

Jasper Cragwall, *Lake Methodism: Polite Literature and Popular Religion in England, 1780-1830*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2013. Pp. 251. \$69.95. ISBN 9780814212271.

Within the last decade, studies of religion in the long eighteenth century have proliferated, and the critical conversation has become more sophisticated, moving from acts of recovery to more complicated meditations on varieties and constitutions of the very term 'religion' itself. Jasper Cragwall's *Lake Methodism* is the most recent arrival in this arena, and an impressive entry it is.

Cragwall's topic is a Romanticism in equal parts fascinated and repelled by the intensity, passion, and success of Methodism: 'Romanticism's rhetorics of privilege trafficked in some of the most socially toxic religious forms of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries' (3). The repercussions of that claim, worked out through chapters on Wordsworth, Coleridge, Joanna Southcott, and the Shelleys, is a picture of the field and period some distance not only from the high arguments of idealism and theory but also from their reversal by historicism. 'Methodism' is not a figural presence here—it is all too real—but that leads not to a simple empiricism but to a re-interpretation of central tropes in the field. Readers of this book will never again be able to glance at Coleridge's *Lay Sermons*, for example, or hear Wordsworth declare that 'To the open fields I told / A prophesy' without feeling the pressure and presence of the Methodist field preachers whom the poets were willing to 'figure but not join' (80).

The nervousness that Methodism inspired amongst polite eighteenth-century observers is also the topic of Misty Anderson's recent *Imagining Methodism*, and Cragwall's book makes a nice companion to that volume by bringing the story fully into the nineteenth century.

Methodologically, however, Cragwall proceeds somewhat differently. For while Anderson's topic is selfhood, particularly Methodism's excessive performances of a self modern yet fractured, Cragwall locates a different excess: a world of books, sermons, hymns, pamphlets, and tracts, in short a print culture 'powered by irrational and uncontainable desire, rather than [the] politely scripted sociability' of the kind we have learned, since Habermas, to locate in the eighteenth century (20). The extreme popularity of what we might call the Methodist *style* is really Cragwall's subject: 'a high culture volubly contemptuous of and surreptitiously attracted to disreputable Christianities'—this, he argues, is the 'animating spirit of Romanticism' (9). A large claim, but one fully borne out in the readings that follow.

Methodist thematics, and the anxieties they produced, unlock remarkable interpretations of the potent marriage of privilege and enthusiasm that has always been Romanticism's distinctive calling. In the chapter on *Frankenstein*, for example, Cragwall offers the best reason I know for why Victor exerts such remarkable influence upon everyone he meets yet remains from start to finish one of fiction's least likeable characters. In his reading Victor is not a hubristic rationalist but an enthusiast 'determined to superimpose the ... antagonism between Man and Devil onto a relationship that might have been purely secular and contractarian' (211). This method consistently shakes up a too-familiar story. The spleen behind Jeffrey's infamous 1802 dismissal of the Lake school ('a sect of poets ... dissenters from the established systems') for example, turns out to be motivated in part by his hatred of Methodism (15), while *The Prelude* emerges here as a document torn not between high ideals and historical reality but between establishment symbols and Methodist enthusiasm.

Though Cragwall allows his categories—enthusiasm, Lake poetry, Methodism—to expand beyond narrow bounds, some readers might still wish for a slightly larger canvas. 'Methodism' in this book largely appears through the eyes of its enemies, yet I kept wondering

just *why* cultural arbiters of varying politics—from Southey to Paine, Leigh Hunt to the *Blackwood's* group, Hazlitt to the Anglican establishment—converged so spectacularly in their contempt. One of Cragwall's answers is that the 'twinning authority and vulgarity of the enthusiastic imagination had to do with the difficulty of policing the boundaries between polite literature and popular religion' (17). This is a solution situated solidly within the field's current interest in professionalism, print culture and canonicity, but good taste is a concern only for a relatively small group, as Cragwall's own book shows so convincingly.

A more satisfying answer, explored in Cragwall's second chapter, is that Methodism 'posed an intractable puzzle' to the established church, whose authority was 'identified by habits of thought, speech, and affect' (17). Into this comfortable world, Methodism's insistence on doctrine and its channeling of bodily comportment forced even polite Christians to confront the fantastic propositions at the center of their own faith. Joanna Southcott is perhaps the most notorious example of this phenomenon, and serves in Cragwall's fifth chapter as a link between the literary and religious worlds, a 'commercially successful instance of high romantic argument' (155).

Lake Methodism is an absolute delight to read. Cragwall has a terrific style; his turns of phrase, lightness of touch, and real wit enhance the book immeasurably without ever distracting from the rigor of its argument. If only all scholarly writing met this standard! All who are interested in Romanticism, in literary history, or in religious history should read this marvelous book.

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