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Fred Pratt Green

A Latter-Day Charles Wesley?*

Maureen Harris

Why is it that critics see similarities between the work of Wesley and Pratt Green?

Is it simply because both were ministers and both wrote hymns? Or are there more substantial links between the work of these two men? As one might expect, both writers display a very powerful emphasis on the life and death of Jesus Christ and its purpose. The birth, death, resurrection, and ascension are highlighted by both writers, as is the effect that the life of Christ has upon the world, both in the general and in the particular. For both hymn-writers the Holy Communion is central.

To give form to this paper I am focusing firstly on the church festivals, as Wesley did throughout his work, especially in the texts of *Hymns on the Great Festivals* (1746). There will be a discussion of hymns written for each season by both writers, hymns which display similarities and differences and which show Wesley's possible influence on Pratt Green's work. The final part of this paper is a comparison of the poetry of the hymn-writers and how their work differs.

As a child, Pratt Green lived for a time in an area where the only church near enough for the family to walk to was an Anglican church. Thus Pratt Green attended this church for some time. Like Wesley, as a child Pratt Green's young mind was filled with phrases from the Book of Common Prayer and the Bible, something which is no longer possible. This literary heritage becomes internalized. School days with Shakespeare texts and Milton's poetry leave us all with turns of phrase that become so much part of ourselves that we cannot readily identify their origin. Wesley, and later Pratt Green, are borrowing, improving, restating texts such as the Bible and Book of Common Prayer almost subconsciously. So in trying to trace echoes of Wesley in Pratt Green's work, it is important to remember where the literary heritage of both lies. Pratt Green was a Wesleyan Methodist prior to 1932 and his weekly services included Wesley's hymns which became part of his literary heritage to be absorbed into the mind and recast, and reproduced, perhaps unwittingly, in the 1960s always with a different twist or turn. T. S. Eliot's remark "Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different," is relevant here because Wesley and Pratt Green do just this.

*Most of the Charles Wesley hymn texts cited in this article are quoted from *Hymns and Psalms* (London: Methodist Publishing House, 1983), *The Methodist Hymn-Book* (London: Methodist Publishing House, 1933), and may include some editorial differences from first printings.

Hymns for the Christian Year

I begin with Advent and Christmas. Wesley's "Come thou long-expected Jesus" is found in *Hymns for the Nativity of our Lord* (1745). It contains much Old Testament imagery, e.g., Israel's strength and consolation refers to Exodus 15:2 and Ps. 18:2; "Dear desire of every nation" refers to Malachi 3:12. Wesley alludes to various Old Testament passages but Pratt Green, writing for a generation that doesn't know its Bible or its history, uses simply "prophets" here with his Advent hymn "Long ago, prophets knew," where he writes in stanza 1:

Long ago, prophets knew
Christ would come, born a Jew.¹

It is the expected Messiah, prophesied in the Old Testament. The messianic images of hope, a ruler, a kingdom expressed in the Wesley hymn, are found here in Pratt Green whose last line "We will make him welcome" brings up to date the joyful expectancy. Pratt Green just gives us narrative here but Wesley's hymn takes an inward sense with "Joy of every longing heart"; "Rule in all our hearts alone"; "hope of every contrite heart" which makes the Incarnation for Wesley a birth of Christ's love in our hearts.

The refrain of Pratt Green's hymn makes excellent use of repetition:

Ring, bells, ring, ring, ring!
Sing, choirs, sing, sing, sing!
When he comes,
When he comes,
*Who will make him welcome?*²

This last chorus of Pratt Green's hymn takes the tune and exploits it. Hope of Israel is no longer a physical but a spiritual expectancy and the Old Testament prophecy has been fulfilled by the New Testament account of the Incarnation. For the hymn-writers, we are the children of God (children of Israel). Israel has become "us," "our hearts" are those which "long" for Christ; both writers blending the Old Testament prophecies with the birth of Christ, each applying its relevance in his own time. Stanza two contains the lines:

God in time, God in man,
This is God's timeless plan.

This is a very interesting use of the word "timeless," contrasting as it does with "the time expected" in stanza 3 and reminds us of T. S. Eliot's line in "Burnt Norton":

Only through time time is conquered.³

¹*The Hymns and Ballads of Fred Pratt Green* (London: Stainer and Bell, 1982), No. 17, p. 25.

²*Ibid.*

³*The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969). *Burnt Norton: The Four Quartets*, l.ll.1-5, p. 171.

There is also a close intertextuality between “Long ago, prophets knew” and “Hark! the herald angels sing.” In Pratt Green’s hymn we find the words:

Born himself of woman
 God divinely human
 . . .
 Mary hail! Though afraid,
 She believed, she obeyed.
 In her womb, God is laid.

Compare Wesley’s words:

Offspring of a virgin’s womb.
 . . .
 Veiled in flesh the Godhead see!⁴

To heighten God’s self-imposed limitation in the Incarnation and the place of the Virgin Mary in the story, the physical humanity of Christ is stressed.

Again, in “Glory be to God on high” he writes:

Emptied of his majesty,
 Of his dazzling glories shorn,
 Being’s source begins to be,
 And God himself is born!⁵

All this emphasizes the paradox at the center of the doctrine. This paradox of the powerful becoming weak, the mighty/the physically frail, the intangible/the physical, and the Creator/the created, is the marvel that is the birth of Christ. It is this great paradox, this truth that Wesley and Pratt Green express in their hymns:

Being’s source begins to be,
 And God himself is born!⁶

This becomes in Pratt Green’s simple words: “The Word is born this very night”⁷ where the concept of the Eternal Word is a restating of the opening of St. John’s Gospel. This mystery of God’s infinity becoming finite is found not only in hymns of the Incarnation but elsewhere.

I turn from the Advent and Christmas hymns to some on the Passion. This paradox Pratt Green repeats with economical diction in his Passion hymn “Jesus in the olive grove” (*Hymns and Psalms* [1983], 169) with the phrases:

God in man . . .
 God as Man— . . .

⁴John and Charles Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739), 207.

⁵*Hymns and Psalms* (London: Methodist Publishing House, 1983), 101.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷*The Hymns and Ballads of Fred Pratt Green*, No. 31, p. 42.

This Passion hymn is also reminiscent of Wesley in other ways. Pratt Green's hymn starts with graphic word pictures of the scenes in Holy Week; the olive grove, the flickering torches, the shadows, sounds of approaching men. The hymn moves with speed, achieved by simple language and short lines which seem to emphasize the inevitability of the cross. Then the hymn changes from narration to reflection:

How much darker must it be
For a God to see and care
That we perish in despair?

The answer comes in the next stanza:

It is God himself who dies!
God in man shall set us free
God as Man—and only he.

reminding us of Wesley's "'Tis mystery all; the Immortal dies!"

The final stanza of Pratt Green's hymn, like Wesley's hymns, is a dedication and a commitment:

Let him claim us for his own;
We will serve as best we can
Such a God and such a Man!

Furthermore, "Jesus in the olive grove" is also similar to "And can it be . . ."⁸ in its use of fleeting word pictures. Wesley uses phrases like "I woke, the dungeon filled with light"; "my chains fell off"; which remind us of both the release of Paul and Peter from prison. These are passing references, just as are Pratt Green's glimpses of the Passion scenes. Both hymns move towards the concluding stanza where Pratt Green's line:

Let him claim us for his own,

reminds us of Wesley's words:

And claim the crown through Christ, my own,

which affirms the claiming possession (the "interest in the Savior's blood"). The allusion to Romans 8 here, "There is therefore now no condemnation" is obvious.

Pratt Green's hymn is also interesting because it follows Wesley's portrayal in "God of unexampled grace" (*Hymns and Psalms*, 166) of a suffering God. Neither Wesley nor Pratt Green shies away from the physical description of the terrible suffering of Christ, in spite of the difficulties of accepting a suffering God. In stanza 3 Wesley states:

See him stretched on yonder cross,
And crushed beneath our load!

⁸*Hymns and Psalms* (1983), 216.

These lines not only remind us of the pain but attribute to us the weight of crushing the physical body; we are responsible for Christ's pain through our sin. Similarly, Pratt Green writes:

Innocent and guilty down
In a flood of blood and sweat.⁹

Both writers force us to think of the blood from his hands and side, and the sweat from his extreme agony. This last phrase is surely a reference to "sweat of blood" from Wesley in "Would Jesus have the sinner die?"¹⁰

Thou loving, all-atoning Lamb,
Thee—by thy painful agony,
Thy sweat of blood, thy grief and shame,
Thy cross and passion on the tree,
Thy precious death and life—I pray:
Take all, take all my sins away!

In the hymn, "Lo, he comes with clouds descending,"¹¹ Wesley presents a transformation of the Passion into Christ's final glory.

Every eye shall now behold him
Robed in dreadful majesty
Those who set at nought and sold him
Pierced and nailed him to the tree
Deeply wailing
Shall the true Messiah see.

With his use of "dreadful majesty," Wesley is more severe than Pratt Green who also does this in "To mock your reign, O dearest Lord,"¹² where he describes the soldiers joking at Christ's condition; he points out man's inability to see the truth.

In each stanza of this hymn the last four lines answer the first four; the crown of thorns becomes the crown of glory; the purple cloak, the robe of mercy thrown round us; the sceptered reed in the grim charade of the soldiers becomes a symbol of God's power and eternal kingdom.

Although Wesley's hymn was intended primarily as one of the hymns in *Hymns of Intercession for All Mankind*¹³ under the heading "Thy Kingdom come," his "robed in dreadful majesty" is a direct reminder of the purple cloak and "Saviour, take the power and glory" reminds us that these words were first spoken to mock Christ. Both writers are using the contrast of earthly Passion

⁹*Hymns and Psalms* (1983), 169, stz. 4.

¹⁰*Hymns and Psalms* (1983), 185.

¹¹*Hymns and Psalms* (1983), 241.

¹²*Hymns and Ballads of Fred Pratt Green*, No. 32, p. 43.

¹³Bristol: Printed by E. Farley, 1758.

with Christ's ultimate victory over death and the uplifting to the cross has become the raising to the high eternal throne. The idea is further expressed in the final line of "Pray for the Church, afflicted and oppressed" (*Hymns and Psalms*, 556), where Pratt Green writes: "The crown of thorns that signifies his reign."

Here the helplessness and suffering seen at the crucifixion are the signifiers of power and triumph, the external dressing of majesty, like the orb and scepter at a coronation. The earthly association of power and might are turned upside down by the equating of helplessness with power, and a crown with an instrument of torture.

Hymns for Holy Communion

Other parallels can be seen between these writers in their treatment of the Sacrament. Both Wesley and Pratt Green stress its importance. Pratt Green's hymn (*Hymns and Psalms*, 700) which begins with

Lord, we have come at your own invitation,
Chosen by you, to be counted your friends,

restates the invitation found in Wesley's "Come, sinners, to the gospel feast," (*Hymns and Psalms*, 460) where in stanza 2 are found these words:

Sent by my Lord, on you I call,
The invitation is to all.

Wesley stresses the Arminian doctrine that salvation is "for all" not only here but elsewhere—"For all, for all, my Saviour died."

Later, Wesley surprises us by his use of a colloquialism:

Ye poor, and maimed, and halt, and blind,
In Christ a hearty welcome find.

This is not really a word we expect to find in a hymn.

Wesley refers to the gospel story of the rich man's feast where the servant goes to invite all on behalf of his master, which becomes Pratt Green's "Lord, we have come at your own invitation." However, Wesley then emphasizes the physical disabilities of those invited which might possibly exclude the guests from some worldly gatherings, while Pratt Green's hymn moves from the invitation, to develop the idea of how humanity has power to do both good and evil, how it is assailed by temptations; it is only by accepting the invitation God offers that we can deal with:

each duty assigned us,

which

Gives us the chance to create or destroy,
Help us to make those decisions that bind us,
Lord, to yourself, in obedience and joy.

Thus, the starting point and the concept of invitation is similar but Wesley enlarges on salvation, leaving Pratt Green to consider the coming of the Christian to the Communion table from the world's difficulties (difficulties that require a decision), a return to God, and a chance to re-dedicate ourselves. For Pratt Green, Holy Communion gives us the chance to bind ourselves once more in obedience to God. It is a commitment of ourselves:

May we increasingly glory in learning
All that it means to accept you as Lord.

Wesley's words:

Yield to his love's resistless power,
And fight against your God no more.

suggest a call to the unregenerate, whereas Pratt Green's words are a reminder to the Christian of what the Christian life should mean.

Wesley's final stanza of this hymn, "Come, sinners, to the gospel feast," starts:

This is the time; no more delay!

which thought appears in Pratt Green's hymn "His the gracious invitation,"¹⁴ as "Lose no time in hesitation."

So Wesley's hymn expresses the invitation, reinforcing it with the universality of those invited, and giving reason why men and women should accept him: "his offered benefits embrace," where the use of the imperative tense heightens the urgency for action. While Wesley is writing to the unconverted, Pratt Green is dealing with believers and moves beyond the pressing invitation to see the re-enactment of the Last Supper as a means to reinforce our original vows to God, to accept again forgiveness for our failings, and to strengthen our dedication and commitment to a lifelong vow of service.

Wesley's hymns for Holy Communion have a repeated amazement at the overwhelming sacrifice made by God on Calvary. Although Pratt Green realizes the enormity of the sacrifice, he moves in hymnody to our living out our faith. Wesley often remains "lost in wonder, love and praise"; his hymns are sometimes continuations of his desire to express such wonder.

Wesley's hymn, "Jesus, we thus obey" (*Hymns and Psalms*, 614) which has the last line of stanza 1, "We come to meet thee, Lord," and his later lines:

He gives his flesh to be our meat,
And bids us drink his blood.

are similar to Pratt Green's Holy Communion hymn, "Here are the bread and wine."¹⁵ Stanza three is arresting in its use of "commonplace," an important word

¹⁴*Hymns and Ballads of Fred Pratt Green*, No. 70, p. 85.

¹⁵*Hymns and Ballads of Fred Pratt Green*, No. 22, p. 31.

for Pratt Green who sees the ordinary daily bread and wine, described in stanza 1 as “homely,” as being used by Christ to signify the most important meal for the Christian. This is not a description of the Holy Sacrament Wesley would use.

Christ in the commonplace
Of bread and wine,
Offers himself, his grace.

. . .

Those who on him shall feed
Shall never die;
They shall have life indeed.

Come, then, O holy Guest,
And be the Host,
Yourself our Food and Feast.

Paradoxically, for Pratt Green, The Guest is the Host and the Food and all three make the feast. This is another example of Pratt Green’s economical diction with its wealth of compressed meaning.

Wesley’s

Now let our souls be fed
With manna from above

reminds us that the Holy Communion is life-giving. Pratt Green tends to see Holy Communion as maintaining and fostering our living out of our faith in Christ in our lives, in terms of service. We have only to look at “An Upper Room did our Lord prepare” (*Hymns and Psalms*, 594) to find further evidence of Pratt Green’s concept of our participation in the Holy Communion service as a prelude to going back to live out our faith: “Sent out to serve, as he was sent.”

In these hymns, Wesley and Pratt Green in their treatment of their subject present us with an interpretation of the Last Supper that, by its startling imagery, both diversifies and deepens our understanding of its significance for us.

Doctrinal Similarities

The expression in hymnody by both writers of the justification by faith for all believers is what we might expect. Wesley’s

The God of love, to earth He came
That you might come to heaven;
Believe, believe in Jesu’s name,
And all your sin’s forgiven.

Believe in Him who died for thee,
 And sure as He hath died,
 Thy debt is paid, thy soul is free,
 And thou art justified.¹⁶

may be compared with Pratt Green's "Justification by Faith":¹⁷

Lord, I repent my sin
 And bow my head in shame,
 I am confounded by a God
 Who loves me as I am.

Wesley addresses others, while Pratt Green writes a personal confession of his awareness of his shame. This makes the hymn more suitable for private devotions. Wesley has found God. He is now urging those who do not yet know their Savior to turn to him; the repetition of "Believe" stresses the urgency of this in the evangelical tone we have come to expect from Wesley. Pratt Green does not write with such evangelical fervor. Both writers are using a simple meter, a simple construction and vocabulary but the choice of language in Pratt Green's hymn is arresting and there is a deliberate connecting imagery, as in "lawlessness," "sentence," "my Judge."

In stanza 4 we see another trait of his writing:

For when I put my trust in him
 He takes me too on trust.

His ability to use words to maximum effect, whether as an ambiguity or a paradox, is matched, and surpassed!, by Wesley. Wesley's "'Tis certain, though impossible" compares with Pratt Green's "Disbelieve my unbelief" where their use of paradox to explain God's submission to death on Calvary, itself a paradox, simply heightens the marvel of it.

Between Wesley and Pratt Green we find ourselves faced with problems and questions that have arisen in the time between 1750 and (say) 1950. For example, we are aware, as Wesley was not, of the work of Darwin, Marx, and Freud.

How does Pratt Green react? How does he fit all these ideas into his Christian outlook? In 1971 he published this hymn, entitled "A Mature Faith" (*Hymns and Psalms*, 686):

When our confidence is shaken
 In beliefs we thought secure;
 . . .
 Solar systems, void of meaning,
 Freeze the spirit into stone;

¹⁶*The Methodist Hymn-Book* (London: Methodist Conference Office, 1933), 372.

¹⁷*Hymns and Ballads of Fred Pratt Green*, No. 89, p. 104.

Always our researches lead us
 To the ultimate Unknown:
 Faith must die, or come full circle
 To its source in God alone.

There are very few hymns which express doubt like this. We see and hear of once-accepted boundaries being exceeded; there is the apparent contradiction of nature's laws. It is a test of faith and he writes in the last verse of this hymn:

God is love and he redeems us
 In the Christ we crucify:
 This is God's eternal answer
 To the world's eternal why;

and for Pratt Green this is sufficient; God is love

His lifetime encompassed the greatest scientific discoveries yet known to humankind. This fact alone means we cannot see Pratt Green as just a twentieth-century writer in the steps of Wesley. He is not.

His inherited religious culture was a Wesleyan one; the hymnody he used for most of his ministry was *The Methodist Hymn-Book* (1933)¹⁸ with its significant number of Wesley's hymns.

His work, his writing is different. Because he was surrounded by such a different social scene, although there were still Wesley's "outcasts of men, to you I call," by the mid century, despite the many thoughtful people who did feel the need for forgiveness, some people no longer felt any need, or even that their lifestyle and habits were unacceptable. The point for Pratt Green is that modern living challenges the old certainties.

One very important reason both men have for writing is that they were both faced with an indifferent society. The twentieth century had become so complex that its society didn't know where to turn, or who to believe, or what tremendous event would occur next, and the eighteenth century so corrupted by the world, by misuse of alcohol, by slavery, by abuse of its workforce and a self-centered struggle to survive in a hostile world. There are thus many ways in which their audience was very similar. Both centuries were in great need of God.

The differences are not confined to personal standards of behavior, scientific discoveries, political ideologies or analysis of the human mind. Already in the 1930s Pratt Green had encountered different faiths while he was traveling overseas. In 1946 he wrote a religious drama "Plane from Basra," in which he presents a Hindu's view of Christianity, where we see the coming together of different faiths and differing views. A multi-cultural and multi-religious society was something that Wesley never experienced in his own country; Pratt Green did. As a result, he did not like to sing in his later years one of his most popular hymns,

¹⁸*The Methodist Hymn-Book* (1933).

first sung in 1968: "Christ is the world's light, he and none other." Pratt Green realized that the ecumenical movement within the Christian churches must be accompanied by our acceptance of other faiths, of other beliefs and cultures in today's world, which has become a global village with the present technological communications linking us with Milton, Keynes, and Melborne in the same second!

Poetic Art

I would now like to discuss the poetry of these two hymn-writers briefly, by examining Wesley's "Wrestling Jacob"¹⁹ and Pratt Green's "The Skating Parson."²⁰ Wesley's "Wrestling Jacob" may be found in both *The Oxford Book of English Verse*²¹ and *The Faber Book of Religious Verse*,²² recognized for its merits as a poem, not just a hymn.

"The Skating Parson" portrayed here depicts a neatly clad figure, a contrast to the untidy Madonna depicted on an adjoining Christmas card. Raeburn's portrait is of an elegant figure, skating with ease and confidence. The sense of "removal" here is seen from the start; (this contrasts with the immediacy of Wesley's poem). The poet is considering a Christmas card, which is a reproduction of a painting, which is itself a representation of real life; art representing life brought to him through a picture on a card. There is also incongruity here, a sense of the comical, a parson dressed in clerical garb, complete with high hat, skating! We do not expect a parson to be skating in his high clerical hat any more than we expect an artist to paint a Madonna who looks untidy. We have a conventionally-painted scene but the tone indicating the poet's pleasure and his gentle humor at receiving the card, is changed abruptly by the italicized last line:

He skates on solid ice and I on thin.

The metaphor of thin ice is one of danger and is sinister. The deliberate omission of an end-stop in the line indicates the action of the statement is incomplete.

The Reverend Dr. Robert Walker lived from 1755-1808, born about fifty years after Charles Wesley. Pratt Green was born 200 years later. Our skating parson lived when the arts flourished and the kirk unfroze. While in stanza 4 the use of the word "unfroze" links with the ice on which the parson skates, it also refers to the liberation of thought, which is in stark contrast to the annihilation under the ice. In the last verse in the expression "dark as water under ice," Pratt Green indicates the instability of the twentieth century, and the disappearance of the old certainties.

¹⁹First line of hymn known as "Wrestling Jacob" is "Come, O thou Traveller unknown." *Hymns and Psalms* (1983), 434.

²⁰*The Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century Verse*, edited by Philip Larkin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), No. 322, p. 346.

²¹*The Oxford Book of English Verse* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900), No. 459, p. 525. Nine stanzas only, omitted are stanzas 4, 6, 10, 11, and 12.

²²*The Faber Book of Religious Verse*, edited by Helen Gardner (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), 207-209. Complete text.

The poet sees the picture as a comment on life. In contrast to the skill, elegance, and zest of the skating parson, in today's world—

On Holy Lochs the skaters match their skill
The ice is thinner than they guess
Under the ice annihilation waits.

So this last stanza presents skaters competing with one another, Holy Lochs indicating different areas all similarly designated, rivalry rather than co-operation.

The twentieth century was one of rivalry—multi-culture, multi-faith. The eighteenth century was more one of consolidation of Christian values, leading people to individual awareness and acceptance of Christ. Against this, the final lines of the poem show a dark nihilism threatening the present age.

The poet is pondering the search for religious truth, for meaning in life, aware that darkness is never far away.

This is no poem of underlying Christian conviction but expresses rather a Christian existentialism. The line "A meaning dark as water under ice" refers to the unfathomability of life today. Also there is a sense of impending disaster. Are the skaters on Holy Lochs in search of religious truths, or are they perilously near to darkness under ice? Here we are reminded that this poet is the writer of the hymn "When our confidence is shaken."

I turn to "Wrestling Jacob." What is the link? The subject of both poems is from the arts; the skater from a painting; the wrestler from biblical literature, from a patriarch's encounter with an angel, which leads Wesley to make parallels with one's search for the truth. Both poems are about physical exercise. Skating and wrestling both depend on balance, but while one is a solitary pastime, the other is a close contact skill, aiming at supremacy, relaxation as opposed to conflict. The state of mind of the participants is markedly different: one is relaxed, the other tensed for victory. Visually, the skater is elegantly clad while the wrestler is nearly naked. These obvious differences prepare us for the difference in tone and mood of the poems.

The power of Wesley's verse breaks through. The tone is decisive, almost aggressive at the start of the poem. There is urgency in a personal conflict. The actual vocabulary, "struggled," "resolved," heightens the idea of conflict. The couplet at the stanza end reinforces the strength of intention:

With thee all night I mean to stay,
And wrestle till the break of day.

In stanza 2 the personal involvement of the writer and his self awareness, followed by the reference to the wounds of Christ's crucifixion, place this firmly in a religious context, the final couplet here conveying the urge to search for religious truth. Stanza 3 is resolute: "I never will unloose my hold," but there is a possibility emerging of recognition of the Unknown. Then there is a change of

tone in stanza 4, "I beseech thee," and an appreciation that the name demanded may be too holy to utter; (Genesis: Yahweh: I AM THAT I AM). Despite this holy opponent, the physical imagery of stanza 5 reminds us of the close wrestling with its tactile references: "hold thy tongue, touch my thigh" and the brilliant phrase "sinew be unstrung," while the ambiguity of l:4, "out of my arms thou shalt not fly" brings together conflict and love, which is what the poem is all about.

Stanza 6 moves to the wearying of the seeker but expresses the paradox of strength in weakness. So the balance has shifted. It is no longer an equal struggle. Nevertheless, the determination to know, to find the truth about the Unknown, is unflinching. Stanza 8 is the pivotal stanza. Here the last line hazards a guess at the name: "And tell me, if thy name is Love." The demand that the stronger should yield to the weaker is, in worldly terms, nonsense; in this verse the physical struggle has moved to the spiritual victory; the language is of blessings and prayer.

The rest of the poem is written in a wondering, contented tone. The search is over. The truth came not through fighting but through submission; not in noise but in near silence. Stanza 10 by its skillful alignment of prayer and power equates them.

The struggle has not been in vain: I know thee, Savior. Each stanza now ends with the words: "Thy nature and thy name is Love." This is a declaration of assurance and certainty which leads Wesley to the confidence that:

from thee
My soul its life and succour brings.

Such religious conviction sets this poem apart as a personal conversion; this is what Wesley's writing aims at. Converted himself, he wants only to bring others to Christ. In stanzas 13 and 14 he reminds us of the original Genesis story but it is now transcended. Despite lameness he leaps for joy, for his heart, like the hart, has found its home through all eternity which is the term of God's love.

Wesley's poetry abounds in allusions and reference to the Bible. It assumes a knowledge of the biblical code by the reader; indeed it necessitates it. "Wrestling Jacob" with the external struggle which becomes internal, and the physical yielding which parallels the spiritual submission, is timeless in its theme: one seeking and finding God.

Much of Wesley's poetry is concerned with individual action and response. Pratt Green is commenting on society and the human condition at large. Although Pratt Green starts with the individual, as in "The Skating Parson," he moves to the general. In hymnody Wesley expresses an uncontrollable joy at personal salvation, while Pratt Green considers "The Church of Christ in every age" and how it must be concerned with the world around it. Of course Wesley was also concerned with social issues, "to serve the present age": "outcasts of men"; he wrote of earthquakes too, as in "Stand the omnipotent decree."

Again, Pratt Green is concerned with conservation, with green issues, as in “God in His love for us lent us this planet” (*Hymns and Psalms*, 343). His hymns and poetry express an appreciation of the wonder of God’s world. For example, the 1947 hymn “How wonderful this world of thine,” marvels at the unerring instinct of the homing bee:

By secret wisdom surely led
Homeward across the clover field
Hurries the honey-bee.

These euphonious lines remind us that Pratt Green is primarily a poet and a hymn-writer only by request. Consequently, there is a tranquillity, a distancing from his subject, a quiet acceptance, a great width of vision and perception which gives an untrammelled clarity.

Hymn-writers are of necessity didactic. Both these men are products of their times and social background which govern their subject matter. The call to evangelism leads Wesley to write with vigor and urgency, while the reflections and minute observations in Pratt Green’s work result in a more detached style. Am I saying that Pratt Green is not an evangelist? Certainly in the poetry discussed, Wesley is overtly Christian; Pratt Green is not. His statements are those of the convinced Christian, for he sees that we cannot live without God, but he never writes with Wesley’s vigorous and colorful metaphors.

Consider Come, Holy Ghost, all quickening fire (*Hymns and Psalms*, 282) where Wesley writes:

Drawn by the lure of strong desire,
...
Eager for thee I ask and pant,

or

Jesus, lover of my soul,
Let me to thy bosom fly,

words which have overtones of sexual love. Such intensity is not found in Pratt Green’s work.

Pratt Green admired Wesley’s hymns, choosing for his funeral—

Son of God, if thy free grace
Again has raised me up.

Did Pratt Green see himself as a latter day Charles Wesley?

I leave the closing comment to Pratt Green himself: “I’m a Watts man myself.”²³

²³Personal communication to Maureen Harris in 1990.