. With Cowper imaginative figures occur often, but they are less self-proclaiming, and they always have a deeper purpose in the organic fibre of the hymn.

The central metaphor that informs Cowper's hymnody is that of the "storm". He writes continually of "storms that veil the skies", "looking upwards in a storm", hearing the "thunder roar", "the roaring of the sea", "the great water-floods", "the stormy main", and high winds and swelling billows. The storm seems to represent everything associated with the difficulties and vicissitudes of earthly existence. For Cowper, fallen man's everyday life is as precarious and terrifying as a violent storm:

The billows swell, the winds are high,  
Clouds overcast my wintry sky;  
Out of the depths to thee I call,  
My fears are great, my strength is small (177).

This metaphor informs all five stanzas of 'TEMPTATION'. At the end, there is no calm after the storm; rather, the storm continues and he can only wish for guidance and security:

Tho' tempest-toss'd and half a wreck,  
My Saviour thro' the floods I seek;  
Let neither winds nor stormy main,  
Force back my shatter'd bark again (178).

This hymn is a prayer to quell a storm which only rages on and drowns out the pleading voice of its victim.

The voice calling out to God through a storm is the archetypal scene in Cowper's hymns:

GOD of my life, to thee I call,  
Afflicted at thy feet I fall;  
When the great water-floods prevail,  
Leave not my trembling heart to fail (178)!

The struggling Christian continually tries to look beyond his own earthly existence to catch a glimpse of his Saviour:

Thro' all the storms that veil the skies  
And frown on earthly things;  
The Sun of Righteousness he Eyes  
With healing on his wings (185).

The significance of this pervasive metaphor is that it emphasizes man's distance from God rather than his closeness to God. The speaker in Cowper's hymns is always caught in a violent tempest; only God is above it, and there seems to be an untraversable distance between the two:

God moves in a mysterious way,  
His wonders to perform,  
He plants his footsteps in the Sea,  
And rides upon the Storm (174).

The other central metaphor in Cowper's hymns is that of the "calm", or "silent shade". At times Cowper can say, "Far from the World, O Lord I flee,/ From strife, and tumult far" (186), because "The calm retreat, the silent shade,/ With prayer, and praise agree...". In this situation, away from the turbulence of everyday existence and the storms of temptation and sin, man can commune with God:

There, if thy Spirit touch the Soul,  
And grace her mean abode;  
O with what peace, and joy, and love,  
She communes with her God!

But it is only in these isolated moments of "retirement" that there seems to be any real contact between the speaker and God. Only when he flees everyday reality are these moments experienced. Not often, but only

Sometimes a light surprises  
The christian while he sings;  
It is the LORD who rises  
With healing in his wings... (188).

Not in everyday life, but only

In holy contemplation,  
We sweetly then pursue  
The theme of GOD's salvation  
And find it ever new... .

Only in these moments is one "Set free from present sorrow". And these moments occur infrequently in Cowper's hymns.

What is important to notice about these contrasting metaphors of "storm" and "calm", is that they are never set against each other. In the Biblical use of this double metaphor, Christ quells the storm and changes it miraculously into a calm. Cowper never has this happen, even though the metaphor appears continually. The serene "light" that "surprizes" never does so during one of Cowper's storms. When he finds himself "tempest-toss'd and half a wreck", he remains in this state and therefore prays all the more earnestly. It is significant also that the quality of the writing is usually of a higher standard in the stormy hymns than in the quiet ones. It is almost as if Cowper is not involved in the few tranquil hymns to the same extent that he is in the tempestuous ones. For example, this stanza:

Honor and happiness unite  
To make the christian's name a praise;  
How fair the scene, how clear the light,  
That fills the remnant of his days (190)!

seems less to possess Cowper's consciousness and imagination than this:

See, from the ever-burning lake  
How like a smoky cloud they rise!  
With horrid blasts my soul they shake,  
With storms of blasphemies and lies (179).

The frequency with which the violent storm occurs as a metaphor in Cowper's hymns tends to betray the increasingly unstable condition of his mind during the time he wrote these hymns. But though the metaphor is disturbing and recurrent, it is invariably couched in such



a polished hymn as not to raise the suspicions and concern of a congregation of hopeful believers.

Cowper uses imaginative figures as carefully as he uses other poetical devices. The rhetorical tropes that appear so often in other writers are relatively absent in Cowper, who seems to devote his energies to complexities of tone and levels of meaning. A good way to get an idea of the overall poetical quality of Cowper's hymns is to look at a few of them in totality.

#### HATRED OF SIN

Holy LORD GOD! I love thy truth,  
Nor dare thy least commandment slight;  
Yet pierc'd by sin, the serpent's tooth,  
I mourn the anguish of the bite.

But tho' the poison lurks within,  
Hope bids me still with patience wait;  
Till death shall set me free from sin,  
Free from the only thing I hate.

Had I a throne above the rest,  
Where angels and archangels dwell;  
One sin, unslain, within my breast,  
Would make that heav'n as dark as hell.

The pris'ner, sent to breathe fresh air,  
And bless'd with liberty again,  
Would mourn, were he condemn'd to wear  
One link of all his former chain.

But oh! no foe invades the bliss,  
When glory crowns the Christian's head;  
One view of JESUS as he is,  
Will strike all sin for ever dead (196).

As in most of Cowper's hymns, the tone operates on two levels. On the surface it speaks of disgust with sin, and joy at Jesus's ability to eradicate it; the tone is one of determination and confidence. But on a deeper level the tone appears in a different light. The speaker begins by claiming his love for God's truth, but he laments his present condition of sinfulness — the "poison lurks within": stanzas 1 and 2 are written in the present tense.

Stanzas 3 and 4, which speculate upon the possibility of someone being freed from sin, are in a conditional tense. And the final stanza, which appears so positive and triumphant, is in the future tense. The suggestion in this subtle switching of tenses is that although the Christian may hate his sinfulness, it is a state of being that is more real than the possibility of being freed from it. The speaker has indicated that he is infected with sin, and since it only takes "one sin" to make even "heav'n as dark as hell", the overshadowing suggestion is that his sinful condition, "the only thing I hate", possesses his life; and his hatred of it, if not a losing battle, is certainly one with no impending victory.

The point of view is typical of Cowper in that it is the speaker looking into himself: he focuses on the poison that "lurks within". This act of looking inward, as usual, produces a hymn with meaning on more than one level. Imaginative figures are used quite sparingly: the images of the serpent's bite, the chain, and the throne are all Biblical and are used to sharp and unelaborate effect. The imagery and diction are traditional Evangelical material, and thus, in spite of complexities in tone, make the hymn read smoothly.

#### TEMPTATION

The billows swell, the winds are high,  
Clouds overcast my wintry sky;  
Out of the depths to thee I call,  
My fears are great, my strength is small.

O LORD, the pilot's part perform,  
And guide and guard me thro' the storm;  
Defend me from each threaten'g ill,  
Controll the waves, say, 'Peace, be still'.

Amidst the roaring of the sea,  
My soul still hangs her hope on thee,  
Thy constant love, thy faithful care,  
Is all that saves me from despair.

Dangers of ev'ry shape and name  
Attend the follow'rs of the Lamb,  
Who leave the world's deceitful shore,  
And leave it to return no more.

Tho' tempest-toss'd and half a wreck,  
My Saviour thro' the floods I seek;  
Let neither winds nor stormy main,  
Force back my shatter'd bark again (177-8).

This hymn is an elaboration of Cowper's favorite metaphor of the storm. This time, however, he couples it with the sea, and the hymn becomes a vivid depiction of how the speaker in this hymn sees his own spiritual life. After calling out for help he prays that God will calm the storm. When this does not happen, his prayer evaporates into hope in the next stanza. In stanza 4 Cowper indicates that the metaphor of the stormy sea is his own Christian life. And though Christ says, "Peace, be still" in the Bible, He is not saying it in Cowper's life. The hymn ends with the distressed speaker still being "tempest-toss'd" and seeking the Lord, and there is no indication that He is to be found or that the tempest will relent.

Thus while the tone modulates from desperation to prayer to hope to resignation, the metaphor of the storm at sea does not change; and while on the surface the hymn shows a conventional Evangelical calling out to God for help, the metaphor is too vividly realized and acutely felt, and the tone too personal and immediate for the hymn to be read on that level alone. The hymn is entitled 'TEMPTATION', and although most Evangelicals would depict the Christian's triumph over it, Cowper depicts himself embroiled within it and not about to be saved from it. Close reading allows one to sense the spiritual distress that Cowper must have been experiencing at the time he wrote this hymn. This distress reaches a climax in the last hymn Cowper wrote:

LIGHT SHINING OUT OF DARKNESS

God moves in a mysterious way,  
His wonders to perform,  
He plants his footsteps in the Sea,  
And rides upon the Storm.

Deep in unfathomable Mines,  
Of never failing Skill  
He treasures up his bright designs  
And works his Sovereign Will.

Ye fearfull Saints fresh courage take,  
The clouds ye so much dread,  
Are big with Mercy, and shall break  
In blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,  
But trust him for his Grace,  
Behind a frowning Providence  
He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,  
Unfolding every hour,  
The Bud may have a bitter taste,  
But wait, to Smell the flower.

Blind unbelief is sure to err,  
And scan his work in vain,  
God is his own Interpreter,  
And he will make it plain (174-5).

Cowper evidently wrote this hymn shortly before his breakdown in January of 1773. Samuel Greatheed says in his funeral sermon for Cowper that "Our departed friend conceived some presentiment of this sad reverse [the breakdown] as it drew near; and during a solitary walk in the fields, he composed a hymn...".<sup>71</sup> Following this is the hymn.

The two images in the opening stanzas point to the hugeness and incomprehensibility of God, a phenomenon that Cowper was certainly trying to grasp in the last days of his sanity. The image in stanza

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<sup>71</sup> Cited in Baird and Ryskamp's edition of Cowper's poems, p. 484. They also say: "The copy in the Maitland-Madan Commonplace Book is headed: 'Hymn by Mr. William Cowper of Olney, sent me, by the Reverend Mr. Newton. February 18, 1773'".

3 discusses the Christian's relationship with God and is interesting in its dual possibility. On one level it has positive connotations: the Christian is showered with blessings. But on another level the metaphor of the storm-cloud, appearing so frequently in Cowper's hymns, always betokens spiritual unrest and even violence; it is not unlikely that it subtly contains these associations on this occasion also. The thought of clouds bursting on one's head, even if in blessings, is somewhat disturbing, and Cowper seems to be offering both pleasant and unpleasant possibilities in this image. He also does this in the last two lines of the third stanza: God smiles behind frowning Providence; but Cowper, using the active verb, "He hides a smiling face", is suggesting that God deliberately hides His goodness and allows people to experience the frowns of Providence. In the fifth stanza Cowper claims that God's actions may have a bitter taste, "But wait, to Smell the flower". He is not saying that the flower will have a pleasant smell; in fact, he leaves this exhortation inconclusive. And his final stanza is just as inconclusive: man cannot interpret God's actions, only God can. The irony from Cowper's point of view is that he experiences his major collapse into insanity after the writing of this hymn: the belief of damnation is made "plain". The hymn begins by pointing to God's mystery; its centre depicts the disturbing bursting of clouds on the saints' heads; and it ends in bewilderment in the face of God's designs. On the surface it seems a typical Evangelical hymn filled with hope and belief in God, but underneath it reveals Cowper's escalating mental unrest and spiritual dizziness. It explores, through images and complexities in tone, Cowper's inner self as it slides toward insanity.

Cowper's great innovation in hymnody is that he expresses his inner self in proper hymns: he is hymn-writer and poet, and thus fashions the hymn into a complex and specialized literary product. After the breakdown, however, he ceased to be the hymn-writer, and, until he adequately recovered his senses, ceased to be a poet. Shortly after his breakdown, Cowper writes lines that depict his spiritual and mental condition. These lines, neither hymnal nor particularly poetic, mark the end of Cowper's hymn-writing, and his religious faith:

HATRED AND VENGEANCE, MY ETERNAL PORTION

Hatred and vengeance, my eternal portion,  
Scarce can endure delay of execution: —  
Wait, with impatient readiness, to seize my  
Soul in a moment.  
Damn'd below Judas; more abhorr'd than he was,  
Who, for a few pence, sold his holy master.  
Twice betray'd, Jesus me, the last delinquent,  
Deems the profanest.  
Man disavows, and Deity disowns me.  
Hell might afford my miseries a shelter;  
Therefore hell keeps her everhungry mouths all  
Bolted against me.  
Hard lot! Encompass'd with a thousand dangers,  
Weary, faint, trembling with a thousand terrors,  
Fall'n, and if vanquish'd, to receive a sentence  
Worse than Abiram's:  
Him, the vindictive rod of angry justice  
Sent, quick and howling, to the centre headlong;  
I, fed with judgements, in a fleshly tomb, am  
Buried above ground (209-10).<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> This poem, hitherto assigned to 1763, is now dated at 1774: v  
The Poems of William Cowper, vol. I, ed. John D. Baird and  
Charles Ryskamp (Oxford, 1980) 489.

## CONCLUSION

The hymn has hitherto not been considered in detail as a literary form. This thesis has attempted to demonstrate that the hymn has real, though perhaps not always refined, literary and imaginative qualities, and, like other literary genres, it undergoes various transformations in the hands of certain writers, who experience the unique phenomenon of the hymn in different ways, and reach different ends. Admittedly, the hymn may not be a literary form of primary importance. It should be studied, however, not only because it is a significant secondary genre, but also because it can serve as a reliable index to the change in taste and sensibility in the eighteenth century. Watts and Steele express themselves very differently, as do Wesley and Smart; and Cowper differently still. The earlier hymn-writers took for granted what the later ones had difficulty assuming, and the later writers found it necessary to look into their own imaginations, not simply out at God's world. The importance of examining the hymn through the eighteenth century lies less in the readings of individual hymns than in viewing the whole historical and literary process of how the successive writers express themselves, how they reveal changing attitudes toward figurative language, point of view, tone, and form in hymnal writing as the century progressed.

Attitudes toward the possibilities, limits, and propriety of these literary qualities, among others, change in secular poetry as well: the difference in literary consciousness and manner of expression between Pope and Wordsworth is not unlike that between Watts and Smart. This kind of analogy should not be insisted upon; but the point is that by considering the hymn and its transformation, one obtains a

view of eighteenth-century literary consciousness from another, and no less valid, perspective. To evaluate the eighteenth century exclusively by its greatest literary expressions is to be left with a less than complete picture. The prominent poets, such as Pope, Thomson, Johnson, and Gray, answered the tastes of a certain class of society; the hymn-writers answered the tastes of society at large. That the people began turning to hymns, and not just metrical psalms, indicates a change in what they appreciated and saw as important (or permissible) in religious expression. That each of the five major hymn-writers examined here transforms certain aspects of the hymn, indicates a change in taste about what the hymn, as a literary and liturgical expression, should be, and how they, (and their society) address themselves to the issues in human life that they found most important.

This thesis began by tracing the evolution of the hymn, from the Reformation to the time of Isaac Watts; an evolution which can be seen as a slightly more complex process than some hymnologists have assumed. Factors such as the German origin and Genevan opposition to hymns, the metrical psalters, seventeenth-century devotional poetry, and the clerical controversy about hymns in England — these factors were at once, and in varying degrees, major catalytic and inhibiting forces influencing the evolution of the hymn. They acted and interacted in complex ways; and if, as some hymnologists assume, England was late in introducing hymns into church worship, the delay was not due specifically to any single factor, such as the monopoly of the metrical psalms, or clerical adversity — for these factors were stimuli as well as detriments to the advent of the hymn — but rather it was due to the interaction of, and responses to, these main forces that



formed a historical process unique to England. The English hymn in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries was a new and controversial phenomenon, both from an ecclesiastical and a literary perspective.

Attempting to please both camps, Isaac Watts was faced with the task of writing versified theological treatises as well as poems, within one form. This called for some innovations. When writing scriptural hymns, Watts, unlike earlier writers, tended to interpret the scripture for the reader: he varied the amount of detail and occasionally imposed his own imaginative figures onto the hymn; he began with the scripture rather than ended with it. In writing hymns "of meer Human Composure" he was a greater innovator still. Watts's hymns have unmistakable characteristics. His tone is unwaveringly positive: it testifies to God's grandeur at every moment. The point of view Watts usually writes from is that of the omniscient surveyor; he is generally not present in his hymns, and the voice that is heard seems to come from no particular person or place. Watts focuses on the "whole Realm of Nature", often creating a series of static, though panoramic, scenes that together form a mozaic of God and His world. In so doing Watts deliberately kept imaginative figures to a minimum, setting them precariously onto the theological stanza rather than infusing them. Watts's artificial figures — he often brackets them — suggest that he saw poetry and hymnody as separate entities, the combination of which is a difficult, if not impracticable, task. Many of Watts's hymns, then, are not impressive as poetry. But some are. In these instances Watts was apparently unaware that he was producing significant poetry within a hymnal framework. Watts wrote many fine hymns, but the summit of his achievement is reached when these acquire unusual poetical

dimension and therefore imaginative possibility. But considered in totality, Watts's substantial achievement is in laying the foundation for later hymn-writers.

One such is Charles Wesley, who depicts in his hymns the dynamic interpersonal relationship between the individual believer and Jesus Christ; he focuses on man's response to Christianity rather than Christianity itself. Thus, instead of versifying and interpreting scripture in his scriptural hymns, Wesley responds subjectively and often emotionally to it, sometimes illustrating with symbol and allegory, and giving scripture a very different meaning to that which is conventional; scripture becomes a starting point for his own emotional and contemplative reaction. Stressing man's relationship to Christ in all its vicissitudes, Wesley transforms the original hymn into something quite unlike that of Watts. Wesley's tone is ultimately affirmative, like Watts's, but it is seldom so early in the hymn: he frequently presents a spiritual struggle followed by serenity and assurance. Invariably he writes from the point of view of an individual, often a struggling, Christian; rarely from a detached, omniscient perspective. Wesley is generally more adept than Watts at infusing imaginative figures, usually brief, sharp ones, and at linking a series of figures together. They are nearly always, however, taken directly from scripture, and then interpreted in an Evangelical or Methodist context. Wesley is also a more versatile craftsman than Watts: he uses more metrical, rhythmic, and stanzaic forms than any other hymn-writer, more probably than any other poet, of the century. Wesley's real innovativeness lies in this, and in the fact that he made the hymn a personal and passionate discourse with God; he talks to God while Watts talks about Him. Although it is Wesley who familiarized and more integrally combined hymnody

and poetry, it should be remembered that Watts faced a more difficult social climate as far as this task was concerned. All told, Watts and Wesley are highly competent hymn-writers.

Watts and Wesley assumed — because there was never any reason to question — that their hymns were efficacious and adequate praises of God, who hears and answers their utterances. But Anne Steele did not make this assumption. In fact, her whole hymnody (and poetry) is built around the fundamental yet complex problem that God and religious experience are beyond human comprehension and expression. Thus many of her hymns are self-proclaimed failures: examinations of the act of hymn-writing, and indictments of language itself (as is her occasional verse). God is only properly praised, according to Steele, non-verbally: only the phenomena of nature and the occasional inspired note of the greatest poets can accomplish this virtually impossible task. Her point of view, then, is that of a self-defeated hymn-writer, and she focuses on the hymn, the medium between God and man. Unlike Watts, she is not interested so much in the thing praised, and unlike Wesley, she is not interested so much in the praiser; rather, she is vitally concerned with the bridge between the two. Her tone differs from that of her predecessors and contemporaries also. For the first time hymns convey a tone of doubt, defeat, even despair; largely because hymning itself is perceived as a futile activity. For this reason her use of imaginative figures is spare indeed: she keeps mainly to the archetypal metaphor of darkness and light. If plain language is inefficacious and inadequate to fulfil its task, so much more so is figurative language. In her scriptural hymns, then, she does not follow Watts and Wesley in their willingness to deviate from, and manipulate, scriptures.

Instead she retains a great reverence for the Word, and does little more than present it in versified form. Even in her scriptural hymns, however, she is often still concerned with the act of writing them, emphasizing her inability. But in writing about not being able to write, and not being able to unite hymnody and poetry, she produces some penetrating and innovative examinations of both.

Christopher Smart attempted a transformation of Christian liturgy in his book of 1765. He begins by producing a version of the psalms that is quite unlike any other. Smart infuses the psalms with imaginative vision and makes translation an act of recreation. He then reveals hymns on a series of topics on the Christian calendar year. For Smart the hymn is the spontaneous act of looking out at God's world through a divinely inspired and excited imagination, and his hymns are an attempt to take the reader into Smart's imaginative world, rather than meet him on the ground of common experience. Smart sees divinity in the minutest natural phenomena, and sees the world's creatures as a giant symphony dedicated to hymning their Creator's glory. His tone never wavers from imaginative ecstasy; his point of view is that of a divinely-ordained poet and hymnist; and his focus is relentlessly on his own perception of creation. His imaginative figures are a compendium of poly-synaesthetic, minutely detailed, and semantically dense metaphors and images. That the hymns are all linked epanastrophically suggests that hymning is the never-ending and natural activity of the human imagination.

In A Song to David Smart presents himself as the modern David who is taking Christian praise to a new stage by encouraging the reader to view and meditate upon God's world through David's — and Smart's — imagination, and ultimately through his own: praise,

even religion itself, should appeal to the emotional, irrational component of the human psyche, not exclusively to its moral and rational counterpart. Smart makes his greatest poem the greatest hymn, and the epiphany of his Psalms and Hymns. In his attempt to unite hymn and poem, he made the one become the other, and while his hymnody has not found much church use, perhaps for this reason and the esoterically imaginative way he went about it, Smart was obviously aware that he was writing for a celestial rather than a human congregation, and that he had created a supremely artistic, rather than liturgical, monument.

While Smart could raise a monument of "fancy rais'd to Zion's top", William Cowper's immediate task was to write for his ~~Olney~~ <sup>fellow</sup> parishioners. Thus at first glance his hymns seem a regression from Smart's imaginative brilliance. But this is not the case. Smart looked outward while Cowper looked deeply inward. In effect, Cowper performs two task simultaneously: he writes hymns of enduring church value, yet poems that explore and reveal the depths of his own disturbed self. A delicate individual, Cowper was headed toward his major mental collapse while writing most of his hymns. Beneath their pious surface they reveal a turbulent and disintegrating soul. Whether or not Cowper was aware of the multi-levelled nature of his hymns is less important than to notice that for Cowper the hymn is an introspective and all-encompassing imaginative experience. He expressed in the hymn what he could not express in any other literary form, and perhaps what he did not want to express at all, until insanity led him to write 'Hatred and Vengeance, My Eternal Portion', and, very late in his life, 'The Castaway'.

The five writers examined in this study knew that the hymn could

have literary dimensions, and each writer supplied these in a unique way. Watts, it seems, wrote his hymn and then attempted to add poetical elements to it; Wesley joined Biblical poetry to his hymn; Steele saw true hymnody as impossible because of the limits of poetry and language itself; Smart wrote poetry as hymnody; but Cowper wrote imaginative poetry and conventional hymnody within one form. To say this is not to attempt to rank the five writers. There is little doubt that Watts and Wesley were the great hymn-writers of the century, though much of what they wrote is not first-class poetry. Steele and Smart wrote great poems, but as hymns these have lagged far behind in church usage. But Cowper, who wrote conventional hymns with imaginative depth, showed what possibilities the hymn could have. His writing, indebted to the progress made by the others, is the culminating stage of the hymn's development as a literary form in the eighteenth century.

To study the eighteenth-century hymn is to gain a fuller perspective on the literature of that century. Such literary phenomena as the conscious exclusion of current poetic diction, the exploration of the inner self, and the liberal experimentation with form (phenomena that have usually been credited to the Romantic period) are prevalent in the hymn-writing of the century.

In hymns there is a poetic language which is different from that of Pope and his imitators, different from much conventional verse. Exactly contemporary with poets such as Prior, Pope, Dyer, Johnson, Goldsmith, and Mason, there is a school of writers (Watts, Browne, Wesley, Doddridge, Steele, Hart, and Cowper) who were expressing themselves in a different way, and who at times themselves deploy the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation. To say

this is not to say that the hymn-writers are unrecognized Romantics; nor is the intention here to compare Augustan to hymnal to Romantic poetry. What is being suggested is that the transition from classical diction to the real language of men is much smoother and more easily seen in progress if one looks at the language of the hymn, probably the most written genre of the eighteenth century.

Isaac Watts, in the preface to Hymns and Spiritual Songs, laments that hymnody is in a sad state because of "the Matter and Words to which we confine all our Songs". Old-Testament stories and language, says Watts, are foreign "to the present Circumstances of Christians"; a modernized and therefore more applicable and comprehensible mode of expression is needed. Watts's hymns, therefore, are written in the simplest vocabulary, natural word order, uncomplicated sentiment, and are lucid visually. Watts's aims and results, as far as poetic language is concerned, are not unlike those of Wordsworth and Coleridge nearly a century later.

Nor are those of Charles Wesley, whose language, syntax, and phraseology are much more colloquial than Watts's. Wesley is the pioneer of writing incidental and heated conversations with God, and his language is invariably that of an excited individual, such as might attend a prayer meeting on a streetcorner. One thinks, in terms of analogy, of the efforts of Wordsworth to speak through the sensibilities of rustics, a retired sea-captain, an old beggar, and children. One thinks also of Blake. An alert critic has attempted to demonstrate Blake's indebtedness to Wesley,<sup>1</sup> and critics are beginning to see Blake's Songs of Innocence as anticipated, in the simplicity of their language and verse forms, by the children's hymns

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<sup>1</sup> See Martha Winburn England, Hymns Unbidden (New York, 1966).

of Isaac Watts in particular.<sup>2</sup> Though Blake is in many ways original and fresh, he is also following a children's hymn tradition that had found expression in Bunyan, Watts, Wesley, and Smart, amongst others. The hymns of these writers show that there is a recognizable path to the lyrics of Blake, and to the theory and practice of Wordsworth, regarding the language of poetry.

Some hymn-writers in the century write in a simpler, more colloquial style than even Wesley. As is evident in Appendix A of this study, William Hammond and especially Joseph Hart make Watts and Wesley at times look more formal than they actually are. Hart, in particular, deliberately aims his hymns at the widest ~~common-~~ <sup>sector</sup> ~~denominated~~ of society, and in so doing tends to appear "ungraceful and uncouth".<sup>3</sup> The point here is that to study the language of the eighteenth-century hymn is to see that Blake, and Wordsworth and Coleridge, were not the innovators that they are often claimed to be. The "real language of men" and the "innocent" songs of children existed much earlier.

While in the century there is indeed a preponderance of Augustan or Neoclassical diction, which is characterized by, among other things, compound epithet and adjective (and modifiers ending in "y"), ornate Latinisms, obtrusive polysyllabics, periphrasis, personification, archaism, convoluted word-ordering, and other formalities of "correctness"; there is also a preponderance of a different language which fills a multitude of hymn-books, a language characterized by simple vocabulary,

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Michael Phillips, "William Blake's Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience, from Manuscript Draft to Illuminated Plate", The Book Collector, vol. 28, no. 1 (Spring, 1979), 17-59, esp. 36-38.

<sup>3</sup> Rev. W. J. Sykes, quoted by Thomas Wright in The Lives of the British Hymn-Writers (Joseph Hart) vol. 2 (London, 1910), 57.



natural word order, clarity of metaphor, colloquialism, conversational discourse, and spontaneity of feeling. Pope's language is no more the language of the eighteenth century than is Wesley's; they both are. A study of hymns adds two dimensions to one's knowledge of eighteenth-century poetic language. First, it makes one aware that the century is not characterised largely by an artificially-elevated diction, but rather has a very wide range and variability of poetic language. Secondly, it helps one to realize that the seemingly sudden transition to the language of Blake's childlike verses and Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads is not sudden; it came into being and largely matured in the hymn-writing of the century.

Another important literary quality, again thought to have been initiated by Blake, Wordsworth, and their successors, that can be seen in the eighteenth-century hymn, is the exploration and revelation of the inner self.

Charles Wesley uses the pronoun "I" more than any other writer in the century. But it is somewhat hazardous to say that it is his own self to which he continually refers; for the "I" figure in Wesley stands more for the archetypal Christian self than for Wesley's own self. Nevertheless, Wesley does at times reveal his own inner feelings — several of his hymns can be seen as autobiographical — and his exclamatory fervour, though perhaps motivated primarily by stock Evangelical emotion and belief, does at times become very personal, and the individual human voice is heard like it is heard in few other genres of the time. When Wesley exclaims, "O what an evil Heart have I", it is on the one hand an admission which all Christians are expected to share; but on the other hand it is an articulation of the unmistakeably personal utterance. Mainly, however, he refers to

"I" as the Christian soul rather than that of himself. Yet, the inward vision has a beginning in Wesley's canon.

It continues and becomes much more pronounced in Anne Steele, Christopher Smart, and — to a great extent — William Cowper. As noted, Steele questions the efficacy of language in its attempt accurately to depict, describe, and, most important, praise the Creator. Facing this problem she doubts her own value as writer and as Christian; her hymns are quite unlike those of earlier writers because they are self-questioning and self-doubting. This despair in the face of the impossibility of being a hymn-writer, results from Steele looking deeply within and seeing that the self is something too elusive to be articulated, and that therefore God, an even more indescribable phenomenon, is even further beyond the possibilities of language. Steele is not concerned with correctness or conventional diction; rather, she is profoundly concerned with finding a way to build a bridge of communication between her own inner self and an awesome God, much as Wordsworth is concerned to relate that certain something far more deeply interfused with the power and vitality of a mysteriously animated natural world. Steele's task was to explore her self, her God, and her medium.

In the hymns of Christopher Smart one can see an early attempt at making the human imagination the centre of art. Smart's hymns are neither correct nor stylized praise, but rather a personal expression and celebration of God and creation. When Smart says, "I speak for all; for them that fly/ And for the race that swim", he means that rather than follow the Neoclassical dictum, "First follow Nature", he is following first his own imaginative vision of nature instead of nature itself. Smart is not concerned to go to the reader's yard of common experience; he is concerned to take the reader into his

imaginative world instead. Rather than deliberately look out at the world, as other poets had done, Smart looks out at the world from within a heightened and magnified imagination. It is this distinction that makes Smart's writing innovative, and A Song to David astonishing.

Equally distinctive and innovative is the way in which William Cowper explores and reveals the feelings of his inner self. If any poet in the eighteenth century made his soul the centre of art, it is Cowper in his hymns. Cowper is a master of the hymn; and more, as within it he also explores his inner self and expresses the uncertainty, doubt, and despair at its centre. When read closely, Cowper's hymns often reveal the opposite of what they seem to say on the surface: he cannot keep his true feelings from his art, or his art from his true feelings. If Wordsworth's Prelude is about the state and growth of the author's poetic mind, then no less are Cowper's hymns about the state of his spiritual being. In this regard — the exploration and articulation of one's inmost feelings and doubts, and sense of awe — the hymns of Steele, Smart, and Cowper are a harbinger of of a central Romantic theme. n/

A third important literary quality of the hymn is that of technical innovation. While many writers in the eighteenth century tended to disclaim innovation and preferred to keep within the confines of correctness, there were others who experimented with technical form, and even with the concept of genre itself.

Charles Wesley is the most experimental poet in terms of rhyme, metre, and stanzaic form in the eighteenth century. In 1944 Oliver A. Beckerlegge attempted to enumerate and classify Wesley's prosody,<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Oliver A. Beckerlegge, "An Attempt at a Classification of Some of Charles Wesley's Metres: A Contribution to the Study of English Prosody" London Quarterly, 163 (1944), 219-227.

and showed that Wesley not only worked with iambic, trochaic, and anapaestic feet with great versatility, but he often also mixed iambs and trochaes in the same stanza. In his catalogue Beckerlegge lists 55 different stanzaic forms, ranging from Common Measure (8.6.8.6.) with abab rhyme, to very intricate mixed measures such as the 7.6.7.6.7.7.7.6. with aBaBcdcD rhyme, mixing iambs and trochaes, and the 6.6.7.7.<sup>6</sup>8.6., rhyming AAbbCDDC, and again mixing the two feet. But in spite of the usefulness of his catalogue, Beckerlegge misses a few of the oddest of Wesley's forms. Wesley also wrote in five-line stanzas, lines 1 and 2 in iambic dimeter, lines 3 and 5 iambic trimeter, and line 4 trochaic tetrameter, with aabab rhyme; in three-line stanzas, lines 1 and 2 in iambic dimeter and line 3 anapaestic tetrameter, with aaa rhyme; and at times he wrote in stanzas of varying length: one hymn, for example, has twelve stanzas of 10, 12, 6, 14, 16, 12, 14, 24, 12, 8, 20, and 14 lines, respectively. The hymns also range in length from one stanza to several dozen. In contrast, the very popular iambic pentameter is used only once or twice in Wesley's 9,000 hymns. This would suggest that Wesley saw the hymn as a very different mode of literary expression from conventional poetry, and he therefore searched to find the proper form for each hymn. Unlike most poets in the century, Wesley experimented continually with metre, stanza, and prosody, using the hymn as an arena for innovation.

Another great innovator is Christopher Smart, though not in the same way as Wesley. Smart experiments with the whole genre of hymnody, even church liturgy itself, in his volume of 1765. He was innovative in his highly imaginative Psalms, and his Hymns, and his new kind of hymnal exercise, A Song to David. But what is more important to consider is the 1765 book as a whole. To what literary genre does it belong?

While publications consisting of psalm translations and hymns abounded in the century, Smart's volume is original in linking its three sections, and making the whole a single artistic experience: first the elevated psalms, then the imaginatively brilliant hymns, and lastly these two phenomena seem to evolve, like an epiphany, into a totally new religious writing called, significantly, a Song. Smart's volume is an epanastrophic and orchestral synthesizing of all of Christian liturgy and an attempt to play the whole symphony at new imaginative heights. It is a divine vision of the continuity and wonder of the created world. Just as A Song to David is perhaps the most startlingly innovative poem of the century, before Blake, so also is the volume of 1765 as a whole the most original piece of religious writing. It gives the genres of psalm translation, hymn, and religious poem new possibilities; and then, as a book, it presents itself as a new genre, an unfamiliar symphony of religious and poetic expression.

In several ways, all five of the writers examined in this study are innovators. Not only were they working within a relatively controversial and specialized genre, but they were effecting significant changes that they saw fit in order to make the hymn the religious and artistic experience that they felt it could be. Their work makes the eighteenth century the important age of hymnody in terms of the hymn's inception, proliferation, development, and achieved maturity. A close look at the hymn adds an added perspective to the study of the literature of the century, and to the completeness and continuity of English literature as a whole, a dimension which for too long has been neglected.

The purpose here is to look briefly at several other important hymn-writers, thus providing a more comprehensive picture of eighteenth-century hymnody, and highlighting further the innovativeness and literary diversity of the five writers studied. As far as possible, the hymn-writers are looked at in chronological order.

Watts, it was suggested, is an innovator in hymn-writing, and although Charles Wesley was to depart from Watts's approach, the young dissident had several followers and imitators. One, with whom he corresponded, was Joseph Addison, who is most widely known for his contributions to The Spectator, The Tatler, and The Guardian, to the first of which he contributed five hymns between 26 July and 18 October, 1712. These hymns have remained in use for more than two centuries.

Addison's first hymn is actually a poetical rendering of Psalm 23; he refers to it as a "pastoral hymn". Its last stanza is quite different from the Authorized Version:

Tho' in a bare and rugged Way,  
Through devious lonely Wilds I stray,  
Thy Bounty shall my Pains beguile:  
The barren Wilderness shall smile  
With sudden Greens and Herbage crown'd,  
And Streams shall murmur all around.<sup>1</sup>

Watts was impressed by Addison's version, and writes to The Spectator on 19 August 1712: "YOU very much promote the Interests of Virtue, while you reform the Taste of a prophane Age, and perswade us to be entertain'd with Divine Poems".<sup>2</sup> Watts includes a paraphrase of his

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Addison in The Spectator (26 July, 1712). Cited in Donald F. Bond's edition of The Spectator (Oxford, 1965), vol. 4, 51. All citations from The Spectator are from Bond's edition.

<sup>2</sup> Isaac Watts in The Spectator (19 August, 1712). Cited in Bond's edition, vol. 4, 126.

own, which would appear in his Psalms of David Imitated (1719). It is not unlikely that Addison helped to inspire Watts to render the psalms.

A few days later, Addison, evidently pleased with Watts's response to his psalm, publishes a hymn very much in Watts's style:

I

The Spacious Firmament on high,  
With all the blue Etherial Sky,  
And spangled Heav'ns, a Shining Frame,  
Their great Original proclaim:  
Th'unwearied Sun, from day to day,  
Does his Creator's Pow'r display,  
And publishes to every Land  
The Work of an Almighty Hand.

II

Soon as the Evening Shades prevail,  
The Moon takes up the wondrous Tale,  
And nightly to the listning Earth  
Repeats the Story of her Birth:  
Whilst all the Stars that round her burn,  
And all the Planets, in their turn,  
Confirm the Tidings as they rowl,  
And spread the Truth from Pole to Pole.

III

What though, in solemn Silence, all  
Move round the dark terrestrial Ball?  
What tho' nor real Voice nor Sound  
Amid their radiant Orbs be found?  
In Reason's Ear they all rejoice,  
And utter forth a glorious Voice,  
For ever singing, as they shine,  
'The Hand that made us is Divine'.<sup>3</sup>

Like a hymn by Watts, this one of Addison's refers to God as an impersonal cosmic principle, the "great Original", "Creator", "Almighty Hand". The speaker is evidently an omniscient surveyor, and the tone is impersonal and never deviates. There are three definite scenes; each is self-contained and separate from the others. The hymn is a

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph Addison in The Spectator (23 August, 1712). Cited in Bond's edition, vol. 4, 144-45. It is worth noting that this hymn is based heavily on Psalm 19: 1-4.

mozaic of still scenes, rather than one continuous or changing scene. Even in terms of imaginative figures Addison is reserved, like Watts: he is willing to brighten and colour the hymn with illustrative adjectives, but aside from this it is very much a hymn of statement rather than suggestion or vision. Though Addison is like Watts, his hymns do seem to possess a distinct flavour.

Addison wrote three other hymns. On 9 August, 1712 he writes an essay on "Gratitude" and follows it with a hymn on the same topic. Its opening is not unlike Watts's "When I survey the Wondrous Cross":

WHEN all thy Mercies, O my God,  
My rising Soul surveys;  
Transported with the View, I'm lost<sup>4</sup>  
In Wonder, Love, and Praise... .

Like Watts, Addison is always affirmative and joyous in tone:

Ten thousand thousand precious Gifts  
My Daily Thanks employ,  
Nor is the least a chearful Heart,  
That tastes those Gifts with Joy.

His two other hymns (20 September and 18 October) are no departures from his usual Wattsian style. Though by no means a mere imitator of Watts, Addison is very much his follower as a hymn-writer; both believed, in similar language, that

HOW are Thy Servants blest, O Lord!  
How sure is their Defence!  
Eternal Wisdom is their Guide,  
Their Help Omnipotence.<sup>5</sup>

Another follower of Watts, but on a larger scale, was Simon Browne, whose Hymns and Spiritual Songs (1720) contains 266 hymns, most of which are slavish imitations of his better-known contemporary. Like

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph Addison in The Spectator (9 August, 1712). Cited in Bond's edition, vol. 4, 96.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Addison in The Spectator (20 September, 1712). Cited in Bond's edition, vol. 4, 235.



Watts, Browne was pastor of an Independent charge, first in Portsmouth and then in Old Jewry, London. In contemporary and later collections, Browne's hymns were quite prominent, but have now nearly all passed out of use.

In his preface Browne states clearly that "the ingenious Mr. Watts has outdone all that went before him... . The World, I hope, will not do me the injury to think, that I aim at being his rival. These hymns are design'd as a supplement to his, not intended to supplant them".<sup>6</sup> Browne's statement of purpose is an echo of Watts's of 1709: "I have labour'd to make the verse smooth, and the sense obvious and clear; to use propriety of expression, and to give as much ornament as I could to the subject, without rising above the level of ordinary understandings...".<sup>7</sup>

Much of the hymnody is very similar to Watts:

All things made for God.

Great first of Beings! mighty Lord!  
Of all this mighty frame!  
Produc'd by thy creating word,  
The world from nothing came.

Soon as thou gav'st the high command,  
'Twas instantly obey'd:  
And for thy pleasure all things stand,  
Which by thy pow'r were made.

Thy glories shine thro'out the whole,  
Each part reflects thy light:  
For thee in course the planets roll,  
And day succeeds to night.

For thee the earth its product yields,  
For thee the waters flow:  
And various plants adorn the fields,  
And trees aspiring grow.

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<sup>6</sup> Simon Browne, Hymns and Spiritual Songs, in Three Books (London, 1720), sig. A<sub>5</sub>. Hereafter referred to as Browne.

<sup>7</sup> Browne, sig. A<sub>5</sub>.

Unthinking brutes, and senseless things,  
To thee their homage pay;  
Beasts roar, each bird thy praises sings,  
The skies thy pow'rs display.

For thee the sun dispenses heat,  
And beams of cheering light:  
For distant stars in order set  
Break thro' the shades of night.

Whilst, in superior glories drest,  
The angels touch their strings:  
Each seraph, with thy favour blest,  
For thee both lives and sings.

Let us too, Lord, with zeal pursue  
This wise and noble end:  
That all we think, and all we do,  
May to thine honour tend.<sup>8</sup>

In Watts's manner, Browne refers to God as a cosmic principle, and his tone is lofty and unwavering throughout, a tone which seems to exude from an omnipresent voice. Like Watts, Browne takes a panoramic view of Creator and creation, and packages his perceptions into self-contained units in successive stanzas.

At times Browne seems to rework Watts's hymns, rather than write his own. Watts's 'Evening Song' begins:

DRead Sov'reign, let my Evening Song  
Like holy Incense rise;  
Assist the Offerings of my Tongue  
To reach the lofty Skies.<sup>9</sup>

Browne's begins:

ACcept, my God, my evening song,  
Like incense let it fragrant rise:  
Stir up mine heart, and tune my tongue,  
And let the musick reach the skies.<sup>10</sup>

In the next stanza, both Watts and Browne refer to God as "Protector" or "Guard"; in the third they express gratitude for the "Perpetual Blessings from above"; and both songs end with atonement and rest:

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<sup>8</sup> Browne, pp. 50-1.

<sup>9</sup> Isaac Watts, Hymns and Spiritual Songs, ed., Selma L. Bishop (London, 1962), p. 160.

<sup>10</sup> Browne, p. 214.

Watts

Sprinkled afresh with pard'ning Blood  
I lay me down to rest,  
As in th'Embraces of my God, <sup>11</sup>  
Or on my Saviour's Breast.

Browne

Then sprinkled with atoning blood,  
I'll lay me down and take my rest;  
Trust the protection of my God,  
And sleep as on my Saviour's breast. <sup>12</sup>

To the modern reader, Browne's volume seems to border on plagiarism. But Browne deliberately intended his hymns to be a supplement to Watts's, and he sets out to be a follower rather than an innovator. This is not unusual in eighteenth-century hymnody, especially considering the great following that Watts had. Browne's volume reached a second edition in 1741 and a third in 1760. In 1769 Thomas Gibbons (Watts's biographer) published a volume similar to Browne's; in 1784 George Burder published A Collection of Hymns from Various Authors, Design'd as a Supplement to Dr. Watts's Psalms and Hymns — this reached 37 editions before 1840; and even as late as 1833 William Jay of Bath published Hymns as an Appendix to Dr. Watts. The number of appendices, imitations, and supplements to Watts in the early nineteenth century is extraordinary.<sup>13</sup> Both Addison and Browne, then, though not themselves innovators, unknowingly started a tradition which never doubted the supremacy of Isaac Watts.

Watts's supremacy in church song could perhaps have been absolute, had Charles Wesley never written. But Wesley's influence was also deeply-felt and far-reaching; so much so that, as in the case of Watts, a school of hymn-writers tended to grow up around him as well. It would be impossible to investigate adequately the influence Wesley's hymns had on other writers, but one can look at a few of the more

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<sup>11</sup> Watts, cited in Bishop's edition (see note 9), p. 161.

<sup>12</sup> Browne, p. 215.

<sup>13</sup> The interested reader should look at Benson, pp. 127f, Julian's entry on Watts, and Escott's discussion of Watts's influence.

prominent writers and see that despite having a degree of originality, they are deeply indebted to the great itinerant Methodist.

One such was William Hammond, a member of the Calvinistic Methodists until 1745, when he joined the Moravian Brethren, who were in part responsible for leading the Wesleys to conversion. It was just when Hammond was leaving Whitefield and the Methodists that he published Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs.

Like Wesley, Hammond is concerned to depict human experience in his hymns, and to capture and express the innumerable vicissitudes of one's personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Speaking in his preface about the hymns "relating to Souls in Distress" he says; "The Hymns of this Kind were mostly written from my own Experience..."<sup>14</sup> His language, syntax, and rhetorical tropes are unmistakably Wesleyan. Stanzas like

WHY, O Satan, say'st thou so?  
And shall I not return?  
Shall I further further go  
Till I in Tophet burn?  
Shall I now from Jesus flee —  
Jesus of whom I feel such Need?  
Will He not love Sinful me  
Who did for Sinners bleed (5)?

and

JESU, thine Ear in Mercy Bow,  
Attend, and hear my Feeble Cry;  
Redeemer of lost Sinners, Thou  
Draw near, and my Request supply (9).

and

SOMetimes I think myself so strong  
Nothing against me can prevail,  
I grow secure — It is not long  
But Storms and Trials me assail;  
I waver like an Aspen-Leaf  
Shatter'd by Inward Unbelief (14).

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<sup>14</sup> William Hammond, Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs (London, 1745), pp. xii-xiv. All quotations from Hammond's hymns are from this edition and are given by page reference in the text.

and

Why is My Heart so full  
Of Pain and Heaviness?  
LORD, speak the Word, restore my Soul,  
And heal my sad Disease (19).

and

No Sinner shall miss  
Of Pardon and Peace  
Who truly can say that the Saviour is his (31).

could have come from a Wesleyan hymnbook. Hammond deploys a subjective and emotional tone, and stresses his spiritual difficulties; he uses a wide variety of metre, and, like Wesley, bases his hymns substantially on scripture.

To say this, however, is not to say that Hammond is just a copier of Wesley. As in the case of Addison with Watts, Hammond is sometimes able to put his own lustre on his otherwise very derivative hymns.

Occasional stanzas are worth noting:

JESUS, who died a World to save,  
Revives, and rises from the Grave  
By his Almighty Pow'r:  
From Sin, and Death, and Hell set free,  
He Captive leads Captivity,  
And lives to die no more (34).

AWake, my Soul, shake off thy Dust,  
To JESUS now at length look up;  
No longer weep, no more distrust,  
Against All Hope, believe in Hope,  
Strongly reach out thine Arm of Faith,  
And seize the Purchase of his Death (42).

Should I my Tortur'd Breast divide,  
And pluck my Heart from off my Side;  
The Filth of Sin would still remain,  
And prove my Zeal and Labour Vain (45).

Like other competent hymn-writers of the century, Hammond is occasionally able to produce a hymn that has noticeably poetical dimensions:

Convictions

I

HOW long was I asleep in Sin!  
How near the Brink of Hell I've been!  
And am I now awake at last,  
Before the dreadful Doom is past?  
Awaken'd! Sure! how can it be?  
Is Heav'n for such a Wretch as me?  
My Soul is dead — I do not view  
My Vileness as I ought to do.

II

Ah! wo is me! I cannot cry;  
I sigh because I cannot sigh.  
LORD, my Convictions are not deep:  
I weep because I cannot weep.  
I fear I am an Hypocrite;  
If I am wrong, LORD, set me right:  
How far from Thee, dear LORD, I roam!  
O take my Hand and lead me Home.

III

Ah! how much Sin in me I find!  
Yet how much more is still behind!  
LORD, I desire, yet dread to see  
The Depths of Sin that are in me.  
No Creature is so bad as I,  
I shall be lost eternally;  
O for the smallest Spark of Hope!  
LORD, help — or into Hell I drop (265-6).

This hymn, like many others of Hammond's, and of the century, is like those of Wesley in its fervid exclamations, desperate questions, repetition, alliteration, and choppy syntax. The preponderance of first-person referents (29 in 24 lines), the phrase "how can it be"? and the intense self-examination are Wesleyan as well. However, the hymn is not without its idiosyncrasies. First of all, the irresolution of opposites in stanza II is a shorthand way of revealing the incomprehensible misery and complexity of the sufferer's spiritual quandry. Secondly, the box-like, eight-foot by eight-line stanza is, in hymnody at least, unusual for this kind of subjective expression: the content is emotionally explosive but the stanzaic form is restrictive,

and this opposition graphically reveals the speaker's tension. Thirdly, the hymn is tri-partite. Conventionally, a three-stanza hymn tends to present a statement of one's spiritual condition, then repentance and hope, then prayer and assurance; but here there is no such progression. In this, Hammond is unlike Wesley, who invariably finishes with some kind of affirmation. This hymn begins and ends with a powerful realization of the disturbing nature of one's own convictions. Generally, however, Hammond is a follower of Wesley.

There are numerous writers in the schools of Wesley and Watts, but there is one whose hymns are a kind of hybrid between the two and who merges the best qualities of both. The hymns of Philip Doddridge, a dissenting minister at Northampton, were not published until four years after his death, in Hymns Founded on Various Texts in the Holy Scriptures (1755).

The influence of Watts is clearly evident in Doddridge's volume. Often he shares Watts's panoramic view of Christian experience, his tone, his unwillingness to provide too much imaginative colour, and his language:

With joy like his shall ev'ry Saint  
His empty Tomb survey;  
Then rise with his ascending Lord,  
Thro' all his shining Way.<sup>15</sup>

Or,

WIDE o'er all Worlds the Saviour reigns;  
Unmov'd his Pow'r and Love remains;  
And on his Arm his Church shall rest.  
Fair Zion, joyful in her King,  
Thro' ev'ry changing Age shall sing,  
With his perpetual Presence blest (174).

Just as often, however, he shares Wesley's subjectivity, his

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<sup>15</sup> Philip Doddridge, Hymns Founded on Various Texts in the Holy Scriptures (London, 1755), p. 174. All quotations from Doddridge's hymns are from this edition and are given by page reference in the text.

exclamatory fervour, self-examination, conversational diction, tone, imaginative figures from scripture, and his habit of beginning a hymn in medias res:

AND will the Judge descend?  
And must the Dead arise?  
And not a single Soul escape  
His all-discerning Eyes? (169)

Or,

WHAT doleful Accents do I hear?  
What piercing Cry invades mine Ear?  
Loaded with Shame, and bath'd in Blood,  
Who calls to a forsaking GOD?

Amazing and Heart-rending Sight!  
'Tis his own Darling and Delight,  
Who once in his Embraces lay,  
Dearer than all the Sons of Day!

Yet when this Jesus died for me,  
Distended on the cursed Tree... (171).

Occasionally, Doddridge is able to blend characteristics of Watts and Wesley within a single hymn:

- 1 GREAT GOD! did pious Abram pray  
For Sodom's vile abandon'd Race?  
And shall not all our Souls be rous'd  
For Britain to implore thy Grace?
- 2 Base as we are, does not thine Eye  
Its chosen Thousands here survey;  
Whose Souls, deep humbled, mourn the Crouds,  
Who walk in Sin's destructive Way?
- 3 O Judge supreme, let not thy Sword  
The righteous with the wicked smite:  
Nor bury in promiscuous Heaps  
Rebels, and Saints thy chief Delight.
- 4 For these thy Children spare the Land;  
Avert the Thunders big with Death;  
Nor let the Seeds of latent Fire  
Be kindled by thy flaming Breath.
- 5 Oh! be not angry, mighty GOD,  
While Dust and Ashes seek thy Face!  
But gently bending from thy Throne,  
Review, and still increase the Grace... (3).

Though Doddridge could not have known Wesley's work after 1751,



he would have known the earlier Wesleyan hymns, and seems to link Watts and Wesley, thus ensuring the continuity of the hymn. In many ways he seems a midway point between the two greater hymn-writers: he often brackets (or crotchets) figurative stanzas so that they can be omitted, as does Watts, though he often uses Biblical images, as does Wesley; he basically uses the four-line stanza, as does Watts, though he sometimes experiments with odd stanzaic forms, as does Wesley; and he emphasizes scriptural hymns, as do both Watts and Wesley. In fact, Doddridge's volume contains only scriptural hymns: it is as though he dared not introduce himself as a new hymn-writer of original compositions, but rather revered his two superiors and was willing to stand in their shadows. Doddridge is not purely derivative; occasionally he does leave his mark on the hymn, and he fuses Watts and Wesley effectively. But it is probable that his hymns became popular because he would have, in effect, pleased the followers of two traditions, and because his are all scriptural hymns, and thus were not controversial.

Joseph Hart, an Independent divine, experienced conversion after hearing a sermon by George Whitefield in the Moravian Chapel in Fetter Lane on Whit-Sunday, 1757. This inspired him to write hymns, which were published in Hymns Composed on Various Subjects (1759). Though not unlike those of Watts and Wesley, Hart's hymns are rather unusual. They have been condemned as vulgar, "ungraceful and uncouth",<sup>16</sup> but Hart was aiming them at the widest common denominator of English society. They are no more reprehensible, considered in this light, than a painting by Hogarth.

Like Hogarth, whose moral pictures have no dulcet strokes, Hart paints the human soul with a thick brush and loud colours. Describing

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<sup>16</sup> See footnote 3, page 267.

the human heart, Hart writes:

The dungeon, opening foul as hell,  
Its loathsome stench emits;  
And, brooding in each secret cell,  
Some hideous monster sits.

Swarms of ill thoughts their bane diffuse  
Proud, envious, false, unclean;  
And every ransack'd corner shews  
Some unsuspected sin.<sup>17</sup>

At times he is even more graphic:

Now the heart, disclos'd, betrays  
All its hid disorders;  
Enmity to God's right ways,  
Blasphemies and murders;  
Malice, envy, lust, and pride,  
Thoughts obscene and filthy,  
Sores corrupt and putrified;  
No part sound or healthy (24).

His description of the path of life is contumelious:

Deep quagmires choke the way,  
Corruptions foul and thick;  
Whose stench infects the air, and makes  
The strongest traveller sick (36).

Hart's grisly and opprobrious depiction of humanity is not the only thing that differentiates his hymns from those of his contemporaries. He occasionally sets a hymn in dialogue form. In 'A Dialogue between a Believer and his Soul' Hart writes in alternating eight-line stanzas, one is the believer, one his soul. In the final two stanzas, however, soul and believer both speak, and the dialogue becomes more intense and interfaced:

Soul. That he can I nothing doubt,  
Be it but his pleasure;  
Bel. Though it be not done throughout,  
May it not in measure?  
Soul. When that measure far from great,  
Still shall seem decreasing —  
Bel. Faint not then: but pray, and wait,  
Never, never ceasing.

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<sup>17</sup> Joseph Hart, Hymns Composed on Various Subjects (London, 1856 edition), p. 60. All quotations from Hart's hymns are from this edition and are given by page reference in the text.

Soul. When that prayer meets no regard?  
Bel. Still repeat it often;  
Soul. But I feel myself so hard —  
Bel. Jesus will thee soften;  
Soul. But my enemies make head —  
Bel. Let them closer drive thee!  
Soul. But I'm cold, I'm dark, I'm dead —  
Bel. Jesus will revive thee (33)!

Though often simply-written and easy to comprehend, Hart's hymns are not without occasional complexity neatly couched in apparent simplicity. One of his most thought-provoking hymns, 'The Paradox', is also one of his most simply-written:

#### The Paradox

- 1 HOW strange is the course that a Christian must steer!  
How perplext is the path he must tread!  
The hope of his happiness rises from fear,  
And his life he receives from the dead.
- 2 His fairest pretensions must wholly be waiv'd,  
And his best resolutions be crost;  
Nor can he expect to be perfectly sav'd,  
Till he finds himself utterly lost.
- 3 When all this is done, and his heart is assur'd  
Of the total remission of sins;  
When his pardon is sign'd, and his peace is procur'd,  
From that moment his conflict begins (44).

The many paradoxes in this hymn are each themselves worthy of consideration, and even more so is the conclusion which, unlike those of Watts or Wesley, does not really conclude. The end seems to link up with the beginning, and the Christian's life is left as a never-ending series of paradoxes that are unresolvable yet will somehow be resolved. Though other hymn-writers had seen the paradoxical nature of the Christian's life, Hart, in this hymn, left it as such.

This kind of complexity, however, is rare in Hart. In general he is dedicated to being as basic and uncomplicated as possible, both in the plainness of his vision and the simplicity and even crudity of his language. Some of Hart's diction seems even simpler than that of Watts:

JESUS is our God and Saviour,  
Guide, and Counsellor, and Friend,  
Bearing all our misbehaviour;  
Kind and loving to the end... (71).

And,

GRACIOUS God! thy children keep;  
Jesus! guide thy silly sheep;  
Fix, oh! fix our fickle souls:  
Lord, direct us! we are fools (118).

In spite of this simplicity, Hart is quite versatile in metre and stanzaic form. As well as conventional measures, Hart writes in stanzas of six or ten lines, in pentameter, tetrameter, trimeter, and dimeter lines. He seems particularly fond of an odd 8.3.3.6. stanza:

MAN, bewail thy situation;  
Hell born sin  
Once crept in,  
Mars God's fair creation (88).

But all in all, Hart's uniqueness lies in his direct, Hogarthian vision of the soul and human life:

- 1 WHAT tongue can fully tell  
That christian's grievous load,  
Who would do all things well,  
And walk the ways of God;  
But feels within  
Foul envy lurk  
And lust, and work  
Engendering sin!
- 2 Poor, wretched, worthless worm!  
In what sad plight I stand!  
When good I would perform,  
Then evil is at hand;  
My leprous soul  
Is all unclean,  
My heart obscene,  
My nature foul.
- 3 To trust to Christ alone,  
By thousand dangers scar'd  
And righteousness have none,  
Is something very hard;  
Whate'er men say,  
The needy know  
It must be so;  
It is the way.

4 Thou all-sufficient Lamb!  
God blest for evermore!  
We glory in thy name,  
For thine is all the power:  
Stretch forth thy hand,  
And hold us fast:  
Our first and last  
In thee we stand.

Hart's excitement and vindictive depiction of the soul is matched by his inability to articulate it properly: he ~~mixes a~~ metaphors (the worm stands) in stanza 2; the syntax of "And righteousness have none" (omitting "to" in the infinitive usage) is elliptical; and he writes pleonastic and redundant expressions. Nevertheless, the crudely articulated vision is what makes Hart's hymns unusual and easily comprehensible for the sector of society at which he aimed them.

reworks  
dead

A contemporary of Hart who is very different is John Byrom, a teacher of shorthand and friend of the Wesleys, who included several of his own hymns in his Miscellaneous Poems (1773). Unlike Hart, Byrom is characterized by a more elevated diction and a higher intellectual appeal. In his 'Thanksgiving Hymn' he writes:

He plac'd, in the Center, yon beautiful Sun;  
And the Orbs that, about him, due Distances run;  
To receive, as they haste their vast Rounds to complete,  
Of a Lustre so dazling, the Light and the Heat.  
What Language of Men can the Brightness unfold  
Of his Presence, whose Creature they cannot behold?  
What a Light is his Light! of its infinite Day  
The Sun, by his Splendor, can paint but a Ray.<sup>18</sup>

And in 'An Hymn on the Omnipresence' he writes:

If I say, peradventure, the Dark may conceal  
What Distance, tho' boundless, is forced to reveal,  
Yet the Dark, at thy Presence, would vanish away,  
And my Covering, the Night, would be turn'd into Day:  
It is I myself only who could not then see,  
Yea, the Darkness, O Lord, is no Darkness to Thee:  
The Night, and the Day, are alike in thy Sight,  
And the Darkness, to Thee, is as clear as the Light (55).

Byrom seems better able to manage language and ideas than Hart, though

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<sup>18</sup> John Byrom, Miscellaneous Poems (Manchester, 1773), p. 50. All quotations from Byrom's hymns are from this edition and are given by page reference in the text.

he seems to be writing quasi-treatises rather than hymns: he has a different intention to that of Hart. Even when considering simply man's ignorance of the Holy Spirit, Byrom still maintains a convoluted style:

Deaf to its Influence the Wicked stood,  
And mock'd the just Amazement of the Good;  
For want of Sense, ascribing to new Wine  
Their joint Acknowledgments of Grace divine:  
The World's devout Epitome was taught,  
And hid from Pride the Miracle, when wrought (84).

At times Byrom writes in a simpler fashion, and on one occasion produced 'Christians awake, salute the happy Morn', which has become famous in hymnaries throughout the English-speaking world. But generally, Byrom's hymns would appeal to a more refined class of readers than that at which Hart's are aimed.

Another hymn-writer of this time, more prolific than Byrom or Hart, has become famous essentially because of one immortal hymn. Augustus Montague Toplady, a Calvinist essayist and curate at Broad Hembury from 1768 until his death, published three volumes of hymns, but is known for the hymn which skilfully combines clarity of expression and suggestive symbolism, directness of speech and emotional fervour:

A Prayer, living and dying.

- 1 ROCK of ages, cleft for me,  
Let me hide myself in Thee!  
Let the Water and the Blood,  
From thy riven Side which flow'd,  
Be of sin the double cure;  
Cleanse me from its guilt and pow'r.
- 2 Not the labors of my hands  
Can fulfill thy Law's demands:  
Could my zeal no respite know,  
Could my tears for ever flow,  
All for sin could not atone:  
Thou must save, and Thou alone.
- 3 Nothing in my hand I bring;  
Simply to thy Cross I cling;  
Naked, come to Thee for dress;

Helpless, look to Thee for grace;  
Foul, I to the Fountain fly:  
Wash me, SAVIOR, or I die!

4 While I draw this fleeting breath —  
When my eye-strings break in death —  
When I soar to worlds unknown —  
See Thee on thy judgement-throne —  
ROCK of ages, cleft for me,<sup>19</sup>  
Let me hide myself in Thee!

The dominant image of the "Rock of ages" is suggestive of solidity, changelessness, immortality, naturalness, fortitude, immovability; and the fact that it is cleft points to the central concern in Christianity: that God has made a place for man to hide himself within the promise of these qualities and away from their opposites. After describing the futility of human effort, he depicts himself, at the centre of the hymn, alone and realizing that only God can save him. After asking God's blessing, he begins to contemplate the future; but instantly, when imagining these unimaginables, his vision inevitably returns to that place which God has prepared for him, the cleft in immortality that he should seek rather than contemplate. The dashes at the ends of the lines in the last stanza serve to accentuate the fact that human activity and contemplation have unknown and uncertain consequences; what really is important is to give oneself to the rock of ages. This fervour and sincerity, expressed in such controlled language and musical rhythm, is outstanding is hymnody.

However, the 'ROCK of ages' is a very rare example of Toplady's excellence: his hymnody is very uneven. One of his talents, however, is his ability to infuse many scriptural references and allusions without seeming to do so:

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<sup>19</sup> Augustus Montague Toplady, Psalms and Hymns for Public and Private Worship (London, 1776), pp. 308-9.

- 1 CHAIN'D to the World, to Sin ty'd down,  
In Darkness still I lie;  
Lord, break my Bonds, Lord, give me Wings,  
And teach me how to fly.
- 2 Instruct my feeble Hands to War,  
In me thy Strength reveal,  
To put my ev'ry Lust to Death,  
And fight thy battles well.
- 3 Rend ev'ry Veil that shades thy Face,  
Put on thine Helmet, Lord:  
My Sin shall fall, my Guilt expire  
Beneath thy conqu'ring Sword.
- 4 Thou art the Mighty GOD of Hosts,  
Whose Counsels never fail;  
Be thou my glorious Chief, and then  
I cannot but prevail.
- 5 Then slay my Sins without Reserve,  
Burn up each Lust in me;  
Kill, kill my vain rebellious Heart,  
And I shall live to Thee.<sup>20</sup>

Though the hymn is a scriptural encyclopedia, it is written in such a casual manner that it seems spontaneous rather than studied. Toplady is unlike Byrom because of his simplicity, unlike Hart because of his polish, and unlike his contemporary, John Newton, because of his mature control and presentation of religious experience.

Newton's unwavering tone of triumph and declaratory certainty is one of his most salient characteristics. As mentioned, only Newton could declare without a doubt that

BY faith in CHRIST I walk with GOD,  
With heav'n, my journey's-end, in view;  
Supported by his staff and rod, <sup>21</sup>  
My road is safe and pleasant too.

Even in a hymn entitled 'Uncertainty of Life' Newton can staunchly claim that, with God's blessing, life's end is its happiest part:

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<sup>20</sup> Augustus Montague Toplady, Hymns and Sacred Poems on a Variety of Divine Subjects (London, 1860 edition), p. 25.

<sup>21</sup> John Newton and William Cowper, Olney Hymns (London, 1779), p. 5.



"But the happiest year they know/ Is their last, which leads them home". (184) Christianity is neither a struggle, nor is it characterized by doubt, according to Newton. Once one is saved, the rest is easy:

You are safe, who know his love,  
He will all his truth perform;  
To your souls a refuge prove  
From the rage of ev'ry storm...(187).

The point of view in Newton's hymns is slightly different from that of the five writers studied earlier. Newton is consistently the pastor: he preaches in his hymns, and styles himself as a kind of omniscient and benevolent high priest whose words give sacred guidance. Unlike others, Newton very often uses the second-person referent: he often teaches and admonishes:

Call'd again, at length, beware,  
Hear the Saviour's voice, and live;  
Lest he in his wrath should swear,  
He no more will warning give:  
Pray, that you may hear and feel,  
Ere the day of grace be past;  
Lest your hearts grow hard as steel,  
Or this year should prove your last (189).

And he is not unwilling to state his impatience with his flock:

Who can describe the pain  
Which faithful preachers feel;  
Constrain'd to speak, in vain,  
To hearts as hard as steel?  
Or who can tell the pleasures felt,  
When stubborn souls begin to melt (211)?

As he maintains in his preface to the Olney Hymns, Newton is not eager to use figurative language. On occasion, however, he constructs a figure; but he does so with such meticulous care and a desire for clarity that he ends up explaining the figure rather than merely presenting it. 'Moon-Light' opens with an image:

THE moon has but a borrow'd light,  
A faint and feeble ray;  
She owes her beauty to the night,  
And hides herself by day (284).

He then goes on to expound it:

Just such is all the light to man  
Which reason can impart;  
It cannot shew one object plain,  
Nor warm the frozen heart.

Thus moon-light views of truths divine  
To many fatal prove;  
For what avail in gifts to shine  
Without a spark of love (285).

His conclusion is that the gospel, unlike reason, is "like the sun at noon" and it "Affords a glorious light...". The metaphor of the moon tends to lose the suggestive quality it could have had, because of Newton's need to explain it.

In another hymn he uses the image of the sea, which Cowper often uses too; but unlike Cowper he points out exactly what he intends:

My untry'd heart thus seem'd to me  
(So little of myself I know)  
Smooth as the calm unruffled sea,  
But ah! it prov'd as treach'rous too (286)!

In another hymn he draws attention to the phenomenon of thawing:

THE ice and snow we lately saw,  
Which cover'd all the ground;  
Are melted soon before the thaw,  
And can no more be found.

Could all the art of man suffice  
To move away the snow,  
To clear the rivers from the ice,  
Or make the waters flow?

No, 'tis the work of GOD alone;  
An emblem of the pow'r  
By which he melts the heart of stone,  
In his appointed hour (288).

Again he has told the reader precisely what the metaphor signifies. Newton's figurative language, in effect, almost loses its power because he consistently draws it into the arena of literalness. Evidently, he is more concerned to preach rather than to create any kind of imaginative experience in his hymns.

Newton was, it seems, not too deeply influenced by Cowper, except in his borrowing a few phrases and terms. While Cowper reveals his inner self in his hymns, Newton seems intent on simply being seen from the outside, in the dress of a Calvinist clergyman. Newton's work, though in no way reprehensible as hymnody, is perhaps best summed up in the hymn characteristically entitled 'Hear what he has done for my soul':

- 1 SAV'D by blood I live to tell,  
What the love of CHRIST hath done;  
He redeem'd my soul from hell,  
Of a rebel made a son:  
Oh I tremble still, to think  
How secure I liv'd in sin;  
Sporting in destruction's brink,  
Yet preserved from falling in.
- 2 In his own appointed hour,  
To my heart the Saviour spoke;  
Touch'd me by his Spirit's pow'r,  
And my dang'rous slumber broke:  
Then I saw and own'd my guilt,  
Soon my gracious LORD reply'd;  
"Fear not, I my blood have spilt,  
'Twas for such as thee I dy'd".
- 3 Shame and wonder, joy and love,  
All at once possess'd my heart;  
Can I hope thy grace to prove,  
After acting such a part?  
"Thou hast greatly sinn'd," he said,  
But I freely all forgive;  
I myself thy debt have paid,  
Now I bid thee rise and live".
- 4 Come, my fellow-sinners, try,  
JESUS' heart is full of love;  
Oh that you, as well as I,  
May his wond'rous mercy prove!  
He has sent me to declare,  
All is ready, all is free;  
Why should any soul despair,  
When he sav'd a wretch like me (374-5)?

Just as Newton did not write hymns like those of Cowper, neither did other contemporaries of the Olney poet. The hymns of John Fawcett (1782), Joseph Swain (1792), and Thomas Haweis (1792), resemble Newton's

rather than Cowper's, and are not unlike those of Watts and Wesley. Cowper is not without influence on these hymn-writers, who do at times display degrees of introspection and self-revelation; but they do not achieve the sophisticated probing beneath the surface of consciousness that makes the hymns of Cowper outstanding and unique. Though the English hymn took different routes after 1779, it was the major hymn-writers in the formative century of English hymnody who brought the hymn to new crossroads of possibility.

Along with considering what has been written about hymns in the eighteenth century, this appendix considers why hymns were not properly reviewed as literature. Negative attitudes toward hymns and hymn-writers in the century set the stage for the trend that hymns have generally been ignored since. To look at the reviews together in this section is to present this point more clearly than if the reviews had been incorporated in brief into the respective chapters in the body of the thesis.

Reviewing Isaac Watts's Hymns and Moral Songs in 1786, a writer for the Critical Review curtly says: "That they are unexceptionable in point of doctrine, and may answer the purpose intended, is sufficient to recommend them; for, as mere compositions, we do not consider them as objects of criticism".<sup>1</sup> Such a statement could discourage one from searching for critical reviews of other hymn-writers of the century; yet, in the same journal, albeit somewhat earlier, a review of the hymns of Santeuil begins with this categorical declaration: "POETRY never appears to more advantage than when it celebrates the wisdom and omnipotence of the Almighty, and the gratitude of mortals. Religion was the muse's first theme, and it will ever be her noblest subject. The reign of Lewis XIV. had the glory of excelling in every other species of polite literature; it has likewise furnished the finest model of religious poetry in the enchantingly sweet hymns of Santeuil ...".<sup>2</sup> Hymns, it would seem, were just as easily considered a "species of polite literature", and therefore criticizable, as not considered

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<sup>1</sup> Critical Review, Vol. #61 (Jan. - June, 1786), 74.

<sup>2</sup> Critical Review, Vol. #11 (Jan. - June, 1761), 405.

"objects of criticism" at all. More often than not, the latter was the case, and hymns in the eighteenth century are generally ignored, though hymn-writers are not. But the reasons for this tend to be social and sectarian, rather than literary and critical.

In Watts's time, and long after, hymns were generally not seen as acceptable aids to worship, let alone as literary phenomena. Literary criticism of his hymns, then, is understandably scarce. In fact, one of the first people to write about them is Watts himself. In a letter to The Spectator on 19 August 1712, Watts begins by praising the two hymns that Joseph Addison had published on 26 July and 9 August, and then continues by discussing one of his own hymns in practical critical terms; he describes what makes this particular hymn poetically effective:

Upon reading the Hymns that you have publish'd in some late Papers, I had a Mind to try Yesterday whether I could write one. The 114th Psalm appears to me an admirable Ode, and I began to turn it into our Language. As I was describing the Journey of Israel from Egypt, and added the Divine Presence amongst them, I perceiv'd a Beauty in the Psalm which was entirely new to me, and which I was going to lose; and that is, that the Poet utterly conceals the Presence of God in the Beginning of it, and rather lets a possessive Pronoun go without a Substantive, than he will so much as mention any thing of Divinity there. Judah was his Sanctuary, and Israel his Dominion or Kingdom. The Reason now seems evident, and this Conduct necessary: For if God had appear'd before, there could be no Wonder why the Mountains should leap and the Sea retire; therefore that this Convulsion of Nature may be brought in with due Surprize, his Name is not mention'd till afterward, and then with a very agreeable Turn of Thought God is introduced at once in all his Majesty. This is what I have attempted to imitate in a Translation without Paraphrase, and to preserve what I could of the Spirit of the sacred Author.

If the following Essay be not too incorrigible, bestow upon it a few Brightenings from your Genius, that I may learn how to write better, or to write no more.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The Spectator (19 August, 1712). Cited in the edition of Donald F. Bond (Oxford, 1965) vol. 4, 126.

In a sense Watts is here offering a critical review of his own hymn, probably with the hope that some critical response to his other hymnody would appear. What little did appear was not until after his death, and Watts was perhaps fortunate not to have seen it. Apart from a few elegies that point to the value of the hymns as instructive to piety,<sup>4</sup> the contemporary critical response was opprobrious indeed.

In December 1779 the Monthly Review discussed the posthumous edition of Watts's works. Initially, however, the reviewer seems more concerned about Watts's theological views than his poetical or philosophical ones. He begins:

It is generally agreed, by men of taste and science, that Dr. Watts hath no claim to superiority either as a poet, a philosopher, or a divine. He was an ingenious writer. He had a lively and fertile imagination; and some of his poems have been deservedly admired: but he wanted a correct judgement to refrain that hey-dey of the spirit, which too frequently led him astray into the wilds of fanaticism, to play at bo peep with the saints.<sup>5</sup>

He continues:

Far be it from us to accuse this good man of insincerity. The natural enthusiasm of his temper improved on a fanatical education. Hence without design, he ran into certain devotional absurdities: but it needed the genius of a Milton to adopt the cant of Calvinism, and yet maintain the dignity of poetry.

When the reviewer turns from generalities to take an actual look at Watts's work, he becomes more abrasive; but at least he engages in detailed criticism, whatever its value:

This collection consists of poems, letters and sermons. On none of them have we much praise to bestow. The greatest part of the poetical pieces is below criticism: and the best of them are barely tolerable. Several of the Doctor's Hymns are republished in their first and most unpolished

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<sup>4</sup> Elegies and epitaphs on Isaac Watts appear in the Gentleman's Magazine in January, 1749, p. 39, and March, 1749, p. 134.

<sup>5</sup> Monthly Review, Vol. #61 (Dec. 1779), 425.

dress. Whether this was done from ignorance or design, we will not determine. The rude essays — the unfinished sketches of a GREAT work, is an object of curiosity; but very few would be gratified, or improved, by tracing out the rise and progress of a hymn on faith and repentance. If the curiosity of any of our readers should happen to run this way, they may find some amusement, by comparing the first nine pieces in this collection with the improved edition of them in the book of "Hymns and Spiritual Songs" in general use amongst the Dissenters.

The succeeding piece is entitled — "Song of Love"; — in which the good Doctor's fancy runs riot in the wilds of mysticism; and adopts images of too ludicrous an original, to be applied with any sort of propriety to the chaste and awful spirit of devotion:

Shall mortal beauties at a glance  
Engender strong desire;  
And shall it not my joys advance  
My Saviour to admire?

The raptures that I feel within  
No motive can contain;  
The fire that hath concealed been  
Breaks out into a flame.

Some out of fear or shame decline  
To make their passion known;  
Without a blush, I'll tell you mine!  
'Tis God's eternal Son! —

Pierc'd by a dart from his bright eye,  
None knows what I endure:  
If he's withdrawn, my comforts die;  
I love, yet dread the cure.

But oh! the kisses of his mouth,  
Those pledges of his love,  
Seal'd on my lips, in words of truth,  
Make mine affections move. —

When darkness covers nature's face,  
As on my bed I roll,  
The sweet elapses of his grace  
Give vigour to my soul. —

If one line in these verses were altered, they might be very properly addressed by some foolish, love-sick maid to her darling swain.

Dr. Watts had a warm imagination. — He was alive to the attractions of beauty. We shall not enquire how far a man, for his private amusement, may indulge himself in those spiritual extacies, which always apply carnal ideas to intellectual



objects. But we must heartily condemn a public exhibition of those soft scenes of holy dalliance. Few that approve of them will be edified by them. Persons of warm passions, and weak understandings, will be imposed on by the delirium of fancy, and mistake the fervour of the affections for the spirit of devotion. The greatest part of mankind will laugh at this crude mixture of heterogeneous principles; and turn to an ill account, what might possibly be meant to answer a pious design.<sup>6</sup>

After this analysis of the hymn, the reviewer caps his essay with even more contumely, saying that "when he makes use of language and sentiments, so repugnant to all ideas of that distant veneration which mortals owe to their divine Master, we are disgusted and ashamed".

After this blow was dealt to Watts's poetical reputation, reviewers tended to ignore Watts rather than engage in more discussion. The review of his Select Poems and Short Essays in Prose, appearing in 1783, is revealing in its perfunctoriness and its obvious bias against dissent: "As to the rank in which Dr. Watts may be allowed to stand as a poet, our opinion has already been given, on a former occasion. — Of his philosophical and theological writings, nothing need be added to the commendation of Dr. Samuel Johnson, who is not remarkable for paying compliments to the Dissenters..."<sup>7</sup>

With his usual cleverness and caution, Johnson delivers his opinion of Watts's poetical works in his Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets:

As a poet, had he been only a poet, he would probably have stood high among the authors with whom he is now associated. For his judgement was exact, and he noted beauties and faults with very nice discernment; his imagination, as the Dacian Battle proves, was vigorous and active, and the stores of knowledge were large by which

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 429-30.

<sup>7</sup> Monthly Review, Vol. #69 (Aug. 1783), 172.

his imagination was to be supplied. His ear was well-tuned, and his diction was elegant and copious. But his devotional poetry is, like that of others, unsatisfactory. The paucity of its topicks enforces perpetual repetition, and the sanctity of the matter rejects the ornaments of figurative diction. It is sufficient for Watts to have done better than others what no man has done well.<sup>8</sup>

There seems to be little else in the way of contemporary critical response to Watts's hymns. Evidently, Watts suffered because he was a Dissenter, and because the works being criticized were hymns rather than more conventional and acceptable writings. But if Watts suffered critically for his dissent, Charles Wesley suffered even more: Methodism was evidently not well received by those in high critical places.

As outlined earlier, Methodism had its beginning just after the formation of the "Holy Club" at Oxford in 1729. Itinerant preaching and open-air evangelizing began in the late 1730's, and writers in magazines did not hesitate to show their distaste for this sect. As early as May of 1739, in the Gentleman's Magazine, the Wesleys were referred to as "Ringleaders of the Methodists" and instigators of "Enthusiastick Ravings". The writer bluntly and angrily classifies Methodists according to a formula: "Those Quacks are usually Persons of mean Extraction, narrow Education, as narrow Circumstances, and a low Way of Thinking, the usual Consequences of the other Disadvantages".<sup>9</sup> Comments such as this are too numerous to catalogue, and the ill feeling toward Methodism and enthusiasm was just as rampant at the end of the century, when a reviewer of the Original Letters of John Wesley says: "Perhaps, on a future occasion, we may engage in a more philosophical

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<sup>8</sup> Samuel Johnson, The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets (London, 1781), vol. 4, 290-91.

<sup>9</sup> Gentleman's Magazine, Vol. #9 (May 1739), 239.

discussion of that disease of the human mind, styled enthusiasm... . In the family of Mr. Wesley, enthusiasm, or rather that degree of it which gave to particular doctrines more than their usual influence, seems to have been an hereditary disease".<sup>10</sup> And Charles was seen also as one of the diseased. The reviewer claims that during the Wesleys' trip to America "the flame soon burst out with violence in the year 1738, communicating the infection to his brother Charles".

Charles Wesley received brief critical attention in 1771 when he published an elegy for George Whitefield, a scion of the Methodist cause. The Monthly Review was deviously ironic in this very brief and elliptical "review":

'Till quite forsaken both of man and God,  
'Jesus appear'd, and help'd his unbelief.'

We have been told by most divines that the Author of our religion was both man and God; many have asserted that he was no more than man, but Mr. Charles Wesley it seems will have it that he was neither.<sup>11</sup>

The reviewer ignores the possibility that the pronoun "his" refers to Whitefield, not Jesus. The review of Wesley's elegy for Whitefield was even more vitriolic in the Critical Review:

Mr. Charles Wesley might have spared himself the trouble to inform us what he is, (a particular, into which no one would have enquired) because his elegy is too contemptible for criticism, though it deserves the lash for its prophaneness. Speaking of one of the late Mr. Whitefield's transits from our colonies, the author says

'By God's supreme decree and high command,  
He now returns to bless his native land;  
Nor dreads the threat'nings of the wat'ry deep,  
Or all its storms, with JESUS in the ship.

We almost think ourselves criminal, for having transcribed a passage, which represents our blessed

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<sup>10</sup> Critical Review, Vol. #3 (new series)(Sept. - Dec. 1791), 300.

<sup>11</sup> Monthly Review, Vol. #44 (Feb. 1771), 174.

Redeemer embarked on the same bottom with the head  
of a mercenary sect. <sup>12</sup>

Articles such as these tend to suggest that the reason Charles Wesley's hymns were not given proper reviews and responses has more to do with Wesleyan Methodism than Wesleyan hymn-writing. Perhaps this applies to the century as a whole: the people who wrote hymns evidently did not share the ecclesiastical and theological views of those who edited and wrote in the review journals. Whether or not this is true, it is consistently the case that Methodists, Dissenters, Evangelicals, and "enthusiasticks" do not fare well, if at all, in the major critical journals of the century — especially with regard to their hymns. Occasionally a volume of hymns is praised, but invariably because it is instructive and edifying, rather than poetical and imaginative. More often than not, the many volumes of hymns are ignored, or dismissed in cursory fashion. The one extensive review of a Wesleyan hymn-book that does appear in a major journal is symptomatic of the general critical view of Wesley and his hymns in the eighteenth century:

Short Hymns of select Passages of the Holy Scriptures. By Charles Wesley, M.A. and  
Presbyter of the Church of England. 12mo.  
2 Vols. 6s. Bristol. Printed by E. Farley.

HAVING been frequently called upon, by a correspondent who signs himself CANDIDUS, for an account of the Rev. Mr. Charles Wesley's Hymns, printed in 1762; and having at length, by means of this correspondent's directions, procured a set of these delectable hymn-books, — we shall now (without troubling the public with any apology for having so long overlooked so important a publication) proceed to give our Readers some idea of the manner in which Mr. Wesley has spiritualized both the Old Testament and the New, from Genesis, to the Revelations.

In the ninth hymn, composed on Gen. ii. 21. God took one of his ribs, &c, Mr. W. thus takes occasion to manifest his high regard for the

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<sup>12</sup> Critical Review, Vol. #31 (Jan. - June 1771), 75-6.

fair sex:

Not from his head was woman took,  
As made her husband to o'er-look,  
Not from his feet, as one design'd  
The footstool of the stronger kind;  
But fashion'd for himself, a bride,  
An equal, taken from his side;

Her place intended to maintain,  
The mate, and glory of the man,  
To rest, as still beneath his arm,  
Protected by her Lord from harm,  
And never from his heart remov'd,  
As only less than God belov'd.

This is very handsomely said; and many a fair proselyte might the gallant and pious author justly expect to gain, by such a compliment to the sex. But he is not always in such good humour with the ladies; for in his 445 hymn, he has the following angry invective against those mothers who do not suckle their own children\*

Not like the mothers in our day,  
Who of all care themselves divest,  
And thrust their new born babes away,  
And hang them on another's breast.

Does not this indiscriminate censure, by the way, bear too hard on the poor females? Is it not well known that many of them cannot, were they ever so desirous of it, perform the office of wet-nurse? And ought they, therefore, to be represented as having divested themselves of all care for their offspring?

But Mr. W's gallantry totally forsakes him, in N<sup>o</sup> 906, where Solomon's homely similitude gives him the cue to address himself, in very uncourtly phrase, to those ladies who have the misfortune to be endowed with more beauty than discretion. Prov. xi. 22. As a jewel of gold in a swine's snout, so is a fair woman which is without discretion: thus paraphrased:

Of beauty vain, of wisdom void,  
What art thou in the sight of God?  
A slave to every base desire,  
A creature wallowing in the mire!  
Go, gaudy pageant of a day,  
Thy folly with thy face display,  
Put all thy charms and graces out,  
And show the jewel — in thy snout!

Leaving this piece of spiritual Billingsgate to the animadversion of our fine ladies, — who

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\* [Reviewer's note] From 1 Sam. i, 23. The woman gave her son suck, untill she weaned him.

will perhaps insist that he must be an hog of a poet, indeed, who could treat them in so brutish a manner, — we turn now to hymn 105; which will make the reader stare, at least, if not admire, at the dexterity with which a Methodist or Moravian can typify, turn, and twist the plainest passages of holy writ, to adapt them to their mystical system:

Exod. iii. 2. 'Behold the bush burnt with fire, and the bush was not consumed.'

See here the miracle renew'd,  
A bush that doth not fire abide,  
A burning bush, bedew'd with blood,  
A church, preserv'd in Jesu's side!

The above makes but an odd figure for a hymn: would it not do much better as an aenigma?

His 931st hymn is a much prettier and more complete piece of Moravianism. It is given as a comment on 'Tell me, O thou whom my soul loveth, where thou makest thy flock to rest at noon': SONG of SOL. i. 7.

Thou shepherd of Israel, and mine,  
The joy and desire of my heart.  
For closer communion I pine,  
I long to reside where thou art;  
The pasture I languish to find  
Where all who their Shepherd obey,  
Are fed, on thy bosom reclin'd,  
Are screen'd from the heat of the day.

Ah, shew me that happiest place,  
That place of thy people's abode,  
Where saints in an extasy gaze,  
And hang on a crucified God:  
Thy love for a sinner declare,  
Thy passion and death on the tree,  
My spirit to Calvary bear,  
To suffer, and triumph, with thee.

'Tis there with the lambs of thy flock,  
There only I covet to rest,  
To lie at the foot of the rock,  
Or rise to be hid in thy breast;  
'Tis there I would always abide,  
And never a moment depart,  
Conceal'd in the clift of thy side,  
Eternally held in thy heart.

To those who can read of a crucified God, without being shocked, and who have no objection to the author's scheme of divinity, the foregoing hymn will not appear in a very contemptible light, as a poetical composition. — But here comes another, in a sublimier strain:

'Behold I will make thee a new sharp threshing instrument'. Is. xli. 15, 16.

Thee will I wield by grace renew'd,  
A weapon for my use design'd:  
Go, thou sharp, iron-flail of God,  
And thresh the loftiest of mankind, —

The stubbornest and strongest beat  
With violence of resistless zeal,  
And separate from the sacred wheat,  
And chase the cursed chaff to hell:

The author of the learned treatise on the Bathos, would have been much delighted with Mr. W's having so well improved on the ingenious bards who alternately made the most sublime of all Beings a chemist, a baker, a fuller, &c. &c. Here we have him transformed into a thresher; and, in the subsequent hymn he is a Smith: -  
'Jer. xxiii. 29. Is not my word like an hammer?

If thou dost thy gospel bless,  
If thou apply the word.  
Then our broken hearts confess  
The hammer of the Lord:  
Fully, Lord, thy hammer use,  
Force the nations to submit,  
Smite the rocks, and break, and bruise  
The world beneath thy feet.

What strange imagery has the good old Prophet innocently put into the head of this poetical mystic! but, to make the indignant reader some amends, we shall next present him with something in the Jolly, Bachanalian strain:

Ye thirsty\* for God to Jesus give ear  
And take thro' his blood The power to draw near,  
His kind invitation, Ye sinners, embrace,  
The sense of salvation Accepting thro' grace.

Sent down from above Who governs the skies  
In vehement love To sinners he cries,  
"Drink into my Spirit, Who happy would be,  
"And all things inherit By coming to me."

O Saviour of all, Thy word we believe,  
And come at thy call, Thy grace to receive;  
The blessing is given, Wherever thou art:  
The earnest of heaven Is love in the heart.

To us at thy feet The Comforter give,  
Who gasp to admit Thy Spirit and live:  
The weakest believers Acknowledge for thine,  
And fill us with Rivers Of water divine.

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\* [Reviewer's note] Parodied from 'If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink' John vii. 37.

The foregoing specimens will, probably, be thought sufficient to shew the manner in which Mr. W. like his Moravian brethren, hath unhappily, though doubtless, undesignedly, burlesqued the sacred writings.

Seriously, (for though it is sometimes difficult to refrain from laughing at the absurdities of fanaticism, it is really shocking to see religious subjects thus exposed to ridicule) may we not ask these rhyming enthusiasts how they dare to take such liberties, and use such indecent freedom, with the holy WORD of GOD! nay, with the GREAT CREATOR HIMSELF! Are they not apprehensive of the fate of Uzzah, who was so exemplarily punished for rashly presuming to touch the ARK of the GOVENANT with unhallowed hands!

Indeed, the irreverent treatment which the bible continually meets with, IN THIS PROTESTANT COUNTRY, from the swarms of Hackney commentators, expositors and enthusiastic hymn-makers, would almost provoke the rational Christian to applaud even the Church of Rome for the care she has taken to secure it from vulgar profanation: - And much, perhaps might it conduce to the honour and credit of our religion, could any method be thought of, towards attaining so valuable, so important an end, without infringing the common rights of the Christian world.<sup>13</sup>

If critical response to Watts was negative, to Wesley it was malicious. Whether this was due to the hymn-writers' personality, beliefs, reputation, poetical competence, or just the fact that they wrote hymns, cannot be determined. It does seem, however, that the more unorthodox the writer's religious views and the more controversial his personality, the more damning the reviews seem to be.

In the case of Anne Steele, the personality is in no way controversial, and the religious views go only so far as Baptist in their unorthodoxy. Steele fared better with the critics, (insofar as they even noticed her), but one suspects that they looked more at the poems than the hymns in her single publication. In the Monthly Review in April 1760 appears this review:

Poems on Subject Chiefly Devotional. By Theodosia.  
8 vo. 2 Vols. 6s. Buckland, &c.

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<sup>13</sup> Monthly Review, Vol. #38 (Jan 1768), 51-5.



IT is greatly to be lamented that sacred subjects should ever be attempted by pretenders to poetry; who, incapable of attaining to the height of such great arguments, produce only ridicule, where they intended rapture; and who, instead of singing, with effect, to the praise and glory of God, generally get themselves laughed at, by persons of true taste and discernment, on account of their miserable verses.

Of this, but too many incidents have occurred, within our own recollection; to say nothing of the loads of devout rhimes which, from Sternhold and Hopkins, down to Blackmore and Erskine, to this day, serve indeed to make full glad the hearts of many a well-meaning mortal, but at the same time, afford ample scope for derision to ludicrous readers, who are apt to carry their jokes too far; and, forgetting to separate the matter from the manner, are prompted to sneer at religion herself, on account of the unbecoming garb in which she has been unhappily arrayed by her mistaken friends.

With this reflexion it was that we took up the publication now before us; expecting to find, in the contents, abundance of enthusiasm, and devout sentiments, dressed up in such poetry as once was admired in Herbert and Quarles; or, at best, an humble imitation of Dr. Watts or Mrs. Rowe; — but, how agreeably were we disappointed, on turning over a few pages, to find, that, here indeed, the true Spirit of divine poetry had manifested itself, in strains which even Rowe and Watts themselves would not blush to own: such strains, we may venture to add, as they have not often excelled, nor always equalled.

Pleased with this discovery, and delighted to find the muse so happily engaged in her noblest and most natural employment, 'Hymning the great Creator's Praise', we proceeded through the two volumes, with uncommon satisfaction: and though we do not always fall in with the religious\* sentiments of the amiable Theodosia, who, 'like the wrapt Seraph that adores and burns', is sometimes borne away, by the ardour of her zeal, to heights far above the ken and compass of cooler reason; yet, as sincere admirers of the sacred muse, we cannot but feel, and acknowledge, as with unfeigned pleasure we do, the beauties of her poetry: nor ought we here to suppress our high opinion of the goodness of her heart; from the fulness of which, with genuine and unaffected rapture; she pours forth her songs of praise, to the Almighty Father, and to the all-beneficent Saviour of the world.

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\* [Reviewer's note] With respect to her notions of Christianity, she appears to be a disciple of the late Mr. Hervey; of whose tendency towards Fanaticism, and connexion with the Methodists, few of our readers are ignorant. But he was a good creature, and always meant well; tho' neither a free nor a deep thinker: — by free-thinking, we mean what St. Paul meant, when he praised the Bereans.

We would not, however, be thought to speak of all this lady's pieces, as of equal merit. This is a circumstance not to be expected in any Miscellaneous Collection, even of the works of the most improved Authors; and we have heard that the ingenious Theodosia is but a young writer. — The following extracts, not selected as the best of her pieces, but as fair and impartial specimens of her performances, upon the whole, will, in our opinion, support the character we have given them.<sup>14</sup>

The reviewers then print 'To Lysander', 'To Belinda', and 'Occasion'd by reading Mr. GRAY'S HYMN TO ADVERSITY', none of which are hymns, but rather poems dealing more with secular than religious subjects. If these are the pieces which occasioned the encomiastic review, one wonders whether the reviewers automatically turned a blind eye to the hymns, the genre which usually arouses their invective.

Another review of Steele's work appeared in May 1782, after the posthumous publication of the third volume of her collection, entitled Miscellaneous Pieces in Verse and Prose. It begins: "THE two former volumes were noticed with approbation in our Review, Vol. xxii. p. 321. The present, though a posthumous publication, was prepared for the press, and put into the hands of the Rev. Caleb Evans of Bristol, the Editor, some months before her decease".<sup>15</sup> Virtually the rest of the three-page review is a quoted account of Steele's life by Evans, and the review ends: "They who are acquainted with this Lady's former productions, will know what is to be expected from the present; and the following short specimen will inform those who are not...". And 'On a Day of Prayer for Success in War' is quoted. Again, it seems as though the hymns are ignored and the devotional and secular poems are given the attention.

If Steele's hymns were hardly noticed, Christopher Smart's

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<sup>14</sup> Monthly Review, Vol. #22 (Apr. 1760), 321-4.

<sup>15</sup> Monthly Review, Vol. #66 (May 1782), 337.

were not noticed at all. Only A Song to David elicited comment, though it seems that the reviewer did not know what to think of the poem: "Without venturing to criticize on the propriety of a Protestant's offering up either hymns or prayers to the dead, we must be of opinion, that great rapture and devotion is discernable in this extatic song. It is a fine piece of ruins, and must at once please and affect a sensible mind".<sup>16</sup>

The Monthly Review made more effort, but again one gets the feeling that the reviewer had trouble handling the odd poetical package:

From the sufferings of this ingenious Gentleman, we could not but expect the performance before us to be greatly irregular; but we shall certainly characterize it more justly, if we call it irregularly great. There is a grandeur, a majesty of thought, not without a happiness of expression in the following stanzas.<sup>17</sup>

The reviewer prints stanzas X, XVII, XVIII, XXI, and XL, and then censures Smart for his obscure passages dealing with the seven pillars, and for his allusions that are "too little known". He concludes:

It would be cruel, however, to insist on the slight defects and singularities of this piece, for many reasons; and more especially, if it be true, as we are informed, that it was written when the Author was denied the use of pen, ink, and paper, and was obliged to indent his lines, with the end of a key, upon the wainscot.

Confusion in the face of Smart's major work soon gave way to avoidance and invective. Looking back on Smart's conventional Seatonian poems of the early 1750's, and at the eccentric writings of the early 1760's, a reviewer writes of Smart's Poems in 1763:

Instead of entering on the merit of these poems, we shall transcribe a few lines from Milton's SAMSON, and leave our Readers to make the application:

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<sup>16</sup> Critical Review, Vol. #15 (Apr. 1763), 325.

<sup>17</sup> Monthly Review, Vol. #28 (Apr. 1763), 320-1.

This, this is he; softly awhile,  
Let us not break in upon him;  
O change beyond report, thought, or belief! —

By how much from the top of wondrous glory <sup>18</sup>  
To lowest pitch of abject fortune art thou fall'n.

When Smart's hymns finally did appear in 1765, reviewers ignored them, perhaps refusing to take seriously the devotional work of a fanatic.<sup>19</sup>

Of contemporary critical response to Smart's hymns, then, little can be said. Of Cowper, virtually nothing can be said: it seems that there is a lack of contemporary reviews of the Olney Hymns. Perhaps it is that, in the years immediately following 1779, when Cowper became a famous and highly-regarded poet, critics chose to ignore what they would have seen as his distasteful evangelical juvenalia, or perhaps they saw the volume as Newton's. Or perhaps they just did not know what to say about the volume: Cowper's work was invariably praised and Newton's condemned. Whatever the reason, it was several decades before critical assessments of Cowper's hymns appeared.

One appears in James Montgomery's edition of Poems, by William Cowper (1824). Montgomery notices the introspective nature of the hymns, and points to some of their poetic successes:

Of the hymns, it must suffice to say, that, like all his best compositions, they are principally communings with his own heart, or avowals of personal Christian experience... .

Hymn 96, Book I. ["Thy mansion is the Christian's heart"] is a perfect allegory in miniature, without a failing point, or confusion of metaphor, from beginning to end. Hymn 51, Book III. ["I was a grovelling creature once"] presents a transformation which, if found in Ovid, might have been extolled as the happiest of his fictions. The action, imagery, and scene, in the second and third verses, are certainly not exceeded by any thing of the same character in the *Metamorphoses*. Hymn 12th

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<sup>18</sup> Monthly Review, Vol. #29 (Sept. 1763), 227.

<sup>19</sup> See page 173 of chapter five.

Book II. ["Gracious God, our children see"] closes with one of the hardest figures to be met with out of the Hebrew Scriptures. The subject is, the prayer of pious parents for their young children. None but a poet of the highest order could have presented such a groupe as the following, without bombast or burlesque:—

"Lord, we tremble, for we know  
How the fierce malicious foe,  
Wheeling round his watchful flight,  
Keeps them ever in his sight.

Spread thy pinions, King of Kings!  
Hide them safe beneath thy wings;  
Lest the ravenous bird of prey  
Stoop, and bear the brood away".

Verse cannot go beyond this, painting could not approach it.<sup>20</sup> Montgomery concludes his discussion by looking at single hymns and dubbing them, respectively, "a strain of noble simplicity", "a lyric of high tone and character", and "a model of tender pleading", always emphasizing that Cowper is at once pious and poetic.

Robert Southey discusses the Olney Hymns in his edition of The Works of William Cowper, Esq. (1835), but exclusively from the point of view of their being autobiographical chronicles:

Yet if Cowper expressed his own state of mind in these hymns, (and who can doubt that they were written with no simulated feeling, and those with most feeling which are most passionate?) Hayley has drawn the right conclusion from the fact.

Where is the blessedness I knew  
When first I saw the Lord?  
Where is the soul-refreshing view  
Of Jesus and his word?

What peaceful hours I once enjoyed!  
How sweet their memory still!  
But they have left an aching void  
The world can never fill.<sup>21</sup>

Southey goes on to quote extensively from the hymns, sometimes showing Cowper's spiritual anguish and sometimes his "cheerful devotion".

He concludes:

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<sup>20</sup> James Montgomery, ed., Poems, by William Cowper (Glasgow, 1824), pp. xviii-xx.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Southey, ed., The Works of William Cowper, Esq. (London, 1835), Vol. 1, 246.

In common cases these variations would have been nothing more than what Mr. Newton daily was told of by those persons who conversed with and consulted him as their spiritual director. But Cowper's was not a common case. His malady in its latter stage had been what is termed religious madness...and ...indicated a frame of mind to which any extraordinary degree of devotional excitement must be dangerous. The ministerial offices in which his friend engaged him were highly so; and in composing the Olney Hymns he was led to brood over his own sensations in a way which rendered him peculiarly liable to be deluded by them. Whether any course of life could wholly have averted the recurrence of his disease may be doubtful; but that the course into which he was led accelerated it, there is the strongest reason to conclude.

T. S. Grimshawe, in his edition of 1835, writes along the same lines; and, after citing three of the hymns and placing them in their autobiographical context, says that Cowper succeeded in uniting poetry and piety: Cowper's hymns are, "with some few exceptions, distinguished by excellencies of no common kind. To the grace and beauty of poetical composition they unite the sublimity of religious sentiment, and the tenderness and fervour of devotional feeling".<sup>22</sup>

There is little in the way of literary criticism of hymns in the eighteenth century; but this may be due more to the state of religious differences than to the state of the hymn as a literary form in the century. Critics tended to respond to Watts and Wesley as Dissenter and Methodist, rather than as writers, and were more concerned to censure the man rather than his work. In the case of Anne Steele, one gets the feeling that the critics were looking at her devotional verse rather than at her actual hymns designed for congregational use. In Smart's case, critics deliberately stated that they were ignoring his psalms and hymns. Cowper's immediate contemporaries were silent;

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<sup>22</sup> T. S. Grimshawe, ed., The Works of William Cowper (London, 1835), Vol. # 8, 94.

only in the early nineteenth century, it seems, did some commentary appear. Though it was encomiastic, the commentary, like that which was to follow over the next century and a half, was general, vague, and lacked the critical attention that hymns of the eighteenth century deserve.

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