

THE HYMN AS LITERATURE

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CHAPTER I

THE HYMN

IT is remarkable that English literary criticism has given so little attention to a form of literature that holds so large a place in the attention of the people as does the hymn. For the hymn is the most popular kind of English poetry. If this appear to be an immoderate statement, let the objector find and bring forward another type of poetry that is read so frequently by so many people and, at least apparently, with so much approval. If one should count the number of persons in any English-speaking town who had read epic poetry during the last week, or who had read dramatic poetry, or, excepting one book, who had read fifty lines of lyrical poetry, he would find the number relatively quite small. But last week in a small American city there were thirty-seven hundred persons who read or went over at least three hymns. That there were three times thirty-seven hundred readings of lyrical poetry by the people of a typical small community in the ordinary course of its affairs in one

week is a fact of real significance to the student of American life and literature.

To remember that this popular esteem accorded the hymn extends throughout all countries where the English language is spoken, is to be assured that verse is alive and powerful in the world to-day.

It is a fact that the largest single edition of any merchantable book in the United States up to 1912 was the first edition of a volume of lyrical verse, a hymn-book. And the enormous first edition of that book was followed in the same year by two other printings. Between July, 1905, and December, 1920, it had passed through thirty-two printings. The sale of this book, according to a statement by the publishers, has been something over two million copies. It should be remarked that this is but one book of but one branch of the Christian church in the United States. In England there is a single collection of hymns that has far out-distanced this; before the beginning of the World War it had reached an output of no fewer than sixty million copies. These two collections, the English "Hymns Ancient and Modern" and the American "Methodist Hymnal," are of course by no means all of the hymn-books; they are but two among hundreds of similar collections. In this country the "Methodist Hymnal," although it is the largest in point of numbers issued, has many great companions in the field. The Baptist, Congregational, Presbyterian, and Protestant Epis-

copal hymn-books are notable for the extent of their circulation. There are many other hymnals issued by various branches of the church, as for example, the Friends and the Unitarians. The Roman Catholics have a number of good books of English hymns.

Besides these there are several standard hymnals issued by great publishing houses, which have wide circulation. The Anglican "Hymns Ancient and Modern," vastly as it is distributed, is not an official hymn-book of the Church of England; there are scores of other Church of England hymn-books. In the British Isles, besides these, there are many great hymnals, great both in quality and in point of wide distribution, issued by the Irish, Scottish, Roman Catholic, and Non-Conforming churches. It is much the same in Canada, South Africa, and Australasia. The English hymn holds wide sway wherever the English language is spoken.

Of smaller general distribution than those just mentioned, yet mounting into enormous numbers, are the hymn-books of particular religious societies and minor independent organizations. One of the Mormon hymn-books, for example, is now in its twenty-fifth edition, the editions having been of ten thousand volumes each. There is a small religious body, made up originally from Swiss, German, and Dutch immigrants, called Mennonites. This comparatively minute branch of the church has issued, according to information received from its publishing house, about two hundred thousand copies. A collection of songs, mainly ephemeral and not al-

ways innocuous, is printed endlessly; this type of book would hardly be mentioned here did it not almost invariably include a number of the worthy hymns without which it could not well stand alone. Astonishingly large numbers of hymn-books are brought out by standard publishing houses. One of these, "The American Hymnal," containing 726 hymns, has had a sale of nearly one hundred thousand copies; another, "The Army and Navy Hymnal," is in use in every camp, on every ship, and in every naval station of the United States. Another, "Hymns of Worship and Service," has had an output of well over half a million copies. Another, "Hymnal for American Youth," sells at the rate of fifty thousand copies a year. This last is a book designed for young persons, containing 342 lyrics; it is but one of the twenty-two hymn-books published by a single publishing house. It should be noted, too, that none of these are pamphlets or anything less than standard full-cloth octavo books selling at standard prices. Details like these indicate a wide popularity for the hymn-book.

By the term "hymn-book" as it is used throughout this volume is meant no particular compilation of hymns, but that *corpus* of religious lyrical verse selected by a remarkably distinct consensus of taste, and constituting, with slight variations, the body of every good collection.

The hymn itself may be defined as a lyrical composition expressive of religious aspiration, petition,

confession, communion, or praise; a song devoted to the fellowship of souls and the worship of God. In its broader sense the term includes canticles, psalms, carols, "spirituals," and chants; in its more limited sense it includes only religious lyrics in rime and meter—in a style of very definite and narrow restrictions. The good hymn combines in quite remarkable effect the straitest simplicity, clarity, dignity, and melody, rich ideas about the basic matters of life and death, with strong emotion under sure control.

It seems safe to state without any reservations that this type, of all forms of English poetry to-day, stands first in popular favor. The hymn-book—the fairly uniform compilation of the standard hymns of the English language—is published and sold to an extent not approached by the publications of any other types of poetry.

And the hymn-book does not merely reach an enormous printing; it is actually opened and read more often than any other book of poetry. This fact becomes more apparent as one endeavors to call to mind other books of verse that begin to rival the hymn-book in this respect. Further, when verses from the hymn-books are being used it is not infrequent that two persons are reading the same page at the same time, while others may be repeating the lyric from memory 'without any book—as Lincoln and Roosevelt are said usually to have done. Of course many persons may read more often from Shakspeare or Byron or Edgar Guest;

some may never open a hymn-book. The statement here is that among English-speaking people generally, the sum of times that the hymn-book is taken up and read is larger than the sum of times that any other book of poetry is read.

This sway of the religious song in the lives of American people is not a new thing; the hymn has maintained a lyrical regnancy continuously and from the very first. And the hymn, though essentially deep-moving and intimate, has nevertheless exerted its power at times in a quite regal and dramatic manner.

It is with an outburst of religious song that the curtain goes up on the whole drama of America. American history opens with the singing of a Christian hymn. On the evening of September 25, 1492, one of the companions of Columbus saw what he thought to be land lying dimly in the west. Though it was not America yet, still, over those strange waters rang out the first greeting to America. From all three of the ships, as Columbus himself gives the account in his diary, there rose the sound of the old "*Gloria in Excelsis Deo.*" Then later, on Friday night, October 12, when they saw a light glimmering on the shore of the New World, the cry went up, and "*Salve Regina*" swept out over the water. The Old World was greeting the New World with a hymn.

Again, the first English book printed in the Western hemisphere was the old English hymnal, "*The Bay Psalm Book.*" Spanish Roman Catholic

sailors had come singing hymns; and Anglo-Saxon Puritan settlers sent back a hymn-book, the first literary offering of the New World to the Old. It is worth noting that the offering was well received. It afterward went through many English editions. Of course the hymns sung on Columbus's ships were in Latin, and the songs of the New England book were rough-hewn translations of the Psalms into English verse, but they were all, in the broader sense of the word, true hymns.

The great Northwest was opened to civilization and claimed for France with the singing of hymns. And La Salle, discovering the mouth of the Mississippi River, stood on the bank and claimed all the vast region for France in a ceremony marked by the singing of three hymns.

By the New Englanders' firesides, at their social gatherings, and on their austere Sabbaths, the hymns, or metrical psalms, held a large place; and the emotions and ideals which these lyrics bore could not but enter into the fiber of the people's lives.

Along the Atlantic coast the Indians could hear from the clearings of the white men, mingled with sounds of cattle and barn-yard fowl and busy ax, here and there from women at their work, from families in their cabins at night, from gatherings in groves and log meeting-houses, the sound of hymns. And there were Indians who learned to sing them. A letter, for example, to Sir William Ashurst from New England describes the Indians' "excellent

singing the Psalms with most ravishing melody." It did not take the Southern slaves long to learn their masters' hymns and to make sweet and plaintive ones of their own. No one can guess how much the American negro's hymns have meant to him in making for consolation and piety and virtue. They have played, and still play, a large part in his life.

Scattered details here and there in the records of past American life indicate even to the casual reader how intimately religious lyrical verse entered into that life. "The Bay Psalm Book" was printed in the modest dwelling of the first president of Harvard. President Dwight of Yale, chaplain-general of the Revolutionary Army, edited and partly wrote what was for years the leading hymn- and psalm-book in the country. President Davies of Princeton was in his day a leading American hymn-writer.

In 1737, at Charlestown, South Carolina, a young Oxford graduate, John Wesley, Anglican priest, chaplain to Oglethorpe, and missionary to the Indians, published the first real hymn-book—as distinguished from the metrical psalm-book—of the Church of England. Thus in America began the sequence of great English hymn-books.

Among the earliest extant writing in the hand of George Washington is the transcription of a hymn.¹ Thomas Jefferson and John Adams were warmly interested in hymns. In their correspond-

¹ Jared Sparks, "Life and Writings of Washington," Vol. XII, p. 299. Little, Brown, and Company, Boston, 1855.

ence, after they had retired from Washington, the two old chieftains carried on a discussion of hymnody. They seemed to agree upon the Psalms as the greatest of all lyrical poetry. In a letter of advice to young Isaac Englebrecht, Jefferson transcribed Tate and Brady's version of the fifteenth Psalm, "knowing," he says, "nothing more moral, more sublime, more worthy of your preservation."

Benjamin Franklin was particularly fond of the lyrics of Isaac Watts. The first book issued from Franklin's press in Philadelphia was an edition of Watts's "Psalms and Hymns." To a friend, Mrs. Newsom, when she visited him during his last hours, he quoted several of the lyrics of Watts, "discouraging at length upon their sublimity." Joel Barlow, poet of the Revolution, and later minister to France, was a writer of hymns and editor of a notable American hymn-book. John Quincy Adams translated the whole Book of Psalms into English verse, besides writing the large number of hymns in his "Poems of Religion and Society."

The hymn is so much interwoven in the fabric of our past and present that it seems gratuitous to mention instances of the use of hymnody in familiar life. One must leave to the imagination, and to intimate recollections, evaluation of the worth of the hymn as a force in strengthening ties of fellowship and of sanctity, in giving voice to the otherwise unuttered grief or desire, and in bearing to those in need of it consolation and hope and courage.

One might go on with innumerable details indi-

cating the influence of these lyrics in American life. For example, Julia Ward Howe's "Battle Hymn of the Republic," written in a dark hour of the Civil War, and spreading through the camps and marches like fire, was worth to the Northern cause possibly more than train-loads of corn and ammunition could have been in its place. Lincoln was so moved by it that he broke into tears at the public singing of it. Lee, on the other side, was finding in the old hymn, "How Firm a Foundation," something of strength and comfort to help him. When Abraham Lincoln died, the people throughout the North sang the hymns that he had found helpful in his life. Nor is it without significance that many thousands of persons sang together all over the land as memorials to Garfield and McKinley, and later to Roosevelt, and to Harding, the hymns that these men had loved.

Such glimpses as the foregoing indicate that the small type of lyrical poetry called the hymn has had a good deal to do, first and last, with the ideas and emotions of the people of the continent.

The same may be said of the hymns in English life. The first literature written on English soil is, so far as we know, a religious lyric, Cædmon's Hymn. The missionaries who went to England with St. Augustine marched in a procession, singing hymns, up the strand to where King Ethelbert sat waiting to receive them. The king gave them a home in Canterbury, which town they entered, according to Bede, singing a litany. St. Patrick and his followers approached the old druids and hostile chiefs

singing hymns. Among the works of Bede was "A Book of Hymns in Divers Sorts of Meter and Rhythm." There are throngs of incidents in early English lore indicating the part of hymnody in the life of the people. Bede tells, for example, of the famous "Halleluiah victory" of Germanicus over the Saxons and Picts wherein by a "universal shouting of Halleluiah" they put the enemy to rout. King Alfred was so attached to his hymn-book that he would go nowhere, not even hunting, without it. Henry VIII, Elizabeth, Mary Stuart, and James I were authors of hymns. So we may glance down over the hymns of the Wesleys and the hymns of the Oxford Movement and on down to the singing of "O God Our Help in Ages Past" by the English at the burial of their Unknown Soldier at the close of the World War.

An indication of the influence of the hymn in Scottish life may be found in Burns's portrayal in "The Cotter's Saturday Night"; and Robert Burns knew the heart of Scotland.

They chant their artless notes in simple guise;
They tune their hearts, by far the noblest aim;
Perhaps "Dundee's" wild warbling measures rise,
Or Plaintive "Martyrs," worthy of the name;
Or noble "Elgin" beets the heavenward flame,
The sweetest far of Scotia's holy lays. . . .
From scenes like these old Scotia's grandeur springs
That makes her loved at home, revered abroad.

Hymnody constitutes a part, not only of English literature, but of all literature. Rich as the English