

Song Whose Beauty Deepens Prayer

By Thomas H. Troeger | Volume 1.1 Fall 2014

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When and how does a hymn text deepen a community's prayer? When not and why? We do not answer these questions in a vacuum but from a consciousness that has been shaped by a multitude of different forces. Theological convictions, literary tastes, cultural biases, the music of language as we have absorbed it throughout our lives, the impact of new knowledge and ways of understanding the world, the vividness of our imaginations, the song that has nurtured our faith, and the ethos of our home worshiping communities — all these and more shape the critical sensibilities with which we respond to hymn texts. In some of these realms we may share substantial common ground, but in others the landscape of our hearts will have very different contours and features.

It is easy to take the contextual forces that shape our values and standards for granted, especially if we have grown up singing hymns from a particular book. There is something finished and solid about a hymnal, as though its contents were a collection of fixed pieces, as immovable as the skeletal structure of fossils. The resistance that new hymns and new hymnals encounter in many churches gives witness to this misperception of what in fact is a spirited history, often reflecting, as Eric Routley points out, the theological turbulence that has marked the church's story:

Periods when somebody somewhere is tearing up the turf and asking questions and organizing rebellions and reconstructing disciplines produce hymns: when the steam goes out of such movements, or they become part of an expanded main stream, hymn writing goes on in a more tranquil way, but never for very long. Another colour is added to the picture by another 'movement,' and that movement brings new hymns and new kinds of hymn into the repertory.[\[1\]](#)

Routley's insight about the dynamic character of hymnody illuminates our contemporary situation. We live in a period when many people in many places are "tearing up the turf and asking questions and organizing rebellions and reconstructing disciplines." David Mahan states the challenge in broad but succinct terms: "How can the Church revitalize its speech in such manner that its own language regains a foothold in the discourses of the public square and, indeed, in the *imagination* of late-modern audiences, such that the gospel once more becomes intelligible as well as compelling to them?"[\[2\]](#) Mahan raises the question while examining the work of three poets who strive to achieve an idiom that bears fruitful witness to the gospel now, but it applies with equal force to hymn writers. Mahan describes how daunting the task is, quoting Geoffrey Hill's vivid phrase, "the acoustical din that surrounds us all,"[\[3\]](#) and acknowledging in his own words: "So vast and so demanding are the challenges now facing the witnessing Church in its late-modern contexts that all variety of resources of language and of the imaginative intelligence should be marshaled for this decidedly public enterprise we call theology."[\[4\]](#)

Summoning the “resources of language and of the imaginative intelligence” to break through “the acoustical din,” hymn writers might choose to use exclusively the idiom of the world as we know it now — its societal fragmentation, its cultural diversity and conflict, its cosmological vastness. Or hymnists might assume the coherence of the faith-world that fed earlier generations of poets, cultivating the vineyard of images and understandings that have sustained the church’s song through the centuries. Or the hymn writer might combine them both, drawing upon our global and scientific vision to expand the perimeters of tradition, and using tradition as a source of wisdom and revelation that deepen the meaning of our contemporary life. It is this latter, integrative approach that I have chosen. My desire to fuse tradition and innovation manifests itself in the three major criteria by which I judge my own work as well as that of others: musicality, structure and meaning, theological depth. I believe these to be the qualities that make for song whose beauty deepens prayer.

Although the music of language and the music of song and instrumental performance are not identical, they are related. What Seamus Heaney hopes for his poetry would resonate with the aspiration of many composers. Heaney writes that his “effort is to repose in the stability conferred by a musically satisfying order of sounds.”^[5] A rigidly theological mind may find this too esthetic for the writing of hymns, asking: does not right doctrine and clear theological thought take precedence over “a musically satisfying order of sounds?” The question assumes an over-simplified understanding of how theology is manifest through the confluence of language, singing, and instrumental accompaniment when hymns are used in worship. I can illustrate this with an e-mail exchange that preceded my writing a hymn for a church’s anniversary celebration. The congregation wanted a new text that could be sung to a traditional setting, but they were still trying to settle on what the setting would be. Both of the e-mails were written by the pastor prior to my beginning work on the poem, and although she included helpful history and news about the congregation that would influence my creation of the text, I find it revealing how she discusses the musical sound that she has in her head for the church’s anniversary hymn:

I am drawn to the grand tunes but, after hearing a little more about our story, you may have other suggestions. Grosser Gott, wir loben dich is another strong tune that is only used once in the Presbyterian Hymnal. Depending upon how it is played, it seems to me it can be placed in a number of positions in worship. Andy [the church musician] and I will play through some possibilities on Monday.

The pastor demonstrates an awareness of the complex interrelationship between language and music: she acknowledges that, once I learn about the congregation’s story, it may touch off a different sound in my head. She later wrote me again after she and the musician had chosen the setting to which they wanted me to compose their anniversary hymn text:

The one we decided upon is Grosser Gott, wir loben dich. It does not necessarily fit the hymn placement after the sermon, although no hymn can be ruled out, but it serves well as an opening and closing hymn. I realize that it is a fairly grand setting — but it will fit well into our space and we have the organ to support it. In addition, on our Anniversary Sunday we will have timpani, violin (and one more instrument which I don’t remember) — all Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra players — with which to introduce the hymn.

Consider the number of factors that went into this decision: the tonal character of the music (“a fairly

grand setting”), the flow of the liturgy (“the hymn placement” in the service), the church’s nave where it would be sung (“it will fit well into our space”), and the varied instrumental accompaniment (“the organ to support it” and members of the Symphony Orchestra “to introduce the hymn”). All of this preceded the writing of the text, and all of it rumbled around in my heart — “grand” musical sound, architectonic space, organ, timpani and violin — as I worked to create a hymn that opens:

*Every planet, star and stone,
every atom charged and spinning,
every cell of blood and bone
trace to you, God, their beginning.

To exist in time and space
is itself a gift of grace.*

After several drafts, I chose this opening stanza because the simple words, the ring of the rhymes, and the rhythm of the poetry produce to my ear the kind of “grand” sound that the pastor described in her e-mails. To quote Seamus Heaney again, I found in it “the stability conferred by a musically satisfying order of sounds” as well as theology I could offer with conviction.

I consistently raise two questions about a hymn’s structure and meaning, the second major category of my critical criteria: Does the hymn take us somewhere, gathering momentum from stanza to stanza? Is there immediately accessible meaning that will stand up to repeated singing and deeper reflection over time?

Although I find singing cyclic congregational song, for example, music of the Taizé community, prayerful and moving, I am drawn as a hymnpoet to creating sequential hymns. Sequential hymns put forth an argument or narrative line or poetic conceit that progresses from stanza to stanza.^[6] I strive for a sense of development whose meaning is comprehensible upon first singing, yet rich enough to bear repetition and to produce new insights upon closer reading. In the words of Christian Wiman, I hope to attain “a surface clarity without sacrificing depth or complexity.”^[7]

Because Christ teaches that the Spirit will guide us “into all the truth” (John 16:13a), theology can never be satisfied by confining itself to the Bible. We have to ask: Where is the Spirit leading us now? What reveals the Spirit? What blocks the Spirit? These are questions of theological depth, my third criterion for judging hymn texts. Edwin Muir helps me understand why such depth is an essential antidote to the distortions of our technologically obsessed culture. Over fifty years ago he traced the malaise of our culture to its “lopsided development”:

Something in the apparent progression [of ever-expanding human knowledge] has not progressed; for myself I would call it the imagination which would have made us able to use for purely human purposes all that applied science offers us. A lopsided development, whether of the body or the mind, is a diseased development, and is bound to lead to strange and unpredictable results.... What we are troubled by is the sense that science has run on

far ahead of us, and that we are without the wisdom to use for our good the enormous power which it drops in passing into our hands.[\[8\]](#)

The “lopsided development” includes a neglect of theological depth, of what has been variously called through the centuries: mystery, wonder, spirit, God, the holy, the transcendent, the numinous. Writing new hymns in an era of “lopsided development” seems a modest effort at correcting its distortions. Nevertheless, it is a witness to the resurrection, to the way God disrupts the suffocating assumption that human thought and accomplishment define the boundaries of reality. The risen Christ, then, is the ultimate source of song that deepens prayer:

The risen Christ disturbed

far more than earth and stone.

Christ crumbled certainties inferred

from all that’s fixed and known:

the “facts” that we’ve defined —

that life is pulse and breath,

that wisdom is a heart resigned

to finitude and death.

Christ opens to surprise

the truth we presupposed:

accepted thought that calcifies

and views the world as closed.

Divine vitalities

from God’s deep heart and core

rise up with Christ as energies,

alive forevermore.

Refreshing, buoyant streams,

they lift our mind and heart

to look beyond our plots and schemes

to where God's visions start:

inside an empty tomb

where dawn dispels the night

and earth becomes the holy womb

of newborn life and light.[\[9\]](#)

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FOOTNOTES

[\[1\]](#) Erik Routley, *Christian Hymns Observed: When in Our Music God Is Glorified* (Princeton, NJ: Prestige Publications, 1982), p. 6.

[\[2\]](#) David C. Mahan, *An Unexpected Light: Theology and Witness in the Poetry and Thought of Charles Williams, Michael O'Siadhail, and Geoffery Hill* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2009), p. 210.

[\[3\]](#) Mahan, p. 164

[\[4\]](#) Mahan, p. 221.

[\[5\]](#) Seamus Heaney, *Crediting Poetry* (Loughcrew, Oldcastle, Co. Meath, Ireland: The Gallery Press, 1995), p. 28.

[\[6\]](#) For a very helpful discussion of the difference between cyclic and sequential congregational song see C. Michael Hawn, *Gather into One: Praying and Singing Globally* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), pp. 224-240.

[\[7\]](#) Christian Wiman, *Ambition and Survival: Becoming a Poet* (Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 2007), p. 203.

[\[8\]](#) Edwin Muir, *The Estate of Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 85.

[\[9\]](#) Troeger, *Song that Blesses Earth*.

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