Isaac Watts and John Wesley: Metaphors of Travel in Religious Hymns

Maria Yvonne BĂNCILĂ

Les deux hymnes religieux composés par Isaac Watts et John Wesley illustrent l'emploi des métaphores du voyage, pour exprimer les accomplissements spirituels et les efforts des croyants. Mon choix a été motivé par l'abondance des termes appartenant à la categorie lexicale du voyage: le chrétien est un pèlerin, un voyageur, qui quitte ce monde pour arriver au monde céleste. Sa destination c'est le Paradis, la terre qui'il parcourt est pleine d'obstacles qu'il doit surmonter pour poursuivre son chemin, il monte vers sa patrie céleste. Je recours à la theorie cognitive de la métaphore comme cadre théorique.

Mots-clés : hymnes religieux, métaphore conceptuelle, les métaphores du voyage

The present paper addresses the topic of the *journey metaphor* employed in religious texts, resorting as case study investigation to two 18th-century hymns authored by the British writers Isaac Watts and John Wesley[1]. LIFE IS A JOURNEY is a conceptual metaphor deeply ingrained in common thought and language, so deeply that is has become a cliché[2]; it can be illustrated with countless examples in everyday use as well as our topic of interest, namely the religious discourse. Rather than a "verbal matter, a shifting and displacement of words," the metaphor is fundamentally "a borrowing between an intercourse of thoughts, a transaction between contexts. Thought is metaphoric, and the metaphors of language derive therefrom" (A.I. Richards 1936). Hence the Cognitive Linguistics' interest in it, as language is a product of our conceptualization and perception of the world, reflecting our shared experience of it. In my discussion of the two hymns, I employ the tenets of Cognitive Theory of Metaphor discussed by Lakoff and Jäkel (cf. Lakoff 1993, Jäkel 1995) as a theoretical framework[3]. These tenets are summarized by nine hypotheses. 1) the *Ubiquity Hypothesis*: according to it, linguistic metaphor is not an exceptional matter of poetic creativity or excessive rhetoric, but it abundantly occurs in perfectly ordinary everyday language as well as highly specialised discourse. Metaphors must be viewed as part of our general linguistic competence. 2) the *Domain Hypothesis* asserts that most metaphorical

[1] Watts, a prominent hymnwriter, theologian and logician, is regarded as "the father of English hymnody" and credited with about 750 hymns, many of them still in use today, while John Wesley's hymn presented here is the only one definitively attributable to him, in the corpus of his powerful and effective literary work.

[2] Samsonite, for instance, uses it as a slogan in marketing its suitcases.

[3] I also applied them, in a previous paper, to various Old Testament texts, and resume them here.

BDD-A169 © 2012 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:59:44 UTC)

expressions are not to be treated in isolation, but as linguistic realisations of *conceptual metaphors.* These consist in the connection of two different *conceptual domains*, one of which functions as *target domain* and the other supplying the *source domain* of the metaphorical mapping. One conceptual domain is understood by taking recourse to another domain of experience. 3) the *Model Hypothesis* shows that conceptual metaphors often form coherent *cognitive models*: structures of organised knowledge as pragmatic simplifications of an even more complex reality; they can be reconstructed by means of cognitive linguistic analyses of everyday language. These cognitive models are likely to unconsciously determine the world view of a whole linguistic community. 4) the *Diachrony Hypothesis:* even in the historical development of languages, most metaphorical meaning extensions are not a matter of isolated expressions, but provide evidence of systematic metaphorical projections between whole conceptual domains. Therefore a cognitive approach to metaphor can benefit from the integration of the diachronic dimension. 5) the *Unidirectionality Hypothesis* states that as a rule, a metaphor ("X is Y") links an *abstract* and complex target domain (X) as explanandum with a more *concrete* source domain (Y) as explanans, which is more simply structured and open to sensual experience. The relation between the elements X and Y is irreversible, the metaphorical transfer having an unequivocal direction. 6) the *Invariance Hypothesis* asserts that in conceptual metaphors, certain schematic elements are mapped from the source domain onto the target domain without changing their basic structure. These preconceptual *image-schemata* provide the experiential grounding of even the most abstract of conceptual domains. 7) the *Necessity Hypothesis* dwells on the *explanatory function* of metaphors. Certain issues could hardly be understood or conceptualised without recourse to conceptual metaphor. Abstract conceptual domains, theoretical constructs, and metaphysical ideas in particular are only made accessible to our understanding by means of metaphor. 8) the *Creativity Hypothesis* shows that the meaningfulness of metaphor does not yield to simple paraphrase. Its meaning cannot be reduced to a non-metaphorical form without loss. Hence, by its *creativity* metaphor can restructure ingrained patterns of thinking, and have a *heuristic function*. 9) the *Focussing Hypothesis* maintains that metaphors only supply a *partial* description or explanation of the target domain in question, highlighting certain aspects while hiding others. It is this *focussing* that makes the difference between alternative metaphors for the same target domain.

The conceptualisation of metaphysical notions, which are central to the religious domain, is often of metaphorical nature. The general concept of LIFE IS A JOURNEY becomes, more specifically, RELIGIOUS LIFE IS A JOURNEY (namely, progress towards the Kingdom of Heaven). *Journey* is the source domain, through which we obtain metaphorical expressions that define and explain the concept of *religious living*, functioning as the target domain; through the use of the source domain we better comprehend the target domain. Although journey and religion, in the sense of spiritual advancement, involve different kinds of actions,

BDD-A169 © 2012 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:59:44 UTC)

the concept of religious betterment is structured, understood and talked about in terms of journeying. The journey metaphor, as one can easily find, obviously illustrates all nine hypotheses of the cognitive theory of metaphor.

Related to the journey metaphor, the spiritual dimension of pilgrimage is that of a religious act of travelling, related to both the earthly and the heavenly ways, offering access to sacred realities and integrating all aspects that pertain to human nature but are also are open to a theological, revelatory significance. The pilgrim is the central character of the hymns discussed, and the path he travels can be approached in therms of the metaphor theory. Pilgrimage is a notion that expresses the sacralization of the space travelled. There is no pilgrimage without reaching a limit in space, which is a sensible consecration of the spiritual effort. The term demonstrates a willful alienation, while the journey imposes a transformation of the self. To the authors discussed here, their journey was a metaphor of an inner pilgrimage, of spiritual progress.

The idea underlying these two hymns is that of righteous life, moral choice, hope, and the relation between God and human beings, based on the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL schema including a starting point, the path and its goal to be reached. In following this pattern, the lexicon employed in the hymns implies other important notions, like progress, motion in a certain direction (upwards), landmarks, obstacles along the path, or speed of motion. The road, the hardships encountered along it, the scenery, as they appear in these two hymns, illustrate the *Life As A Journey (*or rather*, Pilgrimage)* conceptual metaphor – that is, the difficult conditions of life as a committed Christian as well as the goal one pursues in undertaking such journey.

Isaac Watts: ***Lord! What a wretched Land is this*** **(1709)**

Lord! What a wretched Land is this,
That Yields us no supply!
No cheering fruits, no wholesome trees,
Nor streams of living joy!

But pricking thorns through all the ground,
And mortal poisons grow,
And all the rivers that are found
With dangerous waters flow.

Yet the dear path to thine abode
Lies through this horrid land;
Lord! We would keep the heav'nly road,
And run at thy command.

Our souls shall tread the desert through

BDD-A169 © 2012 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:59:44 UTC)

With undiverted feet,
And faith and flaming zeal subdue
The terrors that we meet.

A thousand savage beasts of prey
Around the forest roam;
But Judah's Lion guards the way
And guides the strangers home.

Long nights and darkness dwell below,
With scarce a twinkling ray;
But the bright world to which we go
Is everlasting day.

By glimm'ring hopes and gloomy fears
We trace the sacred road;
Through dismal deeps and dangerous snares
We make our way to God.

Our journey is a thorny maze,
But we march upward still;
Forget these troubles of the ways,
And reach the Zion's hill.

See the kind angels at the gates,
Inviting us to come!
There Jesus the forerunner waits
To welcome trav'llers home!

There, on a green and flowery mount
Our weary souls shall sit
And with transporting joys recount
The labors of our feet.

No vain discourse shall fill our tongue,
Nor trifles vex our ear;
Infinite grace shall be our song,
And God rejoice to hear.

Eternal glories to the King
That brought us safely through;
Our tongues shall never cease to sing,
And endless praise renew.

BDD-A169 © 2012 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:59:44 UTC)

John Wesley, *How happy is the pilgrim's lot!* (c. 1780)

How happy is the pilgrim's lot!
How free from every anxious thought,
From worldly hope and fear!
Confined to neither court nor cell,
His soul disdains on earth to dwell,
He only sojourns here.

This happiness in part is mine,
Already saved from self-design,
From every creature-love;
Blest with the scorn of finite good,
My soul is lightened of its load,
And seeks the things above.

The things eternal I pursue,
A happiness beyond the view
Of those that basely pant
For things by nature felt and seen;
Their honours, wealth, and pleasures mean
I neither have nor want.

I have no babes to hold me here;
But children more securely dear
For mine I humbly claim,
Better than daughters or than sons,
Temples divine of living stones,
Inscribed with Jesus' name.

No foot of land do I possess,
No cottage in this wilderness,
A poor wayfaring man,
I lodge awhile in tents below;
Or gladly wander to and fro,
Till I my Canaan gain.

Nothing on earth I call my own;
A stranger, to the world unknown,
I all their goods despise;
I trample on their whole delight,
And seek a country out of sight,

BDD-A169 © 2012 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:59:44 UTC)

A country in the skies.

There is my house and portion fair,
My treasure and my heart are there,
And my abiding home;
For me my elder brethren stay,
And angels beckon me away,
And Jesus bids me come.

I come, thy servant, Lord, replies,
I come to meet thee in the skies,
And claim my heavenly rest;
Now let the pilgrim's journey end,
Now, O my Saviour, Brother, Friend,
Receive me to thy breast!

The quest for heaven is a recurrent theme in Christian literature, based on the fact that beyond the physical reality of the earthly world, there is a far more important spiritual realm that must be reached and is a reward of virtue. *Mappings* are the aspect of conceptual metaphor that is essential to understanding metaphorical linguistic expressions. Kövecses defines mappings as "a set of systematic correspondences between the source and the target in the sense that constituent conceptual elements of the source domain correspond to constituent elements of the target domain." For instance, progress is seen as distance travelled: *I have come a long way*/ *I made my way in life*; choices in life are crossroads: *I don't know what path to take*; the means for achieving a particular purpose is a route: one *follows a certain path* to obtain the desired result.

Let us illustrate this notion with excerpts representing major correspondences in the metaphor SPIRITUAL LIFE/ ADVANCEMENT IS A JOURNEY:

Structural mapping	Examples
The person leading a (spiritual/religious) life is a traveller, a pilgrim	A poor wayfaring man… I lodge awhile in tents below or gladly wander to and fro How happy is the pilgrim's lot!
The pilgrim's purposes are his destinations	There Jesus the forerunner waits To welcome trav'llers home! I come to meet thee in the skies
The means for achieving purposes are routes	The things eternal I pursue We make our way to God We march upward Keep the heav'nly road
Difficulties in life are impediments to	Yet the dear path to thine abode

BDD-A169 © 2012 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:59:44 UTC)

travel	Lies through this horrid land; Our souls shall tread the desert through Our journey is a thorny maze
Progress is the distance travelled	I come to meet thee in the skies
Things that gauge one's progress are landmarks	By glimm'ring hopes and gloomy fears We trace the sacred road
Choices in life are crossroads	Our journey is a thorny maze
The traveller has a guide along his way	But Judah's Lion guards the way And guides the strangers home.

Mapping the 'journey' presupposes a particular way of understanding and interpreting the place (the world) depicted in relation to other places (the heaven), thereby endowing the journey itself with meaning. It is precisely this inbuilt interpretative dimension, from which the fascination of travel derives. Man thus is a *Homo viator* leaving the earthly realm in search for a sacred space – which actually is a mindscape, since the pilgrimage described here is a spiritual, rather than a physical journey. The pilgrimage is then a self-imposed exile, presupposing the search for a centre. The travel has an explicitly allegorical dimension, subsumed under the topos of life as a journey/pilgrimage superimposed on the metaphor of the soul's itinerary towards the divine.

The pilgrim has to travel across an inhospitable environment: *a horrid land* with *pricking thorns, dangerous waters, mortal poisons, a thousand (innumerable) savage beasts of prey*, *a desert,* etc. Watt's hymn starts by lamenting for the "wretched land" of this world. The representation of the world as a desert haunted by the evil enhances the eschatological exaltation, for as was told in sermons, these "miseries" were but a moral and spiritual trial before achieving salvation. The devout Christians – pilgrims journeying through life – considered themselves in the situation of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea, just as their condition in the world had been a sort of Egyptian bondage. The references are explicit: the pilgrim aims to *reach the Zion's hill/ gain Canaan*, on a way *guarded by Judah's Lion*. To describe the world as a hideous wilderness is to envisage it as another field for the exercise of moral and spiritual power. This violent image expresses the need to mobilize energy, and postpone immediate pleasures. Survival in a "wretched land" demands action, the unceasing manipulation and mastery of the forces of nature, meaning, of course, human nature. We are reminded by the discourse of the British colonizers of America, who had resorted to a similar imagery of hostile wilderness, which however could be reconciled by the intervention of the Divine Providence: *"Yet it pleased our mercifull God, to make even this hideous and hated place, the meanes of our deliverance"*, Strachey said in 1609.

BDD-A169 © 2012 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:59:44 UTC)

As Corin Braga points out, it is a symbolic geography. Any geography is a representation of space, not space itself; it is symbolic in relation with the space it represents, expressing man's relationship with the surrounding world. The theme of travelling through the (hostile) world having the Paradise as destination reminds of the medieval T-O maps, which were highly symbolic and governed by a theological principle; while the outlines of countries and continents were imprecise, they mainly suggested the sacred history of Christianity, with the garden of Eden at the Oriental extremity, and Jerusalem in the center of the world; whoever intended to regain Paradise had to pass through Jerusalem, where Christ redeemed the fallen human nature. Similarly, the religious man undertaking his "pilgrimage" will reach salvation, via renunciation, hardships and penance.

According to the source-path-goal pattern, then, the starting point is the "horrid land," with "pricking thorns" and "dangerous waters", a (spiritual) desert where "terrors" are met; the path of faith is a journey towards the Christian's true motherland which is the heavenly Jerusalem, or the restored Paradise. The intolerable reality is abolished, and the quest is initiated as a response to a crisis situation: loss, fall from grace, the sense that the world is 'out of joint'. The traveller chooses to exit this degraded world and travel towards the spiritual one, the end of the journey being the entrance into the Kingdom. This religious model lends itself to a number of conceptualizations, as follows: leading a moral life is making a journey on God's way; sinning is swerving from God's way, while repenting is returning; moral choice is a choice of path; God's way leads to (eternal) life, while evil ways lead to death; God's way goes upwards (*we march upward*, to *reach Zion's hill/ a green and flowery mount*), while evil ways are crooked and full of obstacles (*a thorny maze*); the righteous take heed to their way, they hold to their way (*with undivetrted feet*); the wicked trod the old ways (*basely pant for things by nature felt and seen*); the righteous run God's way, while the wicked run to evil; God observes all human ways, He watches over the righteous' way, leads them and teaches them (*Judah's lion guards the way*). Wesley insists on the pilgrim's condition; he emphatically asserts his renunciation of material possessions along the way to the true riches of the Kingdom. This experience is assimilated to a journey; he emphasizes the impermanence of earthly life and worldly possessions, as well as the traveller's spiritual and emotional response to the journey. It is worth mentioning John Wesley's personal experience during an actual voyage; he travelled to the American colonies in 1735, and at one point a storm broke the mast off the ship; while some of the travellers panicked, others sang hymns and prayed.

The world is a prison, and one is either In it and OUT of God's Kingdom, or the other way round. According to Gaston Bachelard, the dialectics of IN and OUT is tantamount to the clear-cut dialectics of Yes and No. "Without being aware of this, we make it into a pool of images that governs all our thinking about what is positive and respectively negative. A logician will draw circles that are superimposed, intersect or exclude each other, and all their rules become instantly

BDD-A169 © 2012 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:59:44 UTC)

clear; by *in* and *out*, philosophers express existence and non-existence. The deepest metaphysics is thus rooted in an implicit geometry, which – whether we like it or not – lends a spatial dimension to our thought." (Bachelard 239).

To a believer, the path to be run is necessarily defined in relation to God: without God (that is, in the absence of faith) man's existential predicament may be expressed as coming from nowhere and heading to nowhere. The path of life ought to be, moreover, travelled in a certain manner in order to lend superior sense to human condition. If reaching the realm of heavens is one's goal – that is, choosing the right path – then the experience of travelling the path of life is, indeed, an ascending path, an *ascension* towards God. The terms employed belong to the lexical category of travelling – at a steady, fast pace, overcoming all obstacles: *run, tread, keep the road, undiverted feet/ the labors of feet, go, trace the sacred road, make the way to God, march upwards, reach Zion's hill, pursue things eternal.*

The twentieth century has seen the rise of dystopia – the more common form of imaginary journeys in our time – perceived as symptoms of the "exhaustion" or "disenchantment" of the world. This is why these hymns dwelling on the metaphor of a different journey, of spiritual search and reflection about human condition, make such a refreshing reading today. Let us conclude with a modern-day metaphor expressed by Michel Barrault, *Dominicale*: *I find myself defining the threshold/ As the geometrical place/ Of comings and goings/ To the house of the Father*.

References

Watts, Isaac, *Lord! What a wretched land is this* (1709)

Wesley, John, *How happy is the pilgrim's lot!* (c. 1780)

Bachelard, Gaston, *Poetica spatiului* (1957), Paralela 45, Bucharest, 2003

Braga, Corin, *De la arhetip la anarhetip*. Polirom, Bucharest, 2006

Kövecses, Zoltan, *Metaphor in Culture. Universality and Variation*, Cambridge University Press, 2005

Lakoff, G., *The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor*, in: Ortony, Andrew (ed.) *Metaphor and Thought.* Cambridge, 1993, 202-251

Jäkel. O., *Hypotheses Revisited: The Cognitive Theory of Metaphor Applied to to Religious Texts*, http://www.metaphorik.de/02/jaekel.htm

Oanca, Monica & Potter, Martin, *Visions of Salvation in Late medieval English Literature*, Ed. Universitatii din Bucuresti, Bucharest 2009

Richards, A. I., *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism*, London & New York, 1936

Vasilescu, L., *Pelerinajul – dimensiuni semantice şi spirituale*, "Anuar FTOUB", Ed. Universităţii din Bucureşti, Bucharest, 2001

BDD-A169 © 2012 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:59:44 UTC)