THE PRAISE OF CHRIST
IN ENGLISH DEVOTIONAL POETRY

Donald T. Williams, PhD
Toccoa Falls College
Toccoa Falls, Ga. 30598

Abstract. English poetry began with the praise of Christ ("Caedmon's Hymn"), and it remained a major theme in English verse for most of its history. Though Christ was eclipsed by his mother in the Middle English period, the Reformation returned a more Christocentric focus to poetry for the common people through metrical psalters and raised that theme to heights as yet unseen, both spiritual and artistic, in Sidney and Spenser. The Seventeenth Century was the great age of Protestant devotional poetry in Donne, Vaughan, and Herbert. After the Endarkenment of the Eighteenth Century, the praise of Christ retreated from public letters into church hymnody, but was kept alive in the public square by isolated writers like Hopkins and Eliot. The writers surveyed here remain an untapped resource for reflection and devotion.

He who would try to cover English devotional poetry in praise of Christ in a paper that can be read at one sitting in a learned journal undertakes a task no less absurd than the attempt to pour the ocean into a teacup. This is especially so when he is taking "devotional poetry" to mean poetry that can be used for devotional purposes, not just that which was written as such. To avoid the accusation of *hubris,* I confess my failure at the outset. Nevertheless, I do hold out my teacup to you with trembling hands, hoping that it may be found to have a drop or two of salt water in it after all.

THE OLD ENGLISH PERIOD

English poetry as a written tradition begins with a hymn of praise. In about the year of our Lord 670, as the Venerable Bede tells it, the monks at the famous monastery of Whitby were still practicing the ancient Germanic oral improvised art form of Alliterative Meter (a more

dignified kind of rap; see Lewis for an explanation of how it works) for recreation at banquets. They would pass the harp around the table, and each brother was expected to "sing" something when his turn came. But one Caedmon, an illiterate lay herdsman attached to the community, was utterly unable to rap. So when the harp got close to him he would sneak out to the stables to avoid embarrassment.

On one such occasion Caedmon fell asleep there only to see a man appear to him in a dream saying, "*Caedmon, sing me hwaethwugu*," "Caedmon, sing me something." And Caedmon replied, "*Ne con ic noht singan*," "I cannot sing at all." But his heavenly visitor replied, "*Hwaethere, thu me meaht singan*," "Nevertheless, you may sing to me." And Caedmon asked, "*Hwaet sceal ic singan*?" "What shall I sing?" And the angel replied, "*Sing me frumsceaft*," "Sing to me about creation." And to his eternal surprise, Caedmon heard these words coming out of his own mouth in perfect Anglo-Saxon Alliterative Meter:

Nu sculon herigean heofonrices Weard,
Meotodes meahte ond his modgethanc,
Weorc wuldorfaeder, swa he wundra gehwaes,
Ece Dryhten, or onstealde.
He aerest sceop eorthan bearnum
Heofon to hrofe, halig Scyppend;
Tha middangeard, monncynnes Weard,
Ece Dryhten, aefter teode,
Firum foldan, Frea aelmihtig. (Cassidy & Ringler 129)

Now let us praise the heaven-kingdom's Keeper,
The Measurer's might and his moving counsel,
The work of the glory-Father, how he each of wonders,
The eternal Lord, established in the beginning.
He first carved out for the sons of earth
Heaven as a roof, the holy Shaper;
Then middle earth, the Guardian of mankind,
The eternal Lord, after created,

A sheep-fold for humans, the Lord almighty. (Trans. D.T.W.)

Caedmon arose in excitement the next morning, still remembered his hymn, and recited it to the monks, who were so impressed with it that they wrote it down. And from that day forth, Caedmon was the best rapper of them all. Until that day English poetry had been a purely oral art form. So Caedmon's hymn was the first English poem to be written and preserved, and it is still the oldest surviving poem in the English language. While it technically references the Father more than the Son, we can call on our theological sophistication to remember the Son's involvement in creation and say without too much of a stretch that the praise of Christ is the very spring from which the whole mighty river of English poetry takes its origin. English-speaking Christians should know this: English verse is properly our inheritance; we started it.

Two other major examples from the Old English period are the long meditation "Christ" from the Exeter Book, and the dream vision "Dream of the Rood" from the Vercelli Book. "Christ" is organized around the eleven antiphons used in Advent, elaborating them with biblical and theological reflection. For example, "O King and Desire of All Nations and chief Corner-Stone, who makest two to be one: come and save mankind whom thou didst form of clay" (Kennedy 77) becomes

Thu eart se weallstan the tha wyrhtan iu
Withwurpon to weorce. Wel the geriseth
Thaet thu heafod sie healle maerre,
Ond gesomnige side weallas
Faeste geforge, flint unbraecne,
Thaet geond earthe eall eagna gesihthe
Wundrien to worolde wuldres ealdor. (Krapp & Dobbie 3:3)

Thou art the wall stone the workers rejected
Of old from the work. It befits thee well
That Thou shouldst be Head of the glorious hall
Locking together the lengthy walls,
The flint unbroken, in a firm embrace,

That ever on earth the eyes of all
May look with wonder on the Lord of Glory. (Kennedy 85)

The antiphon's abstract and unspecified "two into one" are imagined concretely as two long walls of the Saxon mead hall, that place of fellowship and celebration after battle. This imagery overlays Paul's use of the metaphor in Ephesians three with both martial and communal emotion even as it recalls it: by Christ's work Jew and Gentile have now become, not just the church militant, but the church joined triumphant in rejoicing. This emphasis naturally leads to explicit praise which echoes both the Old Testament reference and its New Testament use. The Psalmist's comment on the prophecy is "This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes" (Psalm 118:23), and Paul ends his discussion with glory to Christ in the church (Eph. 3:21). The absence of that element in the antiphon itself implies a thoughtful knowledge of Scripture on the part of the poet who restored it in his poem.

In "The Dream of the Rood," we get the story of the Crucifixion from the point of view of the personified Cross. Christ is exalted indirectly through the way he is portrayed: not as a passive victim but as the conquering Hero, the one truly in charge of the situation.

. . . Geseah ic tha frean mancynnes
Efstan elne mycle thaet he wolde on me gestigan . . .
Ongyrede hine tha geong haeleth (thaet waes God aelmihtig),
Strang and stithmod. Gestah he on gealgan heanne,
Modig on manigra gesyhthe, tha he wolde mancyn lysan.
(Krapp & Dobbie 2:62)

Then I saw the king of all mankind
In brave mood hasting to mount upon me . . .
Then the young warrior, God the All-Wielder,
Put off his raiment, steadfast and strong;
With lordly mood in the sight of many
He mounted the Cross to redeem mankind. (Kennedy 94)

The Cross wants to bow to earth and break under the weight of what is happening; it is Christ's strength, in a wonderful irony, that holds the Cross up and enables it to endure the horrible trial of bearing the Lord.

THE MIDDLE ENGLISH PERIOD

In the Middle English period, Christ is eclipsed by his mother in popular English piety. In *The Mirrour of Man's Saluacioun*, for example,

> The virgine fulle of splendour and thorghout lumynouse
> Is bright as someres dawening and als the sonne radyouse.
> Hire bemes ouer alle the sternes ere incomparabli bright;
> Of this worldis nyght the mone is sho, and aungels light. (Henry 81)

Christ himself seldom gets language this exalted; indeed, he is merely a candle offered up to God by his splendiferous mother. This anonymous work is typical of the period. Mary gets twice the space and evokes twice the emotion of her Son. *The Mirrour* does rise to a truly glorious insight at one point, though:

> For alle the joye of the heven and spirituel reioying
> Is of the gracious visage of Jhesu the contempling.
> For bettre ware a sawle in helle Crist's visage seying to be
> Than in heven for to dwelle and his face noght to se. (Henry 209)

When Christ is the focus, the typical mode is not one of praise so much as elegy, the mood not exaltation or joy so much as pity and pathos, and the emotional response sought not so much praise as love. Jesus is often portrayed as addressing the reader from the cross, pleading that his suffering not be ignored. Typical is the *York Crucifixion Play*:

> Al men that walkis by waye or street,
> Takes tente, ye schall no travail tine!

Beholdes min heede, hine hands, and my feete,
And fully feele nowe, or ye fine,
If any mourning may be meete
Or mischeve measured unto mine. (Bevington 577)

The same note is struck in the lyrics:

O man unkynde,
Have thou in mynde
My passioun smerte!
Thou shalt me finde
To thee ful kynde:
Lo, heer myn herte. (Stevick 161.

Mary is often joined even to these meditations.

Now goth sonne under wode—
Me reweth, Marie, thy faire rode.
Now goth sunne under tree—
Me reweth, Marie, thy sone and thee. (Stevick 5)

It is Mary's intercession that secures her Son's atonement for us, and hence she is the main focus of devotion.

On a lady myn hope is,
Moder and virgine;
We shullen into hevenes blisse
Thurgh hir medicine. (Stevick 49)

What may be the finest of all the religious lyrics of the period marvels not at the Son but at the Lady who was worthy to be his mother.

I synge of a mayden
That is makeles:
Kyng of alle kynges
To her sone she ches. . . .

Moder and mayden
Was nevere non but she:
Well may swich a lady
Goddes moder be.

THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

After the Reformation with its emphasis on *Solus Christus* came to England, devotional poetry became more Christocentric again, if not (for a while) more skillful. The first order of business was to versify the Psalms for congregational singing. The metrical Psalms of Sternhold and Hopkins was one of the most popular books of what Lewis calls the "drab" age of Sixteenth-Century English literature (64).

My soul, praise thou the Lord always!
My God I will confess!
While breath and life prolong my days,
My mouth shall no time cease. (Rollins & Baker 162)

Though lacking in literary excellence or interest, these doggerel lines of common meter should not be despised, for they did what they were designed to do: restore something of genuine biblical piety to the masses. A more literary and artistic metrical Psalter that deserves more notice was done later in the period by Sir Philip Sidney and his sister the Countess of Pembroke.

By the end of the century, both English poetic skill and Protestant piety were coming to a new maturity, and were joined in the person of Edmund Spenser. His long allegorical epic *The Faerie Queene* is perhaps best understood as an exercise in spiritual formation as he attempts to

portray the consummate Christian gentleman in pursuit of all the relevant virtues and dependent on grace for success. Spenser was also the first person to write love sonnets not to a mistress but to a woman he married. In them he praises her Christian virtue equally with her physical beauty and in a wonderful Easter hymn invokes their "Most glorious Lord of Life, that on this day / Didst make thy triumph over death and sin," praying that they may learn to love one another by weighing his love worthily:

> Let us loue, deare loue, lyke as we ought;
> Loue is the lesson that the Lord us taught." (Rollins & Baker 366)

But perhaps Spenser's most significant work for our purposes is the profoundly beautiful and meditative "Foure Hymnes." There is one "hymn" each in honor of earthly and heavenly love and beauty. There has been much discussion of the relation of the earthly to the heavenly in Spenser's vision. Do the heavenly love and beauty reject and replace the earthly, or complete and fulfill them? What is certain is that there has seldom been a more supernal evocation of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ than the hymn to heavenly love:

> O blessed well of loue, O floure of grace,
> O glorious Morning starre, O lampe of light,
> Most lively image of thy Father's face,
> Eternall king of glorie, Lord of might,
> Meeke lambe of God before all worlds behight,
> How can we thee requite for all this good?
> Or what can prize that thy most precious blood?

In the only possible answer to this question, the reader is exhorted to

> Giue thyself vnto him full and free
> That full and freely gave himselfe for thee,

With the result that

Then shalt thy rauisht soule inspired bee
With heauenly thoughts, farre aboue humane skill,
And thy bright radiant eyes shall plainely see
The idée of his pure glorie, present still
Before thy face, that all thy spirits shall fill
With sweet enragement of celestiall loue,
Kindled through sight of those faire things above. (Rollins & Baker 379)

THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

One is tempted to give Spenser the last note in this symphony; but the great age of English devotional poetry is still to come. Deepening fissures in the Church of England that would eventually lead to the disillusionment of civil war and the first signs of secularism in thinkers like Hobbes made the profound simplicity of Spenser's adoration, never a simple achievement, seem even more difficult. So the characteristic note of Seventeenth-Century religious poetry is struggle, a wrestling with God and self *toward* a faith in which the believer can finally rest. Christ is not so much praised directly as exalted in effect by the fact that He emerges victorious in these struggles, having graciously forborne in his patience to destroy his faithless followers in the process. Donne thus calls on the Three-Personed God to batter his heart, reaching assurance of salvation only on what he thought was his deathbed in "A Hymn to God the Father":

But swear by Thyself that at my death Thy Son
Shall shine as He shines now, and heretofore;
And, having done that, Thou hast done.
I fear no more. (Witherspoon & Warnke 759).

George Herbert also wrestles, not so much for faith as for submission; and Christ shines out of that wrestling, often in a sudden glint from a line or two, as the One infinitely worthy of that submission. Some of Herbert's most interesting poems show his speaker in a rebellion that

seems successful until it falls apart in the very last line. In "The Thanksgiving" he rebels against *sola gratia*, insisting on a synergism by which he could match Christ's love with his own, until "Then for Thy passion—I will do for that / Alas, my God, I know not what" (Witherspoon & Warnke 847). In "The Collar" he rebels against God's calling for thirty-two lines until

> But as I raved and grew more fierce and wild
> At every word,
> Methought I heard one calling, "Child!"
> And I replied, "My Lord!" (Witherspoon & Warnke 857)

Herbert also wrestles profitably with what it means to be a Christian and a poet (Williams, "Thou Art Still my God"). His best insights center on Christ and the marvel of His atonement. "Love is that liquor, sweet and most divine, / Which my God feels as blood, but I as wine" (847). Henry Vaughan in England and Edward Taylor in America are also noted contributors to this "metaphysical" vein.

THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

After the Restoration, the praise of Christ retreated almost completely from the public arena of *belles lettres* to the church and its hymnody. Devotion did not disappear completely from the lives of the poets, for Dr. Johnson would as lief have prayed with Kit Smart as any other man; but henceforth only minor eccentrics like Smart with his *Jubilate Agno* would try to address the public outside of church on the topic. But even from the asylum, Smart's voice—and that of his cat, Geoffrey—could not be silenced (Tillotson 1166-8).

Fortunately, the First Great Awakening ushered in the classic age of English hymnody. Christ's love as expressed in the atonement and applied to the individual soul in redemption is the characteristic inspiration for its praise. Isaac Watts meditates on the profound love and sorrow that meet in Christ's sacrifice of his life on the Cross, and responds to it with the affirmation,

> Were the whole Realm of Nature mine,

That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine
Demands my Soul, my Life, my All. (Tillotson 824)

Charles Wesley likewise marvels at Christ's "amazing love" and wonders "How can it be / That thou, my God, shouldst die for me." Christ for him is "all I want; / More than all in Thee I find" ("Jesus Lover of my Soul," Tillotson 1536). Wesley's hymn "Wrestling Jacob" is unfortunately too long and too linear in its development to have made it into modern hymnals, but it is for that very reason a superb expression of the characteristic notes of the period. The sinner and Christ take the place of Jacob and the angel as the sinner wrestles with the nature of the One who confronts him until he realizes,

'Tis Love, 'tis Love! Thou diedst for me;
I hear Thy whisper in my heart.
The morning breaks, the shadows flee." (Tillotson 1536)

And the poem continues, ringing the changes on the joyous revelation that "Thy Nature and Thy Name is LOVE."

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Despite a radical shift from the secular sensibility of Neoclassical literature toward a renewed interest in spiritual values as the Romantic period dawns, the praise of Christ makes no return to mainstream canonical poetry, while the church's hymnody turns increasingly to more sentimental themes. The great Romantics either were not Christians (Keats, Shelley, Byron) or were eccentric ones (Coleridge) or did not swing toward orthodoxy until after the period of their major poetic output (Wordsworth). So the best we get is a vague Presence that "disturbs" us with "elevated thoughts" (Noyes 260), thoughts that never quite coalesce even into theism, much less Christology. Some of the Victorians try to stumble back toward Christian faith. Tennyson's "Infant crying in the night; / An infant crying for the light, / And with no language but a cry" (Hill 147), admirable in its profound humility, can teach us rightly that "There lives more faith in

honest doubt, / Believe me, than in half the creeds" (Hill 171) and can cry defiantly into the face of the Godless deep, "I have felt!" (188). But while we may believe that what it feels is the Christian God, the object of the cry never becomes much more explicit than Wordsworth's Presence; and a cry, while a valuable movement of the human heart for literature to record, is not praise.

It remains for eccentrics like the Jesuit Gerard Manley Hopkins to keep praise of Christ that has real literary as well as devotional merit alive in English poetry. The mastery of the elements of the Windhover, that crown prince of the kingdom of daylight, reminds Hopkins of Christ, his "chevalier," his knight in shining armor (Gardner 69). In the resurrection we shall be what Christ is because he was what we are—which makes us "immortal diamond" (106). For Christ, in his exuberant dance of justice and grace,

> Plays in ten thousand places
> Lovely in limbs and lovely in eyes not his
> To the Father through the features of men's faces. (90)

In strong lines that ring with sprung rhythm, alliteration, and assonance, conveying rich and suggestive metaphor with irrepressible energy, Hopkins shows that even in the spiritual wasteland of modern poetry God has not left himself without a witness.

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY AND BEYOND

In the modern and post-modern periods, faith and praise continue to be mainly absent or muted in mainstream poetry. But it was still possible for a T. S. Eliot to find his way from the hollow men of the wasteland to the still point of the turning world (Eliot 56, 37f, 119). His "Ash Wednesday" and "Four Quartets" combine the best of the English devotional tradition with the mysticism of Dante, finding no cheap rest for the wounded modern soul in Christ the Still Point.

My final response to the apparent divorce between devotion and serious literature is found in the words of Hazel Motes: "They ain't quit doing it as long as I'm doing it" (O'Connor 122; cf. Williams, *Inklings*, *Mere Humanity*, "Poetry," etc.). At the risk of re-inviting the charge of *hubris*, I close with the following:

TO CHRIST OUR LORD

Sonnet XXII

Thrice holy, three times spoken, meant, and heard
By one Voice speaking once, once only hearing,
One only multifold, all-meaning Word
From out of time in time and flesh appearing;
Separate, though inseparably one,
Thou who art not the Father, yet art God,
Thou who art Son of Man, yet no man's son;
Root of Jesse, Rock of Ages, Rod
Of Aaron blossoming in barren soil
Whose petals blades are of a burning sword
That strikes its deep wounds full of healing oil;
Servant of all and universal Lord:
With literal metaphors we stumbling seek
To praise thee, strong Firstborn of all who speak. (D.T.W.)

CONCLUSION

This then is my teacup. May it whet your thirst for the ocean.

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Donald T. Williams holds a BA in English from Taylor University, an M.Div. from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and a PhD in Medieval and Renaissance Literature from the University of Georgia. He is the author of six books*: The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit* (Broadman, 1994), *Inklings of Reality: Essays toward a Christian Philosophy of Letters* (Toccoa Falls College Press, 1996), *The Disciple's Prayer* (Christian Publications, 1999), *Mere Humanity: G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, and J. R. R. Tolkien on the Human Condition* (Broadman, 2006), *Credo: An Exposition of the Nicene Creed* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2007), and *The Devil's Dictionary of the Christian Faith* (Chalice Press, 2008). He has also contributed essays, poems, and reviews to such journals as *National Review, Christianity Today, Touchstone, The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society, Philosophia Christi, Theology Today, Christianity and Literature, Christian Scholar's Review, Mythlore, SEVEN, Christian Educator's Journal*, *Preaching*, and *Christian Research Journal*. An ordained minister in the Evangelical Free Church of America with many years of pastoral experience, he has spent several summers in Africa training local pastors for Church Planting International, and currently serves as Professor of English and Director of the School of Arts and Sciences at Toccoa Falls College in the hills of NE Georgia. More material on the Inklings and other topics can be found at his website, http://doulomen.tripod.com.