

Book Review

Richard Arnold, *Trinity of Discord. The Hymnal and Poetic Innovations of Isaac Watts, Charles Wesley, and William Cowper*. New York: Peter Lang, 2012. xii + 162 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4331-1904-0

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Professor Arnold is to be commended on his choice of subject. It is good to find critical attention being given to the hymn genre, and the three writers who are studied here are well worth serious consideration. Watts was the primary hymn writer of what Donald Davie called 'Old Dissent', the culture that sprang from the great fissure in the religion of English Protestants in the aftermath of the 'Great Ejectment' of 1662. It was closely associated with the Independent churches, of which Watts was a committed member, as his father had been before him: in the words of Samuel Johnson, 'he declared his resolution of taking his lot with the dissenters.' Since his father had been imprisoned for his beliefs, the young Isaac could surely do no other. But there were also the Baptists, to whom Professor Arnold gives brief attention, with reference to the 'Controversie of Singing' between Benjamin Keach (in favour) and Isaac Marlow (against). Following Watts was Charles Wesley, who was animated by an entirely different spirit. He was a determined adherent to the Church of England, and bitterly opposed his brother's course of action in 1784 that led to the formation of a separate church, as Gareth Lloyd has recently pointed out in *Charles Wesley and the Struggle for Methodist Identity*. Professor Arnold describes Wesley's emphasis as being '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', which is true, although it needs qualification: again and again in the hymns of the 1740s, Wesley refers to Christ as 'the sinner's friend', or 'the feeble sinner's friend'. Since Wesley regarded himself as a sinner, this inevitably brought him into a 'face-to-face relationship', but it was one that extended to all mankind, 'harlots, and publicans, and thieves', as the 'Conversion hymn' puts it: or, in the words of a slightly later hymn, an anti-Calvinist one, 'For all, for all, the Saviour died.'

And what of Cowper? He belongs to the Church of England also, but to a particular part of it, a self-consciously different membership which was deeply serious (meaning 'serious in the matter of religion') and which abhorred nothing more than 'a professor', indicating someone who 'professed' a religion without being sincere. For a long time I have relished Cowper's lines, from 'A living and a dead faith' in *Olney Hymns*:

The Lord receives his highest praise
From humble minds and hearts sincere;
While all the loud professor says
Offends the righteous Judge's ear.

Newton and Cowper, and others, were the readers of the *Gospel Magazine*, edited at one time by Augustus Montague Toplady, author of 'Rock of Ages, cleft for me'. Often these Evangelicals knew one another, or were related, as Cowper was to his cousin Martin Madan, chaplain to the Lock Hospital for fallen women and editor of *A Collection of Psalms and Hymns* (1860). Madan knew others, such as John Berridge and Thomas Haweis; there was a network of them, who knew where their sympathisers were to be found. Adherents moved in order to 'sit under' a suitable minister of the gospel, as Cowper and Mary Unwin did to Olney. Cowper's hymns were a part of this culture, just as Watts's depended on Old Dissent and Wesley's on the urgency of the early Methodist movement, still within the Church of England but determined to reach out to the poor and needy and unchurched.

Professor Arnold's unusual title is explained in the Preface. He argues that the three writers are 'so remarkably different, considering they were working in the same (and fairly new) genre: the departures and discontinuities are much more salient than their similarities' (p. ix). This seems to imply that they are somehow in discord with one another, which I think is hardly the case: they all preached the wonder of divine providence in the redemption of the world through Jesus Christ. Another possible interpretation of 'Trinity of Discord' is that the three were 'in discord' with the prevailing condemnation of hymn singing in the Church of England in the eighteenth century (and after: Isaac Williams, who wrote 'Be Thou my guardian and my guide', published in 1842, deliberately made his translations from Latin unmetrical, so that they could not be sung). Whichever interpretation of 'discord' is used, Professor Arnold has a sentence in the last paragraph of his Preface that is partly in italics for emphasis: 'Most noteworthy is that they antedate those poetic writers and their respective movements [Neo-classicism, pre-Romanticism, Romanticism]; their importance to mainstream or canonical literary history cannot be overestimated.'

Amen to that. What is strange, however, is that in this book there seems to be little or no reference to the many recent studies in hymnology that have considered the English hymn, and particularly the eighteenth-century hymn, as part of the canon, either explicitly or implicitly. There is no reference to the work of Erik Routley, Donald Davie, Lionel Adey and others. It is hard to be sure that Professor Arnold has not used them, because there is no bibliography of secondary sources (and no index, either). But the books that are featured in the notes to each chapter belong to the prehistory of hymnological criticism: Louis F. Benson's *The English Hymn* of 1915, F.J. Gillman's *The Evolution of the English Hymn* of 1927, W.T. Whitley's *Congregational Hymn-Singing* of 1933, C.S. Phillips's *Hymnody Past and Present* of 1937. These are all fine books, but the study of hymns has moved on since then: in recent compendiums or 'companions' (such as Cronin, Chapman and Harrison's *A Companion to Victorian Poetry* of 2002) the hymn has taken its place as part of 'canonical literary history' alongside the lyric, the dramatic monologue, and other genres. Meanwhile the hymns and psalms of Watts have been carefully studied by Sharon Achinstein and others; there has been a great deal of Charles Wesley activity, led by S.T. Kimbrough Jr. and Carlton R. Young; Cowper has been re-assessed, and his work revitalized, by Vincent Newey and Bill Hutchings; while Patricia Meyer Spacks has written about Cowper's psychological insight in *The Poetry of Vision*.

It is the section on Cowper that suffers most from this. It is impossible, surely, to write about him without engaging with this critical work. Even so, Professor Arnold's account needs to be considered carefully. His narrative is a familiar one: that the fragile Cowper was taken in hand by the robust Newton, and made to perform tasks that were uncongenial, such as leading prayers, visiting the sick – and writing hymns. There is some external evidence for this, especially the first two. Professor Arnold quotes from a letter of 1768 in which Cowper confesses his agitation at having to lead prayers; and Newton's diaries show that he took Cowper with him on visits to the sick and on 'preaching bouts', both of which Professor Arnold rightly describes as 'unnerving events'.

The idea that the writing of hymns also contributed to his breakdown comes from a letter of Lady Hesketh written to William Hayley, Cowper's biographer. This is dramatic stuff: the task 'heated his Brain, Sunk his Spirits and brought on that dreadful depression – only imagine a man of his Genius walking for hours by himself in that great rambling Church at Olney, composing those Hymns!' The letter claims to include a recollection of the poet himself: 'He has told me that the idea never quitted him night or day, but kept him in a constant fever; add to that when he left the Church, it was to attend their prayer meetings, and all the enthusiastic conversation which these meetings were sure to occasion.' Here the phrasing suggests an anti-Evangelical mind, suspicious of enthusiasm (which, we should

remember, was a term of opprobrium in the eighteenth century) and constructing a scenario to fit the portrait of a mind disturbed by what Hogarth, in an anti-Methodist engraving of 1762, called ‘credulity, superstition and fanaticism’. Even Professor Arnold notices what he calls ‘the evident coloring in this account’, before going on to assert that ‘it is not without some truth.’

We have heard this before, from Lord David Cecil in *The Stricken Deer*: ‘Cowper dutifully carried out his part of the bleak task’ of writing his share of the hymns. The portrayal of a masterful Newton yoked to a timid Cowper, a bully and his victim, is another deduction from Lady Hesketh’s letter: ‘Newton’s unguarded proposal of composing Hymns from ev’ry Text of Scripture they Cou’d collect, did infinite injury to our friend!’ Or, as Professor Arnold writes: ‘Newton’s proposal seems to have been that they were to write hymns on every text that they could from the Bible.’ The italics are Professor Arnold’s: it is not clear exactly what is meant by them, except to emphasise an already odd idea: ‘every text that they could’ presumably means all the texts that they felt able to address in verse; and the ‘every’ may mean that they were to go on and on and on. The idea sounds impossible, although Newton may have had in mind Charles Wesley’s astonishing book of 1762, *Short Hymns on Select Passages of the Holy Scriptures*, which contains 1478 versifications of Old Testament texts and 870 of New Testament ones. Many of these were one-verse paraphrases, but there are some magnificent hymns among them, including ‘A charge to keep I have’, ‘O Thou who camest from above’, and ‘Thou shepherd of Israel and mine’. It was a tour-de-force of hymn writing, the work of a man of immense energy and poetic accomplishment, clearly beyond the capabilities of a busy incumbent and one of his more retiring parishioners.

Professor Arnold’s portrayal of the Newton-Cowper collaboration in *Olney Hymns* leads him to interpret individual hymns, again and again, as having a conventional evangelical surface that – when examined more closely – turns out to reveal a disturbed inner core. Frequently a hymn is described as presenting itself as conventional evangelical piety, at which point the reader learns to wait for Professor Arnold’s inevitable ‘But...’. He recognises that not all the hymns fall into this pattern; but his determination to see trouble almost everywhere is found in his response to the tender and lovely ‘Hark, my soul! it is the Lord’. He admits, very sensibly, that it does not really fit his argument; but he gets round the problem by suggesting that the 7.7.7.7. metre (described as ‘the lockstep iambic lilt that is also common to the “for children” genre’) was employed as an evasion of the problems that a mature spirituality brings: ‘Perhaps Cowper was retreating into this measure as a “safe” form through which he could transpose himself back to his own childhood of relatively carefree spirituality.’ Such an argument suggests that almost everything is being shaped to fit a pattern. There is support for this view from other critics, and it cannot be proved to be wrong: except, perhaps, to point out in this case that Charles Wesley used the same metre in the 1739 *Hymns and Sacred Poems* for some very serious hymns on the great festivals, such as Christmas (‘Hark! how all the welkin rings’ – now ‘Hark! the herald angels sing’), Easter (‘Christ the Lord is risen today’) and Ascension-tide (‘Hail the day that sees him rise’).

It may well be that Cowper was pushed by Newton into writing conventional hymns that tried to conceal his unhappiness and the fear of damnation that later caused him to write ‘Hatred and vengeance, my eternal portion’ and ‘The Castaway’; in which case Professor Arnold is right. But let us propose an alternative scenario. We might see Newton and Cowper not in that ‘great rambling Church’ of Lady Hesketh’s letter but in the pretty summer house in the garden at Olney, the Minister of the Gospel (as Evangelical ministers liked to describe themselves) encouraging the uncertain and tentative member of his flock, the two men exchanging manuscripts with joy and delight, and even wonder. In this reconstruction, we might find Cowper’s description of his ‘holy contemplation’ a moment of deeply-felt content,

when, for a brief period of his life, he was able to use his God-given poetic talent to please his Saviour, his pastor, his friends, and himself:

In holy contemplation,
We sweetly then pursue
The theme of God's salvation,
And find it ever new...

The title of this hymn is 'Joy and Peace in believing', and its gentle assurance is one of the moments in the fluctuating progress of the believer's pilgrimage, a moment of sunshine:

When comforts are declining,
He grants the soul again
A season of clear shining
To cheer it after rain.

This is the imagery of a gentle country walker: it's turned out fine, after all. At this point we might turn to Patricia Meyer Spacks on the hymns: 'their strength derives almost entirely from the quality of their psychological insight' (The Poetry of Vision, p. 165). She argues that they are 'rarely and incompletely successful', a judgement with which I disagree, but it is the concentration on psychological insight that is useful. Cowper's hymns are sensitively, scrupulously, magnificently honest about the spiritual life. When he writes 'The Contrite Heart', a hymn that Professor Arnold naturally sees as full of anxiety, Cowper is (as I have suggested elsewhere), writing one of the finest confessional hymns, one that does not end up sounding pleased with itself. It is full of what Spacks (and today's psychotherapists) would call 'insight'. He describes his lack of love towards God, his weak desires, his feeble worship; above all, he is not sure how genuine his confession is. The penitential uncertainty is described in the final verse:

Oh make this heart rejoice, or ache;
Decide this doubt for me;
And if it be not broken, break,
And heal it, if it be.

Is my heart a broken and contrite one, or not? This is the prayer (from Psalm 51:17) of a humble sinner, who has the grace to acknowledge the confusion of his mind, and the shortcomings of his inner self. The Christian life was not an easy one for him (it should not be for anyone for that matter), and the hymns reflect that; but it could be argued that during those years in the garden at Olney Cowper saw himself clearly and still found a joy and peace in believing.

Professor Arnold's treatment of 'God moves in a mysterious way' is a case in point. Like others before him, such as Erik Routley, he sees this as a hymn that foreshadows Cowper's breakdown in 1773: 'On the surface it seems a typical Evangelical hymn filled with awe and hope and belief in God, but underneath it reveals Cowper's escalating mental unrest and spiritual disintegration.' In response one can only invoke the phrase 'on the surface'. What the text actually says is that God's ways are 'mysterious', beyond human comprehension, and that if we are afraid we should take courage ('Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take') and trust in God ('But trust him for his Grace'). It is possible to undermine this. But maybe we should take Cowper at his word, as thousands of congregations and individual believers have done ever since. Cowper, 'on the surface', speaks to them of an existential uncertainty, assuaged by an ultimate comfort: 'God is his own interpreter,/ And he will make it plain.'

So perhaps we should read Cowper's hymns as meaning what they say. And we could see Newton as a pastor with a deep understanding of human nature, derived in part from the remarkable experiences of his early life. During his time at Olney he understood Cowper, and loved him, loved too the hours in the summer house when they wrote hymns together. He was well equipped to understand exactly what Cowper was getting at: the consolations of religion, even to a nervous and unworthy subject like himself. He was also a hymn writer whose work is unlike that of any other, in its probing honesty and spiritual sensitivity. I think that Newton recognized that, and rejoiced in it: as we should.