

Common missions in John Wesley's Preface to the Methodist 'Hymns' and Wordsworth's Preface to 'The Lyrical Ballads'

Dr. Helen Boyles,

Associate Lecturer and Honorary Research Associate at The Open University

This essay explores the perhaps unexpected correspondences between the moral and literary precepts of John Wesley and William Wordsworth as expressed in the influential prefaces each produced just twenty years apart: John Wesley's Preface to the collected *Hymns* of 1780 and Wordsworth's Preface to *The Lyrical Ballads* first published in 1800.¹ John Wesley's Preface to *A Collection of Hymns, for the Use of the People Called Methodists* outlines the purpose and value of the hymns in religious and linguistic terms.² Wordsworth's collection of ballads depicting humble working experience is introduced with an extended explanation of the moral principles and literary precepts that informs them. The collection of poems which makes up Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* communicates the experience of ordinary people of humble social standing in familiar everyday language. Wesley aims to make 'the truths of our most holy religion' accessible to a widest possible audience for communal musical worship. Accessibility and communicability were watchwords for both.

In each Preface Wesley and Wordsworth articulate the precepts and literary theory which underlie the work they are presenting to the public. Each in their own way challenges classical literary convention by advocating a rejection of formal elegance in place of a commitment to plainness and truth in sentiment and style. The men also share an earnest belief in the morally elevating purpose of the writings they offer to the public and appeal to a reader of a similarly sensitive discernment. Such aims subscribe to the values of the culture of 'sensibility' which each, at different ends of the eighteenth century, inherited. This is, however, a sensibility informed by a distinctively Enlightenment respect for reason which both Wesley and Wordsworth felt should discipline and modify the enthusiasm associated positively with youthful passion and negatively with its immaturity.³

Wordsworth's exposure to Methodist culture

¹ William Wordsworth, Preface to *The Lyrical Ballads* (1800), ed. R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones (London: Routledge, 2nd ed. 1991). The hymns were produced largely by Charles Wesley, with several hymns translated from the German by John, along with those of other hymn-writers such as Isaac Watts and Agnes Burrell.

² John Wesley, Preface, *Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists* (1779), *Works*, VII, pp.73-75.

³ G. J Barker-Benfield identifies the eighteenth-century 'culture of sensibility' with Methodist evangelism in. *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth Century Britain*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), xxvi- xxvii .

The communal singing of Methodism in an open-air, rural context moved Wordsworth to use Methodism as a vehicle for the redemption of his reprobate hero, Peter Bell, in his poem of the name. Wordsworth makes very few explicit references to Methodism in his writings, with which at the time it was certainly unfashionable to identify. In a letter to a friend relating the inspiration for *Peter Bell*, he describes having been moved by the musical worship of an open-air Methodist service near his home in rural Cumbria. As he expresses it:

The worship of the Methodists or Ranters is often heard during the stillness of the summer evening in the country with affecting accompaniments of rural beauty. In both the psalmody and voice of the preacher there is, not infrequently, much solemnity likely to impress the feelings of the rudest characters under favourable circumstances.⁴

The music of the Methodist meeting would not have been an unusual sound for Wordsworth to have heard during his life; it is a significant fact that Wesley preached in Wordsworth's home town of Cockermouth five times during the poet's childhood there, and eighteen times during his continued association with the place.⁵ Methodism made a significant impact in Wordsworth's Cumbria, to which the many remaining chapels and graveyard-headstones and plaques to local Methodist preachers bear witness. He was therefore exposed to, and familiar with the popular culture of itinerant Arminian Methodism in a way that might have albeit unconsciously, influenced some of the aims and sympathies of his writings.

Wordsworth's literary experiment, in its perceived simplicity of theme and language, attracted derisive responses from leading critics of the day who negatively equated the style and sentiment with what was seen as the plebeian, 'enthusiastic' discourse of Methodism, the qualities which had provoked criticism of Wesley's missionary movement from the cultural establishment. This kind of criticism provoked in both writers strong and explicit prefatory defences of their artistic and cultural aims. A consideration of some of the claims made in each of these famous prefaces may serve to illustrate how, in his commitment to both a religion and *language 'of the heart'*, John Wesley anticipates some of the key precepts of literary Romanticism.

Plain truths for all

While there is no record of Wordsworth having read the Preface written by John Wesley just twenty years before Wesley's edited collection of the *Hymns*, his own Preface to *The Lyrical Ballads* has a similar emphasis and aim. Indeed, the mission to revitalise poetry that Wordsworth outlines in his preface partook of the same morally revivalist spirit of the Methodist movement that energised religion from

⁴ Jared Curtis (ed.), *The Fenwick Notes of William Wordsworth* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1993), p.71.

⁵ Evidence for this connection is supplied by John Wesley's *Journals* and Richard Brantley's valuable research in *Wordsworth's Natural Methodism* (London: Yale University Press, 1975), pp. 5, 16, 18.

the late 1730s. Both men claim a 'worthy purpose', and intend the poetry to fulfil a sacred kind of 'duty'.⁶ Wesley's aim is naturally more doctrinally specific than Wordsworth's broadly moral design, his new, more comprehensive collection of hymns being designed to make generally accessible 'all the most important truths of our most holy religion'.⁷

In the unstable political climate of the later eighteenth-century there was a suspicion of any democratising, libertarian philosophy, and Wesley and Wordsworth needed, in their different contexts, to defend their social and cultural allegiances. They both separately claim to have submitted to pressure from friends to make the voice of the *Lyrical Ballads* and the Methodist *Hymns* more widely heard and understood, indirectly acknowledging the challenge each was perceived to represent. 'For many years', declares Wesley, in his introduction to the *Hymns*, 'I have been importuned to publish such a hymn-book as might be generally used in all our congregations throughout Great Britain and Ireland'. The pressure to publish implies a widespread demand for the messages the hymns contain, and the language in which they were communicated. At the same time, Wesley acknowledges the 'experimental' character of its primary appeal to individual and inward experience.⁸ This echoes the affective and experiential emphasis of Wordsworth's challenging new poetic.

Wesley and Wordsworth equally acknowledge the influential power of language as 'the medium through which the heart is to be affected', and in their joint insistence on the morally *elevating* function of true poetry, attempt to dignify and rationalise the language of the heart. Each is anxious to prevent it being conflated with the vulgar enthusiastic style.⁹ They must steer a careful course between the 'enthusiastic' extremism that is identified with puritan fanaticism and revolution, and the *respectable* enthusiasm of genuine inspiration.

In his definition of poetry, Wesley shares with Wordsworth values of plainness which are both ethical and aesthetic. The two prefaces offer precise, and in Wordsworth's case, extended, definitions of poetry which are clarified and elaborated in Wordsworth's Supplementary Essay of 1815 and further Prefaces. These definitions clearly distinguish between shallow and derivative verse and the poetry of genuine inspiration that uplifts and enlightens by engaging the deeper levels of the heart and mind. For both men, the authenticity of the latter is expressed in a purity of sentiment and style which requires a reader with a taste uncorrupted by a fashionable preference for stylistic affectation.

In their differently angled Prefaces, Wesley and Wordsworth each emphasise the inspirational origin of poetry, although Wesley locates this strictly in religious experience. In his Preface, Wordsworth accepts that poetry springs from powerful, if not divinely inspired, sentiment. However, in the Supplementary Essay appended to the 1815 edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth increasingly represents this feeling as spiritual or religious in

⁶ Wordsworth, Preface, 744; 'Essay, Supplementary to the Preface of 1815, *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, eds. W.J. B Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974). p. 63.

⁷ Wesley, Preface, p.73.

⁸ Wesley, pp.73-4.

⁹ Wordsworth, Essay, p.82.

character. At the same time, unlike Wesley, he disclaims any educative doctrinal purpose. Nevertheless, the sense of religious and moral authority in Wordsworth's collection is acknowledged in an appreciative letter sent to him by John Wilson in May 1802, in which the writer admits to valuing the *Lyrical Ballads* 'next to my Bible' and described its poetry as exciting 'the sympathies of our souls'.¹⁰

The visionary inspiration of Wordsworth's poetry appeals to a spiritual sensibility and willingness to acknowledge the limitations of a purely rational comprehension. This is the humble recognition that language, however inspired, can only be an 'imperfect shadowing forth' of the eternal mysteries. Wordsworth recognises that serious poetry demands an imaginative engagement with sublimities which cannot be precisely articulated but only perceived by the receptive spirit and embodied metaphorically. As such, it makes an appeal to the imagination and spiritual sense which exist in the spaces and silences to which the Soul must be alert and is dependent on the inner resources of sensibility that the mature reader should aim to cultivate. As he reasons:

In all this may be perceived the affinity between religion and poetry; between religion – making up the deficiencies of reason by faith; and poetry – passionate for the instruction of reason; between religion – whose element is infinitude, and whose ultimate trust is the supreme of things...and poetry- ethereal and transcendent, yet incapable to sustain her existence without sensuous incarnation.¹¹

In his rejection of a coldly intellectual response to his writings, Wordsworth might seem to favour the more emotional receptiveness that characterises revivalist evangelism. Certainly, he requires from his ideal reader the 'animation' of emotional engagement. He is, however, wary of the zealous 'heat' of intellectual or sectarian dogmatism. While he acknowledges his aim to enlighten his readers morally and spiritually, he persistently disclaims any formally instructive purpose. Although Charles Wesley's biblically-influenced verse explicitly reinforces the formal tenets of the faith, for him, as for Wordsworth, the verse is primarily designed to express and inspire the general spirit of moral purity and piety. The emotional inspiration and language of the hymns is presented as a further vindication of the 'heart-religion' which for the Wesley brothers revived the fervour of early Christian mission. They felt it should be adopted in favour of an empty religion of 'formality, from mere outside religion, which has almost driven heart-religion out of the world'.¹²

The central commitment to truth which governs Wesley and Wordsworth's communicative theory and practice is emphatically asserted. Truth of sentiment and experience is expressed in the words 'real' and 'common', in the latter's sense

¹⁰ John Wilson to William Wordsworth, May 1802, in *Wordsworth: Lyrical Ballads: A Casebook*, ed. Jones and Tydeman (Oxford: Macmillan, 1971, repr. 1984), p.61.

¹¹ Wordsworth, *Essay*, pp.64-5.

¹² Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions* (Leeds, 1799), p.vi.

both of universal and essential. Wordsworth emphasises how his new poetic aims to reproduce the ‘very language of men’ within the context of the natural environment where ‘beautiful and permanent forms’ represent enduring symbols of our natural origins and identity.¹³ With a more specifically scriptural emphasis, John Wesley insists on the way that the hymns communicate ‘true’ religion, and the authentic feelings that this inspires. The collection of hymns, he claims, is ‘large enough to contain all the important truths of our most holy religion, whether speculative or practical’.¹⁴ The hymns can be seen to reinforce the declared aim of the four volumes of Sermons, to ‘demonstrate the essentials of *true* religion’, to ‘describe the *true*, the scriptural, experimental religion, so as to omit nothing which is a *real* part thereof’.¹⁵ With relation to religion, ‘true’ here denotes not just essential religious tenets, but the faith of inward conviction and its plain and unambiguous expression. This truth is the evidence of experience, the knowledge it produces, and the natural, heartfelt language which this inspires. It is the truth (for Wordsworth) of a native closeness to the land, or to the life of the spirit which ‘speaks a plainer, more emphatic language’, or (for Wesley) the ‘plain, practical word of God’ unmediated by form or convention.¹⁶ Such language does not seek to draw attention to itself, but to the moral or religious truths it illuminates, and is designed to appeal to a similar integrity in the reader.

This ideal reader is required to exercise a native wisdom and discernment. ‘I desire men of taste to judge’, declares Wesley, ‘(these are the only competent judges) whether there be not in some of the following hymns the true spirit of poetry’. As Wesley uses it, ‘taste’ implies an instinctual, common-sense capacity to distinguish affected sentiment from ‘the unostentatious beauties of a pure style’.¹⁷ For Wordsworth, an effective connection with a text demands the same, but may also require the more laborious cultivation of a taste which has been corrupted by the worldly values of contemporary fashion. ‘Every author’, he argues, ‘as far as he is great and at the same time original, has had the task of *creating* the taste by which he is to be enjoyed.’ Wesley and Wordsworth both recognise that exercising this discernment involves both reader and writer in, as Wordsworth expresses it, ‘breaking the bonds of custom, and in overcoming the prejudices of false refinement’.¹⁸

Wesley and Wordsworth each appeal to a faculty of moral discrimination very different from the unthinking taste of polite conformity. For both, ‘false refinement’ consists in a fashionable preference for style at the expense of meaning, and a desire to distract and entertain rather than challenge. This is an art of mere performance or artifice which demands nothing of its reader. Wesley, like Wordsworth, makes no concession to style or fashion at the expense of meaning, which is never compromised accordingly: ‘In these hymns there is no doggerel; no

¹³ Wordsworth, Preface, pp.743-44.

¹⁴ Wesley, p.74

¹⁵ Louis F. Benson, *The English Hymn* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1915), 220, cited in *Hymns*, p.56.

¹⁶ Wordsworth, Preface, *Lyrical Ballads* (1802), p.751; Wesley, p.74.

¹⁷ Wesley, p.74.

¹⁸ Wordsworth, Essay, pp.64, 80.

botches; nothing put in to patch up the rhyme'.¹⁹ Wordsworth similarly deplors the corrupted taste of those mature readers who have allowed themselves to be 'beguiled into admiration of absurdities, extravagancies and misplaced ornaments'.²⁰ Wesley credits the hymn lyrics with a confidence and courage in their own integrity and purpose, believing them to ring with the energy and conviction of a genuine inspiration. He rejects the empty flourishes and declarations associated with false enthusiasm, dissociating himself from its inflated rhetoric and those who would accuse him of the same.

'Here is nothing turgid or bombast', he asserts, 'here are no cant expressions.
...Those who impute this to us know not what they say.'

Wordsworth derides popular public opinion and defends his particular view in the same terms when he later declares that those who interpret poetry in a shallow sense 'speak of what they do not understand'.²¹ Both emphasise the superior accessibility of plainness. Although each draw on elemental scriptural or natural metaphor, they are equally disparaging of sophisticated self-serving metaphorical conceits, or of empty, ornamental figures of speech 'pretty compound epithets, as "pale-eyed", "meek-eyed" and the like,' which offend their ideal of stylistic purity by contributing nothing to sense or meaning while deceiving or disarming the judgement.²² In a rejection of all such rhetoric, Wesley declares that he 'dare no more write in a "fine style" than wear a fine coat'.²³

These worthy linguistic principles are not without contradictions, however. Both Wesley and Wordsworth's theoretical commitment to a plain, everyday language is partly compromised by a concern to distance themselves from a diction that was 'common' in the sense of *vulgar*, in which they betray the inherited scruples of their education and class. In his fuller Preface to the 1802 edition of the poems, Wordsworth, spokesman of the common man, admits to feeling it necessary to refine and purify the coarsenesses of common rustic speech, eliminating 'all rational causes of dislike and disgust' which might offend the reader and undermine the moral purpose of the poems. The parenthetical intensifier, 'purified indeed, from all rational causes', seems to underline the poet's fastidious detachment from an authentically coarse vernacular. Wordsworth stresses that his choice of language will be governed by 'taste and feeling' which 'will entirely separate the composition from the vulgarity and meanness of ordinary life'.²⁴

Favouring, with Wordsworth, a decorous and dignified simplicity, John Wesley similarly qualifies his linguistic aims, stating his intention to imitate 'the language of the common people ... so far as consists with *purity* and *propriety* of

¹⁹ Wesley, p.74.

²⁰ Wordsworth, Essay, p.64.

²¹ Wordsworth, Preface (1802), p.751.

²² Wesley, pp.74-5.

²³ Preface to *Sermons on Several Occasions* (1788), *Works*, II, *Sermons* II, p.356.

²⁴ Wordsworth, Preface (1802), 744, 750, 751.

speech'. To Samuel Furly he specifies: 'We must constantly use the most common, little, easy words (*so they are pure and proper*) which our language affords' [my italics].²⁵ Wesley aims to avoid the 'barbarous and low expressions' he is careful to omit from his own dictionary.²⁶ With Wordsworth, he strives to observe the distinction between a 'plain', in the sense of 'simple', and 'common', in the sense of 'coarse' language often criticised in popular enthusiastic discourse.

Each man also makes a clear distinction between the natural and mechanical poet. Wesley insists that true poetry 'cannot be acquired by art or labour', but 'is the gift of nature', and therefore the result of the 'true spirit' of a genuine inspiration, a view that shares the affective emphasis of Romantic philosophy.²⁷ This emotional inspiration is famously expressed in Wordsworth's definition of true poetry as the 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling' in which truth is perceived and experienced internally, 'carried alive into the heart by passion'. The sense of the poet's unique sensibility is further emphasised in Wordsworth's image of him as one 'endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness; ...who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him'.²⁸ He is perceived as one whose work is produced from a state of heightened awareness in which ideas are associated 'in a state of excitement', possessing the inner spiritual resources that are not dependent on external stimulation.²⁹ Wordsworth aspires to the genuine enthusiasm of inspired connectedness through a heightening of the mental and imaginative faculties, and the energy and creative fluency that this supplies. In their praise for a genuine poetic inspiration, Wesley and Wordsworth celebrate the energy which it represents. This is the quality of active engagement through a 'quickening' of heart, mind and senses directly opposed both to formulaic verse-making and empty religious practice.³⁰

The moral integrity of this poetry will ensure its enduring influence, supplying, in Wesley's words, 'not a poor perishable wreath but a crown that fadeth not away', where a sense of spiritual authority is enhanced by the biblical cadences and the scriptural metaphor of the crown. In his Preface, Wordsworth refers to the 'divine spirit' which is the inspired 'breath' of poetry and the emotional knowledge it encapsulates.³¹ For Wesley, the devotional purpose of the hymns will sanctify the poetry and grant it authority and lasting influence 'as a means of raising or quickening his [the receptive reader's] spirit of devotion, of confirming his faith, of enlivening his hope, and of kindling, or increasing his love to God and man.' He invites the reader to acknowledge the 'spirit of piety' 'breathing through the whole collection' [my italics]. The language of inspiration which Wesley applies, 'breathing', 'quickening' and 'kindling', expresses the renewing energy and illuminating power which Wordsworth also attributes to

²⁵ Wesley to Furly, 6 March and 15 July, 1764, *Letters*, 232, 258.

²⁶ Wesley, *The Complete English Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (London, 1777).

²⁷ Wesley, 74.

²⁸ Wordsworth, Preface (1802), 751.

²⁹ Wordsworth, Preface, 745.

³⁰ Wesley, 75.

³¹ Wordsworth, Preface, 752.

poetry, his own use of ‘breath’ and ‘breathe’, with reference to poetic inspiration, similarly suggesting the movement of the spirit. He will have endorsed Wesley’s faith in the capacity of such verse to deepen the reader’s human sympathies and connectedness.³²

For Wordsworth, the crucial ingredient for responsive reading is a genuine ‘passion’ rather than superficial excitement. In its etymological relationship to suffering, this ‘passion’ denotes a labour that may involve discomfort: ‘the connection which Passion has with effort, exertion, and action, is immediate and inseparable’. Serious reading requires a more intense and challenging emotional engagement than was supplied by modern verse’s appeal to superficial sentiment, the pain implicit in the etymology of ‘passion’ perhaps consisting in the personal re-evaluation and moral revelations which this kind of reading can involve. Wordsworth’s use of the active nouns, ‘effort’ and ‘exertion’ emphasises the need for effective reading to be an interactive relationship through the exercise of a ‘co-operating power’.³³

They may have rejected a cold reason divorced from feeling, but John Wesley and Wordsworth insist that the emotional response must be directed and illuminated by a wise rationality. Their belief in the critically regulating influence of reason, Wesleyan ‘common-sense’ and Wordsworthian ‘good sense’, counters any impression of irrational enthusiasm. Summing up Wesley’s control over the collection consisting largely of his brother’s hymns, Louis Benson describes how he ‘planned it, prepared the ground, introduced and fostered it, moulded and administered it, and also *restrained its excesses*’ [my italics].³⁴ The last clause is revealing in what it suggests of Wesley’s persistent sense of the need to regulate the public expression of his religion to preserve its dignity and authority. His commitment to order and clarity is demonstrated also in the systematic arrangement of the hymns on a devotional basis, which he considered a central part of their communicative effectiveness. ‘The hymns are not carelessly jumbled together, but carefully ranged under proper heads’, according to the experience of ‘real’ Christians – the adjective again stressing the integrity of the Christian experience it represents and to which it appeals.³⁵

So, for both Wordsworth and Wesley, the writing and reading of hymns and poetry involves the co-operation of the heart and rational intelligence, each complementing the strengths and compensating for the deficiencies of the other. For Wordsworth, the artist’s emotional resources have their seat in the ‘depths of reason’ to which the mind must ‘descend by treading the steps of thought’. Wordsworth insists on the discipline which a mature engagement with a text involves and which he feels to be absent from modern habits of reading in which ‘thoughts ... are little disciplined by the understanding’.³⁶

‘Understanding’ here implies an intuitive, as well as rational conviction of the kind that Wesley celebrated in his conversion in Aldergate Street. A poetry

³² Wesley, p.75.

³³ Wordsworth, Essay, p.81.

³⁴ Benson, cited by Dale, Introduction, *Hymns, Works*, p.56.

³⁵ Wesley, p.74.

³⁶ Wordsworth, Essay, pp.82-3, 63.

that appeals both to ‘organic sensibility’, and the settled wisdom of ‘one who has thought long and deeply’, as Wordsworth expresses it, also demands the meditative pace and patience of an earlier, more devotional era.³⁷ Both men appeal to a spirit that is uncorrupted by the commercial imperatives of shallow modernity, recognising that reflective pace and depth is necessary to ensure the enduring, transformative influence for which responsible literature should aim. Both their writings are designed to engage readers of ‘enthusiastic’ receptiveness who are, at the same time, ‘modest and ingenuous’ with the capacity to ‘regulate their sensibility’ by exercising ‘a discreet and sound judgement’.³⁸ Each advocate a sensibility moderated by a prudent control which denotes a maturity in contrast with the intemperate raptures of youthful enthusiasm.

Wordsworth also aims for the communicative directness of ‘a man speaking to men’, although his ballad diction is designed for a more selective, literary readership than Wesley’s hymn-singing community. Wordsworth’s persistent emphasis on ‘common’ and commonness, semantically related to communicability, nonetheless expresses his sense of the universal relevance and shared human values which his poetry celebrates and reinforces. John Wesley emphasises the importance of physical convenience as well as linguistic accessibility, commending the size and accessible format of the collection. Yet he also places a philosophical emphasis on the ‘smallness’ of the wide existing variety of hymns which can never entirely fulfil the boundless desires of the faithful: ‘It does not, it cannot, in so narrow a compass, make variety enough’. He acknowledges the enthusiastic energy of the devotional hymn-singing which ‘makes so considerable a part of the public service’, and credits its powerful capacity for unifying and confirming the faith of believers. He emphasises the moral value of the collected hymns as a public declaration of a united faith, and thus, as with the *Lyrical Ballads*, a vital instrument of change.³⁹

This essay has intentionally focused on affinities in the literary theory of Wordsworth and John Wesley, and the moral principles which underlie it. However, it seems appropriate, in the concluding paragraphs, to illustrate briefly how this theory is demonstrated in practice. Reference to examples of Wordsworth and Charles’ Wesley’s writing can be seen to demonstrate the similar ways in which Romantic lyricist and Methodist hymn-writer express in language and poetic structure a joint commitment to simplicity and honesty.

Familiar to most are the stirring lines of Charles Wesley’s conversion hymn:

And can it be that I should gain
An interest in my 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, should’st die for me? ⁴⁰

³⁷ Wordsworth, Preface, 744-45.

³⁸ Wordsworth, Essay, 63.

³⁹ Wesley, 74, 73.

⁴⁰ C. Wesley, *Hymns*, no. 193, 322, l.1-6.

The language of this religious poem has a directness and force which engages the reader. Lacking mystical verbosity, it possesses instead what John Wesley would consider the integrity of plainness in its simple vigour and preference for the familiar – even in the almost prosaic analogy of financial transaction, powerful in its dramatic juxtaposition with ‘blood’: Charles Wesley favoured monosyllabic lexis such as: ‘pain’, ‘blood’, ‘death’, ‘love’, over Latinate, and this, combined with anastrophe in lines like: ‘Died he for me, who caused his pain’, has a rhetorical impact rather than ornamental elegance, with the foregrounding of words of key emotive or scriptural significance. Prominent in the hymn are the rhetorical question and exclamatories which impart the conversational directness associated with pulpit oratory. The connective ‘And’, with which the hymn opens, immediately arrests attention with an immediacy which suggests a continuing line of personal thought or dialogue and involves us in the writer’s personal experience of assurance. As such, it demonstrates the connection explored by Classical rhetoricians between personal and collective experience in which the irresistible energy of the enthusiast invites imaginative participation in the feelings expressed.

This personal engagement with reader (and listener) through a direct use of simple language is shared and demonstrated by Wordsworth throughout *The Lyrical Ballads*. In this collection, powerful words resonant of mental and physical anguish express the essential experience also articulated in the hymns:

Night and day my toils redouble!
 Never nearer to the goal,
 Night and day I feel the trouble
 Of the Wanderer in my soul..⁴¹

So, too, do equally positive affirmations in such examples as Wordsworth’s simple tribute to the beauty of the spring day and the companionship of a loved sister in, ‘Lines, written at a small distance from my house’. Here, a strong and simple metrical structure and language communicates, as with Charles Wesley, an equivalent strength of feeling:

Love, now a universal birth
 From heart to heart is stealing,
 From earth to man, from man to earth:
 It is the hour of feeling.
 [...]

Some silent laws our heart may make,
 Which they shall long obey:
 We for the year to come may take
 Our temper for today

⁴¹ Wordsworth, ‘Song for the Wandering Jew’, *Lyrical Ballads*, 1805, ed. Derek Roper (London: Macdonald and Evans, 1976).

And from the blessed power that rolls
About, below, above,
We'll frame the measure of our souls:
They shall be tuned to love.⁴²
[...]

Both hymn and lyric poem have similar cadences and conversational directness. The language of the poetry gains strength from its repetition of simple, often monosyllabic, elemental words such as 'man' and 'earth', rhythmically reversed, asserting the primacy of the sentiments of joy and love. Hymns and poetry make similar use of 'heart' as a metaphor for emotional conviction. Through language that seeks not for effect but truth, each example celebrates the power of sympathetic connection through loving intimacy with God, humanity and nature. By appealing to a 'new taste', or reviving an existing one in the reader beyond the superficial, ornamental, or simply clever, such verse engages us more deeply and personally. Both Wordsworth and the Wesley brothers recognised that language should be pared to achieve the intellectual force and emotional truth needed to engage the attentive reader. Many of the strongest examples of current hymn-writing and poetry emulate the example that they set. One hopes that they may continue to do so.

www.theologyandministry.org

⁴² Wordsworth, 'Lines written at a small distance from my house', *Lyrical Ballads*, 1805.

Bibliography

Primary References

- Wesley, John, Preface, *A Collection of Hymns*, eds. Hildebrandt and Beckerlegge, *The Works of John Wesley*, VII, 73-75 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975-84; Nashville, Abingdon, 1984 -)
Sermons on Several Occasions (Leeds, 1799), vi.
The Complete English Dictionary, 3rd ed. (London, 1777).
The Works of John Wesley, ed. Frank Baker. 24 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975-84; Nashville, Abingdon, 1984 -)
- Wilson, John, Letter to William Wordsworth, May 1802, in *Wordsworth: Lyrical Ballads: A Casebook*, Alun R. Jones and William Tydeman (Oxford: Macmillan, 1971, repr. 1984), 58-63
- Wordsworth, William, 'Essay, Supplementary to the Preface of 1815', *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W.J. B Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974)
Preface to The Lyrical Ballads: Wordsworth and Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads, ed. R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones (London: Routledge, 2nd ed. 1991)
Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems 1797-1800, ed. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992)
Lyrical Ballads, ed. Derek Roper (London: Macdonald and Evans, 2nd ed. 1976)
The Fenwick Notes of William Wordsworth, ed. Jared Curtis (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1993)

Secondary References

- Benson, Louis F., *The English Hymn* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1915), 220, cited in *Hymns*, 56.
- Barker-Benfield, G.J., *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992)
- Brantley, Richard, *Wordsworth's Natural Methodism* (London: Yale University Press, 1975)