Early Methodist Autobiography

A Study in the Literature of The Inner Life*

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Although much has been written concerning the remote influence of Methodism upon eighteenth-century literature, no investigation has been centered around a literary genre produced under Wesley's immediate influence and expressive, therefore, of the ideas which Wesleyan brought into currency. This is a study of early Methodist autobiography for such evidences.

Methodist autobiography continues a literary convention established in the seventeenth century by the radical Protestant sects, whose interest in inward religion led to their adoption of autobiographical writing as an instrument of introspection and evangelism. By 1650 the ministerial autobiography had become a popular means of self-revelation among all the enthusiasts sects. From them came two masterpieces: Bunyan's Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners, and Fox's Journal. But among the conservatives the form met with disfavor. Anglican autobiography was entirely objective, and the master autobiography from Presbyterianism, Baxter's Reliquiae, gave scant attention to subjective history.

The extreme interpretation given by the enthusiasts to the doctrine of immanence and the freedom allowed for response to the Inner Light was congenial to the romantic temperament.

As a result, their autobiography offers in varying degrees, depending upon the thoroughness of their interpretation of the Protestant theory of private judgment and the extent of their exercise of group control, such qualities as free play of individualism, disregard for the social distinctions traditionally established, faith in the self expressed creatively in a fresh exercise of imaginative vision or wasted in neurotic subjectivism.

But enthusiasm, and with it enthusiastic autobiography, declined at the end of the century, when Latitudinarian developments offered a challenge to the emphasis upon inward religion. The rise of rationalism, while attributable to diverse causes, was to some degree the result of the revolt against the subjectivism of the enthusiasts, and the dogma of reason, identifying, as it did, rationality with uniformity, became a powerful weapon against the eccentricities of individualists. The doctrine of immanence disappeared before an extreme emphasis upon transcendence, and Christian belief sought foundation entirely in external evidence. Revelation was conceived of as simply a restatement of truths already known to natural religion.

In literature the consequences of a philosophy of uniformitarianism are seen in a disavowal of the Platonic doctrine of poetical inspiration, an appeal to traditional authority, an anti-rationalistic distrust of self, an inhibition of individual impulse, and a well-calculated defense of the status quo.

*The title of a doctoral dissertation presented to the Department of English Literature in the University of Wisconsin in 1939. What follows is the abstract and chapter six of this thesis.
The system of natural religion, however, was doomed when its defenders, following the lead of Locke, employed the empirical form of apologetic. The dogmatic assumptions concerning the universality of reason were challenged, and the logical outcome of rationalism proved to be the skepticism of Hume. Wesleyanism at this juncture offered a new foundation for religious belief.

In conclusion it may be noted that Wesleyan doctrine was a synthesis composed of diverse elements which were a part of the eighteenth-century complex of ideas. It adapted to its own ends both the theory of uniformitarianism and Lockian empiricism; but its roots were planted in Anglo-Catholic mysticism and orthodox tradition, and its evolution was influenced by the pietistic ideal of a select body of the converted. Impelled by a profound concern over inward religion, Wesley moved gradually from the rationalistic conception of faith as intellectual assent to dogma, to a definition of faith as assurance. In this appeal to the inner consciousness he believed that he had not only revivified the Protestant theory of justification by faith, but had also discovered an answer to skepticism. He presented as a final attestation to the truth of Christianity the internal evidence given by personal religious experience. While he did not reject traditional evidence, or institutional pattern, or the exercise of the reason, his major appeal was to the "spiritual senses."

The history of early Methodism is the history of the clarification and expansion of this theory of the "spiritual senses." In this process of doctrine-making religious autobiography played a very important part. Originally Wesley under High Church influences used the diary as an instrument of self-examination. Governed always by an emphasis upon the theory of original sin, he approached self-study more analytically and critically than the enthusiastic autobiographers. Yet he valued more highly than they the subjective material. The major objective in autobiographical writing among them had been evangelism; the new motive introduced by Wesley was inductive inquiry into religious experience. An examination of the autobiography and biography produced by various religious groups formed one stage in the process by which Wesley arrived at his definition of faith; a further examination of autobiographical letters solicited from his followers furnished data in formulating his theory of Christian perfection; the autobiographies of the lay preachers were published in the Arminian Magazine as empirical evidence against Calvinistic doctrine. The Methodist movement may therefore be said to have been founded upon an empirical approach to religious experience, in which autobiography was used for case study.

The most noteworthy consequence of this adaptation of the empirical method was the transition made by Wesleyan thought from the universality of reason to the universality of the "spiritual senses." Wesley thereby took over the chief argument supporting the claims of reason and used it to present the claims of intuition. The references made by Blake, Coleridge, and Wordsworth to Methodist doctrine indicate that it was Wesley's effective interpretation of faith that most impressed the early romantics. The success of the Wesleyan appeal to the subjective evidence furnished a basis of fact and certainty for other theories which were denying the supremacy of reason. The strength of Wesleyanism lay in its foundation in orthodox tradition and, likewise, in the balance it effected between individualism and institutionalism.
The Asbury Seminarian

subtly influenced future literary developments. First came the declaration of the universality of the "spiritual senses"; this led logically to a recognition of the spiritual potentialities of the humblest of men when moved by a desire for moral perfection. Moreover, he discovered in the autobiographies of these men "strong sterling sense" and "noble sentiments" expressed "in the purest finest language." He was amazed at the artless beauty of their simple style and recommended it as a pattern, challenging the "most polite" to alter it for the better, and contrasting it with the cant phrases and conventional diction of the day. Early Methodist autobiography thus became the medium for a significant experiment, supplying proof of the trustworthiness of intuition, the safety of democratic privilege, the nobility of the common man, and the beauties of the plain style.

THE LITERARY SIGNIFICANCE OF EARLY METHODIST AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The object of this study has been the examination of religious autobiography written by early Methodists for evidences of the place of Wesleyanism in the literary currents of the eighteenth century. The assumption which has guided this examination has been that the religious autobiography is a literary type which might illustrate the relationship of Wesleyanism to certain pre-romantic tendencies of the age.

What qualities had the ascendance in literature in 1739 when Wesley began his mission as field preacher to England's forgotten masses? Without adding anything more to the already voluminous discussion of the questions, "What is neo-classicism?" and "What is pre-romanticism?" it may be safely asserted that during the first half of the eighteenth century certain qualities dominant in the literature of the time may be designated as neo-classicism, while certain other qualities, fugitive and ill-defined, may be regarded, on the one hand, as reappearances of tendencies in the seventeenth century, or may, on the other hand, be considered anticipations of the characteristics of a succeeding era which is explicitly known as romantic.

The neo-classical qualities which are relevant to this discussion are few but very definite, and appear to be derivatives of the prevailing rationalism rather more than products of the devotion to the classics. They are, nevertheless, customarily spoken of as expressions of eighteenth-century classicism. The first to be noted is the disavowal of the Platonic doctrine of poetical inspiration. This faith in the divine afflatus had been held by most of the English literary critics of the sixteenth century and continued well into the seventeenth century until the fear of enthusiasm laid its chilling hand upon both religion and poetry. The doctrine is of the very essence of romanticism. Fairchild says of it:

The romanticist takes a serious and lofty view of poetry. For him, the true poet is a bard, a prophet, a priest, inspired by some power greater than himself, pouring out floods of wisdom in rapturous song. The poet's imagination, soaring above ordinary reason, gives him insight into the deep spiritual truth of things—gives him power even to create such truth. This conception of poetry... was popular in the literary criticism of the Renaissance. During the second half of the seventeenth and the first half of the eighteenth century, however, it fell upon evil days. Enthusiasm in poetry, like enthusiasm in religion, was under suspicion, and genius was curbed by judgment and the rules. ... Versified rhetoric supplanted 'truth carried alive into the heart by passion.'

bject for study by Sister M. Kevin, S.S.J., in her dissertation on Enthusiasm in English Poetry of the Eighteenth Century. She concludes:

Religious enthusiasm was outside the pale of the rational; it catered to imagination and hence was dangerous. The enthusiast was non-universal, fanatical, hysterical, and egoistic. He displayed altogether too much feeling to be genuine, and he was entirely too excitable to be trustworthy. . . . In the domain of literature this situation was exactly paralleled. Pseudo-classicism like its philosophical corollary frowned upon imagination, upon feeling, upon non-universality, upon irregularity and upon non-conformity to pattern. To give expression to one's emotions or to one's passions was neither good poetry nor good taste. Imagination and fancy, undisciplined by reason and good sense, were as dangerous in poetic expression as they were in religion.2

The extreme emphasis given by the advocates of natural religion, orthodox and non-orthodox alike, to the doctrine of transcendence unquestionably gave support to this reaction against enthusiasm. Every dominant influence of the early eighteenth century seems to have contributed to the re-enforcement of the concept of transcendence. The subjectivism of the Inner Light sects had brought their interpretation of immanence into general disrepute; Newtonian science had furnished a philosophical basis for a doctrine that seemed antithetical; and the decline in the disciplinary and liturgical influence of the church over the masses offered in a practical way a final refutation to the theory of God within. The belief in a personal God, which is an important aspect of the orthodox Christian tradition, was so neglected that it has become almost platitudinous to describe early eighteenth-century religion as "belief in an absentee God" or worship of "the mechanic of the Universe."

The effect of this over-stressed concept upon the divine poetry of the time has been too frequently discussed to call for repetition, and the repercussions in secular poetry are also well-known. The universal popularity of Pope's Essay on Man with all religious groups in spite of its presentation of a God constructed according to Deistic specifications is sufficient evidence of the general satisfaction with a theory which could neither inspire inward religion nor kindle the creative imagination of the poet. Fairchild in a recent, well-documented study of religious trends in English poetry between 1700 and 1740 adds much further evidence to support the well-known hypothesis that sentimentalism found its beginnings in a "common-sense Protestantism verging upon Latitudinarianism" and declares that the traditional faith was "losing its hold on the imagination of a large majority" of the poets. "Yet," he says, "with few exceptions they are not natural unbelievers; they are mostly the sort of men whose feelings urge them to believe in something. When Christianity and poetic imagination have parted company, what beliefs will nourish the poet's art?"3 He finds the answer to this question in "the quasi-religious emotional satisfaction" which came through the cultivation of sentimental naturalism. In other words, with the disappearance of the orthodox concept of the immanence of God there came the doctrine of the natural goodness of man.

An element which has always been considered the mainspring of neoclassicism is the appeal of authority: in literature the appeal to the classics and traditional practice; in religion the appeal to institutions and traditional beliefs. Viewed in relation to its setting in the Protestant religious upheaval, this element may be interpreted as a demand for some limitation on self-assertion. The left-wing movements of Protestantism had been built upon a transcendent faith in the

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3 Fairchild, op. cit., p. 423.
capacity of the individual for immediate apprehension of truth; the extreme right wing now viewed this faith as not only extravagant, but as completely false. With God no longer conceived of as immanent the internal mandate had no authority; all authority must come from without. Truth could be found only in the accretion of wisdom through the ages. For a poem the choicest subject was "what oft was thought"; for a sermon the safest subject was an ethical principle which could be proved common to all religions, Christian and pagan. To the neo-classical critic original genius was a term with dangerous connotations; to the rationalistic theologian the term "revealed religion" had, likewise, dubious associations. The best guide for the critic was the body of rules handed down from the ancients; the best criterion for the theologian was a creed so minimized as to satisfy the natural reason for all time. Authority was to be found in rules copiously stored up in books and institutions, and not in individuals.

This flight to the safety of institutions and age-tested rules and creeds bespeaks a deep-seated distrust of the self. One of the strangest paradoxes of this very paradoxical period is an anti-rationalism which seems to run directly counter to the exaltation of the reason. Many of the great champions of rationalism find themselves eventually admitting the imperfections of reason; indeed, the original exponents of the principles of natural religion—Locke, for instance—undertook their defense because of their deep distrust of individual reason and their profound sense of human limitations. It was a very uncertain and narrow world left for the individual. He was also forced by a universal distaste for spontaneous self-expression to accept a social code in which inhibition and indirection kept the emotions repressed or disguised. In spite of the fact that the theory of self-interest was so popular that the leading divines offered ingenious defenses for it, avoidance of reference to the self was carefully cultivated in conversation and literature. The personal pronoun dropped out of poetry and objectivity became the rule. Inevitably so, for the appeal to external authority discouraged reliance upon the self; the conception of reason as universal made the shades of individual opinion seem eccentric; the distrust of emotion rendered suspect even legitimate impulses; and, above all, the fear of enthusiastic subjectivism held a strict rein upon everything that suggested interest in the world within. The talk of Wordsworth about the "inner eye which is the bliss of solitude" would have been as objectionable as the talk of a Quaker about his "openings."

Since the most fanatical demonstrations of subjectivism in the seventeenth century had occurred where experiments had been made in religious democracy, the eighteenth century saw a zealous support of the status quo; even the humanitarian movements of the day were governed by a demand for the preservation of the caste system. Not everyone was as frank in stating the reason for concern over the results of the Methodist revival as was the Duchess of Buckingham, when in a letter to Lady Huntington she said of Methodist doctrines, they "are most repulsive, strongly tainted with Impertinence and Disrespect toward their Superiors, in perpetually endeavouring to that few men act as rational beings of all Ranks, and to do away with He found himself often, as a result, Distinctions. It is monstrous to be having to choose between a morbid told that you have a heart as sinful as cynicism and a shallow ethics of glorified self-interest. He was also forced the Common Wretches that crawl on
the Earth." But undoubtedly the question of what social readjustments might have to be made when a Bristol miner became aware of his true relation to both his God and his neighbor troubled more than one observer of the revival. And viewed now from the perspective of two centuries the greatest result of the Methodist movement was probably the answer which it finally gave to that question. Recent studies have shown how subtly but steadily the democratic organization of the local religious societies made of nineteenth century Methodism a great levelling force.

The correlation between neo-classicism and anti-enthusiasm presented in the foregoing survey makes unnecessary a lengthy examination of the romantic elements in the autobiography of the enthusiasts. This is not to say that all enthusiastic biography is romantic. Rather, let us say that certain elements inherent in enthusiasm freed the romantic spirit. The extreme emphasis upon the doctrine of immanence, and the encouragement given the worshipper to follow the mandates of the inner authority, created an atmosphere in which the romantic temperament could express itself. As a result the autobiography produced by the early Independents and Baptists, the Seekers, the Ranters, and the Quakers offers in varying degrees, depending upon the thoroughness of their response to the Protestant theory of individualism and the extent of their exercise of group control, such qualities as the free expression of individual impulse, utter disregard for the social distinctions established by a traditional conception of a static universe, and faith in the self expressed either in excessive egoism, neurotic subjectivism, hysterical emotionalism, or in lofty aspiration, "fresh exercise of the imaginative vision," and quickened moral idealism. The delight of the autobiographer in an inner world of the spirit which he felt should be explored and reported upon was regarded by the common-sense man of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as madness or, at best, eccentricity; yet in some of the greatest poetry of the nineteenth century is to be seen a similar delight in the discovery of a poetic world within.

In view of the attitude in the eighteenth century toward subjective autobiography it is important to know what Wesley's original conception of the function of autobiography was. Did he, when he began the practice of keeping a diary at Oxford, think of self-study, as did the Quakers for instance? The answer is plainly, No. He tells us that it was under the influence of Jeremy Taylor that he first undertook diary writing, his objective being ascetic self-discipline and self-examination. He was not looking within for guidance; he was looking within for carnal impulses. The emphasis is, in no sense, upon the inner light, but, instead, upon original sin. His practice is in keeping with High Church doctrine, rather than with the latent sentimental transcendentalism of Quakerism. No one who has formed an idea of Wesleyanism from a study of Wesley's journal, his sermons, and his forceful exposition of the doctrine of original sin, could confuse his purposes in self-study with those which were primary with the Friends, of whom Miss Wright says:

The greater share of the Friends reasoned that if God were indwelling, then man could not be hopelessly depraved and fallen. In this respect they anticipated certain aspects of the theory of man's essential goodness which Law and Rousseau embodied in their philosophies in the century following.

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6 Wright, The Literary Life of the Early Friends, p. 19.
From the beginning Wesley approached self-study analytically and critically, not with the exuberance and confident egoism of the seventeenth century enthusiast. His is an eighteenth-century mind, logical, practical, unmystical, even when most urgent in inquiry concerning what he calls “the life of God in the soul of man.” Self-study conceived of as self-examination was always Wesley’s guiding autobiographical motive. Even in his middle life it governed greatly the development of autobiographical writing among his followers when he was attempting to formulate his theory of Christian perfection. They were directed to investigate their states of mind for the last and least remains of sin. The natural self was not to be trusted; only by the grace of God could it become trustworthy. His was no sentimental faith in human goodness; yet no religious leader has ever expressed greater faith in the potentialities for goodness in every man who renounces his own pretences to natural goodness and relies upon supernatural aid. The distinction is very important, for it sets Wesley quite apart from the sentimental preachers of “perfection” who were becoming influential during Wesley’s last years.

The original and dominant conception of the function of Methodist autobiography is, therefore, neither that of the Quaker, nor that of the sentimentalist or romantic. It looks backward to the attitude toward the self taken by the High Churchman of the seventeenth century, and more important, it may be said to look forward to the psychological study of the self in the twentieth century. With Wesley sinful states of mind are analysed as obstacles to satisfactory relationships with God and man; with the modern psychoanalyst abnormal states of the eighteenth century, and more important, it may be said to look forward to the psychological study of the self in the twentieth century. With Wesley sinful states of mind are analysed as obstacles to satisfactory relationships with God and man; with the modern psychoanalyst abnormal states of the eighteenth century, and more important, it may be said to look forward to the psychological study of the self in the twentieth century. With Wesley sinful states of mind are analysed as obstacles to satisfactory relationships with God and man; with the modern psychoanalyst abnormal states of the eighteenth century, and more important, it may be said to look forward to the psychological study of the self in the twentieth century. With Wesley sinful states of mind are analysed as obstacles to satisfactory relationships with God and man; with the modern psychoanalyst abnormal states of the eighteenth century, and more important, it may be said to look forward to the psychological study of the self in the twentieth century. With Wesley sinful states of mind are analysed as obstacles to satisfactory relationships with God and man; with the modern psychoanalyst abnormal states of the eighteenth century, and more important, it may be said to look forward to the psychological study of the self in the twentieth century.
sonality. It was the great age of gossip, and in spite of the distaste for intimate self-revelation, curiosity was bound to extend to a man's impulses and motives. The immediate cause, however, for Wesley's own interest was his belief that the search made by the earnest seeker for religious certainty bears a direct relationship to truth. Such a man becomes one in a long line of seekers, and finds something of significance to say to the world of the inner life.

Wesley's faith in the evidence afforded by the record of the inner life steadily increased from the time he issued his first Journal. An examination of the autobiography and biography produced by various religious groups formed one stage in the process by which he finally arrived at a revivification of the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith. This examination comprehended the spiritual histories of men, past and present, learned and ignorant. He valued the information wherever he found it.

But it should be noted that his respect for the message of the religious confessant did not arise from his approval of novelty or individual eccentricity; indeed, it was just the opposite. The message of the confessants, in the last analysis, he found to be universally the same: He who seeks shall find that the just shall live by faith. Wesley's debt to the latitudinarian principle of universalism is evident here. The latitudinarian had taught the universality of reason, whereas Wesley believed he had discovered the universality of faith — faith interpreted as the inner consciousness of God. Every religious autobiographer when he charted the course of his search for God proved, whether he was conscious of it or not, that man has spiritual senses that may become active when aroused by faith, the gift of God. Supplementing the uniformitarian theory that reason is universal, Wesley insisted that spiritual capacity is universal.

This version of latitudinarianism reminds us of the Cambridge Platonists in their defense of both reason and religious experience. It will be recalled that Wesley, too, makes such a defense in The Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion. But the outcome for Wesleyanism was far different from that of the followers of Cambridge Platonism, because Wesley insisted zealously that religious experience be kept within the close borders of orthodox tradition. Fairchild finds various poets in the first half of the eighteenth century who sought to reconcile “a real love for the Christian faith” with “a real love for reason of an intuitive and transcendental kind” under the tutelage of such Platonists as Norris of Bemerton. But with many of them “a sort of Platonism” remained standing long “after the collapse of the Christianity it was originally intended to buttress.” The Christianity established by Cambridge Platonism thus

“turned out to be a highly metaphysical affair, not hostile to the faith of the Scriptures, but essentially independent of that faith. Their Neo-platonic belief in a universal harmony revealed to the harmonious mind could readily detach itself from Christianity and continue to operate as an intellectual expression of sentimentalism.”

With this development going on about him, Wesley renounced his early devotion to certain of the Cambridge Platonists and guarded his interpretation of religious experience from extra-Biblical elements. The result was significant in two respects: Wesley's fear of non-Christian mysticism led to a schematization of religious experience and a consequent narrowing of the experiential range; on the other hand, Wesley's democratization of his message, while it may have sacrificed

7 Fairchild, op. cit., p. 563.
8 The Cambridge Platonists to whom Wesley was particularly devoted were Smith and Norris.
some of the intellectual elements valued by Cambridge Platonists, extended the opportunities for the appreciation of inward religion.

The shift of emphasis made by Wesley from the universality of reason to the universality of religious intuition is surely very significant for his century; but broad and sweeping generalizations on his influence are dangerous, for many forces were at work calculated to produce a similar change. There was, for instance, the continuing influence of Platonism which has just been discussed. There was, also, the deliquescence of Calvinism, in which various scholars see a fertile field for the growth of sentimental interest in quasi-religious emotion. There is, also, the possibility of the subterranean influence of Inner Light theories. It would seem that the most evident relationship of Wesley to the collapse of rationalism lies in the power and extensiveness of his appeal. The current of religious influence, which should always be deep and powerful in life and literature are to be at their best, was sluggish and shallow. While the stream of Platonism continued its course, while sentimentalism was arising in remote sources, while the mysticism of the small sects became another tributary, Wesley opened many new springs which flooded again the main channel. For Wesleyanism answered to the satisfaction of thousands a question raised by all thinking men, If the truth of Christianity cannot be fully verified by the reason, how then can it be verified? The demonstrable success of Wesley’s answer, based as it was upon both the empirical and historical appeal, and upon the results of the Revival, gave a basis of fact and certainty for all other theories which denied the supremacy of reason. As Elton says:

We must think of him, with his appeal to the deeper emotions, as an ally of the new poets and recoverers of romance, working unawares and far off. A new source of vital feeling, of experience, was to be touched by his ministry and by his organising power. He was the ‘dowser,’ the man with the divining twig, who finds new springs that only need the spade. There was water before, but not enough; and no one had dreamed there was so much. And he had to prove, what will always be debated, that the new supply was pure.

It has been noted that Wesley made use of confessional literature in his formulation of the doctrine of assurance at the time of his conversion. This confidence in the history of inner experience continued. In his study of Christian perfection, in fact, he placed even greater confidence in the subjective evidence. The background for Wesley’s theory was historical, the Catholic mystics furnishing his original concepts. The new element was his method of verifying and clarifying these concepts. This throws further light, it would seem, upon the part which empiricism played in ushering in the romantic movement. Set in the historical frame of reference, and then investigated by the use of a modern method, this theory of perfection was presented to match other theories more abstract in composition, less traditional in origin. It was a dream which claimed a basis in fact. It illustrates the complex of ideas that characterized the thinkers of Wesley’s generation who employed the empirical approach to traditional ideas.

This recapitulation of the facts concerning Wesley’s use of autobiography makes evident the degree to which the religious genre figured in the evolution of the Methodist movement. At the outset an instrument for self-examination in the form of the diary, it developed into a history of the full range of religious experience, which could be used for formulation of theory, defense of doctrine, or proof
even of the truth of Christianity. Viewed at this distance it becomes a symbol of a great movement which challenged the basic faith of the age, the faith in reason, and offered in its stead a new faith, the faith in man's spiritual sense.

Now when we turn to a review of the mass of religious autobiography produced by early Methodists, we discover first of all a revival of some of the romantic elements which characterized the enthusiastic autobiography of the seventeenth century. The concept of transcendence continues, but with less emphasis, and is supplemented by a renewed sense of God within. One of the most delightful and naive expressions of this dual conception of the Deity is given in a letter written to Wesley by a poor woman in a workhouse. She says:

I am still unwilling to take anything from anybody. I work out of choice, having never yet learned how a woman can be idle and innocent. I have had as blessed times in my soul sitting at work as ever I had in my life, especially in the nighttime, when I see nothing but the light of a candle and a white cloth, hear nothing but the sound of my own breath, with God in my sight and heaven in my soul, I think myself one of the happiest creatures below the skies. I do not complain that God has not made me some fine thing, to be set up and gazed at; but I can heartily bless Him that He has made me just what I am, a creature capable of enjoyment of Himself. If I go to the window and look out, I see the moon and stars; I meditate a while on the silence of the night, consider this world as a beautiful structure, and the work of an almighty hand; then I sit down to work again, and think myself one of the happiest beings in it.10

The confidence in the divine afflatus which was accorded such free indulgence in the enthusiastic autobiography was greatly modified by the steady opposition of Methodist leadership to extraordinary revelations. On the other hand, there was no suppression of discussion and analysis of manifestations of the supernatural.

out encouraging the arrogance of ignorance. Hence the autobiographer while approaching his literary task with confidence, carried a consciousness of certain requirements to be met. Perhaps the most important of these was a pattern of style which was constantly held before him in his work as speaker and writer.

If Wesley made any direct contribution to romantic literary theory, it was by way of his discovery of the beauties of the plain style. He was looking for truth, and he felt that he must see it naked, unadorned by the conventional verbiage. For this reason the style of unlettered people interested him greatly. The Methodist letters and journals, which he chose for publication, out of the mass of autobiographical material which came to his hand, were almost entirely from the pens of such persons. His prefaces to these volumes give a clear indication of his feeling of discovery and his unqualified admiration for the unconventional style. There is, for example, his description of the diction of Mary Gilbert, a seventeen-year old girl, whose journal he edited. Her language, he says, "although plain and altogether unstudied, is pure and terse in the highest degree—yea, frequently elegant; such as the most polite either of our lawyers or divines would not easily alter for the better." 11

The style of Jane Cooper, a servant-maid, whose letters he issued, he describes as

"not only simple and artless in the highest degree, but likewise clear, lively, proper: every phrase, every word, being so well chosen, yea, and so well placed, that it is not easy to mend it. And such an inexpressible sweetness runs through the whole, as art would in vain strive to imitate." 12

The most striking demonstration of his enthusiasm for the "native colours" of the untutored style comes in his preface to the letters of Mrs. Lefevre, an early Methodist, whose correspondence had been previously printed by another editor with an apology for their rhetorical inaccuracies. "Their merit," said the first editor, does not consist "in the fineness of the language, nor in the elegance of the manner." But Wesley disagrees with this estimate and declares, "I am not ashamed to recommend them as patterns of true polite epistolary correspondence, expressing the noblest sentiments in the most elegant manner, in the purest, yea, and finest language." 13

When it is recalled that the first ideal of style held by the eighteenth century was the employment of a universal language such as conformed to the usage of a cultured society, the radical nature of Wesley's encomiums will be recognized. He was one of the early condemners of stock diction in poetry. Quayle in his book on Poetic Diction conjectures that the demand of the revival for "a mode of expression severe in its simplicity" brought forth in the hymns "a more natural mode of expression," and goes so far as to suggest that this practice in hymnology "gave to Wordsworth a starting point when he began to expound and develop his theories concerning the language of poetry." 14 If all of Wesley's comments upon style were gathered together and analysed, he would be recognized as a precursor of both the essayists and the poets of the romantic era.

Another idea with revolutionary implications which Wesley seems to have received from his examination of the self-revelations made by the lowly was that the humble man who enters upon his search for religious truth unhampered by prepossessions may make val-

12 Ibid., p. 541.
13 Ibid., pp. 550-51.
14 See Chapter V, note 6.
uable discoveries and describe them with convincing power. Of the contents of Jane Cooper’s letters he wrote in his preface:

All here is strong sterling sense, strictly agreeable to sound reason. . . . The sentiments are all just and noble; the result of a fine natural understanding, cultivated by conversation, thinking, reading and true Christian experience. At the same time they show a heart as well improved as the understanding, truly devoted to God, and filled in a very uncommon degree, with the entire fruit of his Spirit.  

With these “almost inimitable letters” he compared the Journal of Mary Gilbert who, he says, “set down, from time to time, merely for her own use, just what occurred between God and her own soul.” Her reflections, he finds, “are always just, frequently strong and affecting; particularly those on death, or the shortness of life; especially from the mouth of a child.”

These effusions were not written in 1798 by a Wordsworthian who had just read “We Are Seven,” but by a conservative Tory, who concluded after thirty years of experiment with popular autobiography that he could trust the sanctified understanding of the lowly and unsophisticated. He assumes, with a confidence rare in this period, the sure reliability of accounts which issue from humble men and women when they are animated purely by the desire to set down in a “plain way” a record of their souls communion with God. Certainly Wesley began his ministry to the lowly with no prepossessions concerning their capacity for lofty sentiments. He distrusted the “enthusiastic” utterance, he opposed the obscurantism of the lay preacher, and he exercised vigorous almost tyrannical, control over their publications. Yet, by 1768, after thirty years of open-minded observation of the autobiographical records, he let them testify for themselves, and that evidence led him to conclusions that correlated closely with current theories having other origins.

Various versions of primitivism were by this time widely disseminated. Wesley may once have held a primitivistic interpretation of the American Indian. But actual experience in America brought his realistic mind to reject that illusion. He came to scoff at the idealisation of the rustic, whose life he thought was supremely dull and “usually unhappy.” It seems likely then that his glorification of rustic genius finds its source in his inductive inquiry rather than in any adoption of a popular belief.

The relationship between the Wesleyan elements in early Methodist autobiography and the new literary ideas that were evolving contemporaneously may now be summarized. If the romantic movement be considered “a direct historical outgrowth of eighteenth century sentimentalism,” then Wesleyanism contributed little toward a new literature. Wesley’s realistic view of human nature and his consistent interpretation of orthodox doctrine, particularly the doctrine of original sin, offered a resolute contradiction to all the implications of the sentimental belief in natural goodness. The major objective among early Methodists, in the practice of introspection, was an analysis of inner sin rather than a discovery of inner light or a romantic idealization of impulse; and the Wesleyan doctrine of perfection, though an expression of the growing moral idealism of the century, cannot be identified with other perfectionists, because of its foundation in orthodox tradition and doctrine. Even though it emphasized experience more than doctrine, Methodism did not originate in a liberal theology.

However, if pre-romanticism be considered one of the repercussions of the collapse of rationalism, then Method-

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16 Wesley, Works, VII, p. 541.
17 See Fairchild, op. cit., p. 574.
ism contributed much to a new literature, for it took out of the hands of
the rationalists the theory of universalism, the chief argument that had
been used in support of the claims of reason, and used it to support the
claims of intuition. The strength of
the defense of intuition lay in the appeal
made by Wesley to the facts of
religious experience, facts which form
the nucleus of religious autobiography.
In his appeal to facts he satisfied not
only the believers in tradition and ortho-
doxy, but he allied himself with the
foremost philosophical movement of
his day, empiricism. His examination
of religious experience led, first of all,
to a re-establishment of intuition as
one of the guides to knowledge; there
developed, in consequence, a fresh in-
terest in the inner world; this in turn
produced new conceptions of the func-
tions of self-study and self-history.
The respect for the self was enhanced,
and the efforts of all men, even the
lowly, to express their intuitions were
regarded as significant. Their senti-
ments and their style, when ap-
proached empirically, were seen to
possess intrinsic worth. Professor
Beatty describes the dispersion of
Methodist influence as follows:

This movement did much more than produce
Methodism in the narrower sense of the word: it freed emotion, enthusiasm, and sentiment; it
turned the attention of even the most ordinary
man to the world within him and gave a dignity
to the most common human soul; and how many
who knew nothing of the mysteries of justifica-
tion by faith and the witness of the spirit gave
to the intuitions a glow and credibility that came
from the doctrines of the new sect. . . . The
habit of introspection was spread abroad; and
the subjective poetry of Wordsworth and Cole-
ridge is an important fact not only in itself, but
for the whole period, because these poets were
the formative influences of their time. The con-
sciousness of the religious world within led to
the discovery of the poetic world within.18

A brief statement concerning the
recognition given by the early roman-
tics to the elements which character-
ized Methodist autobiography will
throw further light upon the nature
and degree of Methodist influence. A
recent study by Frederick C. Gill of
The Romantic Movement and Method-
ism offers documentation upon the re-
actions of Cowper, Blake, Wordsworth
and Coleridge to the Revival. The
chief value of the study lies in this col-
collection of specific references; his con-
clusions are too broadly generalized
and too remotely connected with Wes-
ley's ideational background to be en-
tirely trustworthy.

Cowper's indebtedness to the Evan-
gelical movement has been so often
discussed and is so well known that
we shall not include the data upon
him. Four references from Blake fur-
nish considerable insight, not only
into the elements of Methodism which
impressed Blake, but also into the in-
tricacies of his own thought. In
the first reference, Blake stresses Wes-
ley's gospel of faith in God revealed as
Christ:

And these are the cries of the Churches before
the two Witnesses: (Wesley and White-
field)

Faith in God the dear Saviour who took on the
likeness of men,

Becoming obedient to death, even the death of
the Cross . . . 19

In the second, Wesley is presented
as a modern miracle, who devoted his
"life's whole comfort to intire scorn
& death." He was not, says Blake, an
Idiot nor a Madman. The third ref-
ence comes in an indictment of
Deism, where the same distinction as
we have emphasized is made: that the
Methodist, in his attitude toward sin,
neither professed to be "holier than
others," nor to be "naturally good."

It is the Deists, says Blake, men like
Rousseau and Voltaire, who are the
hypocrites. He anathematizes them

18 Arthur Beatty (ed), Romantic Poetry of the
Early Nineteenth Century (New York, 1928),
pp. VIII-IX.

19 Quoted in Gill, op. cit., p. 148.
You cannot escape my charge that you are Pharisees & Hypocrizes, for you are constantly talking of the Virtues of the Human Heart and particularly of your own, that you may accuse others, & especially the Religious, whose errors you, by this display of pretended Virtue, chiefly design to expose. Rousseau thought men Good by Nature: he found them Evil and he found no friend. Friendship cannot exist without Forgiveness of Sins continually.20

The fourth reference is more general, identifying Whitefield and Hervey with mystics like Fenelon and Mme. Guyon:

Fenelon, Guyon, Teresa, Whitefield & Hervey guard that gate, with all the gentle Souls Who guide the great Wine-press of Love.21

It is noteworthy that the features of Wesleyanism selected by Blake, namely, the renewal of a vital faith, the sense of mystery aroused by a religion which annihilates self-interest, the genuineness of the type of perfection professed by Methodists in contrast to the sentimental profession of goodness, and the cardinal element of love in Methodist doctrine, constitute the very heart of the early Methodist message. If this selection might be taken as representative of the points of contact between Methodism and early romanticism we might conclude that the impact was immediate and powerful. But Blake is, of course, too much in a class by himself and too little known in his century to be taken as typical. Nevertheless, it is probable that the features of Wesleyanism that impressed him impressed many and that the interpretation he gave them is in keeping with the sense of many who were rejecting the tenets of natural religion.

In the case of Wordsworth, Gill finds no direct references to Methodism. He emphasizes rather his employment of the doctrinal phraseology and concepts made current by the movement. He quotes, for example, from one of Wordsworth’s “Inscriptions,” the following:

But Thou art true, incarnate Lord
Who didst vouchsafe for man to die;
Thy smile is sure, Thy plighted word
No change can falsify!

I bent before Thy gracious throne,
And asked for peace on suppliant knee;
And peace was given—nor peace alone,
But Faith sublimed to ecstasy.22

His references from “The Excursion” in evidence of “the language of the Evangelical revival” are many. The following is typical:

The law of faith
Working through love, such conquest shall it gain,
Such triumph over sin and guilt achieve!
Almighty Lord, Thy further grace impart!
And with that help the wonder shall be seen
Fulfilled, the hope accomplished; and Thy praise
Be sung with transport and unceasing joy.23

These are interesting echoes of Methodism as it became diffused through all English thought while the Evangelical movement spread, but, at the best, they are echoes, for Wordsworth, we are assured by those who know him well, was not greatly in sympathy with Evangelicalism. The only notable feature implicit in Gill’s chosen passages is the emphasis upon faith, working through love, and producing joy. This concept of religion certainly indicates the result of the pervasive influence of the Wesleyan message upon the thought of Wordsworth’s generation. No further proof need be given in demonstration of the change that had come over the approach to religion than simply to contrast, with the above passage, a selection from the Essay on Man which to Pope’s generation epitomised their conception of man’s relation to God:

20 Quoted in ibid., p. 150.
21 Quoted in ibid., p. 150.
22 Quoted in ibid., p. 165.
23 Quoted in ibid., p. 166.
Say first, of God above or man below,
What can we reason but from what we know?
Of man what... Gill, op. cit., p. 80.

26 Southey, dp. cit.. I, p. 199.
27 Ibid., I, fly-leaf.
28 See Chapter III, note 71.

Coleridge's references to Wesley are so definite and so numerous that a conclusive statement can be made concerning the value which he placed upon the elements which went into the shaping of Methodist autobiography. In the first place, he was familiar with both the lives of the early preachers and the life of Wesley as interpreted by Southey. He considered the lives of the preachers models of popular autobiography. "In 1797," says Gill, "Coleridge began a series of letters to his friend, Thomas Poole, in which he proposed to give an account of his life up to that time. Five only of these letters were written, for they stop short at Cambridge. But their importance for us is that in them Coleridge proposes, and also proceeds, to imitate the autobiographical method of the early Methodist preachers. He writes:

'My dear Poole, I could inform the dullest author how he might write an interesting book. Let him relate the events of his own life with honesty, not disguising the feelings that accompanied them. I never yet read even a Methodist's "Experience" in the Gospel Magazine without receiving instruction and amusement.'

And Coleridge proceeds to relate plainly and simply the story of his birth, ancestry, sins, and fears... 25

Not many people know that Southey's Life of Wesley was the most cherished of all the volumes that ever received in their margins the famous annotations by S. T. C. The reprint by the Oxford press of this annotated two-volume biography makes it available to all who would know Coleridge's musings as he read. Twice he expressed his fondness for the book. In a footnote he wrote:

Oh, dear and honored Southey! this is the favorite of my library among many favorites, this the book which I can read for the twentieth time with delight, when I can read nothing else at all. . . . 26

And on the fly-leaf he inscribed the following memento:

It is my desire and request that this work should be presented to its Donor and Author, Robert Southey, after my death. The substance and character of the marginal notations will abundantly prove the absence of any such intention in my mind at the time they were written. But it will not be uninteresting to him to know, that the one or the other volume was the book more often in my hands than any other in my ragged bookregiment... How many and many an hour of self-oblivion do I owe to this Life of Wesley; and how often have I argued with it, questioned, remonstrated, been peevish, and asked pardon—then again listened and cried, Right! Excellent!—and in yet heavier hours entreated it, as it were, to continue talking to me—for that I heard and listened, and was soothed, though I could make no reply.27

The mingled emotions with which he responded to the Wesleyan message are suggested here as well as in various notes scattered through the two volumes.

One point upon which Coleridge, along with Blake and Wordsworth, was in perfect agreement was his treatment of faith. Southey paraphrases a passage from Wesley's deistic pamphlet, the "Letter to the Rev. Dr. Middleton"28 in the following manner:

25 Gill, op. cit., p. 80.
26 Southey, op. cit., I, p. 199.
27 Ibid., I, fly-leaf.
28 See Chapter III, note 71.
The historical evidence of revelation, strong and clear as it is, is cognizable by men of learning alone; but this is plain, simple, and level to the lowest capacity. The sum is, ‘One thing I know: I was blind, but now I see;’ an argument of which a peasant, a woman, a child, may feel all the force. The traditional evidence gives an account of what was transacted far away, and long ago. The inward evidence is intimately present to all persons, at all times, and in all places. ‘It is nigh thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart, if thou believest in the Lord Jesus Christ.’ This, then, is the record, this is the evidence, emphatically so called, that God hath given unto us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.

Why, then, have not all men this faith? Because no man is able to work it in himself; it is a word of Omnipotence. It requires no less power thus to quicken a dead soul, than to raise a body that lies in the grave. It is a new creation; and none can create a soul anew, but He who at first created the heavens and the earth. May not your own experience teach you this? said Wesley. Can you give yourself this faith? Is it in your power to see, to hear, or taste, or feel God?–to raise in yourself any perception of God, or of an invisible world?–you know it is not. You not only do not but can not (by your own strength), thus believe.29

Coleridge annotated this passage thus:

...that the ‘evangelical’ principles have borne fruits of righteousness, however imperfect, however largely mingled with a blighted and corrupted produce, is sufficient to show that they do to a certain extent deserve their name, and are in the main directly opposed to an anti-Christian rationalism.33

The great attraction, therefore, for Coleridge in Wesleyan principles and Wesleyan literature was the antithesis they offered to the passing age of reason and the effective answer they afforded to rationalism in their direct appeal to a deep and vital faith. Coleridge’s only criticism of Wesley’s personal faith throws light on the wide temperamental differences between the two men. To Coleridge Wesley’s faith lacks the quality of mysticism; the processes of logic are too much in evidence. When one thinks of the complex of Platonism, Unitarianism and Transcendentalism, (to mention only obvious elements in his thought), which determined the quality of Coleridge’s faith, one can understand why he concludes concerning Wesley:

I am persuaded that Wesley never rose above the region of logic and strong volition. The moment an idea presents itself to him, his understanding intervenes to eclipse it, and he substitutes a conception by some process of deduction. Nothing is immediate to him.34

Wesley in response would probably have said, as did Carlyle, of Cole...

30 Ibid., p. 72, fn.
31 Quoted in Gill, op. cit., p. 172.
32 See Coleridge’s discussion of Southey’s interpretation of Wesley’s teaching upon the subject of eternal punishment, Southey, op. cit., II, pp. 299-300.
33 Quoted in Gill, op. cit., p. 170.
34 Southey, op. cit., p. 167.
ridge's ideas, "recognizable as pious, though strangely colored," and added perhaps by heterodoxical mysticism.

As we compare these references from Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge, we find the emphasis chiefly upon the place of faith or intuition in the Wesleyan message. It would seem then that at the end of the eighteenth century, with Methodism rapidly becoming another of the "respectable" bodies, and, with romanticism coming to the front with a new literary manifesto, Wesleyanism represented to the young intellectuals of the day, above all else, a successful disavowal of anti-Christian rationalism and a practical demonstration of the return of intuition to its place of honor. Even when deploring the excesses of the illiterate masses, and failing to recognize the great contribution which Methodism was making to the progress of democracy, even when rejecting certain aspects of the doctrine of assurance, particularly its basis in the theory of original sin, the young romantics deemed sound the central element, the reliance upon the inner consciousness of God, rather than upon reason or the objective evidence of God's being. Coleridge's statement may be quoted as representative of generally accepted opinion:

Men of the Wesleyan school, from Wesley's day to the present, have rather been depreciators of reason, than exaggerators of intellectual efficiency; they dwell on faith as the work of the Spirit; and chiefly rely on a bold plain urgent preaching of the word—a direct assertion of the truth, not proofs and arguments in its favour.36

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