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# Romanticism and the Hymns of Charles Wesley

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*This examination of Charles Wesley's hymns in their contemporary literary context is the work of a graduate of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois, who is now pursuing a doctoral programme at Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee.*

## INTRODUCTION

THE HYMNS of Charles Wesley float in a literary and critical never-never land. They are difficult to analyze either because they are not taken seriously as poetry or because they lie hidden deep beyond criticism in the emotive and non-cognitive aspects of a religious life shaped and defined by its pre-analytic singing and loving of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Whether one may speak intelligibly and credibly of events (or hymns) ingrained in one's own heart is as problematic as whether the hymns of Charles Wesley were written as self-conscious literary expressions designed to take their place in the literary sun of the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, the hymns by their force, impact, and influence in the eighteenth century (and now) beg to be described and explicated, even though the description and explication demand, by the very nature of the hymns, a study in theology, sociology, music, ecclesiastics, and literary criticism. For the purposes of this paper, the discussion will focus on, but will not restrict itself to, the relationship of Charles Wesley's hymns to Romanticism, and particularly the Romanticism of English poetry at the turn of the nineteenth century.

But it is doubtful whether any word, with perhaps the exception of "Christian," has been used so casually and promiscuously as "Romanticism." Romanticism has been praised as the mode which excels all others in the capacity "den Geist des Autors vollständig auszudrücken," and it has been dismissed as "eine Krankheit."<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, Romanticism, however, is to be considered a neutral term, neither adulatory or pejorative. It will be used in its literary connections to signal the shift in values from formalized and stylized diction to simplified, "natural" diction and from strict convention in poetic forms to a liberation from any set of mandated forms. In broader, more inclusively human terms

<sup>1</sup> The first quotation ("to express fully the spirit of the author") is from F. W. Schlegel, in M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1958), p. 374, no. 37. The second quotation ("a sickness") is a famous dictum by Goethe.

Romanticism will be used to describe the heightened awareness of the self as a source of literary or other creative expression. It will also be used to describe an elevated value given to personal expressions of the self: i.e., emotions, feelings, "creations." This use of Romanticism is intended to stand in contradistinction to the classical or neo-classical ideas of a self which draws its reality from its createdness and its external relations, and which employs a standard of self-expression valuing decorum and restraint. It is the working axiom of this paper that at certain times and in certain places a liberal infusion of "Romanticism" is necessary in order to re-establish the proper role and function of the heart or spirit in the heart-mind-body nexus that is man. These periodic infusions may be reactions to cultural sterility, literary servility, or religious conformity.<sup>2</sup>

The second axiom of the paper is, however, that an excessive application of Romanticism, an unrestrained pursuit of the values here characterized as Romantic, can be most disastrous—leading to such an emphasis on the individual and his own creations that no realities outside the self are considered valuable, the self is exalted to be the only source of valid experience, the external world and external persons are demoted to a meaningless place in the individual's cosmos, and spontaneous feeling totally displaces rational thought.<sup>3</sup> It is in the light of these two axioms that Charles Wesley's hymns are to be evaluated, and in this evaluation three questions will be most prominent.

(1) To what extent were Charles Wesley's hymns infusing Romantic tendencies into the religious world of his day?

(2) To what extent was this infusion beneficial to the Church?

(3) To what extent did Wesley sell out to Romanticism, that is, become a religious enthusiast, abandon rationality and communicable propositions in exchange for a non-cognitive, mystical afflatus heading toward an ultimate, howbeit ever so religious, solipsism?

In the paper romanticism or romantic (lower case) will be used to characterize certain features in the poetry of Wesley and later writers; Romantic (upper case) will be restricted in use to the English poets of the early nineteenth century who are generally grouped together as Romantics.

<sup>2</sup> Examples might be the revolt in the mid-eighteenth century of German culture under Herder and Lessing against French influence, in literature the English Romantic revolt, and in religion perhaps the charismatic outbreaks of modern times.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Abrams, pp. 23-25; also Rousseau's *Emile* (particularly the Creed of the Savoyard Vicar) and *New Heloise*, Goethe's *Werther* and *Faust*, Part I, portions of Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*, and Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*.

## I. ROMANTIC TENDENCIES IN WESLEY'S HYMNS

Before we plunge immediately into the examination of Wesley's hymns in terms of their romanticism, it would be wise to establish the right to discuss Charles Wesley as a poet. At the 1788 Methodist Conference, John Wesley eulogized his recently deceased brother, but in so doing said: "His least praise was, his talent for poetry."<sup>4</sup> By this phrase, as so many later commentators have pointed out,<sup>5</sup> John did not intend to demean his brother's hymns but only to place them in their proper context in a life whose central purpose had been the conversion of the English-speaking world. Charles Wesley, to his brother, was not a poet who aided the revival; he was a Christian minister who happened to use his poetry as part of his divine calling.

It is precisely this abject prostration of his lyrical gift before the cause of Awakening that has led some critics to contend, "May 21, 1738, created a hymn writer and destroyed a poet."<sup>6</sup> It is admitted by even many of Charles Wesley's admirers that he lacked artistic sophistication, but it is also claimed that such a lack was in reality no depreciation:

His neglect of art is the essence of his greatness as a poet. . . . He realized the mystery of the divine incarnation, in the flesh of his own time with a vision so single and entire that his language needs no wings.<sup>7</sup>

That is to say, Wesley himself was such a complete captive of such an elevated theme that his poetic utterances were validated as poetry merely on the basis of his theme and his apprehension of it. It is a commonplace (though not unchallenged) that:

A writer's best poetry is usually the expression of his keenest feelings. And though many people have caught a passing whiff of pious emotion, only a few have felt it with the strength and continuity that they feel sexual love or pleasure in nature.<sup>8</sup>

Charles Wesley was one of the rare men who breathed long and deep of the rarified air of piety. The repetition of his sole theme may be called monotonous, "but the monotony . . . is deliberate repetition . . . With him repetition means strength, not weakness. It implies the power to present the great theme in a multitude of ways suited

<sup>4</sup> Frank Baker, *Representative Verse of Charles Wesley* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960), p. 37.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Baker, *ibid.*; and A. Skevington Wood, *The Inextinguishable Blaze* (Exeter: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), p. 95.

<sup>6</sup> J. Ernest Rattenbury, *The Evangelical Doctrines of Charles Wesley's Hymns* (3rd ed.; London: Epworth, 1954), p. 32. Rattenbury himself does not hold to this view.

<sup>7</sup> T. S. Gregory, "Charles Wesley's Hymns and Poems," *The London Quarterly and Holborn Review*, CLXXXII (October, 1957), 253.

<sup>8</sup> Lord David Cecil, *The Oxford Book of Christian Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940), p. xi.

to a multitude of hearers."<sup>9</sup> George Sampson, who made this last statement, goes on to explain why such a powerful theme and such a commitment to it are often dismissed in literary evaluations: "But, alas, [Wesley] addressed the Christian Deity [not Pan or Apollo] in English [not a foreign tongue], and his poems are dismissed as mere hymns."<sup>10</sup> If the apparently natural aversion to take hymns seriously as poetry can be overcome, the outworking of Wesley's Christian experience in his hymns may be said to enshrine the essence of ritualistic drama;<sup>11</sup> if such is granted, there is room to contend for the "lyrical superiority" of Wesley over many of his contemporaries,<sup>12</sup> and it is possible to see that Charles Wesley "has left some verses that will never die."<sup>13</sup>

The preceding fusillade of testimony is hardly a sufficient proof of Wesley's worth as a poet; it may be, however, enough of an attestation to let us take Wesley seriously as a poet.

The clarion call for a romantic diction was sounded by William Wordsworth in his Preface to the Second Edition of *The Lyrical Ballads*, published in 1800. In that work Wordsworth boldly asserted that poetry was to use "as far as possible . . . a selection of language really used by men."<sup>14</sup> Although there had been something of a house-rebellion in English letters against the formalized conventions of neo-classicism throughout the eighteenth century, this challenge by Wordsworth came as a great shock and a presumptuous affront to the arbiters of literary taste in Wordsworth's day. However, it is claimed by many that if the literary world had heeded the hymns of the Wesleyan revivals, Wordsworth's proclamation would have caused hardly a ripple.

The classic statement on the simple and natural poetic diction which Charles Wesley used is given by John Wesley in the preface

<sup>9</sup> George Sampson, "The Century of Divine Song," in *Seven Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1947), pp. 219-220.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 219.

<sup>11</sup> Gregory, p. 262.

<sup>12</sup> Frederick C. Gill, *The Romantic Movement and Methodism* (London: Epworth, 1954), p. 68.

<sup>13</sup> George Sampson, *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature* (2nd ed.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 553. This reference to Wesley and Sampson's essay on him are quite important in their being made by a non-Methodist. Two other works containing favourable critical comment of Wesley by non-Methodists which I could not obtain are: Bernard Lord Manning, *The Hymns of Wesley and Watts* (1942, reprinted 1954); and Donald Davie, *Purity of Diction in English Verse* (1952). Davie's mention of Wesley is particularly significant as he sees Wesley as the herald of a "new classicism" marked by a discipline of speech and a purer mode of expression. It would be interesting to see how Davie handles the fervour and spontaneity of Wesley in a classical model.

<sup>14</sup> William Wordsworth, *Selected Poems and Prefaces*, ed. by Jack Stillinger (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1955), p. 446.

to the great *Hymn Book for the People Called Methodists* of 1780:

In these hymns there is no doggerel; no botches; nothing put in to patch up the rhyme; no feeble expletives. Here is nothing turgid or bombast, on the one hand, or low and creeping on the other. Here are no cant expressions, no words without meaning. Those who impute this to us know not what they say. We talk common sense, both in prose and verse, and use no word but in a fixed and determinate sense. Here are, allow me to say, both the purity, the strength, and the elegance of the English language; and, at the same time, the utmost simplicity and plainness suited to every capacity.<sup>15</sup>

It is further significant that John Wesley, who had such an integral influence on his brother's ministry, eschewed "an highly ornamental style. I cannot relish French oratory . . . Let who will admire French frippery: I am still for plain, sound English."<sup>16</sup> John's *Journal* has been compared, to the depreciation of the two others, with the "polished wit of Pope and the elegant fripperies of Horace Walpole."<sup>17</sup> This quality of simplicity and directness was endemic to Charles and his verse as well. In short, as J. Alan Kay summarizes in a preface to Wesley's private hymns:

There is as much common sense about his language as there is rapture. His manner is direct, his constructions are simple, and his words, in general, are easily understood. There is nothing high-flown about his language, and he does not favour what we call poetic words.<sup>18</sup>

Kay also praises Wesley's metaphors, particularly for the fact that they are "within the experience of the common man."<sup>19</sup> There were, to be sure, more than just traces of his classical education in Wesley's hymns; and it is obvious from the hymns that Wesley was fully familiar with the tin-horn Latinisms of his day and the niceties of poetic construction, but in general he used the popular forms of his day:

The hymns of the eighteenth century had to be written in the popular language of the day, and at no period has popular language been so simple or graceful or more happily suited to the kind of things hymns are.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Alfred B. Haas, *Charles Wesley* (New York: Hymn Society of America, 1957), p. 16.

<sup>16</sup> Gill, p. 62. Gill also notes that John Wesley praised the prose style of Thomas a Kempis as "plain, simple, and unadorned," p. 41.

<sup>17</sup> Sampson, "The Century of Divine Song," p. 216.

<sup>18</sup> J. Alan Kay, *Wesley's Prayers and Praises* (London: Epworth, 1958), p. xvi. Kay goes on to say: "It is true that he loves a good classicism and the rolling majesty of polysyllables, but these things stand out only because of the contrast they made with the very ordinary words which form most of his vocabulary."

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Canon Adam Fox, as quoted in G. H. Vallins, *The Wesleys and the English Language* (London: Epworth, 1957), p. 74. Vallins goes on to question whether Wesley's hymns were really so simple or so suited to the common people of his day; he points particularly to the Latinisms in the verse as obstacles to understanding by the common people. Rattenbury, pp. 57, 58, points out that many of Charles Wesley's worst literary offences were nicely excised by John Wesley in the preparation of the hymn books.

To show how innovative Charles Wesley's use of simple, straightforward English diction really was we must have the foil of eighteenth-century neo-classical poetry before us. In general, eighteenth-century English verse sought to "mediate between nature and art, imagination and reason, delight and instruction."<sup>21</sup> In this self-conscious mission hearty or extravagant emotions were denigrated and a witty, urbane, erudite, and pithy style developed, epitomized in the brilliance of Pope's closed couplets. Diction was elevated, refined, and was very conscious of its pretensions to classicism. Pope's *Essay on Man*, which appeared only five years before the Wesley's conversions, begins:

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Awake, my St. John! leave all meaner things  
 To low ambition, and the pride of kings.  
 Let us (since life can little more supply  
 Than just to look about us and to die)  
 Expatriate free o'er all this scene of Man;  
 A mighty maze! but not without a plan.<sup>22</sup>

In contrast to this paragon of neo-classical verse, the poetasters and minor figures of the day were a great deal less successful in retaining a natural diction in their work. Such lines as this—

Hobnelia, seated in a dreary vale,  
 In pensive mood rehearsed her piteous tale;  
 Her piteous tale the winds in sighs bemoan  
 And pining echo answers groan for groan.<sup>23</sup>

—were frequent and, indeed, the commonplace for much eighteenth century verse.

It was against this background that Charles Wesley's hymns broke upon the world. With the lives of common men as the scene for his matter and a direct diction for his mode, his hymns stated plainly and boldly what were visceral truths, and not recreational fancies:

Come, O my guilty Brethren, come,  
 Groaning beneath your load of sin!  
 His bleeding heart shall make you room,  
 His open side shall take you in.  
 He calls you now, invites you home—  
 Come, O my guilty Brethren, come!<sup>24</sup>

His diction, although elevated somewhat above prose style, is natural, and it uses, for the most part, the normal vocabulary of men. Wesley's argot was not the jealously guarded hoard of

<sup>21</sup> Louis I. Bredvold, *et al.*, *Eighteenth Century Poetry and Prose* (2nd ed.; New York: Ronald Press, 1956), p. xix.

<sup>22</sup> In *ibid.*, p. 370.

<sup>23</sup> John Gay, in *ibid.*, p. 415.

<sup>24</sup> "Where Shall my Wondering Soul Begin," in Baker, p. 4. I have throughout the paper modernized spelling and capitalization in the hymns of Wesley.

the literati but the *patois* of the men and women who were the source and focus of the Awakening. There could be nothing less "poetic," any more divorced from the standards of poetic diction of his day, or anything better adapted to the common ear than the opening lines of what I consider his finest hymn:

And can it be, that I should gain  
 An interest in the Saviour's Blood!  
 Died he for me?—who caused his Pain!  
 For me?—who him to death pursued.  
 Amazing love! how can it be  
 That thou, my God, shouldst die for me?<sup>25</sup>

Although not all of Wesley's hymns were so unselfconsciously direct and natural in their diction, a great many of his lyrics, and the majority of the ones which are still sung in the churches, employ the common words of men in natural syntax and natural forms.<sup>26</sup>

The naturalness of Wesley's hymns, the appeal of their relatively unrefined diction to common men, their great popularity, and their mutation under later hands in the course of their use has led George Sampson to call the process by which the hymns were used, "ballad-making in the very act."<sup>27</sup> And indeed balladry and Wesley's hymns have great similarity: poems for popular consumption, simple and direct, freed from the neo-classical artificiality of diction, and—in many instances—rising through clarity of thought, dramatic movement, and powerful emotion to the status of consequential poetry.

The emphasis by Wesley on the natural speech of natural men and the similarity of Wesley's practice to Wordsworth's poetic criticism have been noted by many scholars. As Thomas Quayle in his discussion of *Poetic Diction* states:

it may well be that these hymns [the Olney Hymns] together with those of Watts and Wesley, which by their very purpose demanded a mode of expression severe in its simplicity, but upon which were stamped the refinement and correct taste of the scholars and gentlemen who wrote them—it may well be that the more natural mode of poetic diction which thus arose gave to Wordsworth a starting point when he began to expound and develop his theories concerning the language of poetry.<sup>28</sup>

And of Wesley's preface to the 1780 hymn book, George Sampson says that "Wordsworth's later essay . . . goes little beyond John Wesley's."<sup>29</sup> Indeed, John Wesley's comments on his brother's

<sup>25</sup> In Baker, pp. 9-10.

<sup>26</sup> See the achingly beautiful "Come Thou long expected Jesus" or several of the verses in "Hark, how all the Welkin Rings," or the "Nancy Dawson" song—"The True Use of Music." In Baker, pp. 62, 12, 118.

<sup>27</sup> Sampson, p. 22; cf. also pp. 204, 215, 229. Sampson says that Isaac Watts lent a ballad-like status to English hymns.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Quayle, *Poetic Diction* (London: Methuen, 1924), p. 49.

<sup>29</sup> Sampson, "The Century of Divine Song," p. 221.

poetry are quite similar to Wordsworth's contention that the language of poetry should be "a selection of the language really spoken by men . . . dignified and variegated, and alive with metaphors and figures."<sup>30</sup> Wordsworth's "Lucy" poems, his sonnets and his blank verse, Coleridge's Odes and verse narratives, Keats' narratives, and Byron's occasional verse all evince a similar commitment to the language of men, although heightened and dignified, as the source for true poetry.

Charles Wesley, with the Romantics, rejected the artificiality, the aloofness, the autocracy of diction which dominated eighteenth century English poetry; in so doing, both Wesley and the Romantics freed themselves to deal with new subjects and emotions which had been banned under the iron rule of neo-classicism.

The fact that the closed couplet of eighteenth century poetry proved to be a major point of attack for the "Lake District" poets requires us to say something, briefly and inadequately, about Wesley's prosody. According to Sampson, he was "the most varied and audacious metrist of his time."<sup>31</sup> There are, in Frank Baker's anthology of Wesley's verse, over one-hundred different metres and rhyme-schemes catalogued.<sup>32</sup> This proliferation of metre and rhyme is almost incomprehensible when cast in the light of the eighteenth century, for in that age the closed couplet in iambic pentameter was the standard of almost all poetic effort. Most, if not all, of Pope's work is in the couplet; John Dryden's verse essays and most of his verse plays are in the couplet. For these geniuses to saddle themselves to the couplet did not significantly reduce poetic merit, but to many of the second and third-raters of the day, writing in the couplet was tantamount to a sentence of triviality or exquisite foppishness. Yet, in choosing *his* metrical and rhyme schemes, Charles Wesley drew on Hebraic, Miltonic, and English

<sup>30</sup> Wordsworth, p. 452.

<sup>31</sup> Sampson, "The Century of Divine Song," p. 219; cf. Vallins, p. 78, for a similar evaluation.

<sup>32</sup> Baker, pp. 396-403.

<sup>33</sup> Gill, p. 67. Nor was Wesley averse to using the forms of his neo-classical contemporaries. Sampson, "Century," p. 217, shows the obvious similarity of a Wesley hymn to an earlier lyric of John Dryden—the Song of Venus in the last act of *King Arthur*.

Dryden: Fairest Isle, all Isles excelling,  
           Seat of pleasures and of Loves;  
       Venus here will choose her Dwelling,  
           And forsake her Cyprian Groves.

Wesley: Love Divine, all loves excelling,  
           Joy of Heaven to Earth come down,  
       Fix in us thy humble dwelling,  
           All thy faithful mercies crown.



ballad forms; he used the rich resources of German chorals and reformation hymns as filtered through the Moravians; and he was, like Luther, not at all afraid to baptize the street songs and popular ditties of his day with sacred lyrics. As F. C. Gill has stated, Charles Wesley was indeed

one of that small but important group of pioneers that came between the formal metres of Dryden and Pope and the richer rhythms of Blake and the Romantics. The evidence clearly shows that Wesley, quite as much as, and possibly even more than, any other at that period, was displaying unusual lyrical enterprise and experiment, not merely producing . . . staid or stereotyped religious forms for congregational worship, but trying out every conceivable metre, and taking inspiration from a rich variety of sources.<sup>34</sup>

A brief word must be said about Wesley's rhymes, many of which (comforter-here, passion-exaltation, have-save, home-come) were only assonantal, sight, or false rhymes. In reality, this would be a fault only if the less than perfect rhymes interrupted or damaged the flow of the verse, and it is usually to sustain the movement of his lines that such imperfect rhymes are used, as in this memorable hymn:

Ye servants of <i>God</i> ,	Your master proclaim,
And publish <i>abroad</i>	His wonderful name,
The Name all-victorious	Of Jesus <i>extoll</i> ;
His kingdom is glorious,	And rules over <i>All</i> . <sup>35</sup>

In short, as G. H. Vallins summarizes the matter of rhyme:

Wesley was concerned above all with what he wanted to say, and what he wanted the people to sing—with piety rather than poetry; and if rhyme was an obstacle, then rhyme had to go.<sup>36</sup>

J. E. Rattenbury discusses at some length the reasons behind Wesley's metrical felicity in his *Evangelical Doctrines of Charles Wesley's Hymns*:

What caused him to seek out many metres was not chiefly his metrical ingenuity, but his efforts to get at the hearts of the people of England and to give them instruments wherewith to express their new and strange emotions.<sup>37</sup>

Particularly striking in their novelty were Wesley's anapaestic verses. The anapaestic foot, two unaccented syllables followed by an accented one, was thought by some to be better for the "light fantastic toe" than for worship.<sup>38</sup> Such a hymn as "Ye Heavenly

<sup>34</sup> Gill, p. 67.

<sup>35</sup> In Baker, p. 50.

<sup>36</sup> Vallins, p. 85; see also pp. 60-84 and Rattenbury, p. 56.

<sup>37</sup> Rattenbury, p. 37.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

Choir" shows us the potential for "ragtime" latent in such a form; but it also shows the mercurially swift movement of the verse to its conclusion in the sound Christian teaching (verse two):

All glory to God,  
 Who ruleth on high,  
 And now hath bestowed,  
 And sent from the sky,  
 Christ Jesus, the Saviour,  
 Poor mortals to bless;  
 The pledge of his favour,  
 The seal of their peace.<sup>39</sup>

When this anapaestic verse was used in longer lines of ten or eleven syllables, it began to almost trip over itself in rapidity of thought, and yet it never faltered in the exposition of spiritual truths:

Away with our fears,  
 Our troubles and tears!  
 The Spirit is come,  
 The witness of Jesus returned to his home.<sup>40</sup>

Again it is necessary to remember the contrast of this prosody to eighteenth century neo-classicism<sup>41</sup> and its similarity to much of the later Romantic School<sup>42</sup> to understand the great upheaval occurring in Charles Wesley's hymns.

Wesley's use of a great variety of metres was grounded in the necessity to express a great range of emotions. It was with the coming of new outbreaks of revival in 1745 that Wesley introduced his joyous and rollicking anapaests on a larger scale. As Rattenbury says:

He had to give people—the common people—some vent for emotions such as they had never experienced, emotion, not merely individual, but collective . . . Metres which danced and flew could do what was impossible to the elephantine tread of more stately measures.<sup>43</sup>

It was in the life and vitality of Wesley's hymns that many of the emotions generated by the great revivals were expressed. According

<sup>39</sup> In Baker, p. 54.

<sup>40</sup> In *ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>41</sup> As in Pope's "Eloisa to Abelard":

In these deep solitudes and awful cells,  
 Where heavenly-pensive Contemplation dwells,  
 And ever musing Melancholy reigns;  
 What means this tumult in a vestal's veins?

In Bredvold, *et al.* (eds.), p. 365.

<sup>42</sup> As in Byron's "The Destruction of Sennacherib":

And the might of the Gentile, unsmote by the sword,  
 Hath melted like snow in the glance of the Lord!

In Ernest Bernbaum, ed., *Anthology of Romanticism* (3rd ed.; New York: Ronald Press, 1948), p. 533.

<sup>43</sup> Rattenbury, p. 38.

to Rattenbury, Wesley's long anapaestic lines were ideal for expressing intense joy ("as is natural of metres which are jigs'"), the shorter anapaests were good for mystery and are called "mystical," the Common Measure, ballad forms are seen as inspiring rapturous worship ("O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing" and "Jesus, the Name High over all"); the Long Measure of four-foot lines is called the metre of solid sentiments ("Ye Simple Men of Heart Sincere/Shepherds who watch your flocks by night"); and the Short Measure of two three-foot, one four-foot, and another three-foot lines is called his "militant metre" ("Soldiers of Christ Arise").<sup>44</sup> Whether or not all these classifications could be borne out in systematic collation, it is obvious that the metrical forms which Wesley used were sufficient for most of the emotions released by the revival. In short,

The Methodist movement . . . was a protest against formalism. Fervour had gone out of the English Church. In its formularies there was life, but the formularies were a dead letter, and the life needed awakening.<sup>45</sup>

The revolt against formalism was very obvious in the metrical innovation of Wesley's hymns. This innovation, however, must be seen as Rattenbury and Sampson indicate, as the product of a more basic revolt against the aridity in the forms of Wesley's day; it was not a flight to innovation for its own sake and to its own ends. There was a renaissance of religious sensibilities underway in England, a rebirth in the totality of Christian conviction that required the means wherewith to run, and jump, and shout.

Did not the mighty emotion, the ecstatic joy of the Great Revival which was daily emancipating people from spiritual tyrannies need some exceptional vent? The chief reason for the disuse of such metres [today] in religious services is that no one is ecstatically happy enough to need them now.<sup>46</sup>

In degree these new Christian sensibilities were very similar to the emotions which came to lie at the root of English Romantic poetry. As Wordsworth said so trenchantly, "all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings."<sup>47</sup> Just as the infusion of this "powerful feeling" into Wordsworth's verse caused new forms and poetic patterns to emerge,<sup>48</sup> so the earlier infusion of "powerful feeling" into the life of the English Church had given a new shape and expression to English hymnody.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 39-44.

<sup>45</sup> Sampson, *Cambridge History*, p. 552.

<sup>46</sup> Rattenbury, p. 40.

<sup>47</sup> Wordsworth, p. 448. His further admonition that such emotion must be thought over long and hard will be discussed later.

<sup>48</sup> The Romantic Period saw an infusion of life into the ballad-forms, a resuscitation of all manner of lyrical forms, a rediscovery of the potential in blank verse and alexandrines, and a new birth of the ode in all its variations.

<sup>49</sup> Rattenbury, p. 32, claims that without the infusion of the emotions of Christianity, Charles Wesley would have remained a very ordinary poet. He would have remained "imprisoned in the chains of the heroic couplet."

In summary, it would seem very fair to call Wesley's verse romantic both in its use of the language of common men and its great freedom in its lyrical forms, a freedom sparked, like the later freedom of the Romantic School, by the intensity of emotion present in the poet. We must, however, delineate this connection in Wesley between emotion and poetry more clearly. And we must see in what sense this kind of emotion and its use may be called romantic.

Although it is regrettably true that "a large proportion of religious verse is poor stuff" and that "the average hymn is a by-word for forced feeble sentiment, flat conventional expression,"<sup>50</sup> religious insipidity is certainly not found in Wesley's verse. For in Wesley himself emotion of a fine and pure intensity was expressed in equally intense and, often, equally fine verse. In such a hymn as the following Wesley portrays unashamedly an emotional vigour of the deepest sort:

'Tis love! 'tis love! Thou diedst for me!  
I hear thy whisper in my heart;  
The morning breaks, the shadows flee,  
Pure, universal love thou art;  
To me, to all, thy bowels move;  
Thy nature and thy name is Love.<sup>51</sup>

Even to the most sceptical it should be obvious that the sentiments expressed in this hymn and so many others<sup>52</sup> were, at the least, evidences of profound psychological excitement. His conversion on May 21, 1738, and the message of grace, as read in Luther's *Commentary on Galatians*, which was finally realized that day, became the centre and energy of his life. There were no ecstasies high enough or profundities deep enough to explicate this event, but in the hymns he sought to marry the profundity of Christ's work to the ecstasy of his liberation. And he did this without mawkishness or sentimentality.

Both the poetry and the religion of Wesley's day had lost the capacity for ecstasy. In the Church the battle against the encroachments of the Enlightenment created a situation where "a moral paralysis had crept over the nation which prevented the gospel from displaying its real power";<sup>53</sup> in poetry many "were dominated

<sup>50</sup> Cecil, p. xi.

<sup>51</sup> Quoted in Gill, p. 68. [If the use of "bowels" in the sense of "mercies", common to the King James Version, Watts and Wesley, be intolerable to modern taste, then let "mercies" be substituted—but so much the worse for modern taste. ED.]

<sup>52</sup> See for example, the last stanza of "Christ the Lord is Risen Today," verses 3 and 5 of "Jesu, Lover of my Soul," "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing," "Soldiers of Christ Arise," verse 6 of "Ye Servants of God, Your Master Proclaim." These examples, culled haphazardly from Baker (pp. 15, 22, 23, 25, 45, 50) are merely suggestive of the nature of much of the tone of his hymns.

<sup>53</sup> Wood, p. 15.

by dry common sense and by sham ideals of gentility and propriety."<sup>54</sup> Within this situation, as J. A. Kay explains, Wesley was unabashed: "the sign of the Spirit's working is joy, and he is right to stress the importance of feeling in religion."<sup>55</sup> So great was the effect of May 21, 1738, on his life that "Charles Wesley wrote every one of his innumerable hymns as if he had never written another. Each seems the product of a renewed religious experience which he must proclaim."<sup>56</sup> And the poetic expression arising from such an experience must of necessity be liberated from the dilettantism, the recreation, and the exquisitely self-conscious preening of much eighteenth-century poetry. "Here are no viewless wings of poesie, but the visions and ecstasies of saints."<sup>57</sup>

Once again, many critics have been quick to see Wesley as unique in his time in this area as well as in his lyrical forms. Henry Bett, who in the early decades of the twentieth century focused attention on the viability of Wesley's hymns as poetry, was quick to point out that

for a period . . . from the death of Henry Vaughan to the youth of Robert Burns, the lyrical note was never heard in these islands. Fire and fervour, the sense of wonder, the arresting note of reality had all gone. Lyrical passion, sincerity and spontaneity reappear first of all in the Hymns of Methodism.<sup>58</sup>

The connection between "revival emotion" and the emotion of the later Romantic School has been well-noted. It has even been claimed:

In preaching a religious revival [the Wesleys] brought a psychological revolution; and when at last the romantic writers appeared on the stage, they found an audience already trained to understand them.<sup>59</sup>

In more judicious terms, Henry A. Beers, in his pioneering work on the eighteenth-century roots of Romanticism, has this assessment of the connection between the revivalists and the Romantics in their use of emotion:

It would be unphilosophical to consider [the English romantic movement] as a merely aesthetic affair, and to lose sight altogether of its deeper strings in the religious and ethical currents of the time. For it was, in part, a return of warmth and color into English letters; and that was only a symptom of the return of warmth and color—that is, of emotion and imagination—into English life and thought; into the Church, into politics, into philosophy. Romanticism, which sought to evoke from the past a beauty that it found wanting in the present, was but one phase of that revolt against the coldness

<sup>54</sup> Bredvold, *et al.*, p. xx.

<sup>55</sup> Kay, p. 10.

<sup>56</sup> Sampson, "The Century of Divine Song," p. 224.

<sup>57</sup> Gregory, p. 259.

<sup>58</sup> Henry Bett, as quoted in F. Brompton Harvey, "Methodism and the Romantic Movement," *The London Quarterly and Holborn Review*, CLIX (July, 1934), 292.

<sup>59</sup> Harvey, pp. 293, 295.

and spiritual deadness of the first half of the eighteenth century which had other sides in the idealism of Berkeley, in the Methodist and Evangelical revival led by Wesley and Whitefield . . .<sup>60</sup>

At the very minimum we may echo this statement of F. C. Gill: "The doctrine of feeling had travelled a long way in the fifty years which divide Wordsworth from Pope."<sup>61</sup>

The close similarity between the emotions of Wesley and those of the Romantics is perhaps nowhere more clearly intimated than in the striking parallel between a section of Wesley's "O Love Divine, How Sweet Thou Art" and Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind." Wesley says:

I thirst, I faint, I die to prove  
The greatness of redeeming love,  
The love of Christ to me.<sup>62</sup>

While Shelley, speaking of an entirely different theme, says:

I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!  
A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed  
One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud.<sup>63</sup>

The repetition of the first person, singular, the enjambment (Wesley's first two lines, Shelley's last two), the conclusive last line (Wesley's three-beats, Shelley's couplet) all work in concert to heighten the emotion expressed and the focus of the emotion on the speaker. The great difference in the objects of the speakers' emotions will occupy us later; for now it is enough to see that emotional intensity and a willingness to express that emotion in poetry are common to both Charles Wesley and the Romantics. This emotional fervor in Wesley is something "for which you search the contemporary poems of Pope in vain."<sup>64</sup>

In summary, the emotions of Charles Wesley in his hymns were not, in the usual terms of schematization, emotions of his time, but of the next.<sup>65</sup>

There is one final coordinate by which we are able to evaluate Wesley's romanticism, in relationship to his own time and the later

<sup>60</sup> Henry A. Beers, *A History of English Romanticism in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Henry Holt, 1898), p. 31.

<sup>61</sup> Gill, p. 160.

<sup>62</sup> Quoted in Sampson, "The Century of Divine Song," p. 211.

<sup>63</sup> In *Anthology of Romanticism*, p. 874.

<sup>64</sup> Sampson, "The Century of Divine Song," p. 211.

<sup>65</sup> Modern writers are not loath to score Wesley's heavy emphasis on emotional reaction. Rattenbury, p. 41, recognizes the threat of enthusiasm, but says, "the exuberance of life is always to be preferred to the rigidity of death and the propriety of the moribund." Kay, pp. x, xviii, notices the apparent inappropriateness of Wesley's emotional modes for our own day and says that Wesley sometimes seems to be sustaining emotion for its own sake; but Kay also says that the fear of emotion in our day may be as much of an error as any possible excess of emotion which shows up in Wesley's work.

Romantic period. Pope's *Essay on Man* is perhaps the sterling example of neo-classical poetry in the eighteenth century. Its measured sentiments, its balanced yet incisive perceptions, and—above all—its decorum mark it as the great representative of the classical ideal: detached, insightful, fair, proportionate, and truly general in its apprehension of reality. Pope is himself, as the poet, the arbiter, the balancer, the definer of perception and conception; in calmness and disinterest he will bring rationality out of the appearances of life. It is almost beyond comprehension, given the hegemony usually granted to prevailing literary taste, that Charles Wesley was almost a contemporary of Pope. For Wesley's verse is the antithesis of detachment; it pulsates with the life and experiences of the writer. It is difficult to read the following selections and to remember that these lines were written within the space of eight years.

Pope (1734)      Two principles in human nature reign:  
Self-love, to urge, and reason, to restrain.  
Nor this a good, nor that a bad we call,  
Each works its end, to move or govern all.<sup>66</sup>

Wesley (1742)      I need not tell Thee who I am,  
My misery or sin declare,  
Thyself hast called me by my name,  
Look on thy hands, and read it there.  
But who, I ask Thee, who art Thou?  
Tell me Thy Name, and tell me now.<sup>67</sup>

In contrast to the neo-classical desire to picture the general, the descriptive class, or the ideal, Wesley's "hymns are composed by Charles and are individualistically the utterance of his own personal experience."<sup>68</sup> And although there are other influences, such as Rousseau and the then current political *Zeitgeist*, there is no doubt that Wesley's hymns—and the whole Wesley-Whitefield revival—had great correspondence with what Gill calls, "the new emphasis on personality which is discernible so plainly in the Romantics."<sup>69</sup> The great poems of Romanticism are not about general man, but about individual men. Wordsworth's *Prelude*, sonnets, and his "Lucy" lyrics; Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner" and his monologic odes; the odes of Keats and Shelley; Byron's *Childe Harold*—all are intensely personal, and all focus on the self as the locus of experience and being of the greatest value.

The hymns of Charles Wesley are full of the supernatural transaction which we have already seen in "And Can it Be" and which abounds in his work from "Where Shall my Wondering Soul Begin"

<sup>66</sup> *Essay on Man*, II, 53-56 (in Bredvold, *et al.*, p. 374).

<sup>67</sup> From "Wrestling Jacob," in Baker, p. 38.

<sup>68</sup> Harvey, p. 237.

<sup>69</sup> Gill, p. 161.

to the end of his career. What happens to and in the self is of highest importance. It is no indiscretion, indeed it becomes an obligation, to centre the hymns around what Christ has done for *me*. The break with the accepted tradition is clear, the affinity to later Romantic writing is equally clear, although the question remains with this latter connection whether the focus on the self was done in the same manner and for the same ends in Wesley and the Romantics.

Thus we have seen that the hymns of Charles Wesley may definitely be classed as romantic in their literary qualities—the use of common, natural speech and a wide variety of poetic forms exercised with greatest metrical liberty. As well, we have seen the romanticism of Wesley in the free rein he gives to his emotions and his use of his own person and its experiences as a source for his poetry. By the standards which we have set up, Wesley was functioning not only to revive the flagging religious consciousness of his day, but also to “romanticize” it. We must now go on to see how beneficial this “romanticizing” was to the revival and, further, to inquire into the extent to which Wesley became “romanticized”—that is, whether his romanticism ended, as in Rousseau and sometimes in Shelley and Keats, in an orgy of feeling welling up from the self and good for nothing except for delightful, yet ultimately inconsequential, aestheticism.

## II. WESLEY'S ROMANTICISMS AND THE REVIVAL

In his *Religious Affections*, Jonathan Edwards makes it clear that intense emotions and elevated psychological reactions cannot play a central role in determining the salvation of an individual, particularly in times of Awakening when the depths of a person's being are being stirred up. Edwards, however, also goes on to state that true conversion must inevitably be connected with intense “affections” not as a criterion for salvation, but as a necessary adjunct to it.

Although to true religion there must indeed be something else besides affection; yet true religion consists so much in the affections, that there can be no true religion without them. He who has no religious affections, is in a state of spiritual death, and is wholly destitute of the powerful, quickening, saving influences of the Spirit of God upon his heart.<sup>70</sup>

In relation to Edwards' statement, it can be said that English religious life before the Wesleyan revival suffered on the one hand from a misuse of the affections (among some nonconformists such as the Friends) and, on the other hand, a dearth of them (in the life of the established church). The upshot of this situation was that for a majority of churchmen a proper and even necessary aspect of religious life, a free expression of affected emotion based

<sup>70</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, ed. by John E. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 120.



on the presence of Christ in one's life, had been tossed out, like the baby with the bath-water of enthusiasm.

This reaction, combined with the prevalence of the metrical psalms, fostered a situation ripe for a new type of hymn to accompany the movements of genuine spiritual vitality springing up from the ministry of Whitefield and the Wesleys. Aside from the hymns of Joseph Addison ("The Spacious Firmament on High") appearing in *The Spectator*, Isaac Watts' *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* was the first mature source of occasional hymns in English. Watts' "revolt from the long tyranny of the metrical psalm [which] gave us our first congregational hymns," became of central importance in English religious life when in Wesley's hymns "we pass from the narrow life of eighteenth-century Dissent to the larger area of the Anglican Church."<sup>71</sup> Wesley's first hymns, perhaps in deference to the usual metres of the metrical psalms, were mostly CM, LM, and SM, although as the revival fires began to burn more brightly, and as the old forms began to seem inadequate to contain the new fermentation, Wesley began his lyrical experimentation—in 1740 he introduced trochaic feet (long-short) into his lyrics and in 1742 he began the experiments in anapaestic verse which he continued throughout the 1740's.<sup>72</sup> This metrical liberation may be seen as a contemporary and practical affirmation of Jonathan Edwards' statement that true religion demanded true emotional response. In the face of the "suppressed emotion" and "the Arctic grip of the heroic couplet,"<sup>73</sup> Wesley provided for the awakening Church a vehicle diverse, sturdy, and evocative enough to express the awakened feelings of new or reviving Christians.

Wesley's hymns not only "brought back tenderness and passion into English verse,"<sup>74</sup> but did it in such a way that he gave speech to the whole multitude under the stimulating and emotive sway of the revival. The hymns of Charles Wesley told of a spiritual dialogue, beginning in words and ending beyond in the poet's participation in the love of Christ; yet when this dialogue became the subject of congregational singing, the hymns could "generate the same personal experience of the same personal salvation for tens of thousands of believers as they rejoice, pray, suffer, and seek full redemption."<sup>75</sup> The hymns, written as if they were "a daily confessional box," became the means by which the joys and fears, sorrows and triumphs of the whole revival were released and given song;<sup>76</sup> although the hymns most often said "I" and "me" and dealt

<sup>71</sup> Sampson, "The Century of Divine Song," pp. 200, 209.

<sup>72</sup> Rattenbury, pp. 33-34.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>74</sup> Gill, p. 63.

<sup>75</sup> Gregory, pp. 259, 257.

<sup>76</sup> Rattenbury, p. 21; see also pp. 20, 29.

with the most intimate spiritual situations, they were in essence a voice for thousands whose hearts were being "strangely warmed." By means of the hymns, the people could put their souls into their singing; and conversely, by means of the hymns Wesley desired that the words sung might return into the singers' souls.

For Wesley's hymns were to be not only a means by which spiritual affections could be expressed, but—more importantly—a way in which spiritual teaching could be impressed. The teaching ministry intended for the hymns is spelled out with precision in the Preface to the 1739 hymns: they are to be "a daily manual of doctrine and practice;" and they are to lead away from quietistic religion (in an obtuse and derogatory reference to the Moravians) to an active Christian life.<sup>77</sup> The 1780 Preface reiterates the same intention: "So that this book is, in effect, a little body of experimental and practical divinity."<sup>78</sup> The hymns were to teach; they were not literary artifacts produced as an end in themselves, but were poetry commissioned in a most non-literary cause—the spread of the Good News. Of Wesley's hymns and their relationship to the revival Rattenbury has said:

it must never be forgotten that everything he did and wrote was subordinated to a religious object, and that much of his poetry is really rhymed confession, or prayer, and only poetry by accident . . . Always he was primarily a preacher—both an evangelist and theologian—using verse for a preacher's purpose rather than a poet's. His work is a conclusive answer to those who prate of "art for art's sake".<sup>79</sup>

Part of the preacher's purpose was the encouragement of doctors, the consolation of women in childbirth, the comfort of appropriate remarks on making journeys, in national crises and celebrations, upon the visit of a friend, and even during the teething of a child<sup>80</sup>—all of these events or situations helped make up the source of his hymns.

The very abandonment of the stylized, disinterested metres of neo-classicism shows that Wesley was committed to teach truths that really mattered to people who really needed to be reached. The closed couplet, with all its measured grandeur and potential for expatiation upon general characteristics of general men, just would not do.<sup>81</sup> Rattenbury claims that Wesley's propensity for the ten or eleven syllable anapaest could be explained by the fact that this was a metre understood by, and congenial to, the common man.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Sampson, "Century," pp. 213-214.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221.

<sup>79</sup> Rattenbury, p. 55.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>81</sup> Cf. Sampson's comment in "Century," p. 231: "The poetic diction of Pope and his imitators was not the language of the eighteenth century. It was the *patois* of fashion, the temporary dialect of St. James's."

<sup>82</sup> Rattenbury, p. 38.

Ought not the work of the Lord be presented to the common man in as clear and lively a fashion as his drinking songs put frivolous fluff and dangerous temptations into his head? R.N. Flew summarizes the appeal of the hymns nicely and points to Wesley's reason for this popularizing:

it is worth remembering that one book which did strike home to the converted old boozier of the eighteenth century was *A Collection of Hymns for the People Called Methodists*, and that its compiler was not afraid of Systematic Biblical theology.<sup>83</sup>

Flew contends that many of Wesley's hymns were set in a systematic pattern of stated doctrine followed by exposition.<sup>84</sup> But whether or not this is the case, we must understand that for Wesley, "the hymn is the ordinary man's theology . . . It must present religious doctrine, religious duty, and religious mythology."<sup>85</sup> The simplicity of language, the directness of discourse, the use of slightly suspect, but very popular metrical forms as the vehicle of the lyrics, and the direct, often emotional participation or confrontation of the individual in the hymns—all these factors offered the castor oil of sound theology in a most palatable and most refreshing form. As Rattenbury summarizes the teaching ministry of the hymns:

[Wesley's] verses were a popular instrument for fixing the doctrines of the Revival in the minds of men as nothing else could, but they were not formal theological documents, but heartfelt songs of personally experienced doctrine and aspirations. In various ways they sang the Great Redeemer. They were experiential theology, but the theology never outweighed them; they were always the real songs of real men and women.<sup>86</sup>

In discussing Wesley's hymns, however, we would be remiss if we failed to distinguish between theology made into verse and living poetry which is generated by a theological cause. That is, many of Wesley's hymns are not particularly striking as poetic utterance, although they do contrive in a workmanlike fashion to convey theological truths. Such hymns as "Incarnated in Me"—

All-wise, all-good, almighty Lord,  
 Jesus, by highest heaven adored,  
 E'er time its course began,  
 How did Thy glorious mercy stoop  
 To take the fallen nature up,  
 When Thou thyself wert man?—

or "The Invitation"—

Sinners, obey the Gospel-Word;  
 Haste to the Supper of my Lord;  
 Be wise to know your gracious day:  
 All things are ready; come away!—

<sup>83</sup> Quoting Canon Charles Smyth, R. Newton Flew, *The Hymns of Charles Wesley* (London: Epworth, 1953), p. 10.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>85</sup> Sampson, "Century", pp. 199-200.

<sup>86</sup> In Baker, pp. 66, 85.

while they are fine evangelistic exhortations, lack the "meridian fire" which characterizes Wesley's best hymns. When such versified theology is clear and straightforward, when it avoids vacuousness or sentimentality (the Scylla and Charybdis of modern evangelical hymns), it can be a medium of high integrity for spiritual truths. It appears from my survey of Wesley's work that the majority of his later verse was of this type—they have cooled somewhat from the fever pitch of the earlier revival hymns, but their theology is basically sound and it can still function as an aid to the ministry of teaching in the Church. Such hymns ought not be disparaged, but we ought to recognize that they are beneath the first rank of Wesley's hymns. It is to this rank of first-rate hymns and their teaching role that we now turn, with just a small excursus to discuss Wesley's polemical hymns coming first.

Such verse was penned, for the most part, in the various surges of the Calvinist controversy. The first and penultimate stanzas of "Sufficient, Sovereign, Saving Grace" will be adequate to indicate the nature and quality of such hymns.

Father, whose *Everlasting Love*  
 Thy only Son for sinners gave,  
 Where Grace to *all* did *freely* move,  
 And sent Him down a *World to save*.  
 Still shall the HELLISH DOCTRINE stand?  
 And Thee for its dire Author claim?  
 No—let it sink at thy command  
 Down to the pit from whence it came.<sup>87</sup>

It is doubtful if the hymns of this nature ever attain to anything more than versed contention. The relative absence in such verse of a direct form of address which speaks to the common problems of ordinary men and women reminds one more of Pope's acerbic *Dunciad* than of Wesley's own "Jesu, Lover of My Soul" or "Soldiers of Christ Arise." It is to such hymns that we must now turn to see the finest examples of Wesley's theological pedagogy.

The end result of the teaching conveyed by Wesley's finest hymns, as T. S. Gregory states,

is not "orthodoxy or right opinion," which, as John Wesley holds, "is at best a very slender part of religion, if it can be allowed to be any part at all"; it is to put on Christ, to be *in* the heavenly Lamb, to be wrapped in his crimson vest.<sup>88</sup>

Wesley's hymns call the singer or listener to the realities of Christ, and, once there, seeks to make the theological and historical realities of Christianity real within a person's life. The hymns

<sup>87</sup> In *ibid.*, pp. 29-31. [So sound a Calvinist as B. L. Manning recognised that the teaching attacked in every line of this hymn was a "debased Calvinism," not the genuine article (*The Hymns of Wesley and Watts*, p. 18). ED.]

<sup>88</sup> Gregory, p. 261.

teach facts to the head, but in singing, feeling, and participating in the best of them, the facts or experiences sung may be believed as fact or witnessed as personal experience. The intense application of the romantic first person singular in the hymns seeks to make that which is related in the hymn a part of the participant; the goal is "to find the fulfilment of the heavenly Father's will in *me*, in every *me*."<sup>89</sup>

The accomplishment of this goal depends in part on the receptivity of the individual, but if the hymn is powerful enough, if while creating great movement, energy, and emotion it is still grounded in the Christian verities, then the hymn can create its own climate of receptivity in the singer's heart; the hymn can, by the nature of its message and the force of its vehicle, become itself the means of awakening. When singing of "Jesu, Lover of my Soul," the love of Christ may actually be realized in the soul far beyond the mere acknowledgement that, yes, Jesus does indeed love souls; when singing "Soldiers of Christ Arise," the singer may realize not only that he should as a soldier of Christ get up and on the work, but in the singing he may actually be led to the work. As Gregory says, "often the reluctant observer is drawn into the play."<sup>90</sup> Gregory continues on to call Wesley's best hymns "dramatic" and claims that they enshrine the "primitive shape of liturgy" and, in their tension (a responsible person in a divinely ordered world), "the immemorial theme of tragedy." But because, in the substance of this "liturgy" and the theme of the "tragedy," "there is no fiction or fable, . . . the preaching does not instruct but creates: it is a function not of knowing but of being."<sup>91</sup> The rarest beauty and finest pleasure in Wesley's hymns does not lead to an appreciation of his poetry but rather of the reality from which the poetry springs. And in Wesley's verse this was invariably the love of God in Christ. His finest hymns along with the others taught doctrine; but these led as well to a quickening of the doctrine into life. His finest hymns, when sung in the proper attitude and under the proper conditions, do much more than teach a truth; they present that truth fleshed-out, three-dimensional, and alive for the singer.

Beyond the specific doctrines and experiences related by the hymns, the community participation in the hymns taught, as no specific sermon could, the value and necessity of the Christian Body. Sampson ranks Wesley with Watts as the English writers who best comprehended "the special work a congregational hymn has to do; and that work may be called the creation of a sense of

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 262.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 251.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 261.

belonging to a continuing fellowship."<sup>92</sup> The Methodists understood the deep theological implications of the German proverb: "SPRICH, und du bist mein Mitmensch, SINGE, und wir sind Brüder und Schwestern."<sup>93</sup> In such hymns as "One Church, Above, Beneath," "At Meeting of Friends," and in most of his funeral hymns the sense of unity in Christ is hymned in didactic song, even as it is practiced in the very singing of the song.

The romantic elements in Charles Wesley's hymns—his use of simple diction and a wide variety of popular metres, his intense emotion and unabashed presentation of personal experiences and feelings—were of inestimable worth in enabling the hymns to play their pivotal role in the revivals. Largely through these romantic means the ecstasies of new-found freedom in Christ were again given voice, sound theology in pleasing and memorable form was made available to common men, and—through the best of the hymns—spiritual realities were infused into the body, soul, and spirit of the singer. These hymns strained as close to mystical rapture as a system grounded on facts of history and sustained by its preaching would allow.

It may, however, be a legitimate question whether the intense personal preoccupation, and the liberation of the emotions did not in fact become truly mystical—detached from the content of the faith and floating beyond the range of utterance. Or, in secular terms, we might ask whether the romantic tendencies in Wesley's hymns carried his verse to such extremes that the expression of the self and its own emotions became ends in themselves, the *raison d'être* of the literary product, and not the means to some other end. The problem grows in magnitude when we observe the origin, goals, and use of emotion in the later writers we more normally think of as Romantic. The paper's final section will deal with a comparison of Wesley's romanticism and the romanticism of the Romantics.

### III. THE ROMANTICISM OF WESLEY AND THE ROMANTICS

There are many incidental and overt differences between the romanticisms of Wesley and the later Romantics: for one thing, Wesley did not exhibit the fondness for nature that was a trademark with the Romantics;<sup>94</sup> nor did he emphasize the non-religious happenings of every day life as the Romantics had done. Overt, yet insignificant, similarities include a predilection for children's poems and poems describing events of childhood (Wesley's *Hymns*

<sup>92</sup> Sampson, "Century," p. 230.

<sup>93</sup> "Speak, and you are my fellow-man; sing, and we are brother and sister".

<sup>94</sup> Gill, p. 68. Gill, p. 54, does note some favourable comments on nature in John Wesley's notebooks, but this is all he discovered in either brother in this regard.

for Children, Blake's *Songs of Innocence*, Wordsworth's "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality"), and an interest in the various aspects of death (Wesley's numerous funeral hymns, Keats' "When I Have Fears that I May Cease to Be" and "Isabella, or the Pot of Basil," Shelley's "Adonais," Byron's *Sardanapalus*).

In seminal matters the origins of Wesley's romanticism and that of the Romantics seem to diverge quite radically. Both, it is true, wrote under the stimulus of extreme emotion, but the cause of the emotion in each was different. For Wesley, a transcendent God had entered the course of his life and liberated him from the weight of sin and death; from this original fact, and from the revealed system of doctrine which enabled Wesley to speak of this fact and all the other operations of God in the world, arose the emotion that fathered the hymns. In contrast, the source of emotions for the Romantics were generally (although not exhaustively<sup>95</sup>) located in the immanent world of nature, inter-personal relationships, or in the person himself.

The epistemological source for Wesley's emotion was "his supernatural empiricism."<sup>96</sup> As is so clear in Wesley's first great hymn, it is the divine-human transaction which has occurred that is the source and fountain of his song.

Where shall my wond'ring soul begin?

.....  
How shall I equal triumphs raise,

And sing my great Deliverer's praise!<sup>97</sup>

And then, more than just his own encounter with God, the wonder, beauty, and majesty of the divine plan for all men became the source for his hymns; Lord David Cecil claimed that it was just this inspiration which Wesley gained from his creed that compensated for, and overcame, his technical deficiencies as a poet.

Evangelicalism, with its emphasis on the mysterious and awful doctrines of the Christian faith, of original sin, redemption by Christ's blood, final perdition, represents a violent reaction against the cool, unenthusiastic common sense of orthodox eighteenth-century devotion. And it imbues [Wesley's] hymns with a passion, a murky thunder-light, that makes them stirring out of all proportion to their literary merit.<sup>98</sup>

Wesley saw in God a source of great love, holiness, and power,<sup>99</sup> and it was this vision that inspired his finest poetic efforts.

As would only be fitting, the poetry drawing its energy and emotions from God's dealing with men drew inevitably upon the

<sup>95</sup> See such poems by Coleridge as "The Ancient Mariner" or "Christabel" and Wordsworth's "Holy Sonnets."

<sup>96</sup> Gregory, p. 253.

<sup>97</sup> In Baker, p. 3.

<sup>98</sup> Cecil, p. xxiv.

<sup>99</sup> Cf. Kay, pp. viii-ix.

Bible as a source of both form and content for his hymns. Rattenbury is particularly impressed with the emphasis on the Bible; of this emphasis he has said that "Holy Scripture was his sole literary inspiration," that Wesley "took into his hands the pure gold of the Bible and wrought it into a glittering chain," and that as a source for his work "sound biblical scholarship . . . is more important than his interesting uses of classical and contemporary poetry."<sup>100</sup> Of both the Wesleys, Gregory adds: "They could and in effect did live in the Bible. They could think in sacred images without misgiving and hold them as facts."<sup>101</sup> A perusal of a hymn such as "Will God Appear to Me," shows some of Wesley's tie to Scriptures. Frank Baker quotes Dr. W. F. Moulton as saying there are fifty references to the Bible in the poem's thirty-two lines.<sup>102</sup> The second verse is typical; I have marked the Biblical referents I could find:

Will He forsake his throne above (Phil. 2: 7),  
Himself to worms (Job 25: 6) impart?  
Answer, thou Man of grief (Isa. 53: 3) and love,  
And speak into my heart.

Wesley's vision was fixed on the transcendent God acting in history. The form of the Bible shaped the form of his writing; its content was virtually his only theme.

Although the brighter emotional expressions of the Romantics seem very close to Wesley's in timbre, style, and intensity, their source is (usually) very different. Nature's manifold and splendid manifestations became Wordsworth's most frequent theme; Byron drew on the ironies of history; and sources for all the Romantics were found in most secular areas of life. Yet in such a poem as Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," Keats' "Grecian Urn," or Shelley's "To a Skylark" it is obvious that the external event, the efficient cause of the poem, is superseded by the final cause, which is an examination of the poet's own inner state. In "Kubla Khan" Coleridge begins to relate the story of the "pleasure dome" which Kubla built in the land of Xanadu and of his vision of "a damsel with a dulcimer." But in the poem's last stanza Coleridge exhibits his desire to make a poem as mysterious and marvellous as the land of Xanadu and the river Alph. The external event is internalized, allegorized even, in terms of the poet and his own sensibilities. There is no retention of an external factor in the poem's ultimate significance—it is just such an external factor, God, which Wesley always retained in his hymns.

In Keats' great odes the movement of the verse is most often from an external perception or event to an internal statement by

<sup>100</sup> Rattenbury, pp. 48, 50, 47.

<sup>101</sup> Gregory, p. 255.

<sup>102</sup> In Baker, p. 48.



the poet of his relationship to an eternal verity. In the "Grecian Urn" the focus is the picture etched on the urn, but by the end of the poem we have come to feel Keats' own transitoriness and his relation to Beauty and Truth, which the urn—apparently impervious to time—proclaims.

Shelley's "To a Skylark" moves likewise from an external reference ("Hail to thee, blithe spirit!") to an internal dénouement ("Teach me half the gladness / That thy brain must know, / Such harmonious madness / From my lips would flow, / The world should listen then—as I am listening now"). The bird in relation to the poet is internalized, the poet (as perceiver) becomes the focus of the poem and the centre of its meaning. The preceding comments are not meant to denigrate these great works; they only seek to show the contrast to Wesley's emotion which, although it arose in the poet, flew as its final vocation to Another.

The purposes to which Wesley and the Romantics bend their romanticisms are dissimilar as well. The didactic purposes of Wesley's hymns have already been illustrated. T. S. Gregory has aptly summarized Wesley's purposes: "he draws a common language for a common people who approach the eternal throne and claim the crown, each in the first person singular."<sup>103</sup> Wesley's hymns are to draw those that sing to God. It is altogether different with the Romantics. To be sure, the Romantics had like Wesley a dynamic and driving goal. They had no truck with the disinterested poesy of neo-classicism. T. S. Eliot has said of Wordsworth: "It is Wordsworth's social interest that inspires his own novelty of form in verse, and backs up his explicit remarks upon poetic diction."<sup>104</sup> This social purpose (perhaps a sign of republicanized times, perhaps the final filtration of the Enlightenment) was, most unlike Wesley's, however, to examine the sources of life and beauty available to all men and the potential in all men to comprehend this life and beauty. To the later Romantics (Shelley, Keats, and Byron) the didactic objective had become (in many poems) the exploration of the self and its relationship to a world which could be made alive in the encounter with the poet. Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* is perhaps the finest example, certainly the longest, of the teaching that points to the resources within man's being and the necessity of drawing on these resources in order to find true freedom. Shelley's "Euganean Hills," his "West Wind," Keats' "Ode to Psyche" and "Ode on Melancholy," Byron's "Prisoner of Chillon" and *Mazeppa*—all show similarly the didactic centre of much Romantic verse: external events being internalized in the poet's struggle

<sup>103</sup> Gregory, p. 256.

<sup>104</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London: Faber & Faber, 1933), p. 74.

toward truth, beauty, or reality. It was, without quibble, certainly Wesley who sang his Redeemer's praise; but, unlike the Romantics, it was also true, without quibble, that his *Redeemer* existed as an external reality which was not being manipulated by Wesley in the definition of himself. Such integrity in the object that was sung in verse was not regarded nearly so highly in most of the works of the great Romantics.

A further difference in the romantics of Wesley and the Romantics lies in the distancing of the self from the emotional involvement. Wesley's hymns were as spontaneous as they could possibly be. The picture of Wesley racing home on his horse and calling for pen and paper as he leaps to dismount is cited in most every account of his life. This spontaneity, its origin in the emotions, and its effects on his poetry have been mentioned above; and Rattenbury summarizes what has been said quite nicely.

It may seem to be an irony to say that his greatest hymns were written in the period when he was primarily a flaming evangelist, but it is, I think, true, although his most carefully modelled hymns were generally of later date.<sup>105</sup>

Spontaneity was also prized by the Romantics, but if we remember Wordsworth's original dictum, the spontaneous feelings were to be found in a poet who "had also thought long and deeply."<sup>106</sup> Wordsworth's own "Tintern Abbey" is perhaps the finest example of a poet thinking long and deeply over his original feelings. In Shelley and Keats the discipline of reflecting long and deeply over the emotions was abandoned to such an extent that J. S. Mill called Shelley the poet born and Wordsworth the poet made.<sup>107</sup> But the dissection of the emotions was a prominent theme in Coleridge ("Depression: An Ode", "This Lime Tree Bower My Prison") and in Byron (*Childe Harold III & IV* and *Don Juan*). Once romantic sensibilities have been set loose from any exterior reality, once they begin to focus on the self, the movement to a certain jadedness or ironic exhaustion may be noted.

There is nothing in the emotion of romanticism, if its object is itself, to prevent frustration and, ultimately, absurdity and despair. The retreat in the nineteenth century from self-conscious romanticism into some kind of Establishment pattern (as with Tennyson and Browning) saved some poets from this frustration and despair. The persistence of self-contained emotion by other poets (Swinburne and Hardy) did ultimately result in despair or a

<sup>105</sup> Rattenbury, p. 46.

<sup>106</sup> Wordsworth, p. 448.

<sup>107</sup> In Abrams, p. 24.

search for new alternatives of hope.<sup>108</sup> The malaise growing out of the Romantics' intense emotionalism and its focus on the self was foreign to Charles Wesley. For he had an infallible and all-powerful external reference point. He had no need to refer his emotions back onto himself or to use his emotions to explain and free the self; for he was trusting in the reality of God, in which reality his own reality attained a substantial, yet derivative meaning. In short, because of his reliance on and being in God, he is free from the "I"-problems of some of the later Romantics.

Charles Wesley is not an individual with that intense egoism which poets assume in highly cultivated society and especially since the Renaissance. He does not seek originality or cherish his own insights but observes a regular grammar, and like the Psalmists or Homer . . . , is conceded in utterance.<sup>109</sup>

It remains then, having examined differences in the source, purpose, and self-distancing nature of the romanticisms of Charles Wesley and the Romantics, to contrast the final nature of the romanticisms. In brief, Wesley's romantic tendencies were by their very nature a response to a transaction occurring between Wesley and God, who was a reality external to himself; the poetic works resulting from this confrontation used all the lively and persuasive means at Wesley's command to express the reality of this encounter and to show the relation of the existential encounter to the propositional content of the biblical revelation. On the other hand, Romanticism at its most extreme was a reaction to essentially internal events which may or may not be casually related to external realities; the poetry that resulted from such experience found its end in its being expressed and, if it had any external didactic purpose at all, it proposed to illuminate the depth of the personality and the powers latent in it.<sup>110</sup>

If the story may be believed, it took the goading of a layman to encourage Charles Wesley to finish his "Where Shall my Wondering Soul Begin," so great was his desire to avoid ostentation and egoistic pretension.<sup>111</sup> The attitudes of Coleridge in "Kubla Khan," Keats in "Hyperion," Shelley in "West Wind," and even

<sup>108</sup> The same mellowing and decay of romantic sensibility into irony or worse can be seen in Germany in the work of Heine and the later naturalistic school.

<sup>109</sup> Gregory, p. 256.

<sup>110</sup> The "at its most extreme" qualification is quite important; for much of the work of particularly Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Byron has these tendencies only latently; and in all fairness, some of Wesley's work certainly tended, in some ways, in the same direction. Again it must be stressed that one could have the highest respect and greatest love for Romantic poetry at even "its most extreme." But the cognitive knowledge of the poetic cosmologies involved is a most important restraint to bear in mind.

<sup>111</sup> Haas, p. 4.

Wordsworth in "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality" are very different; in these poems the emphasis is upon the poetic self and the possibility, the golden dream of some higher and finer reality for the self. This preoccupation with one's own state of being, independent of external relations, characterizes the poetry of the Romantics much more consistently than the poetry of Charles Wesley.

Wesley was no less enraptured by his theme than the Romantics by theirs, but (again in its extreme manifestation) the Romantics' theme was themselves, while Wesley's was Christ: "My heart is full of Christ, and longs / Its glorious matter to declare."<sup>112</sup> In the extremes of Romanticism,

the poetry must be true not to the object, but to "the human emotion." Thus severed from the external world, the objects signified by a poem tend to be regarded as no more than a projected equivalent—an extended and articulate symbol—for the poet's inner state of mind . . . The poet's audience is reduced to a single member, consisting of the poet himself.<sup>113</sup>

Any didactic or social effect poetry might have is strictly incidental to its being as expression. As Shelley said: "A poet is a nightingale who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician."<sup>114</sup>

Reality, in this extreme Romanticism, is contained in the self; it is a full complement of the Enlightenment's conception of the self-sufficiency of man. From the self came the objects of emotion and of poetry, an emotion and a poetry whose only intrinsic functions are expressive or cathartic. To such a Romanticism, Wesley's rapture with the love of God and His grace would be absurd; for the self is sufficient unto itself and possesses all the means for its self-understanding and self-fulfillment.<sup>115</sup> The movement from Wesley and the external source of his romanticism to the internalized romanticism of the Romantics is part of the movement which C. S. Lewis has called the "great process of Internalisation." As he puts it, "always, century by century, item after item is transferred from the object's side of the account to the subject's."<sup>116</sup>

<sup>112</sup> In Rattenbury, p. 56.

<sup>113</sup> Abrams, pp. 24-25.

<sup>114</sup> In *ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>115</sup> My ideas in this area have been influenced by Irving Babbitt and his book *Rousseau and Romanticism* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1917). What Babbitt called "the beautiful soul" is what I have taken to be Romanticism at its most extreme: "The doctrine of the beautiful soul is at once a denial and a parody of the doctrine of grace; a denial because it rejects original sin; a parody because it holds that the beautiful soul acts aright, not through any effort of its own but because nature acts in it and through it even as man in a state of grace acts aright not through any merit of his own but because God acts in him through him" (p. 133).

<sup>116</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), p. 215.

The great difference between Wesley and the Romantics was not their usage of common modes of expression (direct, common discourse and lyrical liberation) and common foci of attention (the self and its emotions), but was the clear perception by Wesley of the reality and importance of the God of the Bible (Wesley's efficient and final causes) contrasted with the Romantics' tendency to see the self as both the formal and final cause of their work—the object of poetry, its mode of expression, and its purpose were all internalized. While it is true that in both Wesley and the Romantics we observe a "Renascence of Wonder," an "emancipation of the ego," and "vital and immediate feeling,"<sup>117</sup> the wonder, ego and feeling of Wesley are bound up in God; the wonder, ego and feeling of the Romantics tended to be bound up within themselves.

#### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we could liken Wesley's hymns to an object on the end of a whirling string—moving in great whorls and swoops, increasing its speed as it moves away from its source, but always tied down securely to its centre, defining itself (however brilliant its manoeuvres) by the course it takes around that centre. The Romantics appear to be the same: vast circular movement, with exciting dances and dips, exhilarating acceleration and originality; but upon closer inspection we see that no cord binds the Romantic to any centre, no reality except its own being defines the arc of its sweeps and curves; it is an object existing in its own right, determined by the whims of its own movement, sustained by whirl.

The romanticisms of Wesley helped to infuse life into a thirsting Church; his romanticisms, however, never presumed to become independently Romantic; for they were bound to, guided by, and directed toward the appearance of God in Christ and the eternal meaning of that appearance for every single man.

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<sup>117</sup> Harvey, p. 292. Harvey's article, in my opinion, suffers from its non-reflective identification of common romanticisms in Wesley and the Romantics. He says for example (p. 293): "If . . . by Romantic we mean the note in poetry, in art, in life, when it rises from the traditional or imitative level to the climaxes of inspiration, when to those wrapped in the commonplace of daily use, the immeasurable heavens break open to their highest, are we not entitled to claim Methodism as being not only a prelude, but one of the main causes of the new springtime in literature?" Such a statement is blind to the great difference between the cause and goal of Wesley's poetry when compared to the Romantics' poetry. Harvey sees the similarity in appearances correctly, but he ought not to transfer this identity to the substance underlying the appearances.