

CHARLES WESLEY AND EDWARD YOUNG

JOHN R. TYSON

Charles Wesley (1707-1788), the co-founder of Methodism, wrote more than 9,000 hymns and sacred poems.¹ He produced enough lyrics to rank him among the most prolific poets of his age. Wesley's poems have had enduring significance since more than five hundred of them continue in the hymnals of various Christian denominations. But his work has been virtually neglected as a portion of the poetic renaissance that captured the imagination of eighteenth century England. Charles Wesley's clearest contacts with other poets of his day is found in his appreciation for Edward Young's *Night Thoughts*. A closer examination of Wesley's appreciation for the *Night Thoughts* can help clarify his connection to the larger poetical world around him.

Charles' hymns and poems were written during a torrid time in English literature. The great luminaries of English verse including Shakespeare and Milton, though physically absent from the scene, were still influential through their successors — a host of equally prominent Neo-classicists or "Augustans." Nor is it surprising that the phraseology of these literary giants found its way into Charles Wesley's hymns; Dryden, Prior, Cowley, Young, Shakespeare, and Milton are among the prominent poets echoed in Wesley's works.² Charles' letters voiced his admiration for many of the same poets; Cowley, Spencer, Milton, Prior, and Young are among those he mentioned as being of interest to him.³

Charles (and his brother John) both received the Oxford A.M. in Classics which was considered the appropriate degree for ministerial preparation. He was educated and wrote his poetry during a literary renaissance which looked to the classics for its style and mode of expression. James Johnson, in his *Formation of English Neo-Classical Thought*, identified an application of classical forms and philology as one of the

¹Baker, *Representative Verse* (London: Epworth Press, 1967), xi. Cf. Tyson, "Charles Wesley: Evangelist," *Methodist History* XXV, No. 1, 41, note #2 for a full discussion of the process of determining the extent of Wesley's hymnological corpus.

²Henry Bett, *The Hymns of Methodism* (London: Epworth, 1913) James Dale, in his unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, "The Theological and Literary Qualities of the Poetry of Charles Wesley in Relation to the Standards of His Age" (Cambridge, 1960) and Barbara Welch, "Charles Wesley and the Celebrations of Evangelical Experience," an unpublished Ph.D. dissertation (University of Michigan, 1971), treat the topic well. Donald Davie's *The Purity of English Diction* (London: Chatto and Windrus, 1952), 70-82 has a helpful discussion of Wesley's diction in 18th century literary context.

³Frank Baker, *Charles Wesley as Revealed by His Letters* (London: Epworth Press, 1948), 129-142; cf. Dale, "Literary Qualities," 127f.

fundamental characteristics of the "neo-classical" poems of this period.⁴ Charles Wesley's hymns participate in this same literary *milieu*, and clear applications of Vigil, Homer, Horace, can be adduced.⁵ Not only did Charles study the classics and allow their allusions to creep into his poetry, he used classical etymology to deepen the nuances of his English.

Like a few of his poetic contemporaries, Charles Wesley wove classical forms into the language of emotion and personal experience to create a new mode of expression. This welding of life experience and theology together in hymns with emotive referents was basic to Charles' poetical pattern. His brother and editor, John Wesley, recognized it and his preface appropriately described the 1780 *Hymn Book for a People Called Methodists* as "a little body of experimental and practical divinity."⁶ "Experimental" and "practical" are good synonyms for the Wesleyan conception of the role of religious experience—it had to do with the connection of life and thought. John's "Preface" located this fusion of doctrine and experience both in the make-up of the hymns and in the organization of the book, "The hymns are not jumbled together, but carefully ranged under proper heads, according to the experience of real Christians."⁷ Hence, Wesley's use of religious experience, the primacy of meaning, and poetic diction are often identified as points of contact between Charles' hymns and the eighteenth century milieu.⁸ Wesley's religious language also shared with his age a Lockean sense of practicality, as John assured the reader: "we talk common sense, . . . in verse and prose"⁹

While there are significant similarities *between* Charles Wesley's hymnology and the "Augustan" or Neoclassical poetry which was its secular counterpart, it is also clear that significant changes were occurring *within* the prevailing poetic style. John Sitter, for example, suggests the poetry of the mid-century is characterized by a "literary loneliness" which sought detachment from contemporary history through the creation of an "alternative history." This "conversion" of history, which was most apparent in the melancholy's "graveyard poetry" of the 1740's (e.g., Gray's *Elogy Written in a Country Churchyard*, Warton's *The Pleasures of Melancholy* and Young's *Night Thoughts*). It indicated an assimilation of a experiential mood into the more sedate Neoclassical poetic style.¹⁰

⁴James William Johnson, *The Formation of English Neo-Classical Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 87.

⁵Bett, *Hymns of Methodism*, 124-127.

⁶John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 14 Vol. (London: The Wesleyan-Conference Office, 1872, numerous reprints), XIV, 340. (Hereafter JW. *Works*.)

⁷JW. *Works*, XIV, 340.

⁸Dale, "Literary Qualities," 149-171; Welch, "Charles Wesley and Celebrations."

⁹JW. *Works*, XIV, 341.

¹⁰John Sitter, *Literary Loneliness in Mid-Eighteenth Century England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 103-171.

Charles Wesley, like a few of his fellow mid-century poets, sought to reshape contemporary history by setting it in juxtaposition with an alternative history; in his case Wesley transformed contemporary history by setting biblical history along side of it in a sort of poetical timelessness. The biblical past became a model for understanding the turbulent present. The reader's imagination and emotions formed the bridge between the past and present. This poetical transfiguration is best seen in Wesley's hymns based on biblical pericopies, which Charles allegorized into experiential dramas.

His hymn on "The Good Samaritan" is an apt example. The Bible passage had long been the focus of allegorical attention. But where St. Augustine and other predecessors turned the parable into an epic of Jesus' life, Charles Wesley saw it as a reconciling event applicable to the life of every Christian. In Wesley's poem the reader or singer becomes the wounded traveler, robbed of true religion by theological thieves.¹¹ Similar treatment can be observed in hymns based on Charles' favorite sermon texts, including: "Blind Bartimaeus," "The Pool of Bethesda," "The Woman of Canaan," and "Wrestling Jacob."¹² Biblical events could be transformed in similar fashion: "The Taking of Jericho," "Jonah's Gourd," "The Children in the Firey Furnace," and "Daniel in the Den of Lions."¹³

The literary impact of his biblical allegories is probably best seen when Charles' poems are compared to renditions of an earlier generation. Unlike John Milton and John Bunyan, Charles Wesley never narrated the allegorized account to the reader. Using the life-experience of the reader as a bridge into the biblical narrative Wesley turned the reader into an actor in the biblical drama. We are the wounded traveler, or "Jacob Wrestling for the Blessing;" Blind Bartimaeus' affliction becomes our own sinful short-sightedness; we are the woman taken in adultery — yet by God's grace no longer accused. Where earlier religious poets used allegory to communicate religious ideals, Wesley used the same device to take reader or singer to the experiential center of the scriptural passage. He recreated the biblical event afresh in the reader's emotions and imagination. Wesley took an old tool and refurbished it to fit the needs of a new age. The key to this transformation seem to be found in his appreciation of Edward Young's *Night Thoughts*.

Charles Wesley and Edward Young

It is difficult for a modern reader of Edward Young's tiresome lines to feel the same admiration his age had for *The Complaint*, which was

¹¹George Osborn, ed. *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley* 13 Vol. (London: Wesleyan-Methodist Conference, 1868), II, 156, verse #1. (Hereafter: *P. W.*)

¹²Compare *P. W.* IV, 378ff and *C.W. Journal*, I, 208; *P. W.* II, 153ff, and *Journal*, I, 249; *P. W.* II, 150 and *Journal*, II, 185.

¹³Compare *P. W.* II, 173ff and *Journal*, I, 278; cf. *P. W.* V, 44, 190; *P. W.* II, 266, 267f.

more popularly known by its subtitle: *Night Thoughts: On Life, Death, and Immortality*. Wordsworth praised Young's originality, William Duff accorded Young a place in his *Essay on Original Genius*. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, dipping into *Night Thoughts* some fifty years after its composition, is reputed to have read a single page and walked out-of-doors to ponder what he read "Young," he remarked, "is not a poet to be read through at once."¹⁴

Charles Wesley's interest in *Night Thoughts* was the most sustained, and perhaps also the most curious connection between Wesley and other poets of his age. As early as his letter of October 10, 1748, Charles intimated to his brother John that he was reading *Night Thoughts* while on a preaching tour in Ireland.¹⁵ Wesley's journal record for July 30, 1754 was luxuriant in its praise: "I began once more transcribing Dr. Young's 'Night Thoughts.' No more writings but the inspired are more useful to me."¹⁶ For the Methodist to rank Young even a distant second behind "the inspired writings" of Scripture was a rave review! Nor was Charles' interest in *Night Thoughts* that of a casual reader since Wesley's journal suggests he was copying the poems over by hand.

A few echoes of Young's verse emerged abruptly in Charles' hymns from the middle decades of the eighteenth century. The most obvious of these allusions was found in Wesley's poetic commentary on Psalm 119:17, where he wrote: "The foremost, that my heart hath bled."¹⁷ This verse showed an obvious reflection of Young's line #498, *Night ix*, "Stand this the foremost that my heart has bled."¹⁸ This reminiscence of Young's verse in Wesley's hymn suggests an important literary connection, since it indicated that both writers offered heartfelt emotion as a verification of religious truth.

It is also important to recall that Charles Wesley and Edward Young were immediate contemporaries of Christian apologists like Bishop Joseph Butler (*Anology of Religion*, 1736), and William Law (*A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, 1728 and *Case for Reason*, 1732). It was an age when apologies for vital faith were coming from various quarters of English society, and in sundry forms. Isabel St. John Bliss showed that the apologetic task of Edward Young was an important factor in the historical context of his *Night Thoughts*; Young's apologetic interests were certainly shared by the poet-laureate of Methodism.¹⁹

¹⁴David Morris, *Religious Sublime* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1972), 145.

¹⁵Baker, *Charles Wesley Letters*, 51.

¹⁶Thomas Jackson, ed. *The Journal of Charles Wesley* 2 Vol. (London: The Wesleyan-Methodist Conference, 1848), II, 106.

¹⁷*P.W.* IX, 329.

¹⁸David French, ed. *Minor Poets of 1660-1780* 5 Vol. (London: Benjamin Blom, 1967), V, 192. Cf. *P.W.* VII, 332 and compare *ibid.*, *Night Thoughts*, iv, line 91; *P.W.* X, 27 and compared *op. cit.*, *Night Thoughts*, iii, line 227.

¹⁹Isabel St. John Bliss, "Young's *Night Thoughts* in Relation to Contemporary Christian Apologetics," *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, Vol. 49 (1934), 37.

Young's *Night Thoughts* is made up of nine poems written in the 1740's, a decade which first saw the death of the author's young daughter-in-law, then the death of his wife, and the eventual dissolution of his family. Death, quite understandably, became a prominent theme in his long poetic meditations. The poems utilized the device of a dialogue between the author and his interlocutor, "Lorenzo." The poems are strongly moralistic in tone and content. Their spokesman has undertaken a task similar to that of the "Preacher" in the biblical book Ecclesiastes, seeking to convince his hearer (in this case Lorenzo) to live well even in the face of the apparent futility of life. The sense of futility is enhanced by the poem's setting in a graveyard.

Young's most direct statement of intention emerged in his rather self-conscious titling of *Night VI*: "Night the Sixth. The Infidel Reclaimed. In two parts. Concerning the Nature, Proof and Importance, of Immortality." While tradition pictures him defending classical Christianity in argument with the famous Deist, Matthew Tindal, the most that can be said with absolute certainty is that both men were in residence at Oxford at the same time.²⁰ Young's apologetic efforts were lauded in Thomas Warton's poem "To Dr. Young:" "Now let the atheist tremble; thou alone/Can bid his conscious heart the Godhead own./Who shalt thou not reform?"²¹ Warton's poem also described well Young's poetical method: "O thou has power the harden'd heart to warm/To grieve, to raise, to terrify, to charm;/To fix the soul on God; to teach the mind/To know the dignity of humankind;/ . . . And practice o'er the angel in man."²²

Since he believed that all forms of infidelity can be traced to doubt about the truth of immortality, Young marshalled his arsenal of arguments to defend that doctrine as a foundation for Christian faith. He mounted a persistent apology for immortality, based on his conception of a remnant of the "Image of God" (*Imago Dei*) within a person, which Young termed "angel appetites." It was an argument based on the higher qualities of humanity which, in the poet's mind, pointed to a human destiny beyond the grave:

This cannot be. To love and to know in man,
Is boundless appetite and boundless power;
And these demonstrate boundless objects too.
Objects, powers, appetites, heaven suits in all;
Nor Nature through her tuneful string.²³

In a similar way, human hope was seen as a sort of self-transcendence that anticipated and pointed to a life beyond death: "His immortality alone

²⁰Isabel St. John Bliss, *Edward Young* (New York: Twayne Pub. Co., 1969), 23.

²¹Thomas Warton, "To Dr. Young," in French, ed., *Minor Poets, op. cit.*, V, 81.

²²*Ibid.*

²³French, ed., *op. cit.* "Night," VII, 170.

can solve/The darkest enigmas, human hope;/Of all the darkest, if at death we die."²⁴

Melancholy

Charles Wesley shared with Edward Young a morbid or melancholy tone in some of his poems. This tendency, which the writers of the day called "the spleen," was a common feature of the poetry of the period.²⁵ Frank Baker catalogued an avalanche of illnesses that befell Charles in the middle decades of the eighteenth century: "pleurisy, neuralgia, lumbago, dysentery, piles, rheumatism, gout, scurvys—a host of ailments."²⁶ Hints of the connection between Wesley's illness and his melancholy can be detected in a few of his hymns from this period. Yet, Wesley's "mood" must also be set in the larger literary context created by Warton, Thomas Gray, Young and a host of others. Edward Young, for example, used the "spleen" in his *Night* III, where meditation upon the thought of death sharpened one's appreciation for the joys of life:

Lorenzo! No; the thought of death indulge;
Give it its wholesome empire! Let it reign,
That kind scather of thy soul in joy!
Its reign will spread thy glorious conquest far,
And still the tumults of thy muffled breast;
Auspicious ear! golden days begin!
The thought of death shall, like a god, inspire
And why not think of death? Is life the theme
Of every thought? and wise of every hour?
And song of every joy? Surprising truth!
The beaten spaniel's fondness not so strange.²⁷

Similar sentiments surfaced in Charles Wesley's journal, where he wrote: "My old desire of escaping out of life possessed me all day."²⁸ His hymns eulogized death as a "Soothing, soul-composing thought!" or "My hope . . ./My immortality,/My longing heart's desire."²⁹ Death could even be personified into a long and loving embrace:

Extend thy arms, and take me in,
Weary of life, and self, and sin;
By thou my balm, my ease;
I languish till they face appears;
No longer now the king of fears,
Though art all loveliness.³⁰

²⁴*Ibid.*, 168.

²⁵Cecil Moore, *Backgrounds of English Literature 1700-1760* (New York: Octagon Books, 1969), 232-233.

²⁶Baker, *C.W. Letters*, 16.

²⁷French, *op. cit.* "Night Thoughts," 144.

²⁸Jackson, *CW. Journal*, II, 144.

²⁹Osborn, *Poetical Works*, III, 162-163.

³⁰*Ibid.*

Several factors coalesced in Charles' fascination for death. Certainly his frail health and sensitive nature played their role, as did his conviction that — as with St. Paul — “to be absent from the body, is to be present with the Lord” (II Cor. 5:8). It merged with his quest after Christian perfection, since laying the body down in death enabled one to rise in the image of Christ: “The more the outward man decays,/The inner feels [God's] strengthening grace,/ . . . Partaker of my glorious hope,/I here shall after Thee wake up,/Shall in Thine image shine.”³¹

Edward Young's bout with “the spleen” emerged in the midst of personal tragedy, as a part of a larger literary revolt against Augustan propriety and eighteenth century rationalism. In Young, melancholy served his apologetic task as a tool in his arsenal against cold religion and atheism in its various forms. In Charles Wesley, melancholy merged with personal proclivities and Christian hope to communicate the emotional force he found in the biblical texts that formed the foundation of his hymns.

Religious Experience

A portion of Charles Wesley's poetical kinship with Edward Young can be traced to his use of poetical emotional and religious experience to communicate what both writers considered to be theological verities. Young urged “Lorenzo” of the *Night Thoughts* “to feel;” “feeling,” and not “seeing,” — as the old adage suggests — was “believing:”

‘Feel the *Great Truths*, which burst the tenfold night
Of *Heathen* error, with a golden flood
Of endless day; to feel, is to be fir'd;
And to believe, Lorenzo! is to feel!’³²

In *Night IV*, religious formalism communicates no sense of pardon; “Oh ye cold-hearted, frozen formalists!/On such a theme [pardon] ‘tis impious to be calm;/Passion is reason, transport temper *here*.”³³ Or, as Young's poetic voice reminds Lorenzo in *Night V*, sheer rationalism remains unconvincing; “Your learning, like *lunar* beam, affords/Light, but not heat; it leaves you undevout,/Frozen at heart, while speculation shines.”³⁴

Emotion and religious experience also had a role to play in the hymns of a Methodist evangelist; yet we do Charles Wesley a disservice if we think of “sentimentalism” or religious extremism (“enthusiasm”) when considering the use of religious experience in his hymns. Charles' use of experiential language was well measured and consistent throughout the Wesleyan poetical corpus.

³¹*Ibid.*, V, 71-72.

³²French, ed., *Minor Poets*, V, “Night Thoughts,” 148.

³³*Ibid.*, 158.

³⁴*Ibid.*

The language of religious experience is a predominant characteristic in Wesley's poetical diction; in his hymns written after 1749 words like "feel" or "felt" occurred over two hundred times. Generally, these terms describe the impact of having "received," "found," or "felt" the "blood of Christ," "Blood" in Wesleyan poetical parlance represented the death of Christ seen in its saving significance; thus, to have "felt the blood applied" suggested forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God in the emotive context of peace, assurance, and liberation.³⁵ The rhyme between "applied" and "justified" made that pairing an important one for Wesley's communication of the experience of redemption: "And bid them feel thy blood applied/And add them to the justified."³⁶ This same experience was described as one that cleansed, broke, and also made one whole:

- 5) Now apply the blood that cleanses
Every stain, once again
Blot out my offenses.
- 6) Bleeding love—I long to feel it!
Let the smart ["pain"] break my heart,
Break the heart and heal it.³⁷

Charles Wesley's "feeling" words introduce one of the epistemological bases of his theology. His writings indicate that one should experience personally what has been affirmed cognitively or confessionally. Hence, he emphasized that joy, peace, and a sense of acceptance accompanied forgiveness. This experiential referent was a way of breaking through religious uncertainty and doubt. For him religious truth was "visceral truth" that was both felt and known.³⁸ It communicated a sense of cognitive and emotive coherence that produced religious assurance in his poetical spokesman:

I now in Christ redemption have,
I feel it through the sprinkled blood,
And testify His power to save,
And claim Him for my Lord, My God!³⁹

Charles Wesley's use of "know" became an important vehicle for communicating religious experience. The term occurred nearly three hundred times in his later hymns, and over eighty-one times in his few surviving sermons. Often Charles' verses joined "know" and "feel" to form a com-

³⁵CW. *Journal*, I, 180-181; *Poetical Works* IX, 26.

³⁶*Ms. Miscellaneous Hymns*, 173, an unpublished manuscript located in the Methodist Archives, England; John Rylands Library and Research Center of the University of Manchester.

³⁷Osborn, ed., *Poetical Works*, VII, 384.

³⁸Mark A. Noll, "Romanticism and the Hymns of Charles Wesley," *Evangelical Quarterly*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (April-June, 1974), 200.

³⁹Osborn, *Poetical Works* VI, 303.

bination that communicated a wholistic, “heart-mind” experience.⁴⁰ He explained the relationship between “reason” “knowledge” and “feeling” in an important verse:

Reason’s glimmering light is vain,
Till Thy Spirit I receive;
He Thy language must explain,
He must give me to believe;
When the precious gift is mine,
Then I know the mystery,
Feel the power of love Divine
’Stablishing its throne in me.⁴¹

For Charles Wesley this “knowledge” of God’s love was neither mere emotionalism nor sheer rationalism. It was, rather, a work of God through the Holy Spirit—a work and presence so real that one could not doubt the reality of having met with God.

Conclusion

Charles Wesley’s appreciation for the Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts* is not as curious as it seems at first blush. Both men were apologists for Christian faith when rationalism threatened its veracity and vitality. Both men knew the apologetic value of religious experience; it plays a prominent role in their poetic diction. But neither man was an “enthusiast.” Like Young, Wesley used emotion and religious experience to produce a sense of dramatic immediacy.

Wesley also shared with Young a tendency toward “the spleen.” Although sadness was a part of the biography of both men, melancholy merged with Charles’ theology of experience to produce a sort of melodrama that recreated the joys and sorrows of the biblical text. In the later Augustans (or “Pre-Romantics”) melancholy marked the beginning of a literary (Romantic) rebellion against the earlier classicism that eschewed direct emotions. This same poetic movement—in which Wesley and Young participated—signaled a movement away from the staid classical verse toward the visceral poetry of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Young’s *Night Thoughts* was one of Wesley’s primary links to that larger literary movement. It is small wonder that Wesley enjoyed reading these “wearisome” verses. In Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts* he met a co-belligerent in a common cause.

⁴⁰Osborn, ed., *Poetical Works* I, 235; V, 24, VI, 374-375; VII, 195, 384, IX, 112, X, 472; XII, 16, 31, 56-57.

⁴¹Osborn, ed., *Poetical Works* X, 472, #839.