



Hymns and Literature: Form and Interpretation

Treasure No 70: Hymns and Literature: Form and Interpretation by J. R. Watson: An article from Bulletin 238, January 2004

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What I here attempt to do is to say something about hymns as literature, and to develop some of the ideas that I started ten years ago when I was writing *The English Hymn*. What kind of a thing is a hymn? How does it use words? What is it, in relation to other forms of literature? How is it affected by its association with church services and with music? Briefly, I suppose, the question is 'what is it?'—not in terms of its function in worship, because that is fairly obvious, but in relation to other forms of literature. And how does this affect our perception of its form, and our techniques of interpretation? I want to do this because I can see it as a form that is cherished by many people whose love for hymns I respect and admire, if only because I share it myself.

Hymns come in all shapes and sizes, but there is something that we recognize when we think of hymns collectively: a form that is regular in metre and rhyme, often doing violence to word order, and dealing with some aspect of Christian doctrine or the human response to it. Its form has to be carried through from the first verse to the last. These may seem to be uncomfortable restrictions, but, in the hands of a really great hymn writer, I suggest that they become an advantage rather than a handicap. In the hands of a great writer accompanied by a great composer the result is even more wonderful. They are hymns that have become known to us throughout our lives, sung by us year after year and season after season. They are like those passages of the Bible which we used to know by heart, and love, and I think that such memorizing and loving is an important part of the experience of hymns. Hearing something repeated is part of our life experience, and our learning experience too. Children like nursery rhymes, poems, catch-phrases, fairy stories, because they do not change, because they can be returned to. Any parent knows that deviation from the words of a nursery rhyme or a story is not permitted. A text does not lose its meaning through repetition but becomes richer and more beloved. Repetition and remembrance allow the mind to take a text and revisit it, to find that at different times it has a new relevance and meanings that change and grow, or sometimes fade. We can return to a poem, or see a new production of a Shakespeare play, without any feeling that this is just the 'repetition' of something. It is more of a pleasurable enrichment of the mind, a new finding of an old experience, a fresh understanding of a previously known text.

I think that there may also be something primitive going on here. Singing is part of it, the repetition of the tune in verse after verse, but that singing also determines the form of the words. The rules of the hymn are the rules of simple form: metre, rhyme, verse, tune. We volunteer to sing within them, as if surrendering ourselves to them. We have an almost instinctive and primitive feeling about their rightness. And I have always been interested in the ways in which people, under the stress of great emotion, turn to verse: the 'In

Memoriam' columns of the newspapers are full of tributes to loved ones, struggling to express feeling in verse that rhymes, however simply.

In order to understand the functioning of this art, I want to suggest that what hymns do is closely paralleled by some of the processes of Greek drama. According to Aristotle, the most important element of Greek tragedy was plot, or 'the combination of incidents of the story' (p.37). These incidents came from the legends and myths of the Greeks, which were known and familiar to the audience. In his own time, Aristotle thought, 'the finest tragedies are always on the story of some few houses', by which he meant families (p.51). Those stories cannot be altered, but it is the poet's duty to take them and repeat them properly and with understanding:

The traditional stories ... must be kept as they are, e.g. the murder of Clytemnestra by Orestes and of Eriphyle by Alcmeon. At the same time even with these there is something left to the poet himself; it is for him to devise the right way of treating them (p.53).

There are two things here which are of paramount importance when we consider the hymn as a literary form. First, 'the traditional stories must be kept as they are.' That is, a hymn writer has at his or her disposal the Old Testament, with the Fall as described in Genesis, and the stories of the people of Israel from the Exodus to the Babylonian captivity; and the New Testament, with the life, work and teaching of Jesus Christ as recorded in the Gospels and as interpreted by St Paul. These are the elements which must be 'kept as they are': hymns cannot be allowed to contradict the Bible, invent their own narratives, or deny the teachings of the Apostle Paul. But, says Aristotle, 'even with these there is always something left to the poet himself; it is for him to devise the right way of treating them.' A hymn will take the original material and devise 'the right way' of treating it, in the same way that a Greek dramatist will take his traditional legend and select from it, treating it in a way that brings out its beauty, its meaning, and its tragedy. Thus Aeschylus, drawing on the long and fearful story of the House of Atreus, chooses to begin at a specific point, the wonderful moment when the watchman sees the fire-beacon that signals victory in the Trojan War.

To compare great things with small, I think that something like this occurs in hymn writing. A hymn writer, faced with the vast material that stretches from Genesis to Revelation, and with the interpretations of it from St Augustine to Karl Barth, has to choose which part to illuminate, where to begin, how to proceed, where to conclude. Having chosen, he or she has to decide how to treat the material: what metre to use, what rhyme scheme, whether to use a recognized tune. There is a vast difference, for example, between Henry Francis Lyte's

*God of mercy, God of grace,
Show the brightness of thy face,*

where the seven-syllabled metre and the rhyme scheme in trim couplets compel the mind to think of this as a neat summing up of the grace and mercy of God, precise, orderly, patterned, shaped into short lines, placed in pairs. Compare this with the beginning of J.W. Chadwick's hymn of 1864:

*Eternal Ruler of the ceaseless round
Of circling planets singing on their way.*

Here there is no rhyme, for that comes later the two lines do not compress and contract, as they do in Lyte's hymn, but expand. They move from 'Eternal Ruler' to a vast vision of the universe, its circling planets going round the sun, with God as a majestic figure over all. That vastness is given form by the long lines, their spreading out across the page to hold the idea, their absence of rhyme to close the thought or to make one line echo against another, push one line close to the other.

At this point we may remember that Greek drama was performed as part of a religious festival, and that the great plays were celebrations of the serious things of life. The theatre functioned as a place where drama was acted before an audience, so that it was a collective experience, community based, what today we might

think of as congregational. The consequences of this were set out by the great Renaissance thinker, Francis Bacon:

Many wise men and great philosophers have thought the theatre to the mind *as the bow to the fiddle*; and certain it is, though a great secret in nature, that the minds of men in company are more open to affections and impressions than when alone.

It is to this audience, this congregation, that the plays speak and the hymns sing; the collective experience of singing them together is part of the effect that hymns have upon us.

The Bacon quotation is taken from Peter Hall's Clark Lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 2000, published under the title *Exposed by the Mask*. Its subtitle is 'Form and Language in Drama'. In it, Hall deals interestingly with questions of 'reality' in the theatre. In *Titus Andronicus*, for example, 'we would not be moved if Titus *really* cut his hand off. We would be horrified and the theatre would speedily be closed' (p.27). He argues that the Greeks could have used their own faces if they had wanted to, but they preferred to use masks, because 'the mask enables the audience to contemplate a passion at an intensity which goes beyond the moment of rejection' (p.25). Such a mask can be metaphorical as well as literal:

performance always has to have the equivalent of a mask in order to transmit an emotion. It must have a mask, even if it is not a literal mask. It needs the equivalent if it is to deal with primal passions. It demands form—either in its text, or its physical life, or its music. All these can act like a Greek mask. Only then can strong feeling be dealt with (p.25).

Hall then makes the point that the verse itself can be the form: 'Shakespeare's form is based on the sanctity of the line' (p.50). He then links one line with another: in *Twelfth Night*, for example, he notices the way in which the second line inverts the scansion at the beginning. After 'If music be the food of love, play on' we have 'Give me excess of it, that, surfeiting': the rhythm of the second line surprises the audience and gives new energy to the incoming line' (p.53).

A good hymn writer knows these things, as a good dramatist does: timing, rhythm, movement. What Hall has drawn attention to with sensitivity and with a lifetime's experience as a director, the good hymn writer knows from his own labours and from those of his predecessors. As an example, I take a well-known verse by a nineteenth-century hymn writer, Matthew Bridges:

*Crown him with many crowns,
The Lamb upon his throne;
Hark, how the heavenly anthem drowns
All music but its own!
Awake, my soul, and sing
Of him who died for thee,
And hail him as thy matchless King
Through all eternity.*

Let us briefly apply Hall's doctrine of the line and verse as form. We start with an imperative, which is echoed by the noun at the end of the line: the two words are the emphatic ones, given strong stresses by being placed where they are, at either end of the line with lesser words between. The line sets up already in our minds a formality, a rhetorical expectation of something quite unlike prose. And then, as in the Shakespeare example, the first line is modified by the second. The 'him' of the first line is the Lamb, and not just the Lamb, but the Lamb upon his throne: into that line comes what we remember of the great vision of Revelation, but also all the other connotations of the Lamb, the sacrificial lamb, the lamb that takes away the sins of the world, the lamb of God, now ascended to the Father sitting at his right hand in glory. All that accumulated significance is compressed into the line, and it is all thrown back to qualify the 'him' of line 1, so that there is a kind of retrospective return to the beginning.

And then, after the heavy accents of the first two lines, ‘Crown ... crowns ... Lamb ... throne’, comes a free-running two lines. From crowners we are now listeners, and perhaps it is hard to know where we are; but the heavenly anthem at this point takes over the action, and we follow it across the two lines, wondering at the end of line 3 where ‘drowns’ will take us, but finding the answer in line 4. It drowns ‘all music but its own’.

Bridges uses the metre brilliantly. It is a very simple one. Double Short Metre, but we have already seen how it is used to contrast the first two lines with the second two. Now it rests for a moment on ‘its own’, while we record and digest that idea in our minds. Then it starts up again, with the echo of Bishop Ken: ‘Awake, my soul ...’: only now it is not duty that we awake to, but singing. Notice how beautifully the verb ‘sing’ is placed at the end of the line, allowing that line momentarily to stand on its own—‘Awake, my soul, and sing’—but then giving the verb a predicate in the next line—‘sing/Of him who died for thee’. That line reminds us of the Lamb of line 2, of the Lamb that was slain; but then, with the last of the four imperatives, the Lamb becomes the ‘matchless King’. Once again, the seventh line can stand on its own, but is then qualified—or rather enhanced—by what comes afterwards, with the resounding word, the only grand four-syllabled word in the verse, ‘eternity’.

What I am trying to suggest is the way in which the form of the line meets the form of the verse. And then, of course, the verses in succession make the form of the hymn: ‘Crown him the Virgin’s Son’, referring to the Incarnation: ‘Crown him the Lord of love’, referring to the Passion, and so on. And then comes Sir George Job Elvey’s magnificent tune DIADEMATA.

That hymn was one of Michael Ramsey’s favourites. It was sung at his request when he preached at the service for the 75th anniversary of a Methodist Church in Durham in 1978. Before the sermon, however, there was a hymn by Charles Wesley, much known and loved by Methodists, beginning ‘All praise to our redeeming Lord’. Ramsey seized on some of the Charles Wesley’s phrases in his sermon, when talking about the Holy Spirit:

But - why the *Fellowship* of the Holy Spirit? For this very reason: that just as we receive God’s goodness, not in isolation but being drawn into sharing with one another, so we respond to God’s goodness not in selfish isolation but in being drawn one to another. And thus it is only in fellowship that we receive, and only in fellowship with one another that we give back; and the Holy Spirit unites us to our God, in and through the process whereby he unites us to one another. And I doubt if I have ever heard this truth put more vividly than in the hymn we have just been singing ... ‘our redeeming Lord ... joins us by his grace’ ... and bids us ‘each to each restored’—we are restored to him only by being restored each to each; and he ‘bids us build each other up’ and gathered into one/we hand in hand go on.’ And then there’s the wonderful phrase, that we are ‘concentred all, through Jesu’s name’. The Spirit enables us to have our centre in Jesus because at the same time he needs us to have our centre in one another, in a common life, not living and dying to self but living and dying through the brethren, and by living and dying through the brethren, increasingly finding our union with God through the Holy Spirit.

We notice a number of features here. This was an impromptu commentary on a hymn, which was clearly a last-minute addition to the written sermon, but beautifully fitted in to it. It was couched in language that sounds slightly archaic to our ears, most notably in the reference to the brethren, which would not be appropriate today. But it does what many of us would do: it uses the hymn as a teaching instrument, and it draws attention to what is seen as its most significant and striking images. Indeed, the idea that literature has a moral purpose, that it teaches us to admire nobility of mind and conduct and to despise hypocrisy, greed, pride, and deceit, is an ancient and honourable one. It is found in Horace’s *De Arte Poetica*, where the sweet, *dulce*, is to lead to the instructive, *utile*: paraphrased by Robert Frost as ‘a poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom’.

So that is the first element to which I wish to draw attention: the function of hymns as teaching, and illuminating. But we notice something else in Michael Ramsey’s commentary: how his mind fastened on the metaphors and on the language. The moments in the hymn that struck him were ‘each to each restored’,

'build each other up', 'hand in hand go on', and finally 'concentred all'. These are characteristic of Charles Wesley, in that they show what has been called 'the physicality' of his work; they provide physical metaphors for a spiritual condition. Each has its place in the architecture of the hymn; we are 'restored', like a painting or a building, and 'built up'; we go on through the world 'hand in hand', like Adam and Eve at the end of *Paradise Lost*, a poem which Charles Wesley knew intimately and often used:

*They hand in hand with wandring steps and slow,
Through Eden took thir solitarie way.*

Here that supremely moving moment at the very end of the poem, when Adam and Eve go out, sadly but together, to start discovering what it is to be human, is taken and used in a hymn about fellowship. As it does so it acquires a new meaning. The singers for whom Charles Wesley was writing, the early Methodists, were going on, conscious of their intimate fellowship, representatives in their own particular way of a journey and a purpose together, part of a particular response to the human condition that Milton had written about with such power and tenderness.

And then comes 'concentred all': that extraordinary and unusual word. It will stand a little examination. One thinks of it at first, perhaps, as intensifying the word 'centred': in singing this hymn we are not just 'centred' but 'concentred'. The first sense in the *Oxford English Dictionary* of the verb 'concentre' emphasizes this: 'to bring or draw to a common centre; to direct towards a centre; to bring together as at a centre.' If we are 'concentred' in this sense we are brought together by something, in this case by common worship. The second sense (b in the *OED*) is described as 'rare': 'to attract to itself as a centre; to form a centre or meeting point for'. Here, I think, the word suggests that if we are 'concentred all, in Jesu's name' we provide, as it were, a meeting point for ourselves and others: our souls make their own centre in the singing. And then comes sense c: 'to collect (the mental faculties, thoughts, etc) and give them a single direction and purpose.' This is what happens too as we join in fellowship with other singers: we collect our faculties and direct them as we sing.

It is further used 'to bring closer together as by drawing to a centre ... to bring into small space or volume; hence, often, to increase the vigour or intensity of.' It is found in chemistry, meaning to concentrate. And it also means 'To mix by concentration, to combine, compound'. It also means simply 'to converge to, or meet in a common centre; to move towards a centre; to come together in one place, *lit* and *fig*. Used as an adjective, as it is here, concentred means 'placed or seated in the centre', 'brought to a common centre', and 'of the mental faculties: directed to a single point or object.' We can see how rich a word like this might be in the context in which we find it here. And then we come across something else: the noun 'concent' means 'harmony of sounds; accord or concord of several voices or parts; playing or singing together in harmony.' And so, in Charles Wesley's hymn, we are 'Concentred all, through Jesu's name/In perfect harmony.'

What I would wish to emphasize here is the sheer energy that attaches to a word like 'concentred': how from it come all these ideas, exploding like some particle in an act of linguistic fission. We cause it to explode when we sing: the meanings are held together in our minds and in the minds of others. For some the word will indicate just a coming together; for others, intensity; for others, the sense of direction and purpose; for others, directed to a single point; and for others, a harmony in Jesu's name. It corresponds, in its multiple possibilities, to the *jouissance* that the French critic Roland Barthes identified, the 'play' of the text, 'play' used both in the sense of a game and in the sense of 'play' in the movement of a door or a hinge.

I am trying to draw attention to the qualities of language that hymns share with other forms of poetry. And I suggest that when Michael Ramsey was drawing attention to particular words and phrases, he was not just celebrating their content but relishing the words themselves. Much discussion of hymns has been concerned with their content, but a more appropriate criticism would acknowledge that form and content are inseparable: that the images and language used actually determine our sense of what those ideas are.

Hymns also resemble literature not only in their use of metaphor and image but also in their use of other texts. They are what Mikhail Bakhtin would call 'dialogic': they engage in a conversation with the texts that

preceded them, speaking to them and using them. They do so in relation to the Bible, obviously, but also in relation to other hymns and other poems. I have already noted the reference to Milton in Wesley's 'We hand in hand go on.' That is one example among many of such borrowing and modifying. As T.S. Eliot said, 'Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal;'

Bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn; the bad poet throws it into something which has no cohesion.

This describes exactly what goes on in the best hymns: they take a verse from the Bible, or a line from another poet, and weld the theft into a whole of feeling. At the same time, they are conscious of one another: Addison borrows from Herbert the idea that 'E'en eternity's too short/to utter all thy praise', and Charles Wesley borrows from Addison the sublime ending 'Lost in wonder, love, and praise'. For a moment they are saying the same thing, their work coincides. At other points they are different, individual voices. I sometimes think that reading a section of a hymn-book is a little like eavesdropping on a seminar: if we listen to the discussion, let us say in the section entitled 'The Holy Spirit' or 'Pentecost' or 'Whitsuntide', we can hear Harriet Auber singing 'Our blest Redeemer, ere he breathed/His tender last farewell' to Dykes's lovely tune ST CUTHBERT; and Christopher Wordsworth, with 'Gracious Spirit, Holy Ghost'; and then Bianco da Siena, with 'Come down, O Love divine', and John Dryden, with 'Creator Spirit, by whose aid'; and Bishop Cosin, with 'Come, Holy Ghost, our souls inspire', and Charles Wesley with 'O thou who camest from above'. From every age and from every part of Christianity they bring their contribution to one of the great mysteries of the faith: 'Spirit divine, attend our prayers'; 'Holy Spirit, come, confirm us'; 'Holy Spirit, truth divine/Dawn upon this soul of mine'. In a section of a hymn book they become for a moment contemporaries, as if at some very grand and very splendid High Table, their individual voices courteously acknowledging one another as they each contribute their own particular insight. And then, one by one, in come the new arrivals, such as Fred Pratt Green, or Timothy Dudley-Smith, or Alan Gaunt, and take their places round the table.

So, to conclude: I suspect that the whole matter of hymn singing is much more complex than we think it is, just as reading a literary text is. A text comes into life because we read it, and a hymn comes into life when we sing it. Hymns that are not sung die, as the indexes of countless nineteenth-century books bear witness. But together with the contemporaneity of the text, in which we sing it into life, here, now, there is another awareness, that of the historical condition in which it was written. 'A work of art', said Schleiermacher. 'is really rooted in its own soil. It loses its meaning when it is wrenched from this environment and enters into general commerce; it is like something that has been saved from the fire but still bears the mark of the burning upon it.'

This seems to me to describe the condition of hymns very accurately. They have been 'saved from the fire' of oblivion, in that we still sing them; but they bear the marks of their origins upon them. When we know that 'All praise to our redeeming Lord' was first published in 1747 in *Hymns for those that seek and those that have Redemption in the Blood of Jesus Christ* under the title 'At Meeting of Friends', we are closer to it by our understanding of it as a hymn written at that particular time for the early Methodist societies. Interpretation is thus a matter of incorporating the historical sense of a hymn's origins. But while it is important to know these things (and I have spent many hours enquiring into them) I do not agree with Schleiermacher that a work 'loses its meaning' if we do not know this: I prefer Barthes's freedom, explosion, *jouissance*. In singing and reading from a hymn book we can listen to the voices round that great High Table, and welcome in the new ones, those who come to join the fellowship of those who seek to express the hopes and fears of humanity, and the wonder of 'Love Divine, all loves excelling'.

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