

Lyric Sincerity: Cowper and the Sapphic Hymn

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Introduction

This essay offers a reading of Cowper's Sapphic ode 'Hatred and Vengeance' (1774), placing it within two conjoined poetic traditions – that of hymnody and that of the eighteenth-century lyric. I wish to argue that Cowper's use of the Sapphic provides a peculiar insight into the contested genre of lyric in the period, particularly in relation to the recovery of a voice of sincerity and authenticity in lyric poetry. Comparisons between Cowper's neoclassic lyrics and his hymnody shed light on the ways in which he was able to use religious sincerity to override the characteristic impersonality or artificiality which contemporary commentators found in the secular lyric. The exploitation of the rare and metrically-intricate Sapphic hymn allowed Cowper to obtain a privileged position of poetic seriousness, and functioned as a solution to a crisis of sincerity and of poetic authority which had arisen at the centre of the lyric genre.

Cowper's hymnody and the trouble with lyric

Given his reputation as the poet of *The Task*, it is worth reminding ourselves that the most widely read of Cowper's works today is the short hymn 'Walking with God', written in December 1767 and published over a decade later in the joint collection *Olney Hymns*:

Oh for a closer Walk with God,
A calm and heav'nly Frame,
A Light to shine upon the Road
That leads me to the Lamb!
Where is the Blessedness I knew
When first I saw the Lord?
Where is the Soul-refreshing View
Of Jesus in his Word?¹

Critical interest in this hymn can be traced to an autobiographical snippet about the circumstances of its composition, included in a letter from Cowper to his aunt Judith Madan:

I began to compose them [these lines] Yesterday Morning before Daybreak, but fell asleep at the End of the two first Lines, when I awaked again the third and fourth were whisper'd to my Heart in a way which I have often experienced.²

As Richard Arnold (amongst others) has commented, it is strange given this highly personal depiction of supernatural inspiration to find the hymn amongst the Olney collection's Biblical renderings, under the heading of Genesis V, 24: 'Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him'.³ Although John Newton, collaborator and eventual editor of the *Olney Hymns*, made the decision to position the poem in Book One ('On Select Passages of Scripture'), its central image of the 'walk with God' is not connected to Enoch, but instead serves as the starting-point for a tangential reverie on Cowper's own struggle to revive the intimacy which he felt at his conversion. It communicates a commendable desire for communion and grace, but it also allows its subjectivity – the worrying, petitioning and pleading of the persona – to overwhelm any potential didactic or exemplary purpose. Whether despite or because of this introspective focus, 'Walking with God' has found enormous popularity and success in congregational use. The poem is very clearly in the evangelical mould, reflecting the experiential 'heart religion' which swept through the British Isles in the mid-century. Yet the fact that its characteristic effect depends upon its inwardness and its attitude of subjective confessional sincerity is troubling to our wider sense of the hymn as a fixed literary genre. How is it that the success of a lyric designed to be sung

by multiple voices is dependent on its avoidance of a shareable, or exemplary, or scripturally-focused message?

The received literary-critical account presumes that the hymn form aims to communicate not only the authentic or sincere individual experience of the Christian poet/singer, as ‘Walking with God’ clearly does, but also an applicable communal version of that experience which can be sung with the compliance of the congregation. Indeed, the marginalisation of the hymn in twentieth-century literary criticism has relied on these presumed qualities: the avoidance of complex or ambiguous language, the reliance on a musical setting (and thus on a strictly metrical, rhythmic and rhyming schema) which restricts rather than facilitates poetic expression, and submersion of the individual’s subjective voice within that of the congregation. By this account ‘Walking with God’, with its unabashedly subjective focus, ought to stand as an exception to prove the rule.

Rather than using the best of Cowper’s hymnody to reveal the poetic expression of the subjective self within a congregational medium, I instead wish to draw a comparison between the qualities of the hymn which have led to its classification as a para-literary genre, and the defining qualities of eighteenth-century lyric poetry as a larger whole. For if a hymn like ‘Walking with God’ is worryingly poised between personal authenticity and congregational approval, between its formal poetic tradition and its expression of sincere individual experience, then so too is the eighteenth-century lyric. Moreover, the instability of the lyric as an expression of sincere subjectivity is both epitomised and effectively resolved in the lyric sub-genre of the hymn.

Neoclassic lyricism and sincerity

Early eighteenth-century neoclassic lyric poems – frequently compared to gemstones, well-proportioned rooms and intricately worked boxes – are, in the influential words of Catharine Walsh Peltz, ‘exercises in ingenuity rather than expressions of actuality’, failing or rather never attempting to achieve a serious or affective impact on the reader.⁴ Peltz’s unapologetic assertion of the ‘unlyric’ qualities which make up the eighteenth century’s predominant poetic mode is based on the observation that neoclassic writing circumvents authorial subjectivity in favour of artifice, charm and wit. Her reading of the neoclassic lyric can be set against our conception of, for example, the sonnet sequences of Sidney and Spenser, the metaphysical lyricism of Donne and Marvell, and the Romantic lyric of the later eighteenth century.

Both the impulse to a well-wrought but impersonal neoclassic style and the awareness of the limitations of poetic discourse as a method for personal expression might be said to feed into Cowper’s personal inheritance of the lyric mode. His early writings strike a careful balance between smartly cosmetic witticisms and a more sober despondency about the possibility of sincere communication, especially in relation to frustrated love. The series of love lyrics written from 1748 to around 1755 are charming if predictable presentations of a tentative courtship of his cousin Theadora (‘Delia’, in his poems), apparently arising from real situations but couched very much in the conventional language of the courtly love lyric. We are pressed, however, to consider Cowper’s depth of feeling when we move from the coquetry and teasing *memento mori* of a poem like ‘Delia, th’Unkindest Girl on Earth’ to the more touching ‘Hope, like the Short-Lived Ray that Gleams a While’. The latter poem likely relates to the 1755 disintegration of Cowper’s relationship with Theadora, which resulted in their permanent separation:

Hope, like the short-lived ray that gleams awhile
Through wintry skies upon the frozen waste,
Cheers e’en the face of misery to a smile;

But soon the momentary pleasure's past!
How oft, my Delia! since our last farewell,
(Years that have roll'd since that distressful hour,)
Grieved I have said, when most our hopes prevail,
Our promised happiness is least secure.⁵

The lyric exposes hope as a transitory illusion serving only to deepen despair. That Cowper preserves both the stanzaic lyric form and the Delia figure from his earlier more conventional poems only adds to the poignancy of the reversed situation he now describes. The usual trope of lovesick suitor and condescending mistress is specifically inverted in stanza six, where the poet imagines that he would happily exchange his present state – knowing Delia to be faithful, but unreachable – with that of the spurned lover. The final stanza figures death as an escape from the torment of hope, which ‘subsists but to prolong my pain’:

Oh then! kind heaven, be this my latest breath;
Here end my life, or make it worth my care;
Absence from whom we love is worse than death,
And frustrate hope severer than despair.⁶

What is significant about ‘Hope, like the Short-Lived Ray’ is that it shows Cowper using the lyric not as a polite mask of his true feeling, but as a facilitating set of generic conventions for describing genuine anxiety and pain through an expressive first-person voice. Yet the Delia lyrics, ‘Hope, like the Short-Lived Ray’ included, never quite seem to achieve a full commitment to the serious portrayal of subjective experience, precisely because of the superficiality, the conventionality – the ‘polite smirk’, as F.R. Leavis terms it – of the neoclassic form by which they are conveyed.⁷

I wish to suggest that the hymn offered a solution to this generic instability through the intense seriousness and sincerity of its religious purpose. The difficulties inherent in the hymn, especially the pitching of personal subjectivity against tradition and convention, are those same obstacles which frustrate Cowper’s attempts to put the lyric to work as a medium for sincerity. Yet to posit a work of hymnody as substantial and serious its author must merely hold onto the religious import within – the theological content which supersedes the inherited cosmetic conventions of the verse and can overcome even the clumsiness of the poet’s diction. More than this, the reader’s confident assumption of the hymnist’s religious intentions validates the hymn as an expression of authorial sincerity. The hymn is thus sincere by its very nature, and therefore successful in its role as a transmitter of *sincerity*, although it may be artistically or theologically flawed. Whilst the lyric ‘I’ remains unsettling, unstable, and artificial, the authenticity of the hymnic voice is never in question. This circular self-validation offers a seeming escape both from the knowing insincerity of the neoclassic lyric, and from the fruitless reach towards subjective authenticity which we find present in the early modern love lyric and revived in the Romantic lyric.

Cowper’s Sapphics

In 1774, Cowper composed two poems which explore habitual themes of loss, bereavement and abandonment. The first, a Latin lyric (‘Heu Quam Remotus Vescor Ab Omnibus’), features its speaker losing himself in the stupefying waters of the Styx, lending a classical context to Cowper’s customary evocation of drowning as self-obliteration. The second is a lyric written at the height of mental distress:

Hatred and vengeance, my eternal portion,
Scarce can endure delay of execution:—
Wait, with impatient readiness, to seize my
Soul in a moment.

Damn'd below Judas; more abhorr'd than he was,
Who, for a few pence, sold his holy master.
Twice betray'd, Jesus me, the last delinquent,
Deems the profanest.

Man disavows, and Deity disowns me.
Hell might afford my miseries a shelter;
Therefore hell keeps her everhungry mouths all
Bolted against me.

Hard lot! Encompass'd with a thousand dangers,
Weary, faint, trembling with a thousand terrors,
Fall'n, and if vanquish'd, to receive a sentence
Worse than Abiram's:

Him, the vindictive rod of angry justice
Sent, quick and howling, to the centre headlong;
I, fed with judgments, in a fleshly tomb, am
Buried above ground.⁸

For Richard Arnold, these 'Lines Written in a Period of Insanity' are 'neither hymnal nor poetic': 'a grim epitaph for his hymnody' which 'mark[s] the end of Cowper's hymn-writing, the end of his religious faith'.⁹ Their intensity and their strangeness – an embodiment of the 'cascading interiority' which drives Cowper's perverted soteriological vision – have made 'Hatred and vengeance' one of Cowper's best-known works.¹⁰ But, as Arnold recognises, the work is uncomfortably *unlyric* in the very simplest sense of that word: in its total unsuitability for singing or even speaking. The syntax and punctuation seem almost to work against the metre, and the shorter line leaves each stanza unfulfilled, and the reader struggling to maintain the poem's rhythm.

But then, this metrical difficulty is not extrinsic to the form, but is one aspect of the Sapphic which exists in its permutations from Greek and Latin, through into the medieval and modern English lyric. Cowper's use of the Sapphic is a conscious choice of a form which he would first have encountered in Horace, and later admired in Pope and Cowley. Although examples of Sapphic poetry were relatively rare, there was a buoyant critical interest in the form. In 1711 Joseph Addison had devoted two papers of *The Spectator* to Sappho and her writing. His valuation of the Sapphic is based firstly on the 'natural' expression of feeling shown in the works, and secondly on the prosodic reflection of the emotional agitation of the speaker:

Among the mutilated Poets of Antiquity, there is none whose Fragments are so beautiful as those of *Sappho*. They give us a Taste of her way of Writing, which is perfectly conformable with that extraordinary Character we find of her, in the Remarks of those great Criticks who were conversant with her Works when they were entire. One may see, by what is left of them, that she followed Nature in all her Thoughts, without descending to those little Points, Conceits and Turns of Wit with which many of our Modern Lyricks are so miserably infected. Her Soul seems to have been made up of Love and Poetry: She felt the Passion in all its Warmth, and described it in all its Symptoms.¹¹

In 'Spectator 229' he returns to the same subject, stressing again that the Sapphic allows for a remarkably 'natural' expression of sentiment, even where it may risk vulgarity:

[...] this Description of Love in *Sappho* is an exact Copy of Nature, and [...] all the Circumstances, which follow one another in such an hurry of Sentiments, notwithstanding they appear repugnant to each other, are really such as happen in the Phrenzies of Love.¹²

Addison, then, identifies the Sapphic as an opportunity for modern lyricists to inject passion into the very syntax and metrical structure of the line, whilst also using the originals as an inspiration for the poem's emotional content. Sappho is a counter-example to his assessment of 'miserable' modern lyric, which in his view shies away from passion in prioritising wit and ornament. Comparing renderings of the fragment 'Ad Lesbianum' by Ambrose Philips and Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux, Addison prioritises originality and passion as the primary aims for successful translation. Judged in this way, Boileau's French misses the mark:

The Reader will see that this is rather an Imitation than a Translation. The Circumstances do not lie so thick together, and follow one another with that Vehemence and Emotion as in the Original. In Short, Monsieur *Boileau* has given us all the Poetry, but not all the Passion of this famous Fragment.¹³

Addison does however find praise for Philips's translation despite its modification of the typical Sapphic metre into iambic tetrameter, and despite what a modern reader might well find distasteful in its clunky closed couplets. The emotional climax of the fragment is rendered by Philips:

In dewy Damps my Limbs were chill'd;
My Blood with gentle Horrors thrill'd;
My feeble Pulse forgot to play;
I fainted, sunk, and dy'd away.¹⁴

Although Philips remains faithful to Sappho's imagery, it is difficult to perceive the 'phrenzies of love' reflected in the versification here. We can only assume that Addison considers him to have captured the passion of Sappho *without* the poetry.

Cowper's instincts about the possibilities of such an unusual form as the Sapphic tie in with those of Addison. The choppy, uneven metrical quality of 'Hatred and Vengeance' is in high contrast with the smooth composition of the *Delia* lyrics – although to an extent the sentiments expressed are based upon the same feelings of abandonment and hopelessness. But rather than indicating a looseness or irregularity in Cowper's poetic diction, the intensity with which he imagines himself damned is strangely enhanced by the accuracy and sanity with which he follows the tight Sapphic form. In 'Hatred and Vengeance' he shows himself adept at revealing mental anguish in a paradoxically restrained yet 'phrenzied' form.

Cowper's masterly use of the characteristically Sapphic 'adonic' line (the short line of five syllables, consisting of a dactyl followed by a spondee) makes a strong impression on the reader, especially in the last stanza – 'Buried above ground'. And it is the adonic which signals that his intervention into the Sapphic tradition relates not only to its classical precedent but also to the modern English hymn. Whilst the Sapphics of Pope, Philips, Prior and Dryden moderated the classical adonic into a more palatable and metrically manageable six syllables, the anglicised Sapphic hymn preserved the distinctive metrical texture of the classical original which Addison so admired. In this manifestation as a hymn metre the Sapphic was not over-scrupulous in terms of stress, but always took the form of three hendecasyllabic lines followed by the five-syllable adonic. The coincidence of a classical verse form, specifically connected to the pagan and morally dubious Sappho, with a Christian literary mode is a little disquieting.¹⁵ It allows us to understand the eighteenth-century Sapphic hymn-lyric as in some ways a more direct inheritor of the original classical lyric in its guise as a vessel for sincerity and unfettered emotion, working to convey individual feeling paradoxically despite *and* because of its formal and structural qualities.

The best-known exploration of the possibilities of the Sapphic hymn, a hymn which Cowper surely knew, was to be found in Isaac Watts's first publication, the *Horae Lyricae* (1706) in

the form of the nine-verse lyric ‘The Day of Judgment, An Ode, Attempted in English Sapphick.’:

WHEN the Fierce North-wind with his Airy Forces
Rears up the *Baltick* to a foaming Fury,
And the red Lightning with a Storm of Hail comes
Rushing amain down,
How the poor Sailors stand amaz’d and tremble!
While the hoarse Thunder like a Bloody Trumpet,
Roars a loud onset to the gaping Waters
Quick to devour them.¹⁶

Watts’s hymn relies on the same storm imagery which permeates Cowper’s oeuvre at moments of high religious import and overwhelming mental distress. But the rattling rhythm of the lines, alternating three- and two-stress feet, does not have the same disjointed feel as Cowper’s ‘Hatred and Vengeance’; and although the images follow each other in rapid succession, their disorder reflects actual, physical confusion rather than that of a mind in turmoil. In fact, in the final two stanzas Watts explicitly moves away from any suggestion of discomposure in the speaker, who is able to dismiss such chaotic imagery and redirect his imaginative faculties to a more proper object:

Stop here, my Fancy: (All away ye horrid
Doleful Ideas;) Come arise to *Jesus*,
How he sits Godlike! And the Saints around Him
Thron’d and adoring!
O may I sit there when he comes Triumphant,
Dooming the Nations: Then arise to Glory,
While our *Hosannahs* all along the Passage
Shout the Redeemer.¹⁷

The subtleties of Cowper’s response to Watts’s poem, and the dialogue which ‘Hatred and Vengeance’ sets up between his and Watts’s differing theologies, are worth exploring. In particular, Watts uses the conventionality of the hymn form to circumvent the severity of his apocalyptic imagery, and to resolve the poem’s conflicts by adopting a speaking voice which models his (and thus the congregational singer’s) removal from and elevation over the scene. On the other hand, Cowper is more interested in deriving added emotional intensity from the Sapphic versification, and concentrating fixedly on the ‘I’ which both speaks and is itself the poem’s subject.

Cowper is preoccupied with the exploration of his own emotions and experiences not as those of a type or everyman, but as something entirely unique. Indeed the force of the poem comes from his continual assertion that his case is the *most* extreme possible: damned below even Judas, hated worse even than Abiram, and the only person kept in continual suspense whilst even hell will not afford him the security of damnation. ‘I’, ‘me’ and ‘my’ echo throughout the piece, often positioned at a point of maximum stress, such as the second stanza where the delayed verb and the eccentric punctuation obscure the line’s metrical caesura to draw attention to the contrast – or comparison – between Christ and the speaker:

Twice betray’d, Jesus me, the last delinquent,
Deems the profanest.¹⁸

These two lines alone show that whilst Cowper may use the verse form of the hymn, he absolutely does not regard his Sapphic as suitable for singing. The sentence which runs over the two lines can only be understood retrospectively, and were the line to be spoken by a reader unfamiliar with the poem then it would certainly cause misunderstanding.¹⁹ The stilted

syntax mimics and underscores the strict accentual stress pattern set up by Cowper without exception in every other stanza. But this halting sentence structure does not denote the speaker's confusion or overwhelmingly emotional state. Instead, the delayed last clause is premeditated and a sign of a poet absolutely in control of his own expressions. Although the poem does reveal a terrible sense of despair and distress, it is fixedly attentive to its own metrical and syntactic effects, and committed to presenting an unrelentingly sane and comprehensive exposition of the speaker's expectation of damnation. Against the backdrop of the poem's syntactic complexity and metrical strangeness, the accentual norm of English verse continues to reassert itself through the caesura, the punctuation, and the reader's anticipation of the hymn-stanza form.²⁰ We must ask whether Cowper was attempting a deliberate alienation of the reader by his quantitative approach – outdoing his contemporaries by a full return to the classical Sapphic.

In the poetry of Watts, on the other hand, the clean-cut syntactic units, the tone and diction, the use of the communal first person, and the simple fact that the writer is first and foremost a *hymnist* do prepare us to recognise the 3-2-4-2 emphasis of the more palatable English Sapphic hymn. That stress pattern is of course identical to Cowper's, yet the communication of desperate emotion which is essential to the poem's effect would be spoiled if spoken with the bright confidence of Watts's metrics. At the root of the disjunction between the verse form and the message it conveys is Cowper's ironic reinterpretation of the collective hymnic 'I' into something unique, extreme and almost impossibly subjective and therefore inaccessible to a reader. In 'Hatred and Vengeance', Cowper gives us a new take on the apocalyptic scene inspired by Watts, realigned and inverted into a description of personal experience – the last judgement as told by the damned.

It is hard to shake the impression that the poem is an anti-hymn: a satire, even, on the practice of hymn writing, especially in its popular evangelical and experientially-oriented form. Whilst 'Hatred and Vengeance' might look like a hymn on the page, make Biblical references, and like Watts's 'Day of Judgement' depict God's methods of election, it is also stubbornly unhymnic. The poem continually points backwards to its Sapphic origins, it resists communality and the possibility of song. The dark irony of the poem, however, is no travesty – rather it displays the ways in which Cowper's spectacular commitment to his Calvinist belief, his urge to express even his final absolute abandonment, drives him to this complex version of the hymn as a route to achieving lyric sincerity.

Notes

¹ *Poems of William Cowper*, ed. by John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980) I, 139, ll. 1-8. The hymn was first published in a collection of 1772 and reprinted several times before its inclusion in the *Olney Hymns* in 1779.

² Baird and Ryskamp, I, 480 (10 December 1767, Cowper to Mrs Madan).

³ Richard Arnold, *Trinity of Discord: The Hymnal and Poetic Innovations of Isaac Watts, Charles Wesley, and William Cowper* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2012) p.103

⁴ Catharine Walsh Peltz, 'The Neo-Classical Lyric 1660-1725', *ELH*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (June, 1944), 92-116 (p.96).

⁵ 'Baird and Ryskamp, 'Hope, Like the Short-Lived Ray that Gleams a While', I, 40, ll.1-8.

⁶ Baird and Ryskamp, I, 41, ll.33-36.

⁷ F. R. Leavis, *F.R. Leavis: Essays and Documents* ed. by Ian MacKillop and Richard Storer (London: A&C Black, 1995), p.76

⁸ Baird and Ryskamp, I, 209. See also the editorial notes to the text for details of the dating of the poem.

9 Arnold, p.129.

10 Conrad Brunström, *William Cowper: Religion, Satire, Society* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2004) p.16

11 ‘No. 223’, in *The Spectator*, ed. by Donald Bond, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965) II, 365-366.

12 ‘No. 229’ in *The Spectator*, II, 393.

13 Ibid., II, 392.

14 Ibid.

15 See ‘Accentual Rhythm in Horatian Sapphics’ by L. P. Wilkinson in *The Classical Review*, Vol.54, No.3 (September, 1940) 131-133; and Otto Kinkeldey, ‘The Sapphic Ode’ in *Bulletin of the American Musicological Society*, No. 5 (August, 1941) 14-15 (p.14). See also Hannibal Hamlin, *Psalm Culture and Early Modern English Literature* (Oxford: OUP, 2007) pp.104ff, which contains a discussion of the incorporation of classical verse forms into the English psalm tradition, especially with relevance to Philip Sidney’s accentual Sapphics.

16 Isaac Watts, *Horae Lyricae* (London: Printed by S. and D. Bridge, for John Lawrence, 1706) I, 40.

17 Ibid., I, 42.

18 Baird and Ryskamp, I, 209.

19 This difficulty could be contextualised in terms of contemporary attacks on the practice of ‘lining out’, in which the lines were first sung aloud by the cleric and then repeated by the congregation one by one and regardless of punctuation or syntax.

20 The same problem of interpretation of the caesura in the accentual classical Sapphic metre, as used by Horace, is discussed by Wilkinson, pp.131-2.

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