



What Makes a Good Hymn Text?

Treasure No 50: What Makes a Good Hymn Text? by T. Dudley-Smith: An article from Bulletin 163

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Last February our household was regulated largely by the television transmission from the Winter Olympics. I think it will come as no surprise that, in British eyes, high among the stars of the Olympic firmament shone Jane Torvill and Christopher Dean, the gold medallists in the ice skating pairs. If you remember, the ice skaters performed incredible and graceful routines. Amid great applause, flowers were thrown on to the ice, with people standing and waving national flags. The performers then retired to a little enclosure on the edge of the rink to await the verdict of the panel of judges. Their marks fell into two distinct categories: *artistic impression* and *technical merit*. It occurred to me then that these are, perhaps in slightly differing expressions, the criteria by which we judge any art. It is what we mean when we say that *vision* must be combined with *execution* and that there must be both *inspiration* and *perspiration*.

I want to consider hymn-writing as, in a real if humble sense, an art form. Much of this consideration will be divided between the twin criteria of the Olympic judges: artistic inspiration and technical merit. But there are two more general over-arching considerations which we must tackle first.

Puzzling

We should note, I suggest, that though we ought only to offer to God the best we have—and in this sense we should look for the highest merits, artistic and technical, in our hymns—nevertheless, God is not bound. Just ninety years ago, the then Archbishop of Canterbury was walking in his garden. On his return he found Sir Edmund Gosse, one of the literary figures of the day, reading alone in the drawing room. They began to talk about Keble's *Christian Year*. Archbishop Benson said,

I delight in Keble. He is the common ground on which poetry and religion meet. Now, a great deal, the majority, of our religious verse is not poetry at all. A great many of our hymns are nonsense, irritating nonsense, if you regard them simply as literature, and yet they undoubtedly awaken the conscience or raise the soul to God. It is a great puzzle, the badness of most really effective and stirring hymns.

Yes, it is a mystery. Perhaps there are certain clues to it—for example in C.S. Lewis's reference to hymns as 'the gang-songs of the church'. Perhaps there is a clue also in Paul's words in I Corinthians 1:26 and 27:

God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things that are mighty ... not many wise after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called.

You will remember how Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, friend and disciple of the Wesleys and of Whitefield, used to thank God for that letter M, without which it would read 'not *any* noble are called'.

I think myself that there are unliterary, uncultivated, even crude and to some ears positively offensive hymns, which we must be humble enough to recognise that God deigns to use. It is easy for Ruskin—easy for any of us—to make fun of them, as he did in describing Victorian hymnody as ‘half paralytic, half profane, consisting partly of the experience of what the singers never in their lives felt or attempted to feel, and partly in the address of prayer to God which nothing could more disagreeably astonish them than his attending to’.

A.C. Benson, Master of Magdalene College, Cambridge, son of Archbishop Benson whom I quoted, used to visit his mother after his father’s death and find himself taking part in family prayers. ‘He hated kneeling upright on the floor: he felt foolish singing hymns in a domestic setting—hymns, he noted in his voluminous diary, bearing the same relation to poetry and music that onion and toasted cheese do to claret and peaches.’

Against that let me set this from Bernard Lord Manning’s *Hymns of Wesley and Watts*:

Reverence is due to hymns as to any sacred object. The hymn that revolts me, if it has been a means of grace to Christian men and women, I must respect as I should respect a communion cup, however scratched its surface, however vulgar its decoration.

True

There are two other general comments that I must offer before we consider artistic impression and technical merit. I submit that a good hymn must be true, in two senses. It must be true to divine revelation and true to Christian experience. It is in and through that truthful correspondence that a hymn achieves a universal quality and becomes the common property of different churches and different individuals (we might add of different generations, different centuries) and performs the unifying ministry which Erik Routley declared some thirty years ago to be one of the functions of hymnody.

True to divine revelation means, in my view, that hymns must be biblical. I do not mean that they must be limited to the versification of Bible passages, although some of our best hymns are just that—for example, all metrical psalms, such as ‘All people that on earth do dwell’ (Psalm 100), ‘The Lord’s my Shepherd, I’ll not want’ (Psalm 23), ‘Through all the changing scenes of life’ (Psalm 34), or ‘Praise, my soul, the King of Heaven’ (Psalm 103). Indeed, one of the problems of metrical psalms is whether to remain with the original in the Old Testament revelation, or to make King David sing as a Christian.

Not, of course, that hymns which are metrical versions of Bible passages come always from the psalms. Think of ‘Bright the vision that delighted’ (Isaiah 6), ‘O for a heart to praise my God’ (Ezekiel 36), ‘Jesus calls us o’er the tumult’ (Mark 1), ‘While shepherds watched’ (Luke 2), ‘Abide with me’ (Luke 24), or ‘Soldiers of Christ, arise’ (Ephesians 6). By biblical, I mean true to the revelation of the Bible—whether a revelation of the nature of God, of the person and work of Christ, or of the dignity, degradation and destiny of men and women. This is more than the inclusion of echoes of the Authorised Version. It comes from—it is the fruit of—a knowledge of the Bible as a book of life. It is what Isaac Watts means, in his preface to his *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, when he says he hopes that the ‘sense and materials will always appear divine. I might have brought some text or other, and applied it to the margin of every verse, if this method had been as useful as it was easy.’ The highest commendation, you remember, that John Wesley could give to the hymns of brother Charles was that they were *scriptural*.

Hymns must also be true to Christian experience. It is the hymn writer’s privilege to offer to the worshipper’s words in which to clothe and express the aspirations and emotions of the heart. What is expressed, then, must not be so individualistic that it cannot be the vessel to describe another’s experience of God, nor so far along the road of sanctity that few can follow it—though I think it is fair that it should in general outdistance most of us to some degree. It can express what we wished we wanted, even when

we know that our honest aspirations fall short. I myself think it reasonable that the hymn writer should rely upon the minister to choose the hymns with care for a particular congregation at a particular moment.

‘Weary of earth and laden with my sin’ is not, should not be, expressive of a general Christian experience all the time. Yet it may express the mood of a generality of worshippers at a particular moment in a service of worship—after a reading or a time of meditation or a particular address. We do not sing many of S.J. Stone’s hymns today though I think we all sing ‘The Church’s one foundation’ written, like ‘Weary of earth’, upon an article of the Apostles’ Creed. These two have retained their usefulness and preserve their author’s memory.

So now I have four propositions on the question, ‘What makes a good hymn text?’

1. It must be true to divine revelation in Scripture.
2. It must be true to the generality of Christian experience.
3. It must spring from some ‘artistic impression’—some inner vision.
4. It must achieve some standard of ‘technical merit’—that is, of execution.

The first two I have tried to illustrate in what I have said so far. I turn now to the third, which we can call artistic impression, vision, inspiration.

Artistic Impression

Fred Pratt Green, like myself a citizen of Norwich, describes hymn-writing as having more affinity with the useful arts, rather than existing as an art-form in its own right, like poetry or music. He describes the hymn writer as more like an architect, designing for a purpose, designing even for a client and being humble enough to change, to modify, to adapt, the better to serve not only his inner vision but his client’s need.

I find this helpful, but not to be pressed to an extreme. Of course a hymn can be ‘written to order’. Many good hymns have been, and Fred’s book is full of them. But the writer, faced with a commission, must find—what shall I say?—inspiration, vision, something that ‘turns him on’, and not mere competence of craftsmanship.

I mentioned A.C. Benson, son of Archbishop Benson. As a master at Eton College he became a personal acquaintance of Queen Victoria. She asked him to write various verses—for example, the words ‘Land of hope and glory’ to Elgar’s *Pomp and Circumstance* March No. 1. One day word came to him from Windsor Castle that special hymns were needed for the confirmation of Prince Leopold of Battenberg. Now, a confirmation hymn is not, I find, an easy assignment. It takes me years rather than days. Benson notes laconically in his diary that he wrote two such hymns immediately: ‘I wrote them on the train from London to Horsted Keynes’. (Horsted Keynes is a little town in Sussex about 40 miles from London.) So we have two hymns, confirmation hymns, hymns for a Royal Confirmation, written on a train journey of perhaps an hour!

I wrote to the librarian of Windsor Castle asking if copies still existed, wishing to see them for myself. Alas, all the papers of King Edward VII were destroyed at his own request. But in fact I found the hymns in a privately printed collection in the University Library at Cambridge, where Benson was Master of Magdalene College. I do not myself see in them much evidence of vision, of inspiration, or of artistic impression. And I am not surprised.

How does inspiration come? It may spring from a picture in the mind, from some new grasp of truth, from a colourful phrase, a line of poetry, even a single word. Somewhere behind it there must lie a spiritual experience to which it relates, with which, if there is any subjective element in the text, it is associated for you, the writer. Robert Frost, in an interview given in Cambridge, Massachusetts, back in 1950 or so, said that

Frost: ... every thought, poetical or otherwise, is a feat of association ... having what's in front of you bring up something in your mind that you almost didn't know you knew. Putting this and that together.

Interviewer: Can you give an example of how this feat of association—as you call it—works?

Frost: Well, one of my masques turns on one association like that. God says, 'I was just showing off to the Devil, Job'. Job looks puzzled about it, distressed a little. God says, 'Do you mind?' And, 'No, no,' he says, 'No', in that tone, you know, 'No', and so on. That tone is everything, the way you say that 'no'. I noticed that—that's what made me write that. Just that one thing made that.

Let me offer one more example before I turn from artistic impression to technical merit. I came across it quite by change in reading the recently published diaries of Cecil Beaton, the photographer and fashion designer. On his thirty-eighth birthday he wrote:

Lunch with Cecil Day Lewis who talked about the way he writes poetry: gets a clue line, writes it in a notebook. Later, when he has a stomach ache that denotes it is time to deliver, the poem is evolved round this line. Half of the poem is due to the way he works it out—half inspiration, half technique.

Technical Merit

That carries me to my final section on technique, execution, perspiration, technical merit. I guess there must be many people who would write good hymn texts but for this necessity. They have the Scriptural understanding and the inner experience of Christ. They have the motivating and, at times,—all of us have it only at times—the inspiration and the vision. But what they produce often lacks the technical merit to gain more than local and limited acceptance.

Technical ability alone, of course, is never enough. Without the inner vision it is hollow and sterile, however confident. But without some measure of technique, a text which might otherwise convey the precious moment of vision falls to the cutting-room floor.

What are the necessary elements? I distinguish four, two of which we can quickly dispose of. They are an element of originality and an element of the contemporary.

By originality I mean that a good new hymn (which I am here talking about) must have *something* to distinguish it from the half-million or so hymns written in English through the centuries. This is not easy. In the interview I have just quoted, Frost recalled the advice of Robert Louis Stevenson to young writers, that in forming their own style they should 'lay the sedulous ape' to established stylists. Frost said 'that did more harm to American education than anything ever got out'. But for Christians, mostly brought up over years, sometimes from earliest childhood, on our heritage of hymnody, it is very difficult not to play the sedulous ape—not to be a copyist—not to write pastiche, derivative of what is already in the hymnbook.

Part of it is quite unconscious. We all respond to a line that 'sounds right' when we are making a lyric. It is all too possible for it to 'sound right' because in fact it is already in use. But the search for originality for its own sake is a blind alley. Leslie Stephen, a fine critic, says 'The ultimate aim of the poet should be to touch our hearts by showing us his own and not to exhibit his learning or his fine taste or his skill in mimicking the acts of his predecessors—and now, we may add, his originality'.

There must also be—it is almost part of the same thing—an element of the *contemporary*. I do not mean by this that we must necessarily follow my friend Richard Jones, and write

*God of concrete, God of steel,
God of piston and of wheel ...*

*Lord of rocket, Lord of flight,
Lord of soaring satellite ...*

though it would be a pity if our hymnody seemed unaware of scientific insights. I do mean that I think we should avoid conscious archaisms, rather as architects avoid mock-Tudor beams or mock-Norman battlements in contemporary design. For myself—and it is half against my nature—I have had to wean myself from the ‘thee’s and ‘thou’s, the beholdeth and endureth, of Coverdale’s Bible, to the language we speak in formal contexts today. I have written elsewhere (*Lift Every Heart*, p. 24f.) about what a constraint it is upon the hymn writer to do this, to forgo the easy rhymes to thee and thine, the easy scansion of ere (as in ‘At even, ere the sun was set’), and o’er (as in ‘As o’er each continent and island’).

An element of the original, then, and an element of the contemporary are my first two headings under technical merit. The other two are structure and smoothness. Under structure I group four elements.

(a) *A pattern of ordered thought.*

I suppose this is the basic meaning of *structure*. The verses should follow one another in a natural sequence, so that on analysis a skeleton can be discovered, around which the thought was built. You may recall J.R. Watson’s analysis of ‘The day Thou gavest, lord is ended’ (*Bulletin* 158) in which he deals in turn with the structure of the line, of the verses, and of the whole. You will find the same thing done for a number of Wesley’s hymns in R. Newton Flew’s *The Hymns of Charles Wesley - A Study of Their Structure* (Epworth 1953). He shows, for example, the three divisions of the metrical prayer, ‘Love divine, all loves excelling’, when seen as Wesley wrote it—namely,

Prayer for the Holy Spirit,
Prayer for the return of Christ,
Prayer for the finishing of the new creation.

These three, as was Wesley’s common practice, are stated or suggested in the first verse: ‘Come ... visit ... enter ... dwell ... crown’. They are worked out more fully in the three succeeding verses. A pattern of ordered thought emerges.

(b) *A balance between objective and subjective.*

This is more debatable (and I have a qualifying section before I close), but is it not true that in many cases the demands of structure include and relate together both an objective statement of the glory of God and some words to describe or convey the response of us, the worshippers? William Bright, to take an example almost at random, begins his great communion hymn with an objective reminder of

*the love
that bought us, once for all, on Calvary’s Tree*

and then goes on to speak of how we respond to that love of God.

*We here present, we here spread forth to Thee
that only offering perfect in Thine eyes,
the one true, pure immortal sacrifice. (AMR 397)*

(c) *A metre suited to its theme with metrical regularity from verse to verse.*

I shall have a little more to say about metre when we come to consider smoothness in verse. But the constraint of having three or four or six verses metrically regular is a very real one. I am always a little ashamed when I see one of my own texts set to music and published with extra notes to be added to verses one and five, other extra notes to verses two and four, and one little twiddly bit marked ‘omit in verse five’. These are faults in the structure of my text. They escaped me at the time because, as you may know, I am quite unmusical and was in this particular instance writing a Christmas poem rather than a hymn. By

the time I heard from the composer that he had set a tune to it, it was not only in print but recorded by his choir for a record company, and on sale in the shops!

(d) *The need for a climax, something to end the hymn.*

You know how preachers are sometimes compared to aircraft—endlessly circling trying to make a landing. Indeed, one definition of an optimist is a lady who, when the preacher says ‘In conclusion ...’, starts looking for her shoes! So with hymns: the final line or couplet, the final verse is crucial. The example that always comes to mind is Mrs. Alexander’s lovely Christmas text, ‘Once in Royal David’s City’. Had she known it would find a place in almost every hymnal for a century to come, would she not have tried harder to find a fitting climax, better than

*Where like stars his children crowned
All in white shall wait around.*

Or has language changed since she published her *Hymns for a Little Children* 130 years ago?

After the elements of structure, I would suggest *smoothness*. It is a word I owe to Bernard Lord Manning who described Charles Wesley’s verse as ‘so simple it could be understood, and so smooth that it could be used, by plain men’. Here I identify three strands: metre, syntax, and sound.

(a) *Metre.*

John Sparrow somewhere suggests the experiment that in Sir Philip Sidney’s sonnet, ‘My true love hath my heart and I have his’, we should try the effect of changing the words *true love* to the word *lover*. The meaning is unchanged. The change in sound is negligible. But the poetic quality of the line is ruined. Why? Sparrow replies in these words: ‘It is because of a slight metrical irregularity—a spondee for an iamb in the second foot, an extra accent on “love”—which gives us two long, lingering syllables at a point where, the meaning being what it is, they are emotionally effective.’

This pinpoints one of the hymn writer’s problems over metre—that he must forgo scansion by stress, which gives, as here, spring and life to so much verse. The hymn writer must be ruled by the regularity of the tune. It is, though, surprising how many hymns do not scan properly by any standard rather than fail because hymnody requires a stricter beat.

(b) *Syntax.*

Hymns, like other writing, need to be grammatical. And they do not always succeed. It is disturbingly easy to write a stanza, concluded by a full stop, but containing no single verb. In a number of my texts the sentence is not concluded within the stanza. How much more difficult, then, to write what one has to say *complete within the line*. This is part of the secret of the smoothness of Charles Wesley’s texts.

*He breaks the power of cancelled sin,
He sets the prisoner free:
His blood can make the foulest clean,
His blood availed for me.*

You will find the same thing when other lyric writers are in search of simplicity of style. A.E. Housman does it constantly. Think of his ‘Epitaph on an army of mercenaries’.

*Their shoulders held the sky suspended;
They stood, and earth’s foundations stay;
What God abandoned, these defended,
And saved the sum of things for pay.*

So does John Betjeman:

*Sand in the sandwiches, wasps in the tea,
Sun on our bathing-dresses heavy with the wet,
Squelch of the bladder-wrack waiting for the sea,
Fleas round the tamarisk, an early cigarette.*

The epitome of Cornwall in the 1930's!

(c) *Sound.*

A large part of technical merit lies in handling the techniques of sound—of assonance and alliteration and especially of rhyme. There is a small class of unrhymed hymns. They have their place. But I believe that a good hymn text must usually include a handling of rhyme. I am hard put to it to say why except that a concluding rhyme gives shape and finish to a verse, gives that satisfying inevitability—without, one hopes, being too predictable—and helps to prevent the whole from becoming unstructured and over-facile. But rhyme carries its own pitfalls. False rhyme can be destructive in all but the hands of an acknowledged master. Even Housman has what Professor G.B.A. Fletcher calls ‘inexact rhymes’, and Grant Richards, his publisher, lists them in his memoir for all to see. Most of them, apart from *trader* and *nadir*, *yours* and *endures*, *morning* and *returning*, are of the kind hallowed in hymnody by long poetic licence like *even* and *heaven*, *move* and *love*, *come* and *home*. Even Wesley—but filial piety seals my lips!

A Final Word

What makes a good hymn-text? This has been my answer:

True to the divine revelation,
True to Christian experience,
Springing from some inner vision,
Achieving some standard of technique.

And this is not lightly done. Alfred Lord Tennyson, whose standards were admittedly high, declared once that a good hymn is the most difficult thing in the world to write. The wonder is that we have so many of them.

I must add one thing more. There is, I believe, no single answer to what makes a good hymn. One could find classic hymns which defy the canons that I here suggest. In the end, what matters is whether in practice a hymn becomes for some congregation or some individual believers a stepping stone to lift the heart to Christ. In the end, that is what matters. Let Charles Wesley have the final word.

*O that the world might taste and see
The riches of his grace!
The arms of love that compass me
Would all mankind embrace.*

*Happy, if with my latest breath
I may but grasp his name;
Preach him to all, and cry in death,
'Behold, behold the Lamb!'*

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