

PSYCHO-RELIGIOUS COMMUNICATION: A POETIC INTERPRETATION OF THE HYMN, “WHITHER, PILGRIMS, ARE YOU GOING?” BY FANNY CROSBY (1820-1915)

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Abstract: This study attempts to penetrate the mindset of the American hymnist, Fanny Crosby, who composed over 9000 hymns, many of which have been performed worldwide. The methodology includes a poetic analysis of the hymn, “*Whither, Pilgrims, Are You Going?*” Previous studies had not examined her works through the combined prisms of poetry, philosophy, theology, thanatology and metaphysics. This investigation assumes the premise that Crosby was not just a prolific and popular hymn writer as often portrayed, but she was more than that. The study uses the lyrics of the hymn as primary data and supplements them with secondary sources such as references and published works. A textual analysis of the hymn is conducted with the literary model propounded by Tom Ryan to determine whether Crosby could be considered a poet or just a hymnist. The investigation demonstrates that she was not just a hymnist and a poet, but also a philosopher, a theologian, a thanatologist and a metaphysician. Thus, Crosby can be likened to great names like Milton, Darwin, Plato, Socrates, Marx and Freud.

Keywords: Religious communication, Poetic interpretation, Poetry, Hymn, Whither pilgrims, Allegory, Fanny Crosby.

1. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

This researcher has heard - and even sung - the song, “Whither, Pilgrims, Are You Going?”, for decades in churches, notably the protestant Presbyterian Church in Cameroon (PCC) which he has frequented several times, although a Catholic. However, it was only at a recent event that the hymn struck the investigator. This was on 25 February 2017 during the funeral service of one of Cameroon’s sports journalists, George Fon Tamo. Incidentally, Tamo was not only a colleague of the researcher’s, but also a cousin of his. So they knew each other well.

The hymn was sung from pages 4 and 5 of the funeral programme booklet. For the first time, the researcher paid particular attention to the lyrics and reflected on their meaning. He found that the story in the hymn was on a dialogue between an unidentified speaker on the one hand and his/her interlocutors whom the speaker referred to as “pilgrims”. The speaker asked where they were going, “with staff in hand” and they explained that they were going to “the better land”. After asking more questions about this “far-off better land”, the interrogator asked the pilgrims: “May we travel with you to that bright and better land”, to which the pilgrims responded:

“Come, oh come, and do not leave”.

Although we are not specifically told that the interrogator(s) finally joined the pilgrims on the journey, the manner in which the hymn ends indicates that the coming together happened.

This dialogue triggered something in the investigator. He suddenly realized that although his “brother” was dead, he might actually be about to join the pilgrims “to that bright and better land”.

2. WHO WAS FANNY CROSBY?

She was born in the village of Brewster, north of New York City in the USA, in 1820 and died in Bridgeport (Connecticut) in the same country in 1915 at the ripe old age of 94.

Crosby was a contemporary of world figures such as Charles Darwin (1809-1882), Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). Lambo (2003) states that Darwin, Marx and Freud stood out in the nineteenth century in that “the renaissance spirit of individual freedom and natural rights” which characterized the century, enabled Darwin’s theory of evolution which contradicts the Genesis creation as recorded in the bible, through its “iconoclastic” stance. According to Lambo, the same could be said of Marx’s dialectal materialism and his claim that “religion is the opium of the people”. Add to that, Freud’s claim of “man’s unconscious actions mostly in terms of infantile repression”. Lambo argues that such views tend to “minimize God’s role in the working of the universe and by so doing, accentuate or highlight man’s fears and needs”

Interestingly, Crosby’s position contrasts with that of Darwin, Marx and Freud. Crosby rather “pitches her tent” in the philosophy of the Middle ages which according to Lambo (2003) acknowledged that “God and Religion were so much at the centre of the universe that man’s life on earth was seen as a thoroughfare of woe and consequently, a passage, a journey to the attainment of what was regarded as the ultimate goal of human existence; to wit, a better, perfect and more blissful life in heaven”. Such a thinking was reflected by the English poet and playwright William Shakespeare (1564-1616) when he wrote in the play *As You Like It* (1599), “All the world’s a stage and all the men and women merely actors”.

Nonetheless, one can better understand the contrary stance taken by Crosby when one considers that although a nineteenth century contemporary of Darwin, Marx and Freud, her world of reality was a different one. For instance, while the other three lived in a Europe which had enjoyed relative political stability for centuries, Crosby was in an America still struggling to build a nation state, having just declared its independence from Britain in 1776. In fact, during the American civil war, Crosby supported the Union cause ideologically and physically.

Crosby also had personal handicaps that might have drawn her towards belief in God. Firstly, her parents John and Mercy were first cousins, which means that under normal circumstances, they could not have been married to each other, being such close blood relatives. But they were. That relationship embarrassed Crosby so much throughout her life that she avoided discussing it (Ruffin 1976). Furthermore, not only was Crosby an only child, but she went blind in both eyes in childhood and remained so throughout her life. She once remarked that it must have been God’s design that she should be blind for life because if she had her sight, she might have been so distracted by earthly things she that she would not have been able to write so many poems in praise of God (Wigton 2008). Willis (1889) corroborates this point when she states: “Had it not been for her affliction, she might not have so good an education or have so great an influence and certainly not so fine a memory”.

From the dual perspective of creativity and blindness, one can liken Crosby to the equally talented English poet and author of the long epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1658-1665), John Milton (1608-1674) who like Crosby, was blind. Even so, Crosby went a step further than Milton by getting married to a blind spouse, Alexander van Alstyne. The couple had one child – a daughter named Frances - who in conformity with Crosby’s flagging personal life pattern died in her sleep shortly after birth. With her unshakable faith in God, Crosby would tell sympathizers, “God gave us a tender babe but the angels came down and took our infant up to God and to his throne” (Terry 2003)

Beset by such trials and tribulations, Crosby “gave her life to Christ” to quote some modern-day evangelists. That is why the number of hymns and gospel songs she wrote is put at not less than 9000. At one point, her publishers became so embarrassed by her rare prolific gift that they insisted on publishing her works only on condition that she accepted a pseudonym. Consequently, Crosby used up to 200 different pseudonyms. She was good at the piano, the harp and the guitar and was a soprano singer as well as an active Baptist missionary, a deaconess and lay preacher.

3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

With such a proven track record, one would have thought that critics would simply roll out the red carpet for Fanny Crosby. That was not the case. Edward Ninde (1921) commented that “none would claim that she was a poetess in any large sense. Her hymns have been severely criticized”. Dr. Julian, the editor of the Dictionary of Hymnology says

(Crosby's compositions) "with few exceptions are very weak and poor" The same source cites *Glimpses of Christian History* as claiming that Crosby's hymns "have sometimes been criticized as 'gushy and mawkishly sentimental' and adds that 'critics have often attacked her writing and her theology'. Douglas (2005) is more forthright in her decimation by affirming that Crosby "was one of the female authors who 'emasculated American religion' and helped shift it from 'a rigorous Calvinism' to 'an anti-intellectual and sentimental mass culture'".

However, Crosby's works have received some credit. Blumhofer (2005) for example, acknowledges that "the popularity of Fanny Crosby's lyrics as well as her winsome personality catapulted her to fame". Hawkinson (2005) quotes a biographer who says about Crosby: "there was probably no writer in her day who appealed more to the valid experience of the Christian life or who expressed more sympathetically the deep longings of the human heart than Fanny Crosby."

It was on such a principle that we set out to examine the hymn, "*Whither, Pilgrims, Are You Going?*" We placed our work within the overall framework of psycho-religious communication whose theories according to Janice Shuetz "assume that the meaning of life derives from a faith tradition grounded in scriptures (holy books), doctrines (collective teachings and beliefs) and communal religious experiences". Pace (2011) describes religion as "a label by which it is possible to study the relationship between the individual expressions of the sacred on the one hand, and the organized system of meanings to be referred to the sacred on the other, developing a relatively free chain of communication". We adhere to the definition of psychology by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as "the science of mind and behaviour".

4. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Lyrics of the Hymn: "Whither, Pilgrims, are You Going?"

1. *Whither, pilgrims, are you going,*

Going each with staff in hand?

We are going on a journey,

Going at our King's command.

Over hills and plains and valleys,

We are going to His palace,

We are going to His palace,

Going to the better land;

We are going to His palace,

Going to the better land.

2. *Fear ye not the way so lonely—*

You, a little, feeble band?

No, for friends unseen are near us:

Holy angels round us stand.

Christ, our Leader, walks beside us:

He will guard and He will guide us,

He will guard and He will guide us,

Guide us to the better land;

He will guard and He will guide us,

Guide us to the better land.

3. *Tell me, pilgrims, what you hope for*

In that far-off better land.

Spotless robes and crowns of glory

From a Savior's loving hand.

We shall drink of life's clear river,

We shall dwell with God forever,

We shall dwell with God forever

In that bright and better land;

We shall dwell with God forever

In that bright and better land.

4. Pilgrims, may we travel with you

To that bright, that better land?

Come and welcome, come and welcome,

Welcome to our pilgrim band.

Come, O come, and do not leave us,

Christ is waiting to receive us,

Christ is waiting to receive us

In that bright, that better land;

Christ is waiting to receive us

In that bright, that better land.

(Fanny Crosby 1859)

The concepts of "Hymn", "Song" and "Poem"

Let us begin by examining the operative terms that will be encountered in this study. Firstly, taking the three as works of art that are intended to be communicated, we agree with Mbunda-Nekang (2012) who posits that communication is the bond that holds society together and the means through which knowledge is disseminated. Every work of art is motivated by the desire to communicate ideas and a vision".

Google defines the word "hymn" as "a religious song or poem of praise to God or a god". Berchie et al (2016) see it as "a type of song usually religious, specifically written for the purpose of adoration or a prayer, and typically addressed to a deity or deities, or to a prominent figure or personification". Reformed Worship (1987) holds that a hymn is an expression of worship, our grand and grateful acknowledgement of the `worth-ship` of Almighty God, our confession of our creatureliness before our Creator, our bowing before his transcendence."

Since the notion of "song" is recurrent in the definition of "hymn", let us examine it specifically. *The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* calls the song "a short piece of music with words that you sing". Google perceives it as "a short poem or other set of words set to music or meant to be sung". Study.com posits that "at its most basic, a song is a short piece of music with words. It usually combines melody and vocals, although some composers have written instrumental pieces (musical works without words) that mimic the quality of a singing voice." Mbunda-Nekang (2012) states that, "singing provides the poetic license for the expression of thoughts and feelings, which might otherwise be repressed and for the singers to comment on events in the society without being held to ransom". She also posits that "songs constitute a very important instrument for living and continued mutual existence". Before we even start examining the definition of the poem, it is worth noting here how the notion of "poetry" already creeps into the definition of the "song".

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2010) defines the poem as "a piece of writing in which the words are chosen for their sound and the images they suggest, not just for their obvious meanings. The words are arranged in separate lines, usually with repeated rhythm, and often the lines rhyme at the end". The Greek philosopher, Aristotle (384-322 BC), cited

by Azonga (2007) pitches his definition of poetry at a higher level: “poetry is superior to history because it uses words in their fuller potential and creates representations more complete and more meaningful than nature can fire us in the raw”. Asong L.T. in Azonga (2004): “in all good poetry (...) a poet tries to convey to you, the reader, an experience he has had. He tries through many devices, to cause in you an emotion similar to the one he had.”

An examination of the three concepts of hymn, song and poem, suggests communalities through them. These include art, creativity, economy, nature, performance and elevation. It is also found that the trio can be performed orally; which takes us into the realm of oral literature that Mbunda-Nekang (2012) refers to variously as “oral performance”, “orature” and “verbal arts”. The notion is defined by Taban Lo Liyong (1972) cited by Mbunda-Nekang (2012) as “the cultural information and values transmitted mainly by the spoken word and received by the ear and responded to by the whole organism”. Ntuli (1988) cited by Kah Jick and Ngam (2017) hold that “orature is more than the fusion of all arty forms. It is the conception and reality of a total view of life. It is a capsule of feeling, thinking, imagination, taste and hearing. Orature is the universe of expression and appreciation and a fusion of both with one individual, a group, a community. It is a weapon against the encroaching atomization of life. It is the beginning come full circle on a higher plane”.

The aspect of performance is highlighted by Mbunda-Nekang (2012) when she defines it while citing Tala (1999), as “the delivery of an oral text, the recitation of a poem, the rendition of a song or the telling of a tale on a specific occasion”. As can be observed, the definition relates to the triple notion of song, poetry and hymn – hence their interconnectivity. The three-in-one relationship is again evoked by Mbunda-Nekang (2012) when she affirms that “the aim of literature is not just to entertain but to put across information to the public; the performers often use specific communication strategies like songs, dramatization, imagery, dance and epithets to ensure that their purpose is achieved”

Structure of the hymn:

Crosby's *Whither, Pilgrims, Are You Going?* is a song of four stanzas, each of which is ten lines long. Each stanza opens with a question from the enquirer, followed by an answer from the interlocutors. It appears that the two parties - the first speaker and the interlocutors in the linguistic speech act – are both groups of people. They are not just made of a group on the one hand (the pilgrims) speaking to a single protagonist, but two groups speaking to each other. That is why the enquirer addresses the other party in the plural, “pilgrims”, as seen in the first, third and fourth stanzas; and in response, makes it clear that the questions are equally coming from a group of persons and not just an individual: “Pilgrims, may we travel with you?” (Stanza 4, Line 1). By providing for this parity in the pairing, the poet ensures that no single camp (or “band” in the words of the poet) has an unfair numerical advantage over the other. From a sociological point of view, one can say the balancing act is confirmation of the adage that “there is safety in numbers”; and from a chemical point of view, one can conclude that “the equation is balanced”. Even so, the poet does not say exactly how many pilgrims there are among the travellers or how many people there are among those showing an interest in the journey of the pilgrims. That is an intentional poetic device that is intended to create suspense and keep the reader or hearer guessing. It is also an elliptic mechanism that enables the poet to use as few words as possible while at the same time making sure that the diction he chooses is straight-to-the point, concise and poignant.

Interestingly, the plural used by the enquirer in Stanza 4, Line 1 by asking if “we” changes to the singular, “me” in Line 1 of Stanza 3 (“Tell me, pilgrims, what you hope for”). By using the singular this time, the speaker is seeking to establish that although he/or she may be speaking on behalf of a group, the group is nevertheless one that has a “leader”, or at the very least, a “spokesperson”, whom he/she is. It is therefore an organized group that knows what it is doing. Consequently, the pilgrims should entertain no fears in accepting their request to be travelling companions, because if they accept their company, they are accepting the company of responsible people. The message obviously gets across very well to the pilgrims because they accept the company with alacrity:

“Come and welcome, come and welcome,

Welcome to our pilgrim band.

Come, O come, and do not leave us”

Each of the four stanzas ends with the words, “better land”, to designate the final destination of the traveling group. By using the same expression several times, the composer is making use of the poetic device known as repetition. The emphasis can be on the repeated vowel sounds in the words, in which case it is called “assonance”, or on the repeated consonant sounds in which case it is called “alliteration”. From the connotative and semantic points of view, the “better

land” here reminds us of the biblical land of Canaan (The Bible 1971) known as “the promised land” (Deuteronomy 31: 23) about which God promised Joshua that he would be the one to lead the Jews, his chosen people. God had earlier offered them this land (Exodus 6: 7-8). Unfortunately, after wandering in the desert for 40 years because they disobeyed God, most of the people who had been “promised” the land, died without living to see it. However, that was then and this is now. That is why Crosby’s hymn does not a priori preclude anyone today from reaching “the better land” but rather presents the new “home” as something for everyone and anyone to look forward to. From that perspective, one can say that Crosby’s “better land” is better than the “promised land”.

Interestingly, the idea of the Promised Land is also echoed in the refrain of the English version of the Cameroon National Anthem “Land of Promise, Land of Glory!” (Mbain 2016), which is not surprising because the refrain which first comes after the first of the two verses of the anthem, is also used to end the second and last verse. What is more, just like with the hymn “*Whither, Pilgrims, are You Going?*” the anthem ends on an upbeat note which expresses the “land” providing “deep endearment for evermore”. The “Spotless robes and crowns of glory” we find in Stanza 3 and Line 3 of Crosby’s hymn are also picked up in the first line of the Cameroon National Anthem, when it talks of Cameroon being a “Land of Promise, Land of Glory!”. The difference between the content and intention of Crosby’s hymn and the Cameroon National Anthem is that whereas Crosby raises her sight to the highest level of God’s creation, the authors of the Cameroon anthem raise theirs rather to the highest level of statehood or nationhood. This is not surprising because the anthem was composed around the time Cameroon achieved its independence and needed to assert its own identity within the political sphere.

The hymn carries the title, “*Whither, Pilgrims, are You Going?*” in which the author chooses to call the travellers “pilgrims”. In the domain of poetry, diction or word choice is not to be taken for granted because some words can have a connotative level of semantics in addition to the obvious one. Some can be just symbols of something broader. Such is the case here with the word, “pilgrim”. According to the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (2010), a “pilgrim” is “a person who travels to a holy place for religious reasons”. Such a definition is quite relevant here, considering the religious context of the song we are analyzing. So, the “pilgrims” here could not have been called mere “travellers” because the latter denotes leisure and pleasure. Another relevance to the deliberate choice of the word “pilgrim” here is its relationship to the allegorical story written by the English Baptist preacher, John Bunyan (1628-1688) entitled “*The Pilgrim’s Progress*” (Dictionnaire Encyclopédique de la Langue Française 1996). The book which, of course, predates Fanny Crosby’s “*Whither, Pilgrims, are You Going?*”, traces the path that leads to Christian perfection. The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary sheds light on another thought Crosby might have had in mind when choosing the title of the hymn. It is that of “*The Pilgrim Fathers*” said to be members of the group of English people who sailed to America on the ship, *The Mayflower* in 1620 and started a colony in America which developed into what is today known as the State of Massachusetts. In fact, Crosby’s ancestry has been traced back to the early immigrant settlers of Massachusetts. By the way, *The Pilgrim’s Progress* is one of the many religious books Crosby read during her 23 years in a New York institute for the blind - eight of which she spent as a pupil and the others as a teacher – (London 1916).

The use of the adverb “whither” in both the title and the opening line of the hymn is note-worthy. According to the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (2010), the word has two meanings, one of which is “old” and means “where” and “to which”; and the other is “formal” and “used to ask what is likely to happen to something in the future”. Remarkably, the sense in which Crosby uses the word is the “old” one, because she uses it to find out from the pilgrims where they are going. This choice of hers is paradoxical because the period in which she lived and wrote the poem is more modern than archaic. One possible explanation could be that by choosing the word, she sought to align her thinking with the much earlier story of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* she had read as well as with her ancestors, *The Pilgrim Fathers*, who arrived in her native America around the same period that John Bunyan wrote *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Another possible explanation is that since her song is about God whom she portrays as the ultimate destination of mankind, from that perspective, the choice of the word “whither” is made to relate to typical archaic biblical phrases such as “thou” (Genesis 4:11, 2) and “thee” (Matthew 5:39), “asketh” (Matthew 5:42). Even so, it must be pointed out that in coining the title of the hymn, Crosby definitely put one foot in antiquity and one foot in modernity. That is because whereas the expression “whither” in the title, is archaic; another expression which she uses in the same title, “you”, is modern. She could have used “thou” instead of “you”, to stay in the antiquity language register. The fact that she spread out herself rather thinly in this manner indicates that she probably sought to serve as a bridge between the past and the future, a future which is full of promise because as the hymn says,

We shall dwell with God forever

In that bright and better land.

Structurally, *Whither, Pilgrims, Are You Going?* is a carefully crafted four-dimensional piece of work in the sense that it is presented in four stanzas, each of which can also be said to represent respectively the pilgrims, their new-found friends who question them, Christ the messenger who “is waiting to receive us” (Stanza 4, Lines 6, 7 and 9), and God with whom they shall “dwell forever” (Stanza 3, Lines 6, 7 and 9). In terms of characterization, the pilgrims who are the main characters in the hymn are given pride of place because they are introduced in the very first of the four stanzas. They in turn indirectly introduce their interlocutors in the second stanza by allaying their fears about what the latter see as being “lonely” (Stanza 2, Line 1) and made up of nothing but “a little, feeble band” (Stanza 2, Line 2). The third stanza introduces the reader to the third personality who is God, the ultimate destination. But the fourth and last stanza comes in with a note of warning by introducing “Christ” who is “waiting to receive us” (Lines 6, 7 and 9) in order to take “us” to God. The implication here is that to go to God, one must pass through his son, Christ, in conformity with the note of warning Christ himself sounded when he said “no one comes to the father except through me” (John 14:6).

The composer of the hymn gives it a tone of certainty of conviction. This is done through the repeated use of the definite article, “the” in the expression “the better land”. This device is seen in Stanza 1, Lines 8 and 10; and Stanza 2, Lines 8 and 10. By opting for the definite article, instead of the indefinite article “a” like in “a better land”, the composer avoids uncertainty, because use of the indefinite article could have implied that there are other similar “lands”. The definite article, “the” rules out this ambiguity.

The literary model of Tom Ryan:

The model developed by Ryan (2017) sets out a clear-cut formula that determines whether a piece of utterance (spoken or written) can be considered to be poetry or not. It is within that framework that we are going to confirm or dismiss Fanny Crosby as a poet, based on our case study of her hymn, *Whither, Pilgrims, Are You Going?*

Ryan (2017) starts off on the proposition that poetry is “a subjective art form that affords its authors freedom to express themselves in ways both traditional and innovative”. Even so, he goes further to argue that “most poems do feature a few key characteristics”. It is those characteristics that we seek to identify in Fanny Crosby’s hymn, *Whither, Pilgrims, Are You Going?*

According to Ryan, the punctuation and format of poetry are distinctive. Unlike the novel that is written in chapters and paragraphs; and the play in acts and scenes; poetry is written in stanzas and stanzas are broken down into lines. “*Whither, Pilgrims, Are You Going?*” is actually written in stanza form - four stanzas, to be more precise, each of which has ten lines. The “freedom” referred to in Ryan’s definition of poetry is exemplified in Crosby’s poem through her unconventional use of the archaic expression, “whither”, instead of simply saying “where”. The same remark can be made about the choice of the old-fashioned word “ye” in the expression, “Fear ye not ...” (Stanza 2, Line 1). The hymn uses the literary device of the ellipse to create gaps in narration and thereby deliberately leave the reader or listener with unanswered questions. It is for this reason that by the time one gets to the end of the hymn, one still does not know the sex of the speakers, how many they are, or even whether at the end of the speech act, those interrogating the “pilgrims” actually finally join them on the journey to that “far-off better land”.

Another characteristic of poetry Ryan mentions is that of “descriptive imagery” which he explains as being the concretization of words through the uses of the five senses so that the result is “a picture the reader can see in his mind”. Meyer (1996) calls such images “a poet’s appeal to the senses”. On this point, one notices that Crosby uses very strong symbolism in the poem. By calling those going on the journey “pilgrims”, she indirectly reminds us of the story of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* by John Bunyan (1628-1688) as well as her British ancestry through the “Pilgrim Fathers” who arrived in America in 1620 and founded the American State of Massachusetts. Similarly, the allusion to “pilgrims” reminds us of the millions of Muslims who undertake a pilgrimage to Mecca yearly, to renew their faith in Allah, “the Almighty”. It is significant that Crosby points out that the pilgrims are traveling “each with staff in hand” (Stanza 1, Line 2). Since their final destination is “the better land” (Stanza 1, Line 8) where they will “dwell with God forever” (Stanza 3, Line 6), we cannot help thinking of the similar “thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me” in Psalm 23:4 of the Bible (The Bible: Revised Standard Version: 1971). The Oxford Learner’s Dictionary defines a “staff” as “a long stick used as a support when walking or climbing as a weapon, or as a symbol of authority”. This definition is very apt in the case of

Crosby's poem because after all, the journey being undertaken by the pilgrims is a long and arduous one for which they may not necessarily have made the necessary preparation because they were commanded:

We are going on a journey,

Going at our King's command.

(Stanza 1, Lines 4-5). Furthermore, those going on the journey can use the "staff" as a physical "weapon" in case of need. And in any case, if they do not use the staff for any of these purposes, they may also be carrying it as a "symbol of authority" of those who have been chosen to travel to "the better land" and dwell with God "forever".

Notably, by choosing the word, "staff", the author excludes use of the alternative one "crook" referred to in Psalm 23 as "your crook and your staff, they comfort me". The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines a "crook" as used here as "a long stick with a hook at one end, used especially in the past by shepherds for catching sheep". The choice is relevant here because it reminds us of Christ, the one the pilgrims say is waiting to take them to God in that "far-off, better land", who once referred to himself as "the good shepherd" as seen in The Bible Revised Standard Version (1971 : John 10: 11).

The image of the "king" (Stanza 1, Line 4) and his "palace" (Stanza, Lines 6, 7 and 9) is a rich one because a king is one who rules over a kingdom. Furthermore, entering a king's palace is an honour. In the tradition of the North West of Cameroon where this investigator and some other researchers cited in this investigation come from, the king's palace is where the hungry go for free food and the thirsty go for a free drink. The writer of the hymn names "God" as the king of this palace where the pilgrims are going. Fascinatingly, while the pilgrims say they are going to dwell with God (the king) "forever", the role they assign to Jesus is that of the person to receive them on arrival and usher them to God the king:

Christ is waiting to receive us

In that bright, that better land.

(Stanza 4, Lines 9 and 10)

This is an indirect confirmation of what Jesus himself preached when he referred to God as his "father" as we read in the gospel of Luke 22: 34 "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Bible: Revised Standard Version: 1971).

When the pilgrims are asked:

Tell me, pilgrims, what you hope for

In that far-off better land

Their response is

Spotless robes and crowns of glory

From a Saviour's loving hand.

The word, "spotless" refers to a life without blemish; a life without sin, where there is total bliss. That was the life Christ led on earth. The "robes and crowns of glory" suggest that once the pilgrims reach the palace of God, they will be clad in "robes of glory" and "crowns of glory" would be placed on their heads. They too would not only taste of royalty in the superlative but would become part of it. The line that says "From a Saviour's loving hand" (Stanza 3, Line 4) is immediately followed by the two lines (5 and 6) which say:

We shall drink of life's clear river,

We shall dwell with God forever,

These three lines remind us of the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well during which Jesus asks her for a drink of water and she is surprised that he, a Jew, should ask of water from a Samaritan. Jesus replies: "Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4: 13-14).

Another distinguishing trait of poetry which Ryan (2017) mentions is the duality of sound and tone. These have to do with rhyme and rhythm. In the case of Crosby's *Whither, Pilgrims, Are You Going?*, one notices that there is a clear rhyme

pattern in each of the four stanzas of the hymn. There is a repeated use of words ending in `and` in each of the four stanzas: `hand`, `command`, `land`, `band`, and `stand`. Three of the ten lines in Stanza 1 end with “palace”, five of the 10 in Stanza 2 end with “us”, four of the 10 in Stanza 3 end with `er` like in “river” and “forever”. This is the literary device called “repetition” which Mbunda-Nekang (2012) cites Leech describing it as “an escape from suppressed intensity of feelings – an imprisoned feeling as it were for which there is no outlet but a repeated hammering at the confining walls of language”. Such a stylistic option leads to the creation of onomatopoeia which Meyer (1996) defines as “the sound of a word suggesting its meaning”, alliteration which the same scholar defines as “repetition of the same consonant sounds at the beginning of nearby words”, and assonance which in his words is “repetition of the same vowel sound in nearby words”.

The use of figures of speech is another poetic device cited by Ryan. He describes this phenomenon as “the explanation of things in a non-traditional and non-literary way”. It is along those lines that Crosby uses satire in *Whither, Pilgrims, Are You Going?* This is perceived when after the pilgrims respond (in Stanza 1) very confidently and optimistically that they are going “on a journey” (Line 3), “going at our King’s command” (Line 4), “...going to his palace” (Lines 6 and 7); “going to the better land” (Lines 8 and 10), somewhat surprised or sceptical, their interlocutor(s) ask rather satirically:

Fear ye not the way so lonely —

You, a little, feeble band?

The manner in which the pilgrim’s enquirers put the question is intended to undermine them because they describe the pilgrims as nothing but only “a little, feeble band”, which implies that they are wondering how such a small and weak and ill-prepared group could ever succeed in undertaking such a long and difficult journey. The pilgrims respond in an equally satirical manner when they repeat the word “band” as they grant the enquirers’ request to join them on the pilgrimage:

Welcome to our pilgrim band.

Mbunda-Nekang (2012) drives the point about satire home when she states; “satire censures and ridicules wickedness and folly and satirists, as Elliot observes: fight under the banners of truth, justice and reason – they attack none but the guilty”.

Another figure of speech that Crosby uses in her hymn is the metaphor. When she says, for example, “spotless robes and crowns of glory from a Saviour’s loving hand”, she does not mean that a hand can “love”. She means that the love is that of the “saviour” whose hand is being talked about. This unusual use of the word, “hand”, also reminds us of the literary device known as personification and defined as the attribution of human qualities to a thing. Similarly, when the writer says “we shall drink of life’s clear river”, she does not really mean that life has a “river” from which the pilgrims will drink. It is a metaphorical reference to the new life to which they are heading.

Based on the application of the above characteristics of poetry laid down by Tom Ryan, we can conclude that Fanny Crosby’s hymn, *Whither, Pilgrims, Are You Going?* is indeed a poem. Even so, there is another level at which the hymn can be analyzed as poetry. That is the next part of our investigation.

5. OTHER THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

A closer look at Crosby’s hymn indicates that the piece of writing is not just a song, or a hymn, or poetry but is actually also a work that enters the realm of the absurd, philosophy and metaphysics. This interpretation becomes easier to understand when we examine the hymn side-by-side with other texts that have been published along the same lines.

The parallel with other dialogues:

The hymn, “*Whither, Pilgrims, Are You Going?*” is essentially a dialogue between two groups of people, one of which is identified as pilgrims going on a journey and the other being one the pilgrims apparently meet on the way. The newly-met group poses questions to the pilgrims on their destination, but strangely enough, not on where they are coming from, as if those asking the questions already know the answer. Paradoxically, as the hymn comes to an end, one is left in doubt, not knowing whether the enquiring group which the pilgrims ask to join them on the journey, actually do so.

This scenario reminds one of the plays “*Waiting for Godot*” (1949) which is a tragicomedy in two acts written by Samuel Beckett (1906-1989). It is a short rendition in which a character called Vladimir (nicknamed Didi) and his companion Estragon (nicknamed Gozo) claim to be waiting for a man named “Godot”. After a long wait that lasts for hours and exceeds a day, they keep waiting. In the end, Godot does not show up, despite repeated assurances from his messenger

that he is on his way. In fact, as the curtain is drawn on the final scene and act, Didi and Gozo are still waiting, just as in the hymn by Crosby, one sings to the end of it without knowing whether the enquirers whom the pilgrims meet on the way actually travel with them to the “better land”, or even whether the pilgrims themselves do end up by reaching the stated destination.

“*Whither, Pilgrims, Are You Going?*” and “*Waiting for Godot*” have this in common: they are what a literary critic, Martin Esslin describes (while referring to *Waiting for Godot*) as “theatre of the absurd” or “absurdist theatre” in that the plot makes one wonder whether the universe in which one lives makes any sense at all, since it turns out to be “a disorienting experience”. Schmoop (2017) relays the same thinking about *Waiting for Godot* by stating that the play is “a work of art of absurdism that explores themes of existentialist philosophy. The sheer emptiness and randomness of the play causes the audience (or reader) to wonder if anything is going to happen, and whether there is any meaning to anything in the play – or in life”.

The third dialogue we shall examine is *The Republic* written by the Greek philosopher, Plato (428-348 or 347 BC, according to the Dictionnaire Universel: 2002) around 380 BC. In the work, Socrates (470-399 BC) under whom Plato studied discusses the significance of justice and wonders whether or not the just man is necessarily happier than the unjust man. Also discussed are the theory of form, the immortality of the soul as well as the role of the philosopher and poetry in society. Sparknotes (2017), comments that “Plato ends *The Republic* on a surprising note. Having defined justice and established it as the greatest good, he banishes poets from his city. Poets, he claims, appeal to the basest part of the soul by imitating unjust inclinations. By encouraging us to indulge in ignoble emotions in sympathy with the characters we hear about, poetry encourages us to indulge these emotions in life. Poetry, in sum, makes us unjust. In closing, Plato relates the myth of Er, which describes the trajectory of a soul after death. Just souls are rewarded for one thousand years, while unjust ones are punished for the same amount of time. Each soul then must choose its next life”.

Ominously, the “immortality of the soul” evoked in Plato’s *Republic* is echoed in Crosby’s hymn where she says:

We shall dwell with God forever,

We shall dwell with God forever

(Stanza 3, Lines 6-7)

The mere thought of “just souls” being rewarded while “unjust ones” are punished in *The Republic* suggests that in the case of “*Whither, Pilgrims, Are You Going?*”, if the new-found friends of the pilgrims follow them to this “better land” (Stanza 1, Line) where there are “spotless robes and crowns of glory” (Stanza 3, Line 3), they will be rewarded because they too “shall drink of life’s clear river” (Stanza 3, Line 5) and “dwell with God forever” (Stanza 3, Lines 6, 7 and 9). Conversely, if they do not follow the pilgrims to “that bright, that better land” (Stanza 3, Lines 8 and 10; and Stanza 4, Lines 2, 8 and 10), then of course, they will lose out. However, Plato’s banishment of poets is contradictory because it fails to explain how through poetry, an artist such as Fanny Crosby has been able to achieve so much and even seem to fall in line with him on the point of some ultimate reward awaiting people who accept to lift themselves up to the higher being. Whatever is the case, Plato’s conclusion that each soul must choose its next life does tie in with the thinking of Crosby because at the end of her hymn, she allows it up to the pilgrims’ new-found friends to decide whether or not to join them on the pilgrimage.

The concept of life after death:

It is worth noting that in “*Whither, Pilgrims, Are You Going?*” Crosby points to the ultimate life, “life after life” (Moody 1975) which is the life in the world hereafter. She does so by using the expressions “in that far-off better land” (Stanza 3, Line 2) and “we shall dwell with God forever” (Stanza 3, Lines 6, 7 and 9). Plato shares the same thinking in *The Republic* when he raises the issue of the immortality of the soul. Nonetheless, the question that arises in both cases is how anyone can get to this superlative plane, if not by dying first of all. In other words, there seems to be a life after the one here on earth.

Turner & Helms (1991), citing Kalish (1981) and Rowe (1982), state that “to live means to die. This inevitable consequence of life is a person’s final developmental task”. ‘Thanatologists’ whom Turner and Helms (1991) describe as “those researchers investigating death and dying” have done some interesting work on the subject. Regarding the transition between life and death, Turner and Helms (1991) affirm that “there seems to be an interval of peace before

death". They add that "those patients who are conscious to the very last minute, state, almost invariably, that they are not suffering. In fact, many report a feeling of tranquillity and peace, as if a long journey is finally over. As William Hunter, the noted anatomist, whispered just before he died, 'If I had the strength to hold a pen, I would write how easy and pleasant a thing it is to die. '"

As one reads this, one cannot help wondering how it is that the pilgrims in Crosby's "*Whither, Pilgrims, Are You Going?*" who are still in the life here on earth, can be so specific and so certain about the next life that they are still looking forward to but have not yet experienced to be able to talk about it. A possible answer can be found in the "near-death experiences" which some people have had and which have been described by Turner and Helms (1991) citing Moody (1975, 1977), Ring (1980, 1984), Siegel (1980), Vicchio (1981a, 1981b) and Sabom (1982).

In fact, Turner and Helms (1991) citing Moody (1977), recount such experiences of a woman who suffered cardiac arrest, was pronounced "clinically dead", but was later resuscitated and brought back to life.

The reference the resuscitated woman makes of what she saw when she mentions "a countryside with streams, grass, and trees, mountains" is momentous because it is what Jick and Ngam (2017) call "ecocentrism or literary ecology" and which they define as "the study of the relationship between literature (oral or written) and the physical environment". They quote specific examples of their own such as "human beings, animals, insects, natural phenomena, plants, household utensils, just to list those". So one can see how all of this creeps into that long journey that leads one the world here below to the one above.

Concluding on the near-death experiences, Turner and Helms (1991) affirm that "although there are individual differences, the stories (collected) bear a striking resemblance to one another".

Although death is inevitable, man does not appear to have come to grips with it. That is why Turner and Helms (1991) report that "denial or at least, partial denial is employed by virtually all patients". Furthermore, citing Vianello & Lucamante (1988), Rhodes & Vedder (1983) and Aiken (1982), Turner and Helms say: "In Western cultures, the subject of death seems to be taboo. It is, for most, a sensitive topic, one that is avoided and frequently repressed. Some people try to deny it; others live in fear of it. Even medical specialists are often uncomfortable talking about death and do not like to be present when their parents die".

Even so, the fear of death is not so much the fault of those many people who fear it. Nisbet (1984) quoted by Turner and Helms (1984) explain that "many don't understand death because they're not given the chance to confront it"

Consequently, to overcome the fear of death, Turner and Helms (1991) cite Gray (1984) and Ruark (1984) who advise that "whatever the specific illness or situation, the quality of life before death should be peaceful. Psychologically, this means that dying patients need to maintain their security, self-confidence and dignity. Efforts should be made to help relieve loneliness, depression and fears". This curative measure is precisely what Crosby offers through the hymn, *Whither, Pilgrims, Are You Going?*

The relevance to George Fon Tamo's death:

A lot of what we have discussed above applies to the passing away of George Fon Tamo whose death *The Guardian Post* (2017) newspaper screams on its front page: "Obituary: Veteran Sports Commentator, George Fon Tamo, Dies"; and whose death was the motivating factor for the present investigation.

By stating in *The Guardian Post*, "Veteran sports journalist and newscaster, George Fon Tamo is no more", Mua (2017) acknowledges that just like the pilgrims in Crosby's hymn, George Fon Tamo has "gone on a journey" (Stanza 1, Line 3), "over hills and plains and valleys" (Stanza 1, Line 5), gone to "the better land" (Stanza 1, Lines 8 and 10), "to dwell with God forever" (Stanza 3, Lines 6, 7 and 9). Some of the eulogy writers in the funeral booklet (*Funeral Programme of Late Papa George Fon Tamo: 2017*) for the journalist's burial also acknowledge that he has gone on a journey of no return; and some, that he has gone to be with God. Those who comment on the aspect of no return include Tamo Eve (sister): "How can you just leave us like this?" (Page 9); Akwen (sister): "It hurts me to know you have gone on a journey of no return" (Page 10). Among those who are convinced George Fon Tamo has gone to be with God are Marie-Claire (daughter): "Rest in the bosom of the Almighty" (Page 8); Tamo Shenis (daughter): "I know you are in heaven" (Page 8); Taku Clara (sister-in-law): "I know you are up in heaven, sitting by the side of God" (Page 9); Becky (daughter-in-law): "As sad as I feel, within me, I know you are resting in the Lord" (Page 11). Some mourners even see George traveling to

the new land to meet relatives who had gone there before him. These include Tamo Eve (sister): “I know that Mom and Dad have prepared a better place for you” (Page 9). Others believe that death is unfair. They include Marie-Claire (daughter): “It’s funny how life can be so unfair” (Page 8); and Tamo Eve (sister): “Big Bro, it’s a pity that life is so unfair” (Page 9). Yet some others accept the inevitability of death. They include Tamo Janet (sister): “My dear brother, I did everything I could for you to be strong, but death is something we cannot do anything about”, (Page 10) and Tamfu Sammy Ngalla (friend): “Georgie, it is the way for everybody. It is just a matter of time” (Page 12). Interestingly, this inevitable aspect of death makes Tamfu Sammy Ngalla to go further and affirm to his friend, George, that “we shall one day meet to part no more” (Page 12).

It would appear that as George Fon Tamo neared the end of his earthly journey, he either caught glimpses of “the better land”, or at the very least, heard the invitation of the pilgrims or other people who had travelled before calling him to join them as they journeyed to that “better land”. This theory is borne out by a request the deceased made for prayers for him from family members, shortly before he departed from this world. In one of the eulogies published in the funeral programme booklet, Mofor and Ungwo Hostencia write: “Daddy, I remember when you called us on Monday as a family to pray for you, little did I know that it was going to be the last thing we were going to do for you” (Funeral Programme Booklet Page 9). This request from George Fon Tamo is corroborated by his junior sister and Head of the Family, Janet Tamo who told the church congregation during the funeral service at Presbyterian Church Mbu-Baforchu that shortly before George died, he asked that the family should pray for him. It seems therefore that at this point, he already saw death coming, and wanted those around him to help him prepare for it, which is not surprising because Turner and Helms (1991) have established that “there seems to be an interval of peace before death. Those patients who are conscious to the very last minute, state almost invariably, that they are not suffering. In fact, many report a feeling of tranquillity and peace, as if a long journey is finally over”.

The theory of the autonomous self and the hymn composer Fanny Crosby:

Lambo (2003) draws parallels between what he calls “a solidarity” activity between a literary author’s “own awareness” and “the universe of discourse that provides the raw material for the production of literary work”. He cites Bjornson (1991) who terms this “the theory of the autonomous self”. Lambo (2003) explains this further: “Basically, what Bjornson is saying or assuming here, in other words, is that the literary work that emanates from this intricate process of arbitration tends to bear the personal stamp or unique vision of the writer. Put differently, in a world replete with an infinite variety of things, views, ideologies and customs, writers more often than not define their selfhood by the principles that they adhere to and the individual choices that they make.”

Citing the writing of the novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914) by James Joyce (1882-1941), Lambo (2003) argues that “Joyce seems to imply in his novel that, albeit the environment furnishes the artist with the new material or inspiration, with what he calls ‘the sluggish matter of earth’, for the composition of his texts, the end product or the work so composed bears little or no resemblance to the raw material used in its creation. The created work assumes a new life of its own, a new reality that is autonomous, palpable and beautiful to behold, and more importantly, reflects the unique vision and sensibility that are portrayed in the writer’s attitude vis-à-vis the recreated experience”.

Obviously, a close study of the life of Fanny Crosby in relation to the hymn, “*Whither, Pilgrims, Are You Going?*” and the question of self-definition (Lambo 2003) shows that the theory of the autonomous self is at work here. The first point to make is that the hymn is only one of some 9000 hymns the author wrote in her lifetime, which means the writing of hymns (a tribute to God) was a dominant aspect of her life. Crosby was a deeply religious person and a firm believer in God as the Almighty. That is why it is said that “by age 15, she had memorized the four gospels, the Pentateuch, the Book of Proverbs, the Song of Solomon, and many of the Psalms» (Wikipedia). When she lost her only child, a daughter, in 1859, she composed a hymn in her honour entitled “Safe in the Arms of Jesus”. She also said “when I get to heaven, the first face that shall ever gladden my sight will be that of my Savior” (Inspiringquotes.us 2018) Not surprisingly, Blumhofer (2005) describes Crosby’s home environment as being sustained by “an abiding christian faith”. Her deeply religious background therefore strongly corroborates the very religious nature of the composition, “*Whither, Pilgrims, Are You Going?*”

Decisively, one can state that through an aggregate of aspects of Crosby’s personal experiences and those from around her, including her fears, hopes and aspirations, the new-born product which Crosby presents to us as the hymn “*Whither, Pilgrims, Are You Going?*” represents an autonomous piece of art with its own identity, its own history and its own story.

It attracts us because it appeals to us through its various aspects and facets. It also gives hope to those who may be downcast and uncertain about the future hereafter. Even so, technically, it is no longer Crosby speaking here, but the hymn, this new and autonomous creation with a life of its own.

6. CONCLUSION

In this study, we sought to determine whether the hymn, “*Whither, Pilgrims, Are You Going?*” (1859), by Fanny Crosby (1820-1915), could be considered as poetry. The motivation for the study was triggered by the funeral church service of Cameroon’s sports ace Journalist, George Fon Tamo which was attended by this researcher and where the hymn was one of those sung during the ceremony. The study has demonstrated that without any doubt, Crosby’s hymn is poetry, one reason being that it meets the criteria for poetry set out by the scholar, Tom Ryan (2017) and also because far beyond the limits set by Ryan, Fanny Crosby’s hymn exhibits ramifications that enter other disciplines such as philosophy, theology, metaphysics, dialectics, logic, epistemology, thanatology, and the theory of the autonomous self. The study further reveals that the poem can serve as a therapy for those who fear death so that they understand that death is a desirable passageway into “the better land” (Stanza 1, Line 10; Stanza 2, Lines 8 and 10) with “spotless robes and crowns of glory” (Stanza 3, Line 3) where “Christ is waiting to receive us” (Stanza 4, Lines 6, 7 and 9) to “dwell with God forever” (Stanza 3, Lines 6, 7 and 9). This interposition of Christ between man and God confirms Christ’s words in the bible that he is the passageway between man and God: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me” (John14:6).

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