The Hymnal: A Reading History by Christopher N. Phillips (review)

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... it is fire,
in even flares of bloom over dark boughs,
improbably reaching over the air and water station,
confident in its living florets of blood, spilled
extravagantly, for all. (66)

Wisdom lies in the speaker's insight that the tree "chooses as its compan-
ions / the empty tanks, the change-oil lights, the flat tires, / the ones who
notice, and the ones who do not." The poem reminds us that Christ died for
all but invites us to be "the ones who notice" in this "unseeing" world. The
entire collection is "a call to the soaring beyond," to "doorways of egg and
gold // and open eyes" ("Nocturne," 51). Litany of Flights allows us to sense
the wings, touch the fire, and glimpse the sacramental vision of saints and
mystics.

Lesley Clinton
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The Hymnal: A Reading History. By Christopher N. Phillips. Baltimore: Johns

Christopher N. Phillips's research into the reading history of the hymn
provides unique insights into hymns separate from their use in congrega-
tional singing. Phillips, associate professor of English at Lafayette College,
examines the use of hymns and hymn books specifically in the private lives
of Americans throughout the nineteenth century. Through his research,
Phillips identifies a distinctive role that the hymn played in American soci-
ety. He argues that the hymnbook was instrumental in the reading culture
of eighteenth and nineteenth century America and shows the impact of the
hymnbook on sacred and secular learning.

Phillips organizes his book in three sections and examines the hymn
in church, school, and the home. He situates his narrative predominantly
on Protestant hymns and hymnals, although he includes a brief dialogue
on those of the Latter-Day Saints, and a lengthier description of Unitarian
contributions in the third section. In contrast to most other hymnological
studies, Phillips centers his research on the read history of the genre and
its impact upon literary society, instead of the sung history and its impact
upon the church.

Before jumping into his first section, Phillips provides important
historical background for the reader to contextualize his argument. Phillips
connects the reader emotionally to his case by describing many antique
hymnbooks in detail. He mentions personal inscriptions and markings
throughout the hymnbooks, allowing the reader to imagine themselves in
an earlier time and place. As Phillips continues to establish his argument,
he notes that a key aspect of his book is conveying "the hymn's fundamen-
tal role in teaching people across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries
how to read poetry, an overlooked but crucial element in understanding the
formal evolutions and market expectations of English and American poetry” (19). This is the central point to his thesis and is carried throughout the book.

As Phillips enters the first section of his book, he notes the use of the hymnbook in the corporate gathering of church members. He states that the chapters in the first group “tell a broad story of how hymnbooks moved from the private to the public, even as they continued to inhabit and shape private spaces” (34). With his emphasis on the public sphere, Phillips articulates specific hymnbooks within Protestant streams, noting their influence upon denominational entities. He rightly discusses the development of hymnody with the shift that occurred from Psalm-singing to hymn-singing as corporate bodies. Where Phillips diverges from other studies is with his emphasis upon the poetic use of hymns, and the use of the hymnbooks themselves, rather than on their musical impact on church members.

With special attention given to the personal nature of hymnbooks, Phillips highlights individual hymnbooks and the stories that are revealed between their pages. He often analyzes the inscriptions and pencil markings to identify how the hymnbooks was used in daily life. In his fourth chapter, “Giving Hymnbooks, and What the Hymnbook Gives,” Phillips notes the rise of hymnbook publication at the beginning of the nineteenth century, which gave way to a new market: the hymnbook as gift. Commencing with this new niche, hymnbooks entered personal lives more vehemently, allowing hymns to be used with more literary designs than simply singing in church. Children received these hymnbooks as rewards, prisoners received them as aids in improving moral standards, and friends received them as tokens of love and goodwill.

Throughout the book, Phillips underscores the role that Isaac Watts had on hymnody, especially the literary impact he had on future generations. Phillips writes, “As a pastor and an educator, Watts was deeply invested in the promotion of reading as a means of piety and inward authenticity” (88). Because of Watts’s attention to developing the new genre of the hymn, he provided a way for churchgoers to worship publicly and privately, while increasing their ability to literarily interpret hymns. The impact of Watts bridged the gap between church and school, which Phillips explains in his second section. Specifically highlighting Watts’s Divine and Moral Songs for Children, Phillips discusses the transition that Watts took from Sunday worship to weekly academics. Phillips accurately summarizes this conversion when he writes, “One of Watts’s aims in writing Divine Songs was to make children’s learning to read, as well as doctrine and morality, ‘a Diversion’ by using the pleasures of rhyme and image to motivate children to not only read but memorize his texts; memorization was a central part of most people’s reading practices with secular as well as sacred texts” (107). Thus, with this summation, Phillips evinces his thesis and shows how hymns found entrance into the schoolroom.

With his focus now on the public sphere, Phillips furthers his argument by expounding upon the development of children’s print literature
that continued throughout the nineteenth century. Throughout chapters 7 and 8, he describes Watts as the springboard for other children’s writers, such as Anna Letitia Barbauld's *Hymns in Prose for Children*, and later Ann Taylor’s and Jane Taylor’s *Hymns for Infant Minds*. According to Phillips, “Children's hymns enabled and enjoyed a genre fluidity between hymn, religious poem, and secular poem that had been latent in Watts’s work and had become a firm expectation by the time the Taylors were writing” (124). With the new genre of “hymn” having found footing in the lives of children in the early nineteenth century, the inclusion of hymns into children’s readers was imminent.

Again, Phillips points to the influence of Watts for linking the hymn between religious and academic study. Expressly highlighting Watts’s publication of *Divine Songs* and his later *Art of Reading*, Phillips illustrates Watts’s attention to utilizing hymns in literacy education. Phillips furthers this point by discussing the evolution of other children’s readers, from *The New-England Primer* to the *McGuffey Readers* and shows the use of hymn as literacy aid and poem. Coinciding with the development of these readers, Phillips also emphasizes the development of music education within public schools, helping to solidify the place of the hymn in both the music and reading classrooms. His ninth chapter focuses solely on the role of hymn in music education, with a rightful evaluation of Lowell Mason’s creation of the American music education system and the role that Watts played in that advancement.

Lastly, Phillips solidifies his thesis in his final chapters, which focus on the role of the hymn in the home. Within these chapters, he centralizes his debate between hymn and poem, and the struggle between hymnist and poet to know the difference. Phillips highlights many influential hymnists in chapter 10, including William Cowper, John Newton, and James Montgomery. Noting Montgomery’s life as poet and hymnist, Phillips observes that Montgomery strove to keep his hymns and poems separate in his publications (167). He further writes that both Cowper and Montgomery followed Watts’s lead and wrote hymns that primarily concentrated on the devotional lives of individuals (169). With the explosion of hymns and the rise of women writers in the nineteenth century, the line between hymn and poem appeared to narrow.

Phillips’s final point demonstrates the entrance of poems into hymn-books, occurring simultaneously with the rise of private Sabbath worship. Arising strongly within the Unitarian denomination, poetry saw its inclusion into hymnals with the aid of Samuel Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Samuel Johnson. These men blurred the lines between poem and hymn, and between biblical theology and transcendental philosophy. Phillips notes that as these writers’ theology shifted, so did the demand for cheerful hymns. No longer were hymns included that emphasized sin and wretchedness; rather, uplifting hymns replaced penitential hymns from previous generations. His final discussion on Dickinson’s advocacy for private Sabbath worship and an examination of poetic meter within hymns
grounds the reader back to Phillips’s thesis, effectively concluding his final chapter and his central argument.

As mentioned earlier, Phillips’s approach to this study is unique and insightful. He stayed true to his thesis throughout the book and effectively argued his points in each chapter. Of particular interest was his stress upon Watts woven within the text. Most church musicians know the impact of Watts upon church hymnody, yet not all musicians know the influence Watts had on literacy and society. Phillips successfully relays pertinent information in an easy-to-follow text. Additional study into how these literacy advancements impacted theology would be of interest, as well as the effect of the progress upon music education within the church and within the schoolroom.

Phillips’s book is of interest to poets and musicians alike. This text is recommended for educators, researchers, and lovers in both fields of literature and church music. It is a well of deep research and insight in which all readers will benefit.

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“Listen with your heart, / If you would have God’s mercy” (14). Opening with this maxim from an anonymous Spanish poet, Bonnie B. Thurston begins her verse life of Saint Mary of Egypt. Indeed, the availability of God’s mercy to all is the core message of this story dating back to the sixth century and perhaps earlier. Mary of Egypt, having been baptized and raised by a Christian family living near the Nile, spent seventeen years in Alexandria as a “cheerful harlot” (xiii). Surprisingly, she took no money for her sexual favors. One day, tagging along with a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the Church of the Sepulcher/Resurrection, Mary is thrice mysteriously prevented from entering the Church, presumably because she is perceived as unworthy. When she prays to the nearby icon of the Blessed Virgin Mary, she is not only smitten by the Virgin’s eyes but realizes the hollowness of her sinful lifestyle. Her subsequent petition to the Virgin for forgiveness enables Mary to enter the church to venerate the Cross. Upon hearing a voice that promises: “If you cross the Jordan, you will find true peace,” she immediately goes to the Church of John the Baptist, at the Jordan, enters the water in a gesture of rebaptism, and lives for forty-seven years in the desert in “solitude and penitence” (9). But this is not the end of the story. As part of his Lenten practice, Father Zossima, a monk always seeking greater levels of mortification in his quest for perfection, departs for the desert, encounters Mary, learns her story, and recognizes he is in the presence of true holiness. In contrast to Mary’s sanctity, Zossima’s excessive spiritual disciplines