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Frederick E. Maser: 1908–2002 3
Introduction: 1999 and 2000 7
S T Kimbrough, Jr.
The Image of Christ in the Poor: On the Medieval Roots of the Wesleys' Ministry with the Poor: Synopsis 11
Ted A. Campbell
Perfection Revisited: Charles Wesley's Theology of "Gospel-Poverty" and "Perfect Poverty": Synopsis 13
S T Kimbrough, Jr.
Charles Wesley's Experience of Salvation: The Evidence of the Sermon Corpus 15
Kenneth G. C. Newport
A Single, Steady Aim: Images of Hope in Wesleyan Hymnody 31
Elaine A. Robinson
"Experimental and Practical Divinity": Charles Wesley and John Norris .. 59
J. Richard Watson
Charles Wesley's View of the Self 73
Martin Groves

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"Experimental and Practical Divinity": Charles Wesley and John Norris

J. Richard Watson

The purpose of this essay is to suggest some ways in which John Norris (1657–1711) may have been an influence upon Charles Wesley, in the context of his "experimental and practical divinity." Norris is more often discussed with reference to John Wesley, and so is the phrase itself. The most convincing description of John Wesley's "experimental divinity" is that of Robert E. Cushman, who discusses the interdependence of doctrine and life which is implied in it with reference to *The Character of a Methodist,* 1742. He identifies it as "the present and immediate working of the Holy Spirit," together with scriptural holiness in church and nation; with an inner recognition of sin, followed by repentance, justification, and newness of life.[1]

However, Cushman also uses Charles Wesley's hymns to illustrate this, and he is right to do so. Indeed, the "Large Hymn Book" of 1780 is the fullest expression of "experimental and practical divinity," as John Wesley's 1779 preface recognized, not because it explains these things, but because it exemplifies them through hundreds of incomplete statements: as if each hymn is an attempt, necessarily part-exploration, of the great mystery. In the individual hymns, then, Charles Wesley explores the condition of the religious mind and spirit, especially in relation to the "experimental" and "practical" elements of it. These words have similar resonance: the *Oxford English Dictionary,* using seventeenth-century examples, tends to conflate the two things, describing "experimental religion" as "practical experience of the influence of religion on the powers and operations of the soul," and "experimental divinity" as "the method of dealing with the conscience and religious feelings." "Practical," in the OED, is simpler: it is the word "applied to that department of the subject, art, or science, which relates to practice as distinguished from theory."

Elements of early Methodist experience are caught up and held, as if in a strong solution in a test tube, by this phrase "experimental and practical divinity." Into it must have gone a whole range of experiences—reading, prayer, and scholarship, and also prison-visiting, the voyage to Georgia with the Moravians, the unhappy experience there for John and Charles. The texts which result—the hymns and journals of Charles, the journals, letters and sermons of John—carry within themselves a multitude of different impressions, aims, hopes, and fears. The present essay examines the influence of one writer, John Norris; in doing so,

[1]Robert E. Cushman, *John Wesley's Experimental Divinity. Studies in Methodist Doctrinal Standards* (Nashville, Tennessee: Kingswood Books, 1989), 37, 62–3. The other most helpful essay on the subject is by Thomas A. Langford, "John Wesley and Theological Method," in Randy L. Maddox, ed., *Rethinking Wesley's Theology for Contemporary Methodism* (Nashville, Tennessee: Kingswood Books, 1998), 35–47.

I am aware that I am deliberately over-simplifying by selecting out one writer for discussion.

John Norris is well known to students of John Wesley, though not, I think, to students of Charles. He was born in 1657, the son of a clergyman: educated at Winchester College, where he would probably have sung Bishop Ken's morning and evening hymns in chapel, and then at Exeter College, Oxford. He became a Fellow of All Souls', and then a country vicar, ending up as Rector of Bemerton, near Salisbury, where he died in 1711.

All writers on John Wesley mention Norris at some point. Martin Schmidt says that Wesley read Norris "time and again" and particularly commended him in his correspondence.[2] Schmidt was probably thinking of two references to Norris in the letters of 1756. In one, dated 14 March, he called Norris's *Reflections upon the Conduct of Human Life, with Regard to Knowledge and Learning* "that masterpiece of reason and religion, . . . every paragraph of which must stand unshaken (with or without the Bible) till we are no longer mortal"; and in another, dated 16 April, he said that "I have followed Mr. Norris's advice these thirty years, and so must every man that is well in his senses."[3] V. H. H. Green, in *The Young Mr. Wesley,* describes him reading "the somewhat heavy lumber" of sermons, including those of Norris, in his first months as a Fellow of Lincoln.[4] Wesley was reading Norris with his pupils in 1729, and published for them an abridgment of Norris's *A Treatise on Christian Prudence* in 1734.[5] Henry Rack has described John and Charles and their friends reading Norris in 1730, and notes the remark at the end of *Reflections upon the Conduct of Human Life* in which Wesley speaks of reading books which "warm, kindle and indulge the affections and awaken the divine sense in the soul," as he is "convinced by every day's experience that I have more need of heat than of light." As Rack notes, he repeated that last phrase from Norris more than once in later years:[6] though one has to add the somewhat self-questioning evidence of the letter of 28 September 1745, "Fourteen years ago I said (with Mr. Norris) 'I want more heat than light.' But now I know not which I want most." [7]

Because John Wesley read Norris with his pupils and friends in the Oxford years, and had a high opinion of his work, it is hard to believe that Charles was not also affected by his work and his thinking; if this did not happen at Oxford (though I suspect that it did), it would have happened in the close confines of the

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[2]Martin Schmidt, *John Wesley, A Theological Biography,* vol. 2, Part 2, translated by Denis Inman (London: Epworth Press, 1973), 108.

[3]See also Schmidt, vol. 2, Part 2, 132, 257.

[4]V. H. H. Green, *The Young Mr. Wesley* (London: Edward Arnold, 1961), 70.

[5]Green, 131.

[6]Henry Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast. John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 1989), 548.

[7]*The Works of John Wesley,* vol. 26: *Letters II, 1740–1755,* ed. Frank Baker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 161.

voyage to Georgia, where John Wesley was reading Norris's *A Treatise on Christian Prudence* to a sick servant of General Oglethorpe's (Journal 2 December 1735; Diary, 8 December). I wish to suggest that Norris's influence is found in a number of places in Charles Wesley's hymns, always remembering that the sources of those hymns are so complex and manifold that such as exercise is an over-simplification. The French post-structuralist critic, Roland Barthes, for example, would deny what he calls "the myth of filiation" (the direct influence of one writer upon another), speaking rather of the text as "a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture." And I would agree that Norris's influence in these hymns is only one of the many "tissues of culture" that go into them. But examining Norris's work does bring into prominence certain features of Charles Wesley's thinking, and also of his technique. Norris anticipates Wesley in a number of features of his experimental and practical divinity: an awareness of death, an interest in wisdom, a stress on the importance of divine love, and a sense of the unfathomable mystery of the purposes and acts of God.

In addition, Norris was a poet, who had a sense of the importance of poetry as a serious expression of the highest moral and spiritual truth. In his best known poem, he used (rather loosely, as was the English seventeenth-century habit, following Abraham Cowley) the form of the Pindaric Ode, used for dramatic, passionate and inspired utterance. I shall argue that Charles Wesley, while not using the Pindaric Ode himself, was influenced by its mode of presentation, using questions and metaphors to address the sublime.

I begin with wisdom. One of the things that impressed the Wesleys about Norris was his learning, his stress on the importance of wisdom: it remained an objective throughout John Wesley's life to have followers who were not ignorant, but who were furnished with truths from the great Christian writers of the past. This emphasis is found chiefly in Norris's *A Treatise on Christian Prudence,* which Wesley abridged in 1734—before the visit to Georgia, and before the conversion experience of 1738 (it may have been from his abridged version that he was reading on board ship). Norris says that in his title "by Prudence I here mean, the same with Wisdom" (p. 3). Wisdom is associated with happiness. It is clear to Norris that "the Happiness of Man is not to "be found in any Thing but in God" and "it cannot consist in sensual Pleasure, Riches, Honour or Power" (p. 3):

> that which is the Object of Happiness must be such a Good, as perfectly satisfies the Mind, contents all its Desires, and gives it an absolute Tranquillity and Repose. But that no Creature does this is plain from Experience, from the Vanity which we find in all Things, and that restlessness and Desire of Change which is consequent upon it. We try one Thing after another, as the searching Bee wanders from Flower to Flower; but we go off from every one with Disappointment, and a deluded Expectation; . . . . (pp. 3–4)

What is needed, says Norris is the right *disposition:* "a certain Temper of Mind, which as the Apostle speaks, is to make us meet Partakers of the Inheritance of the Saints in Light" (p. 9: his use of "temper" here is like Charles Wesley's use of the phrase "holy temper"). Norris goes on to speak, in terms that became common in eighteenth-century devotional prose (and beloved of the followers of John Wesley) of "religious warmth" and of the "flame of devotion": the purpose of prayer, he says, is "to maintain a religious Warmth in our Minds, and to keep up there a Spirit of Devotion, the Flame of which would soon be extinct without the Breathings of Prayer to fan it, and give it Motion" (p. 21). Obviously the image of fire and flame is common in Charles Wesley's hymns, and I do not need to give instances. I am trying to point out the consonance of Norris's thinking with Wesley's imagery, though both would have had much in common with other expressions of devotion.

In Chapter IV of *Christian Prudence,* Norris turns to "the Conduct of a Prudent Christian, with regard to the Government of himself." This is to do chiefly with the control of his understanding, the discipline which is required, and which is assumed everywhere in Charles Wesley's work (and in John's "experimental and practical divinity"). It is followed by a Chapter which contains the word "Practice" in the title: "A Perswasive to Christian Prudence, with some Advices relating to the Practice of it." In that chapter, the Christian is exhorted to "get Wisdom." If he does so:

> Then shall the Remembrance of Wisdom be sweet unto us, and we shall delight in her Conversation, and every Step in her Ways will give us more Comfort than all the little Things of the World. (p. 30)

The conjunction I wish to point out here is that between wisdom, and the practice of wisdom, which is an important element of experimental and practical divinity: as Charles Wesley was to put it in his hymn "Omnipotent Redeemer," there is a "church of pardon'd sinners" who are "practical believers." These are those who do not "profess" Christ (the word "professor" has a very bad meaning in this period, denoting one who has all the outward appearance of being a Christian, without being genuinely one in his heart): this is the import of his hymn "Canst thou with specious word deceive," in which the theoretical Christian "professes":

> Fair words thou may'st to mortals give,
> Persuading them how good thou art,
> May'st perfect love to Christ profess;
> But God thine inmost substance sees.
>
> Actions He more than words requires,
> Actions with right intention done,
> Good works the fruit of good desires,
> Obedience to His will alone,
> Pure hope which seeks the things above,
> Practical faith, and real love.

In Norris's work, this practical Christianity finds its way into the end of his treatise on Christian prudence, by which he means wisdom. His words about the beauty of wisdom are echoed in Charles Wesley's "Happy the man that finds the grace," published in *Hymns for those that seek, and those that have Redemption in the Blood of Jesus Christ* of 1747. It is based upon Proverbs 3:13–18: "Happy is the man that findeth wisdom," but it may also have been influenced by Norris in its reference to the joys and delights of wisdom:

> To purest joys she all invites,
> Chaste, holy, spiritual delights;
> Her ways are ways of pleasantness,
> And all her flowery paths are peace.

A Treatise on Christian Prudence was important enough for John Wesley to abridge it; but John also admired Norris on death. Writing to the Monthly Reviewers on 9 September 1756, he exhorts them: "Be persuaded, gentlemen, to give yourselves the pains of reading either Mr Herbert's 'Providence', or the verses which Norris entitles 'The Meditation'; and you will find them scarce inferior either in sense or language to most compositions of the present age."[8] "The Meditation" is a strange poem (and in no way comparable, either in subject-matter or interest, to Herbert's "Providence"). It reminds the reader of the inevitability of death:

> It must be done—my soul—but 'tis a strange,
> A dismal and mysterious change,
> When thou shalt leave this tenement of clay,
> And to an unknown somewhere wing away;
> When Time shall be Eternity, and thou
> Shalt be thou know'st not what, and live thou know'st not how.

This is an "Amazing state," one which it is hard to conceive of. Death is

> all wrapt up in clouds, as if to thee
> Our very knowledge had antipathy.

Norris then appeals to "some courteous ghost" to tell him what being dead is like, but the ghost takes a malicious pleasure in seeing others suffer uncertainty:

> you, having shot the gulph, delight to see
> Succeeding souls plunge in with like uncertainty

So the soul, at the point of death

> stands shivering on the ridge of life;
> With what a dreadful curiosity
> Does she launch out into the sea of vast Eternity!

---

[8]*The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, ed. John Telford (London: Epworth Press, 1931), III:197.

At this point, the reader expects a conclusion which will draw attention to the redeeming love of God and the soul's salvation. Norris surprises (and disappoints) by likening the state of the soul approaching death to the "astonished sinners" viewing the approach of the flood (Genesis 7:21–23).

John Wesley, while commanding Norris's poem, throws it into relief by his translation from the German of Johann Andreas Rothe:

> Though waves and storms go o'er my head,
> Though strength, and health, and friends be gone,
> Though joys be withered all and dead,
> Though every comfort be withdrawn,
> On this my steadfast soul relies—
> Father, thy mercy never dies!

The sea, which Norris saw as the sea of death, is for Wesley the sea of Christ's mercy:

> With faith I plunge me in this sea,
> Here is my hope, my joy, my rest . . . .

We find the same pattern in Charles Wesley. He also vividly realizes the inevitability of death:

> And am I born to die?
> To lay this body down?
> And must this trembling spirit fly
> Into a world unknown?
> A land of deepest shade,
> Unpierced by human thought,
> The dreary regions of the dead,
> Where all things are forgot!

The idea that death is "unpierced by human thought" is very close to Norris's sense of it in "The Meditation": Wesley's hymn, astonishingly, is from *Hymns for Children,* 1763, and appeared in the 1780 *Collection* in the section "Describing Death." The difference between Wesley and Norris, however, is that Wesley appeals:

> Jesus, vouchsafe a pitying ray:
> Be thou my Guide, be thou my Way
> To glorious happiness!

Norris's poem finishes on the dead end of a simile:

> So when the spacious globe was delug'd o'er,
> And lower holds could save no more,
> On th'utmost bough th'astonished sinners stood,
> And view'd th'advances of th'encroaching flood.

O'er topp'd at length by th'element's encrease,
With horrour they resign'd to the untry'd abyss.

The idea of the sinners climbing higher and higher is vivid; but as a description of death, and as an enquiry into its nature and consequences, it leaves the reader no wiser than before. In the Wesleys' experimental and practical divinity, death is part of the natural process which is subsumed into the overall pattern of sin and forgiveness, of redemption and love.

Norris has a particular approach to the matter of love, from his reading of Plato and his contacts with the Cambridge neo-Platonists. One of his first publications was entitled *The Picture of love Unveil'd: Being An Answer to One, who was very inquisitive to know what Love was,* a translation of a Latin text by Robert Waring (1613–58); and he later wrote *The Theory and Regulation of Love: A Moral Essay, in Two Parts. To which are added, Letters Philosophical and Moral between the Author and Dr. Henry More.*

Henry More was, of course, the celebrated Cambridge Platonist, from whose *Divine Dialogues and Divine Hymns* of 1668 John Wesley took his hymns "Father, if justly still we claim" and "On all the earth thy spirit shower." The major Cambridge Platonists, Henry More, Benjamin Whichcote, and Ralph Cudworth, rejected the materialism of Hobbes and the severity of Calvin, believing that human love was valuable and that the search for truth was the search for God. Their affinity with the sublime work of Plato is shown in their belief that sense revealed only appearances, and that there were realities in ideas and concepts of the divine, so that there was no conflict between reason and revelation.

Norris's book is dedicated to Lady Masham of Oates (1658–1708), who was Ralph Cudworth's daughter Damaris. In it Norris argues that love is "the motion of the soul towards good" (p. 14). He quotes from Plato's *Symposium,* where Socrates describes love as the oldest of the Gods, and argues, as a Platonist would, that "God is the Centre of our Spirits, as the Earth is of Bodies" (p. 27). This distinction between the physical world and the world of the mind and spirit is continually insisted upon:

> As the good state of the Natural World depends upon those laws of Regular Motion, which God has established in it . . . so does the Welfare and happy state of the Intellectual World depend upon the Regularity of Love. (pp. 58–9)

Above all, perhaps, he stresses the importance of the desire for God, and ends with an impassioned final prayer:

> O Spirit of Love, who art the very Essence, Fountain and Perfection of Love; be thou also its Object, Rule, and Guide. Grant I may love thee, and what thou lov'st, and as thou lov'st. O Clarify and refine, inlighten and actuate my Love, that it may mount upward to the Center and Element of Love, with a steddy, chast, and unsullied Flame; make it unselfish, universal, liberal, generous and Divine, that loving as I ought, I may contribute to the Order of thy Creation here, and be perfectly happy in loving thee, and in being lov'd by thee eternally hereafter. Amen. (p. 120)

Norris's vocabulary is found everywhere in Charles Wesley's hymns: words such as "refine" suggest "refining fire, go through my heart," and "actuate" is found in "Move, and actuate, and guide"; so are images such as "Object," "Guide," "Fountain," and "Essence." The idea of "Essence" is found in "Spirit of truth, essential God" from *Hymns on the Trinity* (1767), and although Charles Wesley alters Norris's "Essence . . . of Love" to "Spirit of Truth," the second verse of that hymn is powerfully concerned with the presence of God within the written word: it is as if the Holy Scriptures, being material things, are transformed by what lies behind them:

> Still we believe, almighty Lord,
> Whose presence fills both earth and heaven,
> The meaning of the written word
> Is by thy inspiration given;
> Thou only dost thyself explain
> The secret mind of God to man.

There is a very important sense here of the mystery of God, but also of human attempts to understand it, the most notable of which, for Charles Wesley, was Milton's *Paradise Lost,* the avowed aim of which was "to justify the ways of God to men." Wesley argues that to understand the Scriptures properly will be to worship God, the divine Interpreter:

> Come then, divine Interpreter,
> The Scripture to our hearts apply;
> And, taught by thee, we God revere,
> Him in three Persons magnify,
> In each the triune God adore,
> Who was, and is, for evermore.

God interprets himself. He is the "divine Interpreter" who can provide a meaning in Scripture which is superior to any that can be attained by human hermeneutics. The process involves a return to the mystery, the essence from which the hymn set out: it is significant that the reference in the final verse is to the great mystery of the Holy Trinity.

There is a very deep sense in Charles Wesley's hymns of the movement of the soul upwards towards God, found most sublimely perhaps in "Love divine, all loves excelling" and "Jesu, lover of my soul." We find this in an essay by Norris, printed in his *A Collection of Miscellanies: Consisting of Poems, Essays, Discourses, and Letters, Occasionally Written* (1687). One essay is entitled "Contemplation and Love: or, The Methodical Ascent of the Soul to God, by steps of Meditation." Elsewhere in the same book, we find him at his most Platonic, arguing that "Platonic Love is the Love of beauty abstracted from all sensual Applications, and desire of corporal contract, as it leads us on to the Love of the first original Beauty, God" (p. 444). Thus "the Love of abstract Beauty

must need be a very generous and divine Affection" (p. 444). Religion, in an earlier essay, therefore becomes "the Perfection of a Man, the improvement and accomplishment of that part of him wherein he resembles his Maker, the pursuance of his best and last end, and consequently to his happiness" (p. 284).

These all point towards a doctrine of Christian Perfection. They also return us to the idea of the mystery of God, which Norris links very clearly with love in *The Theory and Regulation of Love:* "the great Mystery of Godliness is nothing else but a Mysterious Expedient for the Promotion of Regular Love." The word "mysterious," of course, has connotations of a holy mystery, and it is evident that Norris was thinking in terms of love as leading upwards towards the central holiness of the Divine. It is found in Charles Wesley, again and again:

> Amazing Mystery of Love!
> While posting to eternal Pain,
> God saw his Rebels from above,
> And stoop'd into a Mortal Man.
>
> His Mercy cast a pitying Look;
> By Love, meer Causeless Love inclin'd,
> Our Guilt and Punishment he took,
> And died a Victim for mankind.

This is from Hymn XXXVI of *Hymns on the Lord's Supper.* The word "mystery" occurs again in "And can it be"—"'Tis mystery all: the Immortal dies!": in that hymn it is again echoed by "'Tis mercy all!", in a conjunction which is a favorite word-play of Wesley's. The mystery is the mercy and the mercy is the mystery.

This is the great theme of the early years of Charles Wesley's hymn writing. His decision to write in such an impassioned way must have come from hundreds of examples: from poets such as Milton, he would have acquired the sense of poetry as having a high and holy purpose. It is to this concept, and to the Pindaric Ode as a literary form, that I now turn.

In 1687, Norris published his poems with a preface which suggested that poetry was becoming trivial and superficial. Poetry had declined, he wrote in the address "To the Reader":

> 'tis now for the most part dwindled down to light, frothy stuff, consisting either of mad extravagant Rants, or slight Witticisms, and little amorous Conceits, fit only for a Tavern entertainment, and that too among readers of a Dutch palate. (p. iii)

The "Dutch palate" was an indication of coarseness, derived from images of boors in taverns as represented in Dutch painting. Norris argued that he was attempting "to restore the declining genius of Poetry to its Primitive and genuine greatness . . . and accordingly I have made choice for the most part of Divine and Moral Subjects, . . ." (p. ii). It is as if he was thinking of religious painting, perhaps of Italian pictures; and it is clear that he was one of those writers from whom

Charles Wesley would have acquired the idea of poetry with a high moral sense. It is in this context that Norris's best known and most ambitious poem, "The Passion of our Blessed Saviour, represented in a Pindarique Ode," should be examined.

The fact that Norris wrote a Pindaric Ode, and saw fit to advertise the fact, is important. The Pindaric Ode was based upon the technique of the Greek poet Pindar (c. 522–443 B.C.), and had been popularised in England by Abraham Cowley. It was bold, impassioned, and exalted, with daring metaphors and a powerful diction, suited to the expression of the sublime. The Ode, writes Stuart Curran, "became the principal lyric vehicle for the sublime."[9] More importantly for our purposes, Curran suggests a transition from the ode as a public poem to an expressive poem of individual passion: "throughout the eighteenth century the ode of public celebration that Cowley transposed from Pindar continually reverts to the poet himself as centering force."[10] He then goes on, very perceptively, to see a connection between the hymn and the ode: the hymn, which is an ancient form for worshipping the godhead, is joined with the ode to celebrate that godhead. He identifies Milton's "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" as an example of this: it is "a poem erected upon the opposing stresses of hymn and ode, of a hymn to the recreated godhead and an ode celebrating his human incarnation."[11]

Curran's insight is worth thinking about when one considers Charles Wesley's approach to writing his "Conversion Hymn," and those which come immediately after it, such as "And can it be." His verse is that of worship, so a hymn; but it is also a verse which is trembling with the passion of celebration, a Pindaric attempt at the sublime:

> Where shall my wond'ring soul begin?
> How shall I all to heaven aspire?

I have written about Wesley and the unanswered question before: here it may be sufficient to note the ode-like character of the hymns, or the hymn-like character of the ode to his conversion. They certainly center on the self, as Curran suggests: the question about "where to begin?" is the same question that Samuel Crossman asked when writing about the Passion of Christ in "My song is love unknown"—"What may say?" In that poem it is inextricably connected with the other question—"Oh who am I?":

> Oh who am I,
> That for my sake
> My Lord should take
> Frail flesh and die?

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[9]Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 65.

[10]Curran, 66.

[11]Curran, 64.

Charles Wesley asks almost the same question: "Died he for me?" These questions suggest a passionate response more powerfully than an answering statement might do, and point to Charles Wesley's ode-like utterance. What Curran calls "the inherently dramatic character of the ode"[12] is found here, and in Norris's Ode:

> Say bold licentious Muse,
> What noble subject wilt thou chuse;
> Of what great hero, of what mighty thing,
> Wilt thou in boundless numbers sing?
> Sing the unfathom'd depths of Love,
> —For who the wonders done by Love can tell,
> By Love, which is itself all miracle?—
> Here in vast causeless circles may'st thou move;
> And like the travelling planet of the day
> In an orb unbounded stray.
> Sing the great miracle of Love divine,
> Great be thy genius, sparkling every line,
> Love's greatest mystery rehearse:
> Greater than that,
> Which on the teeming chaos brooding sate,
> And hatch'd with kindly heat the Universe.
> How God in mercy chose to bleed and dye,
> To rescue man from misery:
> Man, not His creature only, but His enemy.

The elements of Wesley's "Conversion Hymn," and of "And can it be," are here. The poem begins with the question to the Muse, which is "licentious," meaning not what it would mean today, but free, unrestrained: what will you choose to sing about, in your boundless numbers? "Where shall my wond'ring soul begin?" The poem goes on to speak of Love as "all miracle," or (as Wesley puts it) "Who can explore his strange design?" Wesley prefers the word "mystery" to "miracle," rightly: but Norris comes to it later in the verse: "Love's greatest mystery rehearse." Love's greatest mystery, he continues, is not the Creation but the Redemption: "How God in mercy chose to bleed, and dye/To rescue man from misery." Here mercy is juxtaposed to misery: Norris sees mystery in the context of the other two words. The misery is depicted by Wesley more vividly as imprisonment—"Long my imprisoned spirit lay/Fast bound in sin and nature's night," but his verse has the same excited use of key words. Finally, Norris reminds us that Man was not only God's Creature (as he was at the miracle of Creation) but his Enemy. Wesley makes this more immediate by referring it to himself.

[12]Curran, 69.

Died he for me, who caused his pain?
For me, who him to death pursued?

Norris's poem is a long one, and the most important part of it, for the student of Charles Wesley, is this first stanza. It goes on to depict the Passion of Jesus Christ in somewhat extravagant terms, and ends, not with his Resurrection, but with his return to the bosom of the Father. Like "The Meditation," it surprises and disappoints: it describes the Passion and leaves out the Easter story.

I return, finally, to the subject of mystery. I have given examples of specific instances of this word in Charles Wesley and in Norris: I want now to remember that this was part of an intense debate at the time, principally against Deism and Gnosticism. Norris's chief contribution to this is his book *An Account of Reason and Faith: In Relation to the Mysteries of Christianity,* published in 1697. It is an attack on John Toland's *Christianity Not Mysterious,* which Norris described as "one of the most Bold, daring and irreverent pieces of Defiance to the Mysteries of the Christian Religion that even this Licentious Age has produced" (Preface, p. iv). He painted a picture of an age which was, in his view, degenerating fast: "We are posting as fast as we can into Heathenism, and stand even upon the brink of Infidelity" (p. 6). It is difficult to think of a worse state than this, but Norris seems to imagine it:

> But why do I talk of running into Heathenism? I am afraid we are tending further. For as from a Socinian 'tis easie to commence a Deist; so he that is once a Deist is in a hopeful way to be an Atheist whenever he please. (p. 7)

He argues against the overweening pride that goes with the self-sufficiency of human reason. The argument against Christianity, he says, rests on a false syllogism:

> Whatever is above our reason is not to be believ'd as true;
> But the Reputed Mysteries of Christianity are above our Reason:
> Therefore the Reputed Mysteries of Christianity are not to be believ'd as true. (p. 11)

Norris's contempt for this argument would have found favour with such writers as Pope and Swift, who satirized the way in which the trust in reason led to human pride. The Christian opposition to this is led by faith, which is associated with what Norris calls "intuition": "We attribute the way of Intuition to the most Perfect Beings, God and Angels" (p. 47). Faith "signifies a certain Assent, Judgement or Persuasion of the Mind, particularly that which is founded upon Testimony or Authority" (p. 47). We find the same argument in Charles Wesley's "Author of faith, eternal Word":

By faith we know thee strong to save
Save us, a present Saviour Thou!
Whate'er we hope, by faith we have,
Future and past subsisting now . . .

The things unknown to feeble sense,
Unseen by reason's glimmering ray,
With strong, commanding evidence
Their heavenly origin display.

The phrase "reason's glimmering ray" is common at the time: James Dale has discussed instances of it in his splendid essay "The Literary Setting of Wesley's Hymns" in the modem edition of the 1780 book. I bring Norris into the argument to show yet another writer who was engaged in the controversy between reason and mystery. In his 1697 book, the crucial chapter IV is entitled "That Human Reason is not the Measure of Truth." In this chapter he writes of

> those Truths which respect those Divine Ideas of the Superiour Order, that are of the Absolute Essence of God as it is in it self purely and simply Consider'd, and so are not only Essentially, but even Representatively Divine, as truly representing God. (pp. 205–6)

We are back with "Spirit of truth, essential God," in which God is his own interpreter:

Thou only dost thyself explain
The secret mind of God to man.

These mysteries are what Norris calls "the Absolute Ideas and Perfections of the Divine Essence" (p. 204). In order to try to describe them better, he uses a metaphor, almost apologizing for doing so:

> In the Contemplation of the Infinite Idea of the Divine Immensity we are like men that commit themselves to the Main Sea, at the very first Plunge out of our depth, and ready to be overwhelmed, swallow'd up and lost in an Abyss that knows no bottom.
>
> I use a little Figure and Imagery here the better to impress this upon the Imagination of those who are not so well habituated to the Conception of things by pure Intellection, but the thing itself needs none of the advantages of the Metaphorical way, being strictly and severely true. (p. 202)

We shall come across the bottomless abyss again in the hymn already mentioned, John Wesley's translation of Johann Andreas Rothe's "Ich habe nun den Grund gefunden," "Now have I found the ground wherein":

O Love, thou bottomless abyss,
My sins are swallowed up in thee! . . .

(where, we may note in passing the original has "abyss"—"Abgrund"—but not "bottomless"); and in the next verse:

With faith I plunge me in this sea,
Here is my hope, my joy, my rest; . . .

Charles Wesley's version is found in "Come, Holy Ghost, all-quickening fire":

Eager for thee I ask and pant:
So strong, the principle divine
Carries me out with sweet constraint
Till all my hallowed soul is thine,
Plunged in the Godhead's deepest sea,
And lost in thine immensity.

This supremely skillful verse is based on the same image that is found in Norris, though in this case it is beautifully held back and only revealed in the last two lines.

I am not suggesting that either John or Charles Wesley necessarily took it from Norris. What I am suggesting is that Norris is one of these late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century writers whom they read, and whose work influenced their thinking and their poetry. And if I may go back to Barthes for a moment, I would remind you of the argument that a poet's text is a tissue of quotations from the innumerable centres of culture. There is a whole hinterland of such writing which shapes and forms the Wesleys' "experimental and practical divinity": all I have done is to try to explore, very simply, one possible part of it.