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Romanticism and Methodism: The Problem of Religious Enthusiasm

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by Helen Boyles

THIS IS AN INTRIGUING AND RATHER COURAGEOUS BOOK. Helen Boyles is not the first to explore links between Methodism and Romanticism, but her study stands out for its breadth of range and its ingeniously selected comparative texts. The preface lists her predecessors in the field: F. C. Gill, *The Romantic Movement and Methodism* (1937), R. E. Brantley, *Wordsworth's Natural Methodism* (1975), and various more recent works by Jon Mee (to whom Boyles pays particular tribute). Boyles, herself from a Methodist family, claims that her exploration of relationships between eighteenth-century Methodism and nineteenth-century Romanticism has exposed in the writings of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Hazlitt, "significant echoes of the voice of religious evangelism" (182).

An introductory chapter faces the challenge of reconciling the various eighteenth-century meanings of "enthusiasm." Johnson's *Dictionary* offers "a vain belief in private revelation; a vain confidence of divine favour; heat of imagination; violence of passion; elevation of fancy; exaltation of ideas." Dryden's *A Parallel of Poetry and Painting* (1680) had described the poetic imagination as "in itself the very height and life of poetry, which by a kind of enthusiasm, or extraordinary exaltation of the Soul, makes it seem that we behold those things which the poet paints" (4). Such a protean definition sometimes makes it hard to know when like is being compared with like.

It is undeniable that both the Wesleys and Wordsworth were accused of enthusiasm, and that both John Wesley and Wordsworth sought to distance themselves from the embarrassing excesses of Methodist field preachers and their excitable audiences. Wesley's preaching, as well as George Whitefield's, produced in audiences the paroxysms that in pre-Freud centuries so dismayed non-Methodist observers. Robert Southey, in his *Life of Wesley* (1820) described the paroxysms as "a bodily disease, peculiar and infectious" (*Wesley* 1:237). Coleridge shared Southey's distaste for populist enthusiasm, and one of the most instructive chapters of Boyles's book is her detailed examination of Coleridge's marginalia in his own copy of Southey's *Wesley*.

Some of Coleridge's marginal comments are well known: "How 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!" (55). Also familiar is Coleridge's objection to Wesley's ego-centric emphasis and his view that it was

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"an unsafe book for all of unsettled minds" (55). In other marginalia, Coleridge applauds Methodism's Arminian insistence on free grace as opposed to Calvinistic predestination. He seeks a scientific cause for paroxysms, while admitting that "if I believe these experiences can be solved pathologically, it is not for want of a strong *inclination* to believe the contrary" (69). Coleridge accepts the religion of the *heart*: "Either Christian faith is what Wesley here describes, or there is no proper meaning in the word" (68). And in *The Friend*, Coleridge calls for "true Christian Enthusiasm" in accordance with the Greek definition of "possession by the divine" (68). Southey, although deploring Methodism's emotional excesses and fearing its schismatic tendency, gave it full credit for the civilizing impact it had on the lower orders of society (72).

Henry Rack's history of the rise of Methodism (1989) accords Wesley the title of *Reasonable Enthusiast*. Boyles devotes her first two chapters to John Wesley's ambivalent attitude to religious enthusiasm. Ambivalence is understandable in view of Wesley's background as fellow and tutor of Lincoln College, Oxford—a post he abandoned on his return from America after failing to convert the Native Americans of Georgia. It was George Whitefield, an Oxford graduate and a theatrical preacher, whose sermons provoked the grosser excesses of religious enthusiasm. Wesley was initially dubious about Whitefield's field preaching, admitting that he had at first been "so tenacious of every point relating to [decency and] order that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin if it had not been done in a church" (17).

Wesley had severed himself from Whitefield's Calvinistic Methodism by 1741, but until Whitefield's death in 1770 Wesley suffered guilt by association—as Hogarth's famous 1762 etching, "Credulity, Superstition and Fanaticism" on the book's front cover suggests. What Boyles shows in these two Wesleyan chapters is that the Wesleys believed in "good" enthusiasm, but not "false enthusiasm." Citing John Wesley's sermon *The Nature of Enthusiasm*, first published in 1750, she thinks it "prefigured Wordsworth's distinction between a religion of outward observance and inward conviction" (18). Wesley disowns a conventional kind of Christianity, which is merely "a relishing of form, a round of outward duties performed in a decent, regular manner … a system of right opinions, yea and a quantity of heathen morality." Whereas, "if you aim at the religion of the heart, if you talk of 'righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost,' then it will not be long before your sentence is passed. 'Thou art beside thyself'" (18). Among such critics was William Warburton, Bishop of Gloucester, who considered it "enthusiasm or fanaticism" to talk of "new birth," Wesley replied that new birth was "that great change which God works in the soul when he brings it into life," and went on to argue that "every reasonable Christian may discern the mental 'disorder' of a false enthusiast" (19).

Boyles next examines the Wesleys' communicative method as exhibited in sermons and hymns. She commends John Wesley's commitment to clarity, while she denies that simplicity of expression implies simplicity of ideas. Walter Scott considered Wesley's sermons "vastly too colloquial," but Boyles

responds that "this colloquialism was obviously more evident in the uneducated itinerants on the Methodist missionary circuit" (27). Yet Wesley comes close to what Boyles calls "a more broadly secular interpretation of enthusiasm," echoing the creative energy of Homer and Virgil, which he pictures as "an unconscious rigour of thought, a peculiar fervour of spirit, a vivacity and strength not to be found in common men" (165). She believes that this brings Wesley close to Wordsworth's "union of the secular and sublime" (22).

It was Whitefield whom Bishop Lavington laughingly described as "flying upon the wings of inspiration, and talking sublimity in apostolic tones" in *The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists Compar'd* (31). But Boyles commends Wesley's "different, but equally powerful charisma of personal presence" (31). Charisma there must have been, for Wesley's words are not particularly moving in cold print. He urged a restrained pulpit style on his preachers, advising them not to slap their hands or thump the pulpit, to ensure that their hands were "not in perpetual motion," and to speak in public "just as you do in common conversation" (32).

Boyles agrees that Charles Wesley's hymns unite "the disciplined restraint of classicism with the emotional power commonly associated with Romanticism" (43). She cites John Wesley's praise of his brother's hymns: "Here is style! How clear, how pure, proper, strong! … no stiffness, no hard words, no apparent art, no affectation" (43). John nevertheless felt he needed to edit his brother's hymns, rejecting language (says Boyles) "not so much of feminine sensibility, but of effeminate sentimentality" (47). This second chapter on the Methodism of the Wesleys closes by noting that the brothers "in common with Wordsworth later, favoured a plain style over superficial elegance, for its qualities of clarity and truthfulness." They clearly wanted to avoid being associated with the "irrational emotionalism with which the language and religion of the heart were persistently identified" (49).

Four chapters focus on Wordsworth's poetic version of "the language and religion of the heart." Did Wordsworth ever go beyond what might be called the God of *Tintern Abbey*? Boyles explores Wordsworth's affinity with John Wesley's Methodism by comparing the two men's "commitment to authentic religious experience, and the ambivalence they both betrayed in attempts to harmonise the claims of reason and emotion" (81). She begins by charting supposed Methodist influences in Wordsworth's early life and education. The impact of Methodism on Wordsworth's childhood must be largely speculative. Boyles relies on the numerous Methodist chapels surviving in Cumbria and on the fact that Wesley's five visits to Cockermouth made a particularly marked impression on Wordsworth's home town. She suggests that "it is more than likely that the young Wordsworth, whose home fronted the street, would have seen, or at least heard Wesley and his followers" (82). But in those early years, Wordsworth spent long periods with relatives at Penrith (from the age of three) or boarding at Hawkshead Grammar School. Both at Hawkshead and at St John's College, Cambridge, attendance at Anglican worship would have

been part of his corporate life. Admittedly, the Anglican evangelical Charles Simeon was then dominant at Cambridge, and Wordsworth undoubtedly had Cambridge Methodist friends.

While Boyles finds "no evidence of any explicit allegiance to evangelical creeds on Wordsworth's part," she suggests that poems like *The Prelude* "show more emotional affinity with the revelatory inspiration of evangelical culture than with formal orthodoxy, or with secular pantheism" (81). She suggests a complementary resonance between the Methodist boast "I was blind but now I see," which Wesley describes as an "argument of which a peasant, a woman, a child might feel all the force" (82), and Wordsworth's 1800 preface to *Lyrical Ballads*: "Low and rustic life was generally chosen because in that situation the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can find their maturity." The analysis concludes with the uncontestable claim that Wordsworth "shared Wesley's commitment to the language of the heart insofar as there was plain expression of honest emotion" (88).

Boyles pursues her thesis with some ingenuity by comparing two prefaces: Wordsworth's 1800 preface to *Lyrical Ballads* and Wesley's 1779 preface to the *Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists*. Boyles does not claim that Wordsworth ever saw Wesley's preface, but she believes that the 1800 preface "has a similar emphasis and aim" (91). Wordsworth's preface condemns the contemporary literary fashion for "frantic novels, sickly and stupid German tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse," while Wesley's insists that poetry, cannot be acquired by "art or labour" but is "the gift of nature" (96). Boyles points to Wesley's emphasis on the moral value of the collected hymns as a public declaration of a united faith, and thus (as with *Lyrical Ballads*) "a vital instrument of change" (98). She concedes that Charles Wesley's hymns "were firmly grounded in an explicitly Christian faith, while Wordsworth avoided identifying with a defined creed and rejected claims for specific religious guidance" (104).

Boyles defines the "common voice" in both prefaces as "their commitment to the 'common' in the sense of shared human values and the 'common' of *simplicity* against a false sophistications of sentiment and style" (106). Noting that the negative connotation of "common" dominates the critical reaction to Wordsworth's experimental poetic, she shows that the critical response to *Lyrical Ballads* is "contradicted but also unexpectedly confirmed by Wordsworth's own contradictory apologies for his method" (105). Pre-eminent among the critics was Francis Jeffrey of the *Edinburgh Review*, who wrote in his notice of Southey's *Thalaba*: "We may excuse a certain homeliness of language in the productions of a ploughman or a milkwoman; but we cannot bring ourselves to admire it in an author who has had occasion to indite odes to his college bell and inscribe hymns to the Penates" (109). Jeffrey brackets Southey and Wordsworth as members of a "sect" of "*dissenters* from the established systems in poetry" (110). Coleridge, in *Biographia Literaria*, would later endorse such criticism of Wordsworth's poetic language, instancing its alternating between "noble lines" and prolonged prosaic details, bordering on

the banal. But Coleridge rejects the critics' complaints about Wordsworth's choice of characters from the humblest members of society.

Boyles pursues the debate in the final Wordsworth chapter, featuring *The Excursion* and *Peter Bell*. Twelve years after attacking *Lyrical Ballads,* Jeffrey writes of *The Excursion* that "the mystical verbiage of the Methodist pulpit is repeated, till the speaker entertains no doubt that he is the elected organ of divine truth" (127). The hero of *The Excursion* is an itinerant. Boyles notes that walking is "perceived as a radical independent stance." But the poets themselves *had* to walk—as Coleridge did from Bristol to the Mendips via Bridgwater. John Wesley at least rode a horse. In *Peter Bell*, a poem with a twenty-year gestation, Methodism figures more explicitly in the "evangelical conversion" of Wordsworth's "rover with whom I walked from Builth on the river Wye' (140). Among lines from the poem quoted by Boyles, are the "satirically exaggerated stereotype" of the Methodist preacher. Its "element of caricature" suggests a wary authorial distancing, which makes Boyles wonder whether Wordsworth's satisfaction with the religious climax of the poem was moral or artistic (145).

Her final substantive chapter is devoted to Hazlitt, who in 1798 heard Wordsworth read aloud an early version of *Peter Bell*. Hazlitt's connection with the main thrust of Boyles's analysis is justified by the need to distinguish Hazlitt's *gusto* from eighteenth-century enthusiasm. Johnson's dictionary prints *gusto* in italics to emphasize its Italian origin, applying the word to anything that "excites sensations in the palate." In Hazlitt's hands gusto approximates to the modern sense of enthusiasm, though he is thinking in eighteenth-century terms when he mocks self-styled art critics: "They mount the stilts of the subject and ascend the Highest Heaven of Invention, from whence they see sights and hear revelations" (157–58). Hazlitt's attitude to evangelical religion was doubtless shaped by his father, a Unitarian minister, who took his family to America in 1783, when the break with Britain put the colonies outside the Bishop of London's jurisdiction. The rational dissent of Unitarianism was a far cry from Methodism, but Boyles sees the younger Hazlitt's scepticism as "not so much a rejection of his [father's] faith as disillusion with the pedantry of theological disputes" (160).

Hazlitt's essay *On the Causes of Methodism* contains a wickedly witty designation of King David as the first Methodist (164). More explicitly, Hazlitt condemns those who were "willing to indulge in all the raptures of speculative devotion, without being tied to the dull literal performance of its duties" (166). When Boyles turns to Hazlitt's *Liber Amoris*, and claims that his landlady's flirtatious daughter inspires "a romantic ideal which recalled the mysticism of the religious zealot," and that Hazlitt's "indifference to reputation also recalls the martyr's reckless indifference to the world's opinion" (174–75), the comparison is surely overstrained. But Boyles is generally scrupulous in emphasizing the limits of seeming similarities between religious enthusiasm and the romantic imagination.

What this stimulating book does illustrate are the undoubted similarities in

plainness and clarity of language, and in attempts to tailor language and narrative to the everyday needs of the unnoticed members of society. A postscript invites readers to follow Boyles in relating popular evangelism to the sensibilities of Romanticism as a whole (188–91). It also reveals the anxiety of both Methodist preacher and Romantic poet to avoid the more extreme excesses of emotional fervour. Readers who have travelled with Helen Boyles beyond that point will find, in her four-page postscript, an invitation to continue the journey in seeking links between the "enthusiasm" of popular evangelism and the sensibilities of Romanticism as a whole (188–91).