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The child and the natural world: Anna Barbauld's *Hymns in Prose for Children*

JADWIGA WĘGRODZKA

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Abstract

Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1743–1825) is one of the eighteenth century authors of religious hymns for children, a hymn variant initiated by Isaac Watts early in the same century. Nature, as the most important spatial and thematic motif in Barbauld's prose hymns, serves to reveal the omnipresence and power of God to the child. The didactic hymns are addressed to the "rational child"; however, the child's unity with nature and openness to metaphysics look forward to Romanticism.

Key words

Anna Laetitia Barbauld, *Hymns in Prose for Children*, Isaac Watts, *Divine and Moral Songs,* child, semiosphere

Dziecko i świat natury: *Hymny prozą dla dzieci* Anny Barbauld

Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1743-1825) jest jedną z wczesnych autorek religijnych hymnów dla dzieci, zapoczątkowanych w początkach XVIII wieku przez Isaaca Wattsa. W pisanych prozą hymnach Barbauld najważniejszym tłem przestrzennym i motywem tematycznym jest przyroda, która stanowi punkt wyjścia do ukazywania dziecku wszech-

obecności i potęgi Boga. Dydaktyczne utwory Barbauld odwołują się do racjonalności dziecięcego odbiorcy, ale ukazanie otwartego na metafizykę dziecka w jedności z naturą wpisuje się w nurty charakterystyczne dla romantyzmu.

Słowa kluczowe

Anna Laetitia Barbauld, *Hymns in Prose for Children*, Isaac Watts, *Divine and Moral Songs,* dziecko, semiosfera

Religious and moral teaching used to play a major role in texts addressed to children that were published in the late seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. At its roots this didactic tradition includes James Janeway's stories published as *A Token for Children* (1671), emblematic poems by John Bunyan included in his *A Book for Boys and Girls* (1686) and Isaac Watts's *Divine Songs Attempted in Easy Language for the Use of Children* (1715), later known as *Divine and Moral Songs*. All three writers were ministers or preachers of Puritan or nonconformist convictions. Being primarily concerned with the salvation of children's souls, they produced texts essentially utilitarian in their didactic purposes but also innovative in their employment of literary conventions and in their designation of children as a new type of audience.

In this article I intend to focus on the poetic genre of hymn in its variant specifically addressed to children. I define hymn as "a song […] in praise of a divine or venerated being" (Baldick 2001: 118). Initiated by Watts in the early eighteenth century,[1] the idea of writing hymns for children was continued by many other writers, for example, by John and Charles Wesley, and Anna Laetitia Barbauld in the eighteenth century, Jane and Anne Taylor, or Cecil Frances Alexander in the nineteenth. My particular intention here is to examine Barbauld's short col-

[1] On Isaac Watts's hymnody compare, for instance, Clarke (2011), Marini (2003) or Music (2022).

lection entitled *Hymns in Prose for Children* (1781) that seem especially interesting in referring to the Enlightenment cult of reason on the one hand and looking forward to Romanticism on the other. I am going to concentrate on Barbauld's construction of the child, especially in relation to nature treated as a gateway to the spiritual world.

Moreover, it will be instructive to juxtapose Barbauld's hymnal with the earliest collection of children's hymns by Isaac Watts. Since I have examined Watts's collection elsewhere,[2] my references to his hymns will be only serviceable in emphasising important aspects of Barbauld hymnal. The inclusion of Watts as a comparative material is justified by the fact that in the later eighteenth and even in the nineteenth century Watts continued to be an important influence on writers and an author well known by children. In actual fact both Watts's and Barbauld's hymnals went through numerous editions and continued being popular almost till the end of the nineteenth century (McCarthy 2005: 196; Hilton 2007) though possibly this popularity did not directly derive from the children's choices but rather from the convictions of their educators – parents, teachers, or ministers.

Elements of comparative analysis will be supplemented with references to the semiotic notions of semiosis and semiosphere. Semiosis will be understood as a sign process involving the production of meaning, or sign[3] action (Sebeok 1999: 4). Semiosphere is a term introduced by Yuri Lotman to designate "that semiotic space, outside of which semiosis itself cannot exist" (Lotman 2005: 208).

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[2] Compare my article "The construction of the Child in Isaac Watts's *Divine Songs for Children*" (Węgrodzka 2016).

[3] As defined by Charles Sanders Peirce the term sign refers to "something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity" (quoted in Eco 1979: 15).

Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1743-1825) was an educator, teacher, writer and literary critic (Carpenter and Prichard 1995: 44-45). As a writer of hymns addressed to children she followed in the footsteps of Isaac Watts (1674–1748) who was a famous non-conformist minister, theologian, writer and poet primarily concerned with religion (Music 2022: 9–31). Like Watts she was a dissenter though obviously not a Puritan[4] and had a keen interest in religion: she published controversial essays daring to seriously engage in religious disputes even though she was a woman. When in the 1780s her *Hymns in Prose for Children* appeared in print, she was already a successful poet. In contrast to Watts who used rhyming verse in his hymns, Barbauld decided to address children in prose because she "doubted, whether poetry ought to be lowered to the capacities of children, or whether they should not rather be kept from reading verse, till they are able to relish good verse: for the very essence of poetry is an elevation in thought and style above the common standard" (Barbauld 1781).[5] This awareness of children's limitations as readers also inspired her earlier *Lessons for Children* (1778–1779), whose first part is addressed to children as young as two years of age and exclusively employs words of one syllable to make understanding easier. This was an innovative approach[6], especially since at that time many children still progressed from their alphabets straight to the Bible or catechism.

The prose Barbauld uses for her *Hymns…* is what her Preface calls "measured [and] nearly as agreeable to the ear as a more regular rhythmus" (Barbauld 1781). The *Hymns…* employs what can certainly be termed poetic prose that seems

[4] For a brief discussion of Barbauld's dissenting background compare, for instance, Duquette (2016: 1–5) or Bailey (2010: 608).

[5] Watts was also conscious of children's limitations as inexperienced readers. He admits in the introduction to his collection that he "endeavoured to sink the language to the level of a child's understanding" (Watts 1715).

[6] An interesting discussion of the innovative construction of *Lessons for Children* from the perspective of cognitivism can be found in William McCarthy's "Mother of All Discourses: Anna Barbauld's *Lessons for Children*" (McCarthy 2005: 85–111).

occasionally to turn into blank verse (Bailey 2010: 611). Not only do particular hymns allude to Biblical psalms in their imagery, but they also resemble the psalms in their elevated diction and cadenced sentences. The rhythmic quality of Barbauld's prose is functional in relation to the intended reader who – similarly as in the case of Watts's collection – was supposed to recite the hymns from memory. The two collections position the child as the addressee and reader-performer[7] as well as a character in the created world of the poems.

Barbauld's book of 12 hymns is much shorter than Watts's containing 45 poems, with 28 constituting the hymnal proper. Barbauld begins her collection with a hymn encouraging the child to praise God as the creator of all things and then in subsequent texts reveals the presence of God in the observable elements of the world and points to His qualities, such as power, care, or perfection. The sequence ends with the perception of death (in Hymn X), renewal of life (in Hymn XI), and reflection on Heaven (in Hymn XII). While both collections are obviously religious, Watts's is more varied in the selection of topics[8] while Barbauld's is more unified. The latter writer applies the same approach in every text: on the basis of the elements and qualities of the described world the speaker concludes about God's presence in all perceivable phenomena. For example, in Hymn IX the speaker first discusses the variety and richness of creation and then remarks: "There is little need that I should tell you of God, for every thing speaks of him" (Barbauld 1781).

Barbauld's purposes are equally religious and didactic as Watts's, though neither writer resorts to direct moralising. Barbauld presents her didactic messages in the shape of conclusions drawn mainly from the observation of nature. These

[7] The phrase reader-performer refers to the use of the hymns intended by both authors: the hymns were supposed to be learned by heart and then performed by reciting or singing. For a detailed analysis of hymn singing in relation to children-performers (though only in the 19th century) compare Alisa Clapp-Itnyre *British Hymn Books for Children, 1800–1900* (2016).

[8] Watts's children's hymns evidently follow his collections for adults in the broad scope of their theological topics (Music 2022: 64).

conclusions – about the nature of God and the worship He deserves – are never forced on the child-addressee as an obligation he or she must fulfil. Watts's hymns, however, directly teach the child about God's qualities and at the end often present the child-speaker's resolutions which can be seen as indirect admonitions.[9]

In order to make the didactic messages of the hymns accessible to children, Barbauld follows Watts in attempting to ground them in the child's experience. Watts's *Divine and Moral Songs* abounds in references to children's familiar experiences and activities, such as walking, going to church on Sunday, praying, reading the Bible as well as playing, boasting, quarrelling with siblings, or even fighting (Węgrodzka 2016: 467-8). No need to say, quarrels, boasts and curses are presented as reprehensible by Watts. Interestingly, so is playing.[10] This activity, currently recognised as an obvious feature of childhood, is in Watts's poems presented as a waste of time and distraction from religious duty, as is succinctly expressed in Song 24 "The child's complaint":

> Why should I love my sports so well,
> So constant at my play,
> And lose the thoughts of heaven and hell,
> And then forget to pray? (Watts 1715: st. 1)

The tension between playing and praying is entirely absent from Barbauld's texts. Her *Hymns…* contains rather few references to children "sport[ing] [them]selves on the new grass" (1781: Hymn II) or "children at play" (1781: Hymn V). In the former

[9] An example of an indirect admonition can be found in Song 9 "The all-seeing God" ends with: "O may I now for ever fear / T'indulge a sinful thought, / Since the great God can see and hear, And writes down ev'ry fault!" (Watts 1715). The moral lesson is presented as a child's own conclusion and resolution. The lack of direct moralising strongly contrasts with the Victorian collection *Songs for Little Children* (1848) by Frances Alexander, where explicit moral lessons are to be found in every poem.

[10] Playing appears in 8 poems in Watts' collection while its equivalent – sports – in 27 poems; see J. Węgrodzka (2016: 468).

example it is the speaker who encourages the children to come out into the fields and play. The latter phrase appears when the speaker observes the absence of sounds and activity at night: "There is no sound of a number of voices, or of children at play, or the trampling of busy feet […]" (Barbauld 1781). The implication is that while such activities as playing cease at night, during the day they are quite normal. Thus, playing in Barbauld's hymns appears as children's ordinary activity. The hymns also contain some references to family life: such as mother putting a child to sleep in Hymn V. A more extended description of family life opens Hymn VIII, which, in contrast to Watts's hymns, emphasises harmonious coexistence and mutual support and not discord among the siblings:

> See where stands the cottage of the labourer, covered with warm thatch; the mother is spinning at the door; the young children sport before her on the grass; the elder ones learn to labour, and are obedient; the father worketh to provide them food: either he tilleth the ground, or he gathereth in the corn, or shaketh his ripe apples from the tree: his children run to meet him when he cometh home, and his wife prepareth the wholesome meal. (Barbauld 1781)

Also in this context play is treated as an unexceptional activity.[11]

The example of play in Watts's poems points to a significant feature of the created world of his hymns. If we look at the world of Watts's poems as a semiosphere, we can observe that no neutral elements seem to be admitted: every object, human action or thought is either good or bad, that is, employed in the service

[11] It was characteristic of the social structure of the times that older children in poorer families worked alongside their parents (children in richer families would be engaged in formal education). This was not only true of rural life but also later when many farm labourers moved into newly industrialised areas and started working in factories where their children "naturally" accompanied them. Child labour began to be perceived as a problem only in the nineteenth century.

and praise God or not. In this metaphysical vision play is reprehensible because it detracts from praying and worshipping God. Watts's poems guide the child to the realisation that every single act or decision is seen and judged by God, and may lead to heaven or to hell. The dominant rule organising the semiosphere of Watts's poems is the all-encompassing division between good and evil. Thus earthly life becomes an arena of constant struggle between heaven and hell played out in human moral choices. Young age does not exempt children from this struggle: in this respect the child is no different from the adult.

Watts's poems construct a fuller picture of the child's life and range of activities than Barbauld's collection of hymns. In the latter the context of the child's play or familial relations, though present, seems less important than the context of the natural world. The speaker in Barbauld's book opens many hymns with the encouragement addressed to the child to go out and observe natural phenomena: "Come, let us go forth into the fields, let us see how the flowers spring" (Hymn II), "Come, and I will shew you what is beautiful. It is a rose full blown" (Hymn IV), "Come, let us go into the thick shade, for it is the noon of day, and the summer sun beats hot upon our heads" (Hymn VII), or "Come, let us walk abroad" (Hymn IX) (Barbauld 1781). It may be also noted here that the opening imperatives may be primarily understood as addressed to the child-character in the created world of the poems. However, placed as they are without any preliminary information about the communicative situation, the opening imperatives may also function as directed to the addressee of the hymns. It may be tentatively concluded that that the child-character of the hymns is identified or even fused with the addressee, who is encouraged to follow the child-character in an imaginative observation and contemplation of nature.

Nature (in the sense of natural landscapes) constitutes the most important spatial setting of Barbauld's collection: it appears in every single hymn – even in Hymn VIII which explains the human world to the child. Hymn VIII starts with the

description of the family and proceeds through a village, town, and kingdom to the whole world. It is characteristic of Barbauld's semiotic world that the village "stands enclosed in a green shade, and the tall spire peeps above the trees" while the kingdom "is enclosed by mountains; it is divided by rivers; it is washed by seas" (Barbauld 1781). The human sphere is encompassed by the natural world; the two are separate but not opposed.

Moreover, the importance of nature is also suggested in Barbauld's collection by vocabulary items concerning nature in its various aspects. Words naming plants, animals, elements of landscape, weather phenomena, or celestial bodies are present in all the hymns, and testify to the importance of nature not only as a spatial setting but also a thematic motif. The presence of words directly referring to particular plants and animals makes the presented natural world detailed and concrete[12]. The child is encouraged to observe natural phenomena such as various flowers, trees, grass, insects, domestic and wild animals, and different kinds of weather, listen to the sounds made by birds, animals, water and wind, smell the fragrance of flowers, feel sharp thorns or soft leaves, or experience the heat of the sun and the coolness of the shade. For example, the opening of Hymn II emphasises visual and aural perceptions: "Come, let us go forth into the fields, let us see how the flowers spring, let us listen to the warbling of the birds […]", in Hymn IV the speaker asks the child to observe details of a rose plant: "It is a rose full blown. See how she sits upon her mossy stem […]", while in Hymn IX the speaker encourages tactile impressions: "Take up a handful of the sand […] (Barbauld 1781). The hymns abound in nouns and phrases related to visual, aural, olfactory and tactile impressions and describe natural phenomena in ways

[12] Names of particular plants employed in the hymns include (in the order of appearance): primrose, cowslip, violet, rose, poppy, harebell, wheat, fir, willow, thistle, mallow, hop, oak, daisy, tulip, iris, reed, water-lily, heathflower, wall-flower, hawthorn, snowdrop, laurustinus, cherry, lily of the valley, brambles, and hen-bane. Names of animals are only slightly less numerous.

evoking sensory experiences: “warbling of the birds”, “the crimson blossoms of the peach and the nectarine” (Hymn II), “the air […] filled with [the rose’s] sweet odour” (Hymn III), “the air which was sultry, [and] becomes cool”, “the beams of the morning-sun [that] strike through your eye-lids” (Hymn V), “the murmur of the brook , […] the whispers of the wind” (Hymn VI), “the summer sun [that] beats hot upon our heads”, “the shade [that] is pleasant, and cool”, “the grass [that] is soft to our feet” (Hymn VII) (Barbauld 1781).

The “emphasis on the particulars of sensory experience” as the basis of education is one of John Locke’s most influential ideas (Lerer 2009: 107). Barbauld’s attention to sensory impressions is certainly related to her pedagogic practice: as she explains in the Preface, her intention in writing the hymns was “to impress [the child] by connecting religion with a variety of sensible objects; with all that he sees, all he hears, all that affects his young mind with wonder or delight” (Barbauld 1781). Moreover, the saturation of the presented world with names of various plants and animals, and with verbs, nouns and phrases related to sensory perceptions seems to enhance the addressee’s sense of participation in the world of the hymns as the one who observes and experiences nature, albeit only vicariously.

Barbauld’s pedagogical attitude can be also observed in the practice of grounding her texts in what is known to the child and only then progressing to more abstract or more difficult things. Thus in the already mentioned Hymn VIII, the speaker first describes the family as the social unit familiar to the child, and then explains larger units (a village, a town, a kingdom, and the world) in a increasing progression of size and abstraction. A gradual introduction of more difficult or abstract ideas may be seen as a rule operative in the whole collection: the concepts of death, resurrection and heaven appear only in the final texts of the hymnal as less accessible to the child in emotional and

intellectual terms.[13] It has to be emphasised that even in the case of the latter concepts, the speaker's discussion is firmly grounded in the child's experience of the details of the natural world, or "the epistemology of the particular" deriving from Locke's educational theories (Lerer 2009: 113). For instance, in Hymns 10 and 11 which address the problem of death, the latter notion is introduced through a child-speaker's observation of a rose, a tree, insects, and a man. First the child sees them alive and beautiful and then dying or dead. Similarly, such natural phenomena as the regrowth of a plant from its root, the return of the sun in the morning, or the transformation of an insect after its apparent death are used to illustrate the idea of human afterlife.

Isaac Watts also uses elements of nature as a source of examples to teach the child. However, his way of employing the natural world in *Divine and Moral Songs* greatly differs from Barbauld's. Watts's most famous poem "Against idleness and mischief" (Song 20) may be seen as illustrative of his usual technique. The poem is based on the (emblematic) analogy between the child and the "busy bee" which is praised for industriously working all day long and for her skill in building honeycombs. After praising the bee in stanzas 1 and 2, the speaker, who is revealed to be a child in stanza 3, resolves to imitate the bee in "works of labour or of skill" because "Satan finds some mischief still / For idle hands to do" (1715: Song 20, st. 3). An element of the natural world (a bee) is described in the poem as a model for the child's behavior. Similarly, in Moral Song 5, an ant is presented as a pattern of industry and foresight to be followed by a young person. A negative version of this discursive technique is employed in Watts's Song 16 "Against quarelling and fighting" which opens with a description of dogs that "bark and bite" and "bears and lions [that] growl and fight" to lead to the authoritative speaker's warning of the child-addressee against

[13] As Gillian Avery and Margaret Kinnell observe: "Mrs Barbauld's teaching about death was at that time unique in its adjustment to a small child's comprehension" (1995: 47).

"such angry passions" (Watts 1715). In making nature a source of moral lessons Watts's usual discursive technique consists of drawing analogies between children and animals whose various behaviours undergo semiosis in accordance with the basic rule of the semiosphere of Watts's hymns, that is, the division into good and evil. It may be added that semiosis applied to certain features of animal behaviour seems reminiscent of animal fables, though Watts's animals are not directly personified.

While Barbauld also employs elements of nature in a didactic way, she does not use them to suggest instructive parallels between animals and children. The child is not taught to imitate praiseworthy behaviours of animals or reject undesirable ones. In Barbauld's collection children are expected to observe, or even contemplate, the whole world of nature. When some elements of nature are singled out, they serve to exemplify universal laws (as in the Hymns X and XI about death and renewal of life) and not exemplary types of behaviors. For Barbauld nature is the space of contemplation of God's presence and delight in his creation, and not a collection of moral examples. The principal rule of the semiotic world of Barbauld's hymns seems to be its unity. Moreover, the author also appears to view humanity as a part of nature, whose role is to praise God on behalf of his creatures, as it is explained in Hymn II:

> The young animals of every kind are sporting about, they feel themselves happy, they are glad to be alive, – they thank him that has made them alive.
> They may thank him in their hearts, but we can thank him with our tongues; we are better than they, and can praise him better.
> The birds can warble, and the young lambs can bleat; but we can open our lips in his praise, we can speak of all his goodness.
> Therefore we will thank him for ourselves, and we will thank him for those that cannot speak. (Barbauld 1781)

Barbauld's prose hymnal envisions harmony of nature and the human being united in the praise of their Creator. It is through nature that the child first experiences God's greatness and

goodness, just as in nature the child learns about his/her unity with all creation in God. In Barbauld's collection nature is the main object of description in order to become a stepping stone leading to higher levels of perception and understanding. In this sense, children – voicing their praises of God in the midst of natural scenery – become representative of humanity in general. This understanding of the child in Barbauld's *Hymns…* seems similar to the one in Watts's *Divine and Moral Songs*, where the noun "children" occasionally applies to members of the human race, i.e. "children of Adam" in Song 3 (st. 2) or descendants of Eve in Song 22 (st. 1–2). However, it needs to be emphasized that in Watts's Puritan vision what links the whole humanity independent of whether they are young or old is their sinfulness. Contrastingly, Barabauld's humanity is united in their ability to praise God.

Barbauld's linking of the child, nature and spirituality are be also observed on the level of discourse. Similarly to Watts, the author of *Hymns in Prose…* teaches the child-addressee to understand the metaphysical world by logical reasoning. However, while Watts's logic mostly relies on precepts derived from Scriptural teaching, Barbauld usually starts with sensory experiences or simple observations of nature to lead the child-addressee to broader and deeper conclusions. In the predominant majority of hymns nature constitutes the main argumentative premise of the presence and greatness of God. For instance, in Hymn IX the speaker begins with: "Come, let us walk abroad; let us talk of the works of God" and then continues by encouraging the child to consider a great variety of natural phenomena, especially plants in their various shapes and habitats. Observations give rise to questions, such as, for example: "Who causeth them to grow […], gives them colours and smells? […]", "How can a small seed contain a plant?", "How doth every plant know its season […]?", "Who preserveth them alive through the cold of winter […]?", "Who breatheth on them with the breath of spring […]?" (Barbauld 1781). This logical sequence leads to the

conclusion clearly defining the role of nature in the cognition of God:

> There is little need that I should tell you of God, for every thing speaks of him.
> Every field is like an open book; every painted flower hath a lesson written on its leaves.
> Every murmuring brook hath a tongue; a voice is in every whispering wind.
> They all speak of him who made them; they all tell us, he is very good.
> We cannot see God, for he is invisible; but we can see his works, and worship his foot-steps in the green sod. (Barbauld 1781)[14]

Nature is defined here as a source of the knowledge of God.[15] Being a visible proof of his greatness, nature deserves to be closely observed and studied carefully since "They that know the most, will praise God the best" (Barbauld 1781: Hymn IX). The speaker guides the child-addressee in the observation of a variety of natural phenomena and processes, then poses numerous questions underscoring the amazing complexity and intricacy of these processes, and makes the observation of, and amazement at, the variety and complexity of nature the basis of a spiritual posture of worship and gratitude. In *Hymns in Prose for Children* nature is an essential place of the child's spiritual education.

Barbauld's almost exclusive focus on natural scenery creates a significant relationship between the child and nature. Nature is not only a place of games and recreation where children can "sport [them]selves upon the new grass" as Hymn II expresses it, but a fundamental place of education in understanding the created world and its creator, and in learning to perform the most important role of humanity – that of praising God. This essential link between nature, the divine creator and childhood,

[14] Barbauld's words echo the opening utterance of Duke Senior in Act II, scene 1 of *As You Like It* (Shakespeare 1975: 260).

[15] Barbauld's attitude to nature as revealing the presence of God is connected with her Unitarian religious principles (Vargo 1998).

which underlies *Hymns in Prose for Children*, has strong Romantic connotations and establishes Barbauld as an important forerunner of the Romantic vision of the child as close to nature and to spiritual realities.

The conclusion that Barbauld's conjunction of childhood, nature and spirituality looks forward to Romanticism is confirmed by many scholars.[16] However, it has to be observed that the child in *Hymns in Prose for Children* does not have a special relationship with nature simply by dint of being a child. The collection makes it clear that the child must be guided and encouraged in establishing such a relationship – which the speaker attempts to effect by inviting the child to go out into the natural setting, observe it, and interpret it spiritually. In contrast to the Romantic understanding of the child who seems to have an intuitive insight into spiritual matters (like the girl from Wordsworth's "We Are Seven"), the child in Barbauld's *Hymns…* has to be carefully directed in interpreting his/her sensory experiences and observations of nature, which only then become a guide to metaphysics.

Nature as the context of the child's spiritual education in Barbauld's hymns seems very distant from anything Isaac Watts could have embraced. For the latter spiritual education is based on theological doctrines and the Bible, while nature may be useful in providing examples for teaching moral lessons to children. The two writers seem to employ very different semiotic approaches to the natural world. Watts isolates examples from nature and turns them into arbitrary signs: he stresses certain qualities – good or bad – that he needs for his intended didactic messages. Thus a dog is a sign of ferocity (Song 16, Moral Song

[16] For the discussions of Barbauld's vital connections with Romanticism compare, for instance, Hilton (2007), Duquette (2016: 54) or Bailey who claims Barbauld's *Hymns in Prose for Children* to be "highly Romantic in its focus on the spiritual significance of and potential relationship between Nature and the individual human mind, especially the mind of a child" (2010: 609). Bailey also considers the author to be "the pivotal figure in early Romanticism" (2010: 615).

2) while a bee is a sign of industry and skill (Song 20).[17] In each instance an element of nature is made to carry a certain semantic value selected from a set of qualities desirable or undesirable in a child. The semiosis of natural elements is performed in accordance to the general rule of the semiosphere of Watts's *Divine and Moral Songs*: the division into good and evil.

Barbauld displays a completely different and more holistic approach. She does not perform semiosis on particular elements of nature. In her hymns the natural world as a whole is treated as a semiotic object, or even an indexical sign[18] whose appropriate interpretation points to the creator and his qualities. The view of the whole natural world as a text (or a sign) to be interpreted emphasises unity as the main rule of the semiosphere in Barbauld's collection. Whenever she focuses on one element – a lightning, a stream, a meadow, a particular plant or animal – it always remains part of the larger whole of the natural world. In Barbauld's hymns the child is not taught what is good and what is evil but how to interpret the natural world spiritually.

While the division into good and evil is essential in the semiosphere of Watts's poems, it is interesting to note that in Barbauld's hymnal the categories of evil and sin are entirely absent. In contrast to Watts's insistence on humanity's (including children's) inclination towards evil and sin, Barbauld's *Hymns*... neither provide any examples of evil nor warn children against sin. Only in the last Hymn XII does the speaker mention evil – but in a general way without providing any particulars. The hymn focuses on heaven as the true home of humanity, much better than the earth. The speaker contrasts heaven and earth by listing certain unpleasant aspects of earthly life – such as thorns on roses – that will be absent in heaven. The category of

[17] The arbitrariness of animal qualities becomes particularly visible when we compare Watts's Song 20, where a bee is a sign of industry, with Bunyan's "Upon the Bee" from his *Divine Emblems* where the same insect "an emblem truly is of sin" because it tempts with sweetness and then stings (Bunyan 1686).

[18] In Peirce's classification; compare the discussion of indexical signs in Sebeok (1999: 61-79).

evil is suggested by the words "ill", "wicked", and "wrong" in the speaker's claims that heaven cannot be entered by "any one that doeth ill", that "nothing that is wicked must inhabit there" and that it is impossible to "do wrong any more" in that happy place (Barbauld 1781). Significantly, the experience of evil in the sense of moral transgression is not in any way described in terms accessible to the child.[19] The child in Barbauld's *Hymns*… appears not to be conscious of evil in the moral sense, and freely shares in the unspoilt purity of the natural world. In sharp contrast to the child in Watts' *Divine Songs*, Barbauld's child seems uncorrupted by the original sin. However, the speaker's strategy of practically removing the problem of evil from the semiotic world of *Hymns in Prose for Children* seems to suggest the young child should be guarded against potentially corruptive experiences, which evokes the Lockean idea of the child's impressibility (Lerer 2009: 104-5). If the child's innocence is conditioned by the impressions he or she receives, then the speaker's evasive treatment of evil becomes clear in the context of the philosophy and psychology dominant in the eighteenth century England.

Although *Hymns in Prose*… is not concerned with moral evil and sin (Bailey 2010: 613), the collection does address the problem of death. In Hymn XII, already considered above, one important contrast between heaven and earth is permanence as opposed to transience: "spring and summer soon pass away, a beautiful rainbow vanishes from the sky", and "life is […] quickly swallowed up in death" (Barbauld 1781). Hymn X – addressed to the "child of mortality" – is entirely devoted to the problem of death. The child sees a dying rose, a decayed tree falling to the ground, insects dying or being eaten up by birds

[19] However, in the already mentioned Hymn VIII, the speaker includes an example of a "Negro woman, who sittest pining in captivity, and weepest over [her] sick child; […] forlorn and abandoned […] amidst [her] bonds". This image evidently evokes slavery and signals the speaker's negative attitude to it. Slavery is presented in a way of evoking pity and compassion and thus may be seen as a social evil, but the hymn does not dwell on this aspect, instead using the image of the enslaved woman as an illustration of distress that God will redress (Barbauld 1781).

and fish, and an active man who is suddenly "stiff and cold on the bare ground […] his life departed from him" (Barbauld 1781). The child weeps and concludes: "Death is in the world; the spoiler is among the works of God: all that is made, must be destroyed; all that is born, must die" (Barbauld 1781).

The treatment of death in Barbauld's hymns stands in a sharp contrast with Watts's collection though both writers situate death in the theological context of Christianity. Watts makes death directly applicable to the child, who is encouraged to consider it as a point after which no correction of his/her sinful behaviour is possible: death may mean damnation and torments of hell. Conversely, Barbauld makes death a gateway to immortality: in Hymn XI, complementary to Hymn X concerned with death, a dead flower grows again from its seed, the sun reappears after the night, and an apparently dead insect is transformed into a new form. These images from nature serve as arguments for human immortality and renewal of life after death. At the end of Hymn XI the addressee is called the "child of immortality" – in contrast to the "child of mortality" of Hymn X – and asked to "mourn no longer" (Barbauld 1781). It goes without saying that Barbauld does not even mention hell or damnation so important in Watts's hymns. The treatment of death seems to accord with the dominant rules of the semiospheres in each writer's collection: division and unity. Watts makes death a final, absolute division, while Barbauld stresses the aspect of continuation.

Both Watts and Barbauld seem to choose one dominant theological concern each and subordinate to it all other issues. What is equally important, they seek to evoke appropriate emotional reactions in the addressee. Though he raises many doctrinal matters, Isaac Watts appears to focus on the understanding of human (and the child's) nature as essentially sinful (Thacker and Webb 2002: 16). This understanding – based on the doctrine of the original sin – determines the urgency of his insistent call for conversion which must be made within a short span of human life, even a child's life, in order to escape hell

and its torments. Anna Barbauld eschews all references to sin and damnation in her *Hymns in Prose…* and concentrates on the ubiquitous presence of God in the natural world. While Watts attempts to achieve his spiritual aim through evoking emotional reactions of contrition for one's sins and fear of everlasting flames, Barbauld's aim seems to lie in evoking the emotions of wonder, delight and awe inspired by the perception of God's presence in the amazing complexity and richness of his creation.

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In the analysis of Barbauld's *Hymns in Prose for Children* I have so far referred to "the speaker" in the sense of the authoritative adult voice of the hymns. It is interesting to note that this authoritative voice is very often fused with the voice of the child. For instance, Hymn I begins with: "Come, let us praise God, for he is exceeding great; let us bless God, for he is very good. He made all things; the sun to rule the day, the moon to shine by night" (Barbauld 1781). Vocabulary and syntax are certainly simple but the commands and statements are theologically sound and authoritatively made. Moreover, the reference to creation – continued in the next sentence – connects the hymn with the Book of Genesis, which also enhances the authority of the opening statements.[20] The fourth and fifth sentences of the hymn pick up the theme of praise from the opening lines and list birds, brooks and rivers as voicing the praise of God. The sixth sentence introduces the pronoun "I" and identifies the speaker as a child who joins the whole creation: "I will praise God with my voice; for I may praise him, though **I am but a little child**" (Barbauld 1781, emphasis mine). So, while the beginning of the hymn may be understood to be uttered by an authoritative adult speaker, the sixth sentence redefines this

[20] For other Biblical references in Barbauld's *Hymns…*, compare Duquette (2016: 57–61).

speaker as "a little child" – without, in my view, entirely invalidating the adult authoritative voice. I see the hymns as interweaving the voices of the adult and the child, just like the sounds of birds and other natural phenomena are conjoined with human praise of God. This interweaving of voices, made quite evident in Hymn I, also appears in some other hymns. For instance, in Hymn II the pronoun "I" does not appear, and the fusion of the two voices is suggested only by the pronoun "us". These techniques of interweaving and fusing the voices seem to strengthen the sense of the child being subsumed in the general category of humanity, as I have already remarked. Moreover, the technique of interweaving voices may be perceived as an echo on the level of discourse of the semiotic rule of unity we have detected in the created world of Barbauld's hymns.[21]

However, some hymns separate the adult's and the child's voices very clearly by employing a constructional method which I would call antiphonal in place of the term "catechistic" often used to describe the "style" of some hymns by Barbauld (or instance, by Bailey 2010: 613). While I recognise the usefulness of the latter term in describing the technique of questions and answers frequently appearing in education and in poetry (Richardson 1989: 853-868), I intend to dissociate Barbauld's hymns from the connotation of rote learning and "mechanical production of set answers" implied by the adjective "catechistic" (Richardson 1989: 853). By employing the word "antiphonal" I wish to link Barbauld's poetic technique with her intention that her hymns become part of the communal worship (as expressed in her introduction) since antiphonal singing or recitation is often used in liturgy.

This antiphonal method is evident in Hymn VI which opens with direct questions put to the child: "Child of reason, whence comest thou? What has thine eye observed, and whither has thy foot been wandering?" (Barbauld 1781). The child answers:

[21] Obviously, the text a whole, including the level of discourse, can be seen as a semiosphere, where the story world, or even its distinct parts, would appear as semiospheres interacting in different hierarchical positions.

"I have been wandering along the meadows", and lists plants and animals he/she saw as well as the beauty of the summer's day. To this the first voice authoritatively responds:

> Didst thou see nothing more? Didst thou observe nothing beside? Return again, child of reason, for there are greater things than these. – God was among the fields; and didst thou not perceive him? his beauty was upon the meadows; his smile enlivened the sun-shine. (Barbauld 1781)

Subsequently the child describes a walk in the forest, and then reports seeing the moon overshadowed by thunderstorm clouds. To each of these the adult voice responds by urging the child to "return again" in order to see "greater things" than the superficial phenomena registered by the child's eyes and ears. The authoritative speaker provides a proper – spiritual – interpretation of the perceived aspects of the natural world and concludes: "God is in every place; he speaks in every sound we hear; he is seen in all that our eyes behold: nothing, O child of reason, is without God; – let God therefore be in all thy thoughts" (Barbauld 1781).

Though the authoritative adult voice provides correct interpretations of the perceivable phenomena in Hymn VI, I do not think the child's observations are invalidated: they are a necessary step leading to an enhanced understanding. The phrase "child of reason" and the speaker's displeasure at the shallowness of the child's observations seem to indicate cognitive limitations of the exclusively rational attitude to reality. Though the rational attitude needs complementing by spiritual insight, the child's rational cognition is not invalidated. The soundness of the child's observations is even more obvious in the already mentioned Hymn X where the child observes a flower, a tree, an insect and a man who all die, and weeps while correctly concluding "Death is in the world" (Barbauld 1781). The answer comes in Hymn XI which – as I have already stated – transcends the perspective of death and interprets natural processes of

revival as a promise of human immortality. Hymns X and XI illustrate the antiphonal construction operating not only within one text (as in Hymn VI) but across textual boundaries. The child's observations in Hymn VI or in Hymn X are not negated – they are valid in their semiotic context of earthly life. However, they can be complemented and enlarged (as it is suggested in Hymns VI and XI) by spiritual understanding, that is, by being transferred to a new semiotic context: that of spiritual life.

I refer to examples of antiphonal construction to suggest that in spite of the predominant fusion of the adult's and the child's voices, the child's voice retains a considerable degree of separateness and validity. Though the child's cognitive limitations and the resulting need to learn are obvious in Barbauld's instructive collection, the hymns appear to aim at helping the child transcend these limitations rather than at radically remaking his/her nature. The vision of an innocent child developing an understanding of God's goodness and greatness by observing, delighting in and learning to interpret natural phenomena in a spiritual way is far removed from Watts's Puritan vision of the child's innate inclination to sin, which it is possible to correct only through teaching him/her to fear God's terrible wrath. Barbauld, publishing her hymns over 60 years after Watts, evidently operates with a completely different concept of the child – foreshadowing the one soon to be embraced by the Romantics – and places this child in a strikingly different spiritual world.

The spiritual world of Barbauld's *Hymns…* is nature treated as a text which – when interpreted correctly – leads to the understanding of the perceivable universe and human place in it as part of the spiritual world that is both beyond nature and inherent in it. However, the textualised nature is not exclusively an index (*sensu* Peirce) of the divine power and goodness. Nature is valuable in itself as God's infinitely varied and complex creation inspiring emotional responses of curiosity, delight and awe. The three stages – observation of natural phenomena, emotional response, and intellectual and spiritual understanding –

are all essential in forming a reverent attitude in her readers, which Barbauld defines as her aim in the introduction to her *Hymns in Prose for Children*. It is also important to stress that the emotional attitudes of fascination, delight, reverence, or awe are not described or named in the hymns as desirable or obligatory. They are only implied by how the world of nature is described. This reticence seems suggestive of Barbauld's respect for the child's independence and integrity which are not invaded by forceful assertions of what is obligatory for a good Christian.

Barbauld's concept of the child, her depiction of nature as a gateway to spiritual reality through nature are generally regarded as Romantic. It has to be admitted, however, that the Romantics themselves turned her name into an emblem of narrow-minded and literal attitudes which they treated with hostility and derision. In a letter to Samuel Taylor Coleridge written on October 23, 1802 Charles Lamb complains: "Mrs. Barbauld's stuff has banished all the old classics of the nursery […] [while] Mrs. B.'s and Mrs. Trimmer's nonsense lay in piles about. Is there no possibility of averting this sore evil?" (Lamb 1837). The "nonsense" presumably refers to insignificant and vapid but factual knowledge crammed into children under the guise of trivial stories offered instead of traditional imaginative tales. Scathing comments were also voiced by Coleridge himself and by Robert Southey who derisively calls Barbauld "Mrs Bare-Bald" (James 2006: 51; Vargo 1998). It is probable that Lamb referred to *Evenings at Home* penned by Barbauld and her brother John Aikin for the instruction and (useful) amusement of children, since Lamb's accusations do not seem to be applicable to *Hymns in Prose for Children*.

Siding with critics who deservedly place Anna Barbauld among important early Romantics, I have to repeat that her children's hymns are not entirely consonant with the Romantic understanding of the child, most famously expressed in 1907 by William Wordsworth in his "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" where he claims that "…trailing clouds of glory do we come / From God, who is our home: / Heaven lies about us in our

infancy!" (Wordsworth 1807gn: st. 5). While in Wordsworth's Romantic vision, growing up loosens a person's intimate connection to the spiritual realm, no such restriction seems to be indicated in Barbauld's hymns. It is the adult voice that encourages the child (character and addressee) to perceive and experience nature also in a spiritual way. The ability to transcend the limitations of merely rational perception and understanding is not an exclusive prerogative of the child. It is the adult who has to carefully guide the "child of reason" towards spiritual insight into the world of nature. So, even if Barbauld's hymns display a characteristically Romantic interconnection of the child, nature and spirituality, they cannot be seen as a full realisation of the Romantic idea. However, this reservation does not seem to justify the Romantics' hostility which turned Barbauld's name into an emblem of the insistently instructive and unimaginative in texts for children. While Barbauld's didactic purpose is unquestionable in her *Hymns in Prose for Children*, she seems to treat the child as both reasonable and sensitive: rationally observing the world around and open to its spiritual significance.

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Jadwiga Węgrodzka
ORCID iD: 0000-0003-4471-4112
Institute of English and American Studies
University of Gdańsk
Wita Stwosza 51
80-308 Gdańsk
Poland
jadwiga.wegrodzka@ug.edu.pl