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Some Observations on the Language of Hymns

Samuel C. Monson

The volume entitled Hymns: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, first published in 1948, is a varied collection not only of religious and patriotic verse but of linguistic history and change. Most users of the book are unaware of what it reveals about the English language.

Few standard poets are represented--only Joseph Addison, William Cowper, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Rudyard Kipling, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Thomas Moore, and Alfred, Lord Tennyson--perhaps because the language of hymns is more direct and immediate in expression than the metaphorical indirection of most poetry and perhaps because the necessity of exact repetition of rhythmic patterns from stanza to stanza to fit the musical strait jacket does not allow the substitution of poetic feet which occurs in more sophisticated poetry. "Jesus, though dead"--successive trochaic and iambic feet--is possible in poetry, while the "Jesus, though dead" (263) we sing is awkward. The anapestic feet of "Is counted but dross and refuse" (143) force mispronunciation of refuse because only a sixteenth note in the music is assigned to the normally stressed syllable.

The collection has a generous sampling of several great Protestant eighteenth-century hymn writers, particularly Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley, and of nineteenth-century Americans belonging to the less staid, more enthusiastic sects. There are some obvious translations (Martin Luther, Francis of Assisi, and Bernard of Clairvaux did not write in English), but no acknowledgment of who the translators might have been. Some alterations of standard texts are similarly unacknowledged, as when Isacc Watts' "Joy to the World" (88) appears with "the Lord will come" in place of "the Lord is come" and "And saints and angels sing" is substituted for "And heav'n and angels sing." Nearly half of the hymns are by Mormon writers, many more from the nineteenth century than the twentieth. Three of the most generously represented were members before the Church came to Utah in 1847: W. W. Phelps, Parley P. Pratt, and Eliza R. Snow, who together account for 34 texts.

A number of linguistic problems are a direct result of the fact that so many texts were produced by occasional rather than skilled poets. Syntactic patterns are violated for the sake of rhythm or of rhyme, as in:

School thy feelings; condemnation
Never pass on friend or foe,
Though the tide of accusation
Like a flood of truth may flow. (340)

instead of "...never pass condemnation on friend or foe, though the tide of accusation may flow like the flood of truth." In fact, inversions of fixed sentence patterns occur in about half of the hymns, almost always
because of the requirements of verse rather than as manifestations of earlier freedom in sentence order. Words appear as unexpected parts of speech because of the exigencies of verse:

When I leave this frail existence,  
When I lay this mortal by . . . (138)

--rather than "mortal body." Count and non-count nouns are sometimes confused:

Is every man a wheat or tare? (102)

Despite such drawbacks in making a linguistic analysis, there are many other peculiarities of language which can be attributed to the time of composition, to conservatism in the language of religion, or to the dialect of the poet.

Personal pronouns have changed greatly as English has developed. Since the time of Shakespeare the second person pronouns in particular have altered greatly. Ye, the earlier plural subject form, has become archaic or dialectal, while you, formerly the plural object form, has been extended in use as plural subject and as singular subject and object. Many hymns preserve the old case distinctions (11, 12, 13, 23, 27, 29, 37, 48, 52, 62, 63, 100, 128, 129, 137, 145, 154, 183, 207, 211, 214, 218, 223, 229, 233, 247, 255, 278, 289, 290, 294, 335, 344), but a number seem to confuse ye and you. "Judge not, that ye be not judged" alongside "you must receive" (188) suggests that the first is to be considered as a quotation. However, "If you could hie to Kolob . . . / D'ye think that you could ever" (257) is a clear-cut case of variation in form of the subjects of clauses. All other examples seem to make a distinction between you, as a subject form, and ye, as the form appropriate with nouns of address, which are frequent in the exhortations common to hymns. These examples combine both forms in those contrasting uses:

Waft, waft, ye winds, his story.  
And you, ye waters roll. (40)

Now, O ye Saints, rejoice today  
That you can saviors be. (45)

Come, all ye scattered sheep, and listen to your Shepherd,  
While you the blessings reap . . . (302)

Second person singular pronouns-- thou, thy, thine, thee--have disappeared from English except in dialectal and religious use. Mormon church leaders still encourage use of these singular pronouns in prayers addressing God. Many hymns use these forms, mainly in reference to Deity, although some hymns use them in reference to people, as in "School thy feelings, O my brother" (340). A number waver between familiar, habitual plural forms and the singular forms considered "proper" in religious contexts. In "All Creatures of Our God and King" (4) "thou burning sun," "thou silver moon," "thou rushing wind," "thou rising morn," "thou clouds," all exhibit conventional concord, while ye light of evening" does not and "Thou flowing water, pure and clear,/Make music for your Lord to hear"
shifts from singular to plural in reference to water, which is singular. "How firm a foundation, ye Saints of the Lord" shifts to "As thy days may demand, so thy succor shall be" and "Fear not, I am with thee" (66). One hymn makes such shifts in every stanza:

I'll answer, dear Lord, with my hand in thine:
I'll go where you want me to go.

O Savior, if thou wilt be my guide, . . .
I'll say what you want me to say.

So trusting my all to thy tender care,
And knowing thou lovest me,
I'll do thy will with a heart sincere;
I'll be what you want me to be. (75)

Other examples are:

Israel, Israel, God is calling,
Calling thee from lands of woe . . .
Israel, Israel, God is speaking;
Hear your great Deliverer's voice! . . .
Come to Zion, come to Zion,
For your coming Lord is nigh . . .
Israel! Israel! canst thou linger . . .? (81)

Then work and watch and fight and pray
With all thy might and zeal;
Push every worthy work along;
Put your shoulder to the wheel. (206)

and

Praise ye the Lord! . . .
Thy God, O Zion, ever reigns . . . (277)

(This grammatical chaos is emulated in Mormon public prayers, which are notable also for the strange verb forms devised to accompany second person singular subjects.)

For some time after the distinction developed between the possessive pronouns mine and thine and the newer possessive adjectives of my and thy, mine and thine could be used as adjectives if followed by a vowel sound. That distinction between thy and thine occurs in a number of hymns, which may preserve the second person distinction just because all the second person singular forms are similarly archaic. Thus:

"thy grace" but "thine approval" (8),
"thy throne" but "thine arm" (123),
"thy feet" but "thine own appointed way" (142),
"thy will" but "thine ends" (155),
"thy cheerful ray" but "thine ancient people" (240),
"thine every flaw"/"thine alabaster cities" (126),
"thine own" (180),
"thine eye" (188),
"thine ancient fulness" (189),
"thine angels" (192),
"thine eyes" (370).

"Thine heart" (280) suggests that the h is to be dropped in pronunciation. Most corresponding first person singular forms have been reduced to my. Only three example of mine as a possessive adjective occur:

"mine ends" (155),
"mine eyes" (197),
and "mine enemy" (294).

Distinctive verb endings for second and third person singular have disappeared in Modern English, but they appear on many verbs in hymns. Examples of the second person singular present indicative include ten examples of art (104, 109, 146, 148, 149, 188, 203, 212, 274, 346); two of gavest (230, 258); and one each of anointest (104), carest (106), say'st (121), needest (150), didst (153), knowest (192), wilt (230), biddest (258), seest (258), and comest (258). Wast, the second person singular past indicative occurs once (381). Second person singular auxiliary forms are frequent: wilt in nine hymns (75, 97, 109, 148, 240, 176, 260, 265, 381), shalt in seven (108, 212, 260, 273, 346, 381, 386), hast in four (241, 150, 153, 381), canst (81, 106, 121) and wouldst (240, 280, 292) in three each, dost in two (107, 181), and wert (145) and mayst (244) in one each.

Archaic forms are used extensively and carefully in one hymn that includes a second person singular form along with six third person singu-
lars:

he reigneth,
he sustaineth,
all thou needest hath been granted,
he ordaineth,
the Lord, who doth prosper,
all that hath breath. (150)

Third person singular forms are, however, fairly rare: ruleth (9), draweth (11), goeth (27), saith (46), assaileth (157), shineth (165), hath (284), giveth (293), cometh (370) appear once each and the auxiliaries hath and doth in seven each (61, 120, 150, 155, 283, 286, 339; 29, 178, 219, 245, 274, 297, 339), in addition to the example just quoted.

There are a number of other incongruities with these forms within hymns. The auxiliaries doth and hath sometimes appear alongside other verbs with the modern -s ending rather than archaic -th:

"For God remembers still" with
"In Deseret doth truth/ Rear up its royal head" (62);

"Time flies on wings of lightning" with
"As winter time doth follow" (73);
"Satan's host doth flee" with
"Like a might army/ Moves the Church of God" and
"Christ, the royal Master/ Leads against the foe" (128);

"The Lord from heaven hath spoken" with
"Rejoice, for your salvation begins anew" (289).

Likewise, principal verb forms in -s and -th may be intermingled:

He leadeth my soul where the still waters flow,
Restores me when wandering, redeems when oppressed . . .
With blessings unnumbered my cup runneth over. (104)

Sing praise to him who reigns above . . . .
With healing balm he fills
And every faithless murmur stills . . . .
What his almighty power hath made,
His gracious mercy keepeth.
By morning glow or evening shade
His watchful eye ne'er sleepeth . . . .
He leads his own, his chosen band . . . .
. . . the grateful song
My voice unwearied raises. (158)

Faith is a rock, steadfast, secure.
Who builds thereon he buildeth well. (233)

Verb and pronoun forms from the Early Modern and Modern periods are sometimes unexpectedly intermingled:

O God, th' Eternal Father,
Who dwells amid the sky,
In Jesus name we ask thee . . . . (125)

Thy Spirit, Lord, has stirred our souls. (204)

Count your many blessings;
See what God hath done. (202)

During the Modern period a new method of expressing a negative statement command, or question by using the auxiliary do has developed. The earlier forms persist in:

It matters not. (294)

The blood of those that slaughtered lie
Pleads not in vain. (229)

Think not when you gather to Zion. (21)

Shrink not from your duty. (184)

Fear not. (195, 222)

and

Carest thou not that we perish? (106)
"Know you not" (22) mixes the archaic verb form with the new subject form of the pronoun. Two hymns use both archaic and present-day verb forms:

O let not vain ambition nor worldly glory stain
Your minds.

and

O do not be discouraged. (345)

Don't let them pass you by .

Time flies .

and

As winter time doth follow. (73)

We now express the first person plural imperative with let us. The earlier form occurs in some hymns, as in "Now thank we all our God." (120)

In Early Modern English some perfect tenses were formed with to be rather than to have, as in:

He is risen .

Death is conquered. (61)

The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight .

and

For Christ is born of Mary. (165)

One recurrent feature of spelling in hymns was particularly characteristic of the nineteenth century, when past tense and past participle forms ending with the sound of t were frequently spelled with that letter. Apparently such spellings were adopted when pronunciations were changing in order to indicate the loss of a syllable, with an unaccented vowel disappearing and the inflectional ending coalescing with the stem. The spellings are much less common today. Script (153), deprest (294), and tempest-tost (301) each occurs once. The most familiar such form is blest, which appears spelled with t in twenty-one hymns (87, 91, 103, 106, 111, 112, 131, 133, 147, 156, 186, 225, 244, 248, 274, 280, 284, 292, 337, 345, 389). Familiarity with the Beatitudes made the two-syllable bless-ed a possibility even for modern writers, and it occurs in seven hymns (103, 106, 114, 147, 156, 193, 233); bless-ed-ness in one (132). Two hymns use both forms: "bless-ed Redeemer" and "blest harbor" in one (106); "bless-ed to open the last dispensation" and "honored and blest be his ever great name" (147) in the other. Another two use the -ed spelling pronounced as one syllable (13,120).

Bereft (381) for bereaved is a somewhat related shortening of a past participle, with shortening of the stem vowel as well as loss of a syllable.

An apostrophe may be used to indicate an omitted letter, as in contractions of two words into one. English handbooks still deplore contractions in formal writing, but 136 examples occur in these hymns, most of which must have seemed formal to their authors. Some contractions fit the patterns of speech, although they are unlikely to appear in print: enemy's (175) for enemy is, heaven's (106), th'angelic (60), th'encircling (112), th'event (171), th'Eternal (125, 229, 253, 274), th'unbroken (219), th'invisible (228), th'oppressed (277). A number of contractions appear
which are common today in print. We'll, in 24 hymns, is the most frequent (13, 15, 42, 86, 87, 130, 132, 144, 161, 179, 186, 194, 196, 205, 213, 218, 234, 243, 267, 288, 291, 296, 297, 344), with most of the others occurring in only one or two hymns. 'tis and 'tis first appeared in print during the seventeenth century, but it's has almost completely supplanted 'tis in present usage. Hymn language is in a world apart: it's appears but once (302), while 'tis, with 25 occurrences (2, 13, 16, 32, 46, 58, 90, 115, 131, 143, 163, 167, 172, 181, 186, 187, 188, 210, 234, 267, 275, 283, 299, 303, 381), is the most common contraction in the volume. Other archaic or obsolete contractions are: 'twas (136, 187, 233, 275, 295, 299), 'twere (292), 'twill (186)--all of which elide the i of it, a practice common two centuries ago and rare today--and d'ye (257), which employs an obsolete case form of you.

Some proper names from the Bible are syncopated more frequently than not--that is, shortened by a syllable in pronunciation. Cal-vary (275) and Cal-vary's (226) appear once each, as does Cal-va-ry (271) with the full value. Eph-raim appears twice, E-phraim's once, but E-phra-im not at all. Je-ru-sa1em (303) occurs once in three syllables instead of four. Im-man-ue1 occurs once, Im-man-ue1's twice, but Em-man-u-el's only once. Is-rae1 and Is-rae1's appear eleven times each (21, 64, 81, 89, 182, 197, 224, 252, 284, 303, 344; 15, 53, 55, 223, 236, 249, 254, 263, 269, 277, 389), while Is-ra-e1, in three syllables, appears but twice (39, 282).

Before the year 1500, evidences of v disappearing between vowels occurred in spelling. This feature is common in hymns but rare in Standard English today, except for the persistence of has instead of earlier hav-es:

\[
\begin{align*}
e'\text{er} & \quad (72, 133, 337) \\
where'\text{er} & \quad (18, 86, 94, 335, 344) \\
where'\text{en} & \quad (3, 37, 72, 87, 156, 158, 167, 169, 171, 176, 185, 193, 254, 277, 293) \\
e'\text{en} & \quad (66, 85, 124, 167, 275, 280) \\
o'\text{er} & \quad (3, 6, 10, 11, 16, 40, 43, 47, 55, 61, 72, 82, 87, 98, 106, 108, 110, 112, 127, 131, 132, 136, 151, 156, 170, 181, 186, 196, 197, 210, 211, 213, 223, 247, 264, 269, 273, 278, 288, 292, 296, 302, 340, 349, 359) \\
o'\text{er} \text{flow} & \quad (66) \\
o'\text{er} \text{throw} & \quad (81) \\
o'\text{er} \text{throwing} & \quad (239) \\
o'\text{ershadowed} & \quad (106) \\
o'\text{er} \text{come} & \quad (114, 177) \\
o'\text{errule} & \quad (155, 282) \\
o'\text{ersspread} & \quad (241) \\
o'\text{er} \text{head} & \quad (241)
\end{align*}
\]

occur a total of 85 times, all with v omitted in the spelling. A number of other words preserve v in the spelling but probably did not in their pronunciations, although congregations now try to put it in:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{heav'n} & \quad \text{pronounced as one syllable} \quad (1, 4, 5, 19, 33, 35, 41, 44, 53, 78, 82, 83, 85, 90, 103, 129, 151, 171, 187, 211, 220, 223, 248, 249, 281, 296)
\end{align*}
\]
heav'ns (10, 82, 176, 264, 351)
heaven-ly (12, 24, 25, 41, 63, 67, 82, 95, 103, 161, 190, 200, 209, 214, 218, 223, 228, 239, 244)
heaven-born (60)
heaven-lit (181)
given (90, 151, 211, 296)
seven (107)
for-given (281)
driv'n (19)

Sometimes the full form, with a syllable more than the above, occurs in the same hymn as the shortened form of the same word (18, 24, 37, 82, 106, 110). Some of the shortened forms, without \( v \), still occur in the Northern dialect in England. Otherwise, these forms are archaic or poetic.

The greatest store of information about earlier pronunciation of words in hymns is to be found in rhymes, many of which appear to be faulty. While it is true that some imperfect rhymes appear, it seems safe to assume that most rhymes were considered perfect rhymes by their authors. One reason is the distorted syntax, which so often sacrifices ready understanding for the sake of placing words in rhyme position. Another is that amateur poets usually recognize rhyme and rhythm as the only essential ingredients of poetry. The most compelling, however, is the many correspondences between most of the off-rhyme words and observations made by linguists about historical changes and dialectal differences in pronunciation. A thorough study would relate pronunciations to each poet's origins, birth and death dates, and likely mode of speech.

Let us now merely skim the surface lightly, picking some of the more outrageous rhymes and suggesting how to reconcile apparent differences.

Pronouncing -in for a final unaccented -ing is something we hear, and perhaps do, every day, and that process accounts for the rhymes of Zion/lying (205) and flow in/bestowing (225).

Earlier we noted some persistence of ye instead of you. At least one rhyme suggests a pronunciation ye where the spelling has you: carry/hear you (247). Perhaps the same explanation would hold for Missouri/before you (37), although the final syllables might end in schwa: Missouri/before you.

An unaccented final -ure might be pronounced in two ways, as we can see in standard creature and dialectal critter. The latter pronunciation helps explain the rhyming of Creator with nature (40).

The spellings of -oi and -oy have acquired spelling pronunciations during the past two hundred years which they did not formerly have, as we note in the rhymes join/mine (229), join/divine (277), joy/cry (164), and destroy/nigh, where they once rhymed with something not exactly like today's long \( i \) sound.

We now shorten the vowels of some verbs when forming the past tense or past particle, as noted above with bereft and bereaved. That this was not always so we see from such rhymes as reared/heard (62), formerly heared; appeared/heard (250); made/said (41), formerly sayed; afraid/said (295); and flown/gone (17), formerly with a long \( o \).
In spite of the o spelling, the vowel of come has always been pronounced with one of the sounds we associate with u. For that reason, the rhymes of come/home (20, 29, 35, 56, 92, 123, 234, 258), comes/homes (30), and overcome/home (283, o'er-114) might be eye-rhymes, that is, apparent but not real rhymes. The combination of come and home with millennium (132) suggests another possibility, the pronunciation of hum, which I have heard dialectally and which is also suggested by the rhyme Jerusalem/home (223).

At the beginning of the Early Modern period occurred the most far-reaching pronunciation changes in the history of English; and the Great Vowel Shift is an apparent influence in many rhymes. Every long vowel was raised in its pronunciation; and English spelling, which did not change, now suggests different sounds from those suggested by the spelling of European languages. The changes occurred over a long period of time and at different rates in different areas. Some vowels went through successive sound changes, others only one. Some long vowels were later shortened. Some sounds fell together and later diverged.

The names of two poets suggest some of the complexities. The surname of John Keats, born in London in 1795, contains the vowel sound of the spelling ea reached in the final stage of the Great Vowel Shift. The surname of William Butler Yeats, born seventy years later near Dublin, Ireland, preserves an earlier stage of development of the same vowel still characteristic of the Irish dialect. This discussion will concentrate on examples showing the effects of the Great Vowel Shift without explaining all of the ramifications, although perhaps one detailed example will indicate the reason for omission of other details.

God has a short vowel and did in Old English. There was formerly a variant with long o because of lengthening of the vowel in an open syllable in inflected forms. Milton rhymed God with abode and Pope rhymed it with road. The first of these rhymes is found in three Mormon hymns (133, 241, 277), the second in four (28, 44, 193, 290). Middle English long close o raised to [u:] and was then sometimes shortened to [U] and even unrounded to [A]. Apparently God(e) changed with other words containing that vowel. Hymns include the rhyme God/blood four times (218, 227, 242, 244), God/flood twice (229, 253), and stood/blood/God once (264).

Other examples of former rhymes affected by the Great Vowel Shift are:

- mood/good (116)
- understood/blood (125)
- good/blood (288)
- improve/love (17, 90)
- remove/above (18)
- other combinations with move and prove (45, 66, 74, 85, 244, 274, 298, 340, 346; proved/loved (126); beloved/moved (284)
- seed/dead (224)
- beneath/death (290)
- faith/death (187, 225, 252, 345)
- stayed/head—sometimes pronounced haid today, dialectally (84)
- made/stead (274)
The long vowel sound formerly heard in head was similar to what we hear in it today and consider short. That similarity seems to have been utilized in rhyming:

- Deseret/great (62)
- blessing/ceasing (70)
- consent/restraint (45)
- Bethlehem/proclaim (60)
- hell/fail (151)
- bed/laid (209)
- Jerusalem/name (266)

The rhyming of prepared with afraid (13) appears completely false. However, afraid sometimes is manifest as afeard dialectally. In its earlier stage it would have been [afə:rd], and a plausible rhyme.

There are dozens of other rhymes which can be explained by methods similar to those I have employed, but time does not permit it. Perhaps two manifestations of what is usually considered substandard and dialectal might serve to round this paper out: In tomorrow/Gomorrah (183) one realizes that the final vowel of the first word must be reduced to match that of the second. The other example requires the omission of r before s: trust/accursed (46). Now only the lowly cuss rather than curse, but we preserve evidence that not all early Mormons made that social distinction.

Hymns are a great treasure house of linguistic history.