

Restless Endeavour

A Study of the Hymns of A. M. Toplady

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AUGUSTUS MONTAGUE TOPLADY is today remembered, if at all, as the writer of a single hymn, "Rock of Ages". In his own day he was noted chiefly as a controversialist, prominent in that sad division among Evangelicals which marred the progress of the Revival. Toplady was a Calvinist, bitterly opposed to Wesley. The chief of his works, *Historic Proof of the Calvinism of the Church of England* (1775), was considered by Bishop Ryle as unanswerable.

This is a short essay on Toplady as a hymn-writer, but I mention this polemical activity because the picture of Toplady as a hymnwriter would not be complete without it. And yet, though this reference is essential, the final picture is supreme testimony to the manner in which Toplady's full Christian experience was a much vaster and more beautiful thing than any polemic assertion of doctrine can ever be. No hymn ever lived through its doctrine merely, but many cannot be fully appreciated unless the importance of their doctrinal statement is realized. Calvinism suited Toplady. His own tendency to see things in black and white, to envisage stark opposition, his own fervour and sense of the dramatic, were exactly of a kind to rejoice in the faith he avowed. At times indeed the doctrine seems rather crudely imposed on a hymn, as in the lines:

My Robe thou art, I feel thy Grace
And triumph in my Righteousness
Made mine by Imputation.

(Section 2, VI)*

Even in a better example the controversial note is clearly detected:

Repentance, Holiness and Faith
By which to Thee we live,
Are not Conditions we perform,
But Graces we receive.

(Occasional Hymns, V)

Toplady was perhaps trying to use the hymn as a teaching medium, but it can never satisfy such a purpose. When, however, doctrine is a convincing formulation of experience, the results are more felicitous:

How happy are we:
Our Election we see,
And can venture our Souls on thy gracious Decree.
In Jesus approv'd,
For Eternity lov'd,
And lodg'd in his Hand, whence we cannot be mov'd.

(*ibid.*, II)

This sounds indeed, as its title states, “Faith Triumphant”. The writer’s joy and confidence are evident in the fine lilted measure which the 5.6.12 arrangement, emphasized by the repeated rhyme of all three lines, provides. An even better, and better-known, example of this fusion of doctrine and experience is in the couplet:

Nothing in my Hand I bring,
Simply to thy Cross I cling
(ibid.. XXIII)

where the assertion of all-sufficient grace co-exists alongside a convincing indication of humility. Contrast this with the insincere grovelling of another writer’s

Oh, to be nothing, nothing!
Painful the humbling may be,
Yet low in the dust I’d lay me
That the world might my Saviour see.

The great difference, of course, between these passages is that one pretends to narrate a willed, but difficult, subjugation, whereas the other in crisp, economical phrase suggests a more active and ready response.

This is indeed the key to Toplady’s achievement. The whole of his own spiritual experience and of the economy of God is realized in active terms. It is a drama working out for the prize of a soul. When he elaborates the passage quoted above, it is no mere expansion. Every detail adds to the significance of the whole:

Naked, come to Thee for Dress;
Helpless, look to Thee for Grace;
Foul, I to the Fountain fly;
Wash me, Saviour, or I die!

Each line concisely contrasts need and supply, and as each line follows the one before, the need not merely accumulates but becomes more desperate, until he reaches the urgent plea and dire alternative of the final line. Toplady was active enough himself; but with his beliefs God had to be amazingly active. Is it too subtle to read the imperative of the final line as a mixture of pathetic plea and desperate command?

There is in Toplady a kind of Augustinian restlessness for ever seeking that single effectual rest which is in God. To this may be ascribed much of that peculiar pervasive violence in his work, and from it also there comes the singular beauty of Toplady’s contemplation of death and its aftermath. The stark, elemental perspective of “Rock of Ages” prevents the full expression of this latter feature in that hymn. The emotions are too highly pitched even for raptured vision there. He can only seek to hide himself in God. But there is all the urgency and fevered activity there. In one of his hymns he pleads:

Lead me to JESUS for Peace,
The Rock that is higher than I.
(ibid., XV),

but *this* encounter with the Rock is not a pacifying, but a blinding experience. He finds the Rock that is “cleft”, the Saviour with the “riven” side. Toplady’s vision of the cross is not of

sorrow and love, but of terrifying suffering. There is a fine paradoxical relationship later in the hymn between the penultimate and final verses. He pleads for the Saviour's washing to rescue him from death, and then immediately there follows:

While I draw this fleeting breath,
When my Eyestrings break in Death . . . ,

lines again with a terrifying vividness of physical suffering, but this time Toplady's, not his Saviour's. Then again without a pause the stress shifts:

When I soar through Tracts unknown,
See Thee on Thy Judgment Throne

—from one kind of terror to another. Here the terror is more that of scene and action than of feeling. That is, it has become externalized, and thereby to a known suffering there is added an unknown. Those “Tracts unknown” are desert vastnesses of unimaginable consequence. How much more telling than the perhaps more cosmically correct “refinement” of this line in our modern hymn-books to “worlds unknown”! Even the verb “soar” has, besides its suggestions of triumph, some overtones of helplessness. Certainly, it is not so unambiguous as the use of the same word in:

Deathless Principle, arise!
Soar, thou Native of the Skies.
(ibid., XXV)

This hymn is one of those which display Toplady's confidence through death. He has no fears because he knows he can hide himself in Christ:

Lo, He beckons from on high!
Fearless to His Presence fly!

The poet's restlessness and the rest in God are finely expressed in this hymn. He bids his soul,

Fly, celestial Tenant, fly!
Burst thy Shackles, drop thy Clay.

that it may pass upon the sea that God has calmed,

Still'd its Tossing, hush'd its Roar.

Safe is the expanded Wave,
Gentle as a summer's Eve
Not one Object of His Care
Ever suffered Shipwreck there.

See the Haven full in view;
Love Divine shall bear thee through ;
Trust to that propitious Gale;
Weigh thy Anchor, spread thy Sail.

Here is the peace and rest and joy which only the most active most richly contemplate. In an even better example, with lyric sweetness long drawn out, Toplady, writing during one of his illnesses, contemplated the passage to his heavenly home. In “When languor and disease invade” (*ibid.*, XXIV), a long hymn held together with wonderful tautness, he first reflects on past and present blessings and then looks forward to his fast approaching bliss and onward still to the final resurrection. This last he describes as follows:

Soon, too, my slumbering Dust shall hear
The Trumpet’s quickening sound;
And by my Saviour’s Power rebuilt,
At His right Hand be found.

These Eyes shall see Him in that Day,
The God that died for me!
And all my rising Bones shall say,
Lord, who is like to Thee?

In his preface Toplady wrote: “That the Dignity of Truths so momentous might be impair’d as little as possible by the manner of expressing them, they are often introduced in the *very Words* of the inspir’d writers and our venerable Reformers.” “When langour and disease invade” is headed with a reference to Psalm 104: 34—“My meditation of him shall be sweet”—and the various blessings of the first eight verses are recollected as “sweet”. In the passage which I quote above there is another reference to the psalms, namely, to Psalm 35: 10—“All my bones shall say, Lord, who is like unto thee? “But no mere fidelity to Scripture could suffice to produce a vivid rendering. Toplady, however, could be both faithful and original, startlingly original. The bones became “rising bones”—again, the active, dramatic vision of things, yet not so incongruous because not so particularized as Dryden’s

“rattling bones together fly
From the four comers of the sky.”
(Ode; To the Pious Memory of Mrs. Anne Killigrew.)

Perhaps also the consonance of “rising” with our image of the Resurrection helps Toplady. (And was he also helped by recollection of the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel 37?)

Toplady is, not surprisingly, fond of quoting the vivid references of Scripture, such as, for example, the borrowing from Jeremiah (13:23), himself, of course, a writer full of vivid images:

Thy Blood’s renewing Might
Can make the foulest clean,
Can wash the Ethiopian white,
And change the Leopard’s skin.

(Section 1, XXIV)

But Toplady does not always rest content with Scripture, or even with imagery that can be closely related to that of Scripture. The storm and the haven of marine imagery are popular with him, and in one case he produces a striking effect by a sudden particularization of a very general reference:

My Sins, at my Command, shall be

Cast as a Stone into the Sea—
The Sea of JESUS' Blood.

The effect is stunning, because that was how Toplady himself had known it. His religious experience was always like that, close, immediate, intimate.

His controversial bitterness may well have been the result of some sort of hypersensitive sincerity about this intimate experience. It would certainly appear so from the following verse in “Your Lamps, ye foolish Virgins, trim” (Section 3, V):

Hath Satan giv'n a sleeping Draught,
And so become your Lord?
Or has he shot a poison'd Shaft
And are your Wounds uncur'd?
To JESUS fly, the living Stream,
And find your Antidote in Him.

The imagery is here used tellingly to enforce his criticism. How could they so casually neglect the great salvation which he so wonderingly possessed in mingled awe and exultation?

No consideration of Toplady's imagery can avoid discussion of his notoriously mixed references. They are found in “Rock of Ages”, where the first idea is of the rock as protection (suggested, I think, by Isaiah 32: 2), but is quickly followed by the parallel of the rock which Moses struck for life-giving water (Exodus 17: 6) and our Lord's torn side whence blood and water flowed (John 19: 34). There seems to be an arbitrariness about the transitions that proceeds from merely verbal associations of rock and flowing water. Toplady, however, so strongly feels the implication of his references both in isolation and together that there is no sense of incongruity.

An even more outstanding example of mixed imagery is provided by the hymn, “Deathless Principle, arise”. Here in a passage I have already quoted he imagines the soul as a “celestial tenant” in an earthly house about to fly off like a bird. It then becomes a prisoner bursting its shackles, then more conventionally it drops its clay and breathes itself away, only to become a monarch removing to its crown. It crosses a stream, which tosses and roars, has expanded waves and has witnessed shipwreck. By now the ocean image has taken control and the soul is bidden to see its haven and, thus doing, to trust to the wind, weigh anchor and spread sail. Yet so obviously does Toplady feel, and make his readers feel, the passion in his subject that we do not find the imagery disturbing. The mixed imagery also appears in the first lines of the hymn:

Deathless Principle, arise!
Soar, thou Native of the Skies;
Pearl of price, by Jesus bought,
To his glorious Likeness wrought!

Go, to shine before His Throne;
Deck His mediatorial Crown.

A principle is bidden to soar, a pearl to go and shine before God. This is an interesting example of what I may call “active inanimates”. It is interesting because it provides a kind of

reflection of Toplady's theology. As a Calvinist he asserted the utter helplessness of man and the all-sufficient power of God's predestinating grace. The pearl and the principle become active, as it were, by God's animating power.

This mixture of imagery may, however, be in some way related to that restlessness which marks the whole of Toplady's writing and made him so much desire that peace beneath the shadow of the rock of his Saviour. This restlessness makes his spiritual experience so dramatic. Look at the titles of some of the hymns. One moment it is "Faith Triumphant" ("How happy are we," Occasional Hymns, II), then it is "Faith fainting" ("Encompass'd with Clouds of Distress," *ibid.*, XV), and then "Faith Reviving" ("From whence this Fear and Unbelief," *ibid.*, XVI). Or compare again the fluctuation between "Full Assurance" ("A Debtor to Mercy alone," *ibid.*; IV), "Weak Believers Encouraged" ("Your Harps, ye trembling Saints," *ibid.*, XVII) and "Happiness Found" ("Happiness, thou lovely Name," *ibid.*, XIX). There could be no relaxing in his spiritual journey:

If sometimes I strive, as I mourn,
My Hold of thy Promise to keep.
The Billows more fiercely return,
And plunge me again in the Deep.
While harass'd and cast from thy Sight,
The Tempter suggests with a Roar,
"The Lord hath forsaken thee quite:
Thy God will be gracious no more."

(*ibid.*, XV);

but such sentiments quickly bring the sternly questioning reply:

From whence this Fear and Unbelief?
Hath not the Father put to Grief
His spotless Son for me?
And will the righteous Judge of Men
Condemn me for that Debt of Sin.
Which, Lord, was charg'd on Thee?

(*ibid.*, XVI)

The struggle and temptation was always close and persistent in Toplady's spiritual experience; Hence perhaps the frequency of violent, almost masochistic, imprecations:

The Idols tread beneath thy Feet,
And to Thyself the Conquest get . . .
Compel my Soul thy sway to own.

(Section 1, XXV)

Tear away my every Boast,
My stubborn Mind abase

(Section 1, XLI)

Toplady had no faith in a merely persuading Deity; his God was all-subduing Power Divine (Occasional Hymns, III). Such a God could alone avail for a man with Toplady's sense of sin,

Foul as I am, and ripe for Hell

(*ibid.*, XIII)

and with his repeated question,

Can the Aethiop wash him fair?

(Occasional Hymns, III)

Toplady was in everything an extremist, believing himself foul in his sin, yet confident in his salvation, struggling and tempted yet ardent in aspiration, beset by present troubles but looking ever forward to his future bliss. There is no quietness in Toplady, little room even for a pause to praise, but there is plenty of self-examination, plenty of prayer, plenty of conviction. Yet there is nothing forced or artificial about him. Toplady's was not a hot-house faith; it was rather faith in the furnace, religion at perpetual white heat.

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Endnotes:

- 1) All references are to Toplady's *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (Sedgwick, 1860).