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Charles Wesley and the Line of Piety: Antecedents of the Hymns in English Devotional Verse*

James Dale

This article makes no claims to definitiveness and exclusiveness, being rather intended to suggest lines of inquiry and provoke discussion. I want to suggest that one important literary aspect of a complete edition of Charles Wesley's works is the tradition out of which he came and in which he worked.

The phrase "the line of piety" is based on the title of F. R. Leavis' influential essay, "The Line of Wit," in which he presents a tradition of poetry embodying "a wide range of varied and maturely valued interests that are present implicitly in the wit, . . . the finer wisdom of a ripe civilization. . . . The line . . . runs from Ben Jonson (and Donne) through Carew and Marvell to Pope."¹ Much the same tradition exists in devotional poetry, and Charles Wesley is as much an inheritor of this explicitly religious tradition as Pope is of the Jonsonian one; he did not suddenly emerge out of a vacuum and start producing striking and effective hymns.

Whence do poets derive their idiom—the characteristic turns of phrase, the reiterated concepts, the diction, and rhythm? There are invariably antecedents; the relationship of Blake's *Songs of Innocence* to Isaac Watts's *Divine and Moral Songs for the Use of Children* is, for instance, well known. The problem with working out the various elements which contributed to the formation of Wesley's poetic consciousness is that there are so many. The massive figure of Milton, and especially the Milton of *Paradise Lost*, inevitably looms very large in any attempt to account for shaping influences, but I have already tried to say something about Miltonic connections with Charles Wesley.²

In addition, there are any number of seventeenth-century minor poets whose work might well have appealed to Wesley. Here, for instance, is a passage from Thomas Beedome's "The Petition," in his *Poems Divine, and Humane*³ (London, 1641):

But I am dust, at most, but man,
That dust extended to a span:
A span indeed, for in thy hand,
Stretcht or contracted, Lord, I stand.

*This article by James Dale is reprinted, with corrections, from *The Charles Wesley Society Newsletter*, Volume 1, Number 2 (July, 1991), 3–11.

¹F. R. Leavis, *Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1936), 28–29.

²See *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 39–42 (henceforth cited as *Collection*), and my paper for the Canadian Methodist Historical Society on "Milton, Charles Wesley, and the Gospel of Love."

³I am grateful to my former student Mrs. Joyce Whittle for introducing me to the poems of Beedome—and those of John Collop (1656), Edmund Elis (1655 and 1659), and Thomas Phillipott (1641 and 1646).

This might have been suggested to Beedome, an admirer of Donne,⁴ by the eighth line of “Crucifying,” the fifth sonnet in Donne’s sequence, *La Corona*, “Measuring self-life’s infinity to a span,”⁵ but it is Beedome’s language rather than Donne’s⁶ that points towards Wesley’s “Our God contracted to a span,/Incomprehensibly made man.”⁷ (It is only fair to say that Frank Baker points to a more obvious origin of “Our God contracted to a span” in “the last four words of Samuel Wesley’s ‘Hymn to God the Son.’”⁸)

More to the point, though, is the admiration known and shown by both Charles and John Wesley for George Herbert. Any lover of Herbert’s poetry may well cringe at some of the adaptations of him in the *Hymns and Sacred Poems* of 1739,⁹ but they do at least indicate how important he is to the Wesleys. They (for I assume collaboration between John and Charles here, though John’s was almost certainly the dominant hand) “regularize” the versification and try to clarify the concepts and diction, much as Pope had done earlier with his (to modern readers) extraordinary performance, *The Satires of Dr. Donne Versified*. Occasionally the revision is for purposes of doctrinal emphasis as well as literary decorum, as in the rendering of “The Agony.” The third and final stanza of Herbert’s poem, one of his most poignant, reads:

Who knows not Love, let him assay
And taste that juice, which on the crosse a pike
Did set again abroach; then let him say
If ever he did taste the like.
Love is that liquour sweet and most divine,
Which my God feels as bloude; but I, as wine.¹⁰

The Wesley version is:

Wouldst thou know Love? behold the God,
The Man, who for thy ransom died:

⁴See his Epigram 20, “To the memory of his honoured friend Master John Donne.”

⁵*Complete English Poems*, ed. A. J. Smith (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 308.

⁶It must be pointed out that there are several similar uses of the word “span” in Herbert’s poetry, notably in the first stanza of “The Pulley”:

When God at first made man,
Having a glasse of blessings standing by;
Let us (said he) poure on him all we can:
Let the worlds riches, which dispersed lie,
Contract into a span.

The English Poems of George Herbert, ed. C. A. Patrides (London: Dent, 1974), 166.

⁷*The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, 13 vols., ed. George Osborn (London: Wesleyan-Methodist Conference, 1868–1872), 4:109 (*Hymns for the Nativity of our Lord*).

⁸*Charles Wesley’s Verse: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (London: Epworth, 1988), 33.

⁹See the *Poetical Works*, 1:1–192, and F. E. Hutchinson’s article, “John Wesley and George Herbert,” *London Quarterly and Holborn Review* 161 (1936): 439–455.

¹⁰Patrides, p. 58.

Go taste the sacred fount that flow'd
 Fast-streaming from His wounded side!
 Love is that liquor most divine,
 God feels as blood, but I as wine.¹¹

Perhaps it is John Wesley's passion for abridgment that shortens Herbert's fifty words to a more concise forty,¹² but the most significant thing here is the evangelical intrusion of "The Man, who for thy ransom died," characteristically Wesleyan phraseology which skillfully and pointedly changes the thrust of the poem. Herbert has been taken into the Wesleyan system.

Still, Wesleyanized though he may have been, Herbert remains a part of Charles Wesley's consciousness, so much so that ten years after the publication of the 1739 *Hymns and Sacred Poems* Herbert's poem "Vertue" was to spring to mind on Charles Wesley's wedding day:

Sat., April 8th [1749].

"Sweet day! so cool, so calm, so bright,
 The bridal of the earth and sky."

Not a cloud was to be seen from morning till night. I rose at four; spent three hours and an half in prayer, or singing. . . . At eight I led MY SALLY to church.¹³

Another poem that seems to have stayed with Charles Wesley to telling effect is "The Altar." This, one of Herbert's famous "pattern poems" (the other one being "Easter Wings"), needs to be quoted in full:

A BROKEN ALTAR, Lord, thy servant reares,
 Made of a heart, and cemented with teares:
 Whose parts are as thy hand did frame;
 No workmans tool hath touch'd the same.
 A HEART alone
 Is such a stone,
 As nothing but
 Thy pow'r doth cut.
 Wherefore each part
 Of my hard heart
 Meets in this frame,
 To praise thy Name:
 That, if I chance to hold my peace,
 These stones to praise thee may not cease.
 O let thy blessed SACRIFICE be mine,
 And sanctifie this ALTAR to be thine.¹⁴

¹¹*Poetical Works*, 1:27.

¹²In the second stanza, Herbert's "a man so wrung with pains" is shortened to "A Man so pain'd."

¹³Thomas Jackson, ed., *The Journal of the Rev. Charles Wesley, M.A.* [1849] (Kansas City, Missouri: Beacon Hill Press, 1980), 2:55.

¹⁴Patrides, 47.

Recollection of the poem may account for Charles Wesley's penchant for preaching on Jeremiah 23:29, "Is not my word like as a fire? saith the LORD; and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces,"¹⁵ and for "Strike with thy love's resistless stroke,/ And break this heart of stone!"¹⁶ as well as this powerful opening stanza:

Come, O thou all-victorious Lord,
Thy power to us make known;
Strike with the hammer of thy word,
And break these hearts of stone.¹⁷

A more complex derivation may be suggested for the much-loved "O thou who camest from above," No. 318 in the *Collection of Hymns* of 1780 but originating in the 1762 *Short Hymns* as a commentary on Leviticus 6:13: "The fire shall ever be burning upon the altar; it shall never go out." The annotations in Appendix C of the 1983 Wesley Works edition of the *Collection* demonstrate the astonishing richness of scriptural allusions in the hymn—no fewer than twenty-four in only sixteen lines!—but it is quite likely that Herbert's concept of the heart as an altar also lies behind "O thou who camest from above," and what about these opening lines from Herbert's "Love II"?

Immortall Heat, O let thy greater flame
Attract the lesser to it: let those fires,
Which shall consume the world, first make it tame;
And kindle in our hearts such true desires,

As may consume our lusts, and make thee way.
Then shall our hearts pant thee; then shall our brain
All her invention on thine Altar lay,
And there in hymnes send back thy fire again.¹⁸

The flame to be kindled on the altar of the heart is surely adumbrated here.

There are other affinities of concept and language between Herbert and Wesley,¹⁹ but I have time at present for only one more interesting possible affiliation. Though assertions are sometimes made that Herbert's theology verges on Calvinism (despite his associations with the "Arminian nunnery" of Little Gidding), one can see in several poems evidence of that seventeenth-century Laudian High Church Arminianism which reappeared and persisted in the Wesley family in the eighteenth century. One such poem is "The Invitation"; here is the final stanza:

¹⁵See my article, "Some Echoes of Charles Wesley's Hymns in His Journal," *London Quarterly and Holborn Review* 134 (1959): 336–344.

¹⁶*Collection*, No. 99, lines 15–16.

¹⁷No. 82 in the *Collection*.

¹⁸Patrides, 73.

¹⁹Not least the intense biblicism of each author, though Donne's *Divine Poems* are even more packed with scriptural allusion than Herbert's *The Temple*, "Good Friday 1613" being a particularly striking example.

Lord, I have invited all,
 And I shall
 Still invite, still call to thee:
 For it seems but just and right
 In my sight,
 Where is all, there all should be.²⁰

The connections are obvious to anyone acquainted with Charles Wesley's vehemently Arminian *Hymns on God's Everlasting Love* of 1741 and 1742. In this stanza from "Let earth and heaven agree," one has the same repetition of "all," the same use of it as a rhyme-word, the same use of "call," though it serves only as an internal rhyme in Herbert:

O for a trumpet-voice
 On all the world to call,
 To bid their hearts rejoice
 In him who died for all!
 For all my Lord was crucified,
 For all, for all my Saviour died!²¹

"Come, sinners to the gospel feast"²² is Charles Wesley's version of "The Invitation"; it might almost be called, in the eighteenth-century sense of the word, his imitation of it, though it is based more closely on the "great supper" parable of Luke 14 than is Herbert's poem. The full twenty-four-stanza hymn is in effect a sermon, "exhorting, and beseeching to return to God," and culminates in the preacher's plea,

This is the Time, no more delay,
 This is the Acceptable Day,
 Come in, this Moment, at his Call,
 And live for Him who died for All.²³

Herbert, too, was Preacher, as well as Priest and Poet, as Saad El-Gabalawy points out,²⁴ and this is perhaps the strongest affinity between the two poets. They are constantly preaching, to themselves as well as to others.

I am now constrained to jump forward to the end of the seventeenth century, to 1696 in fact, when *Poems on Several Occasions* was published by Philomela.

²⁰Patrides, 185.

²¹Collection, No. 33, lines 37–42.

²²Collection, No. 2 (drastically edited there by John Wesley down to nine stanzas from its original twenty-four. It was originally published in the *Hymns for Those that seek, and those that have Redemption in the Blood of Jesus Christ* of 1747, and is in the *Poetical Works*, 4:274–277. A much better text is in Frank Baker's superb anthology, *Representative Verse of Charles Wesley* (London: Epworth, 1962), 98–102.

²³Representative Verse, 102.

²⁴"George Herbert's Affinities with the Homiletical Mode," *Humanities Association [Canada] Bulletin*, 21 (1970): iii, 38–48.

The pious and accomplished nightingale was in fact Elizabeth Singer, still in her early twenties (she was born in 1674, the same year as her friend Isaac Watts), part of a literary circle which for a time included the elder Samuel Wesley. She came of a staunch Dissenting family from the west of England, but knew Bishop Ken, the saintly nonjuror, in his later years at Longleat. Her marriage to Thomas Rowe was cut short by his early death, and her literary and religious fame dates largely from the works of her years of widowhood (1715–1737),²⁵ and from the posthumous publication of *Devout Exercises of the Heart* (1737) and the *Miscellaneous Works*, published in two volumes in 1739 with prefatory verses by the Countess of Hertford and others, and a memoir.²⁶ John Wesley admired her poetry sufficiently to include a great deal of it in his ill-starred anthology of 1744, *Moral and Sacred Poems*, and Charles's hymns are so full of reminiscences of Rowe that merely listing his obvious indebtednesses would take up a great deal of space. He might even be accused of plagiarism, so close are the resemblances of language and of spiritual attitude.

However, the main importance of the Rowe connection is not how far and in what sense Charles Wesley may be called a plagiarist. Rather, it helps to solve the question as to where and how he acquired his distinctive poetic idiom, allowing for the links to Herbert and others. Wesley's Whitsunday conversion in 1738 does indeed, as Frank Baker says, seem "to have released his powers of evangelical verse,"²⁷ but had he already been reading Mrs. Rowe? With his changed outlook, he almost certainly did read the posthumous *Miscellaneous Works* of 1739, and examples of near-identical phraseology can be found almost at random. Here, for instance, is one of Rowe's hymns as given in *Moral and Sacred Poems*:²⁸

I

In vain the dusky Night retires,
And sullen Shadows fly:
In vain the Morn with Purple Light
Adorns the Eastern Sky:

II

In vain the gaudy Rising Sun
The wide Horrizon [*sic*] gilds,
Comes glitt'ring o'er the Silver Streams,
And cheers the Dewy Fields:

²⁵"Upon the Death of Her Husband," published with the second edition of Pope's *Eloisa to Abelard* (1720); *Friendship in Death* (1728); *Letters Moral and Entertaining, in Prose and Verse*: Part I (1729), Part II (1731), Part III (1733).

²⁶See Roger Lonsdale, ed., *Verses by Eighteenth-Century Women: An Oxford Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 45–46, for an excellent summary of her life and career.

²⁷*Representative Verse*, 3.

²⁸1:215–216.

III

In vain, dispensing Vernal Sweets
 The Morning Breezes play;
 In vain the Birds with cheerful Songs
 Salute the New-born Day:

IV

In vain! unless my Saviour's Face
 These gloomy Clouds controul,
 And dissipate the sullen Shades
 That press my drooping Soul.

V

O! visit then thy Servant, LORD,
 With Favour from on high:
 Arise, my bright immortal Sun!
 And all these Shades will die.

VI

When, when shall I behold thy Face
 All radiant and serene,
 Without these envious dusky Clouds
 That make a Veil between?

VII

When shall that long-expected Day
 Of sacred Vision be,
 When my impatient Soul shall make
 A near Approach to thee?

Perhaps a first point to make about this rather diffuse hymn is that it is in conventional Common Meter, and that Rowe herself has an obvious debt to the familiar paraphrase of Psalm 42 in Tate and Brady's *New Version* of 1696, where the seventh and eighth lines are: "O when shall I behold thy face,/Thou Majesty divine?" But is there not also an obvious link with one of the best-known of all Charles Wesley's hymns, "Christ, whose Glory fills the Skies," first published in 1740? "Dark and Cheerless is the Morn/Unaccompanied by Thee,"²⁹ sings Charles, in effect summarizing Rowe, whose fifth stanza he virtually quotes in "Visit then this Soul of mine" ("O! visit then thy Servant, LORD"). In addition, the opening lines of one of the 1745 *Nativity Hymns* suggest a close kinship with the fourth stanza:

²⁹I quote from the text in *Representative Verse*, 19.

Light of those whose dreary Dwelling
 Borders on the Shades of Death,
 Come, and by thy Love's revealing
 Dissipate the Clouds beneath.³⁰

It's not just that the words "shades," "dissipate," and "clouds" recur; the concepts are also much the same.

A poem in the *Miscellaneous Works* entitled "On Heaven"³¹ is in the form of a vision, suggesting perhaps the influence of Watts's "Give me the wings of faith to rise"; it includes several expressions which later appear in Wesley's hymns in appropriate contexts. For instance, the first of the hymns in the 1780 *Collection* under the heading "Describing Heaven" is the magnificent "How weak the thoughts and vain/Of self-deluding men!" first published in the 1750 *Hymns Occasioned by the Earthquake*. It includes a stanza which presumably generations of Methodists sang,³² while perhaps wondering what the strange word "amaranthine" meant:

Those amaranthine bowers,
 Unalienably ours,
 Bloom, our infinite reward,
 Rise, our permanent abode,
 From the founded world prepared,
 Purchased by the blood of God!³³

In my footnote on "amaranthine" in the Wesley Works edition I go on at great length about Wesley's source being Young or Pope, rather than Milton, to whom the reader was referred in a note in the 1798 edition, but I didn't know about Rowe, who has in "On Heaven" ". . . those blest shades, and amaranthine bowers."³⁴ On the same page in Rowe, the spirits of the blessed "view/The wonders of the beatific sight," the same phraseology used in "Come on, my Partners in Distress": "The Beatific Sight [*not* the Beatific Vision]/Shall fill the Heavenly Courts with Praise."³⁵

But Charles Wesley does not merely echo his sources; he also transforms them. Rowe has a not very impressive poem on "The translation of Elijah" which includes the sentence: "Below the glimm'ring moon's pale regency/They leave."³⁶ It is not impossible to believe that in the exuberant "How happy are

³⁰*Representative Verse*, 63.

³¹*Miscellaneous Works in Prose and Verse of Mrs. Elizabeth Rowe* (London, 1739), 1:52–55 (henceforth cited as *Miscellaneous Works*).

³²Rather astonishingly, it survived until *The Methodist Hymn-Book* (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1904), where it is numbered 847, but the "amaranthine bowers" stanza is omitted. It is not in *The Methodist Hymn-Book* (1933) or in *Hymns and Psalms* (1983).

³³*Collection*, No. 65, lines 25–30.

³⁴*Miscellaneous Works*, 1:54.

³⁵*Representative Verse*, 112. (The hymn first appeared in the 1749 *Hymns and Sacred Poems*.)

³⁶*Miscellaneous Works*, 1:58.

They/Who the Saviour obey,” from the 1749 *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, Rowe’s moon thought becomes:

I rode on the Sky
 (Freely justified I!)
 Nor envied Elijah his Seat;
 My Soul mounted higher
 In a Chariot of Fire,
 And the Moon it was under my Feet.³⁷

Similarly, Wesley transforms Rowe’s “Open the boundless treasures of thy grace,/And let me once more see thy lovely face”³⁸ into:

O, disclose Thy lovely face,
 Quicken all my drooping powers!
 Gasps my fainting soul for grace,
 As a thirsty land for showers.³⁹

A final point, and an important one, needs to be made in this necessarily brief survey of Charles Wesley’s poetic relationship with Elizabeth Rowe. The stanza by Wesley partially quoted above, “O, disclose Thy lovely face,” might merit Watts’s censure in his Dedication to Rowe’s *Devout Exercises of the Heart*, published posthumously in 1737: “. . . some of her expressions [are] a little too rapturous, and too near akin to the language of the mystical writers.”⁴⁰ It sounds uncommonly like John Wesley’s objections to his brother’s “mystical” tendencies, and indeed not only is Rowe rapturous, but she is also given to expressions of grief, to yearning for a God who seems to be hiding his face, to longing for death, which will free her from sin and pain. Is it not possible that John was wrong about the supposed origins of Charles’s mysticism in William Law and the Moravians, when verse like this could have made a much more immediate impact on him, at a very impressionable stage in his life, just after his evangelical conversion?

Ah! why from my impatient eyes
 Dost thou thyself conceal,
 Whilst I in vain, in lonely shades,
 My restless pain reveal?⁴¹

³⁷*Representative Verse*, p. 103. The hymn was not included in the 1780 *Collection*, and when it did eventually appear in the Supplement to the 1876 Wesleyan book (No. 807) it was reduced to four stanzas from the original seven, and the “Elijah” stanza was omitted. *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists by the Rev. John Wesley, M.A. With a New Supplement* (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1876).

³⁸“Psalm LXIII” in *Miscellaneous Works*, 1:125; cf. 1:198: “These eyes have never seen thy lovely face” (“Devout Soliloquies in Blank Verse,” VI, line 1.)

³⁹*Poetical Works*, 1:254 (from *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, 1740).

⁴⁰p. iv in the 1777 reissue.

⁴¹“Tell me, O thou whom my soul loveth . . . , Cant. i. 7,” stanza V (*Miscellaneous Works*, 1:69.)

Poetic consciousness is a very complex matter, and I have only begun to scratch the surface here. It would be interesting, not only to look more closely at Wesley's affinities with Herbert and Rowe, but also to see if, for instance, he read and was influenced by the biblical mysticism in the poetry of that staunch Welsh Anglican, Henry Vaughan. What, if anything, did Isaac Watts (a poet of considerable repute in the eighteenth century, it must be remembered) do for him? What about contemporary hymn-writers, like Doddridge and even the arch-Calvinist Toplady? We need to know more, and the field is a vast one.