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JOHN WESLEY, LITERARY ARBITER

An Introduction to his use of the Asterisk

READERS turning to the edition of his *Works* published by John Wesley in thirty-two volumes during the years 1771-4 may naturally be surprised to find him deserting his normal custom (and the normal custom of the century) of using asterisks as the primary means for directing attention to footnotes. Instead he employs daggers, double daggers, parallel lines, the section mark, the paragraph symbol, but only occasionally asterisks, and then obviously in error.¹ On the other hand, the curious reader will also be surprised from time to time to discover that many paragraphs *begin* with an asterisk. If his curiosity is sufficiently aroused, he may turn to the preface in volume i to discover what Wesley was about. He might also wish to know when Wesley began this practice, how fully he carried it out, and upon what principles. Perhaps he would also wonder whether this unusual feature was in fact unique.

Wesley was in fact indicating purple passages. He may have derived the idea from Alexander Pope, who prefaced his edition of Shakespeare's works by pointing out:

Some of the most shining passages are distinguished by commas in the margin; and where the beauty lay not in particulars but in the whole, a star is prefixed to the scene.

Pope continued:

This seems to me a shorter and less ostentatious method of performing the better half of criticism (namely the pointing out an author's excellencies) than to fill a whole page with citations of fine passages, with *general applauses*, or *empty exclamations* at the tail of them.²

There is no certainty which edition (or editions) of Shakespeare Wesley used, but his diary shows him reading several of the tragedies and histories in 1726—the year after Pope's edition was published.

¹ e.g. *Works* (1771-4), i, p. 315; ii, pp. 37, 228; iii, p. 197; iv, p. 233; x, p. 51; xxii, p. 48.

² Pope: *Works of Shakespeare* (2nd edn., London, 1728), i, p. xxiv.

Wesley may well have perused Pope's edition at Oxford, and as he himself had been so closely engaged in "collecting" selections of various kinds of literature, this method of seeking to guide literary taste would surely register upon his mind. For many years, however, his own method was the normal one of issuing anthologies, as he did in 1744 with *A Collection of Moral and Sacred Poems* in three volumes. In this work (as in others) he first selected a piece which possessed literary and religious value, and then pruned it of what seemed to him the less intelligible, the less improving, and the less beautiful passages.

When, in 1763, he came to prepare an abridged edition of one major work, however, the situation appeared somewhat different. Indeed, his edition of Milton's *Paradise Lost*³ was only to a minor degree an attempt to reduce its size. Rather it was intended to make it more intelligible to those without the immense scholarship needed to appreciate Milton's multifarious classical allusions. Wesley omitted a mere 1,857 of Milton's 10,565 lines, but they were nearly always awkward lines. He maintained the integrity of the narrative by careful surgery—occasionally by skilful creative plastic surgery. He preserved the rhythm and sonority, he added footnotes to explain the obscurities which could not readily be removed, and then he ventured upon something else, which he thus explained in the preface:

To those passages which I apprehend to be peculiarly excellent, either with regard to sentiment or expression, I have prefixed a star; and these, I believe, it would be worthwhile to read over and over, or even to commit to memory.

The reader who followed the last advice would have an arduous though doubtless a rewarding task, for no fewer than 143 passages were marked with an asterisk, singling out for special note some 2,400 lines—over one quarter of the volume.

Usually Wesley placed an asterisk both at the beginning and at the end of "the most shining passages", but the occasional failure to do so renders the statistics a little uncertain. This does not obscure, however, the main pattern of Wesley's selections, which ranged very widely—from a huge chunk of 82 lines from Book IV down to a mere sentence from Book II:

Their rising all at once was as the sound
Of thunder heard remote.⁴

Wesley asterisked most of the passages which he himself had memorized, and quoted most frequently, such as that which he used as the motto for his *Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation*:⁵

³ *An Extract from Milton's Paradise Lost* (London, Henry Fenwick, 1763) (see Richard Green: *The Works of John and Charles Wesley: a Bibliography* (2nd edn., London, 1906), No. 222).

⁴ Book IV, ll. 32-113 (because of an earlier omission numbered 30-111 in Wesley's abridgement) and Book II, ll. 476-7 (numbered 434-5 by Wesley).

⁵ See Green's *Bibliography*, No. 220 (1763).

These are thy glorious works, Parent of good,
 Almighty! Thine this universal frame,
 Thus wondrous fair: thyself how glorious then!⁶

Another favourite passage, quoted, like the last, at least five times, reveals Wesley as the lover of romantic nature rather than as the preacher of the providence of God:

And liquid lapse of murmuring streams. . . .⁷

Nevertheless Wesley himself appreciated the whole of *Paradise Lost*, and in his publications quoted at least seven passages omitted from his own abridgement and a further fifteen which were not asterisked therein. Fifty-one of his known quotations, however, both remained in his abridgement and were asterisked therein—exactly 70 per cent—so that the asterisks remain a valuable guide to his own taste.

Wesley's next venture as literary arbiter was with a similar work—*An Extract from Dr. Young's Night Thoughts on Life, Death, and Immortality*—published in 1770, a moralizing poem in aphoristic blank verse extremely popular in its day, but which afterwards commanded much more attention on the continent of Europe than in Britain itself.⁸ This Wesley edited upon the same principles as he had edited Milton. In the closing days of December 1768 he wrote in his *Journal*:

I took some pains in reading over Dr. Young's *Night Thoughts*, leaving out the indifferent lines, correcting many of the rest, and explaining the hard words, in order to make that noble work more useful to all, and more intelligible to ordinary readers.

His preface stated that it was also a part of his design to point out, especially to "unlearned readers", what appeared to him to be the "sublimest strokes of poetry" and the most "pathetic strokes of nature and passion". (He was quoting a critic referred to earlier in the preface.) Once more his asterisks were designed to indicate two different types of passages—those noteworthy for their literary expression and those singled out for their religious sentiment. This time he introduced a further refinement, using either "a single or double mark". Wesley was considerably more ruthless in excision with Young than he had been with Milton, reducing Young's 9,750 lines to 6,005. Marked with a single asterisk were 117 passages, with a double asterisk 26. In the case of Young's *Night Thoughts* we find little help in Wesley's quotations, with only one undoubted quotation, as against nine passages quoted from Young's *Last Day*, little more than one-tenth the size of his later masterpiece. The absence of quotations is the more strange when one considers that most of Wesley's asterisks seem to indicate brief aphorisms rather

⁶ Book V, ll. 153-5 (the same in Wesley's edition).

⁷ Book VIII, l. 263 (numbered 229 in Wesley's edition). In a letter of 1731 he quotes this with part of its original context, in a 1781 sermon prefaced by a line from Book IV (l. 140), and on three other occasions by itself.

⁸ See Green, *op. cit.*, No. 269.

than extended passages, although with Young Wesley was far less helpful in that he did not indicate the close of the selected passages.

It was in the year following the publication of his extract from Young that Wesley embarked on the collected edition of his own *Works*, a project which had exercised his mind for some years. In addition to the methodizing and revising involved in this edition, Wesley's experience with Milton and Young apprised him of the opportunity of drawing the attention of his readers to passages which seemed of special importance. Accordingly he added the following paragraph to his preface:

It may be needful to mention one thing more, because it is a little out of the common way. In the extract from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and in that from Dr. Young's *Night Thoughts*, I placed a mark before those passages which I judged were most worthy of the reader's notice; the same thing I have taken the liberty to do throughout the ensuing volumes. Many will be glad of such an help; tho' still every man has a right to judge for himself, particularly in matters of religion, because every man must give an account of himself to God.

Again we see that this was designed as a help to the less discerning reader, with no intention of intruding on his right of private judgment. In this instance, however, Wesley was not attempting to indicate any literary excellence, simply what he considered outstanding spiritual importance. The almost 3,000 asterisks scattered throughout the thirty-two volumes of his *Works* may indeed have proved of value to some readers, especially to those who preferred skipping to word-by-word reading and were happy to have the author himself prepare for them a selection of what he considered the more significant passages. One unforeseen by-product of these asterisks, however, is what they reveal to the student about Wesley's predilections and prejudices.

Wesley scholars know that a large proportion of his publications—smaller in number of items, but larger in their combined size—comprises abridged editions of the writings of others. Because he had in fact re-shaped these publications, sometimes drastically, Wesley included them in his own collected *Works*, where they amount to about eleven of the thirty-two volumes, some volumes being wholly given over to non-original works. Wesley seems to have been much more concerned to indicate the striking passages in these writings than in his own, using 1,532 asterisks for this one-third against 1,381 for the two-thirds which can be identified as mainly original. Especially does he concentrate upon the editions of works which had influenced his own religious awakening, contained in volumes iv-viii, namely the writings of William Law, distinguished by 558 asterisks, and *A Christian's Pattern*, with 263. His inclusion of many improving biographies is itself significant of his appreciation of this type of literature, and this is underlined by the fact that the batch of these works (mainly in volumes xi-xiii) contains 371 asterisks—considerably more than the average of 91 per volume.

For the opening four volumes, comprising the forty-four "standard" Sermons and the nine inserted to strengthen their doctrinal impact, Wesley was very modest in his use of asterisks—there are 248 in all. Many of these emphasized spiritual challenges, such as that in his fifth discourse on the Sermon on the Mount:

* First, a Pharisee was "not as other men are". In externals he was singularly good. Are we so? Do we dare to be singular at all? . . . Are we not often more afraid of being out of the fashion than being out of the way of salvation? . . . Otherwise the Pharisee leaves us behind at the very first step. 'Tis well if we overtake him any more.⁹

Most of the Sermons asterisks, however, underlined points of doctrine. Sometimes they singled out a forceful statement of a point at issue:

Secondly, God forgives us *as* we forgive others. * So that if any malice or bitterness, if any taint of unkindness or anger remains, if we do not clearly, fully, and from the heart forgive all men their trespasses, we so far cut short the forgiveness of our own.¹⁰

At other times they pointed to a summary of some broader aspect of Wesley's teaching:

So little do they understand the great foundation of the whole Christian building, * "By grace ye are saved." Ye are saved from your sins, from the guilt and power thereof, ye are restored to the favour and image of God, not for any works, *merits* or deservings of yours, but by the free *grace*, the mere mercy of God, through the *merits* of his well-beloved Son. Ye are thus saved, not by any *power*, wisdom, or strength which is in you, or in any other creature, but merely through the grace or *power* of the Holy Ghost, which worketh all in all.¹¹

In these latter two instances the asterisk was inserted within a paragraph, but usually it came at the beginning (as in the first quotation), and referred to the whole paragraph. Were these passages added together, they would form a précis of Wesley's fundamental teaching and preaching, although some overlapping would be found, and a handful of instances where an asterisk had been inserted either on impulse or by a printer's error—of which the *Works* contain more than a normal proportion.

Theological points were specially emphasized also in later volumes of the *Works*, though with a low frequency, reaching the average (with 92 asterisks to the volume) only in *The Doctrine of Original Sin*, volume xxi. Even here some of the passages noted are really literary in character, such as the six upon the follies of war which Wesley quoted as from "a late eminent hand"—in fact from Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*.¹² Nevertheless many are in fact on important doctrinal issues, such as Wesley's rejection of Dr. John Taylor's arguments:

⁹ Fifth Discourse on the Sermon on the Mount, IV. 7; see *Works* (1771), ii, p. 211.

¹⁰ Sixth Discourse on the Sermon on the Mount, III. 14; *Works*, ii, p. 242.

¹¹ Sermon on "The Means of Grace", II. 6; *Works*, i, p. 330.

¹² *Works*, xxi, pp. 49-56, being section II. 9-10 of *The Doctrine of Original Sin*, for which see Green, op. cit., No. 182.

* Nay, "righteousness is *right action*." Indeed it is not. Here (as we said before) is your fundamental mistake. It is a right state of mind, which differs from right action as the cause does from the effect. Righteousness is properly and directly a right temper or disposition of mind, or a complex of all right tempers.¹³

Similarly his more controversial works, defending Methodist practice as well as teaching, also emphasize with italics many doctrinal points, though it is also interesting to see Wesley himself insisting upon accurate scholarship:

* Here I must beg leave to put Mr. H [ill] in mind of one stated rule in controversy. We are to take no authorities at *second hand*, but always recur to the originals.¹⁴

Of greatest interest in some ways are the asterisks inserted in the *Journal*, which occupies most of volumes xxvi-xxxii. The total is 619, or slightly below the average. Like the *Journal* itself, they cover a very wide range of topics, and form a valuable guide to Wesley's own views about what should prove helpful to his readers. It is not practicable to compile unambiguous statistics, but when the asterisks have been tabulated and roughly classified a few points emerge quite clearly. There can be no question that Wesley was urging the spiritual importance of his descriptions and observations and anecdotes rather than the general interest which they frequently possessed. This of course reflects his purpose in preparing a written journal from his diary in the first instance, of publishing selections from it in the second instance, and in the third of the very passages selected. It is therefore not surprising that those passages which he deemed of special importance usually possessed direct and fairly obvious spiritual relevance. It is possible to discern definite areas, however, where he apparently believed that most spiritual good might accrue to the average reader. As a rough measuring-stick we may use the percentage of the total number of asterisks devoted to these specific categories, though with the warning that many of the asterisks have not in fact been classified (so that the percentages add up to about 80 per cent only), and that in many instances an asterisked passage stressed more than one point, so that it should really appear under several headings rather than under one only. Even these incomplete and somewhat ambiguous figures, however, demonstrate authentic trends.

At the top of Wesley's priorities was the fostering of a confidence that God was at work in human life. Thus at least 7 per cent of his asterisks were devoted to passages describing or discussing conversion, 6 per cent to revivals, and 3 per cent to the experience of Christian perfection; a further 7 per cent illustrated his claim that the Methodists died well because of their deeply-felt personal religion and their faith in eternal life. No less than 12 per cent fall under

¹³ *ibid.*, Part III, section viii; *Works*, xxi, p. 260.

¹⁴ *Works*, xxii, p. 99, *Some Remarks on Mr. Hill's "Review of the Doctrines taught by Mr. Wesley"*, section 24 (see Green, *op. cit.*, No. 283).

the general heading of an emphasis upon God's providence, including 3 per cent dealing with natural wonders and 2 per cent emphasizing different aspects of the supernatural such as dreams, telepathy, second sight, witchcraft, or faith-healing, whilst most of the remainder draw attention to anecdotes implying the special intervention of God in human affairs, such as instances where a sudden change in the weather ensured the success of Wesley's evangelism; a further 1 per cent emphasized divine judgement upon human sin. A strong emphasis upon the spiritual health of the Methodist societies, usually in specific localities, accounts for 7 per cent of the total, whilst instances of the persecution of Methodists are noted in 3 per cent, and their defence in 1 per cent. In 5 per cent Wesley described and defended his own preaching practices, especially his field-preaching, and his pastoral methods in a further 6 per cent. The *Journal* contains very few mainly theological discussions, and therefore very few asterisks employed for doctrinal passages. The major emphasis throughout is upon what Wesley termed "practical divinity"—the working-out of religion in daily life. To this end 5 per cent of the asterisks relate to various aspects of the devotional life, usually with a strong element of spiritual challenge. The same general approach characterizes the 7 per cent in which Wesley emphasized descriptions of and remarks upon men and manners, of which about 3 per cent related to buildings and estates, usually with a comment about the disadvantages of rich people in being tied to material things, whilst 1 per cent stressed the need to serve the poor. The comments upon books in the *Journal* are numerous, nor is their direct spiritual relevance always obvious; nevertheless Wesley employed some 5 per cent of his total asterisks to emphasize such comments, usually critical in tone. Descriptions of natural beauty account for 1 per cent, criticism of the clergy for almost 2 per cent, and a yearning for understanding among Christians for 1 per cent. There are even one or two occasions where Wesley apparently added an asterisk in order to underline a humorous anecdote, such as those about the man who complained to the magistrate that the Methodists "have *convarted* my wife",¹⁵ and the "prophets" who told Wesley that he would be "born'd again".¹⁶

Perhaps it should be pointed out that the best-known passage in Wesley's autobiography, describing how on 24th May 1738 he felt his heart "strangely warmed", is *not* singled out by an asterisk. Possibly this was yet another printer's error, possibly he himself would have agreed with some modern scholars that the incident held no peculiar significance to him—and surely they will welcome this tit-bit of confirmatory evidence!—or it may have been another instance of Wesley's reticence about his personal experience, which has been noted on other occasions. The latter seems to me the more likely, combined with the fact that the years when he was thus

¹⁵ *Works*, xxviii, p. 74. (9th June 1742.)

¹⁶ *ibid.*, xxviii, p. 114. (3rd November 1742.)

publishing his collected *Works* constituted a period when some of the sharp edges of his early dogmatism were being smoothed down, so that although he left the original printed *Journal* intact, he tried to correct the record by footnotes and errata, pointing out that even before 1738 he had been a Christian of sorts, having at least the faith of a servant, though not that of a son.¹⁷ His emphasis upon the possibility and need for salvation for mankind in general, however, remained undiminished, as is shown clearly by the asterisks so lavishly applied to other conversion narratives in the *Journal*.

Wesley's collected *Works* did not turn out to be the landmark for which he had hoped. For one thing, they were poorly printed. For another, he lived for a further seventeen years, and continued to write and to publish, so that the *Works* were rendered incomplete. Even in his own publishing practice these thirty-two volumes fell very much into the background, and there appears to be no instance where he used the supposedly improved text of the *Works* in re-printing any of his individual publications, nor did he attempt to re-print the *Works* themselves, either in their original form or with corrections and additions. Into the backwaters of comparative obscurity flowed the experiment of the asterisks along with the *Works*, its major testing-ground.

We have seen how in this experiment Wesley moved from his initial function as arbiter of literary taste to that of spiritual guide. He also put it to use in one more role—that of medical adviser. In 1772 he published what was described on the title-page as the fifteenth edition of his famous *Primitive Physick*—though at least eighteen issues seem to have preceded it. This was not only "corrected and much enlarged", but immediately after the earlier prefaces Wesley added this note:

** Most of those Medicines which I prefer to the rest are now marked with an Asterisk. Oct. 20, 1772.

In fact this was carried out very imperfectly. After placing asterisks before 43 of the first 180 remedies, Wesley left all the remaining 832 unmarked.¹⁸ He did not complete his task of selecting favourite remedies until a year later, incorporating 70 additional asterisks in the revised edition of the *Primitive Physick* which he placed in volume xxv of his *Works*, the prefatory note being dated 10th August 1773. As happened with other publications, however, this *Works* edition of the *Primitive Physick* was completely ignored in subsequent editions of his major medical compilation, and although his 1772 note about the asterisks continued to appear, until the revision of 1780 the asterisks themselves were confined to the opening pages.

¹⁷ See Frank Baker: "'Aldersgate' and Wesley's Editors" in *London Quarterly and Holborn Review*, October 1966, pp. 310-19, especially pp. 317-19.

¹⁸ Not only so, but from the beginning Wesley used asterisks to indicate footnotes also, and at the end of the volume he employed them to indicate the twelve ailments for which he thought cold bathing was especially helpful in conjunction with going to bed and sweating.

This revision eliminated some of the earlier asterisks, and added a meagre 24 scattered about the remaining four-fifths of the work. Thus it continued until the so-called twenty-third edition, issued in the year of his death. The 1773 edition, the most carefully prepared in this matter of select remedies, remained buried in the *Works*.

It was also while Wesley was caught up in applying this principle of select passages to his collected *Works* that he introduced asterisks into a work of John Fletcher's which he published—*The First Part of an Equal Check to Pharisaism and Antinomianism*. He appended a note to Fletcher's preface:

N.B. I have considerably shortened the following tracts; and marked the most useful parts of them with a *. J.W.¹⁹

In this work Wesley inserted 67 asterisks, spread very unevenly among the four tracts. This was almost the end of his use of this device, except for his treatment of William Law's *Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*. Wesley had issued an abridgement of this in 1744, in which he introduced the valuable numbering of Law's sections.²⁰ When this was incorporated in volumes v-vi of his *Works* (1771), Wesley inserted no fewer than 208 asterisks to indicate the more important passages. In 1784 he prepared another edition for distribution by the Methodist Tract Society formed by Thomas Coke and himself, even though this was a work of 232 pages.²¹ This, however, contained an independent assembly of asterisks. Only 44 of those included in the *Works* edition were retained, and 64 were added which singled out quite different passages. This underlines not only the fact that Wesley's mind was subject to change, and that he considered the *Serious Call* as replete with noteworthy passages, but also that even into his eighties he still regarded the device of the emphatic asterisk as being of service to the ordinary reader. This feature was already obsolescent, however, and was not revived by either Joseph Benson or Thomas Jackson in their editions of Wesley's works. Nor, to my personal regret, did the editorial board of *The Oxford Edition of Wesley's Works* regard it as of sufficient importance to introduce what undoubtedly might puzzle or distract some readers of that edition. Nevertheless the asterisk remains one of the unusual features of Wesley's publishing ventures which offers many clues to his purposes and preferences, as well as constituting a decaying monument to his desire to help the common man and his readiness in this task to undertake an experiment "a little out of the common way".

FRANK BAKER.

¹⁹ Green, op. cit., No. 304 (1774).

²⁰ Green, op. cit., No. 48.

²¹ See Green, op. cit., p. 217.

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