Notes on the Religious Strain in English Poetry to 1800

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From its beginning in Anglo-Saxon times, religious sentiment has had a strong, if intermittent, presence in English poetry. What is regarded as the first English poem, "Caedmon's Hymn," in the late seventh century, is a brief but impassioned praise "Of the Lord the power and his Wisdom/The work of the Glory-Father," exalted as the protector of mankind.[1] The monument of early English literature, the epic poem *Beowulf* in the eighth century, although an essentially pagan story, contains many and significant references to the Bible and Christian teaching. It is suffused with Christian moralizing and allusions, and though its biblical references are to the Old Testament, the hero Beowulf throughout life and in his death is invested with Christian virtues: prudence, justice, fortitude, honor and service. At last he is praised as the "kindest of worldly kings, /Mildest, most gentle, ..." in tones befitting a Christian savior. For Beowulf's final acts for his people were service elevated to sacrifice.

In "Deor's Lament" the poet, reflecting the biblical Ecclesiastes, considers how "The wise Lord varies His ways to men," granting honor to many but to others woe. And in "The Wanderer" the poet sees how wealth and friends and man and maid and "All the foundations of earth" are fleeting, yet "happy the man who seeketh for mercy /From his heavenly Father, our Fortress and Strength."

"The Dream of the Rood" is a vision of the cross on which Jesus the Christ died. It presents Christ as warrior-hero in contest with the forces of evil. The rood is the cross, and the poet concludes, "May the Lord be gracious/who on earth of old/once suffered on the cross/for the sins of men."

In the fourteenth century Geoffrey Chaucer tells of many ecclesiastics—pardoners, priests, nuns, parsons, summoners—as well as of the laity on a holy pilgrimage. In the prologue of the tales of these pilgrims, more than in the tales themselves, Chaucer reflects his devotional intent or moralistic spirit of the tales. Thus he says of the plowman: "God loved he best with all his hole herte/At alle tymes, thogh hym gamed or smerte...." And the parson is a man "of holy thoght and werk./He was also a lerned man , a clerk, /That Cristes gospel trewely wolde preche...." To the end of the stories Chaucer adds a "Retraction," revoking and repenting anything in all of his writings that may have offended against religion, and begs that "Crist for his grete mercy foryeve me the synne."

Writing contemporaneously, the anonymous poet of "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," and possibly of "Patience," "Purity" and "Pearl," towers with Chaucer in narrative verse. Sir Gawain is a Christian hero undergoing, with divine grace, temptation and redemption in overcoming supernatural adversity. Sorely beset on the way, he beseeches "thee, Lord/And thee Mary, mildest mother so dear," the mother of Jesus, for help, and crying for his sins he prays, "Christ speed/My cause, his cross my guide!" In an extremity of danger Gawain exclaims, "By God!...I swear/I will not weep or groan:/Being given to God's good care, /My trust in Him shall be shown." At the end, victorious but humbled, the hero is comforted,

and the poet prays, "Now Christ with his crown of thorn/Bring us his bliss evermore! AMEN."

As with the author of "Sir Gawain," we know nothing of the third eminent poet of the late fourteenth-century, the author of "The Vision of Piers Plowman." The poem reveals how the earnest soul might at last arrive home to God, no matter how long and hard the road. Yet the poem is also a satire or complaint of the corruptions of a worldly life and its traps ("chastity without charity will be chained in Hell") . The poet concludes: "Love is leech [healer] of life, and next Our Lord's self;/...now our Lord look to you."

In the drama of the Middle Ages, too, the Mystery (Miracle) and Morality plays, the religious theme is strong. The paragon of motherhood, the virgin Mary mother of Jesus is described and honored: "Farewell, Lady, so fair to behold, /with Thy child on Thy knee!" ("The Wakefield Second Shepherd's Play") The Morality plays showed the virtues and vices in conflict for the soul of man. "Everyman," author unknown, depicts the dying of a Christian man, bereft of all except Good Deeds, who will stand for him at the Judgment. At last Everyman prays, "Have mercy on me, God most mighty;/And stand by me, thou Mother and Maid, holy Mary." He goes into his grave declaring, "Into thy hands Lord, my soul I commend./Receive it, Lord, that it be not lost."

Also in the Middle Ages there are the sporadic cries: "Nou goth sonne under wode—/Nou goth sonne under tre—Me reweth, Marie, thi sone and the." And from the fifteenth-century: "Western wind, when wilt thou blow, /The small rain down can rain?/Christ, if my love were in my arms/And I in my bed again!"—an impassioned lover's appeal.

And many another Christian lyric, song and ballad lights up the later Middle Ages. "I Sing of a Maiden": "To her son she ches [chose]./He came also stille/Ther his moder was, /As dew in Aprille/That falleth on the gras."

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there is a resonance of English poetry. The Bible is translated increasingly. The King James Authorized Version of 1611 has a rhythmic and sonorous quality that is to influence the writing of generations to come: "The Lord is my shepherd: I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; He leadeth me beside the still waters."

Perhaps the most memorable of early seventeenth-century poets is John Donne. His images are fresh, his similes and metaphors often startling. His religious fervor is intense. To his love he says, "For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love,..." And in "Holy Sonnets" to God himself he speaks: "Thou hast made me, and shall Thy work decay?" And "Batter my heart, three-personed God..."; also, "Show me, dear Christ, Thy spouse so bright and clear," testify further to Donne's religious sincerity. Three hymns Donne wrote in the 1630s — "A Hymn to Christ, at the Author's Last Going into Germany," "Hymn to God My God, in My Sickness, "A Hymn to God the Father" — are vigorous and compelling statements and pleas for help.

Other poets of this time, notably George Herbert, Richard Crashaw and Robert Vaughan, praise the Creator. Thus Herbert in "Paradise": "I bless thee, Lord, because I grow/Among thy trees..."; and Vaughan in "Religion": "Look down, Great Master of the feast; Oh Shine, /And turn once more our water into wine!" Crashaw's "On Our Crucified Lord..." honors the Savior "too richly clad" in "thy

own blood."

John Milton's epics, *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, are the crowning achievements in English religious poetry, revealing in majestic lines the story of mankind's fall from grace with loss of bliss in Eden, through ages of suffering in ignorance and sin, "till one greater Man," the Christ, "Restore us, and regain the blissful seat." Milton's purpose is to "assert Eternal Providence, /And justify the ways of God to men." Two of Milton's sonnets glow with personal religious fervor, showing the epic poet's lyrical mastery. "When I consider how my light is spent" presents the problem of his blindness: why has God given him the talent and urge to write (presumably, the epic to come) while also letting him go blind? Patience, personified, answers: "God doth not need/Either man's work or his own gifts"—here, the gift of poetic genius—"who best/Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best;..." "Patience" thus is the Christian virtue of acceptance and resignation in adversity. Yet Milton also "best" bore the yoke or trial God gave him, as he strove for his gift by inwardly composing, then dictating, the epic verses.

Not patience or acquiescence, however, is found in the sonnet titled "On the Late Massacre in Piedmont." Milton in grief and righteous anger laments and thunders out at the slaughter of Protestants in Alpine villages by an army under the Catholic Duke of Savoy, as even prisoners and women and children were killed. Like an old Testament prophet calling on Jehovah to redress persecution of the faithful, the poet calls for justice: "Avenge, O Lord, thy slaughtered saints, whose bones/Lie scattered on the Alpine mountains cold,..." Nine of the remaining twelve lines also end with the long "o" vowel and it occurs frequently within lines. It is the sound both of mourning

and wrath. In only three sentences, and with only three verses end-stopped before the final words, "Babylonian woe," the sweeping rhythm complements the relentless tones and painful images to create a voice as of a poet inspired and approved by the very God whom he addresses.

Later in the century John Dryden's "Song for St. Cecilia's Day" honors the saint and martyr esteemed also as the patroness of music. The poet asserts a divine source for music, which in turn brings about all creation: "...from heavenly harmony/This universal frame began:..." As the legendary inventor of the organ, Cecilia's notes inspire "holy love" that rises to heaven. Songs ("sacred lays") become "the great Creator's praise," and on Judgment Day the "Grand Chorus" shall end with the trumpet call on high. Dryden's paean to music is itself a musical ode, echoing the sounds of several instruments, and music, attributed to divinity, becomes exalted and, for listeners, the more exalting.

Colonial America, like early England, sounds notes of religious and devotional fervor in its verse. Anne Bradstreet gives a dialogue between the Flesh and the Spirit. Disdaining temptations of earth, Spirit longs for the City of God, where are only Life's "waters sure" and pure and where "beauty shall be bright and clear" evermore. In "To My Dear and Loving Husband" she tells him, "The heavens reward thee manifold, I pray," and exhorts, "in love let's so persever" that after death "we may live ever."

Edward Taylor, like John Donne a religious minister, and strongly infleuenced by Donne and other "metaphysical" poets, wrote at the turn of the seventeenth century but was not known as a poet for over two hundred years after his death in 1729. Startling in metaphors and

similes, colloquial in style and diction, Taylor, like Donne, addresses Christ plainly and boldly, yet with respect of love, to intercede with God.

My Case is bad. Lord, be my Advocate.
My sin is red: I'm under God's Arrest.
Thou hast the Hint of Pleading; plead my State.
Although it's bad thy Plea will make it best.
If thou wilt plead my Case before the King:
I'll Waggon Loads of Love, and Glory bring.

The short, simple assertions, driving home their sincerity, make up an outstanding stanza in the history of poetry of religious humility and faith. "Huswifery" likens Taylor's life to that of a spinning wheel for cloth, which he asks the Lord to make complete in a garment of "Understanding, Will, /Affections, Judgment, Conscience, Memory" until "mine apparell shall display before yee/That I am Clothed in Holy robes for glory."

In England, Alexander Pope's "The Universal Prayer" praises the Creator as "Great First Cause," "Father of All," yet the virtues ascribed to worship are humanistic rather than divine." Still there is the humble plea, echoed since the Gospels: "Teach me to feel another's woe, /To hide the fault I see;/That mercy I to others show, /That mercy show to me." In "An Essay on Man" Pope wrote, "presume not God to scan;/The proper study of Mankind is Man." Though a Roman Catholic, Pope expresses the rationalistic view of mankind in its relation to divinity. As Milton was the last great Renaissance poet, pondering heaven and hell and "the ways of God to men," Pope, the greatest of the Neoclassical poets, is often at his best in satire, whose end is the improvement of the individual and society through

ridicule of ignorance, folly and vice. In this vein, the most memorable verse satire by Jonathan Swift is the mocking "Day of Judgment," in which God comes not to reward or punish perversely "blind" mankind but only to dismiss it from His sight forever.

At mid-century Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churcyard" honors the humble and deserving, obscure dead. Including himself as one such, in his "Epitaph" at the end, the poet is grateful to Heaven for gifts of active sympathy and friendship. As to his final merits and frailties, they abide, as with those of all the dead, "in trembling Hope" in "The Bosom of his Father and his God." It is the poem's universality of meaning and values that Samuel Johnson praised: "It abounds with images which find a mirror in every mind, and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo." ("The Life of Gray," *Works of the English Poets*)

Johnson himself, though not renowned as a poet, composed a conclusion to his Juvenalian satire "The Vanity of Human Wishes" that is a kind of credo and guide to the Christian humanist in his need for help from divinity. The long poem names and exemplifies many vain and dangerous pursuits—for money, fame, power, beauty, even learning, companionship and love. All human goals prove false and fleeting. Even good health of mind and body must suffer loss. Then what to pray for? So far the spirit of the poem has been dark and heavy, the verses often difficult and prosaic; but, as T. S. Eliot has said, "if the last twenty-six lines are not poetry, I confess I do not know where poetry is to be found." Johnson voices the reader's concern: must "no wishes rise, /No cries invoke the mercies of the skies?" Assuredly yes, but thus:

Still raise for good the supplicating voice,

But leave to Heaven the measure and the choice.
Safe in His power, whose eyes discern afar
The secret ambush of a specious prayer.
Implore His aid, in His decisions rest,
Secure, whate'er He gives, He gives the best.

Johnson reflects Christ's words that we should pray for our "good" as known by God, and accept this whatever it is. "In the Lord's Prayer, "Thy will be done on earth..."; and "forgive others." Material good?: "...our daily bread." But specific values and virtues are attainable:

Yet when the sense of sacred presence fires,
And strong devotion to the skies aspires,
Pour forth thy fervors for a healthful mind,
Obedient passions, and a will resigned;

If God sustains our body's health, so He should our mind's. So may our passions be controlled, our will acquiescent. And, if not for misguided, worldly love, we may pray "For love, which scarce collective man can fill;..." Our true need for love cannot be satisfied even by all mankind. We may pray "For patience sovereign o'er transmuted ill;..." The virtue Patience rules calmly through ills of time and chance. And we may pray "For faith, that panting for a happier seat, /Counts death kind Nature's signal of retreat." The trumpet call signaling death is welcomed by faith that longs for happiness with God. All these goods, the poet concludes, "the laws of Heaven ordain, /These goods He grants, who grants the power to gain;/With these celestial Wisdom calms the mind, /And makes the happiness she does not find." Johnson found life to be "a state in which much is to be endured, and little is to be enjoyed." Yet such verses stay to call us to a way to peace and happiness that is

attainable here from a source on high, in a wisdom gained through virtues found and embodied in religious philosophy.

In contrast to Johnson's calm fervor and stately rhythms are the impassioned verses of Christopher Smart and William Cowper. During periods of religious monomania Smart exults in certitude of salvation. In an asylum he writes "Jubilate Agno," celebrating in one long section his cat Jeoffry, who "if he meets another cat...will kiss her in kindness, ""lets one mouse in seven escape," "knows that God is his Saviour," and "is hated by hypocrite and miser." "A Song to David" rings out in many of its fourscore stanzas with adoration by the Old Testament poet to God in his many attributes, while Smart in turn praises David as pious, valiant, sublime, strong, serene, constant, sweet. Strong are the horse, vulture, lion and whale. "But stronger still, in earth and air," says Smart of David, "And in the sea, the man of prayer." The last nine stanzas swell and blaze in groups of three as Smart exclaims how Beauteous and how Precious and how Glorious are David and God and His Son. At last, "Glorious—more glorious is the crown／Of Him that brought salvation down／By meekness, called thy Son;..." Between Donne and Hopkins, no poet shines so bright in religious lyricism as does Smart.

Cowper's religious mania was depressive, as he believed he was spiritually lost, and he underwent several attempts at suicide and bouts of insanity. In "Hatred and Vengeance, my Eternal Portion" he feels "Damned below Judas: more abhorred than he was,..." or again, "Buried above ground." In the last year of his life (1800) he writes "The Castaway," of one drowning, abandoned at sea. The man's despair of help in his last black hour alone is sharply portrayed, and when the victim has sunk, the poet more than identifies with him:

"snatched from all effectual aid, /We perished, each alone:/But I beneath a rougher sea, /And whelmed in deeper gulfs than he." Though joyless himself, Cowper wrote also poems that were entertaining and instructive, and he died honored.

Religious verses of the eighteenth century appeared also in the hymns, or Divine Songs, of which Cowper, ironically, wrote two of the most inspiring and popular ones of his age, "Walking with God" and "Light Shining Out of Darkness." The Wesley brothers, John and Charles, were prolific writers of hymns that were sung at Methodist meetings, most notably Charles's "Morning Hymn" (Christ, whose glory fills the skies") and "In Temptation" (Jesu, lover of my soul"). The best-known of the devotional songs, still a favorite in the Protestant services, may be that composed by the Calvinist clergyman Augustus Montague Toplady in 1775. Titled "A Living and Dying Prayer for the Holiest Believer in the World," the song is now familiar by the first phrase of its opening lines: "Rock of Ages, cleft for me, /Let me hide myself in thee!"

An irreverent and even satirical air concerning religion runs through certain poems by the Scottish Robert Burns. "In "Holy Willie's Prayer" the speaker imagines himself, surprised but unquestioning, at being among the saved in heaven. Willie is no paragon of virtue, as he recounts his adventures of "fleshly lust," but surely it is the drinkers, swearers and gamblers who are damned, instead. Praising the Lord's strange grace and justice, Willy moreover calls on Him to destroy those to whom Willy bears a grudge. The dramatic irony is laden with Burns's ridicule of the righteous of any sect who believe they are somehow saved regardless of their deeds while others who act differently are damned. The satire also cuts at the poet, as Burns was

no model of sexual restraint. More straightforward admonition that we let God alone to judge comes in "Address to the Unco Guid [Uncommonly Good], Or the Rigidly Righteous." We do not know *why* others act as they do, nor "How far perhaps they rue it." Therefore, "Who made the heart, 'tis *He* alone/Decidedly can try us, while "what's *done* we partly may compute, /But know not what's *resisted.*"

William Blake's religious tones and words are borne sometimes in the voice of a child and sometimes in that of a scathing ironist. In "The Lamb" from *Songs of Innocence* a child praises and rejoices in the lamb, in himself, and in the Christ child (biblically, the Lamb of God): "I a child, and thou a lamb, /We are called by his name./Little Lamb, God bless thee!/Little Lamb, God bless thee!" Whereas in "The Tyger" (*Songs of Experience*) the creature of such force and "fearful symmetry" and "deadly terrors" is addressed only in urgent, pounding questions that are unanswered—perhaps, shockingly, unanswerable. The child can identify the lamb, but complex, even dreadful experience, creation itself, What god "Dare frame" that? The mature voice asks helplessly.

In "London" the speaker sees and knows all too much, the woe and weakness in every face, and hears cries and sighs of fear, despair and anger. The chimney-sweeper, soldier and harlot with blind infant are glaring condemnations of religion and government (Church and Palace) and the institution of marriage (Marriage hearse). It is hard to say if the speaker feels more sorrow at the scene than indignation, but the blend of feelings is oppressive, the effect achieved by the many repetitions in terse lines, the searing images, and the trenchant diction in the last stanza ("curse," "Blasts," "blights," "plagues," "hearse").

Religion at century's end is reduced to the "blackening Church," hypocrisy and indifference. Yet let us rather end on a note of light and hope from Blake's "Morning" (1800): "Sweet Mercy leads me on:/With soft repentant moan/I see the break of day...The Sun is freed from fears/And with soft grateful tears/Ascends the sky."

These jottings in an impossible brief survey on this topic have many omissions, both in entire poems missed and, within poems mentioned, too much left unsaid. It is hoped only that overall the reader may have gained some sense of the nature and variety of English religious verse to the year 1800. Many are the poets who compose such verse, numbering among them the best. Though Shakespeare is not a religious poet, his dramatic verse contains numerous references to religion and the supernatural. Some of his most sympathetic characters invoke or affirm divinity or the gods, and trust in Providence. "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will." Characters may rise to the angelic state or sink to the demonic. They may sin and repent, and they pray. Many of the poems mentioned here are of prayer, prayers of honor and praise, of petition and gratitude, of remorse, sometimes almost of complaint. And we have seen at times the abuses of religion and its unworthy ministers criticized. English religious poems are a strange fare, nourishing to some tastes, unpalatable to others', too skimpy for some and too much for others. Such poetry retains its course in the tradition, running strongly or weakly, but from its beginnings thirteen centuries ago springing forth with a vigor and clarity that augurs its continuance in a new millenium.

Note :

1. All of the poems referred to may be found in one or more current standard anthologies of English poetry, including the following. *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature*, Vol. I, ed. Frank Kermode *et al.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1973. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 3rd Edition, Vol. I, ed. M. H. Abrams *et al.* New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1974. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Major Authors Edition, ed. M. H. Adrams *et al.* New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1962. *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 3rd Edition, ed. Alexander W. Allison *et al.* New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1985. *The New Oxford Book of American Verse*, ed. Richard Ellmann. New York: Oxford University Press, 1976. *American Literature: The Makers and the Making*, Vol. I, ed. Cleanth Brooks *et al.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973. *The New Oxford Book of Eighteenth-Century Verse*, ed. Roger Lonsdale. New York: Oxford University Press, 1984, 1987. *Eighteenth-Century English Literature*, ed. Geoffrey Tillotson, *et. al.* New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969.