

The Greatest Hymn in the English Language?

Richard Skeet explores the poetry and lasting power of Isaac Watts' "When I survey the wondrous cross" (StF 287).

It is sometimes said that the Mona Lisa is the greatest painting in the world and that *Bleak House* is the greatest novel in the English language – or is that *Middlemarch*? I'm not sure quite what these statements mean, because people making them seldom explain exactly why they hold that view. Neither have they seen every painting or read every novel. I have heard a number of hymns described in a similar way – each commentator having his or her own suggestion but never really saying why. However, one hymn comes up time after time: "When I survey the wondrous cross". Writing towards the end of the 19th century, Dr. Julian, in his great *Dictionary of Hymnology*, places this among the four that he says stand at the head of all hymns in terms of popularity and use in all English speaking countries. The others are "Awake, my, soul and with the sun", "Hark! The herald angels sing" and "Rock of ages cleft for me" – an interesting list! So what makes "When I survey" so special? I decided to have a closer look.

The hymn first appeared in Isaac Watts' second collection of hymns, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, published in 1707. It was almost certainly written between 1694 and 1696 when the 20-year-old Isaac returned home from his studies at the Stoke Newington Academy. The hymn appears in Section 3 of the book – "Prepared for the Lord's Supper". Watts clearly intends this to be a communion hymn and heads it "Crucifixion to the world by the cross of Christ, Gal. 6. 14".

Two remarkable things

The first remarkable thing about this hymn is the nature of the composition itself. It is, look at it how you will, a meditation based on Christ on the Cross. It is a devotion inspired by a crucifix. Not, of course, a crucifix fashioned in wood or stone, but a crucifix formed by the imagination of the reader and the detail leads us, though not in so many words, to contemplate the Five Wounds of Christ. Now this type of devotion is very much a part of Roman Catholic tradition, but Isaac Watts was not a Catholic nor, like the Wesleys, a high Anglican. He was not even a low Anglican – he was a protestant Dissenter, about as far removed from Rome as it is possible to be. The young Isaac Watts grew up in a period of intense nervousness among English Protestants. When he was 14, the birth of James II's

son, which threatened to usher in the restoration of the Catholic Church as the established church in England, precipitated the Glorious Revolution which finally put paid to the chance of any counter-reformation but ushered in a very difficult time for Catholics. For a Dissenter to write in so Catholic a style at a time of such interdenominational mistrust, if not hatred, is quite remarkable. However, the simple and devotional style of writing rises far above these human tensions and it quickly became a much loved hymn sung by all Christian denominations, Protestant and Catholic alike, throughout the English speaking world.

The second remarkable thing about this hymn is that, at least in the version given to us in *Hymns and Psalms* (No. 180), the text used today is exactly as Watts wrote it, albeit at his second attempt. His original version on 1707 began:

“When I survey the wondrous cross
Where the young Prince of Glory dy’d”

but the author greatly improved this in the enlarged version of his collection in 1709 to the form we use today. Despite many attempts to “improve” his text, mercifully few of which have survived, this is one of only a tiny number of Watts hymns that are sung today in an unaltered form. The substitution of “offering” for “present”, which has returned to us in *Singing the Faith*, first appeared in 1831. These two words do not mean the same thing, for an *offering*, apart from having too many syllables, implies the possibility of rejection and has a nuance of duty. A *present* is given in love without fear of rejection. Dr. Watts had it just right!

One has only to glance at the other, long-forgotten, hymns in his books to realise how extraordinary this great hymn is. While some of his writing is quite magnificent, at best much of Watts’ writing may be described as “quaint”, less charitably it might be said to vary from somewhat awkward to downright embarrassing. Every one of Watts’ hymns included in *Singing the Faith* has been edited in some way, but over 300 years later this great hymn is as fresh as the day it was written. True, we might not use ‘survey’ like this in everyday speech, but it clearly is exactly the right word for the context. We might not use ‘wondrous’ every day either, but perhaps this will come back when our teenagers tire of using ‘awesome’ to describe everything only a little above average. I can only liken this hymn to one of those wonderful ancient clocks which have faithfully told the time for centuries simply by being wound up.

The making of a great poem

To show that a hymn is remarkable is not the same as providing evidence of greatness. For that we need to take the verses apart to see exactly how they work, rather like looking at a great painting with a magnifying glass to examine the detail of the master's brush-strokes.

This hymn, like countless others, is cast in the old English ballad metre of four eight-syllable lines – 8.8.8.8., alternating light and stressed syllables. While this is one of the easiest metres to write, the results can be dire or sublime depending on the skill of the poet. Here Watts shows complete mastery of his medium. Every one of his 160 syllables receives exactly the right stress, every “weak” syllable falls on a light beat and every stressed syllable on a strong beat. In the ballad metre it is only necessary to rhyme lines two and four, but a more compact verse results when, as here, lines one and three are rhymed as well. In much writing in this metre lesser poets than Watts (and even Watts himself) are content to settle for false rhymes or even assonances. Of the ten rhymes here, nine are perfect, only the rhyme of “God” and “blood” is slightly false – and this might have something to do with changes of pronunciation over the last three centuries. This command of metre and rhyme is achieved without any padding or awkwardness, the flow of words being as natural as if there were no constraints at all.

The education given at the Dissenting Academy at Stoke Newington steeped Watts in the techniques of classical poetry and rhetoric and on his return home he uses these to the full. Not content with near perfection in rhyme and rhythm he uses a series of other devices which we hardly notice while singing, but which are the hidden brushstrokes creating this masterpiece.

One of Watts' favourites is the use of repetition to accumulate emphasis. It works beautifully at the climax of the hymn:

Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands *my* soul, *my* life, *my* all.

Note that he puts each *my* on a weak beat, which retains the emphasis but not in a pushy way. The use of personal pronouns is important in this hymn. The very first stressed word is *I* and at almost the halfway point we have the twice repeated *his*:

See from *his* head, *his* hands, *his* feet

– an accumulation which prepares us for the final line. Notice here how Watts effortlessly strings together five consecutive words beginning with ‘h’, a clever use of alliteration which passes almost unnoticed. Apart from this line, Watts avoids simple alliteration of the “round the rugged rocks the ragged rascal ran” type in favour of something more subtle. In the last line of verse one, for example, he puts the alliteration on the first and last stressed syllables.

“And *pour* contempt on all my *pride*”

Now you may think that this is just a happy coincidence, but look at the very next line:

“*Forbid* it, Lord, that I should *boast*”

another pair of explosive consonants (and there only two in English) in exactly the same place. Another coincidence? I don’t think so. By verse three he is really getting into his stride, playing with c’s and r’s on their own and blended together with startling ease:

“Or thorns *compose* so *rich* a *crown*.
His dying *crimson* like a *robe*”

A rhetorical device much loved by classical poets is the *chiasmus*, literally a “crossing-over”, where a phrase or idea is repeated in reverse. Watts uses this twice in this hymn. In verse four we have:

“And am I dead to all the world,
And all the world is dead to me”

This simply reproduces St. Paul in the Galatians 6: 14 text: “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” St. Paul was trained in rhetoric too. But look at what is going on in verse three:

“Sorrow and love flow mingled down,
Did e’er such love and sorrow meet”

The image, of course, is of the streams of blood and water described in the Gospel of John, which are metaphorically replaced by love and sorrow. The very word “mingled” is the pivot of the *chiasmus*, the point at which the crossover takes place. Once again Watts carries this

off in such a natural and uncontrived way that we don't consciously notice it at all but the mental image is reinforced subliminally by the structure of the words.

Another device used by the classical poet is to link the idea expressed at the end of one verse to the start of the next, which I'm told is a form of *anadiplosis*. In this hymn Watts does this between each verse. The "pride" at the end of verse one links to the "boast" at the start of verse two. This verse ends with "his blood", the next verse starting with "See from his head ...", which of course is what we see, though Watts transforms this into sorrow and love. This third verse ends with the image of the crown of thorns – a symbol of royalty, and verse four takes up the second symbol of royalty, the robe. Watts indulges in some poetic licence making the robe crimson rather than purple but he is more than justified by the extremely powerful imagery he creates.

We have already noted the alliteration which is going on here but as well as the *anadiplosis*, in the middle of it all we also have a pun on "dying" and "dyeing"! The intensity of poetic artistry here is quite extraordinary. This verse ends on the idea of the "globe"; the final verse beginning with "the whole realm of nature". Watts knits together his verses seamlessly without us being in the least aware of it, and thus propels the hymn to its climax in the last two lines. Perhaps " .. *my* soul, *my* life, *my* all" leads us back to the start, for it is "when / survey the wondrous cross..."

The greatest hymn?

Undoubtedly the power of this hymn derives from its ability to inspire our imagination and leads us to the response of the last line. The mental crucifix we ourselves create may be as grotesque, violent and ugly as a medieval German wood-carving or as clean, sanitised and surreal as Dali's "Christ of Saint John of the Cross". Our personal image of the cross invokes our personal response.

What makes this a great hymn is that the artistry of the writing is never allowed to get in the way of the simplicity of the words. When we stand back, the individual brush-strokes become invisible as the masterpiece comes into focus. The greatest hymn in the English language? What do you think?

Richard Skeet is organist and choirmaster of St John's Methodist Church in Hereford. An edited version of this article first appears in the *Methodist Recorder* on 22 March,

**2013. It is reproduced on Singing the Faith Plus with permission of the author and
*Methodist Recorder.***