Chapter Two:

Protestant Poetics

> Neither C.H.Sissons nor any one else in our times writes poems like this. New hymns are composed for us, and at times we contrive to sing them in church without intolerable discomfort. But our serious poets, if they are Christians, write as Sissons does of their solitary and private religious *experience*...
>
> (Donald Davie *Augustan Lyric* 17)

In the first chapter I investigated the nature of Coleridge's lyricism and, among its discursive conditions of possibility, mentioned Biblical Higher Criticism, and, in more general terms, a protestant cultural field. In this chapter I shall continue my investigation of this field since it has often been alluded to as the direct ancestor of the Romantic aesthetic lyric, or, which is often the same thing, as its "undissociated" forebear (as Davie does in the epigraph to this chapter). However I should like to examine the devotional and hymnodic verse of the eighteenth century in more detail here and to inquire in exactly what way this type of poetry is ancestral to the Romantic lyric (in chapter three I investigate eighteenth-century *secular* lyric with the same end in view). At the end of the chapter I discuss Robert Lowth's *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, to link hymnody, devotional verse, Biblical Higher Criticism and the emergent lyric aesthetics of Romanticism.

But before proceeding to more considerations of Romantic poetics, we must stop and ask a stupid question. The question is "why poetry?". That is to say, why was poetry the preeminent form in which the temporality and ideology of modernity's personal politics came to be embodied? And it is a stupid question because the Romantic answer is to state that poetry has these characteristics because it is the nature of poetry to have them, and it has always had them. Coleridge, to give one instance, insists in the *Biographia* on the identity of the form with its nature and purpose: "nothing can permanently please, which does not contain in itself the reason why it is so and not otherwise" (II 12).

However, against this history of transcendent sameness it will be necessary for us to insist on non-dialectical difference as the nature of poetry, as indeed with all cultural productions. And there is no better example of this than the wholesale abandonment of discursive genres at the end of the eighteenth century, which we have mentioned before and will mention again. If we look back to the pre-Romantic period we find that the heritage of poetry is not so clear-cut as we would like.[1] And sometimes the expression of mimetic poetics can sound wholly alien to our ears, as, for example, when the Earl of Chesterfield, writing to his son, recommends the "classical works" of poetry to him (a class which includes the works of Milton, Dryden, Pope and Swift): "These sort of books [writes the Earl] adorn the mind, improve the fancy, are frequently alluded to by, and are often the subjects of conversations of the best companies" (*Letters* CCLXXIII, 2nd March 1752).[2]

Regardless of the state of the Earl's morals it is worth pointing out that the poetic theory found in his *Letters* is a consistent one and one, moreover, typical of the eighteenth century. We find for example, that throughout the Letters there is a constant collocation of poetry and oratory, and the one is linked to the other, as "Poetry is a more noble and sublime way of expressing ones [sic] thoughts" (XXV, 16th April 1739). This expressiveness (what the Earl refers to as "the Graces" throughout) is linked to the self-improvement of the reader's own discourse: "I will read everything ... and never cease improving and refining my style upon the best models, till at last I become a model of eloquence myself...." (CCXC 26th September 1752). Indeed a whole series of letters from the Earl make up a course in rhetoric for his son: firstly a letter on poetic epithets (XXXII nd), then a definition of some of the terms of rhetoric (XLII 17th October 1739), and another on poetic devices (XLIII 26th October 1739). There then follow at least eleven letters over the next few years, two on similes (LIV & LV, July 29th 1740 & 3rd August 1740), one on invention, "the soul of poetry", (LVI 14th August 1740), three on description (LVII, LVIII & LIX, all nd), four on imitation (LX, LXII, LXVII & LXVIII, all nd) and a final one on epithets (XCVIII 16th July 1743). The ratio of letters on imitation to those on invention is 4:1.

Finally we should note in the letters a disparagement of much of the poetry that Romantic poetic criticism was to rediscover and celebrate. At one point the Earl writes: "*Petrarca* is, in my mind, a sing-song love-sick poet" (CCVII 8th February 1752); later he links refinement in poetry explicitly with the emergence of polite society:

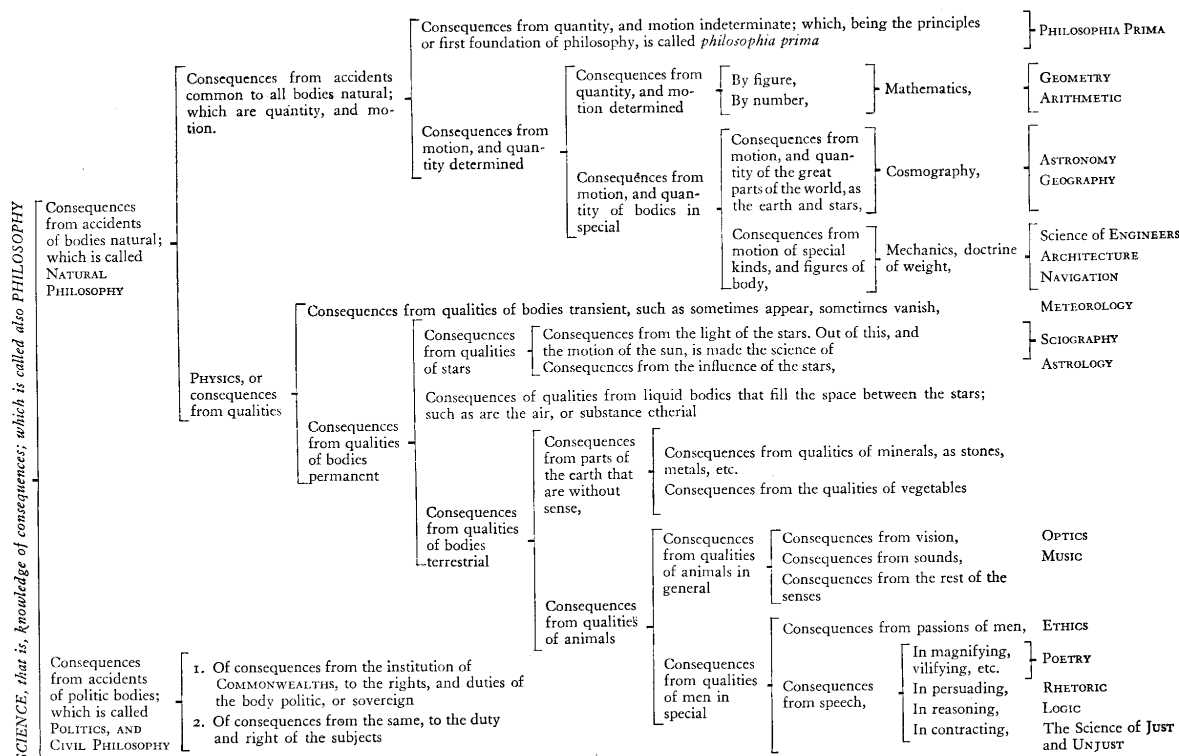

Figure 1: The Table of the "Registers of Science", from Hobbes' ***Leviathan***

> Under the reign of (I do not say) Lewis the Thirteenth, but of Cardinal Richelieu, good taste first began to make its way. It was refined under that of Lewis the Fourteenth.... Before [Corneille's] time, those kind of itinerant authors, called *Troubadours* or *Romanciers*, were a species of madmen, who attracted the admiration of fools". (CCXXXVI 24th December 1750)

The collocation of poetry and madness in a pejorative sense is quite common in the eighteenth century. Hume for example, in a note in the *Treatise of Human Nature*, makes the linkage, but then dismisses it, as poetry is so obviously false that the mind can easily recognise the false nature of poetic enthusiasm (630). Some writers, on the other hand, have hardly any time for poetry at all; for example, in Hobbes' *Leviathan*, at the very beginnings of modern thought, the table which Hobbes supplies (see **figure one**) leaves poetry with only the functions of "magnifying, vilifying &c". The arrangement of the table on the page leaves one in no doubt as to the importance attached to poetry: the entry is crammed down in the bottom right hand corner of the page, beneath such arts and sciences as the "Science of Engineers", Architecture, Navigation, Meteorology, "Sciography", Astrology, Optics and Music.[3] At the other end of the Enlightenment, Kant, despite aesthetic judgement, has little time for poetry either, as Schelling complained (Leask 119).

Even among poetic critics there is little similarity between the poetics of the eighteenth century and those of the nineteenth century. In the next chapter I shall be investigating some of the characteristics associated with poetry, and specifically with lyric poetry, in the eighteenth century, but here we can instance, for example, Joseph Trapp's remarks on the lyric. These were given initially in 1713, in a series of lectures in Latin at Oxford. But their currency later in the century is demonstrated by the fact that they were translated into English and republished in 1742. Trapp's poetics are unequivocally mimetic, and in his lecture on the lyric (which for him, as for most other critics of his time, means Pindar and the Ode, not, for example, Anacreon and the Lyric) he concludes that "the chief Property of Lyric Poetry [is] that it abounds with a sort of Liberty which consists in Digressions and Excursions" (204), exactly the opposite definition to that of Romantic lyrical unity.

A final consideration we need to add is that, perhaps as a consequence of the eighteenth century's attitude to poetry considered generically, several Romantic theorists did not confine the qualities of the highest inspiration and elevation exclusively to poetry. Shelley, for example, declared that Plato and Bacon were equally poets and Wordsworth too flirted with the idea that prose could be as poetic as poetry—for which, famously, Coleridge took him to task (*Biographia* II 74ff). Indeed John Guillory has noted that the eventual emergence of a literary field consisting of poetry and prose (in the shape of novels and short stories) was the result of Romantic poetry's inability to come up with a distinctive poetic diction, as other poetic canons had done in the past (130-31). However, bearing in mind Romanticism's levelling of genres, this is hardly surprising as an outcome.

But we still need to account for the fact that it was poetry which was, and is, primarily associated with the Romantic "Revival". Why, for example, was it not Drama, or the Fine Arts that figured the newly-emergent Romanticism? Clearly I think we need to consider not the essential nature of poetry, or drama or art, but the contingent cultural conditions that obtained in Britain in the late eighteenth century and then explain why poetry came to prominence.[4] We might note, for example the predominantly lower middle-class, and sentimental, orientation of the theatre[5], or the neo-classical academy, which adjudicated painting in Britain (one thinks of Blake's pathological aversion to Sir Joshua Reynolds, for example); I shall be arguing in the remainder of the chapter that poetry was able to assume the role it did because it was able to usurp one particular cultural field and make use of some of its characteristics and methods.

Protestant Poetics

In the next chapter of this thesis I aim to investigate the continuity, *such as it was*, between the eighteenth-century lyric and the new Romantic lyric. In this section I should like to carry on investigating the specifically Protestant range of practices from which a lyric temporality, and a lyric poetic emerged. For we have already seen Coleridge's "possessive individualism", springing from Locke and Burke, becoming supercharged in an effort to preserve its unity and identity. And we have also seen how the new lyric temporality is indebted to the apocalyptic imaginings of the Higher Critics.

Now I wish to look at the tradition of Protestant devotional poetry and hymnody (why I say "devotional poetry and hymnody" will become clear later in the section); I wish to examine the extent to which poetic theory and practice took over and altered the devotional aspects of this genre. Again, though more obliquely, Coleridge will help us through, though perhaps more by what he does not say in his critical and other writings, than by what he does.

It will be clear, I think, that, for example, Biblical Higher Criticism and Protestant hymnody are products of a broadly protestant field of cultural practices. It would be tempting to assimilate them, using for example the sort of evidence that Shaffer cites to link the "loonier" wings of hymn-writing and Biblical commentary (70ff). This assimilation would include what might be called the left-wing of Protestant Dissent, the descendants and imitators of those Independent sects of the Civil War period who stressed the continuation of prophecy and individual inspiration; their influence on Blake, for example, is obvious. It would also cite such continental thinkers as Böhme, Swedenborg and the German aesthetic critic Johann Georg Hamann, whose major work is entitled *Aesthetica in Nuce: A Rhapsody in Cabbalistic Prose* (1762).

However the main-stream of Protestant Nonconformity, then as now, did not hold either with continued prophecy, or with personal inspiration (except in a very strictly-defined sense), or with tinkering with the text of Scripture. This, however, need neither destroy the genuine links that do exist between these movements, nor preclude an attempt to describe the emergence of a lyric temporality and lyric poetic from the protestant cultural field. Weber, to simplify the argument of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, saw the capitalist, secularised world of modernity as a direct product of Protestant individualism. More recently Colin Campbell, in his *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, has given a very detailed

account of the way in which Protestant spirituality gave way to a secularised version of itself, and led to the formation of the bourgeois capitalist society of the nineteenth century. So in discussing the emergence of the lyric, both as a temporality and a poetic, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, I am doing no more than alleging as its conditions of possibility the various and often heterogeneous practices of a protestant cultural field.

What needs investigating here is what those "lyrical" qualities of certain eighteenth-century writings, which Romantic lyricism was later to appropriate, and to describe as having "liberated", were and how their "lyrical" qualities came to be "liberated". I am talking about such qualities as those which Joseph Trapp, for example, whom I quoted a little while ago as showing the *difference* between a Romantic and a neo-classical poetic, ascribes to lyric poetry. And here we find a great deal of apparent similarity, which needs to be qualified. Trapp, for example, says of lyrical poetry:

> As to the Nature of the Lyric Poem, it is, of all Kinds of Poetry, the most poetical; and is distinct, both in Style and Thought, from the rest, as Poetry in general is from Prose.... this is the boldest of all other Kinds, full of Rapture, and elevated from common Language the most that is possible.... Some Odes there are, likewise, in the free and loose Manner, which seem to avoid all Method, and yet are conducted in a very clear one; which affect Transitions, seemingly, without Art, but, for that Reason, have more of it; which are above Connexion, and delight in Exclamations, and frequent Invocation of the Muses; which begin and end abruptly, and are carried thro' a Variety of Matter with a sort of divine *Pathos*, above Rules and Laws, and without Regard to the common Forms of Grammar. (203-04)

But one must read carefully to avoid falling into the trap of describing this as some sort of proto-Romanticism. Firstly we should note that Trapp is here describing only one genre of poetry, one among many, for this is the sixteenth lecture of the series. Secondly, nowhere is there the characteristic Romantic slippage between the poem and the poet; here the generic characteristics of the poem alone are being described. Thirdly, every quality he mentions is a feature of the rhetoric of the poem, not an exemplification of its inspiration.

One could go on at greater length, but it will be more useful in this context to quote a passage from Isaac Watts' Preface to his collection of sacred poetry, *Horae Lyricae* (1706). Here Watts is discussing the qualities of an ideal sacred poetry and concludes:

> 'Tis my Opinion also that the free and unconfin'd Measures of *Pindar* would best maintain the Dignity of the Theme, as well as give a loose to the Devout

> Soul, nor check the Raptures of her Faith and Love. Tho' in my feeble Attempts of this kind I have most unhappily fetter'd my Thoughts in the narrow Numbers of our Old Psalm-Translators, I have contracted and cramp't the Sense, or render'd it obscure and feeble by the too speedy and regular returns of Rhime. (103)[6]

What needs investigating is how this concern with the devout soul came to be secularised into the concerns of the creative soul, how the "secret operation of the spirit" (Bougler 20-21) turned into "the Imagination, or esemplastic power".

The most obvious poetic cultural practice associated with Protestantism is, as we have indicated already, hymnody. Yet surrounding this topic there is often a silence in later historical accounts of the period and this can be attributed to the fact that hymnody was, to begin with, an unequivocally non-conformist practice; the Church of England did not recognise hymns at all until 1820, and not officially until the publication of *Hymns Ancient and Modern* in 1859 (Arnold *Hymns* 17-18). It was, in fact, John Keble who, with the success of his *The Christian Year* (1827), habituated the Church to a lyrical hymnody as opposed to psalm-singing (Gilley 234 & *passim*). This neglect is part of a wider ignoring of non-conformity, and such figures as the brothers Wesley. Especially in the nineteenth century the still-persistent contempt for religious enthusiasm is obvious to see and leads, for example, John Dennis, in his *Studies in English Literature* (1876), to make these remarks:

> Methodism, it may be observed, has produced no literature of abiding value. A few of Charles Wesley's hymns take rank, indeed, with the best in the language, and are likely to form a permanent portion of our hymnody, but beyond these we know of nothing amidst the vast number of publications circulated by this body which has an interest for readers who do not belong to it. Books of a devotional character have been issued from the Methodist press by the hundreds and by thousands, and are probably read by Wesleyans; but even of such books there is not one which, like the 'Holy Living' of Taylor, the 'Saint's Rest' of Baxter, or the splendid allegory of Bunyan, has obtained universal recognition. (228)

Dennis chooses to denigrate the literary output of the Wesleys by alluding to its size, its exclusivity and its lack of literary merit. Its size is certainly astonishing: Charles Wesley, for example, wrote over 900 hymns, and John and Charles published one hymn-book every year for fifty years (Arnold *Hymns* 135).[7] It would be a little rash to say, as Dennis implies, that none of these provided spiritual benefit to non-Methodist readers. Moreover the Wesleys' publishing activities were by no means confined to religious topics, but cover all areas of knowledge, as the indefatigable John digested and summarised contemporary knowledge for a series of popular works on science, medicine, natural history, geography &c &c. The effect of this on the book-trade was profound; indeed it is not too far-fetched to say that the popu-

lar publishing efforts of Wesley and others virtually created the mass book-trade in the later eighteenth-century. In 1791 Lackington, one of the publishers who benefited from this expansion stated that: “four times as many books are sold now than were sold twenty years ago” (quoted in Brantley *Locke*, 119).[8]

There is a danger, however, in simply alluding to hymnody as the ancestor of the lyric, even if we can show that it was caught up in the expansion of the book-trade and the general increase in circulation (in the Smithian sense). For there has been a tendency in the past to treat the hymn as a simple forerunner to the literary lyric—at a certain point the hymn quietly turned secular. As an example of this we might cite Richard Arnold’s article on Cowper’s contribution to the *Olney Hymns* of John Newton. Arnold discerns throughout Cowper’s hymns a split purpose: on the one hand they show an outward confidence and conviction of salvation, on the other an intense inward despair (287). What Arnold seems to be doing is reading these hymns with hindsight, in the light of Cowper’s final nervous breakdown, which occurred during their composition, and put an end to his hymn-writing. He also seems to be reading back into the eighteenth century the Romantic imperative that all poets should have (dialectically) split psyches:

> Cowper’s innovative use of the hymn as a genre is both in his adherence to traditional theories of writing edifying songs of praise, and in his expression of his inner self; he is hymn-writer *and* poet, and thus fashions the hymn into a complex and specialised literary product. After his major mental collapse, however, he ceased to be the hymn-writer, and, until he adequately recovered his senses, ceased to be a poet. (295)

One of the things that Arnold fails to do is to note the devotional context of Cowper’s hymn-writing, as a religious practice enjoined upon him by his spiritual mentor Richard Arnold. In doing so he antedates the aesthetic dialectic he wishes to impose on Cowper. It may well be, and I would argue this, that the progenitor of the Romantic split psyche is the “drama of election” central to Calvinist theology (Bougler 46), but it is an anachronism to make the two psychologies identical, or to permit the one to be applied to the other.

Another misguided approach is more ingenious; this is Donald Davie’s well-known thesis that the origin of all that is good in modern poetry is to be found in eighteenth-century poetry. Specifically Davie celebrates the hymn as a sort of lyric *avant la lettre*, before it went aesthetic and sour in the nineteenth century.[9] But the trap that Davie seems to fall into when he discusses the eighteenth-century hymn is a sort

of Leavisite vision of undissociated, communal sensibility, as here, for example, in discussing a hymn of Isaac Watts:

> Neither C.H.Sissons nor any one else in our times writes poems like this. New hymns are composed for us, and at times we contrive to sing them in church without intolerable discomfort. But our serious poets, if they are Christians, write as Sissons does of their solitary and private religious *experience*; whereas Watts writes of and for the communal experience of worship, and so he deals not with self-disgusting desolations nor for that matter with feelingful exaltations, but with Christianity in its public form, as *doctrine*. These are hymns for theologians—because, in those far-off days, religious leaders like Watts were sanguine enough to think that the humblest worshipper could and should be enough of a theologian to understand the tenets of the Faith which he professed. (*Augustan Lyric* 17-18)

Davie is mistaken to stress the public character of Watts' hymns to such an extent. The Preface to Watts' *Horae Lyricae* (1706), for example, a collection which includes several genres of poetry, not just hymns, explains "The SONGS Sacred to DEVOTION" thus:

> [These] were never written with a design to appear before the Judges of Wit, but only to assist the Meditations and Worship of vulgar Christians.... These are but a small part of two hundred Hymns of the same kind which are ready for Public Use if the World receive favourably what I now present. The Reason I sent these out first ... is that in most of These there are some Expressions which are not suited to the plainest Capacities, and differ too much from the usual Methods of Speech in which Holy Things are propos'd to the general Part of Mankind. (104)

Note the order of "Meditations and Worship", the tentative nature of Watts' description of his songs and the statement that most of his poems are too difficult for the "general Part of Mankind".

For, at the time that Watts was writing, congregational hymn-singing was an innovation. England followed Calvin, rather than Luther, in allowing only psalms, not hymns, to be sung congregationally (Arnold *Hymns* 1).[10] Hymns were until at least 1700 exclusively private devotional verse, and their congregational use was extremely controversial (11-14). Even Wesley's hymns were criticised, by Methodists as well as Anglicans (20-22). Among non-conformist groups, even those who afterwards became synonymous with hymn-singing, such as the Methodists, it was a congregation-by-congregation decision to begin hymn singing, and one that was not generally taken until the latter half of the century (14). So ironically the hymn is a genre which acquired a public function, at the same time as the secular lyric, except for popular genres, turned into the privately-consumed literary object.

So far in our discussion of hymnody we have seen that the hymn, far from being the public thing it is assumed to have been, can provide the requisite private devo-

tional aspects that are transferred to the newly-emergent lyric. At the same time we must beware of treating hymns as simple precursors of the lyric. Perhaps we should, when we remember the context of religious practices in which the hymn is found, also remember the words of John Wesley in the preface to one of his hymn-collections:

> What is of infinitely more moment than the Spirit of Poetry, is the Spirit of Piety. And I trust all persons of real judgement will find this breathing through the whole Collection. It is in this view chiefly that I would recommend it to every truly pious reader: as a means of quickening or raising the spirit of devotion, of confirming the faith, of inlivening his hope, and kindling or increasing his love to God and man. When poetry thus keeps its place, as the handmaiden of piety, it shall attain not a poor perishable wealth, but a crown that fadeth not away. (quoted in Arnold *Hymns* 136)

Nevertheless we can recognise at least some of the features of the later lyric in the eighteenth-century hymn: these would include, and especially in the context of Methodism, "the primacy of individual experience", "intense personal devotion" and its "focus on the salvation of man" (Zeitz 275, 276, 278). Richard Brantley writes too of one of Charles Wesley's hymns: "experience and subjectivity are so nearly equivalent to grace as to anticipate the Romantic apotheosis of self" ("Experiential", 2) and in a longer account has written convincingly of the influence of Wesley's Lockean empiricism and its influence, once transcended, on the English Romantics (*Locke* 25-26).

When we come, however, to look at the Romantics it is hard to prove any obvious influence of the tradition of hymnody. For Coleridge, for example, despite his earlier Unitarianism (Wordsworth "Lamb", 46), in later life became a staunch Anglican, and all his religious writings are within the tradition of Anglicanism, not then a hymn-singing one. Indeed one of the most unattractive features of Coleridge's writings is his constant sniping at Methodists and other non-conformists. Here, for example, is Coleridge at his most toadying, writing to Lord Liverpool:

> In my 'literary life'... there are a few opinions which better information and more reflection would now annul. But even these will, I trust, be found only in the lesser branches, as knotts & scars that may exist without implying either canker at the root, or malignant quality in the general sap of the tree. My only incurable heresy, if such it be, respects that meretricious Philosophy, which was first taken into general keeping by the Courtiers of our second Charles, then shifting sides with its factious Patron, the Earl of Shaftesbury, and having been drilled and dressed up with matronly decorum by Mr Locke, was led to the Altar and honourable espoused by low-church Protestantism.... But what is bred in the bone, the proverb tells us, will break out in the flesh; and it did not require the subtlety of Hume's Logic to demonstrate, that no cement can hold together Pious conclusions and Atheistic premises. After bestowing a few of

> her favours on the semi-christians at home, the Magdalen eloped to the Anti-christians on the continent, the Pallas αιγιοχος of the encyclopedists, and the Jacobin's Goddess of Reason. (*Letters* IV 758)

But nevertheless the influence of protestant poetics, both of the Higher Critical and the hymnodic sorts, are present in Coleridge's poetry and poetics, and indeed, despite his disavowals in this letter, Coleridge only succeeds in implicating himself more in the tendencies he criticises. As an example of the literal influence of the hymn, we might cite a hymn which Coleridge himself wrote in 1814, clearly for private use, as it has no regular stanzaic form, as there must be for a stanza-repeating tune and congregational singing (*Poems* 185).

Perhaps after all though, we should not be too surprised at the apparent lack of signs of the influence of the hymn on the Romantics. In the theoretical model I am using, that of sharp paradigm-shifts, cultural genres have to be related in some measure to what has gone before, otherwise, without these conditions of possibility, they could never occur. However, the point of delineating a paradigm-shift is to describe a break, so that those cultural forms which emerge after can often bear little obvious relation to what has gone before, and, in any case, will certainly not acknowledge it, because the genealogy will be obscure.

Protestant Criticism

I should like to end this chapter by considering another product of the protestant cultural field, Robert Lowth's *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (1749-50). These lectures, I will argue, show a half-way stage between the devotional use of Scripture and the aesthetic use of the same. They are also useful to consider in the context as they sit neatly between various discourses. Coleridge, for example, read them (Ryan 16, quoting Whalley 123), as did the Higher Critics, Herder for example (Shaffer 20). They also show the extent to which a practical poetics can emerge from the practice of biblical criticism, and finally they show the extent to which, even in the Church of England, the ideas of emergent Protestant/Romantic aesthetics could find a home.[11]

Lowth's *Lectures* were originally given in Latin in 1749-50,but were translated into English in 1787. The fact of their republication shows a continued interest in them, but their vernacular translation also indicates a change in the potential readership. This is confirmed in the Translator's Preface, an early and amusing example of

"hard-sell"; but, like the translation itself, the need for such aggressive selling is an indication of the changed nature of the "market-place" into which the book had to make its way. The translator, one G.Gregory, begins his Preface by appealing to the notion of taste:

> [The Lectures] embrace all THE GREAT PRINCIPLES OF GENERAL CRITICISM, as delivered by the ancients, improved by the keen judgement and polished taste of their author. In other words, this work will be found to be an excellence compendium of all the best rules of taste, and of all the principles of composition, illustrated by the boldest and most exalted specimens of genius.... (v)

But on the very next page Gregory destroys the neo-classical notion of taste by his appeal to a "middle-brow" readership; taste, in the strict neo-classical sense, could never have divorced the learning requisite for the judgements of taste from its critical circle:

> the truth is, THAT [the *Lectures*] ARE MORE CALCULATED FOR PERSONS OF TASTE AND GENERAL READING, THAN FOR WHAT IS COMMONLY TERMED THE LEARNED WORLD. Here are few nice philological disquisitions, no abstruse metaphysical speculations; our author has built solely on the basis of common sense, and I know no part of the work, which will not be intelligible and useful to almost every understanding. (vii)

Gregory's next point, a rather disingenuous one, is that it is really better that the *Lectures* should be translated into English, as English and Hebrew are so much alike in their idiom, that the Latin can only be an obfuscation, and a reader with no knowledge of Hebrew will still be able to apply "all the criticisms of our author" to the passages in question (viii). Here I cannot help but be reminded of the common English Protestant reformer's belief that Latin was a Popish subterfuge, to obscure recognition of the cognate expressions of English and New Testament Greek.

It is only in the last pages of his Preface that Gregory turns to spiritual matters, a strange thing for an introduction to a work about the Bible. Here he alleges that:

> by a force of genius, which could enter into the very design of the authors; and by a comprehensiveness of mind, which could embrace at a single view a vast series of corresponding passages, he has discovered the manner, the spirit, the idiom of the original, and has laid down such axioms as cannot fail greatly to facilitate our knowledge and understanding of the Scriptures. (ix-x)

There is more than a hint here of "the Imagination, or esemplastic power". Particularly to be noted are: the idea that the critic's genius searches for a correspondence with the genius of the author(s); that the critic's task is one of synthesis amongst disparate passages; and the idea that in the Bible, in this instance, there is a consistent "spirit" running through, which unifies its disparateness.[12]

When we come to examine the *Lectures* themselves we find that suspicion of a nascent aesthetic is fully justified, for in the second lecture of the series Lowth declares: "This work is purely critical: and consequently theological disquisitions will be avoided" (xxiii-xiv). This is an astonishing statement, even more astonishing than the Romantic assertion that Art is above Politics, for Lowth cannot declare that aesthetic judgement (or Taste) is above Religion or Belief.His position is slightly less extreme than it might have been, however, as he restricts himself to the Old Testament, and does not have to enter into Christological controversy, thus perpetuating the Christian belief that the Old Testament has been supplemented by the New, and if it can be shown that the Old Testament is imperfect in some respects, then all the better.[13] However Lowth's statement of his position is, I think, still quite shocking, and may have escaped public scandal at the time only by, firstly being spoken in Latin at Oxford University (thus guaranteeing its obscurity), and secondly being located some way into a weighty and expensive book on the obscure subject of Hebrew poetry:

> it is not my intention to expound to the student of theology the oracles of divine truth; but to recommend to the notice of the youth who is addicted to the politer sciences and studious of the elegancies of composition, some of the first and choicest specimens of poetic taste. (I 50-51)

In fact, so complete is the aestheticisation of Lowth's criticism that it hardly makes sense to talk about the older poetics of mimesis, despite Lowth's traditional mimetic gestures in the first lecture (I 6-7). For Lowth's professed purpose in his *Lectures* is to exemplify the quality of the lyrical in the most inspired parts of the Old Testament. At first he talks about the Lyric in generic terms, alluding to Pindar, as is inevitable in the eighteenth century:

> The amazing power of Lyric Poetry in directing the passions, in forming the manners, in maintaining civil life, and particularly in exciting and cherishing that generous elevation of sentiment,[14] on which the very existence of public virtue seems to depend will be sufficiently apparent by only comparing those monuments of Genius, which Greece has bequeathed to posterity. (I 20)

But later in the same lecture generics seem to breakdown when Lowth moves on the Hebrew poetry, which is the thing itself:

> than which the human mind can conceive nothing more elevated, more beautiful, or more elegant; in which the almost ineffable sublimity of the subject is fully equalled by the energy of the language and the dignity of the style. (I 36-37)

In a similar way to the break down of genres, the traditional rhetorical description of poetry is exceeded by the lyrical, as in this passage each of Lowth's three points is more lyrical than the last, leading to the empathetic unity of the versification:

> Three points are to be considered in every poem: First, the argument or matter, and the manner of treating it; what disposition, what order, and what general form is adapted to each species of composition: Secondly, the elocution and style; in which are comprehended lively and elevated sentiments, splendour and perspicuity of arrangement, beauty and variety of imagery, and strength and elegance of diction: Lastly, the harmony of the verse or numbers is to be considered, not only as intended to captivate the ear, but as adapted to the subject, and expressive of it, as calculated to excite corresponding emotions in the soul. (I 51-52)

Lowth's basic argument is that biblical Hebrew prose is very plain and simple in expression; but that Hebrew Poetry, on the contrary is complex, obscure and sublime, the contrast between the two pointing to the preeminently poetic nature of Hebrew poetry. Lowth then invokes the Sublime to account for this:

> I speak not merely of that sublimity, which exhibits great objects with a magnificent display of imagery and diction; but that force of composition, whatever it be, which strikes and overpowers the mind, which excites the passions, and which expresses ideas at once with perspicuity and elevation; not solicitous whether the language be plain or ornamented,refined or familiar: in this use of the word I copy Longinus, the most accomplished author on this subject.... (I 307)

In the pages which follow Lowth describes several features of the Sublime which seem to him appropriate to Hebrew poetry, for example:

> The language of Passions is totally different [from that of Reason]: the conceptions burst out in a turbid stream, expressive in a manner of the internal conflict; the more vehement break out in hasty confusion; they catch (without search or study) whatever is impetuous, vivid or energetic. (I 308-09)
>
> all the affections and emotions of the soul, its sudden impulses, its hasty sallies and irregularities, are conspicuously displayed. (I 312)

I think it is clear how much of this criticism is familiar from what we have argued already. The sublime, as is well-known, lends itself to Romantic appropriation and its place in the genealogy of Romantic thought has often been described (cf Lokke 421, 427). What needs stressing is the flavour of the sublime here and the critical practices it leads too.

We have seen how Lowth disregards the terrible aspects of the sublime, in favour of the psychology of the poet of the sublime. This is accompanied by an interest in the obscure and the inchoate, and in this we are reminded of a similar interest shown by Burke:

> hardly anything can strike the mind with its greatness which does not make some sort of approach to infinity; which nothing can do while we are able to perceive its bounds; but to see an object distinctly, and to perceive its bounds, are one and the same thing. (quoted in Lokke 422)

In Lowth's *Lectures* however, the obscure and inchoate, once described, are then explainable to a higher, synthetic critical view.[15] The generic theories of earlier biblical critics have to be left behind, for although, in his later lectures, Lowth can discern the Elegy (Lectures XXII-III), the Proverb (Lecture XXIV) and the Idyll (Lecture XXIX), other generic classifications are inadequate: the Song of Solomon, for example, is "Not a Regular Drama" (Lecture XXX), and the Book of Job is "Not a Perfect Drama" (Lecture XXXIII). Instead Lowth is more concerned with the quality of the Ode, the lyrically sublime, the stuff of prophetic utterance.[16]

The prophetic is characterised, for Lowth, by the way it exceeds generic categories:

> In respect to the order, disposition and symmetry of a perfect poem of the prophetic kind, I do not know of any certain definition, which will admit of general application. Naturally free, and of too ardent a spirit to be confined by rule, it is usually guided by the nature of the subject only, and the impulse of divine inspiration. (II 69)

And this difficulty is met with in looking at the state of the text itself, where historical processes of editing, have at the same time obscured the expression of the lyrical elements, but also, almost as a guarantee of its authenticity, made it perspicuous to the sympathetic critic:

> I lately produced a specimen from this prophet [Isaiah] of a complete poem disposed in the most perspicuous order; and in the former part of his volume many instances may be found where the particular predictions are distinctly marked. The latter part, which I suppose to commence at the fortieth chapter, is perhaps the most elegant specimen remaining of inspired composition, and yet in this respect is attended with considerable difficulty. It is, in fact, a body or collection of different prophecies, nearly allied to each other as to subject, which, for that reason, having a sort of connexion, are not to be separated but with the utmost difficulty.... If we read these passages with attention [, however], and duly regard the nature and genius of the mystical allegory ... we shall neither find any irregularity in the arrangement of the whole, nor any want of order or connexion as to matter or sentiment in the different parts. I must add, that I esteemthe whole book of Isaiah to be poetical, a few passages excepted, which, if brought together, would not at most exceed the bulk of five or six chapters. (II 86-87)

And this then is the final outcome of Lowth's aestheticised criticism; to be able to, with lyric insight, search through the Prophetic books, to determine the extent and nature of the true poetry contained in each, as these further pronouncements show:

> On the whole, however, I can scarcely pronounce above half the book of Jeremiah to be poetical. (II 89)
>
> The style of Micah is for the most part close, forcible, pointed, and concise; sometimes approaching the obscurity of Hosea: in many parts animated and sublime, and in general truly poetical. (II 98)

Moreover we can recognise a cognate practice within hymnody to Lowth's criticism, thus emphasising the extent to which the protestant cultural field is a useful concept: Lowth's critical practice is to concentrate on the most lyrical and the most inspired passages of Scripture, and extract these as examples of the truly prophetic/ poetic. If, as Lisa Zeitz argues, the hymn tradition is one which takes place within Protestantism's imperative to return to a truly Scriptural religion (276), then hymnody follows this in its practice. For an examination of an anthology of eighteenth-century hymns, such as Richard Arnold's, shows that most hymns of the period were based one or more Biblical texts, and even where the hymn is not based on one or two specific passages of scripture then the text will nevertheless be a tissue of quotations and allusions. Indeed the "specimen" of Isaiah which Lowth produces as "a complete poem" is one which could easily be used as a hymn.

The Romantic search for the Word, we might say, takes its technique directly from the Protestant search for the Word of God, and the literary means used to achieve this are identical, except that the Romantics discarded, or perhaps transcended, the Bible text in favour of that of continuous revelation of the productive mind. In the next chapter, however, I will be investigating some of the more traditional areas from which the lyric has been alleged to have emanated.

Notes:

[1] This is probably a reason why Romantic poetics ignore or denigrate eighteenth-century poetry; the Renaissance neo-Platonic tradition is much more susceptible of appropriation for its purposes than the mimetic theories of the eighteenth-century.

[2] As there is no modern critical edition I cite the letters by number in the 1890 edition ("edited by C.J.T") and by date.

[3] Hobbes' arrangement is an eccentric one and there is clearly much going on besides the side-lining of poetry. For example, *below* poetry we find Rhetoric, Logic and "The Science of the Just and Unjust". What seems to be happening is the down-grading of all linguistic disciplines, in favour of the empirical sciences (Foucault 78).

[4] Such an essentialist position is already sketched out by Lessing in his *Lacoön* (1766). For him poetry is characterised by its area of description, "actions", and painting, by *its* area, "bodies". Painting can only depict a body at one moment of the action, but poetry can only show one aspect of a body (99). It would only require a Romantic emphasis on becoming over being to tilt this distinction in the direction of poetry.

[5] Cf Coleridge's strictures on Maturin's tragedy *Bertram* in chapter 23 of the *Biographia*.

[6] Both Trapp and Watts allude to Pindar as the type of a lyric poet. The reputation of Pindar's poetry as wild because irregular in meter was due to a failure to understand the very regular, though very varied, meters of Pindar. It was not until the early nineteenth-century that classical scholarship deduced these from the confused state of the MSS.

[7] The respective proportions of the hymns written by John and Charles is not known since, as a deliberate policy to prevent enemies alleging fraternal doctrinal differences, all their hymns appeared under their joint names. It is the current consensus, however, that Charles wrote the majority.

[8] The publishing success of the works of hymn-writer Isaac Watts, earlier in the century, should be noted too (Pafford 80-83).

[9] His most extended argument for this is found in his Introduction to his anthology *Augustan Lyric* (eg 2-4).

[10] And all the citations in the *OED* under **Hymn** from the period 1500-1700 distinguish between hymns and psalms.

[11] Lowth was later to become Bishop of London. In his writings on English Grammar he was also, incidentally, to invent many of the grammatical "rules" of English, such as not ending a sentence with a preposition, or not splitting an infinitive.

[12] For the Bible, of course, there is the traditional idea of its inspiration by the Holy Spirit. What we are witnessing in this instance is one site where the secularisation of this idea becomes possible, as when Lowth declares his work not a work of theology.

[13] It is a widespread practice amongst Christian biblical critics to criticise the Old Testament, yet spare criticism of the New. *The Revised Standard Version, Annotated Edition*, published in the 1970s, for example, annotates the Old Testament as though the editors considered it simply a collection of historical documents, but its annotations to the New Testament figure *those* documents (many of them more self-contradictory than the books of the Old Testament) as unproblematic and telling their own story.

[14] The proleptic echoes here of Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* are interesting.

[15] Although this is not an idea foreign to Burke either, as Lokke emphasises (428).

[16] The extent of Lowth's influence on German aesthetic criticism can be gauged from Hamann's aforementioned work, *Aesthetica in Nuce*, where he writes:

> The free structure which that great restorer of lyric song, Klopstock, has allowed himself is, I would guess, an archaism, a happy imitation of the mysterious workings of sacred poetry among the ancient Hebrews. (149)