

The Poetry of Charles Wesley

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Charles Wesley's poetry was only secondary in importance in his life; the great task of evangelism came first. But his output was so large and his standard so uniformly high that his verse deserves serious consideration; he is a poet worthy of greater interest and closer examination than he has yet been accorded. The body of verse on which this all too brief study is based is contained in John Wesley's *Large Hymn-book* of 1780 and succeeding Methodist hymn-books, and forms a representative selection of the best of Charles Wesley's vast output.

In literary circles the word "evangelical" is almost a term of abuse. Critics of Bunyan apologize for his quaint Biblical theology, and Wesley is virtually ignored. But all his worthwhile poetry springs directly from his great transforming experience of the redeeming grace of God, and cannot be understood apart from this experience. The turning-point in his life came on May 21st, 1738, when he "found peace with God and rejoiced in the hope of loving Christ", and out of this came a hymn,¹ "Christ the Friend of Sinners":

Where shall my wondering soul begin?
How shall I all to heaven aspire?
A slave redeem'd from death and sin,
A brand pluck'd from eternal fire;
How shall I equal triumphs raise,
Or sing my great Deliverer's praise!

The floodgates were opened, and for fifty years hymns on every aspect of the Christian life poured from Wesley's pen.

The notable characteristics of his verse may be grouped under two headings: first, those features of his poetry which spring from his character, and second, certain important aspects of his technical skill as a poet.

II

First, then, the poetry as it reflects the writer's personality. As is illustrated by the first stanza of the conversion hymn already quoted, the supreme characteristic of Wesley's verse from the moment he began to write anything worth-while, is an eager devotion to Christ, devotion which springs out of heartfelt gratitude for his redemption. Other prominent features are his intense awareness of his mission of evangelism, his childlike simplicity, the mystical apprehension of divine truth coupled with a hunger and thirst for closer communion with God, his delight in Christian fellowship, and, closely linked with this, his longing for heaven, where he will meet his Redeemer in company with the host of the redeemed.

Charles Wesley sings in typical exultation:

Jesus, the Name high over all,

In hell, or earth, or sky!
Angels and men before it fall,
And devils fear and fly.

Again and again this same note of adoration is heard in his hymns. The doctrine of justification by faith was to him no theological abstraction, but a vivid reality, for he had laid hold of eternal life by receiving for himself the pardon freely offered to all. All through his life he retained the joy and wonder expressed in the words:

And can it be that I shou'd gain
An interest in the Saviour's blood?
Died He for me, who caus'd His pain;
For me! who Him to death pursu'd?
Amazing love! how can it be,
That Thou, my God, shou'dst die for me?

and just a few days before his death he is so close to his Saviour that he cries out:²

Jesus! my only hope Thou art,
Strength of my failing flesh and heart;
O could I catch one smile from Thee,
And drop into eternity!

Wesley's Christian life was a blend of doctrine and personal experience; he proved the truth of the doctrine of justification by faith experimentally, and echoes the words of I John i. 20 in a way which shows his sharing of the apostolic certainty:³

We know, by faith we surely know,
The Son of God is come,
Is manifested here below,
And makes our hearts His home.

This combination of doctrine and experience prevents the hymns from-degenerating into mere mawkish self-analysis; the Lord Jesus Christ is always central in Wesley's thought. His awe and wonder at the greatness of the salvation brought by Christ is such that the hymns abound in the hyperbole of rejoicing, as here:

How shall I thank Thee for the grace
On me and all mankind bestow'd?
O that my every breath were praise!
O that my heart were fill'd with God!
My heart would then with love o'erflow,
And all my life Thy glory show.

Not content merely to delight in his own forgiveness, Charles Wesley longed to bring others to a knowledge of his Saviour; less than two months after his conversion he was preaching to the condemned felons at Newgate, and his zeal for the spread of the Gospel was to take him all over the country, until his health failed and he was forced into comparative retirement. A great deal of the poetry is a direct outcome of this evangelistic fervour, and the characteristic pleading note is evident in many of the hymns classified by John Wesley in the *Large Hymn-book* under the heading, "Exhorting and beseeching to return to God". The familiar "O for a thousand tongues" is one of these, and originally contained the striking stanza:

Awake from guilty nature's sleep,
And Christ shall give you light,⁴
Cast all your sins into the deep,
And wash the Aethiop white.

In another hymn he asks in loving exasperation:

Sinners, turn, why will ye die?
God, your Maker, asks you why?

and he always found his greatest delight in commending his Saviour to all men—“The mercy I feel, To others I shew”.

A hymn on the goodness of God concludes with a plea for power to spread the Gospel more widely:

O for a trumpet's-voice,
On all the world to call!
To bid their hearts rejoice
In Him who died for all!

This desire was such a vital part of Wesley's whole being that very many more hymns could be quoted which express it, but it is summed up well in the opening lines of a paraphrase of Psalm xlv:⁵

My heart is full of Christ, and longs
Its glorious matter to declare!

The early Methodists gloried in the simple Gospel, and Wesley's hymns reflect this joy in simplicity, despite the occasional allusions which betray his classical education. Dr. Flew says, “ He spoke of Christ in words which the meanest and lowest could understand,”⁶ and this profound simplicity is seen to advantage in the final verse of a hymn based upon the Aaronic blessing:

That all-comprizing peace bestow
On me, thro' grace forgiven;
The joy of holiness below,
And then the joys of heaven!

The same idea is expressed with the same profound simplicity in “Thou hidden source of calm repose”, in the lines:

To me with Thy dear name are given
Pardon, and holiness, and heaven;

and the whole hymn is interesting as a study of deceptively simple verse. Only a really good poet can so construct his lines that simple clarity is combined with philosophical profundity, and it is no insult to Wordsworth to say that there are strong affinities here between him and Charles Wesley.

That Wesley was no mere theological rhymester, producing vast quantities of jingles for the delectation of illiterate fanatics, is proved—if proof were needed—by the strong tinge of mysticism which is evident in his writings. He would have agreed with Watts that:

Where reason fails
With all her powers,
There faith prevails,
And love adores⁷

and out of this realization that faith is not contrary to but above and beyond reason (this in an age so concerned to prove the reasonableness of Christianity that it was almost explained away), out of this, came that great mystical poem, “Wrestling Jacob”. Wesley takes the story of Jacob’s wrestling at Peniel and allegorizes it into an account of his own struggle for saving faith. All his intensity of longing to come to grips with the spiritual reality of Christ is felt in the lines:

In vain Thou strugglest to get free,
I never will unloose my hold;
Art Thou the Man that died for me?
The secret of Thy love unfold:
Wrestling, I will not let Thee go,
Till I Thy name, Thy nature know.

There is a spirit of mystic adoration about some of the hymns, a lyrical quality which has invited comparison with love-poetry of the more usual kind. The interpretation of the Song of Solomon which sees in its amorous raptures a picture of the relation between Christ and His Church was valuable to Wesley as he sought to express his desire for more intimate fellowship with God, as can be seen in the hymn, “Thou Shepherd of Israel and mine,” based on a verse from the Song of Songs. This is the second stanza:

Ah! shew me that happiest place,
The place of Thy people’s abode,
Where saints in an ecstasy gaze,
And hang on a crucified God:
Thy love for a sinner declare,
Thy passion and death on the tree;
My spirit to Calvary bear,
To suffer and triumph with Thee.

The poet takes us with him into the holiest of all in a startlingly vivid way, and thereby performs his function of communication of experience by sharing.

Wesley’s work abounds with examples of this kind of love-poetry, a *genre* in which his success is all the more remarkable because of the pitfalls of banality and sickly lushness which await the unwary.

As one would expect, the *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper*, a special collection of 166 hymns published in 1745, show him at his best in this respect; these have been dealt with so comprehensively by Dr. Rattenbury in his excellent survey⁸ that a passing reference is all that is possible here—it is worth remarking on the simple tenderness of “Lamb of God, whose bleeding Love”, with its moving refrain:

O remember Calvary,
And bid us go in peace.

The corporate nature of the Eucharist would have served to reinforce the conviction of both the Wesleys expressed by John thus, “It is a blessed thing to have fellow travellers to the New Jerusalem . . . none can travel that road alone,”⁹ and Charles delighted to sing of Christian fellowship. This verse from a hymn “for Persons joined in Fellowship”, expresses the practical and personal aspect of brotherly love:

Help us to help each other, Lord,
Each other’s cross to bear,
Let each his friendly aid afford,
And feel his brother’s care.

Fellowship for him was not restricted, however, to the small circle of his fellow-Methodists; he felt himself to be at one with the universal Church of Christ:

For these, howe’er in flesh disjoin’d,
Where’er dispersed o’er earth abroad,
Unfeign’d unbounded love I find,
And constant as the life of God;
Fountain of life, from thence it sprung,
As pure, as even, and as strong.¹⁰

And he was conscious not only of union with the Church on earth but also with the triumphant Church in heaven. The idea recurs many times, but is perhaps most nobly expressed in the hymn, “Come, let us join our friends above”.¹¹ Here he makes effective allegorical use of the account in Joshua iii of the crossing of Jordan:

One family we dwell in Him,
One Church, above, beneath,
Though now divided by the stream,
The narrow stream of death:
One army of the living God,
To His command we bow;
Part of His host have crossed the flood,
And part are crossing now.

His “friends above” were never far from Wesley’s thoughts, but his longing was not morbid—he looked forward with joyful anticipation to joining them. One funeral hymn begins, typically, “*Rejoice* for a brother deceas’d,” and he was particularly attached to this stanza:

There all the ship’s company meet,
Who sail’d with their Saviour beneath:
With shouting each other they greet,
And triumph o’er trouble and death:
The voyage of life’s at an end,
The mortal affliction is past;
The age that in heaven they spend,
For ever and ever shall last.

Poetic power and personal vision transform a hackneyed conception into a vivid and meaningful experience. The first Methodists, poor and persecuted, were given, through the Scriptures and through the hymns they sang, happy glimpses of eternity. Earth tremors which shook London in March 1750 prompted Charles Wesley to produce a little book of eighteen hymns—not that he ever needed much encouragement—and in that from which this stanza is taken, he contrasts the insecurity of earthly dwellings with the permanence of heaven, rising to great poetic heights as he does so, and also indulging in an unwonted spate of latinisms. Every line is packed with meaning, and charged with emotion:

Those amaranthine bowers,¹²
(Unalienably ours),
Bloom, our infinite reward—
Rise, our permanent abode,
From the founded world prepar'd,
Purchas'd by the blood of God!

III

In considering Charles Wesley's technical skill we shall see in his verse a use of dramatic situations, great command of language, a planned and orderly presentation, a frequent employment of allusion, and a remarkable metrical facility.

He has the genuine poet's capacity for visualization; he can translate difficult abstract ideas into easily grasped concrete images, as in the superb couplet:

My struggling soul in sin remains,
Indignant as a king in chains;

and he is adept at the use of proper names for the evocation of associations, as in the lines:

None is like Jeshurun's God!
So great, so strong, so high!

His dramatic sense enables him to see theological statements and spiritual states as scenes or tableaux, and he shows remarkable skill in conveying impressions of sight and sound, as here:

Arm of the Lord, awake, awake,
Thine own immortal strength put on!
With terror cloth'd, hell's kingdom shake,
And cast Thy foes with fury down!

or here :

We have thro' fire and water gone;
But saw Thee in the floods appear;
But felt Thee present in the flame,
And shouted our Deliverer's Name.

When stronger souls their faith forsook,
And lulled in worldly, hellish peace,
Leap'd desperate from their Guardian-rock,
And headlong plung'd in sin's abyss. . . .

the whole hymn (“Jesu, to thee our hearts we lift”) is magnificent, and worth quoting in full.

Wesley's command of language is such that he almost always selects just the right word for the occasion, and his power of compression is truly amazing. Take this opening stanza, where the paradox of the atonement is thrust home in a way which compels attention:

O Love divine! what hast thou done!
The' immortal God hath died for me!
The Father's co-eternal Son
Bore all my sins upon the tree:
The' immortal God for me hath died!
My Lord, my Love is crucify'd.

This hymn also gives us an example of the way in which Wesley constructed his poems; the beginning of the third stanza shows a favourite way of verbal linkage by means of repetition. The second stanza ends—as do all four—with the line, “My Lord, my Love is crucify'd”. (This use of a meaningful refrain, seen also, for instance, in “Lamb of God, whose bleeding Love”, is in itself a very valuable way of binding a hymn together.) The first line of the third stanza repeats the idea, adding a personal application: “Is crucify'd for me and you”.

The most usual scheme in the construction of a Charles Wesley hymn is that of statement and development, as in the familiar “Love divine, all loves excelling”, where the first verse states the theme, which is then worked out in greater detail in the remaining three.¹³ Many of the hymns are remarkable for the way in which the planned development reaches a suitably strong and telling conclusion. There are countless examples of this—take the ending of the poem, “Free Grace,” better known as “And can it be”:

Bold I approach the' eternal throne,
And claim the crown thro' Christ my own.

As so often, we find that the poet has led us into heaven itself.

The strongly scriptural quality of Wesley's verse has often been remarked upon, and the hymns are certainly packed with Biblical thought. Not that he merely shakes a pepper-pot full of texts over his poetry; he was as determined as his brother to be *homo unius libri*,¹⁴ and his mind was soaked in Scripture. Just as his doctrine was Biblical, so also are the manifold allusions he employs. They endow his poetry with richness of implication, yet at the same time it keeps its clarity for those who know their Bibles. Almost every hymn contains numerous scriptural allusions; “O Thou, who camest from above” has been cited as an example of this practice, but there are many more which could with equal justice have been mentioned, such as the hymn for a restored backslider entitled “After a Recovery”. This is the fourth stanza:

To the cross, Thine altar, bind
Me with the cords of love;
Freedom let me never find

From my dear Lord to move:
That I never, never more
May with my much-lov'd Master part,
To the posts of mercy's door,
O nail my willing heart!

The first and second lines of the stanza refer to Psalm cxviii. 27 and Hosea xi. 4; in lines 3 to 8 there is a skilful use of the Mosaic legislation regarding slaves (Exodus xxi. 5 and 6, Deuteronomy xv. 16 and 17), in which Wesley's genius for bold adaptation asserts itself, and in line 6 there is an echo of Luke vii. 47.

His use of the third chapter of the Book of Revelation gives us examples of the effect he achieves through Biblical allusion. Here is scorn:

In soft Laodicean ease
We sleep our useless lives away.

And here, compassion:

He now stands knocking at the door
Of every sinner's heart:
The worst need keep Him out now more,
Or force Him to depart.

Wesley's remarkable metrical facility demands a whole book to be properly surveyed, not a fraction of a short article. I know of no other poet who has used—and used successfully—such a wide variety of metres, and this is all the more remarkable considering the dominance of the heroic couplet in eighteenth century poetry in general. That he could use the couplet is shown by *An Elegy on the Death of Robert Jones, Esq.*,¹⁵ and *Epistles* to his brother and to Whitefield.¹⁶ This, in the *Epistle* to John Wesley, is strongly reminiscent of Pope, with its combination of smooth movement and blistering invective:

As justly might our christen'd heathens claim,
Thieves, drunkards, whoremongers, the sacred name;
Or rabble-rout succeed in their endeavour,
With *High Church and Sacheverel* for ever!

He was, however, particularly attached to trochaic and anapaestic forms; indeed, his use of the latter must be unparalleled, for he uses it with greater frequency and fluency than any other writer of English verse. Seven-syllable trochaic lines like the following are very common in Wesley:

Jesus is our common Lord,
He our loving Saviour is,

but he has an especial liking for the leaping exultation of anapaestic rhythm, the movement of which chimes in so well with the joy of those who have been brought out of darkness into the marvellous light of Christ. Words and metre unite in rejoicing in this hymn for the Kingswood colliers, men whom the power of the Gospel had raised from appalling degradation:

Glory to God, whose sovereign grace
Hath animated senseless stones;
Call'd us to stand before His face:
And rais'd us into Abraham's sons.

The people that in darkness lay,
In sin and error's deadly shade,
Have seen a glorious gospel-day,
In Jesu's lovely face display'd.

And so through four verses of praise, and one which reminds the first singers of the bad old days when they “lewdly sang the drunkard's songs”, to the crescendo of the close:

But, O the power of grace divine!
In hymns we now our voices raise!
Loudly in strange Hosannas join,
And blasphemies are turn'd to praise!

IV

This eulogy may tempt us to ask if this man was then the perfect poet, free from all prosodic error and always keyed to just the right emotional pitch—has he no weaknesses, no merely mortal failings? Of course he has his blemishes, but just as in considering the poetry of Tennyson one would not overstress his poetical misdeeds, so with Wesley there is little point in dwelling on his failings—even though he has nothing to equal the complete stupidity of “Riflemen Form” or parts of “Enoch Arden”. His occasional hymns are poor, stilted things, lacking the passion and energy of his more deeply felt hymns; he repeats favourite phrases far too often, and he often does not rise above the level of a competent mediocrity. But we never judge a poet by his worst, but by his best work, and Wesley's best is very good indeed—and there is a great deal of it. Moreover, he is noticeably free from the marks of downright bad verse—bathos, bombast, cloying sentimentality, pomposity. He has certainly not received his due as a poet, and a careful study of his poetry from a critical standpoint is badly needed, for it possesses real intrinsic worth for all who are prepared to come to it with minds which are, as far as possible, free from prejudice. John Wesley truly says, in his preface to the *Large Hymn-book*, “Here are . . . both the purity, the strength and the elegance of the English language; and, at the same time, the utmost simplicity and plainness, suited to every capacity”.

The greatest thing, however, about the poetry of Charles Wesley is not the poetry itself, but its sole aim and object. From a full heart he sings:

My heart is full of Christ, and longs
Its glorious matter to declare!

and it is right to conclude as his brother concludes the Preface, “When Poetry thus keeps its place, as the handmaid of Piety, it shall attain not a poor perishable wreath, but a Crown that fadeth not away”.

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Endnotes:

- 1) Unless otherwise stated, quotations are taken from the 1797 Edition of the *Large Hymn-book*, 1800 impression.
- 2) Dictated by Charles Wesley to his wife on his deathbed; they were the last lines he ever composed. (No. 47 of the Verses in *The Methodist Hymn-book* (1933), No. 88.
- 3) *The Methodist Hymn-book* (1933), No. 88.
- 4) The only one of Charles Wesley's sermons which is included in the Standard Sermons is his University Sermon on Ephesians v. 14, "Awake, thou that sleepest," preached on April 4th, 1742.
- 5) No. 270 in *The Methodist Hymn-book* (1933).
- 6) R. Newton Flew, *The Hymns of Charles Wesley: A Study of Their Structure*. London, 1953. Page 69.
- 7) Isaac Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, Book III, No. 38.
- 8) J. Ernest Rattenbury, *The Eucharistic Hymns of John and Charles Wesley* London, 1948. (See the review of this book by the Rev. Frank Colquhoun in *The Churchman* for June 1949.)
- 9) *Letters*, Vol. viii, p. 158.
- 10) G. Osborn (Editor), *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, London, 1868-72. Vol. vi, p. 72. This poem was first published in 1755 as an appendix to John Wesley's sermon on "Catholic Spirit"—No. xxxiv in the 1944 edition of *Forty-four Sermons*.
- 11) No. 824 in *The Methodist Hymn-book* (1933).
- 12) John Wesley's note on this in the *Large Hymn-book* reads: "AMARANTHINE, i.e. everlasting; ever-blooming; not subject to decay. See *Paradise Lost*, III. L. 352."
- 13) Dr. Flew discusses this most helpfully in *The Hymns of Charles Wesley*, pp. 52-55.
- 14) See John Wesley's Preface to the First Series of his *Sermons*, where he writes, "At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be *homo unius libri*." (Yet this did not prevent him and his brother from making good use of their classical learning.)
- 15) *Poetical Works*, iii. 107.
- 16) *Poetical Works*, vi. 53 and 65.