

P E T E R L A N G

Trinity of Discord

THE HYMNAL AND POETIC INNOVATIONS
OF ISAAC WATTS, CHARLES WESLEY,
AND WILLIAM COWPER

RICHARD ARNOLD

The three writers examined in Richard Arnold's *Trinity of Discord*, Isaac Watts, Charles Wesley, and William Cowper, are known as famous poets, but are also the greatest and most popularly compiled and used hymn-writers of all time. While masters of their kind, they were so remarkably different, considering they were working in the same (and quite new) genre. Moreover, when considered in their poetic-historical contexts, it is noteworthy that Watts can be seen as an archetypal Neoclassicist (not unlike Pope and Johnson), Wesley as a transitional pre-Romantic (not unlike Gray and Collins), and Cowper a thoroughgoing Romantic (not unlike Wordsworth and Coleridge, but with a much sharper psychological edge). Most noteworthy is that Watts, Wesley, and Cowper come before their later counterparts and their respective movements: their importance to mainstream or canonical literary history cannot be overestimated.

In terms of the hymn's development in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these three stand as beacons in the genre, if not individual species of a multiform genre itself. In their time and context, these three were, while paradoxically out of tune with the status quo, and radically different from each other, forging a new and everlasting genre, one born out of a veritable trinity of discord.



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Preface

In his “Prayers and Meditations” Samuel Johnson records his momentary encounter with a young beggar-girl on Easter Sunday 1764: “I...gave her privately a crown, though I saw Hart’s Hymns in her hand”.¹ To someone unfamiliar with the turbulent nature of the congregational hymn throughout its first century of use, the logic in this utterance might seem curiously awry. But the sentiment in Johnson’s comment is acutely and revealingly symptomatic of the highly controversial and ambivalent reputation of congregational hymns, a reputation that lasted throughout the eighteenth century even through to the nineteenth, when the congregational hymn was finally recognized as being “not illegal”.² Unlike the sermon, corporate prayer, or metrical Psalm, the congregational hymn was at that time a relatively new phenomenon in England, and its early history is characterized by poignant debate and vociferous pamphleteering. Although English hymns had been written for several centuries before the eighteenth, there is little evidence that they were composed for the purpose of congregational singing, and were not permitted in the Church of England service until much later in their history. England had followed the lead of John Calvin rather than that of Martin Luther in the Reformational issue of congregational singing, thus limiting its sung worship to the metrical Psalms; this restrictive and policed regulation persisted in the eighteenth century, when this “Controversie of Singing” found voices in most major religious sects, as well as in the established Church.

Into this climate of intense controversy steps Isaac Watts, whose book, deliberately titled *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* is a free-standing innovation, a bold attempt to free the words of sung worship from just the Psalms, and to introduce—for the first time—hymns “of meer Human Composure”. While it is evident that Watts was sensitive to how perilous a departure from the *status quo* this was (this seen in the fact that he enclosed many stanzas in “crotchets” that he felt were too imaginative or poetic, and that could be left out in singing), he nevertheless infuses his scriptural hymns with vigor and imaginative significance, offers his own interpretations of the scriptures, and tackles the difficult or frequently ignored scriptures. In his originally-composed hymns he frees himself quite dramatically from scriptures, explores and panoramically surveys Christian experience, and projects a recognizably Wattsonian affirmative and confident tone, infuses plentiful and

illuminating imaginative figures (image, metaphor, symbol, simile), and speaks from a wide-sweeping or even omniscient point of view, much in the fashion of the secular Neoclassicals. It is no wonder that his pioneering hymnal work met with, on the one hand, such critical lampoon and opprobrium in its time, and on the other, with such an enduring school of imitators and even plagiarists.

While Charles Wesley might have taken the lead for writing hymns from Isaac Watts, he worked so many and integral innovations into the hymn that he should be seen as a radical departure from Watts's new genre himself—particularly considering the lasting following Watts had. And while Watts's hymns must be seen as originating from his Independent Dissent, Wesley's should be seen as emanating from his Evangelical Methodism. Therefore his emphasis (and this was *new* not only hymnally but poetically in the century) was on a deeply personal and expressive recognition and articulation of the vicissitudes of his face-to-face relationship with the Deity, in the form of Jesus Christ, his personal friend. In his scriptural hymns Wesley responds personally, translates all scriptures (whether Old or New Testament) into an Evangelical context, and creates his own symbols to apply to the scriptures. In his original hymns Wesley's tone emphasizes individual spiritual struggle followed by assurance or confidence of victory; in his imaginative figures, Wesley is not only more complex than Watts, but delves into personal interpretations of Biblical images, stressing their application and effect: he also openly questions God, often in a most importunate and demanding fashion, therefore his point of view is very personal, esoteric, deliberately limited, and subject to the moment of his mood and outlook, much like the mid to late century "transitional" or pre-Romantic poets. Hence the vitriolic critical commentary on the one hand, and the phenomenal and long-term following on the other.

Unlike Watts or Wesley, William Cowper became a very famous and critically acclaimed poet, hence there is a seeming divorce between his poetry and his hymnody, though the latter is no less poetic or complex, and because of this, seems a rebirth of the genre as well. It is Cowper who conceives the honestly introspective lyric—the uninhibited deep exploration of the real inner self and psyche (much in the mode of the later Romantic poets), all within the context of the unique mental malady that simmers beneath the highly refined surface level of his hymns, which makes them suitable—and made them extraordinarily popular—for congregational use,

despite their highly idiosyncratic center. While Watts's hymns should be seen in light of their context of Independent Dissent, and Wesley's in light of his itinerant Evangelical Methodism, Cowper's should be examined in light of his extreme psycho-autobiographical circumstances, and his Calvinism. Cowper's scriptural hymns have an underlying level which delves into his own psyche, and a surface level that can be applicable to congregations. What primarily distinguishes his original hymns from those of others is the tone: for the first time, there is unresolved doubt, unrequited struggle, and even ultimate despair. Set against their smooth tonal surface, the hymns have a complexity unique to hymnody. Hence the critical reaction was guarded and respectful of the great and sophisticated poet—though critical of his delving into such a genre; and his following in the Romantic period and in 19th-century hymnody most powerfully realized.

The three hymn-writers in this study are not only the greatest and most popularly compiled and used of all time—masters of their genre, they were so remarkably different, considering they were working in the same (and fairly new) genre: the departures and discontinuities are much more salient and significant than their similarities, militating against any arguments of a consecutive transition from one writer to the next—hence they can be seen to re-beget or re-conceive the genre for themselves, each in turn. Moreover, when examined in their poetic-historical contexts, it is noteworthy that Watts can be seen as an archetypal Neoclassicist (not unlike Pope and Prior), Wesley as a transitional pre-Romantic (not unlike Gray and Collins), and Cowper a thoroughgoing Romantic (not unlike Wordsworth and Coleridge). Most noteworthy is that *they antedate these poetic writers and their respective movements: their importance to mainstream or canonical literary history cannot be overestimated*. And in terms of the hymn's development in the 19th and 20th centuries, these three stand as beacons in the genre, if not individual species of the genre itself; and in their time and context, these three were, while paradoxically *out of tune* with the *status quo*, and radically different from each other, they were forging a new and everlasting genre, one born out of a veritable trinity of discord.

NOTES

¹Cited in *Samuel Johnson: Diaries, Prayers, and Annals* (New Haven, 1958), p. 79.

²Technically, the hymn was not legal in the Church England service throughout the eighteenth century. Since any change in liturgy could only take place by an Act of Parliament, and none took place with regard to hymns (the stichomythic volley of pamphlets of the “Controversie of Singing” notwithstanding) between 1550 and 1859, the situation remained static, legally. It was not until 1819, when Thomas Cotterill compiled *A Selection of Psalms and Hymns* for the use of his own parish at St. Paul’s in Sheffield, that hymns were to make some headway. Some parishioners, however, brought an action against him (*Holy & Ward vs. Cotterill*), and the appeal was made to the Diocesan Court of York for a decision by Archbishop Harcourt. He suggested in 1820 a new volume, each hymn of which was to be submitted for his inspection: *A Selection of Psalms and Hymns* appeared late in 1820, and was unofficially and unevenly used for 40 years until 1859, when *Hymns: Ancient and Modern* was officially sanctioned, and hymns were officially recognized as a part of Church worship.

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R.A.A.

Chapter One

“Controversie of Singing”: Historical Sketch of the English Hymn to 1707

This Chapter sketches the development of the English hymn from the Reformation to the time of Isaac Watts. It is neither a close historical analysis, nor does it encompass the innumerable complexities and compendious data that a thorough account would need to consider; what it aims to do is to outline the evolution of the hymn, to point out some of the reasons for and effects of their controversial nature, and to present an identifiable context for the writers under study in later chapters.

I German Origin and Genevan Opposition

The Reformation is a suitable time to look for the origin of the hymn, because although English hymns had been written for 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 to look at two major forces which gave shape to English attitudes toward hymnody: the German origin of the congregational hymn, and the opposition 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 or commission a copious vernacular hymnody, the latter concern being just as much a product of Luther's love of music as a perceived liturgical necessity. As early as 1523 he writes in the preface to *Formula Missae et Communionis pro Ecclesia Wittembergensis*: “I also wish as many of the songs as possible to be in vernacular, which the people should sing...”¹ 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”.² 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”.³ When his friend Speratus complied, Luther himself began composing hymns specifically designed for congregational singing.

The earliest hymn-book of the Reformation is published, therefore, in 1524 at Wittemberg. Luther's *Achtliederbuch* contained four hymns by

himself, and of the other four at least three were by Speratus.⁴ 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 into sturdy general terms, as are most of Luther's hymns. The *Enchiridion* follows in the same year, containing fourteen hymns by Luther along with his earlier four. In 1525 Luther's friend, the composer Ioanne Walthero, publishes 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".⁵ Many more hymn-books followed, the prefaces of which stress 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, the early German hymns seem to possess qualities of simplicity, chiseled 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 would be overshadowed by another highly influential force.

While Luther carried out his reform in Germany, a parallel reformation movement was taking place in Switzerland under Ulrich Zwingli, who, in his lectures on the New Testament in 1519, attacked the concepts of Purgatory, the Invocation of Saints, the Sacrifice of Mass, and other Roman Catholic cornerstones.⁶ As far as the church service was concerned, "Zwingli eliminated everything sensuous from worship. Music, vestments, incense, ritual gestures, and images—all were of no avail to man precisely because his faith, the only reality,"⁷ had nothing to do with the senses. Zwingli died in 1531, but his reforms were carried on by John Calvin, who agreed in principle with Zwingli's position on the denial of music in church; but when he visited Strasburg and heard the "splendid chorale," he became instantly convinced of the necessity of congregational song.⁸ 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".⁹ However, partly because of his reverence for Zwingli and partly because of his own belief in

the total depravity of humankind, 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 publishes 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 Clement Marot.¹⁰ After Marot’s death Calvin persuaded Theodore Beza to continue the work, until the entire *Psautier Huguenot* appeared in 1562, Calvin seems to have believed that to depart from this kind of musical worship was presumptuous;¹¹ his attitude toward metrical Psalms as aids to worship is probably best expressed in his preface to the Genevan edition of Marot’s *Fifty Psalms* on 10 June 1543: “Nous ne trouverons meilleures chansons ne plus propres pour ce faire, que les Psaulmes to David, lesquels le saint Esprit luy a dictez at faits”.¹² The French Psalter of 1562 was well received, and modern scholars 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...Psalters”.¹³ 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 Thomas Cranmer writes 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 euidently grounded upon the same; and that in suche a language and ordre, as is moste easy and plain for the understandynge, bothe of the readers and hearers”.¹⁴ He believed that worship should be the comprehensible act of the people and pertain to the people, as well as to the priest.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ What is more significant is that there are 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 adapta-

tions and translations of German hymns and Psalm-renderings¹⁷—Calvinist feeling ran so hard against it that King Henry VIII prohibited its sale.¹⁸ 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 therefore opposed the German model: while Germany sang hymns, England sang Psalms.

Reading the standard accounts of the history of the hymn, it becomes curious indeed 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 eclipse Lutheranism;¹⁹ but this 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.²⁰ Even Horton Davies, in his extensive *Worship and Theology in England*, 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..."²¹ While this is doubtless a valid reason it too seems to beg the question somewhat. In all likelihood there were several causes or conditions that could have contributed to England's choice. The first is quite simply that, owing to an intrinsic difference in poetic and musical sense between Germany and England, German hymns just did not have the same artistic appeal to the English sensibility as did the compelling French Psalms of Marot and Calvin, and the extremely popular and heralded English Psalms of Sternhold and Hopkins (1562)—discussed below. Moreover, Coverdale in 1531 had made the attempt to adapt and introduce German hymns into English, and to pattern his own after those of Luther, but with a sad result. The German language possesses, among other things, a phonic huskiness and comparatively pulsating cadence that no English translation can capture to advantage; and Coverdale's attempt reveals this. So as far as both artistic taste and comprehensible appeal are concerned, the metrical Psalms were the better choice for England. Another possible reason for England's choice could have been the condition of church music, which had fallen into such a decadent and confused state that the Council of Trent (1545-47) had wanted to exclude music altogether from the Roman Catholic service, one main problem being that choral singing often mixed unrelated themes and melodies in counterpoint.²² Again, the excellent music of the French Psalter and the simple, easily memorized words and engaging measures of the English one would presumably have made Psalms the safer choice. Another