Reading Wesley Today: A Discourse Approach

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Why should a linguist be interested in John Wesley today? Because language is the main instrument of communication that we have, and because it must (like all our gifts and talents) be used efficiently. In this respect, John and Charles Wesley were inspiring examples. Their discourse was a form of multi-media communication *avant la lettre* (field preaching, hymns, writing (tracts, books, magazines), societies, schools), and they made some far-reaching linguistic choices (lay assistants who addressed his audiences in their own social and regional dialect, memorizable rhyme and rhythm, inclusive imagery), ...

Actually, the Methodists' discourse was so efficient that they have been accused of resorting to "linguistic magic" to manipulate the working masses into obedience to capitalist interests at the time of the Industrial Revolution. The Methodists themselves still proclaim that Wesley helped avoid a bloody proletarian revolution in Britain; his Marxist critics, among whom E.P. Thompson (1963) has been the most vocal, have turned the argument around and claimed that Methodism acted as an obstacle to the emancipation of the working classes, and thus contributed to the oppression of the proletariat. Without posing as a revisionist, I would like to take issue with this interpretation by studying Methodist discourse in a CDA (Critical Discourse Analysis) perspective, which ventures beyond the "words" to study co-text, con-text and inter-text, and thus allows to do better justice to Wesley.

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George Lawton (1962) made an earlier attempt at describing Wesley's language. It was a good book, but the approach was mainly vocabulary-based, with hardly any recourse to considerations of frequency: Lawton successfully substantiated the claim that Wesley's vocabulary was rich and varied, but he failed to distinguish between genres (and thus argued for simplicity and complexity at the same time) and was totally impressionistic in his judgments about favourite terminology (Dekoninck-Brossard & van Noppen 2004).

Reading Wesley with the Computer

Today we can do better. We have at our disposal the complete works of Wesley on CD-ROM (Jackson 1872) and software packages like *WordSmith* (Scott 1997) which will within minutes perform word- and frequency counts or concordancing jobs that used to take years when such data were processed manually. Word-counts have their rightful place in stylistic and content analysis: the calculation of absolute and relative frequency allows one to chart the key-words[1] throughout Wesley's œuvre, not only for the complete works, but also differentially, per genre (works, sermons, hymns).

The most prominent key word across the genres is the word *God,* a predictable confirmation of the fact that much Christian language, whether doctrinal or liturgical, may be defined as *God-Talk.*. The other hypostases (*Christ, Jesus, Lord, Spirit*) are key terms as well. In the complete *Works,* the impact of the *Journals* and *Diaries* is clearly discernible. The key words referring to weekdays combine with *rode, preached, afternoon* or *evening* and *congregation* to refer to Wesley's itinerant preaching circuits. In the sermons, the characteristic rhetorical exclamation is the additive-intensifying *Yea;* while in the hymns, a substantial cluster of first- and second-person pronouns in the top key positions and the exclamative "O" make it quite clear that we are here dealing with *ascriptive* speech acts addressed *to* God, rather than *descriptive* reports *about* Him. The sinners/singers posit themselves mainly as an "I" relating to a "Thou" on whose grace their salvation depends: one of the

macrostructural principles underlying many hymns is a recurrent movement whereby the singers are led from individual doubt and questioning to an answer given by an external fact or agent, and thus guided from insecurity to certitude, from fear to trust, from despair to hope and, if they will accept the divine grace, from sin to salvation.

It is only when one has crossed the threshold of genre-marked items that one moves into a zone of confluence between genres, where the most important content-related terms are clustered together: *All, Faith, Heart, Grace, Love, Sin, Soul* and (in the *Works* and *Sermons*) *Holiness.* The Wesley brothers (John and Charles) set great store by the fact that their people should sing the same doctrine in their hymns as they heard and read in their sermons, and John called his collection: *a little body of experimental and practical divinity.* And indeed, it must be hard to give a more compact summary of Wesley's theology than the first few key terms: Methodism is a religion of the *heart* (of personal feeling and commitment) in which individuals must recognise their state of *sin* and their need for divine *grace,* which is available to *all* who aspire to save their *soul* and achieve *holiness.* One recognizes here not only an inherently Protestant theme (*Sola Fide:* salvation through faith, not deserved or bought), but also the more specifically Arminian idea of the universality of grace – a subversive idea at the time, which claimed that all men and women, even the smallest, poorest and most sinful, could have access to God's *grace* and *love.* It was this gospel of love, addressed to the underprivileged classes at the margins of society, which made the message so attractive to the poor and powerless, and so shocking to the wealthy and powerful, who saw their own privileges as a token of divine election.

Discourse Analysis: Beyond the Text

The Discourse Analyst, however, must move beyond the level of words to situate texts within the full range of situational circumstances that condition its full meaning. In Norman Fairclough's terms (1989, 26), if one sees language as discourse and social practice, "one is committing oneself not just to analysing texts, nor just to analysing processes of production and

interpretation, but to analysing the relationship between texts, processes, and their social conditions, both the immediate conditions of the situational context and the more remote conditions of institutional and social structures". The research takes one well outside the familiar paths of linguistics; for the analyst will have to take into account factors like:

- Who were the participants in the discourse (speakers and audience; what were these participants' psychological states, their needs and expectations);

- what was the (avowed or unavowed) purpose ("ideological", i.e. theological, economical, political) of the discourse, and how did it relate to religious, social and historical context within which it operated;

- what kind of contents ("messages") did the discourse convey;

- what were the media and the discourse settings chosen, and how did these choices affect communication and reception of the messages;

- what forms did the discourse take (e.g. with regard to gender, social class and register; or with regard to word choice and imagery);

- what were the norms and beliefs affecting their interpretation; and

- how were the messages received: what can we find out about the actual response of people at the time, and about the eventual impact of the discourse on society as a whole ?

These questions, which are conveniently summarized in Dell Hymes's acronym SPEAKING (1964), cannot all be answered here, but an attempt was made in my book (van Noppen 1999). I would, however, like to employ this form of context-conscious critical reading to answer two questions:

Was Methodist Discourse Manipulative?

Critics of Methodism have suggested, albeit on the basis of highly selective corpora, that by a skillful use of language, the preachers of the Revival engaged in a form of "brainwashing" or even "evangelic aggression", and that present-day manipulation of the masses by means of advertising and TV is nothing compared with the insidious indoctrination carried out by Methodism (Thompson 1963, 415; Bertrand 1971, 53). The procedure at the gatherings, it has been alleged, was to whip the audiences into hysteria by means of rhythmic hymns fraught with a heavy dose of sexual imagery, thus to heighten emotional tension and lower their critical threshold; and subsequently to unsettle them nervously by projecting fearful pictures of the hellfire punishments which awaited the unrepentant sinner. Thus conditioned, the listeners were then persuaded, by dint of "Taylorised" repetition, that failure to achieve salvation would necessarily condemn them for ever; that anybody who left the meeting "unchanged" and met with a sudden fate before they had accepted salvation would pass straight into the fiery furnace; and that such a ghastly destiny could be avoided by immediate conversion. This sense of urgency increased anxiety in the audience, and led to spectacular emotive side-effects like shouting and fainting, but also, we are told, to sudden conversions which were, however, short-lived; hence the need for the class meetings, which encouraged the practice of mutual policing to maintain the newly-gained converts inside the sphere of Methodist influence.

The account is a clever collage of elements which, in isolation, enjoy a certain degree of truth-value, but which were neither as systematically combined nor as representative of Methodist discourse as has been insinuated. The guiding hypothesis which underlies the critics' analysis seems to be that the success of Methodism, if any, was not a natural and voluntary response to a message, but the effect of a deliberate, manipulative process which cynically sought to trick people into a belief system which would condition their world-view and behaviour patterns, presumably on behalf of industrial interests which required an obedient and submissive work force.

It must be granted that both Wesley and Whitefield used hymns to attract their outdoor audiences, not unlike the way in which the Salvation Army today still exploit the natural curiosity of marketplace crowds with their brass bands. It is true that Wesley taught his Methodists to sing German tunes in double-quick time, not like a Bach chorale, and hymn-singing in the societies and preaching-houses could be a hearty, stimulating and emotionally moving experience – not only in terms of exciting participation in a rhythmic phatic activity, but also because of the message of hope conveyed by the lyrics, whose memorisation was facilitated by the musical medium. But it seems unlikely, as a matter of common sense, that crowds of godless labourers could be immediately swept into hysteria by the open-air *a capella* performance of a few hymns to which they had never been exposed before.

It is also a recognised fact that at one time, some of the hymns in the Moravian tradition were charged with suggestive physical language, and that some of the 18th-century "blood and wounds" idiom jars on present-day ears. It was not, however, a salient characteristic of Methodist hymnody. John Wesley was averse to any form of "coarse" anthropomorphism, and severely reproved the "amorous" imagery of the Moravians' hymns, which he censured as "an amazing compound of nonsense and blasphemy" and "gross folly." (*Journal,* December 15, 1748). Even the Moravians themselves were forced to dispense with this kind of imagery by the middle of the century, but it is true that a few relics did survive in Charles's hymns.

Recourse to the imagery of blood is more frequent, but Wesley would not have adopted it had it not partaken of the Biblical vocabulary of atonement with its metaphors of sacrifice, oblation and ablution, where the phrase "blood of Christ" refers both to the cancelling of sin and to the cleansing from sin. A computer study of *blood* in its collocations shows that in most instances, the word is used as a metaphorical shorthand term for redemption and atonement through Christ's sacrifice. Admittedly, in some hymns the sinners are "sprinkled," "cleansed" or "washed in the cleansing

blood of the Lamb of God," the "crimson tide" which was shed for them when "the victim's wounds were opened wide"; but to speakers of the Christian sociolect this imagery does not suggest sordid physicality any more than the language of the Eucharist ("eat my body and drink my blood") has cannibalistic overtones. Phyllis Mack has recently argued that the language of Christ's blood and suffering was one of the elements that allowed the women of the time to identify with, and adopt in their own writings, some of the Methodist imagery (Mack 2004) ; But it is somewhat of an overstatement to speak of "sacrificial, masochistic language" (Davie 1978, 46-7), except on the basis of scraps of verses collated for the purpose.

Again, it must be conceded that Methodist preaching, especially in its more popular lay and "ranting" forms, resorted, and sometimes excessively so, to "rapturous expressions, high flights of piety which soar beyond reason and common sense", and to lurid representations of hellfire and of the immediate effects of divine wrath. As a matter of fact, the suggestion of instantaneous retribution for one's trespasses (such as being struck dead by lightning for a swear-word) was one of the more criticable simplifications in Methodist pedagogy, a concession to popular superstition, and a welcome source for satirical comedy; but with regard to the corpus of Methodist preaching we have inherited, albeit limited, it is an arbitrary reduction to represent all of Methodist homiletics in just those terms.

The proverbial simplicity, directness and even repetitiveness of Methodist sermons does not necessarily lay its preachers open to criticism. As regards simplicity, it has been one of the aims of a study carried out in my department to show that the Wesleyan corpus displayed more conceptual and lexical sophistication than John's reputation usually acknowledges (Van Moorsel 1998). With regard to lexical and thematic recurrence, the rhetorical repetition of key concepts does not necessarily mean slogan-mongering, but may reflect good communicative sense when a speaker is faced with large, little-educated, outdoor crowds like those which constituted the early Methodist audiences.

The emotion sparked by participating in collective social and ritual activities undoubtedly played a part in the attraction which Methodism exerted on its popular audiences; but it would be erroneous to suppose that the movement derived its success only or mainly from "rollicking revival services" or "informal group membership". Original Methodism was a religion of strict discipline, and Wesley exhorted his preachers to encourage austere devotion. The satisfaction of belonging to a closely-knit society within which each individual was entitled to respect and brotherly love undoubtedly played a role; but once again, this gratification of a natural human aspiration for social acceptance and recognition need not be viewed as manipulative; it did not necessarily mean bribing the working classes to accept the miseries of the present with the promise that heaven would show an improvement, but should be viewed, rather, as the concrete, and more immediate, reward of conversion to a faith which offered the desirable advantage of integration into the community of the local chapel, where individuals could find peace and security after the torment and suffering of their weekday lives.

Finally, the presumed short-livedness of conversions based on a mere superficial emotive appeal was not a general phenomenon. Of course, converts who had flocked into the society in the rapturous early days often recanted under pressure from their social environment, and it must be conceded that not all names on the Methodist membership lists represented permanent adherents. A considerable number of people enjoyed only a passing acquaintance with the revival: it is a fact (attested notably by working-class autobiographies) that many children attended Sunday school but never became pious society members, and preferred to follow the secular path of labour activism when they grew up. But here it must be kept in mind that 1) Sunday-school attendance often responded to non-religious motives like the desire for instruction and the resulting social improvement, and 2) that society members were not held against their will. On the contrary: unrepentant sinners, doubters and backsliders were refused renewal of their tickets. The moral "policing" practised in the classes did, indeed, seek to ensure that the members' contrition and conversion were sincere; originally, this supervision by class leaders was

purely spiritual. Only much later did the expulsion from certain societies take on a more anti-radical character. Another significant argument against the coercive representation of the revival is the sort of response it produced in its adherents – no opiate resignation or indifference, but people interested "not only [...] in preparing men and women for another world, but also impassioned in their determination to alleviate their physical and economic distress in this" (Ramage 1967, 254). It would undoubtedly be rash to assert dogmatically that emotional pressure on the individual never occurred in the Class meetings, even in the early days; but the nature of the movement as a whole, the contemporary descriptions and the character of the people would all seem to indicate that emotional coercion, when it occurred at all, was exceptional. Members were not locked into the societies; and despite this openness, the movement kept growing.

Was the Methodist Message Politically Conservative?

There is little agreement on the kind and degree of influence that Wesley and the Methodists after him exerted on the political awareness of the working classes and on society as a whole. The belief, epitomised by Halévy, that the Methodist Revival generally acted as an instrument supporting industrial interests by manipulating the working masses into industriousness, diligence, thrift and obedience, and that it thus contributed to the consolidation of capitalism (Semmel 1971), has been increasingly called into question, notably on grounds of the partiality of the documentation offered in support; but the thesis still enjoys a certain following – possibly because of its apparent simplicity, which brings it into line both with Weber's historical sociology and with the popular Marxism that sees religion as the opiate of the people. The opposite view claims that Methodism, far from stifling revolutionary thought, actually fostered it. It is a fact that Methodism was perceived as a potentially subversive force by the Church, the gentry and the political establishment, and that the act of joining the Methodists was often interpreted as one of social defiance and exerted a progressive, modernising and revolutionary influence – if not by preaching radical action, at least by proclaiming the equality of all men and women – but that this revolution took place in people's souls, rather than in the streets.

As part of a carefully qualified answer to the questions raised by different historians' contradictory claims, it has recently been shown how local research, which underscores the existence of "many Methodisms in many places at many times" (Hempton 1984, 11) should foster wariness of all too comprehensive social or political interpretations of the role of Methodism. While the critics view the movement in an almost exclusively political perspective, the claim that "the Methodist Church never attempted to formulate a political and economic policy" (Edwards 1935:94) may force the proverbial pendulum a little too far back in the opposite direction. Methodist discourse as a whole did contain political messages as well as economic and religious ones, and it would be short-sighted to view the movement as concerned only with personal redemption.

It may be useful, however, to separate Wesley's political utterances from his religious, social and economic ones, and to replace them within their respective discourse contexts, in order to avoid that our judgment should be fraught with a bias shaped by twentieth-century norms of interpretation. In our present-day perception of reality, we easily lump together political, social and economic issues in one sector, and relegate religion to another, which bears only a peripheral relationship, if any, to the first. Wesley has been much maligned for his conservative and anti-democratic sayings and writings. From our present-day perspective it is difficult to reconcile Wesley's reactionary political statements with his concern for the poor and the oppressed; but the two cannot and should not be judged on the same terms, as the relationships of coherence and separation between different discourse contents do not lie where we expect them.

The charge of reactionary conservatism rests on four charges: Wesley's monarchism, his criticism of the American rebellion, his explicit rejection of democracy, and his antiradicalism – a policy followed and strengthened by the Methodists who were to succeed him at the head of the movement. Each of these themes deserves our brief attention here.

i. From its very beginnings, Methodism was perceived by both the church and the state establishment as a potentially revolutionary force. "Wesley's evangelical Arminianism [...] preaching spiritual equality, launching a campaign against clerical indifference [...] and tapping strong emotions, had genuinely incendiary possibilities. [...] This outpouring of religious sentiment with its anti-establishment, even revolutionary implications, made many in both Church and state tremble" . In order to allay these fears which might – and did – spark off attempts at persecution, Wesley sought by different means to affirm his faithfulness to the Church. It thus became his practice to defend Methodist doctrine as the true teaching of the Church of England, as it was formulated in the *Book of Common Prayer,* the *Articles of Religion,* and the *Homilies.* As a result, the political theology of the Anglican Church, with its overtones of loyalty, obedience and the impiety of rebellion played a privileged role in the articulation of his own political views, and the Methodist project was explicitly equated with support for the King, whose power the Wesleys believed, as a matter of biblical conviction, to be divinely ordained. The scriptural argument stems from Romans 13:1; but John Wesley made it clear that "the will of the king is no law to the subject, unless it is laid down in the law of the land, and that the law of God remains supreme".

Wesley was originally a Jacobite and delivered a Jacobite sermon at Oxford as late as 1734; but he began to preach absolute loyalty to George II and his divine right when he realised that restoration of the Stuarts could occur only as the result of a violent upheaval. His strategy of affirming the Methodists' faithfulness and obedience to the Crown was to pay off eventually: when George II was solicited to "take a course to stop these run-about preachers", he answered "I tell you, while I sit on the throne, no man shall be persecuted for conscience' sake", thus granting the Methodists equal protection under the laws. Thus convinced by experience that the king advocated religious liberty, Wesley gave his wholehearted support to George III as well, and at one point actually offered to raise a small militia to help defend the kingdom. His allegiance to the monarchy and the government as a spiritual imperative was taken over by the post-Wesleyan

Methodist Societies who, at a time when popular radicalism became increasingly vocal and powerful, renewed the strategy of reassurance by continually urging their members to "Fear the Lord and King and meddle not with them that are given to change".

ii. Wesley initially supported the American colonists' grievances, but changed his mind almost overnight after reading Johnson's *Taxation no Tyranny* (1775), a tract, incidentally, which he paraphrased and published under the title *A Calm Address to our American Colonies,* a pamphlet which was widely distributed. The rebels, he felt, were not runaway slaves or poor people driven to insurrection by exploitation – in that case, Wesley would have rallied their cause as he had done with others – but wealthy tradesmen and propertied merchant princes seeking to defend their own financial and commercial interests, that is, the very sort of people whose injustice to the poor Wesley denounced in England. The defense of the rights of the poor, the weak and the oppressed chimed in with his theology of universal grace and the ultimate worth of each person in the sight of God: that was why Wesley opposed slavery, religious persecution and press-gangs. The cause of the American rebels, however, did not fit into this category: John Wesley felt it was not concerned with liberty or human rights, but with self-interest dressing up as a fight for freedom.

iii. Wesley's explicit rejection of democracy may be boiled down to a crucial semantic issue – the interpretation of an abstract polysemic noun. The Methodist attitude towards democracy is, in fact, a telling example of how denotation and connotation as well as theory and practice may come apart.

In his political options Wesley worked and thought within the mainstream political theory of an age haunted by the spectre of a popular revolution, and rejected democracy lest it should establish a "dictatorship of the mob", in which civil and religious liberties (i.e. the rights of the free-born Englishman) would be jeopardised. Wesley was persuaded that as a form of government, democracy was an unworkable, dangerous and impious aberration, since according to his own premisses man was viewed as inherently sinful and depraved, and the power of kings was divinely ordained. He denounced the

idea that the people might be the source of power as "in every way indefensible", and attacked the notion of universal suffrage.

Similarly, in the Methodist societies, Wesley felt that he, and not the people, should choose the stewards and leaders: "We are no republicans, wrote he, and never intend to be"; Jabez Bunting is reported to have said that "Methodism hates democracy as much as it hates sin" – a statement typical of an age which identified the democratic revolution with anti-Christianity. Yet in its everyday practice, Methodism turned out to be more democratic than clerical. It was much more a layman's movement than a minister's, and by offering opportunities for service created a sense of individual and communal responsibility: "ordinary men and women were given the religious franchise and learnt the art of local government. Approximately one in every five became a member of the governing bodies such as the Leaders' and Circuit Quarterly Meetings" (Wearmouth 1937, 195), and important matters were subjected to a general vote. But "democracy" here should not be held to be synonymous with an individualistic philosophy. The importance of the individual was secondary to that of the movement, and individualism in thought and deed was viewed as spiritually disruptive.

On the other hand, if by "democracy" one means egalitarianism and the abolition of class barriers and privileges, it is useful to remember that Wesley's Methodism proclaimed that "the poorest and the weakest have the same place and authority which the richest and strongest have", and spread the idea of universal redemption and the preciousness of all men before God: he denied that wealth and privilege were tokens of divine favour, and made concern for the poor the touchstone of Christian action. Wesley was committed to the freedom and safety of each person, to their liberty of religion, life, body and goods, regardless of wealth or class In this respect, he might have been called a democrat. This message, however, was obviously more congenial to the poor than to the wealthy, the noble and the powerful, who were horrified at what they saw as a process of levelling down or *Gleichmacherei.*

iv. Within this gospel-based logic of egalitarianism, two obvious corollaries were the refusal of exploitation and the demand for equitable remuneration. As Coleridge put it, "If Methodism produces sobriety and domestic habits among the lower classes, it makes them susceptible of liberty. [...] Men can hardly apply themselves with such perseverant zeal to the instruction and comforting of the poor, without feeling affection for them; and their feelings of love must necessarily lead to a blameless indignation against the authors of their complicated miseries" (Patton 1970, 13).

It would, indeed, be short-sighted to argue that Methodism was nothing but a conservative force which acted as a controlling agent stifling radical and revolutionary tendencies. The Methodist message of reform and regeneration did foster progressive thought and revolutionary attitudes – but surprisingly, rarely within its own ranks. In Wesley's lifetime, the Methodists were never called upon to take sides in political conflict except (as pointed out already) in defense of the monarchy. After Wesley's death, however, the picture was to change. Many individual members subscribed to radical sympathies, and stood up for freedom and democratic government in matters religious and secular. It was the policy of mainstream post-Wesleyan Methodism to evict these members from the societies, where the "no politics" rule inherited from Wesley provided a logical and pious answer to the problem of the developing labour unrest. At the Conference of 1839, Dr. Beaumont declared that "Methodism ought to have no political line [...] I am jealous for the high spiritual character of Methodism. Every step we take towards politics reduces our character for high spirituality". Thus, the motive for neutrality seems to have been spiritual, not political; but the price to be paid for this attitude was an increasing loss of contact with the laborious classes .

The secession between the Methodist Conference and the Kilhamite New Connexion, whose members were at one time branded "Tom Paine Methodists", drained the Methodist Conference of its more democratically-minded elements , and this was to determine much of the

later climate. Indeed, in 19th-century Methodism, we note complaints that the Chapel had drifted away from its original calling to cater for the underprivileged laborious classes, "a mighty power" whose esprit de corps, interest in politics and tendency to act and move in masses were a cause of concern to the public of established religion: "If the masses do not come to us, we must go to them". The discourse data congrue with the historians' indications of radical activism, disobedience and even threats of violence within some chapel societies as mainstream post-Wesleyan Methodism published its open support to the cause of conservatism, and strongly inveighed against revolutionary ideas. "It was not strange that by the period of Chartism, Wesleyan Methodism, shaped in its birth as the religious society of the poor, should have lost the confidence of the intelligent working man" (Faulkner 1970, 12). Indeed, the workers became gradually frustrated with Methodism. By 1821 Wesleyanism had eliminated most of its radical elements, but in doing so had also changed the whole relationship between the Chapel and the working class. Methodism may have been "the church of the Industrial Revolution", but "it never became the religion of the factory proletariat " (Hempton 1984, 234) and as a result, secular radical politics became a real alternative to the essentially eschatological rewards of the Methodist Church. Eventually, the terrors of hell came to be seen as "nothing compared to the sins of social inequality". For the Radicals, human destiny could be shaped by Man himself; but for the mainstream Methodists, Man's life remained in the hands of God. Jabez Bunting and his peers (including wealthy laymen) were sympathetic to Toryism, and regarded socialism as anti-Christian.

Unlike Kilham, Bunting preached passive obedience and non-resistance – a recurrent position triggered not only by religious motives, but also by the need to display sympathy with the establishment in order to safeguard the Methodists from charges of sedition and radical subversion. He urged all those in want and distress to seek their deliverance from God rather than from men. The Wesleyan Conference regularly sent out circulars to all members of Methodist societies urging them not to become involved with revolutionary thinkers and radicals. The very number of these circulars

suggests their ineffectiveness, and Hempton (1984) points out that in many places, Wesleyan discipline came under heavy pressure from popular radicalism. Those who took part in the agitations received no mercy: Bunting's policy was to censor liberal elements, and to recommend that they should be "forthwith purged" from the societies. But more radically-minded Connexions were prepared to welcome the "insistent democrats" rejected from Wesleyanism, and in some of the manufacturing districts their competition caused a halt, and even a temporary decline, in the growth of Methodism . Bunting was aware of this, but felt that this was the price to be paid for the connexion's respectability.

As in Wesley's time, the conservative attitude on the part of the Methodist Conference can be explained as a strategic move to ward off criticism and action from an establishment which remained basically hostile to the revival; but however conservative and politically correct they claimed to be in social and political terms, the Methodists were still perceived, feared and resented by both Church and Government as a radical challenge to their control. In response, both Jabez Bunting and Thomas Allan (the London-based connexional solicitor) sought to reaffirm the credibility and respectability of the movement. Their portrayals of Methodism as disciplined in ecclesiastical organisation, and sustainer of a stable order, show how persecution forced its leaders into a conservative posture in order to obtain a liberal measure, i.e. the application of the new Toleration Act.

In view of these relentless affirmations of the movement's conservative political options, and the systematic rejection of radical elements, one may better understand the reproach that Methodism, though hailed by some as a social religion *par excellence* , ended up opposing social progress. The issue, once again, deserves some semantic qualification.

If by "social progress" one means increased affluence and comfort, there are indications that parts of the population at least enjoyed a higher standard of living as the 18th century wore on, and that the labouring classes who adopted frugal and thrifty habits could claim their share of these secular

blessings . Methodism and its work ethic must have played some role in this process, as is reflected in John Wesley's own complaints about the disastrous effects of growing wealth on Methodist spirituality; but evidence for the movement's eventual impact on the social behaviour of the working classes as a whole is circumstantial at best.

"Social progress", however, may also be interpreted as the response to demands for just wages and decent working conditions on behalf of tens of thousands of Englishmen who even in the 1830's had to struggle night and day to keep their families above starvation levels; and it is an observable fact that the struggle for the respect and protection of the emerging industrial labour force, and for human rights in general, were not a priority in Bunting's Methodism. Social issues were to become explicit tenets of the Methodist creed only at a much later stage. In the 19th century, however, Methodism was still marked by a recurrent tension between authoritarian and democratic trends; yet the description of the various Methodist Connexions' attitudes towards working-class aspirations, and their different commitments to labour issues at a time when the whole movement was in turmoil (not only over political issues but also about questions of church management and polity under Jabez Bunting's autocratic rule) cannot be cast into a simple binary contrast between countervailing "progressive" vs. "conservative" forces.

The question of the social and political impact of Methodism would warrant a full-fledged study in its own right, in which the linguist would have only a limited say. The decision whether Methodism exerted an influence on working-class behaviour decisive enough to avoid a hypothetical revolution, and whether such a revolution might have taken place had Wesley and Whitefield not taken to the fields to preach their gospel to the poor, is an issue for the historian, and not primarily for the linguist. The discourse linguist's role is not to indulge in historical *what-if* projections, but to show, analyse and explain how language, functioning in various discourse situations, contributed to the total impact of the message.

Conclusion

We may live in a post-positivist era, but the prestige of data as observable and undeniable factual evidence has survived. The present developments of technology and communication have enabled us not only to gain access to an almost unlimited wealth of data, but also to select, classify and process the information in such a way as to keep us from choking on the sheer bulk of facts.

But contrary to a widespread illusion, access to facts and figures does not automatically guarantee a grasp on knowledge, truth or power. Ever larger bodies of data are becoming available for consultation and inspection – if not by all inhabitants of the global village, at least by those who enjoy the privilege of a connection to the information highways – but the quest for the truth in or behind the data, even supposing they are not theory-laden from the outset, remains a matter of interpretation. Recourse to large bodies of information that may be approached from different perspectives and structured in different ways reduces (but does not preclude) the risk of hasty, uninformed inferences. In an age when opinions must often, for the sake of the media's convenience, be reduced to striking formulas or spectacular sound bites, it is useful to remember that complex truths must not, indeed cannot, be painted in bold, black-and-white contrasts, but call for a depiction in many pastel hues.

A comprehensive view of Methodism, which takes into account parameters like discourse genre, medium, purpose and reception as well as chronology, does not vindicate the charge that the revival generally acted as a handmaid in the service of industrial interests by manipulating the working masses into industriousness, diligence, thrift and obedience. Far from being a lackey of capitalism, Wesley spread a gospel of social holiness and advocated a kind of evangelical economics which were fundamentally anti-capitalistic inasmuch as they inveighed against property and the accumulation of wealth.

But it must in all fairness be conceded that the later, 19th-century phases of Methodism can not be totally exonerated from the charge that the movement eventually came to sympathise with the bourgeois establishment. While some Connexions displayed explicitly progressive and even radical sympathies, others came to adopt policies congruent with conservative and industrial interests, and eventually lost touch with the working masses; but the wholesale rejection of the Methodist movement as oppressive rather than liberating can be explained only as the result of a partial (i.e. incomplete and biased) representation, which fails to highlight the substantial positive contribution of Methodism to English society as a whole.

At a time when England and its Church seemed to be morally crippled, Whitefield and the Wesleys managed to restore religion to life and activity, to give it a central place in people's existence, and thus to transform the lives of both communities and individuals; not only by seeking to redeem them from fear, guilt and loneliness; not only by encouraging charity and social solidarity, not only by promoting education and developing community life; but also, and more importantly, by standing up for the underprivileged and giving meaning to their lives – a sense of the responsibility, value and dignity of every human being, to be realised in the practical circumstances of everyday life, and accessible to all. In this sense, by projecting the image of a perfectible humanity, and infusing in the hearts of people a new spirit of love and hope, Methodism tried, despite the difficulties and imperfections inherent in all human endeavour, to live up to the gospel calling to be the salt of the earth.

Notes

[1] i.e. items with significant relative frequency, calculated by checking the Wesley corpus against a 1 million-word reference corpus of varied 18th-century texts.

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