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Lake Methodism

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Postscript

This book began, years ago, where it ends now. I was just starting my dissertation, fired by an etymological curiosity: “enthusiasm” didn’t mean for Mary Shelley what it did for me. She meant it as many people still did in 1818: not our modern “emotional exuberance,” but the older “religious delusion,” an “imposture of divine inspiration,” a blasphemous zeal marred by social vulgarity and intellectual poverty. This “enthusiasm,” while on almost every page of the novel, was out of place in the story I thought I knew, the one about the scientific hubris and technological monstrosities of a university-educated aristocrat. So I tried reading it as a different kind of story. This other story confronted secular modernity with its final delusions: that its very mistakes were secular, that its hegemony was so absolute that even its monsters were the result of reason run amok—and that “enthusiasm” was merely the “ignoble and almost forgotten source” of Enlightenment, rather than its interlocutor, and perhaps even its master.

I’ve made this “enthusiasm” the story of *Lake Methodism*, and even now, the best sense I have for it is “religious literalism.” The demographic,

doctrinal, and historical varieties of “enthusiasm” united as a polemic against rhetoric, literalizing the figures shared by polite Christianities. The “politeness” of these other Christianities, in turn, was figural abstraction: declaring that “all original religions are allegorical, or susceptible of allegory,” Percy Shelley’s skepticism was also the Protestant turn, from the gruesome cannibalism of holy flesh and blood, to the decencies of sacramental symbolism. For many reasonable churchmen and dissenters, miracles needed to be metaphor. As we’ve seen again and again, the Church of England accepted only distant supernaturalisms: prophecies “accomplished” long ago, mysteries better left underexamined, spiritual “callings” best not taken seriously. “Enthusiasm,” by contrast, while suggesting any number of heterodoxies, labeled not so much peculiar beliefs, as peculiar concreteness of belief. It was problematic because it was common, expressing bedrock doctrine viscerally and personally, returning orthodoxy to the strange magics that nominally—if not practically—organized it. “Enthusiasm,” I think, outraged less by heresy, more by reminding other Christians of things they already believed, absurd only when explicit. Most people already professed some faith in prophecy, inspiration, and the resurrection of the dead. Joanna Southcott, the Wesleyan preachers, and Victor Frankenstein were distinguished by the completeness with which they thought these figures might be materialized.

The play between religious fact and figure—between preacher and priest, prophet and poet—seems to me much of the drama of Romanticism. It didn’t happen off-stage: “enthusiasm,” Wesleyan or Southcottian, wasn’t an “underworld” or “counter-public,” an ideological other to the modernity emerging at the turn of the nineteenth century. It mattered because of its ubiquitous vitality, bringing to prominence anxieties already aroused by the increasing marketability of religion, the popularization of culture, the democratization of political representation. But it mattered most of all because this culture was religious in its self-representations: enthusiastic literalism provoked churchmen, not skeptics, defenders of a particularly modulated form of belief, not critics of belief. My story has been so interested in this “reasonable,” Christian consensus—whose security can be misrecognized as secularity—because enthusiasm brought it into unique articulation, sharpening dispositions otherwise deeply implicit, because deeply normative.

For all this sharpening, I confess that the interactions between *Lake* and *Methodism* have sometimes given a fuzzy view. I didn’t want to assume, or even suggest, the coherence of either: my *Lake* spills beyond Lakers, my *Methodism* beyond Methodists. I’ve found fixed positions for

either category less important than the velocity between them, the speed with which “high Romantic argument” could shift into a very different style of “enthusiasm.” And like my “enthusiasm,” my “Lake” and my “Methodism” have been very much styles, imprecise yet recognizable, for which elaborate particularity might schematize away what matters. My guide here has been Henry Abelove, who writes that “Wesley taught the Methodists no particular theology, no particular inflection of the Christian tradition . . . he provided them with an internally contradictory mix of virtually everything Christian, new and old, Protestant and Catholic, Dissenting and Anglican, heretical and orthodox” (*Evangelist of Desire*, 74). This “internally contradictory mix” is the most accurate formula for Methodism ever drafted, making discriminations between Justification and Assurance, Sanctification and Perfection—and, perhaps, between Methodist and Anglican, Methodist and Laker—academic illusions of rigor. Atmospheric have their own substance, and, in Abelove’s telling, Wesley’s unprecedented effect had little to do with his theology, and much to do with the fashion of his clothes, the cut of his hair, and the electricity of his gaze. This sort of “Methodism” has given me my “Lake,” both complexes of fact, innuendo, and misrepresentation, which Hazlitt read as easily in the “consumptive hair-dresser” as in the *Lay Sermons*. The transferences between “Lake” and “Methodist” were figural, not confessional—and yet, as I’ve tried to suggest, the confessions of Romantic religion were most often recognized by their figures. Figural play, I think, had material significance.

This book has argued that Romanticism can’t be written without religion. But I also think that this religion can’t be written without romantics, trained to read metaphor and irony, as others are doctrine or parish records. This work is already well under way, as the literary studies of the last two decades testify. But my ultimate hope is that we teach what we’re coming to write. Our anthologies may lag our scholarship; even as “religion” plays a larger role in Romantic studies than ever before, it’s still hard to find in the book lists and tables of contents designed for the undergraduate classroom. I was fortunate to be able to teach *Lake Methodism* while writing it, and I was delighted to discover that many students find Romantic belief as engaging as Romantic poetry. Southcott is as easy to sell now as she was then, and Paine’s *Age of Reason* retains its urgency for women and men who have come of age amidst a clash of global fundamentalisms. But I’ve been continually surprised at how readily texts I thought I was inflicting—Paley’s *Natural Theology*, for one—became unlikely favorites. The rise of digital archives has gone a long way toward freeing syllabi

from the limits of the anthology, but I'd like to see "religion" as pedagogically convenient as Revolution, Abolition, Science, Empire, and the Rights of Woman. This would let us see how well a culture of sermons as well as lyrical ballads, hymns as well as novels—which is to say, a culture more like it was written and read—might be proved upon the pulses of the classroom.