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George Herbert, the "Hymn Menders," and the Anglican Hymn Tradition

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Notwithstanding their pungency and quaint devotion, they are too abrupt and irregular for congregational use." Thus the Rev. H. Leigh Bennett, Prebendary of Lincoln Cathedral and Rector of Thrybergh, Yorkshire, writing on "Early English Hymnody" in the 1892 *Dictionary of Hymnology*, warns against setting George Herbert's poems as hymns.[1] Another contributor to the *Dictionary*, William T. Brooke, cautions in the entry on Herbert's poems that the "quaintness" of their lyrics "and the peculiarity of several of their metres have been against their adoption for congregational purposes" (p. 512).

The development of the Anglican hymn during the last two centuries reflects such caution. While parishioners have held the poems of *The Temple* in high regard, and some remarkable anthems on its texts have been produced for skilled performers,[2] there have been relatively few

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[1]Ed. John Julian (London: John Murray, 1892), p. 347. More than 50 years later, Adam Fox likewise concludes that Herbert's poems "are too elaborate in thought and often in structure" for vocal setting (*English Hymns and Hymn Writers* [London: Collins, 1947], p. 17). All quotations of Herbert's poems are from *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1941).

[2]Herbert poems have inspired many distinguished anthems by such composers as John Jenkins (1592-1678), John Wilson (1595-1674), George Jeffreys (1610-85), Walford Davies (1869-1941), Edmund Rubbra (1901-86), Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958), and Benjamin Britten (1913-76). See Ruth Smith, et al., "George Herbert," and Nicholas Temperly, "Hymn," sect. iv. 1-3, in *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 2001) and online at *grovemusic.com.*

effective matches of the poems to existing hymn tunes. Attempts have been made, to be sure. In his thorough *Annotated Anthology of Hymns,* J. R. Watson documents several of the "various tunes [that] were tried in the nineteenth century to make Herbert's words singable."[3] But the continued experimentation with only a handful of Herbert's poems suggests the difficulty.

Herbert was absent from *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, the influential collection first published in London in 1861 (with an appendix added in 1868), appeared only twice in the *Yattendon Hymnal* of 1899, edited by Robert Bridges and H. E. Wooldridge,[4] and made but one appearance in the expanded New Edition of *Hymns Ancient and Modern* in 1904, where (as though in confirmation of the "peculiarity" of the poet's metrics), the pleasant setting of "Antiphon (I)" by William Henry Monk (1823-89), "Let all the world in ev'ry corner sing" (no. 308), is *sui generis*, the only hymn in the volume that follows such an idiosyncratic meter (10 4 6 6 6 6 10 4).[5]

Publication of a rival volume, *The English Hymnal,* by Oxford University Press in 1906 revealed more interest in Herbert.[6] The text of "Antiphon (I)" appears again (p. 572), with a contemporary if conventional tune, "Universal Praise," by W. G. Whinfield (1865-1919),

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[3]Watson, *An Annotated Anthology of Hymns* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 94.

[4]The settings are of Herbert's "Praise (II)" ("King of Glorie, King of Peace") (p. 22) and "The 23rd Psalm" (p. 26). This elegantly printed hymnal of but 100 hymns (London and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1895-99) expressed "a low opinion of modern hymn tunes" and turned to sources in plainsong and the English Renaissance. Though an important influence on *The English Hymnal* of 1906 (discussed below) and subsequent hymnals, it did not receive wide congregational use. See J. R. Watson, *The English Hymn* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997) p. 515. Watson's study of hymn texts provides an authoritative overview of the hymn tradition. Another useful but inconsistent reference is Katherine Smith Diehl's *Hymns and Tunes—An Index* (New York: Scarecrow, 1966).

[5]Monk, the "inspired" musical editor of *Hymns Ancient and Modern,* remains a strong influence on the English hymn, as suggested by his 21 settings in *The Hymnal 1982* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1982). See Watson, pp. 34, 351, *et passim.*

[6]On the circumstances of the volume's opposition to *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, see Watson, *English Hymn*, pp. 515-17.

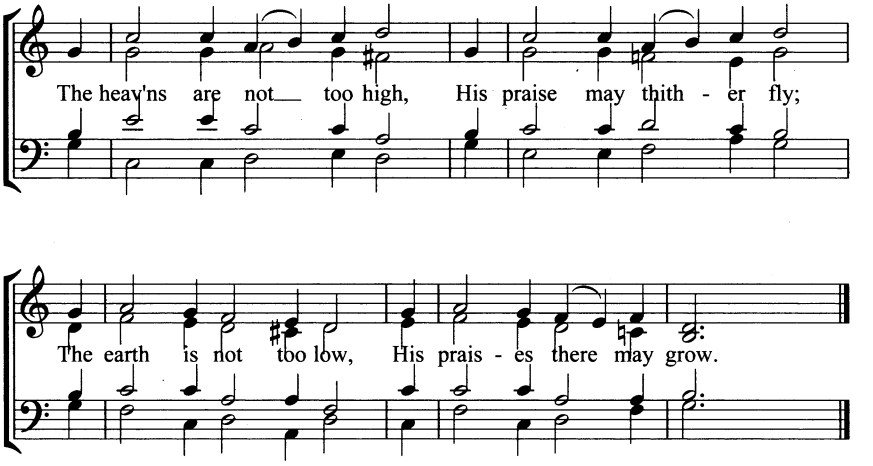
together with three additional hymns joining words by Herbert to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century tunes. "The 23d Psalme" ("The God of love my shepherd is," p. 132) aligns reasonably well with the simple tune, "University," by John Randall (1715-99)—in part, as Donald Davie suggests, because this poem appears to be the only one Herbert intended to be set to music.[7] In another hymn, the tune used for "Praise (II)," "Gwalchmai," by J. D. Jones (1827-70), is well coordinated with the text (p. 569). And "The Elixir" ("Teach me, my God and King," p. 485), couched in one of Herbert's least idiosyncratic meters, finds a graceful new match in an unnamed traditional melody from the collection by W. Sandys, *Christmas Carols, Ancient and Modern* (London: W. Sandys, 1833). But even these four settings, though successful enough, suggest little real progress towards accommodating the broader range of Herbert's poems within a musical vocabulary sufficient to their variety and flexibility.

Further incremental gains appear in the 1925 edition of *Songs of Praise* (Oxford University Press, enlarged 1931), the editors of which were Percy Dreamer, Martin Shaw, and Ralph Vaughan Williams. Seven settings of Herbert appear in the enlarged edition, with the now familiar tune of "Gwalchmai" being used for "Praise (II)" (no. 553), the Sandys tune for "The Elixir" (no. 652), and "University" for "The 23d Psalme" (no. 653), in addition to a striking new setting for "Antiphon (I)" by Martin Shaw (1875-1958), "High Road" (no. 556).[8] Stretching the irregular syllabic count of Monk's earlier version by well-placed, generous caesuras, Shaw deftly scene paints the poem's vertical imagery ("heav'ns are not too high . . . earth is not too low")—

[7]Davie observes in *The Psalms in English* (London: Penguin, 1996, p. 118) that the prosody of Herbert's psalm-version "differs so markedly from that of Herbert's own sacred poems that it has plausibly been conjectured that he contrived a special rusticity so as to appeal to an unlettered congregation."

[8]Copyright 1915 J. Curwen & Sons, Ltd. By permission of Oxford University Press.

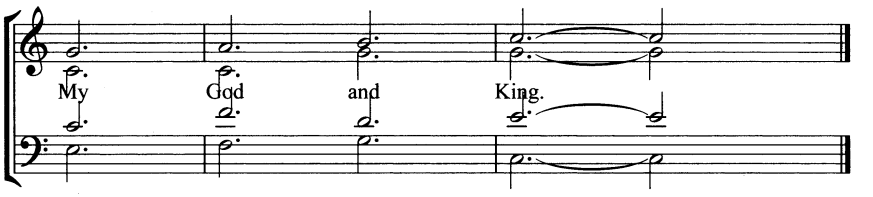
MARTIN SHAW



Example 1. "High Road."

—in preparation for a stirring, conclusive cadence:

MARTIN SHAW



Example 2. "High Road."

As Watson has observed (*Anthology*, p. 94), Herbert's insistent emphasis on "the importance of the heart" invites settings that intimate the deep feeling so often found beneath the deceptively even surface in the poems of *The Temple.*

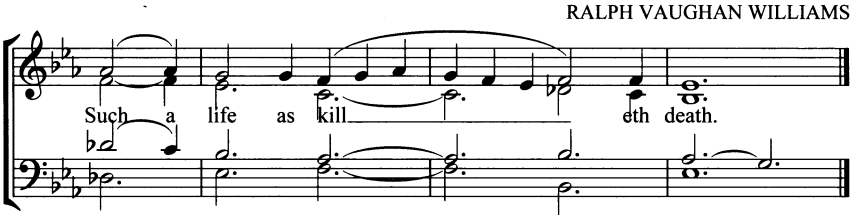
Three other new hymns also appear in *Songs of Praise.* A solemn, stately tune, comprised almost entirely of whole and half-notes, "Wulfrun," by G. W. Briggs (1875-1959), provides the setting for the final three-line stanza (modified in only one word) of Herbert's nine-line

"Trinitie Sunday" (no. 401). The stately urgency of an "Ancient Jewish Melody," "Gaza," adapted by the editors as a tune for Herbert's "Vertue" ("Sweet day, so cool, so calm. . . ."), creates a pleasing tension with the apparent (though deceptive) simplicity of the poem (no. 650). And the "moderately slow" and determinedly steady "Tunbridge" tune by J. Clark (1670-1707) used for "The Call" ("Come, my way, my truth, my life") offers easy access to one of Herbert's least idiosyncratic meters (no. 474).

In the face of so modest a threshold, hymnals published in the first half of the twentieth century for the Episcopal Church in America must be considered by Herbert's disciples as a retreat, or at least as a bivouac. While otherwise borrowing generously from *The English Hymnal* of 1906, the *Hymnal 1916* (New York: Church Pension Fund, 1916) omits Herbert altogether, while the American *Hymnal 1940* (New York: Church Pension Fund, 1943), which received broad use, preserves only two Herbertian hymns from 1906, "Antiphon (I)" with Whinfield's tune and "The Elixir" in the traditional tune published by Sandys (nos. 290 and 476), together with Shaw's "High Road" tune for "Antiphon (I)" (no. 290) from *Songs of Praise.*

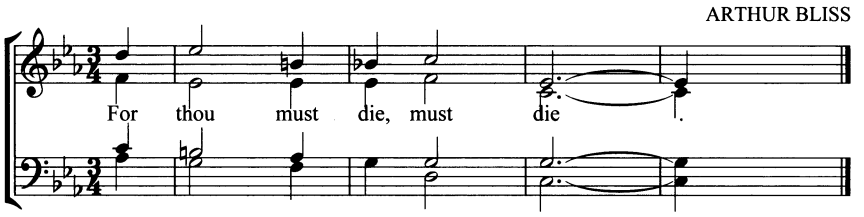
There were more promising signs after mid-century with the publication of the Anglican *Cambridge Hymnal,* edited by David Holbrook and Elizabeth Poston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), and, in the United States, of the Episcopal *Hymnal 1982* (New York: Church Hymnal Corp., 1985). For the first time since the publication of *Songs of Praise*, and to an even greater extent, hymnals intended for wide use revealed a serious effort to draw on the more flexible musical vocabulary of the twentieth century in order to interpret Herbert for congregational singing. It is as though such settings had had to await not only a twentieth-century musical vocabulary, but also growing familiarity with it in the pews. To be sure, not all of the Herbert settings in the *Cambridge Hymnal* are new. Here again are Randall's eighteenth-century "23rd Psalm" (p. 143) and Jones's nineteenth-century "Praise (II)" (p. 68), holdovers from the Oxford volume of 1906, together with the traditional carol melody for "The Elixir" (p. 153). However, in another hymn, the final stanza of Herbert's "Trinity Sunday" (beginning "Enrich my heart, mouth, hands in me," p. 31) finds a surprising ally in a sixteenth-century German tune, "*Es sind doch selig,*" as harmonized by Poston (1905-1987), the hymnal's co-editor.

Five modern settings appear in the *Cambridge Hymnal.* These include the unison treatment by Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) of "The Call" ("Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life," p. 23), originally published in 1911, where a memorable concluding melisma relaxes a delicious tension created by momentary tonal ambiguity:[9]



Example 3. "The Call."

"Antiphon (I)" has a specially commissioned setting by William Mathias (1934-92), who achieves uncommon flexibility within common measure by creating, then violating, an expectation of discrete iambic clauses (p. 58). Another commission in the *Cambridge Hymnal*, the setting by Arthur Bliss (1891-1975) for Herbert's complex, intense "Vertue" (p. 138), responds first to the oscillation of the poet's gentle iambs ("Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright"). Then it allows death to arrest the pendulum ("For thou must die") by repeating the measures expressing Herbert's final two words.[10]



Example 4. "Vertue."

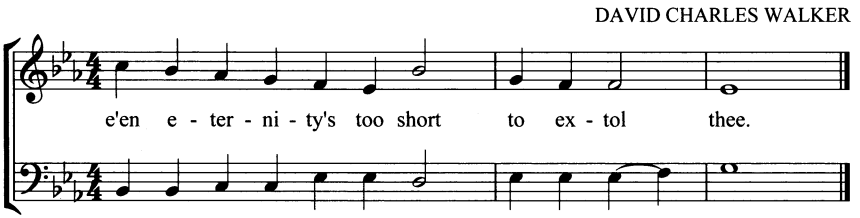
[9]Adaptation by E. Harold Geer. By permission of Stainer & Bell, Ltd., London.

[10]Copyright by Arthur Bliss, 1967. By permission of Cambridge University Press.

Similar responsiveness to textual modulation is sustained through a new tune by John Gardner (b. 1917) for "The 23rd Psalm" (p. 146), as well as in Poston's charming setting of "Discipline" as a round (p. 175).

The Episcopal *Hymnal 1982* maintains the approach of the *Cambridge Hymnal*, with five settings that respond to rather than impose themselves upon Herbert's supple poetry. "The Elixir" (no. 592) is joined here to an uncommonly apposite eighteenth-century tune by Charles Lockhart (1745-1815), "Carlisle," though the second and third of Herbert's six stanzas are left out. And again there is Vaughan Williams's now cherished version of "The Call" (no. 487).

Other Herbertian settings in *Hymnal 1982* that draw on twentieth century musical language include a deceptively simple treatment of "Praise (II)" by David Charles Walker (b. 1938). The long traditional tune, "General Seminary," extends over two stanzas of the poem, then combines in its third verse Herbert's fifth and seventh stanzas, omitting his sixth. Here the music invites a "tenor or soprano *ad libitum*" to sing the words beginning "Seven whole days, not one in seven" in overlapping counterpoint with the group's melody, until on the final statement counterpoint and melody join homophonically to offer praise fit for "eternity" (no. 382).[11]

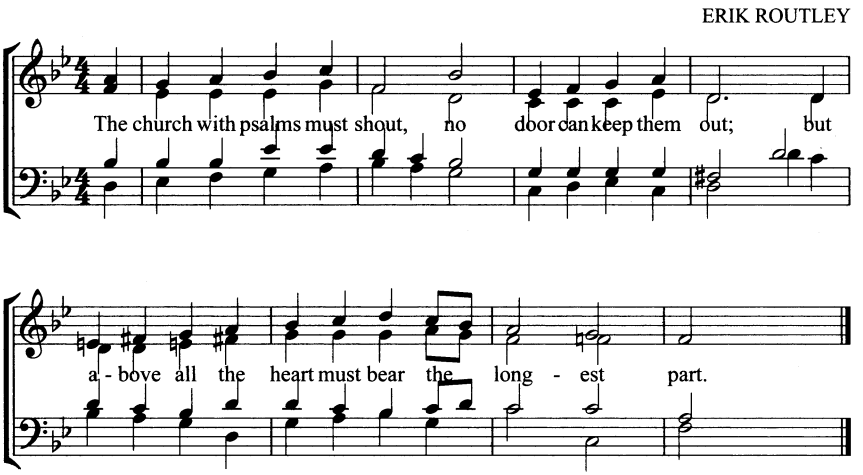


Example 5. "Praise (II)."

And two modern versions of "Antiphon (I)" are offered. The first, "Augustine," by Erik Routley (1917-82), eschews scene painting. Rather, it seeks to suggest, in a striking, discordant, arhythmical idiom (with a

[11]Copyright by David Charles Walker, 1976. By permission of Selah Publishing Company.

unison antiphon alternating with SATB verse) how the singing heart takes precedence over the shouting Church (no. 402).[12]



Example 6. "Augustine."

The other version of "Antiphon (I)," by Calvin Hampton (1938-84), "MacDougall" is more deliberately liturgical, with a four-measure organ introduction in sixteenth notes, followed first by the repeated antiphon in a dotted measure ("Let all the world in every corner sing, my God and King!") and, then, by each of the two verses—all of this sung in unison (no. 403).

Together the settings of Herbert in these two newer hymnals show respect both for the idiosyncratic structure of their texts and for the dexterity of those who will sing them. In appropriating for congregational singing that tension between text and music which is characteristic of sophisticated art song (and which is typically foreign to the hymn), these examples intimate, if not a revolution, at least an insurgency. It is a modest insurgency, of course. While offering just five settings of Herbert, *Hymnal 1982* contains 17 hymns by various hands to texts by Isaac Watts (1674-1748), 23 to texts by Charles Wesley (1707-88), and no fewer than 45 to texts by John Mason Neale (1818-66).

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[12]Copyright by Hinshaw Music, Inc. By permission.

Yet there is something worse than the deference or caution that have made so many reluctant to set Herbert. In contrast with those whose respect for Herbert's complexity has discouraged their efforts to set his poems to music, the "hymn menders" who have boldly adapted Herbert's texts for use in hymns have shown no respect at all.[13] Rather than confess the inability of their contemporaries to write music accommodating irregular works of "quaint devotion," they have done whatever is necessary to bring recalcitrant poems into line with the prevailing limited musical vocabulary and their low opinion of congregational tastes. As Martha Winburn England has observed, all too often "the English hymn has operated on a principle of diction which is peculiar to itself. The rule is: If you don't like it, change it."[14]

Efforts to improve on Herbert's poems by wrestling them into regular meters and simpler language began not long after Herbert's death and continued through the nineteenth century. In addition to the preference of the "menders" for iambic meters in simple stanzas (what Herbert's editor Canon Hutchinson calls "the Procrustean bed of Common, Long, and Short Measure"),[15] they favor simple over esoteric diction, abstractions over particulars, and repetition over development. In their mending, as several examples will suggest, they disclose both their own limitations—of craftsmanship, artistic sensibility, and religious understanding—and their acceptance of constraints that have confined the Anglican hymn tradition as a whole.

Without question, the most assiduous and ambitious mender was John Wesley. As John Sparrow observes, he loved Herbert's poems and included a number of them without alteration (and with only limited abridgement) in hymn collections he compiled early in his career. But when he became acquainted on his travels with the Moravian hymn tradition, he felt inclined to contribute to it and to the singing of his own congregations by creating from no fewer than 47 of Herbert's poems

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[13]"The hymn mender is sometimes a very useful man," say Wilbur F. Tillett and Charles S. Nutter, *The Hymns and Hymn Writers of the Church* (Nashville: M. E. Church Publishing, 1924), p. 221.

[14]Martha Winburn England and John Sparrow, *Hymns Unbidden* (New York: N.Y. Public Library, 1966), p. 39.

[15]*Works of Herbert,* pp. xlvi-xlvii.

hymns that largely disregard Herbert's conceptual idiosyncrasy and idiomatic language.[16]

Hutchinson attributes to Wesley "the most remarkable devotion to Herbert in the eighteenth century" and concludes that he "generally interpreted the meaning correctly, and, at times, even skillfully," but he recognizes that much damage was done to the poet's texts in the process (*Works,* pp. xlvi-vii). Wesley's revisions, however well meant, serve to remind us by contrast, as Helen Vendler remarks, "how open, true, human, natural, and explicit Herbert is."[17] In contrast to Hutchinson, she believes that Wesley's aversion to Herbert's "conceptual audacity in respect to religious matters" exerted a stronger influence on his revisions than the practical necessity of reconstructing Herbert for hymn singing.[18]

But Wesley's narrow idea of the demands of such singing played a part too. The "Alteration . . . necessary to bring the poems within the hymn genre," in Martha England's words, undermined Herbert's "miracle," his ability "to speak for all kinds and conditions of men."[19] If, as Wilbur Tillett and Charles Nutter have claimed, "the hymn mender is sometimes a very useful man," his usefulness comes at a high price when Herbert's complex metrical patterns are reduced to familiar simple forms, and Herbert's distinctive voice and faith are disfigured.

Evidence of these tendencies appears in a hymn that Tillett and Nutter choose from John Wesley's 1778 *Collection of Psalms and Hymns* as an example of his "fine taste" (p. 221), an adaptation for S. M. (Short Metre) which purports to be of Herbert's "The Elixir." They acknowledge that of Herbert's six stanzas only the first is given verbatim, in the opening verse; the second verse is Wesley's own, the third is Herbert's fourth stanza "altered by Wesley," the fourth again belongs wholly to Wesley, and the fifth and last is Wesley's "modification" of the first stanza of Herbert. Wesley "took what was imperfect in form, and by omissions, additions, and changes made it into a useful and beautiful hymn." "A very useful man," the hymn mender?

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[16]England and Sparrow, p. 2.

[17]Vendler, *The Poetry of George Herbert* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 136.

[18]Vendler, pp. 122-136. See also Elsie Leach, "John Wesley's Use of George Herbert," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 16 (1953): 199-202.

[19]England and Sparrow, p. 37.

The treatment of Herbert's fourth stanza is particularly instructive. Drawing on the vocabulary of alchemy, as Watson observes in his *Anthology* (p. 98), Herbert stresses the potential worthiness, even divinity, of all the tasks the world requires:

> All may of thee partake:
> Nothing can be so mean,
> Which with his tincture (for thy sake)
> Will not grow bright and clean. (13-16)

By contrast, in his first stanza Wesley relaxes and destabilizes Herbert's complex, taut coherence, without any significant offsetting gain in clarity or accessibility:

> All may of thee partake,
> Nothing so small can be
> But draws, when acted for thy sake,
> Greatness and worth from thee.

"Small" may be simpler than "mean," perhaps more easily grasped within a musical setting, but the shift of the trope from alchemy to magnetism hardly achieves a similar benefit, and the same might be said for Wesley's replacing Herbert's richly analogical adjectives "bright and clean," which sustain the just if idiosyncratic "tincture," with the abstract and predictable nouns "greatness" and "worth." In short, Wesley strips Herbert's text of both its brightness and its clarity.

Having made these compromises, Wesley then proceeds in his next verse to deprive Herbert's fifth and sixth stanzas of their force as well. In place of the image of the servant who "sweeps a room, as for thy laws" and thereby "Makes that and th'action fine" (19-20), and the poet's witty reassertion of the title, that "This is the famous stone / That turneth all to gold" (21-22), Wesley again generalizes:

> If done to obey thy laws,
> E'en servile labors shine;

> Hallowed is toil, if this the cause,
> The meanest work, divine.[20]

Herbert's alchemical figure works on at least three levels. In alchemy, a "tincture," an immaterial substance, can invade and transform an object or person. Here, Herbert's "tincture" (3) suggests both God's grace, freely given (as in the Eucharist), and the movement of the human will ("for thy sake") that offers up drudgery as devotion. In addition, as Herbert presents his art as devotion, the poet not only describes but himself becomes a "servant" who redeems a room and his laborious endeavor. Wesley, by contrast, states in the first two lines of the quatrain Herbert's exchange in the simplest terms possible, then repeats the point twice in the final two lines.

The profound costs of catering to the limited musical demands of congregations are evident in another dilution of Herbert's expression, this one by Charles Wesley and involving "The Sacrifice." But first there was an intermediary, Herbert's near-contemporary Samuel Crossman (1624-83), known principally for the devotional juvenilia of *The Young Man's Meditation* (London, 1664). The model he found in the 63 quatrains of Herbert's poem follows a dramatic sequence: from the crucified Christ's poignant question, "Was ever grief like mine?," through a penultimate exclamation, "Never was grief like mine" (216), to the conclusive "Onely let others say, when I am dead, / Never was grief like mine" (253-54). But Crossman, while offering a refreshingly eccentric interpretation of Herbert's poem (and of Galatians, according to Watson, *English Hymn,* pp. 87-89), chooses not to depict the accumulating terror of Christ's repeated interrogation. Rather, he summarily disarms this terror, replacing agony with charm, as in the seventh, concluding stanza:

> Here might I stay and sing,
> no story so divine:

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[20]As Hutchinson explains further (p. 541), "the elixer is here identified with the famous stone (l. 21), as in Chaucer's 'The philosophers stoon, Elixir clipt,' supposed by the alchemists to have the property of turning other metals to gold" while "tincture is a technical term in alchemy for 'a supposed spiritual principle or immaterial substance whose character or quality may be infused into material things' (*O.E.D.*)."

never was love, dear King,
never was grief like thine.
This is my friend,
in whose sweet praise
I all my days
could gladly spend.[21]

Charles Wesley, "acting on Crossman's hint," as Watson observes (p. 245), modifies the perspective even further in a hymn published in his 1745 *Hymns for the Lord's Supper,* "God of Unexampled Grace." There he avoids the awful spectacle of the cross, which stands at the center of Crossman's depiction, so as to focus instead on the controlling and limited perspective of an observer. Now, consistent with the demands of the hymn for access and regularity, it is the putative singer of the hymn, not Jesus, who asks the question. The agony of crucifixion becomes "death divine," and "grief" is interpreted (and distanced) as "love."[22]

Jesus, Lord, what hast thou done?
Publish we the death divine,
Stop, and gaze, and fall, and own
Was never love like thine!

Before offering two final examples of adaptation, it would be appropriate to acknowledge that textual compromises to meet musical imperatives are by no means limited to the hymn tradition. Opera libretti offer particularly instructive examples. Nahum Tate's doggerel for "Dido and Aeneas" offers at points a surprisingly effective basis for Purcell's engaging score. And Lorenzo DaPonte, no writer of doggerel, nevertheless understood what all librettists must learn, that texts remain subject to the composer's will and that the finest, most poetic texts are most likely to encourage the composer's scissors. Yet the costs of compromise seem the greater in a hymn, where the purported goal is not so much dramatic effectiveness as earnest and authentic devotion.

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[21]The contemporary setting in *Hymnal 1982*, p. 458, by John Ireland (1879-1962) shows suppleness the text lacks.

[22]Watson observes that the change is to emphasize "not the suffering but the saving love behind it" (*English Hymn*, p. 245).

Consider the late eighteenth-century hymn version of Herbert's "The Collar," a poem titled "The Heart Healed and Changed by Mercy," by William Cowper (1731-1800).[23] The text is not without power, as Watson notes (*English Hymn,* p. 299), but Cowper's conclusion is revealingly different. Herbert's poem ends abruptly in lines 33-36 with a notable *volte-face.* The strikingly dramatized voice, that of a votary in extravagant rebellion (choler) against the discipline of his calling (collar) and its ultimate center (caller), builds an increasingly fragile structure of illogic until that collapses and only one word need be spoken in response:

> But as I rav'd and grew more fierce and wilde
> At every word,
> Me thoughts I heard one calling, *Child!*
> And I reply'd, *My Lord.*

By comparison with this fierce economy, the deliberate resolution of Cowper's ending, though in its own way "powerfully dramatic," is as Watson observes "less sharp in focus and more evangelical in tone" (*English Hymn*, p. 98). Now, six lines are required to achieve closure:

> Till, despairing of my case,
> Down at his feet I fell:
> Then my stubborn heart he broke,
> And subdu'd me to his sway;
> By a simple word he spoke,
> 'Thy sins are done away.'

This obscures the operative power of grace in Herbert's poem, where God's single paternal word penetrates and collapses childish rebellion in full cry. In Cowper, the initiative belongs to the penitent speaker; God's words, explicitly theological, are a response to the speaker's obeisance. Although the limitations imposed by a chosen or intended musical setting may have been foremost in Cowper's mind, the resulting theological shift, from a drama of unanticipated grace to one of penitent acquiescence, is a loss not only of metrical force and dramatic cogency, but of much more.

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[23]First published in *Olney Hymnal* (London: W. Oliver, 1779).

As a final example of the costs involved in forcing complex ideas and images into comfortable metrical structures, there is a Herbertian adaptation by James Montgomery, the early nineteenth century Scottish journalist and hymn writer who is represented by ten hymn texts in *Hymnal 1982* including the beloved carol, "Angels, from the realms of glory." Herbert's "Prayer (I)" is the clear inspiration for Montgomery's hymn text on the private devotional life (no. 93). Like Herbert, he offers a definition of prayer through a series of images. Unlike Herbert, he seeks a text capable of accommodation within a simple tune. But where lines 2-6 of Herbert's craggy, fittingly extravagant text suggest inexpressibility—

> Gods breath in man returning to his birth,
> The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
> The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth;
> Engine against th'Almightie, sinners towre,
> Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear. . . .

—Montgomery's mellifluous sentimentality suggests instead a comfortable resort to the commonplace:

> Prayer is the burden of a sigh,
> The falling of a tear;
> The upward glancing of an eye
> When none but God is near. . . .[24]

Watson, who admires Montgomery as "the greatest hymn-writer on the difficult subject of prayer," acknowledges here some loss of "Herbert's taut power" but commends the "consummate skill" evident in an artful expansion and simplification of Herbert's images (pp. 308-310). Yet the issue is not only one of dexterity and refinement but of principle; in expanding and simplifying Herbert's images, Montgomery distorts the religious convictions they express. Thus Herbert's powerful image of "Gods breath in man returning to his birth" is recast as "the Christian's vital breath, / The Christian's native air." Abandoning Herbert's hard-won, vivid conceit of humankind engaged with God in an economy of grace, Montgomery offers instead earthbound, homely abstractions.

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[24] *The Poetical Works of James Montgomery* (London: Lansdowne, n.d.), p. 141.

Though these examples point to a persistent tendency within the British hymn tradition to subordinate theological reflection and liturgical expression to the requirements of accessible "tunes" and piety, not all would agree that mediocrity is thus inevitable. Erik Routley, himself a skilled modern practitioner of the form, has described hymn writing, somewhat inconsistently, as on the one hand "poetry under strict discipline . . . lyric under a vow of renunciation," and on the other as a form in which only music "very free and subtle" can accommodate "the work of a poet in full flight."[25]

In this constructive spirit, we might try to appreciate why popular hymns typically suppress through musical and textual compromises the volatile internal competition between text and music inherent in all song. As has often been assumed, if the music of a hymn is to serve well, the tune must allow ready learning by rote, its pitch and its intervals must fall comfortably within the range of amateur voices, and the rhythm must evoke (or at least not interfere with) the text. Similarly, the text, if written as a hymn, must fall into easy alignment with the music. And a lyric poem written without that intention must give the impression of willing acquiescence. As a result, in the Anglican hymn tradition music and language rarely achieve the piquant tension of which they are capable when managed in a taut alignment. Hence the community of faith has accepted in many of its most popular hymns facile comfort in place of meaningful inquiry, thoughtful praise, and informed entreaty.

An opposed view, one prompted both by the compelling poetic and spiritual values of seventeenth-century poetry and by the agility of the contemporary musical idiom, holds that a tension between text and music, far from requiring resolution, should in fact be present if a hymn is to engage both the prayerful mind and the willing voice. The most effective hymns, by this view, are those that create sustained interest by the effective modulation of the rich relationship between music and lyric.

Hence the significance of the small modern insurgency observed above. Grounds for optimism appear, as Routley has observed, in the

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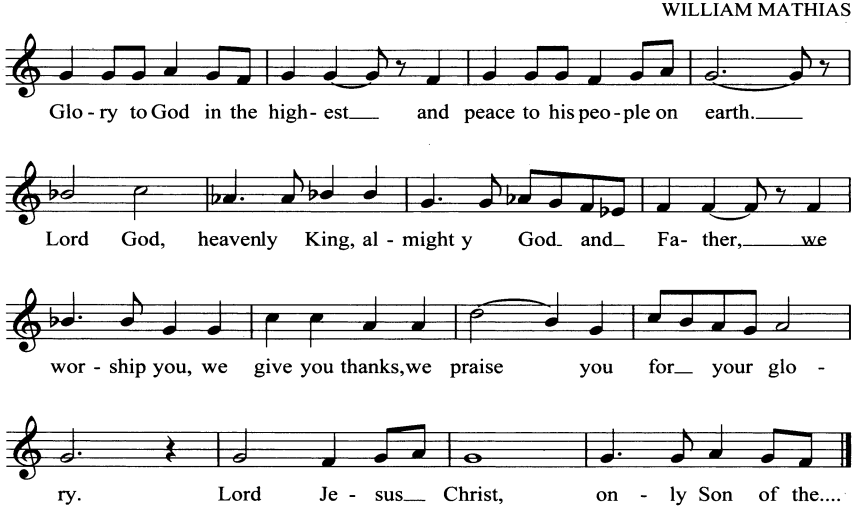
[25] *Hymns Today and Tomorrow* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1964), p. 19. Watson commends Routley for doing "more than anyone to keep alive the study of hymnody in English-speaking countries" but urges that the "content" of a hymn must be seen as "the activity of the words and music themselves" (*English Hymn*, p. 9).

willingness of composers to "throw overboard the traditional ideas about church music," in the efforts by serious writers such as Carl Daw to create unsentimental and rigorously conceived texts,[26] and in the increasing flexibility of congregations and church choirs.

Unquestionably, such preparedness seems the result not so much of professional training or conscious connoisseurship as of sustained exposure through church music, film scores, and orchestral programming to the more supple, receptive, and responsive medium of contemporary composers. To give but one example, the William Mathias 1967 setting of the "Gloria" (*Hymnal 1982*, no. S278), now widely and regularly in use, would surely have offered an insurmountable challenge to most congregations fifty years ago. Even setting aside the angular and unpredictable rhythms of the accompaniment, the single vocal line offers many challenges.[27]



Example 7. "Gloria."

[26]See for instance Daw's texts in *Hymnal 1982* for "Christ the Victorious" (no. 358) and "Like the murmur of the dove's song" (no. 513).

[27]Copyright Oxford University Press, 1985. By permission.

That congregations in small parish churches now sing with sure command this setting with its frequent discords and ambiguous tonality can offer a reminder of what potential there may be for further development.

To be sure, many congregations continue to prefer familiar favorites, hymns with steady, predictable rhythms, a restricted vocal range, and secure tonality. But the ability to learn and sing music of increasing sophistication creates both an interest in the more rigorous hymn settings now available and a higher standard for new ones. Hence, sophisticated settings of Herbert and other complex poets for congregational singing may be increasingly capable of expressing respect for poetry, religion, and experienced amateur singers. More to the point, they may attract congregations worthy of them. What is intimated is nothing less than a new, responsible, and defensible rhetoric of the hymn capable of achieving both musical and textual complexity so as to shape expressions of faith that are, in a word, faithful to the human capacity for the aspirations of worship.

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