The Charming Sound of 18th-Century Hymnody

Treasure No 59: The Charming Sound of 18th-Century Hymnody by J. R. Watson: An article from Bulletin 197

Among the hymns of Philip Doddridge, published in 1755, is a well-known one on infant baptism:

See Israel's Gentle Shepherd stand
With all-engaging Charms;
Hark how he calls the tender Lambs
And folds them in his Arms!

To describe the Saviour of the world, the Good Shepherd, as having 'engaging Charms' may sound strange to twentieth-century ears. Charm, in this cynical and hard-faced age, has become a suspicious quality, something that we rate less highly than involvement, integrity and passion, which often go hand-in-hand with an absence of charm.

To the student of eighteenth-century hymnody, however, the word 'charm' has a certain interest, because it carries some indicative meanings. In Doddridge's hymn it suggests Jesus as attractive, in the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s sense 3: 'Any quality, attribute, trait, feature, etc., which exerts a fascinating or attractive influence, exciting love or admiration'. So Benjamin Beddome uses the words, in this hymn on 'The Gospel of Christ':

Here, Jesus in ten thousand ways
His soul-attracting charms displays, …

This idea of Jesus as a pleasant young man was common in the Latitudinarian theology of the period:

> He was a Person of the Greatest Freedom, Affability, and Courtesie, there was nothing in his Conversation that was at all Austere, Crabbed or Unpleasant. Though he was always serious, yet was he never sowr, sullenly Grave, Morose or Cynical; but of a marvellously conversable, sociable and benign temper.[1]

This comes from Edward Fowler's *The Design of Christianity* (1671), and it is part of the tradition that Doddridge was representing. In his hymn, it is given additional force by the compound adjective 'all-engaging' (winning, attractive). Doddridge probably found this phrase in the *Guardian* essays of the philosopher George Berkeley, who wrote 'Virtue has in herself the most engaging charms'. Berkeley continued:

> and Christianity, as it places her in the strongest light, and adorned with all her native attractions, so it kindles a new fire in the soul, by adding to them the unutterable rewards which attend her votaries in an eternal state.[2]

These essays were written in 1713 as a sustained attack upon 'free-thinkers', and especially upon Anthony Collins's *A Discourse of Free-Thinking*, which had appeared in that year. Free-thinkers hoped, said Berkeley, to convince mankind 'that there is no such thing as a wise and just Providence'[3]. The essay in which this appears is entitled 'Happiness obstructed by Free-Thinkers', and Berkeley's Christianity is consistently hopeful of happiness and pleasure. One essay, 'Pleasures, Natural and Fantastical', contains a passage that might serve as a description of Doddridge's religious temper, as found in his hymns:

> But the pleasure which naturally affects a human mind with the most lively and transporting touches, I take to be the sense that we act in the eye of infinite wisdom, power, and goodness, that will crown our virtuous endeavours here with a happiness hereafter, large as our desires, and lasting as our immortal souls. This is a perpetual spring of gladness in the mind.[4]

This beautiful paragraph provides an insight into the underlying philosophy found in Addison and Doddridge, and even in Watts, that religion is a source of happiness:

> *Religion never was designed*
> *To make our pleasures less.*

Doddridge was a learned man, who might well have relished Berkeley's association of virtue and charm, and seen it as part of a pattern of religious and moral thought. Archbishop Tillotson, for example, was described by Anthony Collins as making God likeable in the same way:

> What a charming Idea does he give us of the Deity: it is alone sufficient, without any further Argument, to make the Atheist wish there were a Deity[5]

So in Doddridge we find a hymn beginning 'Grace, 'tis a charming sound', and another 'Jesus, I love thy charming name'. In 'O happy day, that fixed my choice' the believer is 'Charmed to confess the voice divine'. The word also occurs in Cowper's 'God gives his mercies to be spent' (in verse 6, 'Delight but in a Saviour's charms') and in Newton's 'Sweeter sounds than music knows', which 'Charm me in Immanuel's name'.

The dominant meaning in these passages, I think, is of charm as one of the pleasures and delights of religion. But once or twice there is a trace of an earlier meaning. The earlier senses of'charm' (*OED* 1 and 2) are the (1) literal and (2) figurative meanings: 'The chanting or recitation of a verse supposed to possess magic power or occult influence: incantation; enchantment; hence, any action, process, verse, sentence, word, or material thing, credited with such properties; a magic spell; a talisman, etc.'. As an example we may take a description of the Cross, from a Roman Catholic primer of 1687: 'Blest Tree, most charming and Divine'. The cross is a talisman to ward off evil, a magic power with properties to defeat the Devil. And if this seems like seventeenth-century superstition, we might think of the *OED*'s 'any … word … credited with such properties', and apply it to Charles Wesley's:

> *Jesus, the Name that charms our fears,*
> *That bids our sorrows cease …*

Something of the force of Wesley's hymn comes from his readiness to use such a word in that sense: he is prepared to use the name of Jesus as a 'charm' to ward off evil. It is in such strong vocabulary that his hymns often convey their message; it is as if he recognized the force of evil, and fended it off with the white magic of the name of Jesus.

John Wesley, who believed in witchcraft and wished that others did, used the word in a similar sense in one of his alterations of George Herbert, squashing Herbert's lovely 'King of Glory, King of Peace' into Common Metre for the 1737 *Collection of Psalms and Hymns* published at Charles-town:

What tho' my Sins against me cried
Thou did'st the Sinner spare:
In vain th'Accuser loud replied:
For Love had charm'd thy Ear.

The meaning here is delicately balanced between charmed in the sense of 'enchanted', and charmed in the sense of 'delighted'. In such shifts of meaning we can see belief itself moving: from the seventeenth-century idea of the Cross as a protective talisman, to the urbane elegance of Tillotson, Berkeley and Doddridge, and returning to its earlier literal and figurative force in the Wesleys.

I also think one of the reasons why eighteenth-century hymnody, and Charles Wesley's in particular, seems so powerful, is its readiness to use such vocabulary. I cannot imagine a Victorian writer thinking in these terms, either of God as attractive and delightful, or of the Cross or the name of Jesus as somehow 'magical'; and I suspect that the words 'charm' and 'charming' have entirely disappeared from twentieth-century hymnody. Another reason for this may be that 'charm' was also associated with things that ought to be distrusted, as in Isaac Watts:

All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to his blood.

or in Doddridge's hymn for young people:

Ye hearts with youthful vigour warm,
In smiling crowds draw near;
And turn from every mortal charm
A Saviour's voice to hear.

It looks as if charm was already becoming a dangerous word for hymn-writers to use, as well as one that they continued to employ. For a time, however, it clearly functioned as an indicator of something that the early eighteenth-century writers felt to be important, either in its old sense of magic or in its new sense of pleasure.

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[1] Edward Fowler, *The Design of Christianity*, 1671, chapter 5. I owe the reference to an essay by Isabel Rivers, 'Grace, Holiness, and the Pursuit of Happiness: Bunyan and Restoration Latitudinarianism', in *John Bunyan, Conventicle and Parnassus*, ed. N.H. Keeble, Oxford, 1988, pp.45-69.
[2] *The works of George Berkeley*, ed. A. C. Fraser. Oxford, 1901, IV. 159.
[3] *Ibid*., IV. 178.
[4] *Ibid*., IV. 158.
[5] Anthony Collins, *A Discourse of Free-Thinking*, London, 1713, p. 172.

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