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The contribution of the eighteenth century poetry to the religious thought and attitude of contemporary England

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THESIS:

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY POETRY
TO THE
RELIGIOUS THOUGHT AND ATTITUDE
OF
CONTEMPORARY ENGLAND.

Submitted by

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Introduction:

England at the close of the seventeenth century.
Reaction against ecclesiastical bondage.
Religious controversies:
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  Deism.
State of the Church.
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The Poet:

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Contributions of the Eighteenth Century Poetry.

Introspection.
Pope.
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In order to estimate the value of the contribution which the poetry of the eighteenth century made to the religious thought and attitude of contemporary England, it is necessary to recall in brief the religious condition of the people at the close of the preceding century. In many respects, this period, namely the latter half of the seventeenth century, was one of transition from the medieval to the modern situation in religion. The Reformation had broken the supremacy of the sacerdotal system which had controlled Christianity since the second century. It paved the way for the emergence of the individual to assert his God-given rights in matters alike of law and religion.

Nevertheless the reformed Christianity in England, although breathing the pure spirit of liberty, was finding it hard to shake itself free from the bondage of external authority to which it had grown so long accustomed. It still insisted on the dominance of religion over all forms of educational and cultural life, and on a single type of worship as alone permissible, at least within a given territory. Anglo-Saxon England welcomed indeed with an open heart the great principles for which the Reformation in Germany had stood and struggled; but with a mind all too cautious and slow did it proceed to adopt those principles for reconstructing its own institutions. This
characteristically conservative attitude of England gave rise to many a revolt within the revolt. The people had been helped, once and forever, to realize their inestimable prerogatives as individual members of a common humanity on God's earth. The Bible was now an open book, a free word to them. They could worship God in spirit and truth and obtain His favours without human mediation and molestation. "The just shall live by faith" was their charter; and the universal priesthood of believers their privilege. The hierarchy of Rome, which had long kept concealed from their knowledge this charter and denied to them this privilege, had been bowed out at the front door. The royal declaration proclaiming religious liberty ran as follows:

"We do declare a liberty to tender consciences; and that no man shall be disquieted, or called in question, for differences of opinion in matters of religion, which do not disturb the peace of the kingdom; and that we shall be ready to consent to such an act of parliament as, upon mature deliberation, shall be offered to us, for the full granting that indulgence."

*Clarendon's History iii 747, quoted in Short's History of the Church of England xv 249.
the Church in England, rightly enough perhaps, was anxious that the newly acquired liberty did not degenerate into license. This vacillation, however, expressed itself in strenuous efforts on the part of the various bodies of the Church, the Presbyterians, the Episcopalians and the like, to secure proper safeguards for their peculiar tenets and forms of worship. Furthermore, the long controversy that had raged over the problems of Church discipline and government and its relation to civil power did not prove to be free from evils. Discussing the demerits of the Church establishment, for instance, Short writes thus in his History of the Church of England:

"But this connection has fettered the Church with many evils. It has justly authorized the state in interfering with clerical appointments, and, from the value of the revenues attached to them, has unfortunately induced those at whose disposal they are placed to select their friends, who are not always the proper persons to fill the situations; while it has induced the clergy to seek for the preferments. The poverty of many of our spiritual cures prevents them, humanly speaking, from being properly taken care of; and God knows whether the wealth of others does not tend to diffuse a want of spirituality through the Church."

A new influence in the meantime had come to affect powerfully the popular attitude in the matter of religion: namely, Calvinistic and Rationalistic theology. It unhappily found itself doing evil where it sought to do good. Its one-sided emphasis on the sovereign will of God with regard to the eternal destiny of the human soul, drove the unthinking people to accept the doctrine with a sort of fatal-

*Chapter xviii, 309.
istic indifference and the thinking ones to seek to refute it with rationalistic philosophy. John Locke (1632-1704) with "reasonableness" as his test of truth and Isaac Newton (1642-1727) with his conception of the universe, not as a field of arbitrary divine action, but as a realm of law, led to a radical departure in the religious thought of England. This intellectual movement had taken its rise in the early part of the seventeenth century.

"From the vexed problems, political and religious, with which it had so long wrestled in vain, England turned at last to the physical world around it, to the observation of its phenomena, to the discovery of the laws which govern them. The pursuit of physical science became a passion; and its method of research, by observation, comparison, and experiment, transformed the older methods of enquiry in matters without its pale. In religion, in politics, in the study of man and of nature, not faith but reason, not tradition but enquiry, were to be the watchwords of the coming time. The dead weight of the past was suddenly rolled away, and the new England heard at last and understood the call of Francis Bacon."

England was nevertheless timid in the pursuit of the studies and investigations of physical science. The explanation of this timidity, as set forth by Lecky, lies in a love of compromise and a dislike to pushing principles to extreme consequences.** The strife of the time, however, aided in directing the minds of men to natural enquiries. "To have been always tossing about some theological question," says the first historian of the

Royal Society, Bishop Sprat, "would have been to have made that their private diversion, the excess of which they disliked in the public. To have been eternally musing on civil business and the distresses of the country was too melancholy a reflection. It was nature alone which could pleasantly entertain them in that estate." Science thus suddenly became the fashion of the day. The Royal Society of Natural Philosophy was established in 1662. "Physic, Anatomy, Geometry, Astronomy, Navigation, Statics, Magnetics, Chymicks, Mechanicks and Natural experiments" came to be studied more or less extensively. The physical discoveries of Isaac Newton gave a decided impetus to the pursuit of scientific knowledge. A rationalistic interpretation of nature was the result, giving rise to what is known as Deism. According to it, belief without proof was superstition. To be rid of superstition was to be free, hence the rational thinker was a free-thinker. Deism thus seemed to destroy all historic Christianity and authoritative revelation. An intense warfare consequently raged among the various factions of religious and intellectual leaders. The papists and the protestants, the Churchmen and the puritans, the Calvinists and the Deists, the Arians, the Socinians and the infidels—all were embroiled in mutual denunciations and recriminations; some of them even resorting to unscrupulous means and machinations just so as to gain ascendancy over their opponents.

All this resulted in two things, one following the other in logical sequence:

I. Loss of faith on the part of the people in their own religious leaders; and

II. A low ebb of spiritual life in the Church.
The clergy were treated with sarcastic indifference for which they had their own mode of life to thank. The Church and the polite literature are the two most important factors of influence upon human society. And unhappily for England, the influences of both the Church and the polite literature were, at this period, cast into the wrong scale of the balance. To quote "A New History of Methodism", Vol. I, p. 177: "while many of the clergy maintained purity of life and deportment, history does not absolve them from the charge of tolerating in the Church many clergymen whose conduct scandalized their profession. ...There never was such license among so-called ministers of religion as at this time..... Some of the most distinguished coxcombs, drunkards, debauchees, and gamesters who figured at the watering places, and all places of public resort, were young men of the sacerdotal order."

The passing of the supreme authority from the Church to the State was largely responsible for the impotence of the former to maintain its prestige. The status of the clergy suffered in consequence, as can be gathered from the following description of the so-called "private chaplains" given in "Social England", Vol. IV edited by H. D. Traill, p. 359: "The satirists of the age and of succeeding generations have delighted to make mock of the humble priest, the mere creature of his patron, who said his grace, wrote his letters, and ended with a small living and the hand of his cast-off mistress or his wife's waiting maid. The famous lines of Oldham were in some cases not very far from truth:

'Diet, an horse, and thirty pounds a year,  
Besides the advantage of his lordship's ear,  
The credit of the business and the state,  
Are things that in a youngster's sense sound great.  
Little the inexperienced wretch doth know
What slavery he oft must undergo;  
Who though in silken scarf and cassock drest,  
Wears but a gayer livery at best.  
When dinner calls, the implement must wait,  
With holy words to consecrate the meat,  
But hold it for a favour seldom shown  
If he be deigned the honour to sit down."

To mention one more flagrant abuse common at this time, the system of what were known as Fleet marriages might serve to reflect the moral condition of society. The Common Law permitted marriages on the mere consent of the parties, and a marriage valid for all purposes could be celebrated by a priest in orders at any time or place, without registration and without consent of parents or guardians.

"In such a state of the law atrocious abuses had grown up. A multitude of clergymen, usually prisoners for debt and most always men of notoriously infamous lives, made it their business to celebrate clandestine marriages in or near the Fleet. They performed the ceremony without the license or question, sometimes without even knowing the names of the persons they united, in public houses, brothels, or garrets. They acknowledged no ecclesiastical superior. Almost every tavern or brandy shop in the neighborhood had a Fleet parson in its pay. Notices were placed in the windows, and agents went out in every direction to solicit the passers-by. A more pretentious, and perhaps more popular establishment was the chapel in Curzon Street where the Rev. Alexander Keith officiated. He was said to have made a very bishopric of revenue by clandestine marriages, and the expres-
sion can hardly be exaggerated if it be true, as was asserted in Parliament, that he had married on an average 6,000 couples every year."

The polite literature of the day was another factor equally important and positively baneful in its influence upon the public.

Macaulay in his History of England presents the situation thus: "The wits and the puritans had never been on friendly terms. There was no sympathy between the two classes. They looked on the whole system of human life from different points and in different lights. The earnest of each was the jest of the other. The pleasures of each were the torments of the other. To the Hern precision even the innocent sport of the fancy seemed a crime. To light and festive natures the solemnity of the jealous brethren furnished copious matter of ridicule. From the Reformation to the Civil War, almost every writer, gifted with a fine sense of the ridiculous, had taken some opportunity of assailing the straight-haired, snuffing, whining saints, who christened their children out of the Book of Nehemiah, who groaned in spirit at the sight of the Jack in the Green, and who thought it impious to taste plum porridge on Christmas day. At length a time came when the laughers began to look grave in their turn. The rigid, ungainly zealots, after having furnished much good sport during two generations, rose up in arms, conquered, ruled, and grimly smiling trod down under their feet the whole crowd of mockers. The wounds inflicted by

gay and petulant malice were retaliated with the gloomy and implacable malice peculiar to bigots who mistake their own rancour for virtue. The theatres were closed, the players were flogged, the press was put under the guardianship of austere licensers.... The Restoration emancipated thousands of minds from a yoke which had become insufferable.... The war between wit and Puritanism soon became a war between wit and morality. The hostility excited by a grotesque caricature of virtue did not spare virtue herself. Whatever the canting Roundhead had regarded with reverence was insulted. Whatever he had proscribed was favoured. Because he had been scrupulous about trifles, all scruples were treated with derision. Because he had covered his failings with the mask of devotion, men were encouraged to obtrude with cynic imprudence all their most scandalous vices on the public eye. Because he had punished illicit love with barbarous severity, virgin purity and conjugal fidelity were made a jest. To that sanctimonious jargon which was his shibboleth was opposed another jargon not less absurd and much more odious. As he never opened his mouth except in scriptural phrase, the new breed of wits and fine gentlemen never opened their mouths without uttering ribaldry of which a porter would now be ashamed, and without calling on their Maker to curse them, sink them, confound them, blast and damn them. It is not strange, therefore, that our polite literature, when it revived with the revival of the old civil and ecclesiastical party, should have been profoundly immoral."

Under the circumstances, the barefaced corruption which

stalked through the land at this period fills a dark chapter on the pages of its history.

The social and religious condition of England toward the close of the seventeenth century has thus been considered at length so that we may more fully realize the importance and appreciate the value of the influence of the poets who flourished during the century that followed.

In the meantime the question may suggest itself as to what relation a poet bears to his own age. How far is he the product of his environments and to what extent does he influence them in return? This is a large question which it is not within the scope of this thesis to discuss. Much depends, however, upon the individual poet. Suffice it to say that in general the poet belongs to the category of those who are gifted with the power to see into the heart and significance of things. He is essentially a seer. He sees more than others; "and likewise he does not feel differently from others, but he feels more". In a large measure, he is indeed subject to the influence of his environments; but being born a seer he early learns to create for himself a world of his own--of the kind that he sees apart from the kind that he finds. Thus, in so far as he lives, moves, and has his being in this peculiar world of his own creation, he not only escapes from complete subjection to the influences of the world of ordinary men, but, in proportion as his feelings are stirred by his vision, brings it under his own influence.

This broad viewpoint of the poet and his relation to the outer world is amply illustrated in the poetry of the early eighteenth century. Joseph Addison (1672-1719) called the preceding age a bar-
The early eighteenth century poetry: its classicism.

barous age, as against his own which was an understanding age. This "understanding age", so far as poetry was concerned, believed in classical models which emphasized balance, proportion and restraint. Hence the poetry of the early eighteenth century came to be regarded as classic or neo-classic. Its classicism, however, was not genuine inasmuch as it merely copied the form, without adopting the spirit, of the ancient classical poetry.

This classical movement in poetry, then, was a revolt against two things:

I The complete breakdown of all restraint, resulting in intellectual and spiritual debauchery, so characteristic of the age which had immediately preceded it;

and

II The displacement of man by current materialistic philosophy from the central place of importance, which he had occupied in the universe.

And these conditions were accompanied by an utter disregard for moral authority and a lack of a standard whereby human actions could be judged and regulated.

Hence the poetry of the early eighteenth century proceeded to

I Lay stress on restraint;

II Treat man as its central theme;

and

III Undertake, within its own sphere, what the Church was not able to fulfil, the function of moralizing, and vindicating the ways of God to man.

The didactic character of the classical poetry of the early eighteenth century and its singular use of the couplet—as the best
adapted vehicle for conveying truths—may well be attributed to this unconscious attempt to supply a great want of the time. Poetry as an art was there not to be ministered unto, but to minister; and the exigencies of the time demanded that it should descend to the level of ordinary humanity and speak in their tongue and preach law and order where there reigned chaos and confusion. For the characteristic attitude of men at this period was an utter neglect of the higher claims of their own nature. And poetry took upon itself the task of creating a reign of law, even where none seemed to exist, and to turn, if possible, the minds of men upon themselves. Let there be liberty, easily mistakable for license, all around it; but in the realm of its arm, at any rate, there would be absolute restraint and a strict obedience to the reign of law and order. This indeed was the boast of the early eighteenth century poetry. It would idolize, criticize, analyze, and satirize man freely, if only by so doing it could succeed in turning his gaze upon himself.

"He was a public benefactor", says one writer, speaking of Alexander Pope (1688-1744) with whom the classical movement came to be chiefly identified. The same writer continues: "The poet may influence the mind by virtue directly, by warnings and exhortations, or indirectly by scourging vice and exposing folly. The latter is the method of the satirist, who is the Judge Lynch of civilized society. The case-hardened, with whom serious admonition is vain, he exposes to the public gaze for the public sport, not to effect any improvement in them, but by showing their example to be intrinsically contemptible, to prevent the communication of their disease to others. Thus Pope was serviceable to his generation by satirizing its false taste, false
virtue, false happiness, false life; and, in the character of Satirist, may claim a moral purpose."

Thus Pope:

"Hear ye and tremble ye who escape the laws; Yes, while I live, no rich or noble knave Shall walk the world in credit to his grave."

Again, addressing Bolinbroke, in "An Essay on Man":

"That urged by thee, I turn'd to tuneful art From sounds to things, from fancy to the heart.

That Virtue only makes our bliss below, And all our knowledge is, ourselves to know."

The italics are his own.

Thus introspection was the first contribution which the poetry of this period made to its contemporary thought and attitude:--a thing that was really needed at the time when the Church itself was so utterly powerless in the capacity of an external authority to pass judgments upon human conduct. Along with this, the ethical teaching embodied in the poetry of the school of Pope was as indispensable as it was inevitable. Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) depicting in "The vanity of human Wishes" the fate of those who mount, shine, evaporate and fall, and calling upon his generation not to deem religion vain, merely carried out one of the tasks which poetry at this juncture had set for itself. The numerous elegies, particularly that of Gray, and the customary epitaphs so commonly written in those days, all convey the same lesson.

*Alfred H. Welch in Development of English Literature and Language, Vol. II
In "A Night-Piece on Death", thus writes Thomas Parnell, (1679-1768):

"The marble tombs that rise on high,
Whose dead in vaulted arches lie,
Whose pillars swell with sculptured stones,
Arms, angels, epitaphs and bones.
These, all the poor remains of state,
Adorn the rich or praise the great;
Who, while on earth in fame they live,
Are senseless of the fame they give.
Hah! While I gaze, pale Cynthia fades,
The bursting earth unveils the shades!
All slow and wan, and wrapped with shrouds,
They rise in visionary crowds,
All, all with sober accent cry,
'Think, mortal, what it is to die.'"

Edward Young (1683-1765) prays for help and enlightenment in his "Night Thoughts":

"O Thou, whose word from solid darkness struck
That spark, the sun; strike wisdom from my soul;
My soul, which flies to Thee, her trust, her treasure,
As misers to their gold, while others rest.
Through this opaque of nature, and of soul,
This double night, transmit one pitying ray,
To lighten and to cheer. O lead my mind,
(A mind that fain would wander from its woe)
Lead it through various scenes of life and death;
And from each scene, the noblest truths inspire.
Nor less inspire my conduct, than my song;
Teach my best reason, reason; my best will
Teach rectitude; and fix my firm resolve
Wisdom to wed, and pay her long arrear;
Nor let the vial of thy vengeance, poured
On this devoted head, be poured in vain."

Further, in the same poem, Young's contemplation of himself leads him to exclaim:

"How poor, how rich, how abject, how august,
How complicate, how wonderful is man!
How passing wonder He, who made him such!
Who centred in our make such strange extremes!
From different natures marvellously mixt,
Connection exquisite of distant worlds!
Distinguished link in being's endless chain!
Midway from nothing to the deity!
A beam ethereal, sullied, and absorpt!
Though sullied, and dishonoured, still divine.
Dim miniature of greatness absolute!
An heir of glory! a frail child of dust!
Hopeless immortal! insect infinite!
A worm! a god!—I tremble at myself,
And in myself am lost! at home a stranger,
Thought wanders up and down, surprised, aghast,
And wondering at her own; how reason rests,'
O what a miracle to man is man
Triumphantly distressed!"

The poetry of the early eighteenth century is often charged
with a singular lack of the element of imagination. But imagination
during the preceding decades had proved itself a menace to the morals
of the nation. Especially, in the realm of dramatic composition, it
had served largely to pander to the vitiated tastes of the pleasure-
loving public already in love with the newly imported ideals of the
stage in France. Accordingly, plays were written which, in the words
of Macaulay, "introduce us into a world where there is no humanity,
no veracity, no sense of shame--a world for which any good-natured
man would gladly exchange the society of Milton's devils."* And of
the play-wrights and poets says Macaulay again: "None of them under-
stood the dangerous art of associating images of unlawful pleasure
with all that is endearing and ennobling. None of them was aware
that a certain decorum is essential even to voluptuousness.....Nothing
is more characteristic of the time than the care with which the poets
contrived to put all their lowest verses into the mouths of women."*

Hence the law of restraint on imagination and emphasis on
reason and correctness. Pope carried this emphasis even into the
realm of spiritual experience. In the following passage where Heloise
addresses Abelard, the feeling of the sinner itself is subjected to
the test of reason:

"Of all affliction taught a lover yet,
'Tis sure the harriest science to forget,
How shall I lose the sin, yet keep the sense,
And love th' offender, yet detest th' offence?
How dear the object from the crime remove,
Or how distinguish Penitence from love?
Unequal task!"

Let it not be supposed, however, that the law of restraint, so rigidly followed at this period, crushed all imagination out of poetry. No, it merely drove it underground. For, very soon, imagination emerges again to give us what may be regarded as one of the most delightful riches of poetic effort—a vision of man's kinship with nature. Where philosophy finds nothing but dead matter driven by mechanical laws, poetry sees nature in mute sympathy with man's life itself. Back to nature was the motto of the poets. And although a misconception of what nature is, the nature which the poetry of the Popian school set out to imitate was responsible for some of the false classicism, yet as early as the Seasons of James Thomson (1700-1748) we discover a distinct tendency to treat nature with sympathy that grows deeper and more real in the poets who follow him. Here imagination, as the handmaid of poetry, returns to perform its legitimate function: that of revealing man's oneness with creation and its God. Thus, return to nature is the keynote struck in the poetry particularly of the period after Pope, and odes, ballads, and lyrics reappear revealing a nobler aspect of the function of imagination. Thomson, in his Autumn, writes thus:

"O Nature! all sufficient! over-all!  
Enrich me with the knowledge of thy works!  
Snatch me to heaven;-----------------  
And let me never, never stray from thee!"

According to William Cowper, quoted by T. H. Ward in his English Poets, Vol. III: "To watch nature at her work; to meditate; to cultivate sympathy with those creatures that are, so to speak, most fresh from Nature's hand—with animals and the poor—this is the only rational way to happiness; and to advocate this life is the poet's work. On the other hand, he may emphasize his teaching by contrast;
by denouncing vice, by satire, genial or severe; by drawing in outlines that all may recognize the harm of a departure from Nature. The poet is a teacher and an advocate; his business is to wean the world from worldiness to God."

The following is a beautiful illustration of the spirit of sympathy on the part of the poet with the lower order of animals, sheep:

"How meek, how patient, the mild creature lies!
What softness in his melancholy face,
What dumb complaining innocence appears!
Fear not, yet gentle tribes, 'tis not the knife
Of horrid slaughter that is o'er you waved;
No, 'tis the tender swain's well-guided shears,
Who having now, to pay his annual care,
Borrowed your fleece, to you a cumbersome load,
Will send you bounding to your hills again."

(Thomson: The Seasons: from Summer)

Quotations, expressive of such sentiments, and as apt and impressive, may be presented from the poems of William Collins (1721-1759) and William Cowper (1731-1800). Robert Burns' (1759-1796) "To a Mountain Daisy" is one of many of his poems which reveal this sympathy with nature:

"Wee, modest, crimson-tipp'd flow'r,
Thou's met me in an evil hour;
For I maun crush amang the stane
Thy slender stem;
To spare thee now is past my power,
Thou bonnie gem.

Alas! it's no thy neighbor sweet,
The bonnie lark, companion meet,
Bending thee 'mang the dewy weet
Wi' spreckl'd beast,
When upward springing, blytho, to greet
The purpling east."

and so on. To quote another poet, William Blake (1757-1827) has the following lines characteristic of this tendency:
"Little lamb, who made thee?
Dost thou know who made thee?

Little lamb, I'll tell thee,
Little lamb, I'll tell thee,
He is called by thy name,
For He calls Himself a Lamb;
He is meek and He is mild,
He became a little child.
I a child and thou a lamb,
We are called by His name.
Little lamb, God bless thee!
Little lamb, God bless thee!"

Again, his feeling for the "sick rose":

"O Rose, thou art sick!
The invisible worm,
That flies in the night,
In the howling storm,

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy,
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy."

This then is another contribution which the poetry of the eighteenth century made to the religious thought and contemporary attitude of England: namely, mysticism, a sense of oneness with nature. Nature in sympathy with man and conveying a lesson for him: the lesson of law and order. This view of man and his relation to the external world was of utmost value at the time when religious conception in the popular mind had lost its bearings and traditional faith seemed hopelessly undermined by rationalistic philosophy. It served, moreover, to emphasize the essential elements of religion as being in complete accord with the world of phenomena. This poetic vision and its eloquent testimony to the unworthiness of man in contrast with the worth of nature as a perfect handiwork of God, had a steadying influence upon the minds of men.
If imagination checked and chastened by discipline under the classical school of the early eighteenth century, in rediscovering its legitimate function, gave rise to mysticism in poetry, emotion likewise emerged to produce religious devotion. Religious poetry came in striking contrast with the irreligious condition of the time. Isaac Watts finds it necessary to apologize for writing at all on the subject of religion. His preface is a vehement protest against the immoral poetry of his day. "This profanation and debasement of so divine an art," says he, "has tempted some weaker Christians to imagine that poetry and vice are naturally akin."

Under the circumstances the works of Isaac Watts, William Cowper, the Wesley brothers and others served to make a most valuable contribution to the thought and attitude of the time. They emphasized the practical manifestation, in human experience, of introspection wedded to mysticism in the worship offered to God. Their songs have come to be cherished as the precious possessions of the Church since.

"I want the witness, Lord, That all I do is right, According to Thy will and word, Well pleasing in Thy sight."

Such an experience was what Charles Wesley (1707-1788) and others of his time insisted upon. They realized that the reign of rightness within, to be in complete harmony with the realm of law without, must come from devotion to God. The impetus thus given to human faith in the divine power and willingness to save, and in the ultimate victory of the Strong Son of God over the forces of evil, even when the latter seemed to prevail, has, more than anything else, inspired optimism and practical devotion in Christendom. Of the 770 hymns contained in the Wesleyan Methodist Hymn Book, 627 are of Charles Wesley's composition; and he is said to have written in all more than
6,000 hymns. "These are adapted to almost every situation in social life; they express nearly every shade of religious feeling; and it is astonishing what a high level of excellence most of them attain...... The fact is that the simple fervour of Charles Wesley's religious feelings was always chastened and controlled in the expression by the masculine taste of the scholar and the gentleman, a combination of impulse and judgment which makes him the most admirable devotional lyric poet in the English language."*

The following by Isaac Watts is one of the many hymns that are famous for their inspirational value and optimistic note, considering the appalling corruption, in the midst of which they were written:

"Jesus shall reign where'er the sun,
Does his successive journey's run;
His kingdom spread from shore to shore,
Till moons shall wax and wane no more.

To him shall endless prayer be made,
And endless praises crown his head;
His name like sweet perfume shall rise
With every morning sacrifice.

People and realms of every tongue
Dwell on his love with sweetest song,
And infant voices shall proclaim
Their early blessings on his name."

Thus the poetry of the eighteenth century, promoting introspection, mysticism and devotion, contributed to the sanity of faith and the sturdiness of Christian profession which are some of the outstanding characteristics of the Victorian Era.

An interesting parallel to this phenomenon is afforded by the situation during a similar period in the religious history of India. Under the impact of the iconoclastic rule of the Mohamadans,

Parallelism to Poetry in India.

accompanied by widespread luxury and license, the faith of the people in the religion of their forefathers tended to undergo a great change. Then arose poets among them (Sur Das, Tukaram and others), who preached rather than pleased, with their productions. They invariably wrote in the vernacular of the people and clothed their message attractively in measured couplets. They inspired introspection, mysticism and devotion, and thus saved their land from the threatened moral collapse. This is merely to suggest that, given the necessary conditions, the contribution of the eighteenth century poetry in England, such as it was, was not wholly unnatural.

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