The Confessional Imagination

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The Confessional Imagination: A Reading of Wordsworth’s Prelude.

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James Nayler raises the problem of enthusiasm as daemonic to perhaps its highest pitch of violence and tragedy—in English religious history, at least. He was to the early Quaker movement more or less what George Whitefield was later to be to the Methodist, or what Paul had been to the Petrine, church: an intensely energetic and charismatic early convert who bid fair to take the leadership of the sect away from its original founder not so much through guile as through simple magnetism. Nayler’s acceptance of the inner light was fully as unshakable as Fox’s. Unlike Fox, however, Nayler was not assiduously careful to avoid the full incarnational, christological implications of the doctrine. Nayler’s trust in—and imprisonment by—language is in fact at the heart of his tragedy. For if the inner light is the indwelling of Christ, and if “indwelling” means what it says, then one cannot really, fully distinguish one’s own converted self from the converting and saving self of Christ. And, in fact, to do so can even be a kind of blasphemy against the light. This is the classic problem of the divine becoming the daemonic, and Nayler is only more self-conscious—and more intelligent—than most in his dramatization of it.

As his popularity increased, so did the conviction of his followers that he actually was the Messiah come again. And in Nayler’s courageously literalistic interpretation of Quaker doctrine, it was impossible for him to refute his own idolaters. The climax of the situation came when in October 1656 a group of his cultists led him...
into Bristol seated on a horse, throwing their cloaks in the mud before him and chanting continually "Holy, Holy, Holy." Nayler, who had just been released from an imprisonment for his religious views, was brought to trial immediately, found guilty of blasphemy, and punished barbarously. What makes his trial significant for our concerns is the insistence with which Nayler, before his accusers, holds to the strict letter of the inner light doctrine: he is literally a man held captive by language, by precisely what we have already spoken of as the daemonic power of names. Asked, for example, whether that worship is due him which is due Christ, he replies: "If they did it to the visible, they were to blame, but if to the invisible, that worship is due to me, according to my measure, as was due to Christ."

What is equally remarkable about Nayler—something Knox neglects to mention—is that after his terrible punishment and more terrible humiliation he makes a full spiritual recovery, writes some of his most moving tracts, and becomes the only one of the early Society of Friends to admit and come to terms with the possibility of a second fall from the light. In his later tract *Milk for Babes* (1661), referring to his own messianic possession and to the possibility of it in others, he writes in explicitly daemonic terms of the danger of the "strong man" within:

> There is the strong man to be bound, before the Babe can reign. . . . The strong man having got a possession within, is not easily bound . . . give yourselves no rest until the strong man bow.

3. Ibid., p. 165.