"Novelty divine": Metrical Diversity in Christopher Smart's *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*

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I

Christopher Smart's *Hymns and Spiritual Songs for the Fasts and Festivals of the Church of England* (hereafter referred to as the *Hymns*) appeared in 1765. Though it must be admitted that his reputation as a poet has rested largely upon *A Song to David* (1763), and a greater measure of critical attention and scholarship has been drawn to *Jubilate Agno* since the discovery of its manuscript and the publication in 1939, yet the achievement of his *Hymns* is not a negligible one and has come to be fairly acknowledged in recent years. But two of the recent studies of eighteenth-century hymns do not hesitate to ignore Smart totally—Madeleine Forell Marshall's and Janet Todd's *English Congregational Hymns in the Eighteenth Century* (1982) and Richard Arnold's *The English Hymn: Studies in a Genre* (1995). The fact itself that Smart's *Hymns* have no significance at all in their books, however, does seem to signify much about his hymns.

The eighteenth century was the "hymn's most crucial and indeed most formative time period";[1] and it witnessed a great efflorescence of the

[1] Richard Arnold, *The English Hymn: Studies in a Genre* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), p. xi.

genre. There was already, of course, some attempts of hymn-composing in the preceding century, made by such writers as George Wither (*Hymnes and Songs of the Church*; 1623), Jeremy Taylor (*Festival Hymns, According to the Manner of the Ancient Church*; 1655) and John Playford (*Psalms and Hymns*; 1671).[2] The Calvinist, rather than Lutheran, position of the Church of England in its earlier history, however, had precluded the development of hymnody: it preferred to sing God's own Word to man-made hymns, thus restricting sung worship to the metrical Psalms. In 1562 the so-called "Old Version" of the Psalms by Thomas Sternhold and John Hopkins appeared, and from this time onward the metrical Psalms had a long and virtually absolute reign in the history of Church singing until well into the eighteenth century (officially, until 1819).[3] According to Richard Arnold, between 1562 and 1696 (that is, between the appearance of the authoritative "Old Version" and the supplantation of it by Nahum Tate's and Nicholas Brady's "New Version") no fewer than twenty-six different versions of the metrical Psalms were brought forth,[4] while English hymnody remained still in its prehistoric stage. It is not easy to ascertain what brought about the rise of the hymn under such a strict sway of psalmody; but it seems that the inadequacy of an Old Testament psalter as an expression of modern Christian faith (which was also the cause of the appearances of Christianized metrical psalms in the eighteenth century), the dissatisfaction felt in literary circles with the "Old" and "New" Versions, and the Methodist and Evangelical

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[2]Needless to say, the seventeenth century was the great age of sacred poetry; but most of those religious poems by such poets as Donne and Herbert were not in themselves hymnody.

[3]Arnold, pp. 80–81.

[4]Arnold, p. 32, n. 22.

movements—these and other factors combined to make smooth and straight the way of an original English hymnody. The leading figure was the Independent dissenter Isaac Watts; he published *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* in 1707 (and *The Psalms of David, Imitated in the Language of the New Testament, and Applied to the Christian State and Worship* in 1719), of which great success never failed to be an encouragement to following writers and compilers. It is within this established tradition of hymn-writing, on the one hand, that in 1765 Smart published in the wake of Watts his own *Hymns,* bound up with *A Translation of the Psalms of David, Attempted in the Spirit of Christianity, and Adapted to the Divine Service* (hereafter referred to as the *Psalms*).

On the other hand, however, Smart's *Hymns* are quite exceptional in their time at least in two aspects. As the full title of his collection shows, Smart wrote for the major occasions in the calendar of the Anglican Church, which was persistently a psalm-singing body; whereas almost all the hymns of the period were the work of dissenters, Evangelicals, and Methodists, intended for those groups of congregations. According to Marcus Walsh, "Smart was the only Anglican hymn-writer of this period who was neither a Methodist nor an Evangelical."[5] This might be explained partly by his wish for liturgical reform in the Church. Another anomaly of the *Hymns* is their highly "poetical" nature. The hymn, as well as the metrical psalms, is *essentially* a public genre; a hymn for congregational use must be straightforward in expression enough to be understood, and simple

[5] *The Poetical Works of Christopher Smart, vol. II, Religious Poetry 1763—1771,* ed. Marcus Walsh and Karina Williamson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p. 11. All quotations below from *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* and the *Song to David* will be found in this Oxford Edition.

in prosody enough to be sung—whether meant for a relatively wide range of congregations as in the Wesleys' *Hymns and Spiritual Songs, Intended for the Use of Real Christians of all Denominations* (1753),[6] or confined to a smaller and particular group of people as in the *Olney Hymns* by John Newton and William Cowper (1779). Smart's *Hymns,* on the contrary, are highly allusive, figurative, and rhetorical in style and expression, and unexpectedly diverse in metrical music, making too few of the practical compromises to be acceptable for congregational use; hence arises the question whether his *Hymns* were ever intended for congregational singing, or whether they can be at all called "hymns." My concern in the study below is the metrical diversity of Smart's *Hymns*: first, it is to be surveyed through the analyses of some hymns; then, it will be seen to be located in the poet's reading and understanding of the Psalms of David. It will be clear, at last, that Smart's idea about the praise of God made his hymns less "congregational" and less "generic."

II

The hymn is in definition a praise of God sung during a religious service.[7] For a hymn to be sung by and be familiar to the congregation it

[6]The Wesleys compiled many hymnals, the culmination of which is the 1780 *Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists*; and it must be noted that, while most volumes edited by them contained borrowings from other writers or translations from French or German hymns, the 1753 *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* consisted mainly of original hymns and, therefore, was a distinctively "Wesleyan" hymn-book. See *The Works of John Wesley, vol. 7, A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the Poeple Called Methodists,* ed. Franz Hildebrandt and Oliver A. Beckerlegge, with the assistance of James Dale (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), pp. 22–38.

[7]"A song of praise to God; any composition in praise of God which is adapted to be chanted or sung; spec. a metrical composition adapted to be sung in a religious service" (*OED* 1).

must among other things be plain and simple in form, so that it may be readily and easily adapted to known tunes. Watts, for example, in the *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* did cast his 365 hymns almost exclusively in three metres—common (or ballad) metre, long metre, and short metre: 180 hymns in common metre, 144 hymns in long metre, 33 hymns in short metre, and only eight hymns in other particular metres. Most of the well-known and omnipresent hymns now we have from the eighteenth century are written in these three metres—for example, Watts' "O God, our help in ages past" (common metre), Charles Wesley's "Hark, the herald angels sing" (long metre and typically trochaic), Newton's "Amazing grace! how sweet the sound" (common metre), or Cowper's "There is a fountain fill'd with blood" (common metre).[8] These three metres are the inheritance from metrical psalms: the psalms of the "New Version" by Tate and Brady were versified solely in the three standard metres; the "Old Version" paraphrases by Sternhold and Hopkins were written in rhyming fourteener lines which were "printed in octavo format as two shorter lines of eight and six syllables, or alternating four- and three-stress lines"[9]—consequently, two fourteeners making up one common-metre stanza. It is within such prosodical limitations inherited from psalmody that eighteenth-century hymnodists composed their enduring hymns.

Quite extraordinary are Smart's *Hymns* in this context: twenty-one

[8]In the case of the genre of hymns, a hymn as it originally was and the hymn as it is now are not always the same. Watts' "O God, our help in ages past" was originally "Our God, our help in ages past," and John Wesley changed "Our" to "O." Charles Wesley's "Hark, the herald angels sing" was originally "Hark, how all the welkin rings," and the revised line by which the hymn is known now was the work of George Whitefield; see Arnold, pp. 198—202.

[9]Rivkah Zim, *English Metrical Psalms: Poetry as Praise and Prayer, 1535—1601* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987), p. 114.

stanza forms are used in his volume of thirty-five hymns. What is more remarkable is that some of those stanza forms are constructed in a way "rhyme and indentation fool us," if we borrow Donald Davie's words.[10] For example, Hymn VII ("Ash Wednesday. First Day of Lent") appears, at first sight, to be written in normal common metre, lines of tetrametre and trimetre alternating with the *abab* rhyme scheme; but in fact only the last line of each stanza is a trimetre.

O CHARITY! that couldst receive
  The dying thief's repentant pray'r;
And didst upon the cross relieve
  Thy fellow-suff'rer there! (1–4)

The same metrical trick is exploited slightly in a different way in Hymn XXXI ("St. Thomas"), of which rhyme and indentation deceive us into regarding it cast again in common metre; but scansion reveals that the third line of each stanza is not a tetrametre but a trimetre. In short, in Hymn VII a tetrametre is used where a trimetre ought to be, and vice versa in Hymn XXXI. Another example can be found in Hymn XXXIII ("St. Stephen"):

O MAKER! of almighty skill,
Whose word all wonders can fulfil,
Where'er the sun, where'er the planets shine,
Exertion and effect at once are thine. (1–4)

[10]Donald Davie, *The Eighteenth-Century Hymn in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), p. 108.

This time, since there is no indentation, the appearance demands us to think the stanza is composed in long metre, each line equally in iambic tetrametre; whereas the truth is the third and fourth lines are pentametres—thus, the stanza form again revolts against ordinariness.

Tedious as these analyses might be, a few more innovations should be noted, which will show more clearly Smart's prosodical ingenuity. Hymn XXIII ("St. Matthew") is metrically a little more intricate:

> EV'N exactors of the toll,
> And the harlot of the stew,
> Sooner give the Lord his due
> Than men disguis'd of soul. (1—4)

Not iambic but trochaic is this stanza. In eighteenth-century poetry the iambic measure, especially the iambic pentametre, was predominant in the form of heroic couplet and blank verse; and, as Professor Davie suggests, the frequent appearance of a trochaic beat in Smart's *Hymns* is itself atypical in the century.[11] What is really striking in this stanza, however, is the fact that the fourth line is not a trochaic at all, but an iambic trimetre—an unexpected shift of measure within a stanza, which Smart experiments also in his renderings of the Psalms.[12] Smart's craftsmanship is not confined to such asymmetrical devices; but he also explores a musical contrast produced between masculine and feminine rhymes, as in Hymn I ("New Year"):

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[11]Davie, p. 109.
[12]This stanza form is used also in *Psalm* 149, Version 2.

WORD of endless adoration,
  Christ, I to thy call appear;
On my knees in meek prostration
  To begin a better year. (1–4)

The stanza is written in trochaic tetrametre quatrain with the *abab* rhyme; but the first and the third lines have feminine rhymes (and, accordingly, have eight syllables), the second and the fourth lines have masculine rhymes (and seven syllables). This is nothing new itself, of course; and yet this rudimentary but effective device seems to have taken his fancy, and it is used again in Hymns III, VIII, XIII, and XXXII. But, then, what is all this metrical variety for? Such indulgence in metrical diversity is "at the furthest extreme from other hymnodists' self-denying restriction to short measure, long measure and common measure."[13]

The poet's own answer to this question is stated in the most metrically elaborate poem, Hymn XI ("The Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin"). The hymn begins with an invocation of Purity, by which Smart means both the Virgin and a quality of the Godhead:[14]

O PURITY, thou test
Of love amongst the blest,
How excellent thou art,
The Lord Jehovah's heart,
  Whose sweet attributes embrace,
  Every virtue, praise and grace. (1–6)

[13]Davie, p. 113.
[14]Walsh and Williamson, ed., p. 383.

The stanza turns out to be made up of four iambic trimetres followed by two seven-syllable trochaic tetrametres, rhyming throughout in couplets—quite an extraordinary and, though not sure, unexampled form. The second and the third stanzas relate, in an idiosyncratic way, Gabriel's visiting of the Virgin. The fourth stanza (19—24) introduces an apostrophe to Mystery, and then we get at the *heart* of the poem, where is manifested what seems to be the poet's idea of the hymn:

Hail mystery! thou source
Of nature's plainest course,
How much this work transcends
Thine usual means and ends—
  Wherefore call'd, we shall not spare
  Louder praise, and oft'ner pray'r.

But if the work be new,
So shou'd the song be too,
By every thought that's born
In freshness of the morn;
  Every flight of active wings,
  Every shift upon the strings.(19—30)

The occasion now to be solemnized—the virgin conception of the Son of God—transcends "usual means and ends"; it calls for, therefore, "louder praise, and oft'ner pray'r"; but a "new" song should be composed too, because the God's work is itself new. Walsh comments upon lines 25—26

that they are the "statement of the necessity of the composition of original hymns":[15] psalmody is no more sufficient for the praise of God, since the work to be celebrated is the miracle recorded in the *New* Testament and is worthy of a new song. But those lines suggest also the necessity of a new kind of hymn characterized by the new "thought that's born/ In freshness of the morn" (thought or conception), the new "flight of active wings" (imagination or expression), and the new "shift upon the strings" (metrical music). Professor Davie says: "since the virgin birth was unprecedented as a work of God, so must be any work of man which celebrates that miraculous event. Therefore, we may and should infer, the poet has fashioned for this occasion a stanza that is similarly without precedent.... when Smart refuses to settle into one or two metrical patterns for his hymns,... it is to emulate, so far as human capacities can, the God-like attribute of being, in a phrase beloved of Smart, 'ever new'."[16] Not only the Annunciation but every other work of God is entirely "new"; for God is never circumscribed in any of His works, never ruled even by His own rules—

Who? O Who shall tell
His acts miraculous, when his own decrees
Repeals he, or suspends, when by the hand
Of Moses or of Joshua, or the mouths
Of his prophetic seers, such deeds he wrought,
Before th' astonish'd Sun's all seeing eye,

[15]Walsh and Williamson, ed., p. 383.
[16]Davie, pp. 110–111.

That Faith was scarce a virtue.

("On the Power of the Supreme Being," 94–100)[17]

Just as the works of God told in the Old Testament–Moses' parting of the waters of the Red Sea or Joshua's stilling of the sun and moon at the valley of Ajalon–were unprecedented and unexampled, so are the works celebrated in the calendar of the Anglican Church. The seventh stanza of Hymn IX is also the prescription for the poet who aims to praise God and His works:

Praise him seraphic tone
Of instruments unknown,
High strains on golden wire,
Work'd by etherial fire;
.... (37–42)

A hymn, a praise of God, should not be usual, since the theme is itself unusual, but it must be "high strains"; nor should it be set to known tunes, but to "instruments unknown." Thus, Hymn IX is at once a manifesto and a manifestation of Smart's idea of what a hymn should be.

Ⅲ

Metrical diversity is also characterictic of Smart's *Psalms.* Though the *Hymns* and the *Psalms* were published in one volume,. the dates of

[17]Quoted from *The Poetical Works of Christopher Smart, vol. IV, Miscellaneous Poems English and Latin,* ed. Karina Williamson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

composition cannot be the same: some pieces of evidence from *Jubilate Agno* suggest that the *Hymns* were written in 1762 and early 1763, while the enormous translation of the Psalms cannot have been the undertaking of a few months. Walsh suggests that Smart must have begun envisaging the versification of the Psalms in the early 1750s, and that he may have embarked upon the project as early as the summer of 1759.[18] There is no doubt, anyway, that most of the *Psalms* were written before the *Hymns.*

In the *Psalms* Smart employs twenty-five measures: less striking if compared with the *Hymns,* because the frequency of unusual measures is much smaller in 157 *Psalms* (seven *Psalms* are paraphrased in two versions), but yet strikingly unusual in comparison with other Psalters of the period. Watts' *Psalms of David* were written with a few exceptions in the three standard metres, as his *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* were; besides it, each psalm in Watts' Psalter sometimes has two or three versions cast in different metres, so as to be readily accommodated to known tunes. Richard Baxter (1692) used four stanza forms; Tate's and Brady's "New Version" only three standard forms, as was mentioned above; John Denham (1714) eleven; and Richard Blackmore (1721) seven.[19] It would be hardly worthwhile to scan any metres employed in Smart's *Psalms.* It is enough to note that the asymmetrical devices conspicuous in the *Hymns* are used also in the *Psalms;* that the anapaest beat is experimented in three stanza forms (in four *Psalms* in total), while the trochaic beat is not so recurrent as in the *Hymns.*

[18]See Walsh and Williamson, ed., pp. 4−6, and *The Poetical Works of Christopher Smart, vol. III, A Translation of the Psalms of David,* ed. Marcus Walsh (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), pp. xi−xiii. All quotatis below from *A Translation of the Psalms of David* will be found in this Oxford Edition.

[19]This information is given in Walsh, ed., p. xxi.

When we read a Psalter (Smart's major sources were the Psalter in the Book of Common Prayer and the Authorized Version), we very often meet the psalmist's urge to sing a "new song":

> Sing unto the Lord a new song: sing praises lustily unto him with a good courage. (BCP 33:3)
>
> O Sing unto the Lord a new song: sing unto the Lord, all the whole earth. (BCP 96:1)
>
> I will sing a new song unto thee, O God: and sing praises unto thee upon a ten-stringed lute. (BCP 144:9)

Smart's translations or paraphrases of each of these verses are as follows (he matches each verse of the Prayer Book Psalter with one stanza with the exception of *Psalms* 48, 84 Version 1, and 89):

> Let novelty commend the strain,
>   And sing, adoring, as ye kneel,
> And swell with all your might and main
>   The full resounding peal.
>
> O sing to Jesus Christ a song
>   Of grace and novelty combin'd;
> O swell an anthem sweet and strong,
>   Ye nations of mankind.

O Lord, I will an anthem chuse
Of novelty divine,
And with thy holy muse
The ten-string'd bass shall join.

A new occasion of worship requires us to sing a praise of God again—this is what the psalmist says. Smart's paraphrase, however, does attach a touch of greater significance to it by using the word "novelty": some kind of novelty—of thought, expression, or music—is always indispensable in the praise of God and His works. Such an idiosyncratic reading of the Psalter naturally reflects itself upon the poet's view of the psalmist. In the *Song to David* Smart describes David's twelve attributes or virtues, allotting one stanza to the description of each virtue (stanzas v—xvi), one of which is the "sublime"—a virtue as a poet:

Sublime—invention ever young,
Of vast conception, tow'ring tongue,
To God th'eternal theme;
Notes from yon exaltations caught,
Unrival'd royalty of thought,
O'er meaner strains supreme. (55—60)

In this catalogue of David's sublimities as a poet, the first is his "invention ever young," from which derives, so Smart thinks, the "novelty" of the Psalms; and what demands the inventiveness of Smart's David is, after all, God's own infinite invention.

How manifold thy works are made,
O Lord—by thankful man survey'd,
  What an exhaustless theme!
In wisdom didst thou all dispense,
How with thy vast munificence
  Heav'n, earth, air, all things teem!
      (*Psalm* 104, 139—144)

In the Prayer Book Psalter the corresponding verse is: "O Lord, how manifold are thy works: in wisdom hast thou made them; the earth is full of thy riches." The line "What an exhaustless theme!" is, therefore, Smart's addition. In a word, David the psalmist was the ideal and archtype of poets, who exercised his "invention," "vast conception," "tow'ring tongue," and "Notes from yon exaltations caught" in order to praise "God th'eternal theme," and who, as a result, composed a song of "Unrival'd royalty" which was "O'er meaner strains supreme." The similarity to the lines in Hymn IX quoted above is indubitable. All this suggests that Smart's (re-) reading and understanding of the Psalms led him to embrace the notion that one who praises God and His works has to exercise his own inventiveness—a variety of stanza forms, for example—to match an infinite variety of novelties wrought by the object of his praises.

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