The Secularization of the Victorian Hymn

Treasure No 45: The Secularization of the Victorian Hymn by Lionel Adey: An article from Bulletin 147

About 1880, Matthew Arnold forecast that 'most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry'. Marry to the hymn the Victorian love-ballad; beget of these that heavenly half-breed or earthly miscegenate the sacred song, and you might convict Arnold of forecasting after the event. Hymns, as will be contended here, became expressions of mass emotion unwittingly focused on secular rather than sacred objects. The precursor of secularization was, paradoxically, John Wesley's decision to accord the hymn a central role in religious teaching. In his famous Preface Wesley calls *Hymns for People called Methodists* 'a manual of experimental and practical divinity' for the poor majority of adherents. Like Wordsworth, he condemns poetic diction and aspires to teach the masses through poetry, 'the handmaid of Piety … wearing not a perishable wreath but a crown that fadeth not away'. He proposed to transmit in hymns not merely those Christian events and devotions the medieval Church had taught the masses in icons, drama, ritual and the Primer, but the intensive moral training that, as Ruth Messenger has shown, monks and nuns received through Breviary hymns. The Wesleyan hymns, however, focused not on the whole sequence of Creation, Fall and Redemption but on the believer's experience of redemption through Christ's Passion and Resurrection.

Once hymns had become expressions of inner experience rather than biblical paraphrases, two processes began. The first was the intrusion of secular themes, together with growing concentration on hymn-singing as an end in itself. Successive hymnals showed an increasing if half-conscious devotion both to the Victorian age's *summum bonum*, domestic love, and to its greatest evil, the nationstate, that Moloch soon to devour Europe's youth. Hymn-book religion divided along class lines, into working-class *Eros*, God experienced in family life and love, alienation from work and ambition, and ruling- class *Agape*, sacrificial self-giving in work for neighbour and nation, as in *Tom Brown's Schooldays*.

Secondly, in the long term Wesley's decision made possible the ecumenical movement, for believers sundered by age-old denominational boundaries expressed similar feelings by singing the same hymns. This merging accelerated after 1850, as hymnals became committee products rather than individually-compiled supplements to those of Watts and Wesley. Soon a great wave of translations from German, Latin and Greek made congregations heirs to spiritual songs of all ages.

Like the English novel, the English hymn developed by penetrating a once-contemptuous Establishment, to be composed, edited, translated and indexed according to increasingly explicit critical canons. Now, when hymn-singing has largely united formerly warring denominations, when church and school anthologies finally display the full range of Christian song, many a choir and

congregation has dwindled to a remnant and many a school assembly sings hymns without comprehending words, sequence or context. As Dionysian energy has cooled into Apollonian order, worshippers have drifted from the temple.

The evolution of Victorian hymnody along class lines came about as a late effect of a much longer process with two related features. The first was a decline in the sense of transcendence, an increasingly subjective, personal devotion, implicit in the act of supplementing or even replacing psalms or canticles 'given' by divine inspiration with poems 'achieved' by individual authors whose names and texts were more and more carefully preserved. The second was a change in the purpose and focus of hymns, from objective statement of revealed truth concerning the Creation, Incarnation and Judgment to training and expression of feelings concerning God's presence and action within daily life.

Increasing subjectivity appears most prominently in the treatment through the ages of the Passion. According to Julian, Bishop Venantius Fortunatus wrote the great sixth-century hymn *Vexilla regis* (The royal banners forward go') for a procession bearing a fragment of the True Cross. His poem impersonally confronts us with images of the royal progress, the Cross and the Victim, around which he weaves classical and Christian associations: the tree reversing doom wrought by the Paradisal tree; the Psalmist's prophecy that God would declare Himself among the Gentiles; above all, kingly radiance streaming from the tree. The poet declares no personal feelings, gives no viewpoint, for *ut nos lavaret* refers to the human race. Even the stanza *O Crux, ave, spes unica* inserted by the Breviary editor, refers to saint and sinner in the third person where translators specify '*our* holy hope.'

In 'When I survey the wondrous Cross', Isaac Watts responds emotionally to an imagined figure. The Protestant points verbally to what Catholics represent visually in the crucifix, while the Augustan poet transposes 'blood and water' into the abstractions 'sorrow and love.' The eighteenth-century poet beseeches us to share his emotion where the early Christian lets the images speak for themselves.

Between these extremes lies the medieval *Stabat mater*, in which the poet, as Everyman, responds through the Virgin's agency:

> *Mother may this prayer be granted:*
> *That Christ's love may be implanted*
> *In the depths of my poor heart.*
> (Tr. A. Petti, New Catholic Hymnal)

In Watts's hymn, the divine act of love demands a personal self-giving, of '*my* soul, *my* life, *my* all'.

The Victorian hymnist Mrs Alexander directs our attention not even to an imagined figure but to a 'green hill' outside an unnamed city 'far away'. (Venantius ascribed fertility to the tree, i.e. the Cross.) She dwells not on Christ's suffering but on its redemptive purpose, and presents Him as archetype of virtue, alone good enough, 'as we believe', to open Heaven's gate. Her hymn demands the responses of love, trust and imitation. Ultimately she exhorts children to behave well in this life, and cultivates their feelings regarding the idea rather than the image of Christ.

Some comparisons of Neale's translation of the *Vexilla regis* with Percy Dearmer's free adaptation (in *Songs of Praise Enlarged*) reveal a further shift between 1850 and about 1930. Neale rendered *Dicendo nationibus* as 'Amidst the nations', which the *Ancient and Modern* (1861) editors retouched to 'How God the heathen's King should be'. Dearmer says 'Love's crowning powers unfold, that all may see/He reigns and triumphs …' For Neale's 'spoiled the spoiler of his prey', Dearmer writes 'priceless treasure, freely spent/To pay for man's enfranchisement'. Add to this Dearmer's earlier

lines ‘There was he slain in noble youth/There suffered to maintain the truth’, and we see that in the sixth century hymn God reversed the Fall, in the 1861 rendering He demonstrated His power to the heathen (at that time Africans or Polynesians), and in the twentieth-century version noble youth perished to show love triumphant and so liberate mankind. All these hymnists agreed about what happened on Calvary, yet by unwitting turn of phrase Mrs Alexander suggested a hero of legend, inspiring virtue within this life, Neale’s adaptors an English missionary, and Dearmer any sacrificial figure from Shelley’s Prometheus to the Unknown Soldier.

Our second evolution, from unflinchingly eschatalogical to sentimentally educational hymns, begins with the eighteenth-century giants. In *A Gathered Church*, Donald Davie has well depicted Watts as accommodating Calvinism to Augustan tolerance, and expounded ‘Our God our help’ as a tribal lay, originally of Independents, eventually of the English people. Watts’s hymns show three patterns of contrast: religious inwardness against an objective mythology of warfare in heaven: Calvinist exclusiveness against missionary universalism; didacticism based on a rational, eighteenth-century vision of man, against a Wesleyan love of the Saviour.

The Wesleys properly suppressed Moravian sexual imagery yet went beyond the Moravians in simplifying Christian faith and practice into a feminine submission to the Saviour’s love; scrupulously edited and organized yet took popularized religion to the multitudes and threw off Christian folk-songs by the thousand. E.P. Thompson anachronistically charges them with having imposed factory discipline by scaring workers or soothing them with pie in the sky. The true charge should be that Methodist hymnody directed the singer’s attention towards his own feelings and so hastened secularization by shifting their focus from supernatural to inner realities. ‘Real Christians’ inwardly act out the Gospel drama, as witness these lines in the original version of ‘Hark the herald angels sing’:

Fix in us thy humble home;

Bruise in us the serpent’s head

Oh! to all Thyself impart.
Formed in each believing heart.

At that time, peasants were being driven off their land, but artisans still plied their trades in cottages. In George Eliot’s wistful retrospect. Adam Bede sang hymns in his own carpenter’s shop, not in any mine, mill or pot-bank. So far from preparing children and adults for factory discipline, Methodist and Evangelical hymnists utterly failed to assimilate industrial work into their imagery of the Christian life. Typically, ‘Forth in thy name, O Lord, I go’ calls work an ‘easy yoke’ borne by souls looking ‘to things eternal’ for fulfilment. Alasdair MacIntyre’s comment. ‘Christianity, confronted with the secular life of a post-industrial Revolution society, has found it impossible to lend meaning to that life’, is borne out by hymnals issued during that upheaval.

We may read the psychological malaise of late eighteenth-century England in the *Olney Hymns*, George Burder’s *Hymns Collected from Various Authors* (1784), or the blood-spattered lyrics of John Agg’s *Hymns for Public Worship* (1795). Not just the food, drink and disease metaphors but the sadistic and death-oriented images imply a collective melancholy that may represent the sum of personal repressions in middle-class poets but can hardly represent a profile of the lower orders. Since these poets so constantly proclaim their need of justification, we may suspect some underlying cause of collective guilt-feelings. One obvious cause was the slave-trade, another the American war which, being against colonists of British stock, must have provoked a heart-searching no less painful than the recent war in Vietnam. Our trauma should have taught us that nations feel guiltier when losing wars

than when winning them. Newton writes of an angel's 'vial … Fill'd with fierce wrath ... pouring down/Upon our guilty land!' as 'Brethren … With brethren now engage'. No such tribal guilt can be detected in early American hymnals.

The Marxist indictment of Evangelical religion as the 'opiate of the people' ignores not merely the distinction between literal and metaphorical treatment of hunger, poverty or disease but the failure of middle-class, often clerical, poets to imagine industrial conditions. It ignores the benefits to workers of learning to read, keep sober and keep clean. Those poor converts who indeed experienced life as a mercifully short journey across a desert learned how divine love could transfigure their inner and domestic lives. To discover the limitations of the 'opiate' metaphor, we need only contrast their examined lives with the existential chaos of the alcoholic or the drug addict. Neither inner nor outer reality can be dismissed as illusory.

No national guilt-feeling emerges from the 1838 revision of Wesley's great hymnal, which strikes three keynotes of Victorian piety: happiness here as well as hereafter, lower and middle-class consecration of the family hearth, and the primarily upper-class blend of missionary zeal with national expansionism. Methodism had by now moved into the mainstream of national feeling. By now also, two elements were flying apart that the Wesleys had held together. I call these the 'university' and 'back-street chapel' traditions to indicate a disparity not so much in wealth as in education. 'University' hymnals reflect superior taste and a wider theological and historical perspective; 'back-street chapel' hymnals give often melodramatic expression to personal experience and feelings. Because Oxford reformers, Unitarians and alumni of dissenting academies produced hymnals, the division cuts across denominational and party lines. It can be illustrated from adult hymnals and. more clearly, from those for the young.

A selection of first lines highlights pervading themes of 'chapel' hymnals from the Baptist collection of Ash and Evans (1769) to and beyond the 'Comprehensive Rippon' (1844): 'A beggar poor at mercy's door'; 'Come, ye sinners, poor and wretched', 'Ho, every one that thirsts, draw nigh', 'Hungry and faint and poor', 'Ye wretched, hungry, starving poor', 'Another six days' work is done', 'Come, let us join our friends above', 'For weary spirits, rest remains', 'O where shall rest be found', 'Let worldly minds the world pursue', 'Guide me, O thou great Jehovah', 'We travel through a barren land'.

These first lines define the social class and the pervading other-worldliness. *The Primitive Methodist Hymn-book* of 1854, according to *Julian* the Worst-edited … ever published', has 28 hymns 'For Domestic and Family Worship' that illustrate both heavenly aspiration and alienation from work. On Sunday, God is implored to banish each 'carnal thought' and 'vain desire'. Parents beg for their children guidance in the 'perfect path … through this vale of tears/To joys that never die'. Father resolves to be 'A saint', leading his 'faithful family' in the 'celestial road'. Life is a 'dangerous road' along which 'heavenly hosts' escort the family who, 'Soon as our toils are o'er', will 'joyfully adore thee/In heaven for evermore'. In substance, if not, alas, in style, these hymns read so like monastic office-hymns as to prompt the thought that a poor family of teetotal believers must have lived apart from the world like a conventual house.

The hymn best exemplifying the working-class consecration of family life appears in a hymn-book for Huddersfield schools (1873). In No. 157. 'There is beauty all around', a refrain 'When there's love at home' alternates with lines giving assurance of 'joy … peace and plenty … roses' and an earth that is 'a garden sweet … filled with love'. Its domestic idyll, a 'cottage' full of joy bears little resemblance to life in a West Riding mill-town. Far more often, hymns for the poor, like Breviary hymns, depict earth as a place of exile from man's paradisal home. One frequently anthologized, 'Return, O wanderer, to thy home', begs the penitent no more 'an exile roam/In guilt and misery'. As Charles

Booth remarks, in his *Life and Labour of the People in London* (1902), Baptists tend to be artisans or shopkeepers because their 'life circumstances' acting on minds 'unable to take sin, or anything else, lightly … tend to those stern opinions'.

A 'university' hymnal might be either high, low or broad according to whether it followed the liturgical year, the Calvinist scheme of salvation, or some sequence of human activities. It might be Anglican, Congregational, Unitarian or, by the turn of the century, Presbyterian. Without inconsistency, therefore, the low-church *Hymnal Companion to the Book of Common Prayer* (1870) includes items by Keble and Newman, and the high-church *Hymns Ancient and Modern* and *English Hymnal* items by Wesley and Cowper. Significantly, 'Ho every one that thirsts', as sung in the Countess of Huntingdon's chapel, did not include 'without money/Come to Jesus Christ and buy'.

Three features of 'university' hymnody appear in the *New Congregational Hymn-book* (1855), an orthodox counterblast to broad-church tendencies among ministers. One is the introduction of numerous Christmas carols. A second is a concentration on Christian social behaviour: love, kindness, the imitation of Christ. Finally, a small group of hymns in this large and, in a literary sense, excellent anthology for the educated deals with Britain's role. As British science and trade penetrate distant lands, asks one, shall she not 'engage with eager hearts/To make her Saviour known' (904)? Another asks whether 'Britain's God' shall 'become unknown' to 'Britons thrown/On distant shores' (905). The poetic quality, always uncertain in patriotic hymnody, improves at 'Greenland's icy mountains' but 'God bless our native land' concludes bluntly, 'God save the state' (998). Watts and Heber had blended patriotism with military imagery, but never so blatantly.

At the other extreme of churchmanship, the First editors of *Ancient and Modern* countered Evangelical subjectivity by taking half their hymns from Latin and liberalism by printing counterblasts to biblical criticism. Nevertheless, H.W. Baker's 'Lord, thy word abideth', one of innumerable home-mission hymns produced between 1860 and 1880. though intended (as Erik Routley has shown) to maintain biblical infallibility against Colenso, implies a shift of ground. To those who believe the Bible, it promises 'light and joy' and limits that 'treasure' to the 'simple-hearted'. Would Bunyan or Watts have offered this as the ground of faith? More gifted authors than Baker, for example Caswall, Neale and Christina Rossetti, produced child like, sentimental carols, more circumstantial in focus than older Nativity hymns: 'See amid the winter's snow', 'Good King Wenceslas' and in the bleak midwinter'.

In a preface to *Hymns of Praise and Prayer* (1874), the Unitarian James Martineau charges the Oxford movement with having 'nurtured a retrospective and historical piety' evident in Anglican hymns that give 'exaggerated prominence … to the objective and mythological elements' that accumulated during the formation of the Creeds. In his *Hymns for Christian Church and Home* (1840), he had expounded a hymnody akin to Wordsworth's 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'. Now he suggests that supernatural incidents, even if unhistorical. 'Will retain their significance for the inward life'. More and more hymns, he suggests, pass from even an historical incident to 'some spiritual counterpart' that is their 'real theme'. An early demythologizer Martineau styles this 'the natural method of evolving the future from the past'.

Over many centuries, therefore, hymnody has evolved from Venantius's objective vision of Christ crucified, through Wesley's inward realisation thereof, to feelings appropriate to late Victorian times, prompted by mythical incidents long ago and far away. On Martineau's premise, reflecting a view close to Arnold's, Christianity must disappear into the poet's compost-box with other ancient faiths.

Before illustrating the two traditions from children's hymnals, let me epitomize the 'back-street chapel' tradition as concerned essentially with the life to come, secondarily with domestic life, and the

‘university’ tradition as more concerned with national and social issues. In the one, those who cannot choose their path in life see industrial work as part of the pilgrim’s tribulation; in the other, those who can choose their work regard the development of talents in service to God or man as a divine call.

By the end of the century, the two traditions were converging, for not only had ‘chapel’ hymnals improved out of all recognition, but the most singable hymns had found their way into virtually all hymnals. The ecumenical movement began in the choir-stalls and front-parlours.

Initially, Christopher Smart’s liberal sentiments fell on the same stony ground as John Newbery’s pioneer ventures in children’s literature. In the *Sunday School Union’s Devotional Hymns …* (1816), a threatening Jehovah belies the frontal design showing a child learning under a tree near grazing cattle. The hymns, apparently for lower-middle-class children, consist of threats mingled with self-congratulations on being British (68, 152), warmly clad rather than shivering (79), at Sunday school rather than playing (99), and being warned by ‘kind teachers’ to escape ‘eternal fire’. God has become a permanent parent, ever on watch to forbid play or self-indulgence. In the same year, the editor of the Methodist Sunday-school book urges children to memorize hymns so as to attain cheerfulness by singing God’s praises while at work and be preserved from temptation to sing ‘vain and foolish songs’. Such happiness can scarcely have accrued from learning the hymns on death and Judgment, or on receiving correction for ‘evil actions’ that flow ‘From a vile heart within’.

By the end of the century, in virtually all children’s hymnals this ‘austere and wrathful’ deity of the Murdstones had given place to a kinder, more brotherly one, doubtless because of improvements in the conditions of life and the understanding of children. The change of tone came sooner and more completely in hymns for upper-class children. From 1840, hymnists continue to enjoin humility and resignation on future workers and their wives; in Anglican and Congregational hymnals, the mildness and cloying sweetness are transferred to Christ.

Specifically, hymnals for poorer children became milder from the 1850’s. Thus in 1851 a dismal and threatening little book for National Society schools opens with a terrifying *Dies irae* and keeps harping on death, judgment and eternal rest (or unrest). In 1856, the S.P.C.K. promises children hellfire for lying and sabbath-breaking. In 1858. Ragged School pupils in Manchester ‘lowly bend’ before ‘Great God’, reflect on the ‘happy band of children gone to glory’, urge themselves to ‘speak truth’ at all cost, be ‘kindly … mild and true’ and ‘come to Jesus’ to ‘escape eternal fire’. By 1878, hymns for Board School children in the same city heavily sell heaven as reward for a life of resignation and passive obedience, never of accomplishment or use of talents. Naturally enough, a child in Victorian Manchester must have imagined heaven as a ‘bright land far away’ of ‘never-ending day’ (25), to which God would call any ‘meek, obedient child’ (45). God. who will ‘fill his poor with bread’ (3), is implored to ‘Make me submissive to Thy will/And I would ask no more’ (8). No wonder the rich man remained in his castle as these children besought God to bring them through ‘life’s desert, dark and dreary’ to His ‘heavenly rest’ (50). In the city where Engels worked, such stuff was the sigh of the oppressed, the opiate of the children!

A very different spirit and taste pervade the elaborately-edited Harrow School hymnal of 1881, which exhibits High Church and Broad Church lying uneasily in one bed, with Low Church’s covered body outlined between. Low Church, predominant in the 1855 hymnal, is just visible in German chorales, images of tempted pilgrims, and still frequent allusions to death. The liturgical arrangement and numerous Latin hymns (together with translations), proclaim a powerful Anglo-catholic influence, but it is the Broad Church items that brand this collection as late-Victorian. Appeals to sanctify ‘each brave and holy vow’ (309), and give social justice to invalids, widows and orphans (31); resolutions that ‘farm and merchandise’ be ‘freely shared’ (53); above all Carlylean praises of work for God and fellow-man smack of the elder Arnold, of F.D. Maurice, Kingsley and Thomas Hughes. Life no

longer begins at the death-bed, for Christ has become a ‘Friend of boyhood’, brother and comrade. Even secular work has religious meaning for these future politicians, judges, civil servants or officers. As the God once regnant in dreadful majesty walks beside the growing boy, the future English establishment enjoys its sense of mission, its belief in the special consecration of its class and country. No hymn better embodies this than a variant of ‘Let us with a gladsome mind’ by Dean Stanley, biographer of Dr Arnold. Its eight stanzas give thanks for ‘our Island throne’, this ‘home and refuge of the free’, its monarchs, statesmen, poets, scientists, soldiers and sailors. Finally, it prays for ‘homes serene and pure/Settled freedom, laws secure’, for ‘truthful lips … faith and love’ and begs ‘light and life divine’ glow ‘Long on England’s shores’. No wonder the greatest Old Harrovian, who must have sung these lines, felt himself walking with destiny as he entered the Palace in 1940!

Before drawing some conclusions, I must point out a heresy and an idolatry prevalent in late-Victorian children’s hymnals. The heresy, just traceable in ‘There is a green hill far away’, amounts to a sentimental mythologizing of the Incarnation and Crucifixion. Consider some first lines: ‘Tell me the old, old story’; ‘I think when I read that sweet story of old’; ‘We love the good old Bible’ or ‘We won't give up the Bible’. One from the Congregational *Book of Praise for Children* (1881) begins: ‘The good, old Book! with histories/Of many a bygone age’, then, turning to the New Testament, speaks of ‘every kind and gentle word/That helps and teaches me’. Such hymns, together with carols picturing the Nativity as a fairy-tale in a medieval setting, and images of pearly gates and golden harps embedded in the collective psyche from long-discarded Sunday-school books, tended to distance the Gospel events from the eternal present of the *Vexilla regis* into a half-historical, half-legendary past. While Nietzsche was murdering God, hymn-writers were transforming Him to the likeness of their own times, angry and fearful during revolutions or depressions, brotherly or enervated as the sun set on late-Victorian England.

As Armageddon drew nearer, the English (and doubtless other Europeans) transferred their allegiance to the nation-state. Susan Tamke has cited a late-Victorian comment that ‘Patriotism … had undoubtedly taken the place formerly occupied by Christian sentiment … in the mind of the average man’. An Anglican hymn of 1868 calls England ‘God’s most favoured nation’; a council-school book of 1905 introduces ‘What can I do for England’. Even more startling than these, or further allusions cited by Tamke to Britain’s role as a chosen people, was the Emmanuel School hymnal of 1910. The Headmaster justifies its patriotic emphasis by the strange argument that ‘if a man love not his own land which he has seen, he gives little warrant for belief in a heavenly land which he has not seen’. What schoolboy could distinguish between the military metaphor for the spiritual life and the literal sense when called by the ‘Lord of the brave’ to ‘fearless war’ and urged to pledge a ‘soldier oath’, or ordered in a section on ‘Work and Battle’ to ‘fight with the powers of night’ till ‘thrones of tyrants vanish’? In the section ‘For England’ a hymn praising ‘our God whose bounteous hand/Prepared of old our glorious land’ bears a black-letter gloss ‘That good land which the Lord thy God giveth thee for an inheritance’. In this extremist hymnal, what St Augustine called ‘singing with praise of God’ had been perverted into singing tribal war-cries.

I have tried to show the praises of a transcendent deity adapting themselves to Victorian family and national life, as that deity became immanent in nature and society. The understandable failure of hymnists to consecrate industrial work underlies both their preoccupation with family or nation and their stress on present ‘weariness’ and future ‘rest’. The harsh impact of early capitalism upon community life may explain the appeal of egocentric hymns to workers in raw new towns, and also the relevance of many Victorian hymns to those who pursued collective goals: children, missionaries, soldiers or farmers. Clearly quietism makes best sense to those who cannot choose their paths, a competitive work-ethic to those who can. Never can resigned obedience and laying up treasures in heaven have made better sense to the poor than during the economic and political upheavals between 1750 and 1850. Marx, alas, knew no other religion.

The rash of translations and carol-books, like the earnest Anglo-catholic and Salvation Army proselytizing in London slums, expressed a nostalgia for the pre-industrial world and a resistance to change. If Victorian reformers answered in advance the Marxian case that to turn heart and mind towards God is to turn them away from the betterment of man's lot , were their reforms contingent upon a fading of that celestial vision so evident in the hymns of Ambrose, Venantius and Bernard? Must the worshipper struggle for belief, rather than prostrate himself before the undeniable, in order to practise Christian love in the external world?

We all deplore the transformation of 'Abide with me' from a dying priest's avowal of faith into a vesper-song that now conduces to epiglottal eroticism among Cup-final worshippers. Yet, like the even more idolatrous singing of 'For all the saints' on Remembrance Day, such rituals enable singers to recover momentarily a lost sense of transcendence, as well as strengthening the renowned British social consensus. In a godless age, 'O God our help' or *Ein feste Burg* may easily be poured into the mould of a prevailing idolatry: yet if hymns cannot, as Wesley expected, bear the weight of religious teaching, they can remind us of our transience in the historical and eternal

How far can Britain's decline be blamed upon working-class ability to find meaning in home and football ground rather than mine or factory; upon a naive and sentimental conditioning that ill-prepared late-Victorian public-schoolboys for the world they were to rule. Perhaps to abolish the Devil was to emasculate God. Certainly we see by hindsight that Christ's faithful soldiers and servants often mistook secular divinities for the eternal.

If our newer songs seem to confirm Arnold s forecast that poetry would replace religion as interpreter of life (to the young, at least), they fail to disprove Dr Johnson's claim that religious experience takes us beyond the reach of folk-poetry. As Greek tragedians and Christian poets or artists show us, man attains full potential only in serving something above and beyond himself. In the West, not Marxism or scientific humanism but ecology is the real religion of our time. Can our lost sense of transcendence find expression in songs that confront us with judgment less from an angry Jehovah than from the natural and cosmic order we have flouted? Can such songs replace the biblical images of the still, small voice, the Bridegroom, mighty wind and tongues of flame? Can their imagery meet the human psyche's need, so unforgettably expressed in the *Veni sancte Spiritus*:

Sine tuo numine
Nihil est in homine,
Nihil est innoxium.

(Without Thy divine power, there is nothing in mankind … free from corruption.)

No translator conveys the force of 'numine', that divine instress of Spirit without which heart and imagination become as Beckett's ashcans or Eliot's empty cisterns and exhausted wells, and a once-coherent civilization—capitalist or communist—becomes eroded by a thousand trivialities and corruptions.