

I'd been laboring under the misapprehension that for Americans, Christmastide was the peak period for suicides. Turns out it's July. But Christmas, with its frenetic spending/spurging/stuffing(of mouths & houses with stuff), does uncover in the populace a deficiency of steady-daily joy, which is to the soul what pleasure is to the body. Nothing that can be done in, with, or for the body can bring anything more than a similitude of joy to the soul, which matter cannot reach (otherwise materialism would, as it cannot, drive out other philosophies)....The U.S. Surgeon General's extensive report on "mental illness" has been published just in time for Christmas. It's double **bad** news: (1) It's diagnostic continues the medical-model captivity of psychic distress as illness, & its prescriptions are (as far as his office has disclosed to the public in the prepublication notes, & talks) are just that, drug-prescriptions. But it's also double **good** news: (1) The chicken/egg problem is becoming clearer: brain/mind are distinguishable but symbiotic, inter-influencing: brain pathologies correlate with "mental illnesses," but the dogma that the first is causative of the second is eroding: some "sick in the head" folks caused the messup in their brain chemistry, & in such cases chemistry treats the symptom while leaving the disease (as a metaphor for soul-distress) untended. The other good news is that it's becoming clearer (1) that a far higher percentage of our populace suffers soul-distresses than we formerly thought, & (2) that our society is suffering from multiple soul-malnutrition, deficiencies, one of which has come recently to be called ecstasy deficit, whose primary symptom is various degrees of chronic depression + addictions unconsciously intended as ecstatic chicken soup for the soul, which can only be busied by, not nourished by, addictions.

Today is Christmas Sunday. Christmas! Provider of "joy to the world," ecstasy for starved souls, & thus prophylaxis against the dark powers--in the world, in society, & in us--intending our deprivation, distress, depression + addictions, doom.

THINKSHEET OCCASION: When the alarm woke me from my afterlunch nap today, I found myself inwardly singing a hymn--the tune coming first, swiftly followed by the hymn (a "hymn" being words sung to a hymntune). When this happens, it's almost always easy for me to see how the hymn speaks to my current inner condition as shaped by private or public affairs. This was no exception. I was so in ecstasy over the relevance that I read the hymn to Loree as she was driving us to church for the annual Christmas-Sunday-afternoon pageant. No, it's not a Christmas hymn but is in the same category: **hymns of ecstasy**.

The hymnist was Joseph Addison (d.1719), eminent English literatus-philosopher-statesman, "the first journalist hymn-writer" (Erik Routley, *HYMNS AND HUMAN LIFE* [Eerdmans/52/59] 170), 4 of whose 5 hymns "are in most [hymn]books" today. Our hymn, titled "Gratitude" (& having 13 stanzas!), appeared 8.9.1712 in *THE SPECTATOR*, the influential periodical he published with Steele. He was 40, advanced in years in the sense that he had only 7 more to go. That same month he published what is still his most famous hymn, "The spacious firmament on high," in which God is the "great Original" of nature, which to one who has eyes of faith publishes every day & in "every land / The works of an almighty hand"--the sublime-ecstatic faith (destroyed, 147 years later, by Darwin's cutting the cord between God & nature) in God as both above & within nature.

Of the 13 stanzas of our hymn, here are the 4 (with brief commentary) usual in today's hymnals. But first I'll quote (1) Addison's comment on the hymn (pub. in *SPECTATOR* No.453): "If gratitude is due from man to man, how much more from man to his Maker! The Supreme Being does not only confer upon us those bounties which proceed more immediately from his hand, but even those benefits which are conveyed to us by others. Any blessing we enjoy, by what means soever derived, is the gift of him who is the great Author of good, and the Father of mercies"; (2) of the other stanzas, esp. showing what Routley (171) says of the whole hymn: "unequaled as a piece of spiritual autobiography, a song of gratitude for continued mercies all through life": "When, in the slippery paths of youth, / With heedless steps I ran, / Thine arm, unseen, conveyed me safe, / And led me up to man. // Through every period of my life / Thy goodness I'll pursue; / And after death, in distant worlds, The glorious theme renew."

1

When all thy mercies, O my God, / My rising soul surveys, / Transported with the view, I'm lost / In wonder, love, and praise.

Addison did not follow his father into the Anglican clergy, but became, after a "heedless" youth, a soul as devout as should inhabit all Anglican clergy (indeed, all Christians)...."Rising": in the morning or after a nap. I don't consider myself a particularly pious soul, but I frequently have that experience of my soul rising from dailiness as my body rises from bed or couch. Colors seem brighter, the world less hopeless. And if at the same time a hymn+tune arises in me, ecstasy! An old Christian should be a bag-full of inwardly heard hymn-singing. (And of Scripture-bits such as early Christians put on ostraca [potsherds, pottery fragments] & arranged around the eye-level continuous lampshelf of their major room. My task, on one occasion, was to take a bushel of these & try to identify, scrap by scrap, the Scripture-bits [in Greek, the only universal early-Christian language]. A task I could fulfil only to the extent that my inner life was surrounded, decorated, by those same Scripture-bits. Both those lamps & those ostraca surrounded our earliest Christian sisters & brothers: the Scripture-bits "hid in my heart" [Ps.119.11], in your heart, provide daily light from God, who is "my light" [Ps.27.1], your light.)....Note the order: "wonder, love, and praise." Abe Heschel's *I ASKED FOR WONDER* drives to the heart not only of hasidism but of all religion. Skip that, & both love & praise fail to achieve their holy work...."Transported...lost": The stanza's major-clause verbs, "where the action is." The action? Spiritual ecstasy, putting this hymn in the category I call "hymns of ecstasy."

2

Unnumbered comforts to my soul / Thy tender care bestowed, / Before my infant heart conceived / From whom these comforts flowed.

"Conceived": His God-concept awaited his brain's dendritic development long after his body's conception. Grace precedes nature; & even within nature, the comforts arrive & go into action before we know we need them. Think of the Holy Family in art: mother watching over child, father watching over both: "tender care" with sexual-role assignments (not rigid, please!). Of the 4, this stanza best displays the hymn's mood, for which a Scripture-bit just popped into my head: "underneath are the everlasting arms" of the mother-Father ("mother" not capitalized: the Bible, while using some maternal similies, never calls God mother, nor do we who are faithful to biblical religion).

3  
Ten thousand thousand precious gifts / My daily thanks employ; / Nor is the least a cheerful heart / That tastes those gifts with joy.

For the hymnist, Christmas as gift-receiving is an everyday occurrence. So, Christmas "cheer" throughout the year. So why shouldn't "joy" be in the stanza's periodic position?...."Daily": "Thank you, God" is not just for Sunday. If it were, you'd have this "cheer" & "joy" only on Sundays. FACT: If you don't have it throughout the week, you'll have little of it come Sunday. And the devil will try to persuade you that the littleness proves there's something wrong with the preacher-priest-minister.

4  
Through all eternity to thee / A joyful song I'll raise;/ For, oh, eternity's too short / to utter all thy praise!

The "joy" theme continues, setting the tone for "eternity."...."Song": Joining the celestial choir for perpetual singing is implied, not stated--for the reason that the hymn is first-person throughout, a personal testimony only implicitly in the presence of the church & of the world...."Praise" is the last word of the first & last stanzas. As "joy" (the last word of the 3rd stanza) is in the periodic position for il penseroso, contemplative innerness, "praise" is the central action of l'allegro, the Christian's defining behavior in this world (1st stanza) & the next world (last stanza).

ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS  
309 Lake Elizabeth Drive  
Craigville MA 02632

