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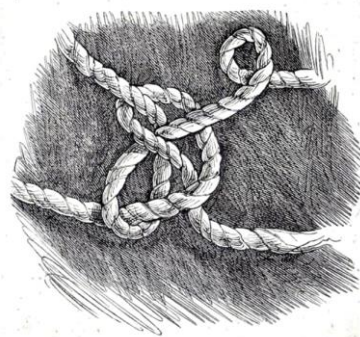
My Natural Methodism: Experience Becomes Words

by Richard E. Brantley¹

RIGHTLY ACKNOWLEDGED AS A PIONEER in the fields of Transatlantic Romanticism and Religion and Literature, University of Florida Professor Emeritus Richard Brantley has published seven books prior to this one, including such classics as *Wordsworth's "Natural Methodism"* (1975) and *Coordinates of Anglo-American Romanticism: Wesley, Edwards, Carlyle, and Emerson* (1993). As the titles of those seminal works suggest, Brantley's scholarship has been foundational in exploring the productive interplay between empiricism, evangelicalism, and Romanticism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Yet this most recent volume is not a work of literary criticism per se, but rather an intellectual and religious autobiography combined with a critical retrospective that, depending on one's perspective, might be considered a summation, apologia, prologue, or propaedeutic. Readers expecting something like an informal discussion/memoir that nevertheless builds its argument through an exacting analysis of its selected authors and texts will be disappointed to read in the penultimate chapter of the volume: '[This chapter] has previewed whatever coming attractions the sustained formal argument of my work-in-progress might ever muster. The earliest subtitle of *My Natural Methodism: Experience Becomes Words* had been "A Hypothesis," which, by acknowledging actuarial pressure on the demonstration of theses at this point in my life, would whet other appetites, I hoped, for studying this literary continuity' (206). Those who approach this fascinating hybrid text with an open mind (and heart), however, will be rewarded with something akin to the entertainment and occasional wonder of giving audience to one of our favorite mentors, educators, church elders, or intellectual sparring partners.

The basic thesis (or hypothesis, as it were) runs something like this: Locke exerted a formative influence on the evangelical religion of Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley, which in turn shaped and found its primary creative outlet in British and American Romanticism (particularly the poets), whose practitioners negotiated the tension between science and religion in a manner that is native or particular to Great Britain and the United States, and extends at least from

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¹ Richard Brantley, *My Natural Methodism: Experience Becomes Words* (Ames, IA: Culicidae Press, 2024).

Edwards to Auden. ‘*This* natural methodism’, Brantley writes, ‘is the experiential, spiritualized as well as naturalized, and eighteenth- as well nineteenth-century, *Zeitgeist* from John Locke (1632–1704), John Wesley (1703–1791), and Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), though the cool head/warm heart, or spiritual sense, of transatlantic revivalism, to Wordsworth and his large and long-term “visionary company”’ (19).

At the same time, Brantley’s interesting foray into memoir and autobiography in the third chapter both acknowledges his family members, mentors, and guides, and serves to trace the origin of his life’s focus on the nexus of Anglo-American philosophy, religion, and literature. This third chapter will be for some the most captivating of the book, offering readers a kind of representative history of evangelical academics in the American South in the latter half of the twentieth century, as well as a lamentation for the decline of the Southern Baptist coalition (a movement that once held considerable regional sway in the realm of U.S. higher education while maintaining an uneasy alliance with scientific thinking rather than an open antagonism). It is this lost colloquy between science and religion that Brantley suggests is the defining feature of the Anglo-American continuity he defines: ‘Empiricism and evangelicalism once did conspire, not so much to risk distance between them, or tempt “the owl Atheism,” after the manner of Samuel Taylor Coleridge in “Fears in Solitude” (1798), as to sharpen the broadly experiential, spiritual as well as natural vision of Anglo-American literature’ (177). The ‘both/and’ method of evangelical thinking tempered by science and skepticism to which Brantley refers throughout the book also reverberates in the relationship he describes with his brother, who is a physics professor at a formerly Southern Baptist college: ‘Bill’s theology, in tension with his experimental method—because science is always changing, “but the Word of the Lord endureth forever” (I Peter 1:25)—entertains the Calvinist, predestinarian predisposition of our complex Baptist tradition, whereas my understanding leans toward the Arminian, free-will-*versus*-contingent outlook of that same doughty heritage’ (51).

For Brantley, the declension from what now appears to have been a halcyon era for evangelicals in American intellectual life also parallels the decline of the humanities; for while he ultimately decries the Southern Baptists’ abandonment of ‘former President Carter . . . the evangelical’s evangelical . . . for Ronald Reagan, Sr.’ (interesting to note the absence of the honorific in the latter case), and the apparent embrace of QAnon among roughly a third of Southern Baptists, he also bemoans at the outset the rise of STEM dominance (‘I regret how single vision overemphasizes objectivity’), and the culling of English professorships at the University of Florida even as the population of students has more than doubled: ‘down from eighty-three professors in 1969 . . . to thirty-two now’ (56, 8). Given these concerns over ‘single vision’ in American religious and intellectual life today, it certainly would have been worthwhile for Brantley to reflect upon the sociocultural and political element of the issue he raises: namely, that Southern Baptists moved largely to the right at the same time as the academy shifted almost entirely to the left. Likewise, while he does address the

racist heritage of Southern Baptist institutions of higher learning rather briefly, he seems to suggest that our present-day reckoning with that heritage is of a piece with acknowledging that institutions like 'Yale, Princeton, Brown, Johns Hopkins, and Georgetown', also had historical 'ties to slavery' (54), while it would have been far more interesting had he reflected on the deep ties between Southern Baptists and regressive stances on race, gender, and sexuality in the latter half of the twentieth century. Yet one also apprehends that part of Brantley's project here is also a highly personal encomium for a Southern Baptist pedagogy and critical approach at its height: 'Our parents' model was not anti-experimental soul-arrogance such as might take hold among anti-scientific evangelicals of the non-classical stripe but instead the experiential "soul-competence" of a turn-of-the-twentieth-century Southern Baptist theologian (whom Harold Bloom has singled out as an exemplar of "the American religion" at its best . . .)' (54). At one point, he even muses on the possibility of someday explaining how his father's forgotten 1967 volume, *Baptist Education Study Task*, 'might yet bring about the revival of Southern Baptist higher education' (58).

It is easy enough, then, to understand the focus of Brantley's scholarship on the 'natural methodism' of the Anglo-American Romantics and its extension into the Modernist era, and he should be lauded for his bravery and candor in acknowledging the extent to which his personal life and evangelical faith have influenced and guided his professional work; yet his insistence that Anglo-American Romanticism is most accurately understood as an essentially Protestant, evangelical enterprise is difficult to brook as a grand narrative, and the strain of this delimitation is apparent not so much in what he affirms as in what he does not. For while he claims that 'Anglo-American literature has not reconciled science and religion' (215), there is no engagement with the critical studies that have worked in the nexus of Romanticism, religion, science, and philosophy like Joan Richardson's *A Natural History of Pragmatism: The Fact of Feeling from Jonathan Edwards to Gertrude Stein* (2007), Laura Dassow Walls' *Emerson's Life in Science: The Culture of Truth* (2003), and Eric Wilson's *Emerson's Sublime Science* (1999). Similarly, there is no treatment of the empirical and pragmatic elements so present in Emerson's essays and Poe's criticism; nor is there a recognition of that spiritual materialism in Thoreau that we now understand as nascent ecocriticism, a negotiation with that great absorber and reconciler of opposites, Whitman, or any mention of the uncertainty that borders on atheism in Melville. It is perhaps due to his vision of Anglo-American Romanticism as a product of the tension between the Calvinist Edwards and the Arminian Wesley (an evangelical alternative to Abrams' and McFarland's narrative of Romanticism as a phenomenon grounded in Coleridge's vacillation between Kant and Spinoza) that Brantley does not take into account the important influence of Franklin's pragmatism and empiricism on the Romantics, and particularly the Americans, most of whom who also imbibed the spirit of Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* (1825) as an antidote to Edwards rather than the Arminianism of Wesley.

Yet for all this, *My Natural Methodism* is a fine meditation on those evangelical-adjacent aspects of Romanticism, and without a doubt an important reminder both of the religious and philosophical origins of Anglo-American literature and of the persistence of the evangelical perspective in American culture and society. In his 'Elegiac Conclusion' to *The Western Canon* (1994), Harold Bloom writes, 'I am not presenting a "lifetime reading plan," though that phrase has now taken on an antique charm . . . As an aged institutional Romantic, I still decline the Eliotic nostalgia for Theocratic ideology, but I see no reason for arguing with anyone about literary preferences'.² Were he alive today, Bloom might be surprised to find that, thirty years after he made this pronouncement, scholars like Brantley are not only expressing an 'Eliotic' nostalgia for a mode of literary criticism in which science and religion meet on equal, if uneasy, terms, but also beginning to imagine a way in which such a method might be revived and practiced anew.

² Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Riverhead, 1994), 483.