

**'Why Should I Strive to Set the Crooked Straight?'**  
**Wesley, His Luminaries, Modern Critics**  
**and the 'Sinlessness Contradiction'**  
**in 1 John 1: 8, 10 and 3: 6, 9**

by  
James Howard Williams

A Thesis  
Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of Biblical Studies  
The University of Sheffield

June 2001

**In grateful memory of my father,  
Albert Williams (1916 - 1991),  
from whom I learned the love of reading.**

**'Why Should I Strive to Set the Crooked Straight?'  
Wesley, His Luminaries, Modern Critics and the  
'Sinlessness Contradiction' in 1 John 1: 8, 10 and 3: 6, 9**

**Summary**

Many scholars have perceived a contradiction between two pairs of verses in 1 John. While the first pair (1: 8 and 10) states that those who claim that they do not 'have sin' or 'have not sinned' are guilty of deceit, the second pair (3: 6 and 9) declares that those 'born of' and 'abiding in' God 'cannot sin.' The apparent discrepancy, known as the 'sinlessness contradiction,' has been the subject of constant debate, an interpretive problem to which Johannine scholars have proposed varying solutions.

This thesis does not propose a new exegetical solution to the debate; rather it analyses the typical hermeneutical moves that interpreters make in such a debate. It draws methodologically on the interplay between the perspectives of reader-response theorists Stanley Fish and Wolfgang Iser, with an emphasis on Fish's prioritization of the 'interpretive community.' By these lights, the thesis attempts to expose how readerly assumptions shape the perception of texts, accounting thus for the diversity of explications of 1 John 1: 8, 10 and 3: 6, 9.

The thesis explores how readers in the eighteenth and twentieth centuries have dealt with the 'sinlessness contradiction.' Given the degree to which John Wesley is identified with a concern for 'Christian perfectionism,' the exegetical debate surrounding Wesley's own treatment of the issues in debate with others, and the work of commentators on whom he drew, is a site of particular hermeneutical interest. Fish is used to question critically the ubiquitous claim simply to 'return to the text.' An excursus fills out the picture of Wesley's 'interpretive community.' Scholarly readers today typically view the debate surrounding Wesley from the perspective of contemporary historical-critical scholarship. The thesis thus finally analyses six recent treatments of the 'sinlessness contradiction,' which together offer more fertile ground for the interest in the readerly aspects of historical-theological reconstruction.

## **Acknowledgements**

To express adequately my gratitude to my wife Janice and to my son Owain for their love and support during my period of study is impossible. Likewise, I have tried in vain to find words sufficient to thank my wider family and my friends, without whom I would have had no chance of completing this thesis.

Dr. Margaret Davies, who was my supervisor for the first two years of my research, provided extremely valuable advice and direction. I am one of many of her former students, at undergraduate and graduate level, who can testify to the genuineness of her support for them.

On Dr. Davies' retirement, Dr. R. Barry Matlock diligently familiarised himself with my work. During my meetings with him he has always provided perceptive, thoughtful and timely encouragement. I have learned much from his scholarship and from his example as a teacher and supervisor.



# Table of Contents

<b>Summary</b> .....	<b>i</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>ii</b>

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Perfectionism, Reader-Response and the Iser - Fish Controversy**

1.1. Reading Perfectionism.....	1
1.2. Reader-Response - A Brief History.....	6
1.3. Iser's (or Escher's) Machine.....	7
1.4. Escher's Fish.....	22

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **The Pertinence of Stanley Fish: A Re-evaluation, Defence and Initial Application**

Fish on the Menu at The Missing Person's: Lunch I - 1976.....	41
---	----

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **The Explication of the Verses and Christian Perfection by Wesley and an Appraisal of that Explication from a Fishian Perspective**

3.1. 'Christian Perfection'.....	93
3.2. 'Salvation by Faith'.....	102
3.3. Wesley's Shifting Emphases.....	103
3.4. 'The Great Privilege of Those that are Born of God'.....	106
3.5. Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament.....	109

3.6. 'On Sin in Believers'.....	111
3.7. 'The Repentance of Believers'.....	116
3.8. A Plain Account of Christian Perfection.....	120
3.9. Summation and Appraisal of Wesley's Solution.....	121

**CHAPTER FOUR**

**The Verses and Christian Perfection as Explained**

**by Those Wesley Respected**

4.1. 'Bengelius'.....	141
4.2. Matthew Poole.....	154
4.3. Matthew Henry.....	161
4.4. Philip Doddridge.....	164
4.5. John Guyse.....	168
4.6. The Exegeses of Wesley and His Luminaries - A Brief Comparison.....	173

**CHAPTER FIVE**

**An Excursus: John Wesley and 'The March of Mechanics'.....176**

**CHAPTER SIX**

**Extant Academic Conventions Regarding the 1 John Problem**

6.1. Prefatory Remarks.....	194
6.2. John Bogart.....	196
6.3. Raymond E. Brown.....	210
6.4. J. Lieu.....	234
6.5. John R. Walters.....	243
6.6. R.B. Edwards.....	252

6.7. D. Rensberger.....259  
6.8. Some Observations on Historical Criticism.....270

**CHAPTER SEVEN**

**SUMMARY CONCLUSION.....276**

**Bibliography.....284**

**CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**  
**PERFECTIONISM, READER-RESPONSE**  
**AND THE ISER - FISH CONTROVERSY**

**1. 1. Reading Perfectionism**

'I was once on the point of committing murder. Once when I was in the north of Ireland, I went into a room, and found Mrs Wesley foaming with fury. Her husband was on the floor, where she had been trailing him by the hair of his head; and she herself was still holding in her hand venerable locks which she had plucked up by the roots. I felt as though I could have knocked the soul out of her.'<sup>1</sup>

It is interesting that when many people of the late Georgian and Victorian periods read this anecdote that vividly portrays John Wesley's unhappy marriage to Mary Vazeille, they responded, says Stanley Ayling: 'in properly shocked tones of anguished outrage' against a woman who would dare violently to touch the 'venerable locks' of the highly respected evangelist.<sup>2</sup> However, I think that various readers of this story in the early twenty-first century would question first what they may perceive as the observer's barely veiled misogyny. Such readers might also ask what it was about John's character and behaviour that had provoked this reaction from his partner. A further query could centre on a society so hypocritically imbalanced that (as Roy Porter has noted) it abhorred wifely 'shrewishness' while granting the judicial right of a husband 'to beat his wife...provided the stick was no thicker than a man's thumb.'<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> From the private manuscripts of John Hampson and assembled in *Hampson's Life of Wesley*, (3 Vols.; Sunderland: Unnamed Publisher, 1791), Volume II, p. 127. See also L. Tyerman, *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A., Founder of the Methodists* (3 Vols.; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1870), Volume II, p. 110.

<sup>2</sup> S. Ayling, *John Wesley* (London: Collins, 1979), p. 220, footnote. Ayling notes the doubt that some historians have cast on Hampson's record of this incident; yet no one doubts that the union was disastrous. However, my point here does not concern the veracity of the story, but how later readers interpreted it, and might interpret it.

<sup>3</sup> R. Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (rev. ed.; London: Penguin Books, 1990), pp. 23 - 24.

We risk the adoption of a simplistic view of the act of reading if we try to explain the varieties of response to the story as a mere sensitivity to *Zeitgeist*, an inevitable progression of human social and moral discernment with the passage of time. Rather, I propose that we may view reading as a complex feat achieved by individuals<sup>4</sup> who are subject to plural internal and external influences. It is feasible to argue that a delicate balance of many factors affects our perception of the written word, and we might list these factors under broad headings such as: social; national; linguistic; historical; theological; political; gender - sexual; emotional; volitional; psychological; biological; educational; nurtural; and cultural. One could submit that the previous sentence is itself a theatre in which to accent the delicate balance that informs reading. Divers readers might interpret each of the word-symbols I have used in a number of different ways. We could suggest that each of the terms used to describe factors affecting reading has a manifest ductility when encountered by disparate people - a malleability induced by the factors the terms purport to describe. The entire string of symbols therefore represents a forum for volatile response. Readers might invest in the phrase 'a delicate balance,' for instance, a resonance of either equilibrium or instability. Moreover, as we will see later, theories exist that question the very existence of the text except as a function of interpretive models. Accordingly, we may say that the reception of literature apparently has an active and constructive element to it. Numerous scholars now assert that a text remains powerless until we engage with it. We have, at the least, some role in the production of meaning, and our interpretations may influence us, alter our viewpoints, evoke our emotions, and incite us to action. Considering the effects of readers' engagement with texts, Margaret Davies has called reading 'a dangerous activity.'<sup>5</sup> In this thesis I wish to consider the process and outworking of this 'dangerous activity' as applied to a composition in the New Testament canon.

---

<sup>4</sup> The question of whether an individual can read alone or must always read in a communal context is an issue we will discuss later.

<sup>5</sup> M. Davies, 'Reader-Response Criticism,' in R.J. Coggins and J.L. Houlden (eds), *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* (London: SCM and Trinity, 1990), p. 578.

John Wesley had a reputation for being a voracious reader: he habitually read works concerning logic, philosophy, theology, medicine, and ethics.<sup>6</sup> However, he declared himself 'a man of one book' in his adherence to the Bible.<sup>7</sup> The leitmotif of this research concerns how the founder of Methodism, five of the commentators that he admired, and ultimately six scholars working in the late twentieth century, read what Ruth B. Edwards has called one of 'the most intriguing writings of the New Testament'<sup>8</sup> - the First Epistle of John. Particularly, I intend to examine their understanding of two brief passages that reveal 'perfection' as a notable, and controversial, facet of the letter. Scholars call the relationship between the two passages (that we will highlight in due course) the 'sinlessness contradiction,' and propose varying solutions to it. My focus is different from much exegetical work in that I do not intend to make my own intervention into the continuing controversy with the purpose of settling the particular point. Moreover, I do not intend to supply a comprehensive account of the twentieth century exegesis of 1 John. Rather, I propose to provide an analysis of the hermeneutical moves that interpreters make in such a contention.

Taking into account the story of Wesley's less than perfect marriage, it may seem strange to some that he should advocate 'Christian Perfection' to the degree that he did; yet H.D. Rack well expresses John's theological emphasis when he writes of 'Wesley's favourite doctrine of perfection.'<sup>9</sup> It was 1 John that formed one of the principal biblical bases of this emphasis. Regarding Wesley's main statement of the doctrine (*A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, 1767), W.E. Sangster states that of all the biblical texts he used the Methodist founder quoted most from: 'the First Epistle

---

<sup>6</sup> W.E. Sangster, *The Path to Perfection* (1943; repr., London: Epworth, 1984), pp. 104 - 108.

<sup>7</sup> F. Baker et al., (eds.), *The Complete Works of John Wesley* (23 Vols.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1980 - 1995), Sermons 1.1, preface p. 105. In this preface Wesley uses the Latin: '*homo unius libri*.' The references that follow I have drawn mainly from the volumes of sermons edited by A.C. Outler, hereinafter cited as 'Sermons.'

<sup>8</sup> R.B. Edwards, *The Johannine Epistles* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> H.D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast - John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (London: Epworth, 1989), p. 334.

of John, from which he culls twenty texts, some of which he repeats frequently...a full third of the texts on which [he] chiefly relies...[he] take[s] from [this] Epistle.'<sup>10</sup>

Of course, John's reading of the letter, as outlined in his *Plain Account* (and elsewhere in letters, sermons, and hymns), itself became the subject of reading by other people. The bare mention of the word 'perfection' stirred strong responses in readers and hearers<sup>11</sup> - responses fashioned by individual and communal cognition of that word. It soon proved that there was no such thing as a 'plain account' of the doctrine, and understandings of it proliferated. Also, parallel to the divergent religious views of perfection generated by interpretations of 1 John and Wesley's work, we note that perfectionism as a moral theory has secular antecedents. Indeed, scholars have observed the multiform apprehensions of perfection in history.

J.A. Montmarquet states that perfectionism is an ethical view: 'according to which individuals and their actions are judged by a maximal standard of achievement - specifically the degree to which they approach ideals of aesthetic, intellectual, emotional, or physical "perfection."' Hence, awareness might vary from a purely moral account, to an abandonment of 'conventional morality in favour of standards based on...non-moral values...[such as the]...artistic.' He remarks that 'no fully worked-out system of "perfectionist philosophy" has been attempted,' yet he sees aspects of perfectionism in the teachings of various philosophers from Aristotle to Nietzsche.<sup>12</sup> Further, T. Hurka traces the numerous 'narrow' and 'broad' reflections on perfectionism. He refers to the former as 'moral theor[ies] based on human nature,' and to the latter as 'more inclusive view[s] that [value] some development of capacities or some achievement of excellence.' Perfectionism, says Hurka, 'starts from an account of the good human life, or the intrinsically desirable life.' The good life develops certain human characteristics to a high degree, or 'realizes what is central to

---

<sup>10</sup> Sangster, *Path to Perfection*, pp. 36 and 48. However, for preaching purposes Wesley seems to have favoured the Gospel of Matthew. See *Sermons* 1.I. Introduction section V, 'Wesley and his Sources - Holy Scripture,' p. 69.

<sup>11</sup> Sangster, *The Path to Perfection*, p. 27.

<sup>12</sup> J.A. Montmarquet, 'Perfectionism' in R. Audi (ed.), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 573.

human nature.' Despite variations in opinion on which attributes one might develop, a common emphasis remains - that the ultimate good lies in the development of human nature. Hurka sees perfectionism in the stress on rationality in Aristotle and Aquinas, in the accent on productivity and sociality in Marx, in the identity with Spirit in Hegel and Bradley, and in the will to power in Nietzsche.<sup>13</sup> Thus, we see that reading the word 'perfection' generates a span of opinion on the enhancement of human nature. To illustrate this span of opinion, as a short excursus within this thesis I aim to present a secular form of perfectionism that was extant in the eighteenth century, so setting Wesley's ideas in a wider context.<sup>14</sup>

I, also, am a reader - in this instance reading other readers' readings of perfectionism in 1 John, as well as the letter itself. Inevitably, my understanding of these writings occurs within a matrix of the delicate balance of the numerous factors I mentioned earlier. Recognition of this balance of factors leads, I suggest, to a declaration of potential bias; so, I accept that critics from different disciplines could rightly explore my own biographical details for evidence of inclination.<sup>15</sup> These details - and many more subtle facets of them - although of no intrinsic interest, nevertheless

---

<sup>13</sup> T. Hurka, *Perfectionism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 3 - 4.

<sup>14</sup> I will look at 'Perfectibilism,' a 'doctrine that man, individual and social, is capable of progressing indefinitely towards physical, mental, and moral perfection' - Margaret Drabble (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1985; repr., Guild, 1989), p. 754. This movement, if such we may call it, had its roots in the eighteenth century. Early in the following century (1816) T.L. Peacock could write satirically in *Headlong Hall* of a character, Mr Foster, who was a 'perfectibilian.' See H.F.B. Brett-Smith and C.E. Jones (eds.), *The Halliford Edition of the Works of Thomas Love Peacock* (London: Constable and Gabriel Wells, 1934), p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> To illustrate, feminist analysts could search for the creation of a male text. Scholars of ethnicity might look for a national disposition from a British reader, and, moreover, raise issues of skin colour: does my having white skin cause me to bring a certain perspective to reading since I have not suffered the evils of racism? Linguists could investigate my use of the English language to discover its influence. Examiners of historical factors in reading will note that I am a reader living at the start of the twenty-first century. Those interested in the effects of nurture will discern that through upbringing I have a sympathetic (but not unquestioning) interest in Christianity. Political students may wish to register that I regard myself as on the 'soft-left' of concern. At present I am a mature graduate student with aspirations to obtain a higher degree, to teach and research, and this factor may interest those who observe social trends. Savants of 'queer theology' would note that I happen to have a heterosexual orientation that has resulted in marriage and offspring, though, as is now common, I have numbered among my friends individuals who have declared themselves as homosexual: how does this factor influence my reading? My personal interests and friends would, to some extent, mirror my mental and emotional make-up for those who research psychology. A sociologist's definition of my childhood social setting could locate me within the 'working class.' Also such a scholar could describe me as simultaneously a member of several 'communities': a family; an academic department; an Anglican church; a group of friends from widely differing social, religious (or non-religious) and national backgrounds.



affect how I will read the material in question. Although a delineation of their potential affects might have limited accuracy, I wish openly to declare their potential to shape how I read. If I have an active and constructive role in my reading, surely these factors exercise their influence in this sphere. I acknowledge that another combination of factors could lead to a radically different reading of this literature. Furthermore, my successive readings might elicit divergent responses to it. The question of how we read, and how we might read, must now concern us, and to explore the issue we must move forward almost two centuries from the time of John Wesley.

## **1. 2. Reader-Response Criticism - A Brief History**

'No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader'<sup>16</sup>

When Robert Frost wrote these lines in the late 1930s, he wrote them in the shadow of an ascendant literary theory - New Criticism. Frost, as I read his words, appears to assert that poetry directly communicates an author's emotion (or lack of emotion as I could read it), and that readers may recover the pathos embedded by the author in his work - and thus experience, in turn, this emotion (or emotional barrenness). The proponents of New Criticism, however, railed against these perceived 'Affective and Intentional Fallacies': a 'confusion between [a] poem and its results...It begins by trying to derive the standard of criticism from the psychological effects of a poem and ends in impressionism and relativism.'<sup>17</sup> For the New Critic, a poet's emotion when writing became an irrelevance, as did a reader's emotional response: 'the author's intentions in writing, even if [recoverable], were of no relevance to the interpretation of his or her text...[n]either were the emotional responses of particular readers to be confused with the poem's meaning: the poem meant what it

---

<sup>16</sup> R. Frost, *Complete Poems* (1951), (Originally published in *Collected Poems*, 1939; repr., London: Jonathan Cape, 1951), 'The Figure a Poem Makes,' p. 18.

<sup>17</sup> W.K. Wimsatt, Jr., and M. Beardsley, 'The Affective Fallacy' in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1954), p. 21.

meant, regardless of the poet's intentions or the subjective feelings the reader derived from it.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the mere text of a literary work assumed primary importance. Interpretation became limited to the text, and close reading strategies emerged as the principal tools in the critical effort to discover meaning. The reader now looked carefully for linguistic and literary relationships within the text as indicators of its essence.<sup>19</sup>

Against this background of New Critical formalism, the techniques of reader-response critics evolved from the early 1950s.<sup>20</sup> These critics 'reject the validity of the Affective Fallacy; they deny that texts make meaning; rather, they affirm that readers make meaning; what counts now is readers and the experience of reading.'<sup>21</sup> Of the many attempts at a definition of this critical strategy, Jane P. Tompkins' comment appears apposite; she explains that: '[r]eader-response criticism is not a conceptually unified critical position, but a term that has [be]come...associated with the work of critics who use the words *reader*, *the reading process*, and *response* to mark out an area for investigation.'<sup>22</sup> Her statement lays the foundation for an understanding of this critical strategy. If reader-response is not 'a conceptually unified critical position' we might, nevertheless, view it as a spectrum of critical emphases on the reader. For the purpose of this thesis I intend to limit my observations of the spectrum to two Western male scholars: a German, Wolfgang Iser, and a North American, Stanley Fish.

### **1. 3. Iser's (or Escher's) Machine**

In an aside during an acerbic critique of Iser's work, Fish refers to Iser's theory of reading as 'a marvellous machine whose very loose-jointedness makes it

---

<sup>18</sup> T. Eagleton, *Literary Theory - An Introduction* (2d ed.; Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 41 - 42. Here Eagleton paraphrases Wimsatt and Beardsley's arguments.

<sup>19</sup> W. Randolph Tate, *Biblical Interpretation - An Integrated Approach* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), p. xviii.

<sup>20</sup> J. P. Tompkins, *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), p. x.

<sup>21</sup> The Bible and Culture Collective, *The Postmodern Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 'Reader-Response Criticism,' p. 25.

<sup>22</sup> Tompkins, *Reader-Response Criticism*, p. ix.

invulnerable to a frontal assault.'<sup>23</sup> I think that the analogy is a useful one as Iser, I suggest, seemingly attempts to make his critical apparatus appear 'all things to all people.' It is a mechanism that seeks to chart a median course between the poles of text and reader in the debate concerning interpretative authority; it is a device that tries to avoid an unchanging determinate meaning on one side, and unchecked indeterminacy on the other. At this point I wish to look at this 'machine,' to discover its shape and how it works, to ascertain its 'loose-jointedness,' and to depict the nature of Fish's critical attack.

We may begin to understand its frame and operation by means of Iser's declaration that a literary work:

cannot be identical with the text or with the concretization [of a cohesive aesthetic object by the reader], but must be situated somewhere between the two. It must inevitably be virtual in character, as [one cannot reduce] it to the reality of the text or to the subjectivity of the reader, and it is from this virtuality that it derives its dynamism. [T]he reader pass[ing] through the various perspectives offered by the text and relat[ing] the different views and patterns to one another...sets the work in motion, and so sets himself in motion too.<sup>24</sup>

If we analyse this declaration we can see that it contains Iser's view of: i) the nature of the literary work; ii) the text; iii) the reader's role; iv) the interaction between text and reader, and the location of meaning; v) the dynamics of reading; and, vi) the effect of the act of reading on the reader. Let us look at each of these interconnected components as revealed in further citations from his work.

The text in this theory is 'a structured indicator to guide the imagination of the reader';<sup>25</sup> it 'designate[s] instructions for the production of the signified (the aesthetic object).'<sup>26</sup> It is 'an array of sign impulses (signifiers) which are received by the

---

<sup>23</sup> S. E. Fish, 'Why No One's Afraid of Wolfgang Iser,' *Diacritics* 11 (1981): p. 13. See also *Doing What Comes Naturally - Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Oxford: Clarendon and Oxford University Press, 1989), Chapter 3, pp. 68 - 86.

<sup>24</sup> W. Iser, *The Act of Reading - A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 21.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

reader.'<sup>27</sup> So we discover it is the 'structure of the text' that guides comprehension.<sup>28</sup> Throughout his work Iser presents texts as having the status of determinate objects that contain definable points of instruction (or 'textual segments'): the 'stars' in a literary text, he states, remain 'fixed'; yet simultaneously he acknowledges a certain (limited) indeterminacy resulting from the reader's role: 'the lines that join them are variable' - each reader will experience the text differently.<sup>29</sup> '[T]he structure of the text allows for different ways of fulfillment.'<sup>30</sup> While acknowledging that all judgement on a text has its basis in 'private' comprehension, Iser emphasises that this comprehension is not 'arbitrary' because it is 'guided' by the text.<sup>31</sup>

Identifying the reader's role involves the realisation of an intercourse between two entities: a construct of the text known as 'the Implied Reader,' who 'embodies all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect,'<sup>32</sup> and a real reader who engages in 'actualisation' of potential meaning during the reading process.<sup>33</sup> So, the Implied Reader 'designates a network of response-inviting structures, which impel the reader to grasp the text.' The implied reader as a textual structure anticipates a real reader without characterising, or historically locating, her or him. Therefore, this notion 'prestructures the role' for any recipient of the text. Textual 'instructions' evoke 'mental images' in the recipient which evolve as reading progresses. This 'ideational activity' occurs in accord with 'the...reader's own disposition': she or he will selectively interpret the text in the light of personal experience. Personal experience is 'responsible for the many different ways in which people fulfill the reader's role set out by the text'; furthermore, the new experience gained while reading merges into the reader's 'store of knowledge' and 'consciousness.' Consequently, we see that the reader's collateral role as a textual

---

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>29</sup> Iser, *The Implied Reader. Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1974), p. 282.

<sup>30</sup> Iser, *Act of Reading*, p. 37.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>33</sup> Iser, *Implied Reader*, p. xii.

structure and structured act become fused 'in [this] dynamic process.' The notion of the implied reader represents a description of a 'transmutation process': textual structures become personal experiences through the active formation of ideas in the mind.<sup>34</sup>

Iser uses speech-act theory as a basis for the 'dyadic interaction' that he posits between text and reader.<sup>35</sup> The literary work emerges through a complete process of such interaction, prompted by both the structures of the text and by strategic absences of determinacy. Literary texts are not entirely explicit and contain 'blanks,' 'gaps,' 'places [or 'spots'] of indeterminacy' and 'vacancies.'<sup>36</sup> The definable points of instruction mentioned earlier appear in the text without connective directions - consequently 'blanks' emerge between them that the reader must fill. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries literary works have displayed an increasing degree of indeterminacy by the growing 'presence' of such spaces.<sup>37</sup> It is these hiatuses that prompt the reader to seek 'coherence' (and to construct, dismantle, and reconstruct 'Gestalts'); they represent 'the fundamental asymmetry between text and reader, that give rise to communication in the reading process.'<sup>38</sup> Thus, we discover that reading is 'a two way relationship':<sup>39</sup> the text has patterns implanted within it that generate the reader's response to 'build up' connections - 'the syntheses which eventually individualize the aesthetic object.'<sup>40</sup> Also, we ascertain that 'the meaning of the literary work remains related to what the printed text says, but it requires the creative imagination of the reader to put it all together.'<sup>41</sup> Hence, meaning emerges from this interaction 'not [as] a definable entity but...[rather as] a dynamic happening.'<sup>42</sup> All

---

<sup>34</sup> Iser, *Act of Reading*, pp. 34 - 38.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 54 - 62.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 165 - 178; 201 - 203 and passim.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 203 - 207.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 167; 127 - 130; 185 - 186.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 117 - 118.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

literary texts induce 'performances' of meaning - they do not themselves formulate meaning.<sup>43</sup>

The latter remark, that meaning is a 'happening' or 'performance' rather than a formulation within the text, receives some qualification from Iser, however. At one point he seems to indicate that meaning has some referential foundation within the text itself:

Meaning is the referential totality which is implied by the aspects contained in the text and which must be assembled in the course of reading. Significance is the reader's absorption of the meaning into his own existence. Only the two together can guarantee the effectiveness of an experience which entails the reader constituting himself by constituting a reality hitherto unfamiliar to himself.<sup>44</sup>

Both the referential aspects of the text and the self-constitution of the reader will occupy us in later paragraphs.

In Iser's critical apparatus, reading progresses by means of an impulse he calls the 'wandering [or moving] viewpoint.'<sup>45</sup> The reader cannot 'grasp the text' in its entirety, but rather: 'only as a series of changing viewpoints, each one restricted in itself and so necessitating further perspectives...This is the process by which the reader "realizes" an overall situation.'<sup>46</sup> During the reading of a narrative text, for instance, a reader's viewpoint 'travels' through various 'perspectives.' These perspectives are 'references to the world incorporated into the text.' Iser lists them as narrator, characters, plot, 'and that marked out for the reader.' Interestingly, he fails to elucidate on the readerly perspective in his subsequent discussion, and the phrase does not appear again; I conclude, therefore, that he may be alluding to the textual construct known as the 'implied reader' that we considered earlier: thus, the perspective marked out for the reader is the response-inviting structures motivating the real reader's grasp of the text. 'The function of these different perspectives,' he tells us, 'is to initiate the

---

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 26 - 27.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 108 -109; 196 - 199 and *passim*.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

production of the aesthetic object (i.e., the meaning of the text).’ During the real reader’s progress through the text the perspectives continually interweave and interact and the ‘theme’ (or ‘foreground’) emerges - the particular perspective ‘in view’ at any one moment. Iser says that behind this ‘theme’ lies what he terms the ‘horizon’ (or ‘background’). This represents those ‘perspective segments’ previously encountered and contains the themes of earlier phases of reading. He informs us that ‘the structure of theme and horizon organises the attitudes of the reader and at the same time builds up the perspective system of the text.’<sup>47</sup>

At this point we must look at the effect the act of reading has on the reader. We have already observed the ‘transmutation process’ - whereby textual structures, through an active formation of ideas in the mind, penetrate the reader’s consciousness. The latter now becomes the location where ‘the text begins to exist as a Gestalt...,’ says Iser.<sup>48</sup> This process results in the ‘original consciousness’ of the reader undergoing a change. During reading, her or his ‘original consciousness...[cannot] remain unaffected...as the incorporation of the new requires a re-formation of the old.’<sup>49</sup> Iser boldly avers that ‘[r]eading removes the subject - object division, and so the reader becomes occupied by the author’s thoughts’ (albeit, against a ‘background’ of the reader’s own ‘orientations’). Assimilation of these ‘alien’ thoughts consequently produces ‘retroactive effects on [the reader’s] store of experience.’ A new division, that of the ‘subject against himself,’ supersedes the former subject - object division. The reader makes her - or himself ‘present to the text,’ that is: ‘temporarily [absent from] his own disposition’ (or ‘past experience’, or ‘self’). In this state the subject becomes ‘lifted out of time’ and experiences the events in the text with an immediacy that renders ‘the past...without influence, and the future...unimaginable.’ A state of self-forgetfulness ensues - and a ‘transformation’ takes place.<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> Iser, *Act of Reading*, pp. 96 - 103.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 155 - 156.

An analysis of this transformation seems to indicate that it has both temporary and permanent effects (although which are temporary and which are permanent we do not learn). The split between the subject and himself results in 'a contrapuntally structured personality in reading.' This indicates that a counterpoint, or dialogue, of understanding has started between the thoughts of the author and the subject, so enabling the subject's 'presence' to the text.<sup>51</sup> A corresponding 'tension' arises that signals the extent to which the text has affected and transformed the subject: this tension is a desire for coherence through a 'reunion' with the self. However, for reunion to take place there must be an incorporation of the new experience into the existing 'store.' A new spontaneity in the reader's attitudes emerges due to the temporary division that has occurred in the reader. Unhindered now by past experience, these spontaneous attitudes occasion the flexibility to facilitate incorporation of any type of text; ultimately they aid the reading subject to 'reconcile' the 'experience of the present text with his own store of past experience.' Thus, the new experience merges into the store and the subject reunites with the self.<sup>52</sup>

The 'significance of [a] work,' we learn, 'does not lie in the meaning sealed within the text, but in the fact that that meaning brings out what had previously been sealed within us.' Through the process in which texts 'guide' and 'shape' spontaneity we discover the permanent nature of the 'transformation' mentioned earlier: it is no less than the creation of a 'new and real consciousness.'<sup>53</sup> Reading 'enables us to formulate ourselves and thus discover an inner world of which we had hitherto not been conscious.'<sup>54</sup> We noted earlier that Iser affirms that: 'as the reader sets the work in motion, [she or he] sets [her - or himself] in motion too.' Regarding the effect of reading, we may deduce that in Iser's critical elucidation this dual 'motion' initiated by the reader leads to a fuller self-knowledge and the recreation of the reader's consciousness.

---

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 156 - 157.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.



Beneath Iser's initial declaration of his theory's construction and operation, we discover an underlying assumption that has governed its design. For Iser, the world is an absolute 'given' external reality, its 'objects, unlike imaginings, are highly determinate.'<sup>55</sup> Therefore, it is possible to comprehend the 'facts' of empirical existence 'in scientific texts, but not in literature, where the text does not reproduce facts but at best uses such facts to stimulate the imagination of the reader.'<sup>56</sup> Scientific texts are exhaustive and explicit in their description of the world: they do not contain 'places of indeterminacy' as do literary texts. Likewise, during real-life conversations people can refer routinely to the empirical, factual nature of objects 'so that [their] utterance may gain [the] intended precision';<sup>57</sup> however, 'for the literary text there can be no such "facts" [but rather the text represents] a sequence of schemata...which have the function of stimulating the reader himself into establishing the "facts"' (therefore, the 'schemata' themselves are determinate).<sup>58</sup> So, we note from these statements that: a) the world is an objective entity; and, b) although the literary text does not express referential certainties, it nevertheless is intrinsically part of the world - as we have already seen, for Iser the text exists as a 'structure' containing definable points of instruction.

So, it is this assumption of the objectivity of the world and the text-as-structure that provides Iser with the frame on which he constructs and operates his critical theory. From this basis he is able to speak of 'a significance which is *to be* supplied, and a significance which *has* been supplied.'<sup>59</sup> Stanley Fish's critique of Iser's 'machine' strikes at the dyadic nature of a determinate 'given' world and textual structure on the one hand, and a corresponding indeterminate aspect of literature on the other. Fish argues that 'the distinction between the determinate and the

---

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>59</sup> Iser, 'Interview,' *Diacritics* 10 (1980): p. 72. See also *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp. 66 - 67.

indeterminate...will not hold.'<sup>60</sup> This is because 'the distinction itself is an assumption which, when it informs an act of literary description, will *produce* the phenomena it purports to describe.' All the components of Iser's machinery are 'the products of an interpretive strategy that demands them, and therefore no one of those components can constitute the independent given which serves to ground the interpretive process.'<sup>61</sup> The result of the collapse of the distinction 'is that we know "real people" no more directly than we know the characters in a novel; that "real life" objects are no less "ideated" than fictional objects; that ordinary language is no more in touch with an unmediated reality than the language of literature.' Fish admits that his reasoning seemingly contradicts the 'differences we all feel' regarding the material world and the world of the text.<sup>62</sup> To solve this contradiction Fish points to conventional categories that inform perception.

In the critical review *Diacritics*, Iser explicitly declares that:

My interpretation of the world may well be as much a product of linguistic acts as my interpretation of a literary text, but I maintain that there are substantial differences between the things being interpreted. First, the real world is perceivable through the senses, whereas the literary text is perceivable only through the imagination - unless one believes that reading the words sunset, music, silk, wine, and scent is the same as seeing, hearing, touching, tasting and smelling the real things. Secondly, all known experience suggests that the real world (uninterpreted) lives and functions independently of the individual observer, whereas the literary text does not. Thirdly, our contact with the real world has immediate physical or social consequences, whereas our contact with the literary text need not, and indeed rarely does have any such consequences.<sup>63</sup>

Commenting on this statement, Fish observes that Iser posits the world and the text as both 'things'; 'but they are different things and therefore they are interpreted differently.' However, this still upholds 'the objectivity of either the text or the world.'<sup>64</sup> For Fish the crux is not whether there are differences between them.

---

<sup>60</sup> Fish, 'Why No One's Afraid of Wolfgang Iser,' p. 6.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>63</sup> Iser, 'Interview,' p. 72.

<sup>64</sup> Fish, 'Why No One's Afraid of Wolfgang Iser,' p. 10.

Rather, he questions whether the differences are equivalent 'to the distinction between [the] given and [the] supplied': he contends that they are not. He concedes that seeing, tasting, and touching the world is not the same as reading about it; however, he argues that even our senses are 'conventional' rather than 'natural' activities: 'What can be seen will be a function of the categories of vision that already inform perception, and those categories will be social and conventional and not imposed upon us by an independent world.' Sensing and reading are both 'conventional and mediated, and, therefore, whatever differences [one might attribute to them], they would not be differences between an activity that was in touch with [and therefore constrained by] the "real world" and one that was not.'<sup>65</sup>

A major implication follows from this line of reasoning - that Fish is consequently rendering everything as indeterminate: '[I]f the world and the objects in it are no less the product of human invention than the world of literary experience, the brakes are off everywhere and communication - ordinary and literary - would seem to be deprived of its ground.' Fish denies this implication. He insists that, to the contrary, the result of his premise is that the 'breaks are *on* everywhere.' For indeterminacy to run unchecked, readers would require a position from which they could perceive independently of assumptions, and Fish maintains that no such position exists. Reading is an instance of perception, and perception 'always occurs within a set of assumptions that preconstraints what could possibly be perceived (or heard, or tasted, or touched).' These assumptions are 'public and communal rather than individual and unique.' Thus, he declares, 'perception can never be arbitrary...[so the need to explain] how arbitrariness or subjectivity is...controlled loses its urgency.'<sup>66</sup>

Hence, Fish posits a scenario of reading where the distinction between the categories of 'determinate' and 'indeterminate' has collapsed; and further, where perception is never arbitrary as it is always prestrained by public and communal assumptions. He suggests that under this scenario one could equally speak of

---

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10 - 11.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

everything as 'given' or of everything as 'supplied.' The terms, he says, 'only make sense as fundamental categories of classification if the entities to which they refer are pure...[that is] a text that is simply there...[and]...a reader who is...wholly free.' This purity does not exist, however, since 'perception is always mediated (and therefore objects are never available directly), and...[also] perception is always conventional (and therefore readers are never free).'<sup>67</sup>

Replying to Fish's critique, Iser grants that it is not possible to have an unmediated given. However, he accuses Fish of coalescing 'interpretation and that which is to be interpreted into an indistinguishable whole.' He states that: 'interpretation would be useless if it were not meant to open access to something we encounter.' This 'something,' he maintains, 'exists prior to interpretation,' it 'acts as a constraint on interpretation...and thus contributes to a hermeneutical process, the result of which is both a mediated given and a reshuffling of the initial assumptions.'<sup>68</sup> Iser justifies his maintenance of the existence of an object prior to interpretation by distinguishing between the 'given' and the 'determinate.' He affirms:

Professor Fish's confusion is caused by the fact that he has telescoped three ideas into two. I draw a distinction between the given, the determinate, and the indeterminate. I maintain that the literary world differs from the real world because it is only accessible to the imagination, whereas the real world is also accessible to the senses and exists outside any description of it. The words of a text are given, the interpretation of the words is determinate, and the gaps between given elements and/or interpretations are the indeterminacies. The real world is given, our interpretation of the world is determinate, the gaps between given elements and/or our interpretations are the indeterminacies. The difference is that with the literary text, it is the interpretation of the words that produces the literary world - i.e. its real-ness, unlike that of the outside world, is not given.<sup>69</sup>

Elizabeth Freund, in her assessment of the Iser - Fish controversy, comments that Iser's reply appears to side-step the force of Fish's attack. She remarks that contrary to Iser's reply, Fish 'is not confused at all about the distinctions [between the

---

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11 - 12.

<sup>68</sup> Iser, 'Talk Like Whales: A Reply to Stanley Fish,' *Diacritics* 11 (1981): p. 84.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

terms 'determinate' and 'indeterminate'] - he simply puts them in doubt.' Iser, however, simply repeats his original position and avoids 'the challenge to question the assumptions behind the assumptions.'<sup>70</sup> This avoidance of the issue is for Fish typical of Iser's entire theory:

Ask it a hard question - if one can argue about where the gaps are (or about whether or not there are any), how can they be distinguished from the givens? what authorizes the assumption that everyday life is characterised by continuity and determinacy? if gaps have increased in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and if literature is defined by the presence (strange word) of gaps, does this mean that literature is becoming more literary or that pre-nineteenth century literature wasn't literature? - and it can only respond by rehearsing its basic distinctions.<sup>71</sup>

There are issues arising from this controversy, notably the issue of possible change in readers' perceptions, that I shall expand on in chapter 2.

After assaulting the assumptions undergirding Iser's machine, Fish turns his critique to dismantling every part of the superstructure: 'Iser is impressive in his ability to affirm both sides of a traditional opposition'; his theory 'seems able to accommodate emphases...often...perceived as contradictory in the writings of other theorists'; it 'has something for everyone, and denies legitimacy to no one.'<sup>72</sup> Every point Iser makes about reading, says Fish, he balances with a counterpoint:

His theory is mounted on behalf of the reader, but it honors the intentions of the authors; the aesthetic object is constructed in time, but the blueprint for its construction is spatially embodied; each realisation of the blueprint is historical and unique; but it itself is given once and for all; literature is freed from the tyranny of referential meaning, but nevertheless contains a meaning in the directions that trigger the reader's activities; those activities are determined by a reader's "stock of experience," but in the course of their unfolding, that stock is transformed.<sup>73</sup>

---

<sup>70</sup> Elizabeth Freund, *The Return of the Reader - Reader-response Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1987), pp. 149 - 150.

<sup>71</sup> Fish, 'Why No One's Afraid of Wolfgang Iser,' pp. 12 - 13.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6; 5; 3.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

Fish declares: 'By defining his key terms in a number of ways, Iser provides himself in advance with a storehouse of defensive strategies.' Moreover he casts doubt upon the very definition of Iser's work as a 'theory'; rather he construes it as literary: it satisfies Iser's own criteria for an 'aesthetic object' - 'it is full of gaps, and the reader [has an invitation] to fill them in his own way.'<sup>74</sup>

In spite of his attacks on Iser, Fish allows that his opponent's rationale may work 'as a *consequence* of an overarching interpretive assumption'; it will work 'if determinate and indeterminate (or given and supplied) are conventional categories *within* a system of intelligibility.' Under these circumstances all who are involved in this system will 'see' (or produce) determinacies and indeterminacies. However, everything they see is a construction, as opposed to something they have found. Furthermore, communal constraints will operate to hinder sheer invention.<sup>75</sup>

We can view an example of Iser's rationale at work (and Fish's critique of it) by looking at his treatment of a passage from Henry Fielding's novel *Tom Jones*. By a happy coincidence for my purposes this passage deals with an instance of 'perfectionism' in the eighteenth century. Concerning the character of Allworthy, Iser says:

Allworthy is introduced to us as the perfect man, but he is at once brought face to face with a hypocrite, Captain Blifil, and is completely taken in by the latter's feigned piety. Clearly, then, the signifiers are not meant solely to designate perfection. On the contrary, they denote instructions to the reader to build up the signified, which represents not a quality of perfection, but in fact a vital defect, namely, Allworthy's lack of judgement.<sup>76</sup>

Using Iser's terminology, Fish explains<sup>77</sup> that this is an illustration of the juxtaposition of perspectives that stimulate the reader to search for consistency.<sup>78</sup> The story exhibits two 'character perspectives' that 'confront one another': Allworthy as *homo perfectus*

---

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>76</sup> Iser, *Act of Reading*, p. 65.

<sup>77</sup> Fish, 'Why No One's Afraid of Wolfgang Iser,' p. 7.

<sup>78</sup> Iser, *Act of Reading*, p. 114.

and the apparently pious Dr Blifil.<sup>79</sup> Iser says that in this case the reader redefines what she or he means by perfection during the process of reducing the indeterminacies. Looking also at the signifiers the reader discovers that they 'do not add up to the perfection they seem to denote.' Thus, a revised conception of Allworthy's character emerges.<sup>80</sup>

Fish comments that an examination of the textual segments that frame the category of the 'given' in this story merely reveals Iser's particular interpretive strategy. In considering the portrayal of Allworthy as the perfect man, we must, for Iser's explication to work, understand human perfection as incompatible with any form of naiveté. Only under these circumstances will the reader view the singular perspectives of Allworthy and Blifil as 'discontinuous' and so experience an 'intensification' of 'the acts of ideation.'<sup>81</sup> However, if one imagines a reader who regards ingenuousness as a characteristic of perfection, such a reader would not see a disparity in Allworthy's behaviour; she or he would not perceive a 'gap' that required closure. Introducing the possibility of this sort of reader, Fish says:

irreparably blurs the supposedly hard lines of [Iser's] theory, for if the "textual signs" do not announce their shape but appear in a variety of shapes according to the differing expectations and assumptions of different readers, and if gaps are not built into the text, but appear...as a consequence of particular interpretive strategies, then there is no distinction between what the text gives and what the reader supplies; he supplies *everything*; the stars in a literary text are not fixed; they are just as variable as the lines that join them.<sup>82</sup>

Fish does not advocate his own reading, but he highlights its possibility. He emphasises that he is not discounting Iser's reading, he stresses that it is entirely possible to give an account of *Tom Jones* that relies on the distinctions we have

---

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 120 - 121.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 65 - 67.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 189.

<sup>82</sup> See note 29.

described. As we have said, however, Iser's work finally rests on an assumption that will produce the phenomena it claims to describe.<sup>83</sup>

At the beginning of our discussion of Iser I said I wished to look at his 'machine' - to discover its shape and how it works, to ascertain its 'loose-jointedness,' and to depict the nature of Fish's critical attack. Having explored these matters we might visually represent Fish's mechanistic analogy of Iser's theory using a lithograph by the Dutch artist M.C. Escher: 'Tetrahedron - Cube with Magic Ribbon.' The virtual character of Iser's literary object resembles Escher's mechanical image: as we study the components in the artist's graphic design we discover a flexible articulation. If we gaze at the tetrahedron's frame we discover that it has 'inversion symmetry.' Should we 'invert the entire structure through the centre of the cube, the cube would...remain unaffected, but the tetrahedron would turn into its dual, identical to itself, but sharing the remaining four verticals with the cube.'<sup>84</sup> An assumption of the possibility of such flexibility aids our understanding (or 'reading,' even 'creation') of the image. Similarly, the 'Magic Ribbon' that weaves through the tetrahedron, when followed by the observer's eye, can alter in appearance - the protuberances on its surface can 'surreptitiously change from convex to concave.'<sup>85</sup> Thus the image appears 'all things to all people,' and works by an assumption. Iser's 'machine,' likewise, works only because of an overarching interpretive assumption - an assumption that will produce the phenomena it claims to describe. Consequently, everything the reader 'sees' is a construction, as opposed to something found in the text. Iser's 'machine' also has 'inversion symmetry': it can invert to accommodate emphases frequently perceived as contradictory in the writings of other theorists. I conclude that in both Iser's and Escher's machines the meaning achieved has an element of the illusory.

---

<sup>83</sup> Fish, 'Why No One's Afraid of Wolfgang Iser,' p. 7.

<sup>84</sup> A.L. Loeb, 'Polyhedra in the work of M.C. Escher,' in H.S.M. Coxeter et al., (eds.), *M.C. Escher - Art and Science - Proceedings of the International Congress on M.C. Escher - Rome, Italy, 26 - 28 March, 1985* (Amsterdam: Elsevier Science, 1986), pp. 195 - 199.

<sup>85</sup> M.C. Escher, *The Graphic Work* (Köln: Benedikt Taschen Verlag, 1992. English Translation by J.E. Brigham. Originally Published in 1959 under the title: *M.C. Escher - Grafiek en Tekeningen*. Zwolle: Koninklijke Erven J.J. Tijl N.V.), p. 13, and illustration 55 originally entitled 'Kubus met banden,' 1957.



#### 1. 4. Escher's Fish

As we have already seen, Stanley Fish rejects the supposed determinate nature of the text. His theory renders 'seemingly objective and autonomous facts embedded in the text... [as simply] the result of our perceptual strategies or reading acts.'<sup>86</sup> However, as Stephen Moore points out, to reach this point Fish underwent an 'intellectual conversion' that began during the period 1967 - 1970.<sup>87</sup> His work since that time has (says Freund) evinced 'a characteristic, progressively self-revising structure of concerns' observable in the collection of his work *Is there a text in this Class - The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (1980).<sup>88</sup> At one time Fish belonged in the same arena of theoretical practice as Iser inasmuch as he viewed reading as an interaction between text and reader.<sup>89</sup> Fish himself states: 'In 1970 I was asking the question "Is the reader or the text the source of meaning?" and the entities presupposed by the question *were* the text and the reader whose independence and stability were thus assumed.'<sup>90</sup> Preceding an exploration of the implications surrounding Fish's more recent premise that 'texts never dictate to readers - readers always dictate to texts,'<sup>91</sup> it is worthwhile to observe something of the progression of his thought from that early period. It is worthwhile also to look at examples of a 'Fishian' reading of texts.

Initially, therefore, I propose to look at two essays as representative of Fish's nascent post-modernism: 'Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics' (1970), and 'Interpreting the Variorum' (1976). The first of these essays grew out of his 1967 book *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* in which he proposes that John Milton's poem is 'about how its readers came to be the way they are.' In it (Fish

---

<sup>86</sup> Freund, *Return of the Reader*, p. 149.

<sup>87</sup> S.D. Moore, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels - The Theoretical Challenge*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 113.

<sup>88</sup> Freund, *Return of the Reader*, pp. 91 and 104 - 105.

<sup>89</sup> Bible and Culture Collective, *Postmodern Bible - 'Reader-Response Criticism,'* p. 27.

<sup>90</sup> Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? - The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: The Harvard University Press, 1980), p. x.

<sup>91</sup> Bible and Culture Collective, *Postmodern Bible - 'Reader-Response Criticism,'* p. 30.

suggests) the poet seeks to make 'the reader self-conscious about his own performance.'<sup>92</sup> This work featured a reading methodology that Fish expanded in 'Literature in the Reader' - the essay to which we now turn. It is 'a method of analysis which takes the reader, as an actively mediating presence, fully into account.'<sup>93</sup> It is innovative in that it removes the literary text from the centre of critical attention and replaces it with an emphasis on the thought processes of an individual who is reading a text. In doing so it reveals Fish's trajectory towards the reader as the pertinent object of analysis.

Fish describes the reading process as a moment-by-moment reaction to language.<sup>94</sup> The basis of his method is 'simply the rigorous and disinterested asking of the question, what does this word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, chapter, novel, play, poem, *do*? And the execution involves an analysis of the developing responses of the reader in relation to the words as they succeed one another in time.' Every word of a line or sentence is therefore noted for the response it produces. All types of response receive attention - '[A]ny and all of the activities provoked by a string of words: the projection of syntactical and/or lexical probabilities; their subsequent occurrence or nonoccurrence; attitudes toward persons, or things, or ideas referred to; the reversal or questioning of those attitudes; and much more.' Fish acknowledges the resultant burden on the analyst. She or he must, at every moment of reading, elucidate previous responses and aggregate them. Additionally, the analyst must draw in the effects of pre-reading issues such as genre and history. Thus, the 'temporal flow' of reading is the centre of the method 'and [the assumption is] that the reader responds in terms of that flow and not to the whole utterance.' From the first word to each of its successors, Fish's formula requires a report 'of what has happened *to that point*.' Also, he says in parenthesis: '(The report includes the reader's set [sic] toward future experiences, but

---

<sup>92</sup> Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* p. 21.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics,' p. 23. This essay originally appeared in *New Literary History* 2 (1970): pp. 123 - 162.

<sup>94</sup> Tompkins, *Reader-Response Criticism*, p. xvi. Tompkins uses the word 'reactions' advisedly in her description of the method, as in 1970 Fish still seemed to invest language with intrinsic meaning to which the reader reacts. As we will see below, this results in a contradiction in Fish's argument that he later sought to correct.

not those experiences).<sup>95</sup> He effectively 'slows down' reading to record the sequence of actions performed as a reader negotiates sentences and phrases: 'It is as if a slow motion camera with an automatic stop-action effect were recording our linguistic experiences and presenting them for our viewing.'<sup>96</sup>

Fish uses ten examples to illustrate his method. Applying the technique, he claims, enlivens even supposedly 'neutral and styleless statements'; the question 'what does it do?...assumes that something is always happening.'<sup>97</sup> Furthermore, apparently obscure sequences of words that resist the New Critical search for 'meaning,' with its presumption of the objectivity of texts, become fruitful as strategies to explore the response of readers. Such sequences we can regard as actions 'made upon a reader rather than...container[s] from which a reader extracts a message.'<sup>98</sup>

Presenting an example of a 'straightforward and non-deviant' sentence, Fish discusses a line from Walter Pater's 'Conclusion' to *The Renaissance*: 'That clear perpetual outline of face and limb is but an image of ours.' The first word 'That' is not simply there, 'it is *actively* there, doing something.' It is a demonstrative word pointing to a sense of its (yet unidentified) referent outside the observer-reader. An expectation arises, impelling the reader to find out what 'that' is. The word and its effect form 'the basic data of the meaning experience' and guide description of that experience 'because they direct the reader.' The adjective 'clear' has a dual function. First, it assures easy recognition of what 'that' is; second, it guarantees the unmistakable nature of the word itself. 'Perpetual' has a stabilising purpose regarding the prominence of 'that' before the reader sees it; 'outline' supplies a potential form, and generates a question: outline of what? The question receives its answer in the phrase 'of face and limb,' effectively filling in the outline. When the reader reaches the declarative verb 'is' - 'which sets the seal on the objective reality of what has preceded

---

<sup>95</sup> Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* 'Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics,' pp. 26 - 27. By the word 'set,' I think Fish means the reader's anticipation of her or his experience of forthcoming words in the line or sentence.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

it' - she or he becomes securely oriented 'in a world of perfectly discerned objects and perfectly discerning observers.' However, the sentence then turns on the reader by removing the world it has created; the appearance of the word 'but' impedes progress and causes a momentary hesitation before the realisation comes that 'but' has the force of 'only'; the declarative force of 'is' becomes weakened, and uncertainty clouds the previously firm outline 'the reader has been pressured to accept.' Then 'image' resolves uncertainty but in 'the direction of insubstantiality'; while 'of ours' both dispels the now clouded form, and collapses the distinction between the reader and the outside referent. Fish demonstrates the final response of the reader as simply viewing the referent as appearing and disappearing. So we see the description of the reader's experience equates to an analysis of the sentence's meaning. Any question concerning meaning as understood in a New Critical sense would simply generate a repetition of the description.<sup>99</sup>

Furnishing an example of an 'utterance...which says nothing,' Fish applies his method to a line from Book I of Milton's *Paradise Lost* (335): 'Nor did they not perceive the evil plight.' The first word - a negative assertion - produces a precise, but abstract, expectation of a required subject and verb for its completion. This dual expectation becomes reinforced by the auxiliary 'did' and the pronoun 'they.' The reader presumes the verb will shortly follow, yet discovers a second negative 'not,' a negative that resists settlement within the reader's projection of the statement's form. At this stage progress through the line halts; the intrusive (because unexpected) negative forces a question as to whether the perception occurred. In pursuit of a solution the reader either re-reads - resulting in a repeat of the succession of mental operations; or, continues - ensuing in the discovery of the anticipated verb. However, taking either action fails to resolve the syntactical uncertainty. Invoking grammatical logic such as the 'rule of the double negative,' one cancelling the other and producing a 'correct' reading - 'they did perceive the evil plight' - has no bearing on the logic of the reading experience or on meaning. Reading, according to Fish, is a temporal experience in

---

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 30 - 31.

which the combination of two negatives work not to produce an affirmative but rather 'to prevent the reader from making the simple (declarative) sense which would be the goal of a logical analysis.' Any attempt to rationalise the line removes 'its most prominent and important effect - the suspension of the reader between the alternatives its syntax momentarily offers.' Regarding the line as an occurrence rather than an object eliminates its supposed problematic nature. The 'fact' that the reader cannot tell if 'they' did perceive, and has involuntarily to interrogate the word sequence 'are events in [the] encounter with the line, and as events they are part of the line's *meaning*, even though they take place in the mind, not on the page.' Fish concludes that Milton has set a dilemma in the text by using two senses of the word 'perceive': 'they' (the fallen angels) do perceive (indeed 'see') the tortures of perdition, but they are, however, blind to the moral gravity of their position.<sup>100</sup>

Holding these two examples before us we note that Fish at this stage begins to reify his observations of the activity of reading, and of the nature of meaning, at the expense of the text. Despite maintaining that the stringent character of his method is 'too fine for even the most analytical of tastes,' and that it 'puts restrictions on the possible responses to a word or a phrase,' Fish declares that 'the objectivity of the text is an illusion.' The physical presence of the text projects an image of completeness and self-sufficiency: an image of a sole repository of value and meaning. Yet this image is false. Literature is not a rigid object; it is 'a kinetic art.' Its physical form belies its true nature: when we read a book 'it [is] moving....[its] pages [are] turning, lines [are] receding into the past - we [are also] moving with it.' Fish avers: 'Analysis in terms of doings and happenings is...truly objective because it recognises the fluidity, "the movingness," of the meaning experience and because it directs us to where the action is - the active and activating consciousness of the reader.'<sup>101</sup> According to this hypothesis, then, we cannot extract meaning from the text - meaning is an experience that occurs during reading. Consequently, a change takes place in literature: it ceases

---

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 25 - 26.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 22; 42 - 44.

its existence as a fixed object. Instead it becomes an unfolding sequence of events in the reader's mind. Also, the objective of literary criticism alters and becomes the thorough description of the activity of reading. Thus, the questions we ask about literature change: they do not ultimately concern what poems mean, nor what poems do, but how readers make meaning.

Conversely, Fish does not deny that words have meaning, or that the reader is constrained by the text, as we have seen from both examples above. Rather, he declares that our experience of literature depends largely on linguistic and literary competence. The reader in Fish's terms is an 'informed reader'; she or he possesses three attributes: first, a faculty in the language of the text; second, a mature and comprehensive semantic knowledge; third, a literary expertise enveloping 'the properties of literary discourses.' Such a reader is a 'hybrid' - an abstract and a real reader combined - and 'Each of us, if we are sufficiently responsible and self-conscious, can, in the course of employing the method, become the informed reader and therefore be a more reliable reporter of his experience.'<sup>102</sup> So, rules of shared language make understanding uniform. These rules constrain the production of literature, so also do they constrain the range and direction of response. A reader reacts to the words of the text in certain ways because he or she shares the same linguistic rules with the author. In this sense the author creates the reader's experience and the reader accomplishes the author's will. Still, Fish's main emphasis remains that literature is an activity performed by a reader and is not, therefore, a stable artefact.

To conclude, we may comment that this essay shows Stanley Fish as among the first critics to propound a 'moment-by-moment method of critical reading.'<sup>103</sup> He claims a therapeutic effect for his theory - as we apply it we become more aware of our cerebral processes when reading: 'It is a method which processes its own user, who is also its only instrument. It is self-sharpening and what it sharpens is you. It does not organise materials, but transforms minds.'<sup>104</sup> Yet despite the benefits of the method,

---

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 48 - 49.

<sup>103</sup> Moore, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels*, p. 112.

<sup>104</sup> Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* 'Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics,' p. 66.

Fish's autobiographical account of his developing position openly declares a major fault in his reasoning. Although his essay seeks to counter the New Critical espousal of the idea of a self-sufficient text (even so far as to question its existence), it nevertheless posits a reader who is 'an extension of formalist principles, as his every operation is...strictly controlled by the features of the text.' Retrospectively, Fish acknowledged how he practised self-deception in order to mask this inconsistency: 'I kept this knowledge from myself by never putting the two arguments together but marshaling each of them only to rebut specific points.' When charged with potential solipsism and anarchy in emphasising the reader, he would highlight the constraints the text imposes. If accused of merely extending New Critical praxis, he would claim that his model freed the reader from the tyranny of the text and provided a central role for her or him in the production of meaning.<sup>105</sup> Despite this inconsistency we note that even at this stage Fish's ideas about the creation of meaning extend much further than his predecessors. Nevertheless, he still held 'to the assumption (shared by the formalists) that the text and reader are independent and competing entities whose spheres of influence and responsibility must be defined and controlled.' From this point we must look at an essay in which Fish makes a significant step: it involves the realisation that we may not uphold the claims of either the text or the reader 'because neither has the independent status that would make its claim possible.'<sup>106</sup>

In 'Interpreting the Variorum,' an essay written in three stages, Fish 'moves into the position that he has since occupied.'<sup>107</sup> Taking six examples from the Milton Variorum Commentary, he uses them to illustrate his developing thoughts. The first part of the piece represents a restatement of his views in 'Literature in the Reader,'<sup>108</sup> but at this juncture he directly confronts his relation to formalism.<sup>109</sup> Most significant for our purposes are the manoeuvres Fish makes in the second and third parts of the

---

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Introduction,' pp. 7 - 8.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Introduction,' p. 12.

<sup>107</sup> Moore, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels*, p. 114.

<sup>108</sup> Freund, *Return of the Reader*, p. 106.

<sup>109</sup> Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* 'Introduction,' p. 12.

essay. In part two he seeks to answer a question regarding whether the text contains the author's intention and produces the reader's experience. For Fish this question only has force if one assumes that the formal patterns of the text exist independently of the reader's experience: it is only under these conditions that they seem to have priority. The claims of independence and priority for the text are actually 'one and the same'; to separate them enables them to 'give circular and illegitimate support to each other.' If we ask whether formal features exist independently, those who believe so will point to their priority: 'they are "in" the text before the reader comes to it.' Likewise, if we ask if formal features are prior, the formalist will affirm that they are 'by pointing to their independent status: they are "in" the text before the reader comes to it.' Fish says that this is not a progressive argument but 'an assertion supporting itself.' Any attack mounted against the independence of formal features is also an attack on their priority (and vice versa). He conducts such an attack using two passages from *Lycidas*.<sup>110</sup>

First, Fish looks at a short passage beginning at line 42:

The willows and the hazel copses green  
Shall now no more be seen,  
Fanning their joyous leaves to thy soft lays.'

As we have seen, Fish believes that the reader is always 'making sense' (a term he says he uses in this case with 'literal force': rather an ironic claim considering his argument). As a person reads 'something is always happening.' Here the reader makes sense by means of the assumption ('and therefore the creation') of a completed assertion after the word 'seen': *Lycidas*' death has caused a sympathetic reaction in the local flora to the extent that it dies away ('will no more be seen by *anyone*'). Therefore, at the end of line 43 the reader will have accomplished a single action that might take any of four forms; she or he has: made sense, interpreted, performed a perceptual closure, and decided intention. Yet, whatever the reader has accomplished (rather, 'however we characterize it'), it will unravel while reading the next line. The closure or sense made proves premature, so the reader must construct a new solution completely reversing the

---

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Interpreting the Variorum,' pp. 161 - 162.



relationship between man and nature originally assumed. It is others who will now see the flora; *Lycidas* has gone forever but the plants will move to the music of someone else; thus the whole of line 44 serves to modify and remove the absolute nature of 'seen.' Nature is indifferent and any notion of sympathy is a false surmise. We must note at this point that the words of Fish's summation become the basis for an innovation in his thinking: the poem 'is continually encouraging and then disallowing' these false surmises.<sup>111</sup>

Fish declares that the use of words such as 'encourage' and 'disallow' demonstrate how easy it is to submit to the bias of our critical language. We begin to talk 'as if poems, not readers or interpreters, did things.' The words 'encourage' and 'disallow' (along with others he has used) imply agency, assigning it both 'to an author's intentions and then to the forms that assumedly embody them.' However, Fish thinks that, rather than intention and its formal realisation producing interpretation, it is the reverse that applies: 'interpretation creates intention and its formal realization by creating the conditions in which it becomes possible to pick them out.' His analysis of the first passage from *Lycidas* deliberately followed the standard critical line to illustrate his new thought: he 'saw' what his 'interpretive principles permitted or directed [him] to see'; he then attributed what he had 'seen' to a text and an authorial intention. Fish's principles lead him to 'see' readers performing acts: the points at which he finds (or more precisely, he says, 'declares') those acts to have been performed become '(by sleight of hand) demarcations *in* the text.' The next step is for these demarcations to receive the designation 'formal features' and as such gain an '(illegitimately) assigned responsibility for producing the interpretation which in fact produced them.' In this passage the demarcation Fish's interpretation 'calls into being' occurs at the end of line 42; but, under his innovation he views the end of that, or any other, line as there only because the model used '*demand*s' (the word is not too strong) perceptual closures and therefore locations at which they occur'; he notes that not every

---

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 162 - 163.

line ending occasions a closure, and that another model, one that did not emphasise reading activity, would not raise the possibility of its being a closure.<sup>112</sup>

So, Fish's suggestion is 'that formal units are always a function of the interpretive model one brings to bear.' We cannot say that these units are 'in' the text - and the same is true, he says, for authorial intentions. Intention and formal unit alike emerge 'when [one hazards] perceptual or interpretive closure.' It is an interpretive act alone that verifies intention: 'intention is known when and only when it is recognised; it is recognised as soon as you decide about it; you decide about it as soon as you make a sense; and you make a sense [according to Fish] as soon as you can.'<sup>113</sup>

Looking now at Fish's second passage from *Lycidas*, he quotes lines 13 - 14:

'He must not float upon his wat'ry bier

Unwept...'

Fish explains that in this example the 'hazard' of perceptual closure occurs at the end of line 13. The reader makes sense of the line as 'a resolution bordering on a promise,' an expectation and anticipation of a call to action and a programme of rescue. As she or he meets the word 'Unwept,' however, these feelings abate in disappointment; readerly realisation of disappointment fuses with the making of a new and comfortless sense: nothing will happen - Lycidas will remain floating on 'his wat'ry bier' and futile lamentation is the only recourse; even speaking and listening to this lament is an empty gesture: we learn that line 15 meretriciously and self-mockingly designates the lament as 'a melodious tear.' Fish comments that three 'structures' emerge simultaneously: a) the dismantling of an initial resolution of sense and the formation of a new one; b) the identification of a formal unit such as a line ending or beginning; and, c) the revision of an inaugural decision about intention and meaning by a further decision that creates another intention.<sup>114</sup>

Assembling his thesis upon his illustrations, Fish elucidates: 'that the form of the reader's experience, formal units, and the structure of intention are one, that they

---

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 163 - 164.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 164 - 165.

come into view simultaneously, and that therefore the questions of priority and independence do not arise.' Yet, he remarks that this thesis provokes a question: 'If intention, form, and the shape of the reader's experience are simply different ways of referring to (different perspectives on) the same interpretive act, what is that act an interpretation of?' He cannot answer. Nevertheless, he avers that no one else can answer it either; the formalists endeavour to do so by pointing to patterns and making a claim that they exist prior to, and independent of, interpretation; but these patterns, says Fish, 'vary according to the procedures that yield them' - statistical, grammatical, or any other. It is interpretive acts, therefore, that always constitute these alleged patterns (they have no 'innocent' existence). He concedes that this is as true of his analyses as it is of anyone else's. The examples he offers work by his appropriation of the notion 'line ending' that he treats 'as a fact of nature,' a 'fact,' one might conclude, that is responsible for the reading experience. However, Fish thinks that the situation is exactly the reverse; 'line endings exist by virtue of perceptual strategies rather than the other way around.' Historically the strategy that we know as 'reading (or hearing) poetry' includes attention to the line as a unit, but this attention 'has made the line as a unit (either of print or of aural duration) available'; what we notice in a text we have 'made noticeable' by an interpretive strategy.<sup>115</sup>

It is merely our habitual practice of this reading strategy that has made the forms it yields seem substantial. Fish says that the effect of alliteration, for instance, rather than being dependent on independently existing 'facts,' operates by an orthographic convention, and so may easily tolerate substitution with another convention: the phonetic - thus removing a supposed objective basis; effects are therefore the product of interpretation. Fish raises the possible objection that alliteration is an aural rather than a physical phenomenon; so when we hear poetry it grants unmediated access to the physical sounds themselves - the 'real' similarities of vowels or consonants. He answers this by showing that heard and seen patterns alike are the products of perceptual habits: 'phonological "facts" are no more uninterpreted (or less

---

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 165 - 166.

conventional) than the "facts" of orthography; the distinctive features that make articulation and reception possible are the product of a system of differences that must be *imposed* before it can be recognised.<sup>116</sup>

Concluding the second part of his essay Fish supports his thesis by pointing to competing linguistic paradigms; each of these models offers a different account of the constituents of language. He declares that all the technical terms used to describe language appear or disappear according to the descriptive apparatus employed. Resting analyses on syntactic descriptions is actually to rest them on interpretation; any facts referred to *'are* there, but only as a consequence of the interpretive (man-made) model that has called them into being.' In Fish's theory, therefore, we cannot make the choice between objectivity and interpretation: our choice is always between an unacknowledged interpretation and an interpretation that is 'at least aware of itself.' Fish claims this awareness for himself. In doing so he relinquishes the claims he formerly made: he had argued that a 'bad' spatial model of reading had suppressed 'what was really happening,' but now he sees the notion 'really happening' as simply one more interpretation.<sup>117</sup>

During the third part of 'Interpreting the Variorum' Fish discusses issues arising from the preceding arguments. This discussion surrounds the stability of interpretation among readers, and the variation of interpretation in the career of a single reader. Further, it surrounds the assumption that these factors point to the existence of a text - prior to and independent of interpretive acts. Fish asserts that both the stability and the variety are functions of interpretive strategies rather than of texts.<sup>118</sup>

He subsequently introduces a very significant facet of his scheme, that of the 'interpretive community.' Taking the stance that there is no independent text to guide interpretation raises the questions: 'Why should two or more readers ever agree, and why should regular, that is habitual, differences in the career of a single reader ever occur?' Excluding the stability and variety of texts, how do we explain the stability of

---

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 167 - 171.

interpretation among certain groups at certain times? Conversely, how do we explain the orderly variety of interpretation?<sup>119</sup> Fish thinks that his idea of the 'interpretive community' answers these questions fully. 'Interpretive communities,' he declares, 'are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions.'<sup>120</sup> The strategies he speaks of exist prior to the act of reading and determine 'the shape' of the material - rather than, as is commonly assumed, the reverse. If a particular community believes that there are a variety of texts, the members of that community will possess a repertoire of strategies for making them. However, if a community holds that there exists only one text then 'the single strategy its members employ will be forever writing it.' Members of the first community will accuse those in the second of reductionism; those in the second will accuse the first of superficiality. Fish explains that such a situation arises because each community assumes that the other fails correctly to perceive the 'true text'; actually, he says, 'each perceives the text (or texts) its interpretive strategies demand and call into being.'<sup>121</sup> So, we discover that the explanation of the stability of interpretation among different readers is that they belong to the same community. Similarly, we find that the issue concerning the regularity with which a single reader will employ different interpretive strategies, and thus make different texts, has its solution in that she or he belongs to different communities. Also, we ascertain why disagreements happen and why debate can go on in a principled way: 'not because of a stability in texts, but because of a stability in the makeup of interpretive communities and therefore in the opposing positions they make possible.'<sup>122</sup> Fish acknowledges that this stability is a temporary event (unlike the timeless stability of the text posited by the formalists). Interpretive communities operate in a state of flux, they expand and contract, members transfer from one to another. Thus, although alignments are impermanent 'they are always

---

119 *Ibid.*, p. 171.

120 *Ibid.*, p. 171.

121 *Ibid.*, p. 171.

122 *Ibid.*, p. 171.

there' and they provide sufficient stability for interpretive disagreements to continue; they also supply enough 'shift and slippage' to ensure that the disagreements will never find resolution. The idea of interpretive communities hangs poised between an ideal and a fear. The ideal is the impossible conception of perfect agreement that requires texts with a status independent of interpretation; the fear is of interpretive anarchy - a fear that causes many to maintain the ideal. Fish assures us that such a fear would only come to realisation 'if interpretation (text making) were completely random.' However, it is the 'fragile but real consolidation of interpretive communities that allows us to talk to one another, but with no hope or fear of ever being able to stop.'<sup>123</sup>

Interpretive communities, then, have no more stability than texts because interpretive strategies are 'not natural or universal, but learned.' Nevertheless, we do have an inherent ability to interpret. What we acquire beyond this ability are the ways of interpreting - ways that we may forget, that become supplanted or complicated, or that fall into obsolescence (the reasons for these alterations in our ways of interpretation I will discuss in chapter 2). Should any of these things befall our ways of interpreting, a corresponding change in texts occurs 'not because they are being read differently, but because they are being written differently.'<sup>124</sup>

In Fish's model the sole stability lies in the 'fact' that the reader constantly deploys interpretive strategies; communication under these circumstances becomes 'a much more chancy affair than we [customarily] think it.' Fish describes the situation in terms of a question: '[I]f there are no fixed texts, but only interpretive strategies making them, and if interpretive strategies are not natural, but learned (and are therefore unavailable to a finite description), what is it that utterers (speakers, authors, critics, me, you) do?' We have already observed that under 'old' models 'utterers' express prefabricated meanings in codes that exist independently of those who decipher them. As we have also seen, Fish holds that we do not extract meaning but make it.<sup>125</sup> We do not make meaning by recognising the encoded forms (the Iserian 'textual

---

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 171 - 172.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

instructions' referred to in section 3) but by interpretive strategies that create the forms. Fish now avers 'that what utterers do is give hearers and readers the opportunity to make meanings (and texts) by inviting them to put into execution a set of strategies.' A presumption operates here that the audience will recognise the invitation; the presumption itself has its basis in the speaker's or author's projection of the 'moves *he* would make if confronted by the sounds or marks he is uttering or setting down.'<sup>126</sup>

Fish recognises that this looks like an admission that a formal coding exists after all, albeit not of meanings, but of directions for making them - for executing interpretive strategies. In answer he states that they 'will only *be* directions to those who already have the interpretive strategies in the first place.' The directions are a product of an interpretive act - they do not produce them. It is not because of something 'in' the marks on a page that the author 'hazards' his projection of strategies, but because of an assumption about something in the reader. Fish asserts that the 'very existence of the "marks" is a function of an interpretive community'; it is only members of a community that will recognise (that is make) the marks. Those who are outside the community will marshal a different set of interpretive strategies (Fish insists that it is impossible to withhold interpretation) and will consequently make different marks.<sup>127</sup>

Concluding his essay, Fish admits that although he has 'made the text disappear,' a particular dilemma remains. This dilemma centres on the discovery of membership of an interpretive community. How does an individual who is performing interpretive strategies (and who is thus constituting 'texts, intentions, speakers, and authors') recognise others who use the same strategies? Fish thinks that this is an impossible task as 'any evidence brought forward to support the claim would itself be an interpretation.' 'Proof' of membership lies in 'fellowship,' a subtle recognition from a fellow member who expresses 'what neither [individual] could ever prove to a third party.' Fish intends his last comment to illustrate this recognition: 'we know,' he

---

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 172 - 173.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.

confides, 'I say it to you now, knowing...that you will agree with me (that is, understand) only if you already agree with me.'<sup>128</sup>

It is important to comment on Fish's use of such language as 'making' (as opposed to 'finding') meaning, to wit: the reader does not find meaning in the text, she or he creates it out of the interpretive strategies employed in the act of reading. I suggest that although he uses this kind of language to undermine a naive interpretive 'realism' (and a prevalent critical rhetoric), he is not doing so on behalf of a personal belief in some sort of opposing epistemological or metaphysical 'idealism' (that holds as its essence that interpretation 'creates' everything out of nothing); rather, his argument stands outside the realism versus idealism debate. Primarily Fish wishes to indicate that there is no space between 'interpretation' and the 'facts' such that the former could be weighed against the latter.

As I stated earlier, with the publication of 'Interpreting the Variorum' Fish moved into the position that he has since occupied. Subsequent to this essay he has sought to consolidate this position. Regarding Fish's more recent work, the Bible and Culture Collective rather scathingly declares that: 'These days Fish sticks to sweeping theoretical pronouncements and does much less practical criticism than he did in the days of *Surprised by Sin*...Fish can avoid the text versus reader debate in which he used to revel only as long as he talks about criticism without actually doing it.'<sup>129</sup> This, however, is a sweeping statement in itself as it does not take into account his use of texts as part of his teaching work at numerous universities. Even in the same year that the Collective published their work, Fish wrote: 'At [this] moment I am not enriching my central thesis, or deepening it; I am abandoning it, doing literary criticism rather than talking about doing literary criticism.'<sup>130</sup> Leaving aside that issue, we may nevertheless present brief critical observations of the two central pillars of Fish's

---

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.

<sup>129</sup> Bible and Culture Collective, *Postmodern Bible* - 'Reader-Response Criticism,' p. 34.

<sup>130</sup> Fish, *Professional Correctness - Literary Studies and Political Change* (Oxford: Clarendon Press and The Oxford University Press, 1995), Preface p. viii.



mature theory: a) the disappearance of the text; and, b) the authority of interpretive communities.

I will deal with the second pillar first - a major buttress of Fish's theory - the authority of interpretive communities. A comment from the Bible and Culture Collective expresses a widespread view of critics: 'Many have charged that Fish's interpretive communities are static, homogeneous, hypothetical abstractions.' Further, 'they lack the concrete political and ethical complexities of actual communities of flesh-and-blood readers.'<sup>131</sup> As we consider these criticisms we must remember that Fish's maxim that 'texts never dictate to readers - readers always dictate to texts'<sup>132</sup> has behind it the shadow of reading conventions. A critical estimation of Fish's communities is that within them an individual never enjoys the act of reading or imagination free from communal constraints. Also, the ossified communities seemingly envisioned by Fish do 'not require critics to take into account the many different readers of texts and their localized interests.'<sup>133</sup> Thus, Freund contends that Fish's insistence on the authority of interpretive communities results in 'a radical retreat from reading.' Fish's reader submissively exercises the act of reading as informed by her or his community: she or he never engages issues of power and authority by resistance, reinvention, or revision. What ensues is a form of conservatism as institutional assumptions alone enable reading: so the reader becomes powerless. Freund concludes:

Fish's position so far has refused to face up to the ways in which the authority of interpretive communities might become grimly coercive. The salutary curb on subjectivity, without a corresponding curb on the authority of consensual norms, remains troubling. The appeal to the imperialism of agreement can chill the spines of readers whose experience of the community is less happily benign than Fish assumes.<sup>134</sup>

---

<sup>131</sup> Bible and Culture Collective, *Postmodern Bible* - 'Reader-Response Criticism,' p. 34.

<sup>132</sup> See note 92.

<sup>133</sup> Bible and Culture Collective, *Postmodern Bible* - 'Reader-Response Criticism,' p. 57.

<sup>134</sup> Freund, *Return of the Reader*, pp. 110 - 111.

We may remark, however, that this sort of observation, that Fish fails (especially at the early stage of his project) to give a comprehensive account of 'interpretive communities,' does not justify any treatment of the idea as irrelevant. To continue the process of interpretation as if there were no legitimate point for consideration here would be to miss an opportunity. Surely, it is reasonable that we should seek to refine our understanding of this important issue. Furthermore, on the point of the supposed coercive nature of reading communities, it seems that some of the foregoing comments strangely hold Fish personally responsible for the nature of interpretation under his description. During the next chapter, therefore, I will attempt to establish if Fish's communities are indeed as conservative, determinative or benign as Freund and other critics maintain.

The first pillar, the disappearance of the text, is also a mainstay of all of Fish's later work. In order to convince us of the totality of this textual dematerialization, he invites us on a journey. He asks us to descend, beneath our mere sight of paper and ink, 'in the direction of atoms.' Once arriving at the atomic level, we discover 'that these entities too have a palpability and shape only because of the assumption of some or other system of intelligibility.' Therefore, these particles become just as vulnerable to deconstructive disintegration 'as are poems, assignments and lists.'<sup>135</sup> Freund comments that such a move 'leads into what may prove to be an ultimately empty or trivial abyss of infinite regress.'<sup>136</sup>

The 'infinite regress' Freund speaks of has its visual parallel in Escher's wood-engraving, *Depth*. The artist wished to represent an 'unlimited space' and to do so he employed the image of a limitless number of fish expanding in all directions.<sup>137</sup> Escher's image gives 'a perception of three dimensional space.'<sup>138</sup> So, also, Fish's perspective with its emphasis on the disappearance of the autonomous text (and the independent reader), in turn causes the evanescence of the subject / object opposition.

---

<sup>135</sup> Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* 'How To Recognise a Poem When You See One,' p. 331.

<sup>136</sup> Freund, *Return of the Reader*, p. 151.

<sup>137</sup> M.C. Escher, *The Graphic Work*, p. 12, and illustration 36 originally entitled 'Diepte,' 1955.

<sup>138</sup> G.A. Escher, 'M.C. Escher at work,' in H.S.M. Coxeter et al., (eds.), *M.C. Escher - Art and Science*, pp. 4 and 7.

Once this opposition vanishes 'reader-response criticism also disappears at a stroke...[t]he reader's self is itself a sign - another text.'<sup>139</sup> Thus we observe a regress that talk of 'autonomous interpretive communities' cannot halt. The Bible and Culture Collective affirms this point: 'Not only is the reader's self constituted by the reading conventions of his or her interpretive community, but those reading conventions themselves become another construct, another text, another sign to be read...and so on indefinitely.'<sup>140</sup> Escher's fish expand into a three dimensional infinity, a space large enough for the ramifications of Fish's theory.

---

<sup>139</sup> Freund, *Return of the Reader*, p. 108.

<sup>140</sup> Bible and Culture Collective, *Postmodern Bible* - 'Reader-Response Criticism,' p. 55.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE PERTINENCE OF STANLEY FISH: A RE-EVALUATION, DEFENCE AND INITIAL APPLICATION

#### Fish on the Menu at The Missing Persons: Lunch I - 1976

'You reading over my shoulder, peering beneath My writing arm -

I suddenly feel your breath  
Hot on my hand or on my nape,  
So interrupt my theme...'<sup>141</sup>

ὁ κόσμος, ἀλλοίωσις· ὁ βίος, ὑπόληψις

The Universe - mutation: Life - opinion.'<sup>142</sup>

'Toutes les histoires anciennes, comme le disait un de nos beaux esprits, ne sont que des fables convenues.' - 'All our ancient history, as one of our wits remarked, is no more than accepted fiction.'<sup>143</sup>

Much of what I have written thus far (and will write in this chapter) is a 'story' of reader-response criticism<sup>144</sup> (and, ultimately, my entire thesis will form a 'story' of the interpretation of particular perfectionist texts). In using this word I cede that my observations are merely a construct, a brief abstraction of what is a complex and evolving ratiocination of the act of reading.<sup>145</sup> Regarding the status of reader-response

---

<sup>142</sup> Robert Graves, *Collected Poems - 1959* (London: Cassell, 1959), 'The Reader Over My Shoulder,' p. 89.

<sup>142</sup> Marcus Aurelius, *Communings*. 4. 3 (Haines, LCL). The Loeb Classical Library translator and editor C.R. Haines says this was also a maxim of the Pythagorean Democrats.

<sup>143</sup> Ulla Kölvig (general ed.) and Christiane Mervaud (ed.), *Oeuvres Completes De Voltaire*, 21 Romans, (Paris: Garnier Frères, Libraires - Éditeurs, 1879), François-Marie Arouet, called Voltaire, 'Jeannot et Colin' (1764), p. 237. Mervaud attributes the original quote to Bernard le Bovier Fontenelle (1657 - 1757) but does not give a reference.

<sup>144</sup> Bible and Culture Collective, *Postmodern Bible* - 'Reader-Response Criticism,' pp. 25 - 26.

<sup>145</sup> The Bible and Culture Collective allows that virtually all the theoretical approaches covered in

criticism, moreover, I note that it now has the reputation in some circles as having 'a past rather than a future';<sup>146</sup> the comments I have made concerning 'the evanescence of the subject / object opposition' in the previous section illustrate the reasons for its supposed vitiating. Yet, in the orbit of biblical studies it retains its standing as somewhat of an avant-garde methodology.<sup>147</sup> Its continued relevance among biblical scholars invites an attempt to employ it in an original way. My account of Iser and Fish has this objective: to study interpretations of two brief 'perfectionist' passages of 1 John using a form of reader-response criticism. The abstraction of Iser and Fish's insights I have thus far assembled in one sense will result in a trajectory away from Iser and towards an examination that incorporates Fishian perspectives on the commentators' treatment of the material. This is significant because it departs from the trend in biblical studies to use Iser's work as a model for reader-centred studies.

The Bible and Culture Collective regard Iser as 'the most influential figure in the appropriation of reader-response criticism by biblical critics'; but the Collective adds that these critics have so far failed seriously to engage Fish's ideas.<sup>148</sup> During the course of this thesis I shall take up the challenge implied by this comment. Researching and writing as I am at the threshold of the twenty-first century, and so acknowledging the matrix within which the delicate balance of the numerous factors affecting my own reading occurs, I intend first to delineate an eighteenth-century reading of the letter (along with some earlier and synchronous readings that influenced it) that began to address an interpretive problem; then, in contrast, I mean to illustrate six extant academic readings thus revealing the continuing efforts to solve the issue. As I said in my introduction, it is not my intention to make a typical intervention of my own into the debate with the purpose of settling the exegetical problem known as the 'sinlessness contradiction.' Neither is it my aim to give a complete account of twentieth century exegesis of 1 John. It is rather to provide an analysis of the hermeneutical moves that

---

their work we might class as versions of reader-response criticism. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>146</sup> Freund, *Return of the Reader*, p. 10. It is interesting that Freund should make this comment as early as 1987. Evidently even by that time some scholars regarded it as obsolete.

<sup>147</sup> Bible and Culture Collective, *Postmodern Bible - 'Reader-Response Criticism,'* p. 38.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 31 and 55..

interpreters make in such a debate. Viewing the pre-critical and recent understandings in the light of Fish's work (and using Iser's theory as a mirror to reflect further Fish's ideas), I hope to exhibit the material from a new aspect. All these aims, though, rest on the idea that we may apply reader-response to a composition such as 1 John (we will discuss the vexed question of its genre later), and, moreover, they rest on the notion that reader-response itself has a continuing relevance as a literary critical tool. Writing in 1996, Ruth Edwards stated that the array of 'modern' criticisms, including '[s]tructuralist, post-structuralist, and semiotic interpretative methods,' had 'not yet hit our texts' [the Johannine epistles].<sup>149</sup> There would seem to be an imperative, therefore, to provide some precedent for such a bearing, as New Testament critics who employ these 'modern' criticisms ordinarily concentrate on the canonical Gospels and some narratives.<sup>150</sup> However, recently there have been successful attempts to apply reader-response to other New Testament epistles, and we may regard these as having set the necessary precedent.<sup>151</sup> Nevertheless, I believe Edwards' statement serves as a catalyst for remarking on any such move in the realm of the Johannine material. A brief digression regarding my employment of the method follows accordingly, and this draws on a further essay from Fish. At the head of this digression, in answer to Freund's charge of archaism, I will state in what form I believe we may most effectively use reader-response. Concomitant to this, I will provide an inaugural presentation in this section of how the method might operate within the confines of our study.

Before we continue thus, however, it is important to make some additional observations on the topic of interpretation and change - for in the fourth section of chapter one I alluded to ways (of interpretation) that we may forget, that become

---

<sup>149</sup> Edwards, *Johannine Epistles*, p. 19.

<sup>150</sup> Bible and Culture Collective, *Postmodern Bible* - 'Reader-Response Criticism,' pp. 38 - 39. The emphasis is particularly on North American critics here.

<sup>151</sup> See J.G. Lodge, *Romans 9 - 11, A Reader-Response Analysis* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholar's Press, 1998). Also C.D. Stanley, *Paul and the Language of Scripture - Citation Techniques in the Pauline Epistles and Contemporary Literature* (Cambridge: Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series, No. 74, Cambridge University Press, 1992).

supplanted or complicated, or that fall into obsolescence.<sup>152</sup> We must try to discover why our interpretations change and how those changes advance; but, considering Fish's emphasis on the conventions of reading, does he really allow that change (either in the acts of reading or composing a work) is possible?

It is Iser who provides us with a prototype of change. He casts James Joyce as a writer whose works have the potential to change readers' perceptions of possible worlds. Using descriptions of Joyce's *Ulysses* as an example, Iser remarks that some critics characterise it as 'chaotic, destructive, nihilistic, and simply a joke.' Explaining the nature of the work, he speaks of various 'minus functions' of this text that invalidate the criteria that readers traditionally use to understand, and that 'block off the reader's access to his own expectations.' A sense of 'disorientation' grows in any who try to 'interact' with the book. From the perspective of Iser's system we discover that when one reads *Ulysses* it proves 'virtually impossible to stabilize any of the connections that one has established.' Although Iser concedes that the text 'resists all attempts at integration into a single unified structure,' he argues that this 'leads not to chaos but to a new mode of communication.' Now the reader experiences 'everyday life' not 'compressed into a superimposed pattern,' but rather, 'as a history of ever-changing viewpoints.'<sup>153</sup> There is a marked contrast in Fish's attitude to Joyce; he incuriously discards him in barely a sentence when he writes of 'Baroque eccentrics like...James Joyce.'<sup>154</sup> Does Fish's silence on Joyce's work - and on Iser's assertion that it constitutes a new mode of communication - signify that there are forms of writing that escape communal constraints? We can only postulate that from the disposition of his system, Fish would argue that Joyce recognised others as members of the same interpretive community, and they likewise recognised him. Those held by the same perspective as Joyce's, such as Édouard Dujardin, Dorothy M. Richardson, Virginia Woolf, and Marcel Proust, as we know, thought of themselves as 'stream of consciousness,' 'interior monologue,' or 'modernist' writers. It was Dujardin's novel

---

<sup>152</sup> See note 125.

<sup>153</sup> Iser, *Act of Reading*, pp. 209 - 210.

<sup>154</sup> Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* 'Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics,' p. 30.

*Les Lauriers sont coupés* (1888) that Joyce later credited as the source of his own use of interior monologue. We might discover a deeper source in the experiments of Sigmund Freud and William James. Inevitably, Joyce's style of writing eventually became absorbed into the literary field insofar as it no longer seemed unorthodox.<sup>155</sup> My point is that it is possible to argue that Joyce's work, rather than being a singular cause of change as portrayed by Iser, sprang out of existing assumptions in literature and science concerning the importance of studying consciousness. Furthermore, it arose in radical dependence on existing types of writing that give it its distinctive appearance (and the latter assertion features in a general Fishian topic we will deal with later). One could say that, from Fish's point of view, writers of Joyce's literary group do not so much challenge the pervasiveness of communities or conventions as actually further establish them. Any interpretive difficulties initially arising from 'stream of consciousness' writing we could attribute to the process of the shift of conventions. Yet, regardless of his dismissal of Joyce, we do find other conceptions of change within Fish's work.

Several related questions arise concerning Fish's notions on why alterations occur in our ways of interpreting. These questions concern: the reasons for change in the conventions of interpretation; the impetus behind decisions to change allegiance from one interpretive community to another; the explanation for changes in communal constraints; the belief in the conventional interpretation of all texts (and whether this leads to a restriction on imagination); the simultaneous support for self-conscious reading on the one hand, and interpretation on the other. As a preamble to our exploration of these questions on change, I would like to make some associated remarks concerning interpretive communities, disagreement, and political awareness.

I cited earlier Freund's portrait of a Fishian reader. She or he is a submissive and powerless figure who obediently follows institutional assumptions when interpreting a text. Furthermore, within Fish's communities Freund detects a worrying

---

<sup>155</sup> Drabble (ed.), *Oxford Companion to English Literature*, pp. 520, 658, 944.  
G.A. Miller, *Psychology - The Science of Mental Life* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966), pp. 54 - 55, 196.



lack of restraint on the authority of consensual norms. Such authority, she argues, has sinister undertones in its 'appeal to the imperialism of agreement': an agreement whose innocuity would disappear under certain circumstances.<sup>156</sup> Presumably, Freund has in mind hostile environments in which singular interpretations, and, therefore, interpreters, that do not accord with an accepted standard of correctness suffer exclusion as a consequence. She implies that though Fish's communities are potentially oppressive, Fish ensures the safety of his compliant readers. He achieves this by creating congenial (and, thus, unrealistic) settings as the context of interpretive activity. His communities certainly confine interpretation, but do so in a refined manner. Admittedly, Fish seems to envision interpretation of texts as a process that occurs in a civilised 'literary institution.'<sup>157</sup> Indeed, the first context in which Fish speaks is, of course, the academic discipline of literary criticism. Thus, we discover that, for him, interpretation is merely a 'game' - indeed it is the 'only game in town.'<sup>158</sup> However, I think that critics exaggerate what they perceive as Fish's lack of political awareness. Statements that impugn Fish's communities as politically and ethically simplistic, and his readers as hopelessly docile, do not, I propose, take into account certain aspects of his later work. As we will see, even at the end of the 1970s, Fish did not exclude critical deprecation and contention within interpretive communities and among 'subcommunities.' Still further, we will see that by the 1990s he had illustrated his theory of interpretation by means of 'flesh-and-blood' political and ethical questions, and had positively 'take(n) into account the many different readers of texts and their localized interests.'<sup>159</sup>

So, returning to Fish's position two decades ago, in the preface to his eponymous essay, 'Is There a Text in this Class?', Fish recalls a public 'forthright attack' on his work.<sup>160</sup> He also facetiously recollects that a review of his lectures at

---

<sup>156</sup> See note 135.

<sup>157</sup> Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* 'What Makes an Interpretation Acceptable?' p. 343 and *Passim*.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 355.

<sup>159</sup> See notes 132 and 134.

<sup>160</sup> Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* 'Is There a Text in This Class?' p. 303.

this period contained the observation that his 'intellectual skill' in debate was 'not always the skill of a gentleman.'<sup>161</sup> We have already seen an example of Fish's 'ungentlemanly' acerbity in 'Who's Afraid of Wolfgang Iser?' - and we find further evidence of this in Alan Sinfield's accusation that Fish uses a 'bullying tone' in his arguments<sup>162</sup> (a charge that Fish freely admits<sup>163</sup>). Evidently, these instances of comparatively mild censure and rebuttal remain far from the communal malignancy foreboded by Freund, and accord to some extent with the critical estimate of Fish's 'safe' communities. Nevertheless, I think that there is much evidence in Fish's work to demonstrate his mindfulness of the factional stances inherent in interpretation, and of the potential dangers. I note that he states that there are no political implications 'built into [his] theory [of interpretive communities].'<sup>164</sup> Nevertheless, I think that we will find contained in Fish's notion of change a caution that interpretation is sometimes a hazardous game to play.

In part four of chapter one we saw how Fish briefly outlined his thoughts concerning: i) the reasons for interpretive disagreement; and, ii) the basis for the continuity of 'principled' debate. As an explanation for both he pointed to a stability in the makeup of interpretive communities, and therefore in the opposing positions they make possible, though he emphasised that this stability is transitory in nature. Disagreement occurs because communities operate in a state of flux, they expand and contract as their members transfer allegiance from one interpretive stance to another. Alignments are impermanent, but always present; they provide enough stability for interpretive disagreements to continue, but enough instability to ensure that the disagreements will never find resolution.<sup>165</sup> In two pertinent essays Fish elaborates on this theme, and at this stage I think it aids our purposes carefully to scrutinise his arguments as I think that they exhibit his ideas about interpretive change as a continuum

---

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 304.

<sup>162</sup> A. Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.), pp. 288 - 90.

<sup>163</sup> Fish, *Professional Correctness - Literary Studies and Political Change*, 'Yet Once More,' p. 2.

<sup>164</sup> Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 'Change,' p. 156.

<sup>165</sup> See note 124.

within his communities. Turning, then, from my preliminary remarks, the first essay I wish to look at is 'What Makes an Interpretation Acceptable?'

Those who believe in determinate meaning and attempt to offer an explanation for interpretive disagreement suffer merciless sarcasm from Fish. For these objectivists 'disagreement can only be a theological error.' The truth is plainly available in texts, they say.<sup>166</sup> It is only those who 'perversely' choose not to see this truth that go on to 'substitute their own meanings for the meanings that texts obviously bear.' Yet they offer no explanation for this 'waywardness' in readers. Fish taunts the objectivists: 'original sin would seem to be the only relevant model.' He wonders why they also do not explain why 'some readers seem to be exempt from the general infirmity.' Disputes over meaning reach resolution by impartial interpreters referring erring readers to 'the facts as they really are.' Our discussion in sections three and four of chapter one demonstrated how, for Fish, 'facts' appear only in the context of the reader's perspective. Thus, we do not settle disagreements by the facts - disagreements are the means by which we settle the facts. In other words, facts do not exist in some self-evident form that one party may indicate and thus solve an interpretive contention. Rather, those elements which readers perceive as indisputable 'emerge only in the context of some point of view.' Inevitable disagreements occur 'between those who hold (or are held by) different points of view, and what is at stake in a disagreement is the right to specify what the facts can hereafter be said to be.' Ongoing disputes unveil how the 'facts as they really are' undergo metamorphosis. It is not the stability of textual objects that accounts for either agreement or disagreement; their explanation lies only in: 'the power of...interpretive communit[ies] to constitute the objects upon which [their] members (also and simultaneously constituted) can then agree.'<sup>167</sup>

Using four examples, Blake's '*The Tyger*,' Faulkner's '*A Rose for Emily*,' Austen's '*Pride and Prejudice*,' and Booth's '*An Essay on Shakespeare's Sonnets*,'

---

<sup>166</sup> Later we will see that this is the very attitude that John Wesley held concerning the texts from 1 John that he adduced in support of his view of Christian perfection. Moreover, it is the position occupied by many commentators at the latter part of our century, as will become evident later.

<sup>167</sup> Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* 'What Makes an Interpretation Acceptable?' pp. 338 - 339.

Fish dissects the critical struggle for authoritative interpretations. The extant conventions of literary criticism require that critics support their own interpretations by arguing that they more perfectly accord with the facts. Other readers must see the veracity of the critic's interpretive principles, as it is in the light of these principles that the purported facts will appear indisputable. Consequently, we find opposing critics using the same words from a disputed work as internal and confirming evidence. However, (given the type of exclusive claim each critic makes - that they alone present *the interpretive facts*), two conflicting commentators cannot both be right, says Fish; and furthermore there is no foundation for deciding between the interpretations they advocate. As we have seen, they cannot appeal to the text as it is merely a product and consequence of their respective interpretations. The uninterpreted text is unavailable to adjudicate between competing interpretations. Thus any appeals to 'the text' become circular, merely referring to earlier interpretations. Any word or context cited as evidence becomes so because of an already assumed interpretation. Therefore, what is at stake in any dispute are the assumptions behind interpretation, rather than the supposed facts. Every new reading of a work is a function of a critic's interpretive perspective.<sup>168</sup>

Pluralists have always argued that a poem such as Blake's *The Tyger* is open to more than one interpretation - however, it is not subject to an infinite number. Critics may argue about subjects such as the theme, or 'speaker,' of the poem, but certain readings will not enjoy admittance to the circle of accepted interpretations. Such limited plurality testifies to the potential of a great work of art to produce many readings (no single reading can encapsulate its abundant richness and complexity). Fish agrees with Wayne Booth that it is right to rule out at least some readings, but he questions the authority of critics to do so. For the pluralist this authority lies in some mysterious quality of the text. Booth's pragmatic view is that there is usually a unanimity in agreement about what constitutes 'unacceptable meanings'; he sees justified limits to legitimate uses of a text, and this is evident as disagreement could not occur without a

---

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 340 - 341.

core of agreement. The concurrence Fish has with Booth on this point he qualifies by saying that if the text is a function of interpretation then we cannot say that the text is the locus of the core of agreement that enables us to reject interpretations. An impasse seemingly arises in that we have no foundation from which to regard an interpretation as inadmissible, yet conversely we reject interpretations as a matter of course.<sup>169</sup>

However, Fish contends that the impasse exists solely on the strength of the assumption that interpretive activity is itself unconstrained. It is the literary institution that will determine the contour of this activity as it will authorise only a finite number of interpretive strategies. The core of agreement consists in the ways of producing the text, rather than in the text itself, and remains open to change. There is no catalogue of acceptable ways of interpreting; yet Fish says that there is common knowledge among critics regarding how interpretation operates within the literary institution as presently constituted. An example of this knowledge comes from one of Fish's students who successfully applied one of several interpretive routines in any literary class regardless of subject. She variously viewed texts as instances of the tension between nature and culture; as providing evidence of large mythological oppositions; as vehicles for arguing that the real subject concerned composition; as demonstrations that narrative simply reveals the speaker fragmenting emotionally and displacing personal anxieties and fears. All these routines were perfectly acceptable within the given institution, the John Hopkins University. Nevertheless, Fish declares that if the student tried to argue that a text represented a prophetic message from a deceased relative, this interpretation would suffer exclusion.<sup>170</sup>

The student's routines represent: an application of the 'unwritten rules of the literary game'; a display of the 'common knowledge' of literary interpretive protocol; an awareness of how interpretations gain admittance or undergo exclusion. Indeed, all those who play the 'literary game' instinctively know its rules: journal writers and editors; readers and audiences in professional meetings; those who seek and award

---

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 341 - 342.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 342 - 343.

tenure in literature departments; graduate students who wish to display professional competence. However, these rules and their concomitant practices are not monolithic or stable. Fish says that within the literary community there are 'subcommunities' such as those formed by the adherents of opposing literary journals. Furthermore, within any community there is a constant reassessment of the boundaries of the acceptable, and issues of authority come into play within a community. Professors who emphasise psychological factors in reading might indeed admit an interpretation of a text supposedly based on a message from a deceased relative; conversely, teachers holding New Critical views would instantly dismiss such an understanding as non-literary and illegitimate.<sup>171</sup>

Fish emphasises that although there exists a category of interpretive actions that are illegitimate - and this is simply the reverse of a category of those that are legitimate - the contents of that category constantly change. We see them change in a lateral manner when an interpreter moves from one subcommunity to another; we see them change in a temporal manner when a previously excluded interpretive strategy gradually gains acceptance. Reader-response criticism is itself an example of the latter. In chapter one section 2 we briefly discussed the New critical dictum against perceived 'Affective and Intentional Fallacies.' Fish describes juridical terminology in Wimsatt's and Beardsly's dismissal of the reader's response: they treated their own pronouncements as legal decisions against violation of institutionalised conventions. However, with the passing of several decades we have seen the once interdicted strategy of reader-response transformed from a 'fallacy' to a widely used methodology. We can see by the emergence of factions among its followers the extent to which reader-response has become established as a critical 'orthodoxy.' So, reader-centred criticism, though not invulnerable to challenge or attack, had by the late 1970s become a recognised and competing literary strategy. It had become acceptable not by virtue of its universal reception but by the fact that those who rejected it now had to argue against it. Fish repeats his acquiescence with Booth that we are right to exclude at least some readings,

---

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 343.

but goes on to explain that because of the inclusion of reader-response as a legitimate procedure within the literary institution critics can now admit some previously excluded readings.<sup>172</sup>

It is not the text that excludes a particular reading, but rather the absence of a refined interpretive procedure for producing that text. To demonstrate this, Fish evaluates Norman Holland's psychoanalytic analysis of Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily*. Here is an example of a strategy that, though innovative, is subject to supersession. This strategy is pluralist in nature in that it treats the text as a matrix of possible readings. Holland deliberately sets limits, however, as he thinks that only some possibilities fit the matrix. A reading that equated two of the principal characters with 'Eskimos,' for instance, would not represent a justifiable response to the story, but rather appear as the pursuit of a 'mysterious inner exploration.' This reading would not find a hearing in the literary community and Fish agrees that it should not. However, he disagrees with Holland's assertion that it is the language of the text itself that rules out the Eskimo reading. Fish argues that it is simply the lack of an interpretive strategy for producing this reading that hinders its acceptance: there is presently no way of looking at, or reading, the text that aids the emergence of an unmistakably Eskimo reading. Fish goes on to posit a scenario under which the required strategy could establish itself - a scenario based on recent precedents for reading works by W.B. Yeats, William Blake and James Miller. He envisions the discovery of a letter in which Faulkner discloses that he has always believed himself to be an Eskimo changeling. On the strength of this discovery interested critics (or, the 'Faulkner industry' as Fish calls them) would begin to reinterpret the canon of his work. This would involve the development of a symbolic or allusive system (similar, Fish says, to mythological or typological criticism) the application of which would at once transform the text to one informed throughout by Eskimo readings. Fish precludes the charge that he seems to acknowledge the existence of a text *per se*, and explains that he refers to the text (or texts) supplied by the interpretive strategies destined for dislodgement or expansion by

---

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 343 - 345.

the Eskimo strategy.<sup>173</sup> Thus, appropriation of the new interpretive strategy leads to the addition of a new reading of the text (Fish lists the following as instances of currently accepted understandings: Freudian; mythological; Christological; regional; sociological; and linguistic). Given Fish's hypothetical scenario, an 'Eskimo' reading of *A Rose for Emily* gains legitimate status.<sup>174</sup>

As the means for ruling out readings lies solely in the presently recognised interpretive strategies for producing the text, it follows that no reading, no matter how eccentric, is innately unrealisable. Moving to a third example to demonstrate this point, Fish notes Booth's report on Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* that he has never found a reader who fails to see the jokes against Mr Collins - and that therefore the text 'enforces or signals an ironic reading.' Replying, Fish rehearses a similar argument to that we discussed at the end of chapter one, section 3: that it is entirely possible to imagine a reader who empathises completely with Mr Collins' values - values that are diametrically opposite to those we would have to assume for the passage to have an obviously ironic tone. In this instance, however, Fish's concern is the exclusion of a reading by the wielding of the professorial authority referred to earlier. He presumes that none of Professor Booth's students would hold values that lead to the rejection of an ironic reading of the text. Most significantly though, Fish also presumes that Booth would not 'allow' these students to hold them; he states: 'students always know what they are expected to believe.'<sup>175</sup> Before we continue to look further at Fish's essay, I would like to make some comment on this statement, as it exposes an aspect of the supposed determinative function of interpretive communities.

The statement assumes an assertive control on interpretation, and I deduce from it that a student may adjust her or his 'beliefs' according to the credence of a lecturer or the ethos of a department. Entirely practical considerations are at the heart of this adjustment: the achievement of the highest grades possible, the avoidance of failure, or the acquisition of professional status. Thus, the student seeks to conceal her or his

---

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 345 - 346.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 346 - 347.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 347.



personal opinions if their expression would result in institutional disapproval; many would rather conform to established views to gain kudos. So called liberal and radical establishments (shortly we will see that Fish does not think anyone can be radical) on the one hand, and putative conservative establishments on the other, insist upon their own interpretive mores to varying extents. We have already discussed in chapter one section 4 Fish's contention that in the act of reading we 'create' or 'write' the text. Yet, we must also ask how interpretation continues during the act of writing as distinct from reading a text. If students always know what their lecturers and departments expect them to believe, they must, if they wish to avoid institutional stricture and gain prestige, embrace that belief and express it in writing, moreover, using only accepted language and literary forms. Just as students learn to write only that which is acceptable to teachers, teachers also notice how their authority curtails perceived aberrant readings of texts. Arrogating interpretive conventions in this manner represents a type of collusion between writers and those readers who approve or disapprove of their work. Such collusion does not confine itself to the relationship between students and lecturers, however. We may see lecturers writing their lessons and research papers in accord with institutional requirements rather than their own ideas. Furthermore, as we noted above, Fish detects that journal writers and editors play the literary game - both parties becoming cognisant of the requirements of content and style necessary for the successful publication of a work. All these scenarios suggest a situation well expressed in the lines by the poet Robert Graves quoted at the head of this section: the writer feels the influence of the reader upon her or his work almost as if someone were reading over their shoulder as they wrote. Be this as it may, we must stress that no interpretive community can exert total determinative power over a writer. A community can change, or its members shift allegiance to another. A confident writer may, as in the case of Joyce that we recited above, deliberately challenge the accepted conventions of writing (although, as we will see later, do so solely from a position of dependence on existing types of writing that give it its distinctive appearance). We will make further comment later how dominant attitudes to a text within a community can change through

a process of persuasion, thereby releasing formerly suppressed writers' voices - voices that, in turn, become representative of the community. Moreover, other interpretive avenues exist: the student can transfer to another course, the lecturer move to a different university, the journal writer produce work for rival publications. My point in this digression is that the particular interpretive strategy characterising any community can have an effect on the writers, as well as the readers, within it. The extent and nature of that effect varies considerably according to the complexion of a community, and that complexion always remains vulnerable to change. However, I recognise that I have concerned myself here with matters involving more-or-less self-conscious choice and that it is not possible to render all the influences of community and convention transparent in this way.

Returning now to Fish's essay, he continues to show: 'that while there are always mechanisms for ruling out readings, their source is not the text but the presently recognized interpretive strategies for producing the text.' Regarding the Austen example he describes the conditions under which a new reading might *become* convincing. He argues for the credibility of these conditions given the procedures used within literary institutions to propose and establish fresh understandings. To establish a non-ironic reading of *Pride and Prejudice* would require the unearthing of new documentation (such as a letter, a lost manuscript or a contemporary response) leading to the conclusion that critics had previously misunderstood the author's intents. These conditions would indicate to the literary fellowship that all along Austen had not written in a sardonic tone. The work would then appear not as a satire, but rather as a celebration, of the country 'gentry' and their ways. Objections to this reading inevitably arise - for instance, how do we account for the narrator's absolute condemnation of Mr Collins? Fish comments that within the literary institution it is possible to meet this, or any other objection. A portrayal of the narrator as fallible serves to undermine the vilification of Collins; we could variously depict the narrator as dupe, moral prig, uneducated innocent. This would result in the narratorial condemnation taking 'its place in a structure designed to glorify Mr Collins and

everything he stands for.' Thus, we see the potential transformation of our understanding of the piece. Even though, after answering objections, many critics would reject the revised reading, Fish contends that the conditions he has described leaves the text as a work that changes shape according to the interpretive assumption applied to it. We may say, then, that anyone who understands the procedures for proposing and establishing an interpretation, and knows how to apply such procedures, could elaborate any reading whatsoever.<sup>176</sup>

Still, we have our 'canons of acceptability' and continue to rule out readings - and remain right to do so, Fish repeats. That we deem some readings as ridiculous demonstrates how these canons are always with us. Though, as we have seen, there are conditions that we can imagine under which a reading once thought of as asinine can move into the circle of respectability or even orthodoxy. For Fish, this is evidence that the 'canons of acceptability' can change - and change not in an erratic fashion, but systematically, and with elements of predictability. New interpretive strategies become acceptable in a certain 'relationship of opposition' to strategies they destine to replace. Old strategies often indicate forbidden interpretive practices from which the new strategies emerge (witness how Fish's own strategy 'a poem *is* what it *does*' arose from Wimsatt's and Beardsley's regime).<sup>177</sup>

Of course, advocates of a new strategy herald it as an absolute separation from the old; but Fish maintains that the new exists in radical dependence upon its precursor. It is wholly in the context of some differential association that we perceive it as new, or indeed perceive it at all. Any patronage of Mr Collins as hero would appear futile (even as an intended absurdity) if the critical assessment had not already allocated that status to Elisabeth and Darcy. It is only as set against their status does the claim for Collins have any power to surprise.<sup>178</sup> Hence, new readings require established ones to validate their existence (and this point applies, I think, to new writing: Joyce's 'stream of consciousness' style required the Victorian and Edwardian framework of narrative,

---

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 347 - 348.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 349.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 349 - 350.

descriptive, and rational exposition in poetry and prose to validate its existence).<sup>179</sup> Answers to questions that critics have previously asked about a text become the basis for different answers - or for declining to answer, or for declaring that the 'real point' of a work is that there is no answer.<sup>180</sup>

Those who advocate new interpretations always claim discovery of this 'real point.' However, we can only make sense of that claim in relation to a point (or points) heretofore considered as the real one. A dependency ensues where the critic launches her or his interpretation only from the basis of a previous understanding. This dependency becomes apparent in the unwritten requirement that, to claim our attention, the new interpretation must amend some significant fault in the previous understanding. The New Critical approach honours critics who, judging by its criteria, enhance the appreciation of a work. Fresh interpretations must have the foundation of a scholar's proofs that old readings failed to esteem sufficiently the piece's literary qualities, it is this failure that the propounder of the new reading claims as justification for her or his actions. The latest reading remains in dependent opposition to what has gone before and yet pierces the centre of the text's literary value. Fish uses Stephen Booth's *An Essay on Shakespeare's Sonnets* to illustrate the assumptions behind the search for the real point.<sup>181</sup>

Booth states in his preface:

The history of criticism opens so many possibilities for an essay on Shakespeare's sonnets that I must warn a prospective reader about what this work does and doesn't do. To begin with the negative, I have not solved or tried to solve any of the puzzles of Shakespeare's sonnets. I do not attempt to identify Mr. W. H. or the dark lady. I do not speculate on the occasions that may have evoked particular sonnets. I do not attempt to date them. I offer neither a reorganisation of the sequence, nor a defense of the quarto order. What I have tried to do is find out what about the sonnets has made them so highly valued by the vast majority of critics and general readers.<sup>182</sup>

---

<sup>179</sup> Drabble (ed.), *Oxford Companion to English Literature*, p. 658. This reference explains the style of writing in place at the time of Joyce's challenge to its authority.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 350.

<sup>181</sup> Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? 'What Makes an Interpretation Acceptable?'* pp. 350 - 351.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 351 - 352.

Fish comments that Booth's first move is to set himself in 'differential opposition' to the work of the previous interpreters that he seeks to dislodge. Booth will not repeat their interpretive strategies as (he implies) they have mislead readers or are irrelevant. The location of the source of the sonnet's value ('what...has made them so highly valued') now becomes the central issue. Booth's predecessors have looked in error to find this source in the historical identity of the characters, in the biographical details of composition, in the establishing of an authoritative manuscript order. Now, though, the correct source of value has emerged through Booth's research, and the account he gives will truly elevate Shakespeare's work. Thus, Booth's interpretation fulfills all the requirements of literary critical conventions: it uncovers an inadequacy in former interpretations and proposes a solution; the solution involves the production of a superior elucidation of the work; this results in an enhancement of the sonnet's value. Fish records that, at the end of his book, Booth hails Shakespeare's 'remarkable achievement.' This validation reflects on Booth also, however, as he has demonstrated to his peers that he is a competent member of the institution, having satisfied all requirements.<sup>183</sup>

Booth goes on to declare: 'I do not intentionally give any interpretations of the sonnets I discuss. I mean to describe them, not to explain them.' This is an interesting manoeuvre in that by it he claims to free himself and the sonnets from the very institution (with its practices) that he has sought approval from. Fish comments that this is ironic because at the precise moment Booth declares himself outside of the 'game' of interpretation, he has, in fact, performed one of its most familiar moves. Here we see two versions of this move: i) what Fish terms as the 'external-internal' where a critic dismisses earlier interpreters as not sufficiently literary; and, ii) the 'back-to-the-text' in which we see the revulsion of the critical history of a work as an accretion that serves only to obscure. Fish regards the latter as the most potent version of the move as it harmonises with a basic assumption made by the literary profession:

---

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 352.

'the function of literary criticism is to let the text speak for itself.' This seeming humility before the text has a tinge of 'righteousness' to it, however. It suggests that although other critics have displayed the ingenuity of their interpretations, the one who supposedly returns 'back-to-the-text' is a servant of that text with the simple desire to make it accessible to its readers - 'who' Fish remarks dryly 'happen also to be (the 'servant's') readers.'<sup>184</sup>

What appears, then, as a move to abjure interpretation in favour of the simple presentation of the text, is actually a gesture in which one set of interpretive principles displaces another. The new set of principles bears the claim that it is not an interpretation. Fish contests this claim by pronouncing its impossibility on the grounds that a so-called 'simple presentation' must involve description; this description can only occur within 'a stipulative understanding' of what is before us for description, 'an understanding that will produce the object of its attention.' So, when Booth rejects the existing assumptions regarding the problems surrounding the sonnets in favour of 'the assumption that the source of our pleasure in them must be the line by line experience of reading them,' he is not seeking to avoid interpretation but rather proffering an alteration in the terms in which it will occur. He expressly proposes a transfer of attention from the poem conceived as a spatial object that contains meanings to one conceived as a temporal experience in which meanings become momentarily available. As we read the poem, meanings fade as others take their place in a process of commutation, contradiction, qualification and forgetfulness. Fish observes that it is only as a reader submits to Booth's opinion of the location of value and significance in a poem does she or he see the 'facts' of his subsequent analysis. Booth's description of the temporal reading experience that replaces interpretation is therefore an interpretive construct of the same order as the interpretations it claims to replace.<sup>185</sup>

The 'back-to-the-text' manoeuvre, in Fish's judgement, is not an option because the text returned to is simply the one demanded by an interpretation that

---

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 352 - 353.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 353 - 354.

governs its production. Yet, the stratagem is effective rhetorically inasmuch as it rides on an unchallenged assumption that the text must have an elevated position over criticism, and that we must not permit criticism to overwhelm it. Fish charges Booth of not only failing to challenge this assumption, but also of invoking and relying on it - as he relies on other assumptions that are equally open to dispute: that we may distinguish literary language from the ordinary as the literary form displays an invulnerability to paraphrase; 'that a poem should not mean, but be'; that the higher the complexity of a work, evinced by the number of its propositions held in tension and equilibrium, the better it is. These assumptions point to a certain 'conservatism' in Booth's thought thus undermining his reputation as a radical. However, the issue is not that Booth is not truly radical, but that he could not be. As we foreshadowed earlier, Fish argues that no one can be radical. No one would even recognise Booth's work as a challenge to some of the conventions of literary study (the poem as artefact, the issue of meaningfulness) if unquestioned conventions were not already firmly in place. It is impossible to conduct a wholesale challenge to the conventions as there are no terms in which to make it - such a challenge would require the use of terms wholly outside the institution. Any attempt would be unintelligible as it is exclusively within the institution that the 'facts' of literary study such as texts, authors, periods and genres become available. Fish states that the price Booth, and everyone else, pays for intelligibility is entanglement in the 'structure of assumptions and goals from which one desires to be free.'<sup>186</sup>

He closes his essay by observing that there are no moves outside of the 'game' of interpretation, including the move of claiming that one is no longer a player. Fundamental to the institution, Fish says, is a wish to disclaim that its actions have any consequences and this leads to a situation where scholars practice literary criticism and simultaneously deny they are doing so. Within the circle of most literary institutions, scholars' training leads them to believe that they are the guardians and transmitters of the best that others have thought and said. To be accused of substituting personal

---

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 354 - 355.

meaning for received meaning is an anathema. No one wishes to face the accusation that they have interpreted. Yet, Fish concludes, 'whatever they do, it will only be interpretation in another guise.'<sup>187</sup>

It is important to make some comments concerning Fish's observations on the typical critical claim not to be 'interpreting' but simply listening to the text without the imposition of an agenda. I posit that in giving voice to these observations Fish is not seeking to mount a covert exposé of supposed hermeneutical incoherence. As we have seen, the 'back-to-the-text' manoeuvre (in Fish's judgement) is not an option as a proof of the veracity of a reading because the text returned to is simply the one demanded by an interpretation that governs its production. Nevertheless, his work recognises that as part the ebb and flow of interpretive practice almost everyone uses such hermeneutical rhetoric. Indeed, in terms of that rhetoric, there is a degree of inevitability about using this type of language. However, his remarks on the scholarly claim of going 'back-to-the-text' reveal that claim as a 'move,' a style or gesture that we do not notice because of its seeming naturalness or obviousness. His observations serve to unveil the rhetoric of objectivity or 'truth-telling.' Fish attends to what readers do in their effort to have their reading prevail, how they commend their work, the type of posture they adopt towards it. His insights might well make one more guarded about such critical rhetoric, yet it remains doubtful that they could, or should, entirely remove that rhetoric. One cannot commend a reading to others by asserting its non-existence in relation to the text, by declaring that it is fictive. As we will now see, Fish proposes a model of interpretive praxis that places persuasion - based on our beliefs and assumptions - at its centre.

A second relevant essay, 'Demonstration vs. Persuasion: Two Models of Critical Activity,' is the medium by which Fish supplies another paradigm of interpretive change. Reiterating that there are no moves outside of the game of interpretation, he explains that not only may we not opt out of the game, we may not disrupt it either. No matter what interpretation we offer it will be 'in the game' -

---

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 355.



otherwise we would not even recognise it as an interpretation. Literary critical practice thus continues in a seamless manner. We always produce and perceive change within the provisos of the interpretive game, and a recognisable challenge to some of those provisos can only occur if others remain in place. Assurance of the continuity of the practice of literary criticism grows from the absence of a text that is independent of interpretation. It is merely an incoherent emotion to fear the discontinuity of the practice; and further, an irony lies in that it is only as one supports the idea of a free-standing text is there a possibility of moving away from it. Fish's system suggests that any movement away from the text is at once a movement toward it - 'toward its reappearance as an extension of whatever interpretation has come to the fore.'<sup>188</sup>

Fish foresees an objection: that his model of the continuity of literary critical practice would result in greater incoherence. If we can explain changes by the conventions of criticism rather than by a more accurate presentation of an independent text, it follows that the succession of those changes deteriorates into irrelevance; there remains no reason to argue for one interpretation over another, except for the opportunities afforded by the conventions. Under these circumstances criticism becomes ultimately a cynical exercise in which one would only advocate a reading to 'win points' or because it had not previously been proposed. Although all developments have a link and are not random in nature, without a goal outside of the institution such as the progressive clarification of the text all these developments are empty.<sup>189</sup>

A view that gives supremacy to the conventions of criticism seems counterintuitive to many. Those who are teachers and critics often sense in their work that they are advancing towards a clearer sight of the object they study. To counter the denial of determinate meaning, critics evoke the powerful fear that it will make of the whole literary institution 'a gigantic confidence trick.' Following an abandonment of belief in determinate meaning how may teachers presume to judge their students'

---

<sup>188</sup> Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* 'Demonstration vs. Persuasion: Two Models of Critical Activity,' pp. 356 - 358.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 358.

approximations of texts - or indeed presume to teach anything? How may a teacher claim a validity of reading superior to that of any pupil? One might ask a further question: does not 'common sense' and 'professional self-respect' aid the assertion that the foundation of interpretation must rest on 'something other than the accidental fact of a teacher's classroom authority'?<sup>190</sup>

At issue, says Fish, is the teacher's self-confidence. We have learned that the force and persuasiveness of an interpretation depends not on a normative standard of correctness, but on constantly changing institutional circumstances. On what basis, then, may we argue with conviction for the interpretation we presently hold? Fish answers this by a statement that the general or metacritical belief he advocates has no affect whatsoever on the tenets we currently regard as inescapable and obvious. He explains how a knowledge that a present reading follows from assumptions we have not always held, and may not hold in the future, does not prevent us from regarding our existing understanding as the correct one. Fish can offer this explanation because the uncertainty attendant to a presentation of a reading amounts simply to an admission of a possible change of mind. Yet, the possibility of a future change of mind does not affect what we now believe. Any subsequent beliefs we might adopt will, in their turn, seem correct. Awareness of a limited personal perspective does not cast doubt on the reality of the 'facts' resulting from that perspective. Subsequent perspectives result in new 'facts' that we then regard as 'real.'<sup>191</sup>

What of the doubt regarding the evidence of one's sense that could ensue from constant changes of mind? Fish says that the mental activity that is doubt occurs within a set of assumptions that cannot simultaneously be the object of doubt. We can only doubt from some perspective - a perspective that is itself invulnerable to doubt until another has taken its place; and the newly established perspective will then display the same invulnerability. Therefore, Fish argues for the impossibility of radical doubt: 'in order to doubt *everything*, including the ground one stands on, one must stand

---

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 358 - 359.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 359 - 360.

somewhere else, and that somewhere else will then be the ground on which one stands.' Thus, we find another Fishian 'infinite regress' cognate to that we discussed at the end of chapter one, section 4. We could only halt this regress by standing free of any ground whatsoever - having a mind completely at liberty from prejudice and presupposition and free to start anew. However, this position would leave nothing to start *with*. Moreover, any thought from which one attempted to start would automatically count as prejudice and presupposition. The mind would require an existence independent of the categories of understanding that inform it to enable radical scepticism to exist. Fish's claim, that it is the categories of understanding that constitute the mind, makes it impossible for anyone to achieve the detachment required to make such categories accessible to critical investigation. Scepticism and relativism alike become infeasible in this scenario because of our inability to distance ourselves from our beliefs and assumptions to the extent that they hold no more authority for us than those held by others - or even those we used to hold. An inescapable tautological conclusion emerges from all this: 'one believes what one believes, and one does so without reservation.' Articulating the qualification inherent in his general position - 'that one's beliefs and therefore one's assumptions are always subject to change' - Fish avows that it has no real force. For until a change occurs the interpretation we regard as axiomatic will continue to seem so regardless of the number of previous changes remembered.<sup>192</sup>

Fish emphasises, though, that our present perspective does not confine us. We may always consider beliefs 'other than [our] own,' but they will appear exactly that to us - extraneous beliefs 'that are false, or mistaken, or partial, or immature, or absurd.' He asserts that this is why a 'revolution' in our beliefs always feels like a progression, despite its appearance to others as mere change. We believe in the veracity of our beliefs, and conversely we believe in the falsehood of our doubts - even if what we now doubt we accepted as true only a moment ago. Our currently held opinions seem sounder than those we had previously or than those professed by others. The

---

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 360 - 361.

privileged position of our existing views casts the positions of the past as false, imperfect, mistaken, opaque or deflected. An impression of progress grows, based, not on actual movement towards a clearer sight of an independent object, but on a feeling of progression - an inevitable consequence, says Fish, 'of the firmness with which we hold our beliefs, or, to be more precise, of the firmness with which our beliefs hold us.'<sup>193</sup>

This confidence in our newly held beliefs does not, however, repress a nostalgia for what we formerly regarded as true. Sometimes discomfort accompanies the sense of progress, and we find it an inconvenience to embrace our latest thoughts, but find also that it is impossible not to believe them. Fish uses an example from formal linguistics to depict this nostalgia, discomfort and inconvenience. The ideas of Noam Chomsky were highly influential from the 1950s and resulted in the elevation of linguistics and the appropriation of his methods by other disciplines. At the apex of its success during the 1960s several of Chomsky's best students raised grave doubts about his model and it subsequently collapsed. Many of those who had used the paradigm discovered that they could no longer believe in it. Yet, this was something that they wished to believe in. Fish quotes Barbara Partee, a (former) Chomsky disciple, writing in 1971: 'I'm by now sure that the [Chomsky] model can't work, and I consider that a great pity.' 'Pity or not,' comments Fish, 'she can't help herself'; the many conveniences for Partee's teaching and research, and for her confidence in the discipline's future, that follow from belief in the model, cannot persuade her to espouse it again; it is only possible for her to believe what she believes. It is impossible to will belief in something we have abandoned, just as it is impossible to will disbelief in arguments that have persuaded us to desert our original position. Actions of the mind such as willing (and doubting) cannot occur 'outside the beliefs that are the mind's furniture.'<sup>194</sup>

---

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 361 - 362.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 362 - 363.

Fish empathises with Partee's position, as he has experienced as a literary critic the compulsion to give up an interpretation that he once regarded as obvious. As a result of arguments for a less solemn version of the pastoral, Fish revised his view of Spencer's *Shepherd's Calendar* from one that treated it as a serious exploration of rural life, to one apprised by 'the spirit of play and playful enquiry.' He now looks on the composition and no longer sees what he used to see; furthermore, he sees things that did not enter his vision before, yet presently seem obvious and indisputable. Consequently, various eclogues within the *Calendar* have lost their centrality in his teaching, while others have moved from the margins to become pivotal. He acutely feels this '(self-) depriv[ation]' of what were important features of his work.<sup>195</sup>

These prevalent experiences of a perceived progression in belief lead to the same conclusion says Fish: we believe in - and teach - only what we believe, regardless of the convenience, safety, and satisfaction of teaching something else. Fish states categorically that no teacher would teach an interpretation she or he has rejected in preference over one that they currently embrace. I would remark, however, that this statement presumes the teacher feels at liberty to offer a personal opinion; we have already discussed how teachers might write their lessons and research papers in accord with institutional requirements rather than their own ideas. Nevertheless, we must remind ourselves that Fish is here simply emphasising the possibility of our changing our perspective on a work, and stressing that even under the rule of institutional circumstance over interpretation we may have confidence in our current reading. He thus circumvents any objection that he has created a situation where we may treat texts in whatever way we wish. Fish continues by declaring that to believe in an interpretation is to regard it as superior. Furthermore, because we always believe in something we will never lack something to teach, and teach with a firm confidence and enthusiasm borne out of belief - albeit with the knowledge that belief may change. We are always and already proceeding within a perspective because we are likewise proceeding within a structure of beliefs. Our certain knowledge regarding a reading

---

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 364.

may change if and when our beliefs change, but at any one time we invariably know what is true as we constantly remain held by a belief. It is, then, perfectly possible to argue from and for a perspective based on our belief. Teachers may with certainty expound what they see to their students and readers, and try to change their perceptions to the point where they share the sight.<sup>196</sup>

Successful efforts to persuade others to accept our beliefs do indeed result in a shared sight of a text. They also result in a conjoint appreciation of the facts brought forward to support an interpretation. Fish opines that this is the entire purpose of critical activity - 'an attempt on the part of one party to alter the beliefs of another so that the evidence cited by the first will [appear] as evidence by the second.' The New Critical model of this activity operates in the following manner: critics deploy evidence that they regard as existing apart from all conviction to judge between competing beliefs (or interpretations). Demonstration, then, emerges as the principle factor in the New Critical paradigm: confirmation or denial of a reading depends upon independently specified facts; our perception changes as we progress towards an increasingly accurate account of a fixed and stable text. Whereas, in Fish's rationale persuasion forms the centre: the facts cited become available only due to an already assumed interpretation; change occurs as one perspective yields to another, bringing allied facets to our attention for the first time. So, set against the supposed objectivity of the New Critical pattern, Fish argues for a system in which 'prejudicial and perspectival perception is all there is.' He emphasises again that the text may emerge from 'a number of equally interested perspectives.'<sup>197</sup>

The risks and responsibilities attendant to Fish's persuasion model are very high. Most articles we read or write merely corroborate or attenuate existing assumptions. Yet, the literary institution approves of those who seek to challenge the 'ordinary' practice of critical performance - as long as the challenge has the purpose to redefine and reshape its configurations, rather than to eliminate it. Despite a

---

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 364 - 365.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 365.

paradoxical resistance to this action from some quarters, interrogation of critical performance can occur at numerous levels - one could attempt: the overturning of the interpretation of a single work; the recharacterization of a significant author's entire canon; to argue for a wholly new arrangement of genres, or even question the very idea of genre; most significantly, to propose a new definition of literature and its function in the world. The critic questioning at any of these levels, if she or he is to successfully convince others of the verity of a particular conclusion, must argue from a shared point of departure and common idea of how to read.<sup>198</sup> Implicit in the performance of these actions, however, is the goal of the establishment of new points of departure and the refashioning of ideas about reading. Herein lies the increased risk and responsibility of Fish's model: a demonstration pattern solely requires adequate description of an independent object, an object, moreover, that always retains its ontological distinctness; whereas, his paradigm of persuasion portrays critics' actions as directly constitutive of that object. In the latter even the terms in which we can describe the object, and the standards by which we evaluate and validate it, also spring from critical activity. To illustrate the point, Fish returns to his 'game' metaphor: 'rather than being merely a player in the game, [the critic] is a maker and unmaker of its rules.'<sup>199</sup>

Fish reassures us that, in appropriating his paradigm, we still retain 'texts, standards, norms, criteria of judgement, critical histories, and so on' - though not in the same form. The acts of convincing others that they are 'wrong,' that one interpretation has merit over another, the citation of evidence for our preferred reading, all these acts continue as before; now, however, we operate with the knowledge that we complete them within a set of institutional assumptions that may themselves turn into disputed objects. An advantage emanates from this model as we obtain a 'principled account of change' and an explanation, sufficient for ourselves and for others, for intractable interpretive problems.<sup>200</sup>

---

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 366.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 366 - 367.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 367.

Furthermore, using the model of persuasion provides novel perspectives on problems concerning the history of literary criticism; where we find attempts at explication previously regarded under the demonstration pattern as unsuccessful, we may view them as developments born out of a literary culture holding assumptions different - and not inferior - to our own. When we set aside the essentialist notions that inform a demonstration pattern, it permits us to think about the evolution of the literary institution, and to lay bare the interpretive strategies that enabled the production and understanding of its canons.<sup>201</sup>

Moving to the final phase of his essay, Fish seeks to answer two hypothetical questions from a poststructuralist standpoint regarding 'the status of [his] own discourse.' First, if all arguments continue within assumptions and presuppositions that are also subject to challenge and change, does not that make Fish's reasoning itself as vulnerable as the claims it seeks to replace? Fish nonchalantly dismisses this question: of course his position shares the vulnerability of all argument, the question is irrelevant; no one can claim privilege for her or his standpoint, all must use persuasion. Thus, Fish's essay is itself not merely a presentation, but an argument - it is also, he says, a (not necessarily) successful example of how the model of persuasion works. It is essential always to contend, to establish our perspective, to anticipate objections regarding the consequences of our contention. Fish maintains that he has tried to remove all sources of objection and to alleviate the fear of dire consequences. Really, it is only within his position that we can account for the phenomena his opponents wish to preserve.<sup>202</sup>

Fish readily accepts the possibility that the reverse could happen: someone could persuade him that what he wishes to preserve depends upon a position other than his. If this befell he would share the other's belief and position. However, until such an event he would argue for his position with all the certitude that springs from belief - simultaneously acknowledging that under certain conditions in the future he might

---

201 *Ibid.*, pp. 367 - 368.

202 *Ibid.*, pp. 368 - 369.



believe something else. This subjection to the same challenge as that put to his predecessors is not, in Fish's view, a weakness in his position but a restatement of it. Indeed, it is incoherent to conceive of a position that is invulnerable to challenge, unless one accepts the possibility of a position innocent of assumptions. Certainly, Fish does not accept the latter and, therefore, the fact that his assumptions remain subject to dislodgement does not overthrow his argument but confirms it, for it is an extension of it.<sup>203</sup>

In the second hypothetical question, Fish considers the practical consequences of his ideas in the realm of literary criticism. Tersely, he states that there are none whatsoever. As we know, Fish's proposition is that all that seems evident and unequivocal to us 'is only so within some institutional or conventional structure,' therefore, we can never work outside such a structure. Yet, he does not think that anyone could conduct their practical criticism by means of his position - it is purely a matter of theoretical reasoning about assumptions. Once we cease from this reasoning we inhabit our assumptions again and speak about literature from within whatever beliefs we held before. Any thought that Fish's ideas might prevent practical criticism has no basis because for this to happen one would have to have absolutely no belief about authors or texts; such a situation remains impossible as we cannot think of them independently of belief. Our ability to think about these matters safeguards our capacity to speak of them, and to have the confidence to do so. There is no potentiality of any practical consequences of Fish's work as it would involve a perpetual analysis of beliefs, without commitment to any, and that is not a stance anyone can take. Fish says, though, that we 'liv[e] out' the position he proposes as our firmly held beliefs yield to others, and bring with them a boundless consecution of 'practical activities that we are always able to perform.'<sup>204</sup>

A question surrounds the relevance of Fish's position as a result of his laconic statement. If there are no effects on the way we read and teach literature, why should

---

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 369 - 370.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 370.

we concern ourselves with Fish's work? At the heart of this query is an assumption that to have any interest for us a matter must have a direct affect on our customary experience of literature; connected to this assumption is an anti-theoretical bias central to the ideology of New Criticism. Fish thinks the question typifies the very parochial view he challenges, and it damns his argument 'only from [that] point of view.' He further emphasises the importance of elaborating his position by highlighting that the issues he deals with have a pivotal place in the concerns of the literary institution.<sup>205</sup>

So, in these two essays we have seen Fish's exemplar of interpretive change. We have observed the process of alteration in conventions and constraints; we have noted how interpretive communities modify their configurations during the admission of new understandings; we have learned of the process of persuasion, rather than demonstration, as an impetus of change; we have explored Fish's simultaneous support for self-conscious reading on the one hand, and interpretation on the other; we have discovered that interpretive communities do not lead to a confinement of imagination.

Surveying these essays a decade later, Fish emphasises that change is an integral part of his thesis. Incorporated into his scheme is the idea of self-transformation. He explains that the sum of connected beliefs that is our mind is not an inert structure. Beliefs can pressurise each other and this can lead to a shift in perception. The mind, rather than simply being an object of observable change, 'is an engine of change' (another Fishian mechanistic analogy); it is 'an ongoing project whose operations are at once constrained and the means by which those same constraints [may undergo alteration].'<sup>206</sup>

The interpretive community is also (by extension) 'an engine of change.' It is so 'because its assumptions are not a mechanism for shutting out the world but for organizing it, for seeing phenomena as already related to the interests and goals that make the community what it is.' Therefore, we find that the interpretive community perpetually works to transform everything into material for its own project; and the

---

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 370 - 371.

<sup>206</sup> Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, 'Change,' pp. 146 - 147.

process does not end there, as the project itself then becomes transformed by the work it does.<sup>207</sup> Thus, the critical probation into the reputed conservatism and determinism of Fish's communities discovers an answer: not only does he believe that interpretive change is possible - it is at the very centre of his idea of how interpretation progresses. Our opening quotation from Marcus Aurelius Antoninus' meditations neatly presage Fish's ideas: the Universe is indeed mutation (or, change), and Life is merely opinion (or, interpretation).

We must turn our attention now towards other matters. Before I begin to look at the nucleus of my thesis, I will try to address the remaining issues that I identified earlier. First, I wish to make a statement regarding the form in which I believe we may most effectively use reader-response. Drawing, furthermore, on an additional essay by Fish, I will make some brief remarks about its employment in this context. Also, I will provide an inaugural presentation in this section of how the method might operate within the confines of our study. Second, I will endeavour to show, as concisely as I can, how Fish has discussed interpretation, and, indeed, interpreted, within the arena of 'flesh-and-blood' political and ethical life.

Beginning here the statement about the form of reader-response we may effectively use, we must recall that it is a term that covers many approaches. So, as we progress towards an examination that incorporates Fishian perspectives, it is important that we carefully refine our understanding. We must make a distinction between reader-response as a method of practical criticism, like the 'Affective Stylistics' of the early period, and the sort of literary-hermeneutical considerations of the later work by Fish. It is the latter aspect of his theory that I wish to incorporate into my thesis. As we have seen, Fish first earned his reputation as a reader-response critic by his design of Affective Stylistics. However, studying facets of his career has shown us that his account of reading is a self-revising project, and that his ideas have evolved considerably over almost three decades. Although still thought of as under the umbrella of reader-response, one could now speak of his recent work as akin to hermeneutics.

---

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

Fish's present observations apply to reading generally, without offering a method that applies only to particular types of text. The emphasis on the reader remains, but he has adopted a more generalised and abstract reflection on reading. Fish's account now centres upon perception and communication rather than specific word and sentence analysis. Such an account aids my quest to illustrate how readers solve the particular interpretive problem we will explore in due course. Far from being anachronistic as charged by Freund, this form of the literary critical tool has much to offer for the completion of my task. Having stated the appropriate form for my purposes I will now make some brief remarks about its employment in our context.

To remark, then, on my use of reader-response, I propose that we refer to Fish's critique of juridical concerns in his essay 'Don't know Much About the Middle Ages: Posner on Law and Literature.'<sup>208</sup> Richard Posner is 'an [American] appellate judge of national reputation and a scholar of enormous influence'<sup>209</sup> who has written on the relationship of literature to the statutes of law.<sup>210</sup> Looking at this critique will demonstrate how Fish, as a proponent of reader-response, has dealt with a genre of writing that is outside the accepted field of that perspective.

Fish takes forward his argument in this way. He begins from the apparently intractable statement set forth by Posner that the study of literature has little to contribute to the interpretation of legal texts.<sup>211</sup> From there Fish takes us to the place where we see this declaration as merely an accurate account of interpretive conditions presently in force, conditions, moreover, that have no inevitability. So, Fish appreciates that currently differences exist between the two disciplines, but he repudiates the judge's assertion that these differences have any connection with their supposed essential nature, or that we can assume that such differences will last. During the process of his argument we learn that the difference between literary and legal

---

<sup>208</sup> Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, 'Don't Know Much About the Middle Ages: Posner on Law and Literature,' pp. 294 - 311.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 311.

<sup>210</sup> Richard Posner, 'Law and Literature: A Relation Reargued,' *72 Virginia Law Review* 1351 (1986): pp. 1351 - 1379.

<sup>211</sup> Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, 'Don't Know Much About the Middle Ages: Posner on Law and Literature,' p. 294.

interpretation has nothing to do with the nature of the texts; this is because it is the already differing interpretive strategies that establish textual differences rather than the reverse. Also, the specific strategies of law and literature remain as historically achieved and contingent as the texts they enable us to produce. Accordingly, the very natures of the legal or literary enterprises, along with any perceived sense of their difference from other enterprises, may undergo revision. Hence, Fish speaks of a blurring of differences between enterprises (they 'may become less sharp').<sup>212</sup> I propose, therefore, that this blurring of differences could serve to remove any obstacle to the use of my chosen perspective. If, as Fish avers, literature has no essence, if it merely adopts a succession of forms according to its location within different social settings; and if some cultures own institutional arrangements that result in law being indistinguishable from religion or prophecy; and still others understand that literary productions issue from specific political agendas<sup>213</sup> - then why should we continue under these circumstances to enforce barriers between these supposedly different types of undertaking when it comes to our study of the act of reading? Specifically, why should we limit the application of reader-response solely to what we classify as Gospel, narrative, or poetic texts?

The questions may seem particularly apposite in the case of 1 John due to its amorphous literary constitution as perceived by biblical critics. Ruth B. Edwards encapsulates recent scholarly opinion on this matter when she writes, '[t]he literary form of 1 John is an enigma.'<sup>214</sup> Judith Lieu reinforces this judgement when she comments that not only is 1 John very different from 2 and 3 John in that it lacks 'the unambiguous marks which would characterise it as a letter,' she adds, 'nor is there any comparable literature which would help us to classify it.'<sup>215</sup> These remarks, and comments such as that of Robert Kysar's that 'the question of literary genre is

---

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 304.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 304 - 305.

<sup>214</sup> Edwards, *Johannine Epistles*, p. 34.

<sup>215</sup> J. Lieu, *The Theology of the Johannine Epistles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 3 - 4.

problematic in the case of 1 John,<sup>216</sup> represent a frustrated critical endeavour to categorise the piece. Kysar thinks that it is 'useful to imagine' the present form of 1 John as a collection of 'homilectical' fragments.<sup>217</sup> For Luke T. Johnson, the writing arrived at its destination as part of 'a three-letter packet from the Elder,' though he concedes that, unlike the accompanying sections, it is 'not really a letter at all but a word of exhortation, closer in nature to a sermon.'<sup>218</sup> Raymond.E. Brown first looks at three options, that 1 John is: a) a universal religious tractate; b) a circular epistle; c) a homily, diatribe, informal tractate, or an encyclical. Rejecting all of these he observes that 'they do little to clarify the nature of 1 John.' Notably, he decides to 'offer no new name for the literary genre represented by [the composition].' Rather, Brown promises that his study will 'simply attempt to describe what the work basically does.' He opts for an explanation that posits an essential relationship of 1 John to the Gospel of John. First John is an attempt to expound ideas found in the Gospel in order to refute a group of secessionists whose 'misinterpretation' of the latter was disturbing those 'Johannine Christians' who remained in communion with the author. This author directed it not to the secessionists themselves, but to the faithful group with the purpose of strengthening them.<sup>219</sup> Brown advances this view of 1 John as part of his extensive project to reconstruct the historic setting of so-called 'Johannine Christianity' - a project that he began over four decades ago.<sup>220</sup> Pheme Perkins sees analogies to 1 John 'in treatises like Heb[rews] and Ja[me]s.' Still, she qualifies her opinion by taking up a similar stance to Brown - that unlike those writings 1 John arose from a desire to refute the teachings of dissidents; rather than being the primary purpose behind the composition of the work, the elements of general instruction emerged from Johannine tradition and then underwent specific fashioning to accomplish this disavowal.<sup>221</sup> David

---

<sup>216</sup> R. Kysar, 'Epistles of John,' *ABD* 3: 902.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 902.

<sup>218</sup> L.T. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament - An Interpretation* (London: SCM, 1986), p. 504.

<sup>219</sup> R.E. Brown, *The Epistles of John* (AB; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982), pp. 86 - 90.

<sup>220</sup> R.E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1979), p. 5.

<sup>221</sup> P. Perkins, 'The Johannine Epistles' in R.E. Brown, J.A. Fitzmyer, R.E. Murphy (eds.), *The*

Rensberger finds 'serious problems' in codification, and declares that the composition is 'hard to specify.' He comes to no conclusion, but simply states that similarities exist with forms such as 'ancient demonstrative (epideictic) rhetoric...[and] exhortation (parenthesis).'<sup>222</sup> Finally, noting Stephen S. Smalley's departure from any effort to solve the problem of its ancient genre because it is 'entirely debatable' and his claim that the piece 'approximates to what might be termed today...a "paper,"'<sup>223</sup> we can understand Lieu's resigned remark: 'It seems that 1 John must be interpreted from itself using such hints as the letter offers, with all the problems of misreading that such an approach entails.'<sup>224</sup>

If we look at the annals of interpretive judgement, during post-enlightenment times the main emphasis of those who have studied this material has been historical-critical. Moreover, in the past two decades there has emerged an additional interest in the subject of social background. We find that historical concerns have predominated in Johannine scholarship during the whole of the modern era.<sup>225</sup> The assumption is that it is essential to establish the nature, purpose and setting of the 'epistle.' However, even under this interpretive regime, the reputedly indistinct literary silhouette of First John could serve both to reduce our ability to distinguish it from other types of document, and to give it a certain plasticity. It is possible to argue that since scholars do not know how to classify it there is no reason why various readers might not interpret the nature of our text in any number of different ways. Indeed, those who base their projects on the idea of objectivity notice the potential for such capacious interpretation: 'Proposed structures are almost as numerous as those who propose them,' comments Lieu.<sup>226</sup> Yet, in Fish's assertions: that our definition of language governs how we scrutinise texts, that it is the assumed background circumstances of

---

*New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Article 62, Section 9, Topic (V), London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1989, p. 988.

<sup>222</sup> D. Rensberger, *1 John 2 John 3 John* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), pp. 30 - 31.

<sup>223</sup> S. S. Smalley, *Word Biblical Commentary 51 - 1, 2, 3 John* (WBC; Dallas TX: Word, 1984; repr., Milton Keynes: Word [UK], 1991), p. xxxiii.

<sup>224</sup> Lieu, *Theology of the Johannine Epistles*, p. 4.

<sup>225</sup> Edwards, *Johannine Epistles*, pp. 18 - 19.

<sup>226</sup> Lieu, *Theology of the Johannine Epistles*, p. 4.

possible use that supply shape and significance to any composition, that there is no distinction between so-called 'straightforward' or 'specific' language and supposedly 'vague' or 'literary' language, that distinctions emerged in history through argument and debate - we discover indications that the nature of 1 John, even if one deemed that nature as more certain, is absolutely vulnerable to change. Even the notion of 'genre' itself presents difficulties according to some scholars. Fish explains: '[F]or those who write under the influence of the new historiography as represented in the work of Foucault and others, the persistence of genres, either in literature or criticism, is a fiction.'<sup>227</sup> Given, then, that forms may alter and that lines of division may become unclear, and given also that scholarly readers do not know how to classify the work, I suggest it is purely an artificial restraint that prevents us from discovering how reader-response as a perspective might illuminate this particular text (or, indeed, any text). I believe that the background assumptions suggested by Fish provide us with a critical starting point to begin to employ a form of this criticism apropos 1 John. Furthermore, because Fish has already used his own insights to comment on legal texts - a genre, it seems, thought of as unsuitable material for reader-centred critics - this encourages us that we may use similar insights to elucidate readings of our chosen work. Prior, then, to making an inaugural exhibition using the relevant 'perfectionist' extracts from that text, I wish to make some final remarks to create a transition from existing interpretive practice to an adaptation of the method for my purposes.

Recalling aspects of what we have discovered thus far, we may imagine a sequence of events in which biblical critics concerned with historical-critical matters might augment their list of the accepted characteristics of our document. Recollecting again Fish's observation that some cultures own institutional arrangements that result in law being indistinguishable from religion or prophecy, we can detect a similar arrangement as the setting of our piece. We may consider the posited Judaeo-Christian scriptural background of the recipients of the communication as an instance of this.

---

<sup>227</sup> Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, 'Change,' p. 158.



Dale Patrick writes of 'a built-in ambiguity in the study of Hebrew Scripture.' He continues:

The [Law of Hebrew Scripture or the Old Testament] is at once the tradition of an ancient society, Israel, and the Word of God for two living religious communities, Judaism and Christianity. As the tradition of an ancient society, [readers may study] the text...for the legal system and scheme of values of that society. As the Scripture for Jews and Christians, [readers may study] the document...for its representation of God and God's will for the people.<sup>228</sup>

I contend that this ambiguity in the institutional arrangement of the culture in which 1 John appeared,<sup>229</sup> coupled with the discovery of a new paradigm to 'guide' perception, could lead to a fresh comprehension. Studying our text in these circumstances we may discover that it is possible to produce a 'juridical' reading of it that harmonises with current practice. One could imagine a conviction growing within the company of biblical critics that the author of 1 John adopted some type of legal format for his composition. The discovery of an ancient text at Ephesus, Palestine, or Syria<sup>230</sup> - reminiscent of the style of First John - that dealt with religious matters using some judicial terms would be enough to generate a new reading of the Johannine material. If this appears ludicrous, we should remind ourselves of Fish's hypothetical scenario of a newly discovered document producing an 'Eskimo' reading of Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily*. Fish's illustration shows how an equivalent situation could arise in secular circles. A condensed visualisation of how a find of this nature might alter perceptions of elements within 1 John therefore follows.

New understandings of the terms used in the work would emerge. Now a reader may 'see' for the first time a framework of trial procedure in the document. Here are those who give 'eyewitness testimony' (ἑωράκαμεν καὶ μαρτυροῦμεν)<sup>231</sup>

---

<sup>228</sup> Dale Patrick, *Old Testament Law* (London: SCM, 1985), pp. 7 - 8.

<sup>229</sup> Judith Lieu comments that: '1 John's apparent disregard for the Old Testament is deceptive, and the Jewish parallels offer useful insights into the letter.' She adds that: 'many of the images (in 1 John) have Old Testament roots.' See Lieu, *Theology of the Johannine Epistles*, pp. 20 and 87.

<sup>230</sup> Scholars suggest these sites as possible locations for the Johannine community. Kysar, 'Epistles of John' in *ABD* 3:F4; 909.

<sup>231</sup> K. Aland et al., (eds.), *Greek New Testament*. (3rd ed. [corrected]); Stuttgart: United Bible

- 1: 2) to the remarkable life of Jesus. These witnesses also have heard a declaration regarding God's integrity (1: 5). Yet, this testimony has an annexed deposition. God has a case against his people that they have sinned, but deception is rife and some suppress the truth. The people must 'confess' their sin (ἐὰν ὁμολογῶμεν τὰς ἁμαρτίας) as this is the one condition on which they can receive pardon (1: 8 - 9). Denial of the offence represents a counter-charge against God that he is 'lying' (ἐὰν εἴπωμεν ὅτι οὐχ ἡμαρτήκαμεν ψεύστην ποιοῦμεν αὐτον) - or as we could call it under the new reading, committing perjury (1: 10). Though the principal thrust of the document is to prevent sin, if anyone does sin, Jesus, whose character is beyond question (καὶ ἁμαρτία ἐν αὐτῷ οὐκ ἔστιν - 3: 5b), will act as an 'advocate' (παράκλητον) for them before God (2: 1). So serious is this case that it transcends mere community wrongdoing and has required a universal propitiation or expiation (ἰλασμός) for a solecism that has had world-wide effects (2: 2). Issues of light and darkness, love and hate, perfection and sin, pride and humility, lust and purity, truth and deceit, life and death, murder and mercy, penuriousness and philanthropy - all feature throughout this adversarial hearing. A ruling has established that the practice of sin is synonymous with 'lawlessness' (ἄνομία - 3: 4). Such lawlessness has an inextricable link with the spiritual opponent of Jesus. No one may remain neutral - all must discriminate between the attestations offered on behalf of the respective litigants (4: 1 - 6). Some have already given their allegiance to this opponent - and it is they who have lied (2: 18 - 22), even while they accused God of deception (5: 10b). Which party will others believe? For, ultimately, the case rests on a matter of believing (πιστεύων - 5: 5) either the 'spirit of truth' (τὸ πνεῦμα τῆς ἀληθείας) or the 'spirit of error' (τὸ πνεῦμα τῆς πλάνης - 4: 6). Is Jesus the Christ - the Son of God, or not? In order for him to act as advocate of the people, a resolution of this issue must emerge. The choice made will reflect in subsequent behaviour and affections (4: 7 - 21; 5: 1 - 4, 13 - 21). Not only do human witnesses (τὴν μαρτυρίαν τῶν ἀνθρώπων)

---

Societies, 1983). Throughout my thesis I will quote from this source when referring to the Greek text, unless otherwise stated. Likewise, unless otherwise stated, all quotations from the English text I will take from the New Revised Standard Version.

testify to Jesus' standing (5: 9a), three further witnesses appear - the Spirit, the water, and the blood - whose harmonious testimonies (καὶ οἱ τρεῖς εἰς τὸ ἓν εἶσιν) corroborate the evidence (5: 8). One other steps forward to give additional testimony in support of his Son, a testimony greater than that offered by humans - it is God himself (5: 9b).

Echoing Fish, I am not formally submitting this forensic reading as an alternative, I am simply highlighting that such an understanding of the text remains a possibility should the necessary strategies for producing the text alter in the way we have described. As we have seen, Fish would argue that it is simply the lack of an interpretive strategy for producing this reading that hinders its acceptance: there is presently no way of looking at, or reading, the text that aids the emergence of an unmistakably legal understanding.

Many biblical critics treat the text as a stable entity with determinate meanings and a real sociohistorical reference point. Clearly such critics use the text of 1 John as a kind of tableau vivant from which to reassemble the 'actual' setting. The life work of Brown we referred to earlier, his extensive project to reconstruct the historic setting of so-called 'Johannine Christianity,' is the prime example of this enterprise. An Anglican exegete, Barnabas Lindars, reveals the status of his colleague's efforts by commenting: 'Brown's reconstruction is not definitive, but it is the best on offer.'<sup>232</sup> We might say that for the biblical scholar, historical reconstruction of a first or early second century setting is the presently recognised interpretive strategy for producing the text.<sup>233</sup> Referring again to Fish's critique of Posner, we find the judge invoking historical context as a constraint upon interpretation of the Eighth Amendment.<sup>234</sup> Similarly, Brown and others appeal to a historical context that, they would argue, provides a

---

<sup>232</sup> Barnabas Lindars, *John* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), p. 62.

<sup>233</sup> Similarly, R. Schnackenburg portrays the community at the 'turn of the first century of the Christian era.' See R. Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles - Introduction and Commentary*, (New York: Crossroad, 1992), p. 41. Translated by R. and I. Fuller. Originally Published as *Die Johannesbriefe*. Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 13/3. Verlag Herder KG Freiburg im Breisgau, 1975.

<sup>234</sup> Stanley Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, 'Don't Know Much About the Middle Ages: Posner on Law and Literature,' pp. 298 - 300.

constraint on biblical interpretation. The Bible and Culture Collective sum up the situation thus: 'A meaning, or an acceptable range of meanings, is...determined by a consensus among the various congregations of historical-critical readers.'<sup>235</sup>

Yet, it is not only scholars such as Brown who hold to historical principles when interpreting texts. The Collective observes that: 'The works of reader-response criticism that biblical scholars have produced surely must appear strange to secular literary critics because of the predominance of historical concerns.'<sup>236</sup> We have already alluded to a trend in biblical studies to use Iser's work as a model for reader-centred studies; the Collective sees much of the resulting activity as the consequence of a marriage between Iser's ideas and historical criticism.<sup>237</sup> Such an admixture simultaneously tries to give some autonomy to the reader while she or he discovers historical meaning in the text.<sup>238</sup> On the one hand, readers bring their own assumptions to a work, on the other, they presuppose 'the efficacy of the biblical text to guide them to historically verifiable knowledge.'<sup>239</sup> If we are to use a form of reader-response criticism that reflects present reading agendas, we must disengage the text from this quest to reconstruct original settings. On this point, Stanley E. Porter has said: 'If the historical question as traditionally posed in Biblical studies is not bracketed, if only temporarily, reader-response criticism will never have a genuine opportunity to contribute to New Testament studies, but will be reader-response criticism virtually in name only.'<sup>240</sup>

Ironically, it is Iser who provides the opportunity for biblical critics to effect just such a bracketing of the historical question. In his essay 'The Art of Failure: The Stifled Laugh in Beckett's Theater,' Iser writes of the 'unmask[ing] [of] the true nature

---

<sup>235</sup> Bible and Culture Collective, *Postmodern Bible* - 'Reader-Response Criticism,' pp. 41 - 42.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 39 - 44.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>240</sup> S.E. Porter, 'Why Hasn't Reader-Response Criticism Caught on in New Testament Studies?' *Journal of Literature and Theology* 4 (1990): 285.

of meaning, which is nothing but a substitute for reality.'<sup>241</sup> Taking this statement to include the meaning produced by historians the Bible and Culture Collective reassures us that Iser does not necessarily mean, of course, that nothing happened in the past; he only means that one's access to what happened [emerges] through language and through narrative constructs written by historians themselves.'<sup>242</sup> They emphasise that Iser's statement has significance for biblical critics in that it implies that the act of '*writing about* historical events is like writing a fictional account.'<sup>243</sup> Iser is more explicit in another essay, 'Representation: A Performative Act.' He says:

Thus in philosophical discourse - particularly that of the empiricists - at one moment fiction is being unmasked as an invention, and the next it is being elevated to the status of a necessity. Small wonder that it turned into a burden for epistemology, which could not come to grips with the dual nature of the fact that make-believe is indispensable for organising that which appears to be given...What distinguishes fiction in philosophical discourse from fiction in literary discourse is the fact that in the former it remains veiled whereas in the latter it discloses its own fictional nature.<sup>244</sup>

For the Collective, this has the implication that biblical critics 'cannot know the past on its own terms but only through their narrative constructs.'<sup>245</sup>

This unveiling of the 'fictional nature' of philosophical discourse by Iser demonstrates a poststructuralist element in his theory that many biblical reader-response critics seem to ignore. Following Hayden White in a correlative exposure of the assumptions of historiography, the Collective writes: 'What they have felt obliged to ignore or repress is the unsettling possibility that "the historical milieux," which really "exist" for historians, are themselves products of their own "fictive capability."<sup>246</sup> We may not accede entirely to the idea expressed in Voltaire with which we began this

---

<sup>241</sup> Iser, *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology*, (Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press, 1989), 'The Art of Failure: The Stifled Laugh in Beckett's Theater,' p. 179.

<sup>242</sup> Bible and Culture Collective, *Postmodern Bible - 'Reader-Response Criticism'*, p. 50.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>244</sup> Iser, *Prospecting*, 'Representation: a Performative Act,' pp. 240 - 241.

<sup>245</sup> Bible and Culture Collective, *Postmodern Bible - 'Reader-Response Criticism'*, pp. 50 - 51.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49. See H. White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 89.

chapter, that all our ancient history has the status of accepted fiction; yet, I think it is important to acknowledge that the work of biblical critics and historians alike can only account for past events by reference to their own reading strategies - strategies, moreover, that have both defined the relevant data and predetermined its interpretation.<sup>247</sup>

To say that readers cannot know the past on its own terms but only through their narrative constructs is to involve *all* readers in an act of construction. Iser says that a text represents a 'recodification of social and historical norms.' This recodification 'has a double function.' It enables: i) contemporary readers 'to see what they cannot normally see in the ordinary process of day-to-day living'; and, ii) 'subsequent generations of readers...to grasp a reality that was never their own.'<sup>248</sup> Iser fails to explore the implications of this observation. Characteristically, Fish presses the issue to a further point:

Iser avoids the hard choice...between historical and ahistorical interpretation. The readers contemporary to an author are in no more a privileged position than the readers of later generations; for both sets of readers are provoked to an act of construction rather than an act of retrieval; and since the blue-print for construction is significantly incomplete - it displays gaps and blanks and indeterminacies - no instance of construction is more accurate, in the sense of being truer to an historically embodied meaning, than any other. Even the first reader of a work is called upon to complete the connections left unspecified in the text according to his "individual disposition."<sup>249</sup>

Hence, we might say that readers of 1 John - whether at the turn of the first century of the Christian era, or in the eighteenth century, or at the end of the twentieth century - stand in equal relation to that text, in that all 'create' it through their own acts of construction born out of their own reading strategies.

If we now turn to the primary exhibition of the relevant 'perfectionist' extracts from 1 John, we may begin to discern how a form of reader-response - a form disengaged from the notion of objective historical reconstruction - might operate within

---

<sup>247</sup> Bible and Culture Collective, *Postmodern Bible* - 'Reader-Response Criticism,' p. 49.

<sup>248</sup> Iser, *Act of Reading*, p. 74.

<sup>249</sup> Fish, 'Why No One's Afraid of Wolfgang Iser,' p. 4.

the confines of our study. In the first chapter we find a dual declaration: a) 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us' (ἐὰν εἴπωμεν ὅτι ἁμαρτίαν οὐκ ἔχομεν, ἑαυτοὺς πλανῶμεν καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν ἡμῖν 1: 8); and, b) 'If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us' (ἐὰν εἴπωμεν ὅτι οὐχ ἡμαρτήκαμεν ψεύστην ποιοῦμεν αὐτὸν καὶ ὁ λόγος αὐτοῦ οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν ἡμῖν 1: 10). I would infer from these verses that denial of sin represents both self-deception and fundamental dishonesty. Accompanying these faults is a tacit accusation that God is guilty of equivocation, and this proves that 'his word is not in' those who deny their sinful acts. The underlying implication, I deduce, is that sin is an inherent flaw of humanity - a flaw surely shared by Johannine Christians. Occurring as it does during the opening phase, one might suppose that this declaration might form the infrastructure of the entire composition. However, when we reach the third chapter we find another biform assertion: a) 'No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him' (πᾶς ὁ ἐν αὐτῷ μένων οὐχ ἁμαρτάνει· πᾶς ὁ ἁμαρτάνων οὐχ ἑώρακεν αὐτὸν οὐδὲ ἔγνωκεν 3: 6); and, b) 'Those who have been born of God do not sin, because God's seed abides in them; they cannot sin, because they have been born of God' (Πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἁμαρτίαν οὐ ποιεῖ, ὅτι σπέρμα αὐτοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ μένει καὶ οὐ δύναται ἁμαρτάνειν ὅτι ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ γεγέννηται 3: 9). My understanding of these verses is that sin has no presence in the lives of the believers. Indeed, if someone commits sin it indicates that no association has ever existed between that person and God. The state of 'having been born of God' is one in which the individual does not sin. To sin is an impossibility because of the presence of 'God's seed' within him.<sup>250</sup>

Historical-critical scholars accept that there is an apparent contradiction between these two assertions. Kysar's comment typifies those of other critics when he states that: 'a serious contradiction arises within the treatment of sin in [1 John]. The author

---

<sup>250</sup> I acknowledge that it is not possible fully to isolate these verses from others within 1 John. We might say that several verses within the work repeat similar ideas, or link those ideas in some way. For instance we could also incorporate the following: 1: 6; 1: 7; 1: 9; 3: 8; 5: 18. During our study I will deliberately refer to such verses also. The exhibition of verses 1: 8, 10 and 3: 6, 9 simply help us to view most clearly the perceived hermeneutical problem.

claims, on the one hand, that the Christian is guilty of sin...On the other hand, there is the absolute assertion that the Christian does not sin.' He adds: 'This contradiction is resolved by interpreters in a number of different ways.'<sup>251</sup> It is the interpreters' resolutions of the contradiction that must absorb our attention in this thesis - how readers have made meaning of these verses within their set of particular reading conventions.<sup>252</sup> If we briefly reassemble the foundations of their respective theories (using the context of the verses in question), we may signal how we intend to use Iser's ideas as a mirror to reflect Fish's, and so concentrate our focus on the ways people have created the text.

I suggest that an Iserian approach would treat the two dual declarations, 1: 8, 10 and 3: 6, 9, as the definable points of instruction (or 'textual segments'). These verses are among the 'stars' in this biblical text that remain 'fixed.' Iser's system allows a simultaneous acknowledgement of a certain (limited) indeterminacy resulting from the reader's role ('the lines that join them are variable'). Thus, we would discover his explanation of why interpreters resolve the contradiction in a number of different ways.<sup>253</sup> '[T]he structure of the text allows for different ways of fulfillment.'<sup>254</sup> His admission that all judgement on a text has its basis in 'private' comprehension has the accompanying emphasis that this comprehension is not 'arbitrary' because it is 'guided' by the text.<sup>255</sup> Here we see the inception of the idea of 'dyadic interaction' between text and reader so favoured by biblical reader-response critics. Previously we have discovered that literary texts are not entirely explicit and contain 'blanks,' 'gaps,' 'places [or 'spots'] of indeterminacy' and 'vacancies.'<sup>256</sup> The definable points of instruction, 1: 8, 10 and 3: 6, 9, appear in our text without clear connections, say scholars - consequently the reader discovers a 'blank' between them that she or he must

---

<sup>251</sup> Kysar, 'Epistles of John,' *ABD* 3; G3; 910; cf. Rensberger, *1 John 2 John 3 John*, pp. 90 - 91; Edwards, *Johannine Epistles*, pp. 98 - 99; Lieu, *Theology of the Johannine Epistles*, pp. 64 - 65; Smalley, *1,2,3 John*, p. 159; R.E. Brown, *Epistles of John*, pp. 412 - 413.

<sup>252</sup> Bible and Culture Collective, *Postmodern Bible* - 'Reader-Response Criticism,' p. 53.

<sup>253</sup> See note 29.

<sup>254</sup> See note 30.

<sup>255</sup> See note 31.

<sup>256</sup> See note 36.



fill.<sup>257</sup> It is this hiatus that prompts the reader to seek 'coherence' (and to construct, dismantle, and reconstruct 'Gestalts' - or the various reconstructions of the historical situation that may explain the contradiction). The blank or gap represents 'the fundamental asymmetry between text and reader, that [leads to] communication in the reading process.'<sup>258</sup>

Conversely, a Fishian posture regarding 1 John would emphasise that all perception of it is at once mediated and conventional.<sup>259</sup> Fish would posit readers with contrasting presuppositions, and this would have the effect of irreparably blurring the supposedly hard lines of Iser's theory. Thus, he would claim that the 'textual signs' in the 'epistle' do not announce their shape but appear in a variety of shapes according to the differing expectations and assumptions of the various readers. He would argue that the 'blank' is not built into the text, but appears as a consequence of particular interpretive strategies - including the search for coherence. So, there is no distinction between what the text gives and what the reader supplies; she or he supplies *everything*. To reverse Iser's image, no stars remain fixed in the text of 1 John - they are just as variable as the lines that join them.<sup>260</sup> Rather than critics explaining the contradiction by studying the text, and thereby also accumulating evidence to reconstruct the historical setting, it is the critics' interpretive strategies that write that text;<sup>261</sup> we might say that the interpretive community represented by an association of biblical critics creates another community, the 'Johannine community,' along with its problems - which the critics then go on to 'resolve.' Fish would declare that biblical scholars share interpretive strategies that constitute the properties of 1 John and assign its intentions.

As I have advanced towards constructing a form of reader-response to apply to 1 John, I have determined to engage seriously Fish's ideas. So that I may press this

---

<sup>257</sup> See note 37.

<sup>258</sup> See note 38.

<sup>259</sup> See note 68.

<sup>260</sup> See note 83.

<sup>261</sup> See note 121.

engagement to a conclusion, however, I must defend Fish against the charges noted earlier: that he lacks political awareness, that his communities are politically and ethically simplistic. Additionally, I intend to defend him against a further accusation made by the Bible and Culture Collective (following M.L. Pratt). The essence of this charge is that his model, along with Iser's, would: 'efface the insights offered by ideological critics that every reading is a contextualised reading, and that different readers of biblical texts (whether they be male or female, white, black, Latino, Asian, and so on) stand in asymmetrical relationships concerning power and in their ability to speak about the text *even within the same general interpretive community*.'<sup>262</sup> I propose that Fish does not efface such insights, but contemplates their significance from within his system. Therefore, to demonstrate this I now return to the essay 'Don't know Much About the Middle Ages: Posner on Law and Literature,' as its conclusion provides the basis for my brief defence of Fish's political awareness.

Fish says in the essay that it is historical factors that constitute our preferences for certain institutional arrangements in relation to various contending political and social agendas. When we defend or reiterate our preferences (and Posner's article, Fish says, is just such a defence and reiteration) we do not do so on behalf of some pellucid truth, but on behalf of 'interests whose universality is always contestable.'<sup>263</sup> Taking up his reasoning at this point, we find that Fish goes on to question Posner's interests. He seeks to reveal the agenda behind the judge's disquisition. We discover that Posner desires to remove all obstacles to secure the authority of economics in the legal academy.<sup>264</sup> Though he does not explicitly state his purpose, we find that it is to give legitimate status to the interpretive strategies authorised by economics. Posner attributes a powerlessness to literary interpretation, at least in comparison to legal interpretation, and this is a disguised move in a power game. If he can halt, and even

---

<sup>262</sup> Bible and Culture Collective, *Postmodern Bible - 'Reader-Response Criticism'*, p. 58.  
See M.L. Pratt, 'Linguistic Utopias' in Nigel Fabb et al., (eds.), *The Linguistics of Writing: Arguments Between Language and Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1987), pp. 48 - 66.

<sup>263</sup> Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, 'Don't Know Much About the Middle Ages: Posner on Law and Literature,' pp. 302 - 305.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 305 - 308.

reverse, the increasing incursions of literary studies into the legal profession achieved by members of the Critical Legal Studies Movement, the judge can then freely promote the doctrines of another pressure group known as Law and Economics.<sup>265</sup> Fish claims that Posner:

detects in the perspectives offered by literary and deconstructive theory a danger to the program with which he is so closely associated. It is, after all, a thesis of deconstructive theory that forms of representation, of which any system of currency is an instance, are always agencies of power and manipulation and never simply stand in for natural forces like the market. Perhaps the trouble with literary studies is not that they are irrelevant but that, at least potentially, they are too relevant.<sup>266</sup>

So, Posner writes in a manner that suppresses the significant developments in academic law and legal interpretation that have resulted from the liaison between forensic and literary schools. Still, this liaison has seen 'the former [school] borrowing and appropriating far more than the latter, and to considerable effect.'<sup>267</sup>

Fish believes that neoconservative agendas lie behind Posner's work. Tracing connections through the judge's asides and footnotes, Fish uncovers a phalanx of right-wing activists: economists, law school professors, literalists and formalists with university affiliations, and government advisors (of the Bush administration). Such forces in the late 1980s were mounting a concerted attack on the humanities - particularly literary interpretivism - through the press and even at congressional level. Posner's essay is, for Fish, 'part and parcel of a wholesale effort to restructure several key American institutions in accordance with a very definite, and some would say extreme, political and moral vision.'<sup>268</sup> Fish declares that 'it is incumbent upon those who find his views not only wrong, but supportive of wrong views now being put forward in other (sometimes high) places, to challenge them in the strongest terms possible.'<sup>269</sup>

---

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 308 - 309.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 309.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 307.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 310.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 311.

Dealing as he does with issues of power, I propose that in the conclusion of his essay we see a demonstration of Fish's political awareness. Not only do we find in it descriptions of arguments among sub-groups within the legal guild, those who embrace the adoption of literary interpretivism and those who oppose it, but also a report of two communities in contention - the legal and the literary. Fish is acutely conscious throughout his observation of the debates that interpretation is political - it is not value-free. Furthermore, I suggest that the piece reveals that within his theory there is no sense that interpretive communities are ideologically sterile. As we would expect, the interpretive strategies that influence the judge, objectivism and literalism, receive full exposure from Fish. However, he also uncovers the right-wing ideology that lies behind Posner's essay, and explains how deconstructive theory is a threat to its programme.

By the early 1990s Fish had published a series of essays that addressed his theory of interpretation to texts dealing with 'flesh-and-blood' political and ethical questions such as: feminism; racism; Afrocentrism; multiculturalism; lesbian and gay rights; political correctness; and discrimination.<sup>270</sup> In these pieces Fish uses this list of issues as stimuli to explore the interpretation of words and phrases like 'reason,' 'merit,' 'fairness,' 'neutrality,' 'free speech,' 'the marketplace of ideas,' 'color blind,' 'level playing field,' and 'tolerance.'<sup>271</sup> The moral drawn throughout is that individual readers do indeed stand in asymmetrical relationships concerning power and in their ability to speak about texts:

While notions like "merit" and "fairness" are always presented as if their meanings were perspicuous to anyone no matter what his or her political affiliation, educational experience, ethnic tradition, gender, class, institutional history, etc., in fact "merit" and "fairness" (and other related terms) will have different meanings in relation to different assumptions and background conditions. That something is fair or meritorious is not determined above the fray but within the fray; the words do not mark out an area quarantined from the pull of contending partisan agendas; they are among the prizes that are claimed when one political agenda is so firmly established that its vision of the way things

---

<sup>270</sup> Fish, *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech and it's a Good Thing, Too* (New York: The Oxford University Press, 1994). These issues appear throughout Part 1 of the book.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, Preface p. viii and 'Introduction: That's Not Fair,' p. 16.

should be is normative and can go without saying. At such moments of political victory (which can last a moment or a millennium), the agent who lives entirely within the reigning paradigm will look at a practice and say..."That's not fair," in perfect confidence that his judgement will be as obvious to his hearers as it is to him.<sup>272</sup>

That this asymmetrical relationship exists even within the same *general* interpretive community is a notion, I submit, that Fish's system would encompass. He is careful to explain that an interpretive community is not monolithic in nature.<sup>273</sup> This is so because its members may simultaneously belong to several communities.<sup>274</sup> Members of a biblical interpretive community, therefore, may also belong to other communities; and this multiple membership, I suggest, signifies the delicate balance of many factors that affects our perception and stimulates our creation of the text. We have just referred to Fish's opinion that a dominant interpretation arises from a struggle among differing agendas. There should exist no doubt as to the complexity of this process. The factors shaping perception converge on us from many directions. Hence, interpretive communities, as we saw in chapter one, section 4, operate in a state of flux. A complex network of influences operates within and without any discipline. We should not make the mistake Fish says, of 'accepting at face value the boundaries that separate disciplines and render their respective activities discrete from one another. In fact, neither disciplines nor the activities they enable are discrete; they exist in networks of affiliation and reciprocity.' The process of change within interpretive communities that we discussed earlier continues as 'a position taken in one corner of the institutional world is authorized by and authorizes in its turn positions of a similar kind taken elsewhere. Given the structural interdependence between disciplines, the effects of a piece of writing will always extend to contexts apparently far removed from the ones explicitly addressed.'<sup>275</sup>

---

<sup>272</sup> Fish, *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech and it's a Good Thing, Too*, 'Introduction: That's Not Fair,' p. 4.

<sup>273</sup> Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, 'Change,' p. 142.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144. See also note 123.

<sup>275</sup> Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, 'Don't Know Much About the Middle Ages: Posner on Law and Literature,' p. 310.

Moving now towards the end of chapter two, I believe that Fish's remarks on politics and power aid us in three ways: a) they enlighten us regarding the ideological influences behind interpretation; b) they point to the existence of networks of affiliation and reciprocity between disciplines; and, c) they guide us towards a self-reflectiveness in the appropriation of reader-response. As I said in my introduction in chapter one, we must openly declare that many factors have the potential to shape how we read.

Hanging in Gallery 10 of the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art in Edinburgh is a retouched colour photograph mounted on aluminium plate. Featured in the photograph are several people seated at a dinner party. The table, laden with food and drink, has an empty chair drawn away from it. Viewing the picture, one questions why the assembled company look towards an open door. Ger Van Elk, the artist responsible for the picture, created it as part of a series under the collective title, 'The Missing Persons,' and the one I refer to is 'Lunch I 1976.' Van Elk found inspiration for his series in images from totalitarian regimes. Reading the gallery's accompanying explanation we learn that a member of a community who formerly enjoyed acceptance from her or his peers, has now fallen into disfavour. Tellingly, we see in the picture the aftermath of this person's removal.<sup>276</sup> In linking Fish's name with this work in the heading of this section, I wished to accent his awareness that interpretations, and therefore interpreters, can disappear from view as a result of rival understandings gaining ascendancy. Such evanescence, he understands, occurs in malignant and benign circumstances alike. The First Epistle of John, we might say, has its own portrayal of 'missing persons' - the disapproval of, and departure of the so-called 'secessionists': 'They went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But by going out they made it plain that none of them belongs to us' (ἐξ ἡμῶν ἐξηλθον ἀλλ' οὐκ ἦσαν ἐξ ἡμῶν· εἰ γὰρ ἐξ ἡμῶν ἦσαν, μεμενήκεισαν ἄν μεθ' ἡμῶν· ἀλλ' ἵνα φανερωθῶσιν ὅτι

---

<sup>276</sup> No publication of Ger Van Elk's work exists yet. This description and explanation arises from my own visit to the gallery. However, during a conversation with the gallery's librarian I discovered an exhibition catalogue featuring his photographs: Venice Biennale, published by the Visual Arts Office for Abroad, Amsterdam, June 1980.

οὐκ εἰσὶν πάντες ἐξ ἡμῶν. 2: 19). According to the influential reconstruction undertaken by John Bogart, their departure centred on the question of perfectionism.<sup>277</sup> Because of the same issue, we learn, large numbers became 'missing persons' from Wesley's communities in the eighteenth century.<sup>278</sup> Concluding this chapter, I contend that I may use a form of reader-response criticism to discover how people have read - or, as we may say, created - a perfectionist text that accounts for these disappearances. Therefore, I propose now to take forward our investigations in five ways. First, I want to illustrate Wesley's reading of the verses we have outlined in chapters 1 and 3 of 1 John, along with his accompanying comments on Christian perfection and interpretation. Secondly, I wish to display the commentaries that the Methodist leader used to formulate his own understanding of the verses, and to look at the additional remarks on interpretation made by these exegetes. Thirdly, during my exhibition of the solutions offered by Wesley and his associates, I propose to employ our Fishian critical perspective to conduct an appraisal of their explication of the problem. In the fourth place, I plan to provide a concise excursus regarding a secular instance of perfectionism in the eighteenth century that might serve to set Wesley's reading in an interpretive context. Lastly, I intend to investigate the extant academic conventions regarding the issue using six monographs that have appeared in the last thirty years.

---

<sup>277</sup> John Bogart, *Orthodox and Heretical Perfectionism in the Johannine Community as Evident in the First Epistle of John* (Missoula, MT: Scholar's Press), pp. 132 and 140.

<sup>278</sup> Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, pp. 333 - 342.

### CHAPTER 3

#### THE EXPLICATION OF THE VERSES AND CHRISTIAN PERFECTION BY WESLEY AND AN APPRAISAL OF THAT EXPLICATION FROM A FISHIAN PERSPECTIVE.

'[B]e sure that you go to the author to get at *his* meaning, not to find yours...the metal you are in search of being the author's mind or meaning, his words are as the rock which you have to crush and smelt in order to get at it.'<sup>279</sup>

#### 3. 1. 'Christian Perfection'

London Bridge was a structure that had progressively borne houses, shops, and even a chapel since its completion in 1209.<sup>280</sup> A person walking along its stretch in 1741 eventually came upon the 'Looking Glass and Bible' - a book shop owned by W. Strahan. Here, and at the 'Foundery' (sic) near Upper Moorfields in the East of the city, the browser might find the newly published '*Christian Perfection: A Sermon, Preached by John Wesley, M.A. Fellow of Lincoln-College, Oxford.*' Sixpence was the price of what would prove to be John Wesley's principal comment on our verses in chapters 1 and 3 of 1 John.<sup>281</sup>

Philippians chapter 3 verse 12 appears at the head of the sermon in the Authorised Version (AV): 'Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect.' Unexpectedly, Wesley uses the verse merely as a proem in this explanation and defence of his assertion that perfection is attainable in this life.<sup>282</sup> Initially one would think that the sermon should feature an exegesis of the Pauline epistle and the 'seeming contradiction' that he notes between this verse and Philippians 3: 15 - 'Let us

---

<sup>279</sup> J. Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies* (London: George Allen, 1904), I . 'Of King's Treasuries,' sections 13 (2) and 14, pp. 18 - 19.

<sup>280</sup> P.W. Goetz (ed.), *The New Encyclopædia Britannica* (14th ed.; Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 1985), Volume 23: 'London,' p. 292.

<sup>281</sup> I have reconstructed these publication details from the facsimile of the sermon frontispiece in *Sermons* 2.II, facing p. 97.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*, Sermon 40, §1, p. 99.



as many as be perfect, be thus minded.' However, the Methodist leader<sup>283</sup> instead turns to 1 John as his prototype of 'the counsel of God.' Furthermore, he goes on to discuss the enigma that concerns us. Studying this sermon in some detail will serve to reveal his interpretation of our verses, but will also introduce us to an understanding of the related Wesleyan nuances of Christian perfection. In my introduction, I stated that Wesley's main formulation of the doctrine was the disquisition, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, first published in 1767. While this statement remains true for the doctrine in its entirety, we find in his sermon 'Christian Perfection' the anterior, and indeed only, exhibition of the doctrine that offers Wesley's explicit solution to the Johannine discrepancy. His 'Plain Account' merely reproduces the sermon (though with some comments that we will draw on for a concluding observation concerning Wesley's form of perfectionism). Five further works - four sermons and a commentary - also address the interpretive issue, albeit indirectly, and make interesting supplementary remarks on Christian perfection, so these also will prove valuable to our study. When I have examined this core of composition I will introduce and scrutinise the works of the Methodist leader's favoured annotators. As we move forward thus, I will attempt to highlight and assess significant aspects of each of the commentators' interpretive manoeuvres and assumptions from our theoretical perspective.

Wesley begins his 1741 sermon by showing 'First in what sense Christians are *not*, and Secondly, in what sense they *are* perfect.' 'Experience and Scripture' apparently teach us that believers 'are not *so* perfect as to be free' from: i) ignorance; ii) error (in the sense of a 'mistaken' understanding 'in things unessential to salvation,' for Christians 'do not mistake as to the things essential to salvation'); iii) bodily infirmities and those infirmities 'which are not of a moral nature' (such as 'slowness of understanding' as opposed to 'uncleanness'); iv) temptation.<sup>284</sup> Wesley explains that, contrary to what 'some men seem to have imagined,' Christian perfection does not

---

<sup>283</sup> Throughout his life Wesley remained within the Anglican Communion and his 'class meetings' operated with the permission of its bishops. I have used the titles 'Methodist leader' or 'Methodist' for the sake of our discussion to differentiate Wesley's position from that of his Anglican critics.

<sup>284</sup> *Sermons* 2.II.40, §2; I.1 - I.8, pp. 100 - 104.

exempt us from this four-fold fragility - indeed the term is merely synonymous with the term 'holiness.' Those who are perfect are holy, and those who are holy are 'in the Scripture sense' perfect. Yet we may not conclude that there is 'any absolute perfection on earth.' There is no state of perfection in this life that 'does not admit of a continual increase...[s]o that how much soever any man hath attained, or in how high a degree soever he is perfect, he hath still need to "grow in grace," and daily to advance in the knowledge and love of God his Saviour.'<sup>285</sup> Thus, we discover that Christian perfection does not preclude the forms of fragility we have listed. Furthermore, it is not an ultimate zenith beyond which there is no further ascension; it is rather a state of continual mounting to higher levels of holiness.

Wesley continues: 'In what sense then are Christians perfect?' He suggests that as in natural life there are three stages in Christian experience. Utilising the designations of 1 John 2: 12 - 14, those of 'children,' 'young men,' and 'fathers,' the preacher discusses the attainments of people at each level. Other references from the New Testament also come into play at this point.<sup>286</sup> 'Children' have received forgiveness of sins, have been 'justified freely,' and enjoy peace with God. 'Young men' have overcome the 'wicked one,' are strong, and have the word of God abiding within them. Furthermore, they have 'quenched the fiery darts' of diabolic doubt and fear, and now enjoy the divine witness to forgiven sins as an abiding assurance. 'Fathers' know 'him that is from the beginning' - in their 'inmost soul' they have an intimate knowledge of the Trinity. Those at this third stage 'are perfect men,' says Wesley, 'being grown up to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.'<sup>287</sup> The believers belonging to the latter echelon represent a state of spiritual maturity, and

---

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*, I.9, pp. 104 - 105.

<sup>286</sup> In this section of the sermon these include: a) Romans 3: 24; b) Romans 5: 1; c) Romans 6: 1, 2, 5 - 7, 11, 14, 15, 18; d) Ephesians 4: 13; e) Ephesians 6: 16; and, f) 1 Peter 4: 1 - 2. Wesley rarely supplied book, chapter and verse in his sermons. He seemed to assume that his audience knew the Bible well enough to recognise his allusions. Because of his remarkable familiarity with the Scriptures 'even his natural speech was biblical.' See *Sermons* I.I, Introduction V., 'Wesley and His Sources,' pp. 69 - 70.

<sup>287</sup> *Sermons* 2.II.40, II.1, p. 105. As we will see later, Wesley (who was 38 when he wrote this sermon) does not necessarily link chronological age with spiritual attainment. God may suddenly grant freedom from sin at any stage of the natural lifetime.

'these only are properly Christians.'<sup>288</sup> However, even 'babes in Christ,' as people who are born of God, 'are in such a sense perfect...[so as] not to commit sin.' They do not continue in sin, serve it, or live any longer within its domain; united with Christ in his crucifixion and death their old life is at an end; not under law but under grace, they live to God and now experience freedom from sin; moreover, they now serve righteousness. According to the preacher, even the most cautious interpretation of the Johannine, Pauline and Petrine witness leads to a conclusion that all real Christians possess a freedom, at the very least, from outward sin - from any outward transgression of the law. The will of God is now the Christian's central concern.<sup>289</sup>

At this point, Wesley begins to examine 1 John 3: 9 and its attendant verses as the 'most express' of the biblical testimony to Christian perfection. From the beginning of his exegesis we see that for the Methodist there is the need to resist a tendency to modify the verse. Evidently, some (unnamed) ministers had glossed it in this way: the one who is born of God 'sinneth not *wilfully*; or he doth not commit sin *habitually*; or, *not as other men do*; or, *not as he did before*.'<sup>290</sup> A faithful person does not sin with the liberty of her or his former life, but nonetheless remains subject to the power of sin. It is not St. John who makes such qualifications, counters Wesley. No explanations of this kind appear 'in any part of his writings whatsoever.' Therefore it is incumbent upon the interpreters who insert these explanations to prove them from the Word of God.<sup>291</sup> The preacher records the evidence the annotators bring to support their contention. First, that many of the pious biblical figures committed sin: Abraham; Moses; David; Solomon; Peter; and, Paul. Second, that there are assertions in Scripture that expressly declare that the virtuous remain subject to sin: 1 Kings 8: 46;

---

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*, II.2, p. 105. Outler makes the following comment: 'Taken literally, this would mean that none but the perfect are "proper Christians." In 1750 and thereafter, Wesley altered this to read, "these only are perfect Christians."' See his note 57, p. 105.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*, II.2 - II.4, pp. 105 - 106.

<sup>290</sup> See also *Sermons* 1.I.18, 'The Marks of the New Birth,' pp. 420 - 421; here Wesley briefly restates in 1748 his arguments of 7 years before. Outler cites the work by James Hervey, *Eleven Letters...to...John Wesley* (1765) as a later example of this gloss. On page 128 of that work Hervey comments: 'True, he [the believer described in 1 John 5: 18] sinneth not habitually. It is not his customary practice.' *Sermons* 1.I.18, 'The Marks of the New Birth,' p. 420, note 24.

<sup>291</sup> *Sermons* 2.II.40, II.5 - II.6, pp. 106 - 107.

Ecclesiastes 7: 20; 2 Corinthians 12: 7 - 10; James 3: 2. During a lengthy rebuttal of this evidence, Wesley acknowledges that the prominent believers in both the Jewish and Christian 'dispensations' did commit sin. However, he rejects the idea that these examples of infraction indicate that Christians of all generations will commit sin as long as they live. 'Without doubt,' he declares, during the period from Adam to Christ people could affirm that 'there was *then* no man that sinned not.' However, the Advent ended this period. For the Methodist leader, the life, death, resurrection, and glorification of Christ had instituted a redemption, adoption, grace, life, and immortality that superseded any benefice obtained from adherence to the Old Testament law: 'So that, whatsoever was the case of those under the law, we may safely affirm with St. John that since the gospel was given, "He that is born of God sinneth not."<sup>292</sup> Even the Apostolic failure in the face of temptation is not a reason for inferring that all Christians must necessarily sin. The sin of Paul in his contention with Barnabas (Acts 15: 36 - 40), and the sin of Peter by his dissimulation at Antioch (Galatians 2: 11 - 14), were both unnecessary as the grace of God was as sufficient for them as it is for later generations. Such is that grace 'that [those who are] tempted to any sin *need* not yield; for no man is tempted above that he is able to bear.' Moreover, it is shamefully poor reasoning from the scriptures by 'the patrons of sin' that upholds their annotation of 1 John. Not one of the verses that they claim as evidence of sin's continuous power over the believer will Wesley admit as being correctly interpreted. The verses cited from Kings, Ecclesiastes, Corinthians, and James, when understood properly, in no way undermine St. John's assertion of Christians' freedom from sin. Though the specific details of the Methodist's exposition of these passages do not concern us, we note that he takes it as an axiom that the authors of Scripture are entirely consistent with each other.<sup>293</sup>

It is here that Wesley faces our hermeneutical problem. He remarks:

---

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*, II.7 - II.10, pp. 107 - 110.

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*, II.7 - II.17, pp. 107 - 115.

But here a fresh difficulty may arise. How shall we reconcile St. John with himself? In one place he declares, "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin [1 John 3: 9]." And again, "We know that he which is born of God sinneth not [1 John 5: 18]." And yet in another he saith, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us [1 John 1: 8]." And again, "If we say that we have not sinned we make him a liar, and his word is not in us [1 John 1: 10]." <sup>294</sup>

As great a difficulty as this initially appears, the problem 'vanishes away,' says Wesley, if we 'observe' certain things about these verses. Several prefatory remarks lay the basis for the exegesis. First, in chapter one of the work it is important to realise that 'the tenth verse fixes the sense of the eighth: "If we say we have no sin" in the former being explained by, "If we say we have not sinned" in the latter verse.' Second, the point under present consideration is not whether we have or have not sinned in times past, it is rather that 'neither of these verses asserts that we *do sin, or commit sin* now.' Third, 1: 9 explains both 1: 8 and 1: 10: 'If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. We could paraphrase St. John's position, Wesley declares, as follows: it is as if he had said,

I have before affirmed, "The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth us from all sin." But let no man say, I need it not; I have no sin to be cleansed from. If we say "that we have no sin", "that we have not sinned", we deceive ourselves, and make God a liar. But if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, not only to forgive our sins, but also to cleanse us from all unrighteousness, that we may go and sin no more. <sup>295</sup>

St. John is therefore 'well consistent with himself' and with other 'holy writers.' This consistency becomes more evident, we learn, when we place all the Apostle's assertions on this matter in a synopsis: a) the blood of Christ cleansing from all sin; b) the need for admission of personal sin; c) the divine readiness to forgive and cleanse past sins, and 'to save us from them for the time to come'; d) the promise of a

---

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*, II.18, p. 115.

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.*, II.119, pp. 115 - 116.

heavenly advocacy (1 John 2: 1) that will render continuance in sin an anomaly. 'Thus far all is clear,' declares Wesley, but in case any doubts remain regarding this 'point of so vast importance,' he informs us that the Apostle's resumption of the subject in the third chapter 'largely explains his own meaning.' However, despite the supposedly self-evident nature of St. John's words, the Methodist inserts a gloss in 3: 7 - "'Little Children", saith he, "let no man deceive you (as though I had given any encouragement to those that continue in sin)"; "he that doth righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous.'" Also, citing verses 8 - 10 from the AV, Wesley reveals his interpretive stance in stark terms. He states:

Here the point, which till then might possibly have admitted of some doubt in weak minds, is purposely settled by the last of the inspired writers, and decided in the clearest manner. In conformity therefore both to the doctrine of St. John, and to the whole tenor of the New Testament, we fix this conclusion: "A Christian is so far perfect as not to commit sin."<sup>296</sup>

This freedom from sin is the privilege of every Christian, even, he reiterates, of those who are 'babes in Christ.' Yet, there are greater heights to climb, and here Wesley embarks on an aside concerning spiritual progress that draws from numerous parts of the New Testament. It is only 'the strong in the Lord,' who 'have overcome the wicked one,' those who 'know him that is from the beginning,' it is only these whom we may regard as perfect in the sense of being free from 'evil or sinful thoughts and evil tempers.' Regarding evil thoughts, it is important to distinguish between a thought concerning sin and a sinful thought. Just as Christ thought of or understood the temptations proffered to him in the wilderness yet 'had...no evil or sinful thought, nor indeed was capable of having any,' so also 'it follows that neither have real Christians; for "everyone that is perfect is as his master [Luke 6: 40]."<sup>297</sup> Therefore,

---

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*, II.20, p. 116.

<sup>297</sup> Note Wesley's use of the Authorised Version (AV) here in its employment of the word 'perfect.' Yet, as we know, the Greek text has *κατηρτισμένος* ('having been fully trained') rather than *τέλειος* ('perfect,' or 'complete'). See *BAGD*, pp. 417 and 809. It is interesting to find that Wesley's own translation of this verse is: 'every one that is perfected shall be as his master.' See John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*, 'Notes on the Gospel According to St. Luke' (1755; repr., London: Epworth, 1976), p. 225.

if he was free from evil or sinful thoughts, so are they likewise. Where would evil thoughts come from in a servant who is 'as his master?' It is out of the heart of man (and Wesley pointedly comments 'if at all') that proceed evil thoughts. Therefore, if the heart is no longer evil, then evil thoughts can no longer proceed from it. A good tree can only produce good fruit. This freedom is the 'happy privilege of real Christians' and we discover testimony to it in various scriptures. Paul wrote of the formidable weaponry used through God to demolish 'strongholds' (2 Corinthians 10: 4 - 5). Their use entails 'casting down imaginations (or "reasonings" rather, for so the word λογισμοὺς signifies: all the reasonings of pride and unbelief against the declarations, promises, or gifts of God).' All haughtiness contrary to the knowledge of God consequently falls, and every thought comes into captivity to the obedience of Christ.<sup>298</sup>

'Evil tempers' likewise no longer imprison the real Christian. The believer's perfective congruence with Christ results in an entirely new disposition, a heartfelt love even for enemies. Christ 'was free from all sinful tempers...So therefore is his disciple, even every real Christian.' Crucified with Christ, her or his evil nature is now 'destroyed,' moreover 'all that is holy, and just, and good' becomes essential through the indwelling of Christ. A 'purification' has occurred that has rid the heart of pride, self-will or desire, and anger (except for that Christ-like ire against sin that has an accompanying grief for the predicament of the sinner). 'Thus,' says Wesley, 'does Jesus save his people from their sins' - from the sins of 'the heart' as well as 'outward' sins, 'from evil thoughts and from evil tempers.'<sup>299</sup>

Returning to his exegesis of 1 John, the preacher continues to resist those who, as he sees it, would modify its perfectionist thrust: 'True,' say some, 'we shall thus be saved from our sins, but not till death; not in this world. But how are we to reconcile this with the express words of St. John? "Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgement: because as he is, so are we *in this world*.'" For

---

<sup>298</sup> *Sermons* 2.II.40, II.21 - II.23, pp. 117 - 118.

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.*, II.24 - II.27, pp. 118 - 119.

Wesley, the Apostle here affirms 'beyond all contradiction' about himself and other living Christians, that 'not only at or after death but "in this world" they are as their Master.' Indeed, the affirmation of 4: 17 appears in the text as if St. John had foreseen the same sort of evasion now perpetrated by the annotators 'and set himself to overturn it from the foundation.' The verses in 1: 5 - 9 prove 'exactly agreeable' to 4: 17 in that the Apostle evidently 'speaks of a deliverance wrought "in this world."' The pure luminescence of God's nature, if consistently revealed by the believers through the transparency of their lives, will result in present fellowship and cleansing. St. John did not say, "'the blood of Christ will cleanse" (at the hour of death, or in the day of judgement) but it "cleanseth (at the time present) us (living Christians) from all sin.'" It is equally evident for Wesley that: i) 'if *any sin* remain we are not cleansed from *all sin*'; and, ii) 'if *any unrighteousness* remain in the soul it is not cleansed from *all unrighteousness*.'<sup>300</sup> One could argue that Wesley's reasoning becomes fragmentary at this point in his effort to enforce his perfectionist agenda. For a sinner to say that the Apostle's words relate to justification only, or solely to cleansing from the guilt of sin, is tantamount to speaking against her or his own soul. This is because thereby: a) the sinner confuses 'what the Apostle clearly distinguishes' as he mentions first the forgiveness of sins, and second the cleansing from all unrighteousness; and, b) it erroneously asserts 'justification by works in the strongest sense possible' - it makes 'all inward as well as outward holiness necessarily previous to justification.' For, reasons Wesley, if the cleansing referred to is merely a cleansing from the guilt of sin, then it follows that there is no cleansing from guilt; that is, the believer does not enjoy justification, unless it is on the condition of 'walking in the light, as he is in the light.' Only one conclusion remains, then, that God saves Christians from all sin and unrighteousness 'in this world'; 'that they are now in such a sense perfect as not to commit sin, and [to have] freed[om] from evil thoughts and evil tempers.'<sup>301</sup>

---

300 *Ibid.*, II.27 - II.28, pp. 119 - 120.

301 *Ibid.*, II.28, p. 120.



Drawing his sermon to a close, the preacher declares that this perfection is the fulfilment of God's word through the 'holy prophets...since the world began.' Alluding to various scriptures,<sup>302</sup> Wesley displays the divine blueprint for Christian holiness: the promise of a circumcision of the heart and soul; the creation of a clean heart and right spirit; the cleansing from filthiness and idols; the gift of a new heart and right spirit; the salvation from all uncleanness and iniquity; the possession of the prophetic word confirmed in the gospel by Christ and his apostles. Accordingly, he reminds his audience of the urgency to appropriate all that God has pledged; they are to cry to God day and night until they experience deliverance 'from the bondage of corruption' and enter the liberty of the sons of God.<sup>303</sup>

### **3. 2. 'Salvation by Faith'**

As I stated earlier, Wesley wrote several other pieces that have some bearing on our subject, and it is to these we turn at this juncture. While my assertion remains true regarding the sermon 'Christian Perfection,' that it is the anterior, and indeed only, exhibition of the doctrine that offers Wesley's explicit solution to the Johannine discrepancy, an earlier sermon contains a brief passage that foreshadows it. Following his noteworthy experience in Aldersgate Street, London, on 24 May 1738, Wesley preached 'Salvation by Faith' at St. Mary's church, Oxford eighteen days later on 11 June.<sup>304</sup> Affirming Ephesians chapter 2 verse 8, 'By grace ye are saved through faith,' the Methodist leader explains his proposition of 'free grace' and the nature of authentic faith and salvation. Amidst a section on the latter, Wesley states:

[A]ll that believe in him, he will save from all their sins: from original and actual, past and present sin, of the flesh and of the spirit. Through faith that is in him they are saved from the guilt and from the power of it...They are also saved from the fear, though not from the possibility, of falling away from the grace of God, and coming short of the great and precious promises...Again, through this faith they are saved from

---

<sup>302</sup> See Luke 1: 70; Deuteronomy 30: 6; Ezekiel 36: 25ff; Psalm 51: 10 (AV); 2 Corinthians 7: 1; Hebrews 4: 1; Philippians 3: 13 - 14; Romans 8: 21.

<sup>303</sup> Sermons 2.II.40, II.29 - II.30, pp. 120 - 121.

<sup>304</sup> Sermons 1.I.1, Introductory Comment, p. 110. Outler records that Wesley had tested the ideas in this sermon on several occasions in and near London during the intervening period.

the power of sin as well as from the guilt of it. So the Apostle declares, 'Ye know that he was manifested to take away our sins, and in him is no sin. Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not.' Again, 'Little children, let no man deceive you ...He that committeth sin is of the devil.' 'Whosoever believeth is born of God.' And, 'Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.' Once more, 'We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not; but he that is begotten of God keepeth himself, and that wicked one toucheth him not.' He that is by faith born of God sinneth not, (1), by any habitual sin, for all habitual sin is sin reigning; but sin cannot reign in any that believeth. Nor, (2), by any wilful sin; for his will, while he abideth in the faith, is utterly set against all sin, and abhorreth it as deadly poison. Nor, (3), by any sinful desire; for he continually desireth the holy and perfect will of God; and any unholy desire he by the grace of God stiflenth in the birth. Nor, (4), doth he sin by infirmities, whether in act, word, or thought; for his infirmities have no concurrence of his will; and without this they are not properly sins. Thus, 'He that is born of God doth not commit sin.' And though he cannot say he *hath not sinned*, yet now '*he sinneth not*'.<sup>305</sup>

Thus we find in this earlier piece similar elements to those found in the 1741 sermon. The bedrock of Wesley's solution we discover in the last line: 'And though he cannot say he *hath not sinned*, yet now "*he sinneth not*".' From this statement we may again deduce that verses eight and ten of chapter one synonymously refer to past sin, but 3: 6 and 9 pertain to the regenerate state of the believer. Furthermore, we also descry from the beginning of the extract the proviso that the Christian retains a frailty that could lead to a 'falling away from the grace of God.' So, on first sight, some might argue that these sermons form a definitive statement of the Methodist leader's interpretation of our verses.

### **3. 3. Wesley's Shifting Emphases**

However, though he does not approach Wesley's writings from any type of reader-response perspective we find that M.R. Fraser cautions us against drawing absolute conclusions about any of Wesley's statements on interpretation. He does so because Wesley often 'shifted' emphases and modified scriptural applications or definitions according to the audience he addressed. Without doubt the Methodist leader

---

<sup>305</sup> *Ibid.*, II.2, 4, 5, 6, pp. 122 - 124.

taught from the foundation of his belief in an 'unquestionably authoritative Scripture [that was the] incunabulum of his doctrine and the canon against which [he measured] every interpretation and experience.' Moreover, he built upon this biblical basis a soteriology that became his 'rule of faith.' After he had studied a scriptural theme 'he rarely deleted any of the constituent elements.' At times though, says Fraser, Wesley 'might consider that some point was more applicable to an advanced stage of the Christian life, but this involved a shift rather than a deletion.' The area most subject to modification was the application of his rule of faith to his audience. He placed accents upon different elements of his practical divinity according to 'the general context and the perceived needs of his hearers.' He realised that: 'Temporary experiential aberrations called for temporary shifts in the balance between the elements of his application.' A 'continual dialectic flowed between the religious experiences he observed in his serious hearers and his application.'<sup>306</sup> Consequently, Fraser declares that:

Wesley modified his application of Scripture whenever he perceived spiritually malformed believers. For this reason, it is almost impossible to place a single definition on any important soteriological term he used; he varied its meaning depending on the pastoral and pedagogical context. For the same reason, it is unwise to use the date of publication alone to determine the maturity of his thought in any particular work.<sup>307</sup>

The matter becomes still more complex when we consider two additional factors. Fraser informs us of the first factor which was that: 'Wesley went through three major stages before 1759 in his developing doctrine of Christian perfection.'<sup>308</sup> These were (in a greatly simplified form): i) a brief period from 1733 to the middle years of the decade when he thought that 'a lifetime of earnest endeavour after holiness preceded justification which most likely occurred near death'; ii) the interval after he

---

<sup>306</sup> M. R. Fraser, 'Strains in the Understandings of Christian Perfection in Early British Methodism' (Ph.D. Thesis, Nashville, Tennessee: Vanderbilt University, 1988, Microfiche Order Number: 8910848), pp. 24 - 25.

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

met the Moravians in October 1735 when he began to believe, under their influence, that 'one could be justified in an instant by faith long before death and that the normal fruit of this experience was happiness and holiness'; iii) the move away from the Moravian influence after the end of 1738, when 'frustrated in his own experience and observant of the experience of others, he came to believe that a [Christian] could become perfect in Christ in a moment after justification and before death.'<sup>309</sup> After reaching this third stage, Fraser says that Wesley:

did not deny the possibility that a person could be renewed in love when justified, he claimed not to know such a person. The typical experience [he discovered after conducting numerous personal interviews] was that of a justified believer seriously seeking Christian perfection for years and, finding it, to continue growth as love excluded sin. While he believed that such an entire sanctification would take place in an instant, his primary emphasis lay on the disciplined spiritual life of which that instant was an integral part.<sup>310</sup>

Evidently, the limited number of works concerning us here emerged from the third stage. Nevertheless, it seems that in the final stage we may detect traces of ideas Wesley had during the first two stages.

Beside these phases in the development of the doctrine, we must also consider the second factor Fraser presents as an impediment to conclusiveness regarding Wesley's interpretative stances. Fraser informs us that the Methodist leader deliberately concealed the extent of his perfectionist beliefs from all but a coterie of sympathisers:

He became quite sensitive to his audiences, so much so that he published different claims about Christian perfection to the populace at large than he did among the inner circle of Methodists. Among the latter group he advocated a more radical understanding of the possibilities of grace.<sup>311</sup>

Furthermore, we learn that:

---

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 75; 27 - 45.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

Certainly, within the [Methodist] community Wesley expressed verbally possibilities of grace seldom mentioned to those on the outside. These possibilities rarely found their way into print; it was probably a common theme of the select societies which were reserved for those close to or professing Christian perfection.<sup>312</sup>

We might say, then, that hidden dynamics were at work behind Wesley's pronouncements on biblical matters - forces that shaped the interpretation of our texts. As we analyse the remaining pieces that deal with them we will be able to discern certain shifts in emphasis that correlate with the considerations raised by Fraser.

### **3. 4. 'The Great Privilege of Those that are Born of God'**

Taking these pieces in chronological order, for his next comment we move forward ten years to 1748. In 'The Great Privilege of those that are Born of God,' the preacher uses 1 John 3: 9 to clarify certain issues surrounding the 'new birth'; whilst this sermon does not address the contradiction directly by referring also to 1: 8 and 10, it nevertheless alludes to it by discussing again the apparent sinfulness of the most reputable of biblical characters. Moreover, it provides a valuable background for our understanding of the Methodist's manner of interpretation.

Those who suppose that 'the being born of God was all one with the being justified; that the new birth and justification were only different expressions denoting the same thing' have misunderstood God's dealings with his people. Wesley can allow that justification and the new birth 'are in point of time inseparable from each other.' However, we must distinguish them as 'things of a widely different nature.' Justification 'changes our outward relation to God,' whereas the new birth changes 'our inmost souls...so that sinners become saints.' The former restores us to the favour of God, and takes away the guilt of sin. The latter restores us to the 'image of God,' and 'tak[es] away the power of sin.'<sup>313</sup> Such a failure to discern or observe the difference there is between justification and the new birth 'has occasioned exceeding

---

<sup>312</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>313</sup> Sermons 1.I.19, §1 - §2, pp. 431 - 432.

great confusion of thought in many who have treated on this subject; particularly when they have attempted to explain this great privilege...to show how "whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin." Therefore, it is necessary for a 'clear' apprehension of St. John's assertion to approach the verse in two stages: a) to consider what is the 'proper meaning' of 'whosoever is born of God'; and, b) to inquire 'in what sense' the Christian 'doth not commit sin.'<sup>314</sup>

Explaining his view of regeneration occupies the preacher for a significant portion of the sermon. Condensing his arguments here, we learn: 'that it implies not barely the being baptised, or any outward change whatsoever; but a vast inward change; a change wrought in the soul by the operation of the Holy Ghost, a change in the whole manner of our existence; for from the moment we are "born of God" we live in quite another manner than we did before; we are, as it were, in another world.'<sup>315</sup> Before new birth a person has no awareness of God, but when born of the Spirit '[h]is whole soul is now sensible of God.' '[H]e has a clear intercourse with the invisible world.' Peace, joy, love and knowledge are now his.<sup>316</sup>

Moving on to consider in what sense the believer does not commit sin, Wesley states that one who has been born of God lives 'by a kind of spiritual re-action.'<sup>317</sup> This is a devout state whereby the believer 'returns the grace he receives in unceasing love, and praise and prayer...' As a person thus 'keepeth himself' [1 John 5: 18, AV] in this condition, he does not commit sin. Furthermore, the preacher declares, 'so long as this "seed remaineth in him he cannot sin" [1 John 3: 9], because he is born of God.' On this occasion the term 'sin' Wesley defines as 'outward sin, according to the plain, common acceptance of the word.' He delineates it as 'an actual, voluntary "transgression of the law"; of the revealed, written law of God; of any commandment

---

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.*, §3 - §4, p. 432.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*, I.1, p. 432.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*, I.8 - I.10, pp. 434 - 435.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.*, II.1, p. 436 and III.2, p. 442. Wesley here coins the word 'reaction' but inserts a hyphen for emphasis. As Outler observes, the Oxford English Dictionary mistakenly cites this pioneer use of the term as appearing in 1771 rather than in this sermon in 1748. See Sermons I.1.19, p. 436, note 26. Cf., C.T. Onions [ed.], *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (2 vols.; 3rd ed. with etymologies revised by G.W.S. Friedrichsen; Oxford: Clarendon and Oxford University Press, 1973), Volume II, p. 1754.

of God acknowledged to be such at the time that it is transgressed.' Those who have experienced the new birth - those who 'abide in faith and love and in the spirit of prayer and thanksgiving' - not only do not, but cannot commit sin. It is plain that so long as the Christian believes in God through Christ, and unreservedly loves him, he 'cannot voluntarily transgress any command of God, either by speaking or acting what he knows God hath forbidden.' The 'seed' that remains in the Christian Wesley establishes as 'that loving, praying, thankful faith'; so long as this faith resides, it 'compels him to refrain from whatsoever he knows to be an abomination in the sight of God.'<sup>318</sup>

Distilling his arguments from 1741, the preacher answers again those who inculcate biblical heroes in an effort to disprove Christian perfection. We may note, however, some additional elements to the earlier sermon. He admits that the sin of these prominent characters is a difficulty that has appeared insuperable to many, and 'has induced them to deny the plain assertion of the Apostle.' How can we reconcile such sin with St. John's words if we take them 'in the obvious literal meaning'?<sup>319</sup> Again emphasising the importance of the believer 'keeping himself,' Wesley stresses that this self-maintenance is entirely achievable through the grace of God. In this condition the Christian remains safe from the touch of the 'evil one.' However, 'if he keepeth not himself, if he abide not in the faith, he may commit sin even as another man.'<sup>320</sup> Therefore, it is easy to understand how any of the faithful might fail in their steadfastness, 'and yet the great truth of God, declared by the Apostle, remain steadfast and unshaken.' The blame lies entirely with the individual: 'He did not keep himself by that grace of God which was sufficient for him.' A 'step by step' declension followed: beginning with 'negative inward sin' characterised by the neglect of the devotional life; continuing with 'positive inward sin' marked by an inclination to wickedness, evil desire or temper; followed by a loss of faith, 'his sight of a pardoning God,' and consequently his love of God; finally, 'being then weak and like another man he was

---

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*, II.1 - II.2, p. 436.

<sup>319</sup> *Ibid.*, II.3, p. 436 and II.6, p. 438.

<sup>320</sup> *Ibid.*, II.7, p. 438.

capable of committing even outward sin.'<sup>321</sup> All the biblical saints who transgressed followed just such 'an unquestionable progress from grace to sin.' Their culpability in no way devalues the veracity of St. John's statement. Thus Wesley deduces that 'it is unquestionably true that he who is born of God, keeping himself, cannot commit sin; and yet if he keepeth not himself he may commit all manner of sin with greediness.' It remains only for the preacher to urge faithfulness upon his audience. The 'man of God' is 'to watch always, that thou mayest always hear the voice of God. Watch that thou pray without ceasing, at all times and in all places pouring out thy heart before him. So shalt thou always believe, and always love, and never commit sin.'<sup>322</sup>

### **3. 5. Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament**

The interpretation of the Johannine verses proposed by the preacher became established Methodist doctrine with the publication in 1755 of his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*. This work provided Methodists with an exegetical tool that contained some original notes by Wesley, but also remarks borrowed from commentaries that he admired (I will list and examine these commentaries in due course). Additionally, Wesley constructed the *Notes* as a revision of the AV New Testament; though he regarded the AV as 'abundantly the best [translation he had] seen,' he took 'the liberty...to make here and there a small alteration' to the text to bring it 'nearer to the original.'<sup>323</sup> From a document dated eight years later we discover the importance of this work. To try to correct acute problems (as he saw them) of doctrinal variance among the preachers he had appointed, Wesley drew up a 'Model Deed' for new chapels in 1763. It declared that the trustees of each chapel must welcome the new preachers provided that they 'preach no other doctrine than that contained in Mr. Wesley's *Notes Upon the New Testament* and the four volumes of *Sermons*.'<sup>324</sup>

---

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*, II.7, pp. 438 - 439.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*, II.8 - III.4, pp. 439 - 443.

<sup>323</sup> John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, Preface pp. 6 and 8.

<sup>324</sup> *Sermons* 1.I, Introduction III, 'The Sermon Corpus,' pp. 41 - 42.



His *Notes* of 1755 are largely staccato observations designed to 'assist serious persons, who have not the advantage of learning, in understanding the New Testament.' They are for 'plain, unlettered men, who understand only their mother-tongue, and yet reverence and love the Word of God, and have a desire to save their souls.' So, Wesley ensured that he 'studiously avoided, not only all curious and critical inquiries, and all use of the learned languages, but all such methods of reasoning and modes of expression as people in common life are unacquainted with.'<sup>325</sup> Consequently, he does not draw attention to the inconsistency in 1 John. Rather he offers his explication for each of the verses taken in isolation.

Looking first at his handling of 1: 8, here is an example of the disconnected style adopted by the Methodist leader: '*If we say - Any child of man, before His blood has cleansed us. We have no sin - To be cleansed from, instead of confessing our sins (verse 9), the truth is not in us - Neither in our mouth nor in our heart.*'<sup>326</sup> Assuming an intention of consistency with the sermon of 1741,<sup>327</sup> we could infer that Wesley interpreted this verse as a censure against those who would not admit having sinned before their conversion. He would deny that it implied an inescapable tendency to sin subsequent to justification and new birth. The comments subjoined to verses 7b and 9b confirm this: '*Cleanseth us from all sin - Both original and actual, taking away all the guilt and all the power.*' [7b]; '*And to cleanse us from all unrighteousness - To purify our souls from every kind and every degree of it*' [9b].<sup>328</sup> For Wesley, the boon of becoming a Christian was an emancipation from sin. Yet, this emancipation could only become effective following a heartfelt confession of the sin committed during the unregenerate period of life.

---

<sup>325</sup> John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, Preface, pp. 5 - 7.

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Notes on the First Epistle of St. John,' p. 904.

<sup>327</sup> *Sermons* 2.II.40, II.19, p. 115 - 116. Wesley always maintained that he had been consistent in his presentation of Christian perfection from the Scriptures. See John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, (1767; repr., Peterborough: Epworth Press, 1952), section 27, p. 108.

<sup>328</sup> John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, 'Notes on the First Epistle of St. John,' p. 904.

The elucidation of chapter 3 reveals a Christ manifested: '*To take away our sins* - To destroy them all, root and branch, and leave none remaining' [3: 5]. Furthermore, as this manifestation had the purpose of destroying the works of the devil, that is 'All sin,' the question remains, 'And will He not perform this in all that trust in Him?' [3:8]. Some of the phraseology of the comment on 3: 9 reappears from the 1741 and 1748 sermons. Provided that 'the divine seed of living faith *abideth*' in the believer, he cannot sin - he remains 'inwardly and universally changed.'<sup>329</sup>

So, we see that though Wesley does not mention the inconsistency he observed in 1741, he nevertheless performs the same act of harmonisation. The sin spoken of in 1: 7 - 10 he effectively consigns to a pre-conversion state, and he then, by using chapter 3, seeks to demonstrate that the faithful believer can go on to enjoy freedom from the guilt and power of sin. Interestingly, however, he remarks concerning 1: 10 that despite the purification of our souls from 'every kind and every degree' of sin, 'still we are to retain, even to our lives' end, a deep sense of our past sins.'<sup>330</sup> He thus urges upon his readers the necessity of humility and repentance. Such an entreaty appears to link with the accent on continuous spiritual ascent that we saw in his work of 1741. Furthermore, we have noted the emphasis on spiritual self-maintenance in the sermon of 1748 - that without it there is a danger of inclination to sin, even following the new birth. By making an abbreviated examination of two further sermons published in 1763 and 1767 we discover the reason for the Methodist leader's introduction of these ideas.

### **3. 6. 'On Sin in Believers'**

Throughout much of his ministry Wesley found himself caught between opposing views of 'sin in believers.' The Lutheran and Calvinist theologians, on one side, stressed that Christians, though justified, continued to be subject to the power of sin - they would enjoy freedom from it in heaven only. The Moravians and some

---

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 910 - 911.

<sup>330</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 905.

Methodist ministers, on the other, took the statement that 'whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin' to its 'antinomian extreme of sinless - even guiltless - perfection, as if the power not to sin meant the extirpation of all "remains of sin"' during a person's lifetime.<sup>331</sup> 'On Sin in Believers,' the 1763 sermon, begins to chart what Wesley regarded as a valid third alternative.<sup>332</sup>

Opening his argument, the preacher poses the question: 'Is there sin in him that is in Christ? Does sin *remain* in one that "believes in him?" Is there any sin in them that are "born of God," or are they wholly delivered from it?' This is a question of great importance to 'every serious Christian' insofar as its resolution 'concerns both his present and eternal happiness.'<sup>333</sup> Alluding to numerous parts of the New Testament, and to the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England,<sup>334</sup> Wesley proposes that believers in Christ 'till they are "strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might," have need to "wrestle with flesh and blood," with an evil nature, as well as "with principalities and powers."' Despite regeneration, Christians continue to suffer from an 'infection of nature,' and this receives further confirmation from the testimony of the 'Greek and Romish Church' and from that of 'every Reformed Church in Europe, of whatever denomination.'<sup>335</sup>

However, some churches 'carry the thing too far...so describing the corruption of heart in a believer as scarce to allow that he has dominion over it, but rather is in bondage thereto...[a]nd by this means they leave hardly any distinction between a believer and an unbeliever.' Conversely, in trying to avoid that 'extreme' many 'well meaning men, particularly those under the direction of the late Count Zinzendorf'<sup>336</sup>

---

<sup>331</sup> Sermons I.I, Introduction to Sermons 13 and 14 'On sin in Believers' and 'The Repentance of Believers,' pp. 314 - 316. See also H.D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast - John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism*, p. 334.

<sup>332</sup> Sermons I.I, Introduction to Sermons 13 and 14 'On Sin in Believers' and 'The Repentance of Believers,' p. 315.

<sup>333</sup> Sermons I.I.13, I.1, p. 317.

<sup>334</sup> See the Book of Common Prayer, 'Articles of Religion,' Article IX *Of Original or Birth-sin* (1662; repr., Glasgow: Collins, 1968), p. 564.

<sup>335</sup> Sermons I.I.13, I.2 - I.4, pp. 317 - 318.

<sup>336</sup> For information regarding Count Ludwig von Zinzendorf and the Moravian Church, see Edward Langton, *History of the Moravian Church* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1956). It seems that the literary sources that record the history of the English Moravians of this period are not currently available. My attempt to gain access to the Moravian archive in London did not

take up a position at the opposite pole in 'affirming that "all true believers are not only saved from the *dominion* of sin but from the *being* of inward as well as outward sin, so that it no longer *remains* in them.'" This results in an opinion 'that even the corruption of nature *is no more* in those who believe in Christ.' Responding to Wesley's challenge to their stance many of the Moravians conceded 'that sin did still remain *in the flesh*, but not *in the heart* of a believer.' Furthermore, once experience had proved to them the 'absurdity' of this notion also, they abandoned it, conceding 'that sin did still *remain*, though not *reign*, in him that is born of God.' Yet, the Methodists who had originally received the tenet from the Moravians '(some directly, some at second or third hand) were not so easily prevailed upon to part with a favourite opinion.' Even when most of them became convinced that it was utterly indefensible a few people, says Wesley, 'could not be persuaded to give it up,' and maintained it to that day.<sup>337</sup>

By sin in this sermon, the preacher understands 'inward sin: any sinful temper, passion or affection; such as pride, self-will, love of the world, in any kind or degree; such as lust, anger, peevishness; any disposition contrary to the mind which was in Christ.'<sup>338</sup> Although he remains convinced that all the parties concerned agree that 'Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin,' he enquires: '[I]s a justified or regenerate man freed from *all* sin as soon as he is justified? Is there then no sin in his heart? Nor ever after, unless he fall from grace?' The state of the justified person is indeed 'inexpressibly great and glorious.' However, Wesley cannot believe that there is no sin in her or his heart. He argues that the whole tenor of the Scriptures runs against this, and adduces many verses to prove his case. This is the 'grand point, that there are two contrary principles in believers - nature and grace, the flesh and the spirit.' The inspired writers continually exhort Christians 'to fight with and conquer

---

succeed as it is currently stored pending potential sale to the John Rylands Library, Manchester. Therefore, we remain reliant upon Wesley's account of their doctrine. See Sermons I.I.14, p. 352, note 134.

<sup>337</sup> Sermons I.I.13, I.4 - I.7, pp. 318 - 319.

<sup>338</sup> *Ibid.*, II.2, p. 320.

[wrong tempers and practices], by the power of the faith...in them.<sup>339</sup> Those who insist 'that there is no sin in believers' are propounding a doctrine that 'is quite new in the church of Christ.' From the inception of Christianity to the eighteenth century no such teaching has appeared, 'never till it was discovered by Count Zinzendorf.'

Wesley is unequivocal: 'it is a new, unscriptural doctrine.'<sup>340</sup>

According to the preacher, Zinzendorf and some of his Methodist colleagues advanced their view by declaring that because the Spirit of God dwells in the Christian that one is consequently 'delivered from the guilt, the power, *or, in one word*, the being of sin.' Yet, they have erroneously coupled these things together as if they were the same; whereas they are separate matters. 'That believers are delivered from the *guilt* and *power* of sin,' Wesley allows. 'That they are delivered from the *being* of it,' he denies.<sup>341</sup> To affirm, as do the acolytes of Zinzendorf, that 'sin cannot in any kind or degree *exist* where it does not *reign*; for *guilt* and *power* are essential properties of sin...[and] [t]herefore, where one of them is, all must be' is contrary to 'all experience, all Scripture, all common sense.' For instance, one might feel resentment for an affront (an emotion Wesley confesses to have 'existed in me a thousand times'). Resentment is a sin, 'ἀνομία, disconformity to the law of love.' The believer might feel it, it might exist within her or him, and yet not *reign*. If 'the resentment...is not yielded to, even for a moment, there is no *guilt* at all, no condemnation from God upon that account.' Consequently, the Methodist leader declares, the sin 'has no *power*: though it "lusteth against the Spirit" [Galatians 5: 17] it cannot prevail. Here, therefore as in ten thousand instances, there is *sin* without either *guilt* or *power*.'<sup>342</sup>

Supposing that sin is *in* us does not imply that 'it has the possession of our strength.' Acknowledging its mere existence in the believer does not imply 'its usurpation of our hearts.' Wesley assures his audience that the usurper has suffered dethronement. Sin '*remains* indeed where [it] once reigned; but remains *in chains*.' It

---

<sup>339</sup> *Ibid.*, II.3 - III.3, pp. 320 - 322.

<sup>340</sup> *Ibid.*, III.9 - III.10, p. 324.

<sup>341</sup> *Ibid.*, IV.4, p. 328.

<sup>342</sup> *Ibid.*, IV.10, pp. 330 - 331.

'in some sense' prosecutes the war against the Christian, but becomes increasingly enfeebled, 'while the believer goes on from strength to strength, conquering and to conquer.'<sup>343</sup> Christians are not slaves to sin, says the preacher, yet 'sin remains (at least for a time) in all that are justified.' Sins such as pride or self-will exist in the believer and unbeliever alike. These failings, however, do not govern the believer. The unregenerate man obeys sin, but the regenerate man does not. 'Flesh is in them both,' we learn, but the Christian differs from his opposite inasmuch as he walks after the Spirit rather than the flesh. Even the sin of unbelief exists in the faithful (principally 'in all babes') in the sense of '*little faith*,' rather than in the sense of '*no faith*' as in the unbeliever.<sup>344</sup>

If we '[u]nderstand the proposition right' the doctrine that sin remains in the believer will not serve to encourage people to sin. God's favour may rest on a man even though he '*feel* [s] sin.' It is when he yields to sin he forfeits that favour - merely '*having sin*' does not contribute to its loss. Wesley remarks: 'Though the flesh in you "lust against the Spirit," you may still be a child of God. But if you "walk after the flesh," you are a child of the devil. Now, this doctrine does not encourage to *obey* sin, but to *resist* it with all our might.'<sup>345</sup>

The preacher leaves his audience with a summation of his teaching. We must see Christians as '*sanctified, yet...only in part*.' In a degree, according to the measure of their faith, they are *spiritual*; yet in a degree they are *carnal*.' The contrary principles working within the justified person make necessary the biblical exhortations to 'watch against the flesh, as well as the world and the devil.' A witness lies within believers that they have 'a will not wholly resigned to the will of God.' They know that they are in Christ and yet find a readiness in their hearts to depart from him, 'a proneness to evil in many instances, and a backwardness to that which is good.' The new doctrine claiming that God frees Christians from the 'remains of sin' is 'attended with the most fatal consequences.' To embrace such a doctrine is to remove 'all watching against our

---

<sup>343</sup> *Ibid.*, IV.11, p. 331.

<sup>344</sup> *Ibid.*, IV.12, pp. 331 - 332.

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.*, IV.13, p. 332.

evil nature.' Moreover, the doctrine 'tears away the shield of weak believers, deprives them of their faith, and so leaves them exposed to all the assaults of the world, the flesh, and the devil.'<sup>346</sup>

### **3. 7. 'The Repentance of Believers'**

Having argued for the continuing existence of sin in believers subsequent to justification Wesley went on in 'The Repentance of Believers' (1767) to emphasise the necessity of acts of repentance throughout a Christian's life. Without doubt, repentance and faith are the 'gate of religion.' However, these acts in a slightly modified sense 'are requisite after we have "believed the gospel"; yea, and in every subsequent stage of our Christian course.' Lacking them we cannot progress spiritually. So, the Methodist leader asks: '[I]n what sense are we to repent and believe, after we are justified?'<sup>347</sup>

A post-justification understanding of repentance moves beyond the initial inward change, the 'change of mind from sin to holiness.' The Methodist declares: 'we now speak of it in a quite different sense, as it is one kind of self-knowledge - the knowing ourselves sinners, yea, guilty, helpless sinners, even though we know we are children of God.'<sup>348</sup> Our first appreciation of redemption, divine love and the kingdom of God may lead to a supposition that we are no longer sinners, 'that all our sins are not only covered but destroyed. As we do not then feel any evil in our hearts, we readily imagine none is there.' This is the very perspective taken by those 'well-meaning men...[who] having persuaded themselves that when they were justified they were [also] entirely sanctified.' Without referring to the Moravians and their associates by name, Wesley portrays their belief that justification brings complete destruction of all sin: absolutely no sin remains in the heart, it is 'altogether clean from that moment.' Again, he acknowledges a shared belief with them in the words of 1 John that 'he that believeth is born of God' [5: 1], and that 'he that is born of God doth not commit sin' [3: 9]. However, he restates that he cannot accept that the Christian does not *feel* sin

---

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid.*, V.1, pp. 332 - 333.

<sup>347</sup> *Sermons* 1.I.14, opening paragraphs §1 - §3, pp. 335 - 336.

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.1, p. 336.

within himself. Wesley's axiom is: 'it does not *reign*, but it does *remain*.' The 'conviction of the sin which *remains* in our heart is one great branch of the repentance' he now speaks of.<sup>349</sup>

A theme of spiritual self-maintenance reappears in the sermon - along with many previously stated proofs of sin in the believer. Additionally, we find statements regarding the utter helplessness of Christians. They have no strength of their own 'to do good or resist evil; no ability to conquer or even withstand the world, the devil, or their own evil nature.' Yet, they have indeed a power to overcome all these enemies, but not one born of their own vigour or from their own nature. It is simply the gift of God. 'Nor,' we learn, 'is [this gift] given all at once, as if they had a stock laid up for many years, but from moment to moment.'<sup>350</sup> Helplessness, thus, takes various forms. Of ourselves we cannot find freedom from 'guiltiness' or 'desert of punishment.' Furthermore, we are unable to remove, either by grace or by our natural powers, any sins of commission or omission. We experimentally know that a predisposition to depart from God remains in our hearts in spite of all our endeavours, even after regeneration.<sup>351</sup>

Wesley issues a challenge to anyone 'not satisfied of this.' Let him make repeated experiments to try to expel 'inbred sin' even 'by the grace he has already received.' The preacher promises that 'the longer [the believer] tries the more deeply will he be convinced of his utter helplessness in all these respects.' He declares that although 'we may *weaken* our enemies day by day, yet we cannot *drive them out*.' It remains true that even by 'all the grace...given at justification we cannot extirpate them.' Attendance on watchfulness and prayer is to no avail - it is '[m]ost sure we cannot.'<sup>352</sup> Significantly, however, at this point Wesley appears to insert a proviso. We cannot eradicate sin 'till it shall please our Lord to speak to our hearts again, to

---

<sup>349</sup> *Ibid.*, I.2, pp. 336 - 337.

<sup>350</sup> *Ibid.*, I.17, p. 345.

<sup>351</sup> *Ibid.*, I.18, p. 345.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*, I.19 - I.20, p. 346.



'speak the second time, "Be clean."<sup>353</sup> It is at the point of this second divine utterance that the deliverance from sin becomes effective. Wesley states:

[T]hen only "the leprosy is cleansed." Then only the evil root, the carnal mind, is destroyed, and inbred sin subsists no more. But if there be no such second change, if there be none but a gradual work of God (that there is a gradual work none denies) then we must be content, as well as we can, to remain full of sin till death. And if so, we must remain *guilty* till death, continually *deserving* punishment. For it is impossible the guilt or desert of punishment should be removed from us as long as all this sin remains in our heart, and cleaves to our words and actions. Nay, in rigorous justice, all we think, and speak, and act, continually increases it.<sup>354</sup>

Here, then, we note a re-emergence of the emphasis on freedom from sin. Not all is certain, however. It seems that believers may, or may not, receive the boon of sudden perfection. Some remain under the shadow of guilt and anticipation of punishment, hoping only for a gradual improvement in personal holiness. The fate of all lies in the mystery of sovereign grace. Suffice it to say at this juncture that the Methodist leader regards awareness of a predilection to sin in the Christian (prior to a possible full deliverance at some stage) as an essential type of repentance. For until we become sensible of our need we will not seek the solution. Assuming, then, that such a repentance becomes pivotal to a Christian's life, the preacher now advises that she or he must persevere and 'believe the gospel.' As we have seen, a post-justification understanding of repentance must move beyond the initial issue of inward change. It must progress towards a recondite self-knowledge of guilt and helplessness. Now we discover that Wesley proposes a similar redefinition of belief. From viewing belief as that trust that ushered in justification, we must go on to see it as a confidence in the ability and willingness of God to 'save...from all the sin that still remains in...[the] heart.'<sup>355</sup> Christ bestows the power to overcome sin on a 'moment to moment' basis.

---

<sup>353</sup> Here Wesley quotes from a work by his brother, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1749), II.164; cf. *Collection of Hymns* (1780) reproduced in F. Baker (ed.) *The Complete Works of John Wesley - Hymns* (Vol. 7; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982), Number 386:5.

<sup>354</sup> *Sermons* 1.1.14, 1.20, pp. 346 - 347.

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.*, II.1, p. 347.

Our faith in his life, death and intercession for us, and our devotion to him, are the conduits of divine life to us. Without God's power, Wesley warns, 'notwithstanding our present holiness, we should be devils the next moment.'<sup>356</sup>

Thus, we learn that 'in the Children of God repentance and faith [or 'belief,' for Wesley uses the terms interchangeably in this sermon] exactly answer each other.' Repentance brings a sensitivity to the sin remaining in our hearts and cleaving to our words and deeds; it makes us sensible of our desert of punishment for inward and outward sins; it supplies an abiding conviction of our own helplessness; it disclaims the possibility of other help than the divine; it declares that without Christ we can do nothing. Faith encourages our reception of the power of God in Christ that purifies our hearts and actions; it makes us conscious of Christ's continuous advocacy for us that obviates condemnation and punishment; it conveys mercy and grace to us in every need; it aids our acceptance of help from the Almighty; it declares that with Christ we can do all things by his strength. Repentance and belief so work together within us that we may declare: 'Through him I cannot only overcome, but expel all the enemies of my soul.' I can love God with heart, mind, soul and strength and, moreover, live a holy and righteous life until my death.<sup>357</sup>

The danger of adopting the Moravian teaching is that if believers suppose that they became wholly sanctified at the time of justification they will regard it as 'absurd to expect a farther deliverance from sin, whether gradual or instantaneous.'<sup>358</sup> Those 'who are not convinced of the deep corruption of their hearts...have little concern about *entire sanctification*.' To break this complacency it is necessary that God 'unveils the inbred monster's face, and shows them the real state of their souls.' It is only when they feel the burden of sin will they long for emancipation.<sup>359</sup> Therefore, a deep sense of our '*demerit*' (which Wesley says 'in one sense may be termed *guilt*'), even after our acceptance in Christ, is a prerequisite of 'our seeing the true value of the atoning

---

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*, II.4 - II.5, pp. 348 - 349.

<sup>357</sup> *Ibid.*, II.6, pp. 349 - 350.

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.*, III.1, p. 350.

<sup>359</sup> *Ibid.*, III.2, p. 351.

blood.' Without this conviction we may count Christ's blood 'a common thing...of which we have not now any great need, seeing all our past sins are blotted out.' Our helplessness, Wesley exhorts, must bring us to the place where Christ is not only our Priest, but also our King. We must 'go out of ourselves, in order to be swallowed up in him.' We are to 'sink into nothing that he may be all in all.'<sup>360</sup>

It is interesting that in 'On Sin in Believers,' and 'The Repentance of Believers' we find, again, no mention of 1 John 1: 8 and 10. Perhaps this is because (as we have seen) Wesley had already consigned the relevance of these verses to the period prior to conversion.<sup>361</sup> We could argue that in an effort to maintain the consistency of his scheme of Christian perfection he forwent the inclusion of the very verses that might aid him in his debate with those he perceived as guilty of antinomian error. Having made them applicable to the unregenerate state he cannot use them to prove the existence of sin in those born of God. Nevertheless, despite their absence, the verses' warning against the denial of culpability reverberates throughout the sermons. Now the Methodist leader has to use the implication that Christians may sin as a corrective to what he regards as the excesses of other perfectionist groups.

### **3. 8 'A Plain Account of Christian Perfection'**

Previously we noted that the disquisition 'A Plain Account of Christian Perfection,' apart from reproducing the 1741 sermon, does not offer any further explanation of the conundrum of 1 John. However, we may draw on it for a concluding observation concerning Wesley's form of perfectionism. Appearing in the same year as 'The Repentance of Believers,' that is 1767, it is the work in which

---

<sup>360</sup> *Ibid.*, III.3 - III.4, pp. 351 - 352. The concluding remarks to the effect that the believer's self must somehow become obliterated for perfection to become effective appears in Charles Wesley's poem 'The Promise of Sanctification.' Verse 28 well expresses the entire aspiration of the work:

Now let me gain perfection's height,  
now let me into nothing fall!  
Be less than nothing in my sight,  
And feel that Christ is all in all.'

It forms an addendum to Sermon 40 'Christian Perfection.' See *Sermons* 2.II.40, p. 124. Cf. John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, 'Brief Thoughts on Christian Perfection,' p. 116.

<sup>361</sup> See notes 293; 306; 316; 331.

Wesley sought to 'give a plain and distinct account of the steps by which [God led me], during a course of many years, to embrace the doctrine of Christian Perfection.'<sup>362</sup>

Writing on the question of the timing of sanctification, he acknowledges two possibilities. Christians may 'gradually die to sin and grow in grace, till at or perhaps a little before death, God perfects them in love.' The Methodist leader believes 'this is the case in most, but not all' instances. God usually allows 'a considerable time' for the process of leading men to the place of either of justification or sanctification. However, it is true that 'He does not invariably adhere to this; sometimes He "cuts short His work": He does the work of many years in a few weeks; perhaps in a week, a day, an hour.' So, a person may suddenly enter a state of justification and sanctification. It is not a prerequisite to undergo a preparatory period. The Lord may do as he wills with his own. Regarding sanctification we may assume: that 'most men [become] perfected at last'; that 'there is a gradual work of God in the soul'; and that, in general, much time ('even many years') elapses before the destruction of sin occurs. Yet we may also assume that God may 'with man's good leave' condense the perfecting of the Christian 'in whatever degree He pleases, and do the usual work of many years in a moment.' God accomplishes this immediate sanctification 'in many instances; and yet there is a gradual work, both before and after that moment, so that one may affirm the work is gradual, another it is instantaneous, without any manner of contradiction.'<sup>363</sup>

### **3. 9. Summation and Appraisal of Wesley's Solution**

Thus, we have now studied the sermons, commentary and disquisition written by the Methodist leader dealing at any important level with our verses.<sup>364</sup> Also, we have gleaned from our study much of his argument on the nature of Christian perfection. Following from our achievement of these objectives, I wish to conduct a

---

<sup>362</sup> John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, Section 1, p. 5.

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*, Section 25, Question 25, pp. 80 - 81.

<sup>364</sup> Thomas Jackson (ed.), *The Works of John Wesley* [London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1831 and Third Edition 1878; repr. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House], Volume XIV: *Grammars, Musical Works, Letters, Scripture Index, Subject Index*, pp. 371 - 372.

summation and appraisal of what these works reveal of the background to Wesley's solution of the problem, and of his declared stance concerning interpretation.

Moreover, to conduct this summation and appraisal I will include from this point some germane observations of the Methodist's work from our critical perspective.

Drawing first upon the insights gained during our earlier study of Iser I suggest that the main characteristic of Wesley's solution is his refusal to accept the notion of any 'gap' or 'indeterminacy'<sup>365</sup> between our two groups of verses. For him the argument of 1 John continues in a seamless manner. It is not that he does not recognise that some may see a hiatus in the Apostle's reasoning, it is rather, as we have seen, that he appears to abjure the suggestion of any dissonance between the verses on the basis that it is a threat to the integrity of the scriptures. He effectively regards those who note any such 'blank' in this instance as either being 'patrons of sin' as they balk at his perfectionist agenda, or as having 'weak minds' and in need of protection from error. Certainly Wesley would concur that the two dual declarations are 'definable points of instruction,' that they are 'stars' in the biblical firmament that remain fixed. However, he would object to the notion that 'the lines that join them are variable.'<sup>366</sup>

Yet, there is some evidence in Wesley's pieces of his recognition that 'the structure of the texts allows for different ways of fulfilment'<sup>367</sup> (this is certainly not true of his explicit exegesis of our verses but, as we will see, there may be some evidence of such a recognition in his general comments on interpretation that accompanies the exegesis). Nevertheless, as there is no possibility of a contradictory element in this case - the verses in chapter one refer to our sin while unregenerate and so do not gainsay the assertion of regenerate perfection in chapter three - the necessity does not arise of variously solving it. Some trace evidence exists, moreover, for the idea of a 'dyadic interaction' between text and reader despite the Methodist's opinion that the Apostle had made his meaning patently obvious to his audience. We may say

---

<sup>365</sup> See note 36.

<sup>366</sup> See note 29.

<sup>367</sup> See note 30.

that Wesley's observation that some readers might see a contradiction is an unconscious admission of the reader's interaction with the text.

Furthermore, it is possible to argue that the Iserian notion of 'gaps' in the text that prompt the reader to seek 'coherence' has an equivalent in Wesley's works as we see him striving to demonstrate the consistency of 1 John. One could say that he treats the text, albeit on behalf of other readers, as if it contained a blank or gap and that this induces him to construct a 'Gestalt' that resolves the apparent contradiction. Thus, despite Wesley's refusal to countenance any gap in the text, he indeed responds to the 'indeterminacy' that represents 'the fundamental asymmetry between text and reader, that [leads to] communication in the reading process.'<sup>368</sup>

Overall we may say that Wesley's view of 1 John coincides with a formalist element of Iser's theory, that is that the text has a determinate nature, that meaning has a referential foundation within the text.<sup>369</sup> It seems that the Methodist's view of our material is akin to Iser's view of a scientific text - it is the 'most express' of the biblical testimonies to Christian perfection and so does not contain 'places of indeterminacy' as do literary texts. So from it we may obtain the 'facts' of empirical existence.<sup>370</sup> By carefully studying the 'epistle' we discover St. John's unambiguous testimony to the divine providence of perfection.

When we discuss the material from a Fishian standpoint, however, the presence or absence of a gap, indeterminacy or contradiction between the two groups of verses becomes purely a question arising from the differing expectations and assumptions of the readers. Recalling again the foundations of Fish's rationale - that all perception of the text is at once mediated and conventional - enables us to comment on Wesley's interpretive stance in a way that runs counter to his formalist bias, and yet recognises the extant communal preconstraints. Hence, we could say that regarding the issue of mediation Fish would propose that the 'textual signs' in 1 John do not 'announce their shape' but appear in a variety of shapes according to the manifold readerly expectations

---

<sup>368</sup> See note 38.

<sup>369</sup> See note 44.

<sup>370</sup> See notes 56 - 59.

and assumptions; correspondingly, concerning the idea that all reading remains subject to convention he would place the Methodist within an 'interpretive community' composed of those that emphasised perfectionism. A Fishian analysis would serve to demonstrate the particular constraints on interpretation in force in this case.

Therefore, addressing mediation, we may move towards several standpoints. That Wesley on the one hand, and disparate readers on the other, denied or acknowledged the existence of an apparent contradiction between our verses is a consequence of the particular 'interpretive strategies' adopted by each party. Also, the interpretation tendered by Wesley, or by any other readers, remains predicated upon the presuppositions he, or they, held concerning the text. So, viewed from this perspective the Methodist leader's emphasis on the coherence of 1 John becomes simply a matter of what he has brought to the text; that the preacher regards the entire epistle as a lucid and unbroken argument is an outcome of his interpretive strategies - his explication of it we may say is merely his interpretive strategies writing the text. It is Wesley who has constituted the properties of First John and assigned its intentions.<sup>371</sup>

Using these observations in a thematic manner, we can now conduct our summation and appraisal of what the Methodist's pieces reveal of the background to his solution of the problem, and of his declared stance concerning interpretation. To begin with, if we take up the point that all reading is conventional, we find that much documentation exists showing that Wesley counted several significant Christian figures as influences in his adoption of Christian Perfection. Apart from his period of association with Zinzendorf, we learn that Bishop Taylor, Thomas à Kempis and William Law represent the early influences on Wesley to pursue holiness.<sup>372</sup> Outler comments that Wesley is among those few in the West that had ever envisioned perfection as a realistic possibility *in this life*.<sup>373</sup> We may say, therefore, that these figures represent an interpretive community.

---

<sup>371</sup> See notes 66; 83; 119 - 122.

<sup>372</sup> John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, Sections 2 - 4. pp. 5 - 6.

<sup>373</sup> *Sermons* 2.II.40, Introductory Comment, p. 97.

However, these well-documented direct influences on Wesley are not the only examples of perfectionism we should consider as part of this interpretive community. I maintain that we should consider a wider milieu of perfectionist thought: one that, although not having any immediate influence on the Methodist, demonstrates a coexistent tendency within English society to aspire to perfection. As I said in my introduction, there are secular forms of perfectionism, and it is to one of these forms that we must turn in due course. In a short excursus that will constitute chapter five I will present a model that was extant in the late eighteenth century, so setting Wesley's ideas in a wider context. Consequently, I hope that we will gain an extended purview of the interpretive community to which Wesley belonged. I intend to show that it is not only the religionists who argued for perfection. Before we discuss this wider view of the Methodist leader's interpretive community, though, we must look further at other issues behind his explication of 1 John.

Throughout his life the Methodist founder maintained that he had never wavered from his position taken in the early 1730s, nor had he 'encountered serious difficulty' in harmonising 'Christian perfection' with his later emphases on 'faith alone' and 'assurance.'<sup>374</sup> He had an interest in proving his own consistency in the treatment of the biblical texts as well as defending their own internal coherence in the matter of Christian perfection. This often involved him in controversy. When advised to forbear the use of expressions referring to perfection because of the great offence they gave, Wesley refused to comply as he believed that these statements appear 'in the oracles of God,' and as such remain inviolable. God has spoken the words of scripture: they are 'all the counsel of God,' the 'words of God, and not of man.' However, he states: 'But we may and ought to explain the meaning of them, that those who are sincere of heart may not err...[from the path leading to divine reward].'<sup>375</sup>

Remarking directly on the issue of interpretation Wesley says:

---

<sup>374</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>375</sup> *Sermons* 2.II.40, §2; §3; §4, pp. 99 - 100.



[W]ith regard to the Holy Scriptures themselves, as careful as they are to avoid it, the best men are liable to mistake, and do mistake day by day; especially with respect to those parts thereof which less immediately relate to practice. Hence even the children of God are not agreed as to the interpretation of many places in Holy Writ; nor is their difference of opinion any proof that they are not the children of God on either side. But it is a proof that we are no more to expect any living man to be *infallible* than to be *omniscient*.<sup>376</sup>

The Methodist leader goes on to gloss the Apostle's statement in 1 John 'Ye have an unction from the Holy One, and know all things' [2: 20 in Wesley's own translation] as follows: 'Ye know all things that are needful for your soul's health.' To imply any greater knowledge would be to 'describe the disciple as above his master.' It seems that for Wesley, then, the believer may only be sure of the interpretation of scriptures relating to salvation, and this reinforces his earlier statement in this sermon ('Christian Perfection'), to wit that 'the children of God do not mistake as to the things essential to salvation.'<sup>377</sup> Most remarkable here, though, is the comment on interpretation. Mistakes in exposition do occur, particularly respecting those passages that 'less immediately relate to practice.' Even leading interpreters may fail to interpret properly, and this simply shows human fallibility in handling the Scriptures. The significant element in this statement is that Wesley seems to equate differences in interpretation with mistakes. Though he graciously says that difference in opinion does not indicate the salvific condition of opposing parties in an interpretive dispute, he implies that one party must have the 'correct' understanding. Also, he does not state how we choose between interpretations apart from an appeal to the text, but by using the language of 'mistake' he hints that some interpretations should suffer exclusion.

Nevertheless, there is evidence that Wesley acknowledged the possibility of interpreting words and phrases within the Bible in different ways. For instance he says regarding the phrase 'born of God' that it is 'an expression taken also in divers senses.' However, regarding any doubt concerning the 'privilege' of those so born - that is, the freedom not to commit sin - we learn:

---

<sup>376</sup> *Ibid.*, I.5, p. 102.

<sup>377</sup> *Ibid.*, I.4, p. 102 and I.6, pp. 102 - 103.

[T]he question is not to be decided by abstract reasonings, which may be drawn out into an endless length, and leave the point just where it was before. Neither is it to be determined by the experience of this or that particular person. Many may suppose they do not commit sin when they do, but this proves nothing either way. 'To the law and the testimony' [Isaiah 8: 20] we appeal. 'Let God be true, and every man a liar' [Romans 3: 4] By his Word will we abide, and that alone. Hereby we ought to be judged.<sup>378</sup>

Thus we find that the preacher appeals to the existence of a stable biblical text. It is not 'abstract reasonings' or personal experience that will solve the interpretive issue at stake in 1 John, rather the solution lies in a text the meaning of which is self-evident.

Wesley's argument seems to oscillate between what he sees as the determinate nature of the text and the perceived need to provide an explanation for passages other readers find hard to understand.

Discounting the interpretations of others seems a straightforward task for Wesley: 'Why, then, the best way to answer a bold assertion is simply to deny it,' he says. Those with whom he contends bring to the argument merely 'strange assertions, drawn from examples recorded in the word of God.'<sup>379</sup> The contempt in which Wesley holds his adversaries' reasoning powers we may observe by the following remarks. A 'child of common understanding' would suffer shame if found reasoning in the same manner as they. Their examination of the issue has a real futility at its heart: 'Least of all can you with any colour of argument infer that any man *must* commit sin at all.'<sup>380</sup> Given the level of disdain Wesley displays for the contrary reasoning of his rivals, it is remarkable that the Methodist leader makes the admission, albeit a tacit one, that any 'colours [or varieties] of argument' might gain entry to the discussion.

The Methodist leader's collection of his own discourses, including the ones we have studied, that he called 'Sermons on Several Occasions,' featured a preface to the 1746 edition that contained some remarks on interpretation apposite for our purposes. Used in conjunction with Wesley's exposition we can penetrate further into his

---

<sup>378</sup> *Ibid.*, II.2, pp. 105 - 106.

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid.*, II.6 - II.7, p. 107.

<sup>380</sup> *Ibid.*, II.14, p. 112.

elucidative methods. A serious approach from one who peruses these sermons, the Methodist says, will reward him by providing the ability to 'see in the clearest manner what those doctrines are which I embrace and teach as the essentials of true religion.'<sup>381</sup> That Wesley regarded the first of our set, Sermon 40 (Christian Perfection), as also part of 'the essentials of true religion,' we may presume as he used this preface again at the beginning of every volume that incorporated number 40 published in his lifetime, including Volume III.<sup>382</sup>

The clarity Wesley claims for his sermons he attributes to his design to 'write...*ad populum* - to the bulk of mankind...' He claims that: 'Nothing' in his collection 'appears in elaborate, elegant, or oratorical dress.' 'I design plain truth for plain people,' he asserts. His is a project that avoids 'philosophical speculations,' 'the show of learning,' and 'technical terms.'<sup>383</sup> Moreover, Wesley's sermons, he avers, are expressions of his design:

to forget all that ever I have read in my life. I mean to speak, in the general, as if I had never read one author, ancient or modern (always excepting the inspired). I am persuaded that, on the one hand, this may be a means of enabling me more clearly to express the sentiments of my heart, while I simply follow the chain of my own thoughts, without entangling myself with those of other men; and that, on the other, I shall come with fewer weights upon my mind, with less of prejudice and prepossession, either to search for myself or to deliver to others the naked truths of the gospel.<sup>384</sup>

He writes to 'candid and reasonable men'; to such he is 'not afraid to lay open what have been the inmost thoughts of [his] heart.'<sup>385</sup> I propose that this is a Wesleyian version of what Fish called the 'back to the text' manoeuvre. Fish, we remember from our remarks in chapter 2, employed this expression to describe the artifice used by Stephen Booth in his work *An Essay on Shakespeare's Sonnets*. Like Booth, Wesley

---

381 *Sermons* 1.1, *Sermons on Several Occasions*, Preface, §1, p. 103.

382 *Ibid.*, Outler's 'Introductory Comment' to the Preface, p. 103.

383 *Ibid.*, Preface, §2 - §3, pp. 103 - 104.

384 *Ibid.*, Preface, §4, p. 104.

385 *Ibid.*, Preface, §5, p. 104.

aims to reveal the 'real point' of I John 3 verse 9. Fish's analysis helps us to expose the assumptions lying behind that quest.<sup>386</sup>

The Methodist resembles Booth inasmuch as he sets himself in 'differential opposition' to the work of previous or fellow interpreters. He will not repeat the interpretive strategies of others. He will engage the text he says: 'without entangling [him]self with [the thoughts] of other men.' Consequently, he will: 'come [to it] with fewer weights upon [his] mind, and so with less of prejudice and prepossession.' This action will enable him to achieve either a personal discovery, or an impartation to others, of 'the naked truths of the gospel.' The location of the heart of St. John's epistle has become the central issue for Wesley, and that heart is Christian perfection. From the sermons we learnt that those who have interpreted the work thus far have placed wrong emphases on it either by highlighting human vulnerability, or by accenting sinlessness. Yet, now the correct third alternative has emerged through Wesley's research, and his account suitably elevates the Scriptures. The preface adds to the impression that he has exposed the inadequacies of other interpretations and has proposed a superior elucidation that results in an enhancement of the value of the piece: St. John's First Epistle reveals nothing less than God's promise of Christian perfection in this life.

The Methodist leader's approach further correlates with Booth's in this instance in that he effectively claims to be merely describing the Apostle's message. Unencumbered by the influences of other expositors, Wesley can faithfully report on what he has found. Significantly, he does not seem to regard his own thought processes as in any way mediatory in the establishment of meaning. The exclusion of other interpreters Wesley sees as a way of facilitating a clarity of expression in his personal judgement of the epistle. Under such conditions he remains free 'to simply follow the chain of [his] own thoughts.' Because the comments of others proved to be 'entanglements,' achieving a state of isolation from them is essential; being left to his own deliberations about the text means that he can more easily see its true meaning.

---

<sup>386</sup> See note 164.

Thus, we may say that Wesley claims to be outside of the 'game' of interpretation. This becomes evident in the assertion we have noted that he delivers 'naked truths.' Contradicting this claim, a Fishian analysis enables us to comment that at the precise moment Wesley distances himself from interpretation he has, in fact, performed one of its most familiar moves. He has *dismissed other interpreters* and claimed to return to the text alone. Moreover, he has treated the critical history of 1 John as an obscuring accretion. Booth's effort to appeal to the literary profession by declaring that 'the function of literary criticism is to let the text speak for itself,' has its complement in the Methodist's endeavour to court the believing community by engaging their confidence in biblical transparency. On the strength of this engagement he introduces his doctrine of Christian perfection. To the believers he says that the scriptures are self-explanatory in their divine promise of perfection, and that we must not stifle that perspicuity. Thus, Wesley joins Booth in a seemingly artless humility before the text. This potent move suggests that although other critics have displayed their ingenuity in interpreting the text, the Methodist leader has returned to the text alone on behalf of the 'plain people.' Acting as servant of the text he has laid it open with the candid desire to make it accessible to Everyman.

Wesley's move to renounce interpretation in favour of the simple presentation of the text is really a gesture in which one set of interpretive principles displaces another. As with Booth, so with Wesley: the new set of principles bears the claim that it is not an interpretation. We may contest this position by arguing its impossibility. A purported 'simple presentation' must involve description and this description can only occur within a stipulative understanding of what is before us for description, an understanding that will produce the object of its attention. Therefore, Wesley's declaration that he has excluded 'philosophical speculations' regarding 1 John in favour of 'plain truth' does not indicate that he has successfully avoided interpretation but rather that he is proffering an alteration in the terms in which it will occur. He expressly proposes a transfer of attention from the 'thoughts' of 'other men' to the text of 1 John. Wesley has read that text while supposedly mentally disengaged from other

influences and he claims now to display it in its elemental state. Once he has so altered the terms of engagement with the piece, he presents as unmediated truth his explication of it. In the sermons, as we saw earlier, the Methodist avers that the unadorned truth of 1: 8 - 10 is that it refers to pre-conversion sin. This enables him to make the claim that the obvious meaning of 3: 6 - 9 is that subsequent to conversion the Christian does not (or, in some instances, cannot) sin. Taking a Fishian position on this leads us to conclude that it is only as a reader submits to Wesley's opinion of the location of emphasis in these verses does she or he see the 'facts' of his analysis. Therefore, we may conclude that the Methodist leader's description of the 'naked truths' of 1 John is an interpretive construct, and, moreover, one of the same order as the interpretations it seeks to exclude.

Our earlier exploration of Fish's ideas demonstrated that the 'back-to-the-text' manoeuvre is not an option as a proof of the veracity of a reading because the text returned to is simply the one demanded by an interpretation that governs its production. In this case the text returned to is one produced by the Methodist leader's perfectionist hypothesis of the benefits of the new birth. As we discussed in chapter 2, it is important to emphasise that Fish is not seeking to make a covert exposé of hermeneutical incoherence. His observations on the claim to have gone 'back-to-the-text' have the purpose of revealing that claim as an interpretive 'move,' a style or gesture; such observations serve to unveil the rhetoric of objectivity or 'truth-telling.' They illuminate the actions taken by readers in their effort to have their reading prevail. The 'back-to-the-text' stratagem remains rhetorically effective, however, as it rides on an unchallenged assumption that the text must have an elevated position over criticism, and that we must not permit criticism to overwhelm it. All of Wesley's work ostensibly rests on his invocation of, and reliance upon, such an assumption. Indeed, it is possible to argue that (in the West) the self-effacing rhetoric of biblical interpretation is the very origin of the rhetoric of objectivism that Fish exposes.

Unlike Booth, Wesley does not lay claim to radicalism. Rather, he sees himself as a conservative who is adhering to the ancient tenets of Christian belief in perfection.

A consistent rejection of innovation in doctrine was a feature of the Methodist leader's theology. Reacting to the supposed inventions of Count Zinzendorf, Wesley says that 'whatever doctrine is *new* must be *wrong*; for the *old* religion is the only *true* one; and no doctrine can be right unless it is the very same "which was from the beginning" [1 John 1: 1].<sup>387</sup> It is his opponents, Wesley avers, who offer novel solutions - whether they overemphasise human vulnerability on the one side, or sinlessness on the other. For the Methodist, his third alternative is the authentic voice of New Testament Christianity. Yet, we would not recognise the distinctiveness of the Methodist leader's teaching except for its position over against the conventions already in place at the inception of his movement: for instance the conventions of Calvinism. All successive understandings of any text exist in dependence upon their precursors. In the *mêlée* of interpretive dispute the Anglicans, Lutherans, and Calvinists of all persuasions, would accuse Wesley of extremism (and, conversely, the Antinomian Moravians would charge him with rigidity). Taking a Fishian view of the matter, however, even if Wesley had professed a revolutionist theology it would have been an empty boast. No one can conduct a wholesale challenge to extant conventions as there are no terms in which to make such a challenge - in this case it would require the use of terms wholly outside the institution of Christian thought. Any attempt would prove to be unintelligible as it is exclusively within that institution that the 'facts' of theological study become available. All the protagonists in the dispute must entangle themselves in the structure of assumptions and goals in order to be intelligible.

So, Fish's perspective repudiates Wesley's claim that he can return to the text alone to present the 'naked truths of the gospel.' There are no moves outside of the 'game' of interpretation - including the move of claiming that he is no longer a player. He cannot say that he is merely transmitting the message. Whatever the Methodist leader does it will only be interpretation in another guise.<sup>388</sup>

---

<sup>387</sup> Sermons I.I.13, III.9, p. 324.

<sup>388</sup> See notes 187 and 188.

The inspired and transparent text to which Wesley refers nonetheless contains perplexing passages. Despite his avowal to 'forget all that ever I have read in my life' concerning the Bible, and so achieve unmediated access to the text, later in the preface to the sermons the Methodist seemingly reneges this pledge. On reaching obscure passages Wesley puts into effect a series of three levels of enquiry: the first is an entreaty for divine insight; the second is a search for, and a musing on, comparative scriptures. The third level, however, is a consultation of the opinions of others. We receive the following advice of how to read these portions:

Is there a doubt concerning the meaning of what I read? Does anything appear dark or intricate? I lift up my heart to the Father of lights: 'Lord, is it not thy Word, "If any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God"? Thou "givest liberally and upbraidest not" [Cf. James 1: 5]. Thou hast said, "If any be willing to do thy will, he shall know" [Cf. John 7: 17]. I am willing to do, let me know, thy will.' I then search after and consider parallel passages of Scripture, "comparing spiritual things with spiritual" [I Corinthians 2: 13]. I meditate thereon, with all the attention and earnestness of which my mind is capable. If any doubt still remains, I consult those who are experienced in the things of God, and then the writings whereby, being dead, they yet speak. And what I thus learn, that I teach.<sup>389</sup>

We do not receive any indication that this consultation might influence the eventual presentation of the bare truths of the text. It appears to have only an illuminative effect. Following the resolution of any difficulties in understanding, Wesley declares that he has:

set down in the following sermons what I find in the Bible concerning the way to heaven, with a view to distinguish this way of God from all those which are the inventions of men. I have endeavoured to describe the true, the scriptural, experimental religion, so as to omit nothing which is a real part thereof, and to add nothing thereto which is not.<sup>390</sup>

Although he has taken upon himself the role of teaching others, the Methodist leader moves to admit the possibility of mistake:

---

<sup>389</sup> *Sermons* 1.1, *Sermons on Several Occasions*, Preface, §5, p. 106.

<sup>390</sup> *Ibid.*, Preface, §6, p. 106.



But some may say I have mistaken the way myself...It is probable many will think this; and it is very possible that I have. But I trust, whereinsoever I have mistaken, my mind is open to conviction. I sincerely desire to be better informed. I say to God and man, 'What I know not, teach thou me.'<sup>391</sup>

Furthermore, he makes the following request:

Are you persuaded you see more clearly than me? It is not unlikely that you may. Then treat me as you would desire to be treated yourself upon a change of circumstances. Point me out a better way than I have yet known. Show me it is so by plain proof of Scripture. And if I linger in the path I have been accustomed to tread, and am therefore unwilling to leave, labour with me a little, take me by the hand, and lead me as I am able to bear. But be not displeased if I entreat you not to beat me down in order to quicken my pace. I can go but feebly and slowly at best - then I should not be able to go at all.<sup>392</sup>

Though the text remains axiomatic in his view, it seems that Wesley here acknowledges again that interpretation occurs. Furthermore, he seems to entertain the possibility of changes in interpretation. The text is self-explanatory, but it is possible for some readers to see its verities more clearly than others. However, it is only by the 'plain proof of Scripture' that changes may gain admittance as legitimate understandings of the Word.

In his *Explanatory Notes*, as we would expect, the Methodist has an elevated view of the biblical texts:

This is what we now style the Holy Scripture: this is that 'word of God which remaineth for ever' [Cf. Isaiah 40: 8]; of which, though 'heaven and earth pass away, one jot or tittle shall not pass away' [Cf. Matthew 5: 18]. The Scripture, therefore, of the Old and New Testament is a most solid and precious system of divine truth. Every part thereof is worthy of God; and all together are one entire body, wherein is no defect, no excess. It is the fountain of heavenly wisdom, which they who are able to taste prefer to all writings of men, however wise or learned or holy.<sup>393</sup>

---

<sup>391</sup> *Ibid.*, Preface, §8, p. 107.

<sup>392</sup> *Ibid.*, Preface, §9, p. 107.

<sup>393</sup> John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, Preface, paragraph 10, p. 9.

The divinely pristine nature and certainty of meaning of the Scriptures become apparent to the reader even when studying particular words and phrases:

An exact knowledge of the truth was accompanied, in the inspired writers, with an exactly regular series of arguments, a precise expression of their meaning, and a genuine vigour of suitable affections...In the language of the sacred writings we may observe the utmost depth, together with the utmost ease. All the elegancies of human composes sink into nothing before it: God speaks, not as man, but as God. His thoughts are very deep, and thence His words are of inexhaustible virtue. And the language of His messengers, also is exact in the highest degree: for the words which were given them accurately answered the impression made upon their minds...To understand this thoroughly, we should observe the emphasis which lies on every word - the holy affections expressed thereby, and the tempers shown by every writer. But how little are these, the latter especially regarded! though they are wonderfully diffused through the whole New Testament, and are in truth a continued commendation of him who acts or speaks or writes.<sup>394</sup>

So, we see that Wesley holds that it is by means of a careful word analysis of Scripture that we discover its meaning: we are to 'observe the emphasis which lies on every word.' Even the writers' 'holy affections' and 'tempers' become discernible to us when we read in this way. Fascinatingly, we discover that even in 1754 (when he wrote the preface) the Methodist had to bewail 'how little are these, the latter especially regarded!' He cannot contain his astonishment at the failure of many other readers to discover these emotions in the writers' words. He, however, sees their obvious diffusion throughout the New Testament. Seen in the light of our exploration of New Critical praxis and the origins of reader-response, this belief in the reader's access to the authors' feelings again demonstrates an unconscious awareness of the reader's role. Not for Wesley the strictures of the rule of the 'Affective and Intentional Fallacy,' he regarded the New Testament writers' emotions as recoverable.<sup>395</sup> Nevertheless, he would reject any Fishian notion that the pathos so discovered was merely a construct of the reader's interpretive strategies. The text definitely contained the precious lode of Apostolic meaning. Wesley would agree with John Ruskin's instruction appearing at the head of this chapter - a mandate published 150 years later: '[B]e sure that you go to

---

<sup>394</sup> *Ibid.*, Preface, paragraphs 11 - 12, pp. 9 - 10.

<sup>395</sup> See notes 17 - 19.

the author to get at *his* meaning, not to find yours.' The Methodist's careful word analysis represents the metaphorical 'crushing' and 'smelting' process Ruskin recommended to obtain from the text the metal of the author's mind or meaning.

We may deduce, furthermore, that should the reader conduct such an attentive study of the First Epistle that person will discover not only the meaning intended by the Apostle John, but through him the 'counsel of God.' Moreover, as a result of this diligent reading of the text the believer may encounter nothing less than the transforming power of God. From what we have observed of Wesley's account, the ramifications of reading the epistle are manifold. An earnest pursuit of holiness may begin and result in a gradual and ongoing ascent to perfection. Although God may sovereignly grant freedom from sin at any time during this life, this remains conditional on the reader 'keeping himself' within the means of divine grace. Due to inherent frailty, the believer requires moment-by-moment divine sustainment to remain holy. A new self-knowledge convinces the reader of her or his status as both child of God and guilty sinner, and so ensures continual repentance and a profound appreciation of the merits of the blood of Christ. Of course, at no time will the reader legitimately be able to claim that they have never sinned, as according to 1: 8 and 10 all have sinned in their pre-conversion state. Correspondingly, if one approaches the text correctly - that is, without preconception - it is not possible ever to infer from it a condition of sinless or guiltless perfection. However, because God's 'seed' abides within the Christian reader, such a one may have assurance that the declaration of 1 John 3: 6 and 9 will come to fruition in personal terms during the post-conversion period. Even at the earliest stage of Christian commitment the reader enjoys a freedom from sin's dominion through the power of God. From the text the reader finds a surety that by the Spirit one may experience liberation from habitual and wilful sin, sinful desire, and sin through certain types of infirmity. Though sin remains within everyone as a predisposition and a potential undermining force, it does not reign in the genuine Christian. Moreover, at some time after conversion, the reader will know in the fullest measure the truth that those that are born of God cannot sin.

It is important to note that in Wesley's scheme the believer discovers this propitious state through the act of reading. We have explored how for the Methodist leader the text of 1 John, when correctly understood, is a lucid and consistent treatise on God's purpose to grant holiness to his people. Wesley read this text and found its message both self-evident and puissant. Yet, while recommending that others read it, he perceived a danger that they may misunderstand it. In providing aids to understanding, he claimed to set forth the unadorned truth of the epistle. Wesley takes this interpretive certitude (that accompanies all reading situated in an interpretive community) and perceives within it the power of God at work, due to the agency of the Holy Spirit. Thus, we may say that the mere act of reading becomes elevated into a spiritual experience. Engaging with the text imparts to the reader not only the truth of the divine declarations, but also ushers her or him into the benefits of those declarations. The text itself, because it is 'the word of God and not man,' has intrinsic power. It is 'the fountain of heavenly wisdom, which they who are able to taste prefer to all writings of men, however wise or learned or holy.' God has so imbued this written word with his authority that the reader may find within it the divine fillip leading to sinlessness. When viewed from our Fishian critical stance, however, Wesley's elevation of the act of reading 1 John (along with the rest of the New Testament) appears as an interpretive strategy. The presentation of 1 John as the word of God creates an expectation in the reader that the deity will fulfil her or his aspirations to perfection. It is a move to control the reader's assumptions about the text. In reading the epistle the believer will receive a message directly from God. A document with such a source guarantees the bestowal of perfection upon the believer. Yet, the question of the reader's ability to understand the message continually exercised Wesley.

In his *Explanatory Notes* we find a self-imposed suspension of his scholarly facility for the sake of 'the unlearned reader.' The Methodist leader does not deny his own theological erudition. He declares: 'I purposely decline going deep into many difficulties, lest I should leave the ordinary reader behind me.' Despite his affirmation of the exactness of biblical language, and the 'precise expression of [its] meaning' by

the writers, we note in this declaration a muted recognition that there are indeed 'difficulties' inherent in interpretation. Moreover, it seems that - as we have seen in the case of 1 John - there were difficulties that exercised his scholarly abilities to resolve. To explain many issues he eventually sought the findings of several theologians that he respected. Regarding his *Notes* he states: 'I once designed to write down barely what occurred to my own mind, consulting none but the inspired writers.' Subsequently, however, he says: 'I entirely changed my design.' He decided to incorporate in his study the works of particular commentators because 'it might be of more service to religion' to do so. He declared himself as one who had a 'desire to sit at [the] feet, and to learn of...men of long and deep experience in the ways and word of God.' It was the discovery of the work of one man that prompted Wesley to decide thus, and we will look at the nature of his influence, and that of others, on the Methodist's interpretation of 1 John in the next section.<sup>396</sup>

To conclude, then, our observations of Wesley's approach to the text, we note that concerning 'On Sin in Believers' (Sermon 13) Outler makes significant remarks concerning Wesley's theology - the 'third alternative' we have explored:

Wesley insisted on holding to both traditions - sola fide and holy living - without forfeiting the good essence of either. Moreover, he saw no inconsistency in his shifting from one emphasis to the other as circumstances seemed to require. He was more concerned to face the dreadful realities of sin while never yielding to any defeatist notion that God's grace is intrinsically impotent to save souls 'to the utmost', in this life.<sup>397</sup>

The concerns prompting the shifts in emphasis we have observed were essentially pastoral. Wesley interpreted our texts, on the one hand, in the context of persuading believers of God's willingness to deliver them from the power of sin. On the other, he construed them while seeking to warn of the error, as he saw it, of belief in a sinless - even guiltless - perfection. In either instance he did not concern himself

---

<sup>396</sup> John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, Preface, paragraphs 6 - 7; 3, pp. 7; 6.

<sup>397</sup> *Sermons* 1.1, Introduction to Sermons 13 and 14 'On Sin in Believers' and 'The Repentance of Believers,' p. 316.

with the pursuit of meaning for its own sake. Interestingly, there is no attempt by the Methodist leader to reconstruct the first-century conditions of the creation of 1 John. He does not seek to solve the interpretive problem in retrospect. This is because in Wesley's estimation no such problem existed in the primitive church. Referring to the issue of the remnant of sin he says that it is 'of the utmost moment to every serious Christian' - and confines his remarks to the believers of his own generation. Yet, about the first century situation he makes, for him, this rare observation:

And yet I do not know that ever it was controverted in the primitive Church. Indeed there was no room for disputing concerning it, as all Christians were agreed. And so far as I have observed, the whole body of ancient Christians who have left us anything in writing declare with one voice that even believers in Christ, till they are 'strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might', have need to 'wrestle with flesh and blood', with an evil nature, as well as 'with principalities and powers'.<sup>398</sup>

Thus we begin to discover a reason why Wesley omits to embark on any reassemblage of the Johannine church situation: it is because seventeen hundred years before his own day all faithful Christians lived in blissful agreement - at least on the point in question here. If any interpretive problems arose among Wesley's audience, they did so because Georgian Christians simply misunderstood a text that possessed an original clarity. No need existed to discover first century meaning - such meaning the text had obviously retained to that day. Any contradictions perceived in the New Testament were due to interpretive mismanagement of the text. For instance, of the Pauline corpus he says: 'But we must not so interpret the Apostle's words as to make him contradict himself. And if we will make him consistent with himself the plain meaning of the words is this...'<sup>399</sup> So, we may say that managing the text correctly involves a recognition of, and a submission to, the existing harmony of all parts of the Apostle's testimony. Once the reader acknowledges and submits to this harmony the 'plain meaning' of the text then emerges.

---

<sup>398</sup> *Sermons* 1.I.13, I.2, p. 317.

<sup>399</sup> *Ibid.*, IV.2, p. 327.

However, the reader's submission to the harmony of the Bible was not the Methodist leader's only concern. Affirming the consistency of his own presentation of the doctrine Wesley states in *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*:

This is the doctrine which we preached from the beginning, and which we preach at this day. Indeed, by viewing it in every point of light, and comparing it again and again with the word of God on the one hand, and the experience of the children of God on the other, we saw farther into the nature and properties of Christian perfection. But still there is no contrariety at all between our first and our last sentiments.<sup>400</sup>

My own reading of the material leads me away from concluding that Wesley demonstrated the congruity he claims. On this point Outler warns:

None of these sermons stands alone; none is norm for all the others. Wesley can quite readily be quoted against himself when this passage or that is taken out of context. His sermons are bound to be misread unless they are understood as experimental statements and restatements of his vision of the Christian life.<sup>401</sup>

According to Outler apparent disparities exist throughout the body of sermons. It is therefore necessary to regard each sermon as an 'experimental statement' or 'restatement' of Wesley's position in order to create any sense of coherence. So, taking an Iserian view of this warning, we could say that like 1 John Wesley's entire comment on its interpretive enigma contains 'gaps' and 'indeterminacies' that the reader must fill. Our Fishian analysis, moreover, induces us to regard both Wesley's explication and his reader's understanding of it (and of 1 John itself) as simply a product of their interpretive assumptions. The formation of interpretive assumptions is a complex issue as we noted in our introduction: a delicate balance of many factors affects our perception of the written word. Now we must explore one aspect of the formation of the assumptions held by Wesley - the commentaries he used to aid him in his search for a solution to our problem.

---

<sup>400</sup> John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, Section 15 (6), p. 30.

<sup>401</sup> *Sermons* 1.I, Introduction section VI, p. 97.

**CHAPTER FOUR**  
**THE VERSES AND CHRISTIAN PERFECTION**  
**AS EXPLAINED BY THOSE WESLEY RESPECTED**

When some hypothesis absurd and vain  
Has fill'd with all its fumes a critic's brain,  
The text that sorts not with his darling whim,  
Though plain to others, is obscure to him.<sup>402</sup>

**4. 1. 'Bengelius'**

We have already discussed the 1755 work *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*. We have mentioned how the Methodist leader augments his own notes with remarks borrowed from biblical commentaries written by theologians whom he admired. As we have said, it was the discovery of the work of one man that prompted Wesley to decide to augment his work thus, and we must now look at the nature of his influence, and that of others, on the Methodist's interpretation of our verses in 1 John.

In the preface to his *Notes* Wesley states:

[N]o sooner was I acquainted with that great light of the Christian world (lately gone to his reward) Bengelius, than I entirely changed my design [to merely write personal comments on the texts], being thoroughly convinced it might be of more use to the cause of religion, were I barely to translate his *Gnomon Novi Testamenti*, than to write many volumes upon it. Many of his excellent notes I have therefore translated; many more I have abridged, omitting that part which was purely critical, and giving the substance of the rest.<sup>403</sup>

The 'Bengelius' Wesley speaks so highly of is the German scholar John Albert Bengel (to Anglicize his name), whose Latin commentary of 1742 (with its Victorian English

---

<sup>402</sup> H.S. Milford (ed.), *The Poetical Works of William Cowper* (1905; 4th ed.1934; repr. London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 'The Progress of Error,' lines 444 - 447, p. 27. Cowper wrote this in December 1780 and published it in 1782.

<sup>403</sup> John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, Preface, paragraph 7, p.7.



translation by A.R. Fausset and William Fletcher) is the first we will study in our effort to understand the influences upon Wesley's interpretation.

Other Theologians and their works quoted by Wesley are: i) Matthew Henry, *An Exposition of All the Books of the Old and New Testament* (1725); ii) Matthew Poole, *Annotations Upon the Holy Bible* (1688 and 1696); iii) John Guyse, *A Practical Exposition of the Four Evangelists, in the Form of a Paraphrase, with Occasional Notes*, 3 Volumes (1739 - 1742); iv) John Heylyn, *Theological Lectures, With an Interpretation of the Four Gospels*, 2 Volumes (1749, 1751); v) Philip Doddridge, *Family Expositor; Or a Paraphrase and Version of the New Testament, with notes* (1739). Though he quotes from these theologians, we are unable to discern the source materials, however. Wesley explains the reason for this:

It was a doubt with me, for some time, whether I should not subjoin to every note I received from them the name of the author from whom it was taken, especially considering I had transcribed some, and abridged many more, almost in the words of the author. But upon further consideration I resolved to name none, that nothing might divert the mind of the reader from keeping close to the point in view, and receiving what was spoke, only according to its own intrinsic value.<sup>404</sup>

As the Methodist leader chose to filter his sources from the reader it is essential, if we are to discover something of their influence on Wesley, to study each of these works in their original form. The Bodleian Library in Oxford holds the first or very early editions of each of the commentaries listed, so we may now conduct an inquiry using these source materials. I do not intend to try to discern the particular words, phrases or passages that Wesley borrowed from these theologians. Rather my purpose is: i) to explore how the commentators addressed our verses, and, ii) to understand the general areas of influence on Wesley exercised by these men regarding the interpretation of the New Testament, and 1 John in particular.

---

<sup>404</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraph 8, p.8. *Sermons* 1.I, Introduction section III, 'The Sermon Corpus,' p. 41, note 50. This list supplies the titles of the first volume of each of the commentaries. The titles of the subsequent volumes containing 1 John vary according to their contents.

Wesley's effusive reference to J.A. Bengel as the inspiration for his own *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* leads us to begin our investigation with the *Gnomon Novi Testamenti*. By the time Wesley wrote his *Notes*, the German scholar Bengel had been dead for scarcely three years, hence Wesley's aside that his cynosure had 'lately gone to his reward.'<sup>405</sup> It is understandable that the Methodist leader expressed such admiration given that the two men shared a similar attitude to the biblical text. A.R. Fausset records the scholar's axiom: 'Te Totum applica ad Textum; Rem totam applica ad te' - 'Apply thyself wholly to the Text; Apply the subject wholly to thyself.'<sup>406</sup>

Choosing the title 'Gnomon' for the work, Bengel wished to impress upon the reader that his comments merely 'indicate what lies within the compass of the sacred text; for Scripture is its own safest and best interpreter.' 'My annotations,' he says, 'are so far from being intended to preclude the reader from increased research, that I wish rather to put him upon investigation of the text itself, by merely showing him how to set about it.' The Gnomon thus serves as a 'pointer' to aid the reader in the discovery of the inherent meaning of the text. Bengel declares that his design is also to refute those expositors 'who put upon *isolated* passages of Scripture their own forced (mystical) construction' in their effort to appear impressive. Instead he means to 'insist upon the full and comprehensive force of Scripture in its whole connection.'<sup>407</sup> I suggest that this is another instance of the 'back-to-the-text' manoeuvre that we observed in Wesley's work, and I discern that here Bengel includes that form of the stratagem to exclude other commentators who supposedly overlay the text with their own 'constructions.' Referring again to our discussion in chapter 2, Fish's perspective draws attention to the 'back-to-the-text' claim to reveal it as an interpretive 'move,' to unveil it as an example of the rhetoric of objectivity. There is no intention here to imply hermeneutical incoherence. Further examples of this move appear in the work of the

---

<sup>405</sup> Bengel died on 2 November 1752. A.R. Fausset (rev. and ed.), *Gnomon of the New Testament by John Albert Bengel*, (Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, 1858), Volume V, 'Sketch of the Life and Writings of J.A. Bengel by the Reverend A.R. Fausset,' p. xxxii.

<sup>406</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xv.

<sup>407</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

other commentators Wesley admired. We will return to Bengel's general observations later as he has much to say that demonstrates eighteenth century scholarly views on interpretation, at least from an evangelical perspective. However, an unfolding of his comments on our verses must occupy our attention at this point.

Exploring Bengel's *Gnomon* we may notice in certain passages elements of the same staccato style of writing that Wesley later used in his *Notes*. For instance, regarding chapter 1 verse 7b Bengel expounds it within two lines: 'καθαρίζει ἡμᾶς, *cleanseth us*) by remission and taking away: comp. ver. 9. - πάσης, *all*) original and actual.'<sup>408</sup> My understanding of this abbreviated note is that not only does the blood of Christ provide for a pardon for sin - it also in some way removes it. However, as he passes on to subsequent verses Bengel adopts a more flowing, and fuller, mode of expression that may enable us to make further judgements on his interpretation.

There is an incompatibility between those who deny their sinfulness and those who confess their sins. The latter have responded to St. John who, we learn, speaks of actual sins, indeed 'those which flow from original sin.' Alluding to Proverbs 28: 13, and so warning against any attempt to veil personal sin and promising mercy to those who confess and forsake it, the annotator says that: 'In proportion as each person has contracted less or more, so he deems it necessary to confess less or more.' Wholehearted commitment to Christ, therefore, leads to sensitivity to sin; whereas a lesser allegiance results in a reluctance to acknowledge sin. The Apostle, Bengel says, differentiates between 1: 10, which refers to sin we have committed in the past, and 1: 8, which indicates present sinfulness. So, all periods of life 'without distinction' St. John includes under the realm of sin. In a fleeting mention of the first century situation, Bengel declares: 'But there were even then some who extenuated sin, and therefore also disparaged grace.' As in the past, so also now there is a futility in thus denying our sin, for: 'The fault is in us...[it] is ours: the glory belongs to God: ver. 9.'<sup>409</sup>

---

<sup>408</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>409</sup> *Ibid.*, 'On The First Epistle of John,' Chapter 1: 7b - 9, pp. 113 - 114 (Translated by Rev. William Fletcher).

Verse nine, the annotator tells us, lies 'between two antithetical sentences.' There is a further contrast between the statements 'I have no sin' (1: 8), and 'I have not sinned' (1: 10): 'The former is concerning the *guilt* of sin, which *still* remains; the latter is concerning *the actual commission*.' By the former statement we practice self-deceit, by the latter we make God a liar. Confession is 'the best plan' as God 'holds us guilty as sinners, ver. 10.' The Apostle asserts here the universal necessity of this confession. St. John, according to Bengel: 'not only says that if we have sinned we must confess,' but also 'that all have reason to say, *I have sin*, and *I have sinned*, and ought to confess that, although with different degrees: otherwise we should not need cleansing by the blood of Jesus Christ.'<sup>410</sup> So, from these statements we may conclude that for Bengel, unlike Wesley, 1: 8 and 10 have an application to the period after regeneration. The apostle inveighs against Christians who claim to be invulnerable to sin after their new birth or to have been innocent of sin before it.

Thus there is a dichotomy between Bengel and Wesley regarding the sphere of intention of verses eight and ten. However, I submit the possibility that Bengel's opinion influenced Wesley to increase his emphasis on the continuing moral frailty of believers, even though we do not see this influence frankly stated in the Methodist's work. We have seen how Wesley having stated that the application of 1: 8 and 10 belongs to the pre-conversion state does not alter his opinion of the verses, even when to do so would suit his purposes in confronting the antinomians. However, we have also observed how the tension seems to increase between the Methodist leader's belief in the perfectionist thrust of 3: 6 and 9 and the perceived need to counter 'sinless perfection.' We could speculate that Wesley's reading of Bengel (and, as we will see, the other commentators) influenced him to resist the espousal of an extreme perfectionism. Much of the essence of what we have found in Bengel's commentary

---

<sup>410</sup> *Ibid.*, 'On The First Epistle of John,' Chapter 1: 7b - 9, pp. 113 - 115 (Translated by Rev. William Fletcher). Here is Bengel's original Latin text regarding the necessity of confession: 'Optimum consilium, *confiteri*, erga Deum, nos peccatores reos agentem: v. 10. & hujus confessionis necessitas hic asseritur universalis, ut Iohannes non solum dicat, si peccaverimus, confitendum esse; fed omnes haber quod dicant, *peccatum habeo*, &, *peccavi*, idque confiteri debere, quanquam vario gradu. Alias non egeremus purificatione per sanguinem Iesu Christi.' Alberti Bengelii, *Gnomon Novi Testamenti*, (Tübingen: Henr. Philippi Schrammii, 1742), 'In Epistolam Primam Iohannis, Caput I,' p. 1045.

we find in Wesley's work, particularly the need for the confession of past and present sins - because without such confession we may think that 'we should not need cleansing by the blood of Jesus Christ.'

Despite universal sinfulness, Bengel says, divine faithfulness is such that 'He makes good all things, which we promise our-selves respecting the goodness of God...so that we experience it, and do not make him a liar.' Christ meets every expectation that the Christian has of him, and the believer's apperception of divine benevolence turns to fruition in the experience of God's kindness and the believer's consequent vindication of God.

Moreover, God is also just 'so as to spare the sinner, and abolish the sins.' We note that this reference to the abolition of sins seems to begin to run in parallel with the emphasis upon all-pervasive sin and the absolute and constant need for confession.

Bengel writes:

καὶ δίκαιος, *and just*) so as to spare the sinner, and abolish the sins. Thus also Jesus Christ is called *the righteous*, ch. ii.I. 0 - ἀφῆ, *to remit*) while He takes away the guilt. - καθάρισι, *to cleanse*) so that we sin no more.<sup>411</sup>

'So that we sin no more,' and the previous phrase 'abolish the sins,' taken together may seem to suggest perfectionist considerations by Bengel. Indeed, when we arrive at chapter three we find some evidence of the idea of freedom from sin, but the emphasis on guilt and confession remains.

Without remarking on any strain between the messages of chapters one and three, this scholar says of 3: 6a that in the Christian: 'the good of righteousness is not overcome by the evil of sin.'<sup>412</sup> However, explaining 6b Bengel tells us that he who sins, whether he has merely seen Christ 'in spirit,' or has perhaps beheld his 'personal appearance...in the flesh,' does 'at the very moment of sin' become 'as though he has

---

<sup>411</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 1: 9, p. 115. See the Latin text: 'καὶ δίκαιος, *justus*) ut peccatori parcat, peccata aboleat. Sic quoque Iesus Christus dicitur *Iustus*. cII.i. ἀφῆ, *remittat*) dum reatum tollit. καθάρισι, *purificet*) ut posthac non peccemus,' p. 1045.

<sup>412</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 3: 6a, p. 127. Cf. the Latin: 'Bonum justitiæ in eo non superatur malo peccati,' p. 1053.

never seen Him in any way.' The occasion of sin brings not only instantaneous severance of spiritual sight, but also proves that the one who sins has never known God 'in truth.' Prior knowledge of Christ by anyone, 'although perhaps *he hath* formerly *known Him* personally,' seems to be of no consequence. After pronouncing on the possibility of this exclusion from Christ, Bengel suddenly hints at a time when sin will not have the opportunity to impair the believer's communion with God in such a manner. He says in a terse statement bringing in 3: 2: 'Light and knowledge produce likeness to God: ver. 2.'<sup>413</sup>

Devoting a much longer section to 3: 9, Bengel carries forward the expression from verse six, 'sinneth not,' and states that in verse nine this 'sentiment is immediately increased in weight' by the declaration that the believer 'cannot sin.' In the explication of 3: 9 we learn that to each of the propositions ἁμαρτίαν οὐ ποιεῖ ('is not practising sin') and οὐ δύναται ἁμαρτάνειν ('is not able to sin') 'its own *because* [ὅτι] is added.' The first 'because' refers 'to the seed, or the regenerate man'; the second refers to 'the part of God Himself' as the source of regeneration. The seed of God (defined first as 'the word, with its peculiar efficacy') remains in the regenerate person and keeps him from habitual transgression, 'although sin often endeavours, by a furious attack, to overthrow' him. Furthermore, Bengel offers an alternative interpretation of the 'seed.' He proposes that 'It may be taken in this sense: *the seed* of God, that is, he who is born of God, *abideth* in God.' In support of this interpretation he adduces Malachi 2: 15 AV where God declares his desire for people who truly are his 'godly seed.'<sup>414</sup>

The possibility of such a one sinning, says Bengel, 'is not absolutely denied.' Yet the Apostle affirms 'that the new birth and sin *cannot exist together*.' Just as in Revelation 2: 2 the believers cannot bear those who are evil and in Acts 4: 20 they cannot but speak of the things that they have seen and heard, so in the matter of sin the

---

<sup>413</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 3: 6b, p. 127. Cf. the Latin: '*non vidit Illum spiritu; quamvis forte de facie eum in carne viderit. vel etiamsi spiritu viderit, in ipso peccati momento talis fit, acsi eum nullo viderit modo...neque novit illum vere; quamvis forte de facie quondam noverit. Visio & cognito, similes Deo Facit. v.2.*' p. 1053.

<sup>414</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 3: 9, p. 127.

Christian displays a repugnance that amounts to a compelling inner restraint, 'he cannot sin.' We learn: 'The matter is, as in the case of an abstemious man, who cannot drink wine, and in various kinds of antipathy (*i.e.* natural aversion).' Bengel advances a paraphrase of this verse to explain his position:

*The regenerate man does not sin: he proposes to himself, as far as possible, a life free from sin; nor does he ever spontaneously give himself up to sin. And if at any time, contrary to the purpose of his mind, he shall have offended, he neither rushes headlong into sin, nor does he continue in it; but having acknowledged his error, he immediately returns in haste to his former course as soon as, and as far as, he is able.*<sup>415</sup>

As the magnetic needle, which usually points to the pole, 'is easily turned aside from this direction, but always reseeks the pole,' so also the believer after falling into sin will admit his offence and turn again to his post-conversion life of holiness.<sup>416</sup>

We have already noted that Bengel does not observe any contradiction between our verses. For him the congruity of the New Testament was a first principle. Moreover, it seems that he had established to his own satisfaction that 3: 6 and 9 referred to the impossibility of the practice of sin; but also that we have sinned in the past and presently remain expugnable to sin's power as revealed in 1: 8, 10. The image of the believer that emerges is of one vulnerable, and yet strongly disinclined to sin. Thus, we see that this scholar tries to hold in tension the ideas of holiness and propensity to sin - a feat performed in a similar manner by his admirer Wesley. Yet, unlike the Methodist leader, he does not overtly touch on any questions of biblical consistency or perfectionism. Having discussed Bengel's comments on 1 John, I now

---

<sup>415</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 3: 9, pp. 127 - 128. Regarding his preferred explanation of 3: 9 compare the Latin text: '*Regenitus non peccat: vitam peccato immunem, quantum potest, sibi proponit; nec peccato unquam sponte dat operam. quod si quando præter animi propositum deliquerit, nec in peccatum totus proruit, nec in eodem persistit; sed errore agnito ad institutum max pristinum, quam primum quantumque potest, festinus revertitur.*' This paraphrase Bengel attributes to 'Gatakerus' [Gataker] 'Posth., ch. 33' without supplying full bibliographic details, p. 1053. From my investigations in Oxford I think that this source could be Thomas Gataker (1574 - 1654) whom I found sometimes referred to in catalogues of his work as Thomæ Gatakeri, although I could discover no entry resembling the composition mentioned by Bengel. An alternative author of the paraphrase could be Charles Gataker (1614 - 1680), but again none of this person's works equate to Bengel's citation.

<sup>416</sup> Fausset (rev. and ed.), *Gnomon of the New Testament by John Albert Bengel*, Volume V, Chapter 3: 9, p. 128.

wish to return to his general observations as he makes several points that illustrate eighteenth-century evangelical views on interpretation as he saw it, and so provides a background to much of what we have studied so far, and of what we will go on to note in the works of the remaining commentators of the period. To return to these observations will also aid our survey of these interpretations from our chosen theoretical perspective.

The title page of the *Gnomon* reveals much of Bengel's assumptions about the New Testament. He presents his work as one 'in which, from the natural force of the words, the simplicity, depth, consistency and saving power of the divine revelation therein contained is indicated.' Fausset says that here Bengel's Latin literally speaks of 'The symphonious harmony of the heavenly meanings.'<sup>417</sup> Not only do the words of the New Testament contain a 'natural force,' that is, I presume, inherent meaning, but also a divine consistency characterises the Christian Scriptures taken as a single entity. Furthermore, the *Gnomon* effectively indicates these attributes to the reader.

In his 'Sketch' of Bengel's life, Fausset records the scholar urging his readers thus:

Put nothing *into* the Scriptures, but draw everything from them, and suffer nothing to remain hidden, that is really in them...Though each inspired writer has his own manner and style, one and the same Spirit breathes through all, one grand idea pervades all...Every Divine communication carries (like the diamond) its own light with it, thus showing whence it comes: no touchstone is required to discriminate it...The true commentator will fasten his primary attention on the *letter* (literal meaning), but never forget that the *Spirit* must equally accompany him; at the same time we must never devise a more spiritual meaning for Scripture passages than the Holy Spirit intended...The expositor who nullifies the *historical* groundwork of Scripture for the sake of finding only spiritual truths everywhere, brings death on all correct interpretation. Those expositions are the safest which keep closest to the text.<sup>418</sup>

---

<sup>417</sup> Fausset (rev. and ed.), *Gnomon of the New Testament by John Albert Bengel*, Volume I, Frontispiece. The Latin Frontispiece in full reads thus: 'Gnomon Novi Testamenti in quo ex navita verborum vi simplicitas, profunditas, concinnitas, salubritas sensuum coelestium indicatur opera io. Aberti Bengelii. Tubingæ sumtibus ac typis io Henr. Philippi Schrammii A. MDCCXLII.'

<sup>418</sup> Fausset (rev. and ed.), *Gnomon of the New Testament by John Albert Bengel*, Volume V, 'Sketch of the Life and Writings of J.A. Bengel by the Reverend A.R. Fausset,' p. xvii. Fausset here quotes from Bengel's 'Essay on the Right Way of Handling Divine Subjects,' which formed the prefix to the volume of 'Sermons' by J.C. Storr, publisher not listed, 1750.



So, we may deduce, the reader, according to Bengel, interacts with the scriptural text in that she or he may 'draw everything from [it],' and conversely, by implication, have the (illegitimate) power to insert meaning, or suppress it. Despite the stylistic differences displayed by each of the New Testament writers, a divinely inspired congruity characterises the whole. Every work within it is a source of enlightenment that awaits discovery, its heavenly source evident to all. Literal meaning is the primary concern of the 'true commentator,' though all annotators need the help of the Spirit to discern it. Bengel implies that it is possible to know the Holy Spirit's intended meaning for a given passage and thus avoid the mere contrivance of spiritual meaning. Moreover, historical concerns must inform interpretation, as without them spurious meanings may occur to us. 'Correct interpretation' will cease if we allow the quest for merely 'spiritual truths' to predominate. Those who pay closest attention to the text will produce the most reliable exposition.

Several passages from Bengel's Preface to his *Gnomon* further confirm the scholar's confidence in the certainty and clarity of the biblical text. However, they also display his belief in the necessity of guiding the reader towards correct understanding:

It is, in short, my intention briefly to *point out*, or *indicate*, the full force of words and sentences, in the New Testament, which, though really and inherently belonging to them, is not always observed by all at first sight, so that the reader, being introduced by the straight road, into the text, may find as rich pasture there as possible. The *Gnomon* points the way with sufficient clearness. If you are wise, the text itself teaches you all things.<sup>419</sup>

While it is true that the text possesses an obvious meaning that is discernible by the wise reader, the *Gnomon* serves to introduce her or him immediately to its authentic

---

<sup>419</sup> Fausset (rev. and ed.), *Gnomon of the New Testament by John Albert Bengel*, Volume I, The Author's Preface, Paragraph VII, (Edinburgh: T and T. Clark, 1857), p. 9. Cf. the Latin text: 'Hoc denique agitur, ut, quæ in sententiis verbisque Scripturæ N.T. sita *vis* est, neque tamen primo intuitu semper ab omnibus observatur, ea breviter *monstretur*, lectorque in textum recta introductus quam lautissime pascatur. *Nonni hil Indicii satis est in Gnomone factum: Omnia te textus, si sapis, ipse docet.*' Alberti Bengelii, *Gnomon Novi Testamenti*, PRÆFATIO VII, (There are no page numbers to the preface of the original Latin commentary).

sum and substance. We might say that this scholar wishes to retain a position of superior status for the New Testament text, in that the 'full force' of its words and sentences 'really and inherently [belong] to them.' However, he also argues for the necessity of an indicator, one of 'sufficient clearness,' to save the reader from initial misunderstanding.

He tells us that 'writings and commentaries' such as his *Gnomon* have several purposes: a) 'to preserve, restore or defend the purity of the *text*'; b) 'to exhibit the exact force of the language employed by any sacred writer'; c) 'to explain the *circumstances* under which any passage was uttered or written, or to which it refers'; and, d) 'to remove *errors* or abuses which have arisen in later times.'<sup>420</sup> However, not all those who have read the Christian scriptures have been in need of these helps; it is only those belonging to later periods that suffer lack. It is the commentaries that bring an equality before the text to the entire readership. Bengel states:

The first hearers required none of these things. Now however, it is the office of commentaries to effect and supply them in some measure, so that *the hearer of today, when furnished with their aid, may be in a condition similar to that of the hearer in primeval times who made use of no such assistance.*<sup>421</sup>

A commentary, therefore, when judiciously used alongside the scriptures, assures the reader of a refined experience of the text, an experience comparable to those who first perused it. Though, we learn, the primitive Christians had no need of aids to understand that which they read, their initial advantage over later readers becomes negligible when the moderns use reliable commentaries. The eighteenth century believer could discover the 'exact force' of the sacred writers' language, and the circumstances governing composition. These statements by Bengel remind us of Fish's discussion of the same issue: the perceptual standing of primitive and modern

---

<sup>420</sup> Fausset (rev. and ed.), *Gnomon of the New Testament by John Albert Bengel*, Volume I, The Author's Preface, Paragraph IV, p. 7.

<sup>421</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7. The Latin text is as follows: 'Nil horum desiderabant primi auditores: nunc autem commentariorum est, hæc quodammodo supplere, & efficere, ut *auditor hodie iis adjustus instar sit auditoris antique tali subsidio nil utentis.*' PRÆFATIO IV. The italics are in the original text.

readers before an ancient text. Within the Fishian rationale likewise, the readers contemporary to an author are in no more a privileged position than the readers of later generations. However, this is not because of the provision of an additional text - such as Bengel's commentary - that serves to heighten the understanding of modern readers to that of their forebears, and thus produce equality. Rather it is because both sets of readers experience provocation to an act of construction rather than an act of retrieval. Even in Iserian terms, since the blue-print for construction (in this case 1 John) is significantly incomplete - it displays gaps and blanks and indeterminacies - no instance of construction is more accurate, in the sense of being truer to an historically embodied meaning, than any other. Indeed, the first reader of 1 John had to complete the connections left unspecified in the text according to her or his "individual disposition." This theologian wishes us to accept the premise that he has not interpreted the New Testament. Rather he would have us think that he has merely provided an aid to facilitate the reader's immediate access to its meaning. Yet, according to our Fishian perspective, Bengel cannot do anything but interpret and, along with other readers, write the text of 1 John according to interpretive strategies.<sup>422</sup>

Regarding the fourth purpose of commentaries, the removal of later errors or abuses surrounding the text, it is an action extensively practised by Bengel as a commentator. For this scholar the task of protecting the reader from error had a high priority, as not all interpretations are worthy of admission:

It is better...for the weak to be wholly ignorant of opinions which are in themselves foolish, and would scarcely enter into the mind of any one, than to have them recorded in connection with the passages to which they refer (even though in each instance they be carefully and successfully refuted). We should fare badly, if, in order to ascertain the royal road to truth, it were necessary for us to obtain an accurate knowledge, and make a personal survey of all the tracks which lead away from it. - In fact the true interpretation is more frequently buried than assisted by a multitude of conflicting opinions. I have, however, guarded the reader against some erroneous interpretations of modern date, without either naming the authors or quoting their words.<sup>423</sup>

---

<sup>422</sup> See notes 249 - 250.

<sup>423</sup> Fausset (rev. and ed.), *Gnomon of the New Testament by John Albert Bengel*, Volume I, The Author's Preface, Paragraph XVII, p. 51. Cf. Bengel's Latin text: 'Ineptas vero sententias & vix cuiquam in mentem venturas, subinde commemoratas legere, minus juvat infirmos, quam

From this passage we may deduce that it is certain that we can arrive at 'the true interpretation' in every case. Bengel's scholarship acts as a sign that directs the reader along 'the royal road to truth' and blocks off any mere 'tracks' that he deems erroneous. So complete is the assurance displayed by this scholar that he excludes incredibly 'foolish' understandings of scripture on behalf of the 'weak' (and by this I presume he means 'impressionable') reader. Though he could 'carefully and successfully' refute these modern explanations, it would be detrimental to the process of obtaining 'an accurate knowledge' of any passage to explore such errors. The names of the perpetrators remain anonymous and their words excised. The reader enjoys the safety of reading only Bengel's cautiously directive account of the text, thus shielded from 'a multitude of conflicting opinions.' As an aside, we may remark here how the history of interpretation displays many such critical appeals to one true path and the censure of the numerous departures from it.

Having excluded the readings he disapproves of, Bengel nevertheless assures us that he recognises the value of interpretive historiography. That he does not undertake the task is simply because to do so is not the purpose of his *Gnomon*:

He who comprehends the intention of this work, will not expect to find differences of opinion carefully enumerated and laboriously refuted, with the names of their advocates and the titles of their works. It is expedient indeed that some should undertake that office, and deduce the history of Scriptural interpretation from century to century; few, however, possess the opportunity or the capacity for performing such a task; though there are many who can search out and bring together many particulars for the general advantage.<sup>424</sup>

---

ignorare. Male nobiscum ageretur, si ad regiam veritatis viam dignoscendam necellum eoset, omnia avia in numerato habere & pertentare: imo multitudo sententiarum veram interpretationem sæpius obruit, quam subministrat. Novis tamen quibusdam interpretationibus accurro, neque auctoribus neque verbis eorum citatis.' PRÆFATIO XVII.

<sup>424</sup> *Ibid.*, Paragraph XVII, p. 51. Bengel's Latin text reads thus: 'Opinionum divortia operose enumerata ac refutata, cum scriptorum nominibus & librorum titulis, non admodum requiret, qui, quid hic agatur, intelligit. Esse quosdam expedit, qui eas partes suscipiant, historiamque interpretationum vel per secula deducant: sed paucorum facultas est; nec desunt tamen, qui multa in utilitatem communem eruant & convehant.' PRÆFATIO XVII.

Herein, then, is an acknowledgement by the theologian that interpretations change, an admission made despite his overarching claim that the text contains unequivocal meaning. He seems to imply that although the compilation of interpretive development is a worthwhile task there exists only an élite who can perform it effectively.

As we move on from our examination of Bengel, our suggestions are that Wesley found in this scholar's work several assumptions that he shared, namely: the essential availability of authorial meaning within the text of 1 John; the coherence of that text; its importance as a guide to Christian holiness; the idea that 'Scripture is its own safest and best interpreter' and yet that there is a need to guide and inform the reader. We might comment regarding the last point that it is possible to view the need to guide and inform the reader as a desire to control her or him. Indeed, we might arraign Wesley's 'model deed' that we mentioned earlier as an example of such an effort to control.<sup>425</sup> With Bengel, Wesley tries to hold in tension the ideas of holiness (which Bengel sees from 3: 6 and 9 as a 'repugnance' to sin) and vulnerability to sin. Indeed, we may hypothesise that Wesley's resistance to sinless perfection may, in part, stem from the influence of Bengel. However, the Methodist leader differs from his exemplar in his insistence that 1: 8 and 10 refer to the period before new birth. Our scrutiny of the remaining works will reveal similar emphases to those that we have highlighted in Bengel's annotations.

#### **4. 2. Matthew Poole**

Looking at those commentaries in chronological order, and so first to the work of Matthew Poole (1688 and 1696), we discover that this is a posthumous publication 'being a continuation of Mr. Poole's work by certain judicious and learned divines.' The frontispiece declares that regarding the 'Sacred Text,' Poole (and the anonymous custodial contributors to his commentary) had created a work in which: 'the more difficult terms in each verse are explained. Seeming contradictions reconciled. Questions and doubts resolved. And the whole text opened.' Moreover, by quoting

---

<sup>425</sup> See note 325.

Nehemiah 8: 8 (AV) they align themselves with the priest Ezra and his companions in their interpretive role: 'So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused *them* to understand the reading.' Furthermore, they identify themselves with the evangelist Philip in his conversation with the Ethiopian: 'Understandest thou what thou readest?...How can I, except some man should guide me?' (Acts 8: 30, 31 AV). It seems that the commentators wished to appear as those who: a) had read the Bible 'correctly' on their own behalf, thereby solving perceived contradictions, questions and doubts; and, b) had the authority and ability to interpret the Scriptures on behalf of others. This impression becomes reinforced when we come to the special 'Preface to the Reader':

Our sincere design and endeavours have been to search and unfold the meaning of the Sacred Oracles; abhorring the impious arts of those who pervert the Scriptures from their Pure and native sense, to give colour and countenance to their private fancies.

Despite their confidence, however, there is an open acknowledgement from these divines that they had experienced some difficulties in interpreting certain texts:

Wherein we have mistaken their genuine sense (for who in the present state of infirmity and imperfection fully knows the mind of the Lord in them?) it has not been for want of Love to the Truth, nor of using the best helps within our compass [sic] for the clearing [of] the difficulties found in them.<sup>426</sup>

Turning to Poole's comments on 1 John chapters 1 and 3 we discover, as we might expect from a longer theological work, a more elaborate treatment of the issues than we find in Wesley's sermons or Notes. Also, the convoluted sentences of this seventeenth-century piece seem far removed from the Methodist leader's ideal of plainness of expression.

---

<sup>426</sup> Matthew Poole, *Annotations upon the Holy Bible* (London: Printed for Thomas Parkhurst, Dorman Newman, Johnathan Robinson, Brabazon Ailmer, and Thomas Cockerill, 1688), Volume II, Frontispiece and Preface.

Beginning at 1: 7, we note that the scholars speak of 'a continued and progressive motion' whereby believers: 'do *persevere* and *improve* in Holiness. Being transformed into the Holy Image and Likeness of God, and shewing themselves the *children of light, as he is Light, and the Father of Lights.*' However, they maintain that this emphasis in 1 John receives a qualification from the Apostle 'lest our Purity and Holiness should be thought to have deserved such a Privilege.' So, say the commentators, 'tis cautiously added' that it is the 'Blood...which alone expiath, or makes atonement for our sins.' It is both our 'former sinfulness and present imperfect Holiness' that 'render it impossible' for God to 'admit us to Communion with him for our own sakes, or without such an intervening Sacrifice.' Even if we 'further extend the notion of *cleansing*, so as to comprehend *internal subjective purification*' we must still attribute 'even that purifying influence, whereby we are qualify'd for present holy walking with God, and for final Blessedness in him...to the merit and procurement of the Redeemer's Blood.'

The act of 'saying', we learn, 'usually signifies the habitual bent and disposition of the heart and practice,' declare the commentators concerning 1: 8. Therefore, to 'say' that we have no sin indicates that we regard ourselves as 'so innocent creatures' as not to need the expiatory sacrifice of Christ, and that 'we may be admitted to Communion with God' on our own merit. To speak or think thus demonstrates that in our self-deceit 'The system and frame of Gospel Doctrine...hath no place with effect in us.'

However, the self-abasing confession of our sins (1: 9) results in God's faithful and just forgiveness based on the 'Atonements made by his Son.' Poole significantly remarks regarding the accompanying verb 'cleanse':

[The word] may either be added as a farther expression of the same thing [that is, divine forgiveness] or may, more-over, signifie his vouchsafing that purifying Influence of the Spirit of Christ (obtained also by his Blood) which shall both purge away, and prevent the Defilements that would render us incapable of his own holy Communion.

The phrases 'which shall both purge away...and prevent the Defilements' seem to indicate that Poole envisioned a twin aspect of God's work that involved: a) the forgiveness of past sins and, b) a purifying and safeguarding influence against future transgression. This impression becomes stronger when we read the comment attached to 1: 10. Believers will not receive admittance into 'God's holy Society and *Communion* under the notion of [having been] *always innocent*.' Rather, they will only enjoy fellowship with him 'as pardoned and purified sinners.' Not only must a person's former sins be forgiven, but she or he must experience purification for future conversance with God.<sup>427</sup> As we know, Wesley's sermons display a comparable emphasis to that which we find here regarding progressive growth in holiness, the folly of self-righteousness and the value of Christ's blood as the sole means of expiation and communion. However, Poole holds that 1: 8 and 10 apply to the believer's ongoing relationship with God.

Poole's treatment of our verses in chapter three, and their relationship with those in the first chapter, entails the inclusion of evidence from the other works in the Johannine corpus and elsewhere: 'The Apostle's notion of committing Sin, may be interpreted by his own Phrase, 3d *Epist.* v.II. ὁ κακοποιῶν, *a Doer of Evil*; and by *that*, used in both Testaments, *a Worker of Iniquity*.' This use of 3 John 11 forms the basis of the following exegesis of 1 John 3: 6 to 9.

A 'doer of evil' in 3 John 11 is not a person who has committed 'any one single act of sin,' just as ὁ ἀγαθοποιῶν ('a doer of good') in the same verse, and ὁ ποιῶν τὴν δικαιοσύνην ('a doer of righteousness') in 1 John 3: 7, do not refer to 'every one that doth any one righteous or good Action.' Rather, the term refers to 'him who hath acquir'd the habitual skill, and doth ordinarily imply [sic] himself accordingly.' Therefore, we may conclude that ὁ ποιῶν τὴν ἁμαρτίαν, or 'a Maker of Sin' in Poole's translation of 1 John 3: 8, designates a 'habitual or customary Sinner...one that Sinneth with deliberation, not by surprize [sic], [but] from a prevailing Habit.'

---

<sup>427</sup> *Ibid.*, 'The First Epistle of John,' Chapter I, verses 7 - 10. [This edition does not contain page numbers].



Such a habit either maintains him in 'a Course of *actual known Sin*,' or 'with-holds him from repenting sincerely.' The repentance envisioned by Poole is of an order unknown to 'an im-penitent Person.' She or he may, 'upon other inducements,' 'refrain from further gross Acts of Sin.' However, the Christian must so repent as to 'mortify and prevail against all sinful Habits and Inclinations.' It seems that a believer may reach a state of success in subduing the power of sin by means not only of the initial act of repentance at conversion, but by a lifelong practice of repentance. I propose that in this passage we have a possible influence on the Methodist concerning repentance as an abiding feature of the Christian life. The believer's acts of repentance remain a necessary feature of the Christian life because of her or his vulnerability - sin 'remains but does not reign.' On the other hand, repentance also plays its part to usher in a liberty from sin.

Bringing in evidence from verses 6 and 9 at this point, the commentator tells us that the allusions to sinning in these verses refer to exactly the type of habitual, customary and deliberate transgression depicted in 3: 8. One who sins in this manner the Apostle regards as 'of the devil' insofar that she or he is '*born of him*, were his Child, really conformed to him, and having his sinning nature' [Cf. John 8: 34; 44]. Introducing, then, the idea of being 'Born of God,' Poole says that this latter expression is 'elliptical in reference to the former.' Yet, the original work of the devil, that is sin, receives an obliterative stroke on the appearance of the Son of God, whose purpose is to '*dissolve the Frame* of all such Works' [3: 5].

Quoting (without supplying a reference) from 'a very learned Annotator, Dr. Hammond'<sup>428</sup> (and here we discover a still earlier layer of reading - a theologian studied by Poole or his custodians), Poole defines the phrase 'born of God' in 3: 9 as the state of 'having received some special Influence from God, and by the help and power of *that*, to be raised to a pious Life.' Once entered into this state the believer

---

<sup>428</sup> From my examination of the catalogues of the Bodleian and British Libraries I have concluded that the theologian referred to here is Dr. Henry Hammond (1605 - 1660). Of all his published works I think that Poole in this instance alludes to *A Paraphrase and Annotations upon all the Books of the New Testament, Briefly Explaining all the Difficult Places Thereof*, (London: Printed by J. Flesher for Richard Royston, 1653). The British Library hold the Second Edition of this commentary.

becomes 'sincerely changed from *all* Evil to *all* Good.' However, we must note that the phrase does not simply denote 'the Act of this Change...the single transient Act of Regeneration, or Reformation' that has occurred in the past. Rather, it connotes 'a continued course, a permanent state' in which the believer 'lives a pious and godly life, and continues to do so.' It seems at this point that Poole propounds a form of perfectionism akin to Wesley's, at least as the Methodist leader saw it in 1741. At that stage, we remember, he emphasised very strongly the element of freedom from all sin.

At this juncture, Poole addresses the problematic comparison of 3: 6, 9 with 1: 8. Though the Apostle asserts that the one born of God 'does not commit sin,' the commentator emphasises that this should 'not be understood simply, as if he could not sin at all,' for this would be 'to contradict what he had said before, *chap. 1.8.*' There is no contradiction to solve, says Poole: "tis plain, the Apostle intends by these two Expressions the same thing.' The Christian 'cannot sin' in the sense that she or he cannot:

do an Act of known, gros [sic] Sin, deliberately, easily, remorselessly, maliciously, as Cain v.12. out of an hatred of Goodness: Or do not such Acts customarily, or not so unto *Death*, (as *chap. 5: 16*).

Instead, 'through the advantage of inlaid Principles, or the remaining Seed,' and 'by dependence upon the Grace, Spirit, and Covenant of God in Christ,' the Christian will 'recover.' That is, because he is born of God, 'in as much as it belongs to his Temper and Inclination, in respect of the holy new Nature receiv'd in Regeneration' he will 'abhor from the grosser Acts, [and] much more from a Course of Sin.' So, the believer, upheld solely by the virtue of the divine 'remaining Seed,' may not only resist the malicious perpetration of the worst sins, but also the routine practice of sin. However, the stress Poole lays is on the necessary reliance upon God for holy living - the Christian is not intrinsically immune from sin. Though God has forgiven the sin of our pre-Christian state, this is no basis for complacency. We will always remain dependent on divine grace.

The 'Child of God' has an 'Interest in the Grace of Christ.' Being born of God the Christian 'may and ought' to expect God to keep him from the dominance of sin. The believer 'may implore, trust, obtain, and improve' his claim on that Grace to keep him 'from such destructive sinning.' There may be clear evidence of 'his deep and thorow [sic] Change, that [proves that] he is born of God'; nevertheless, the believer must not cherish 'presumptuous negligence' in his anticipation of holiness. There must always be an attitude of 'Vigilance and humble Dependence' within him. The commentators assert confidently that, in comparison with the 'boasts' of some 'pagans' who claim that 'one might as soon divert the Sun from its Course...as turn [one of their adherents] from the Course of Righteousness,' it is not 'strange' that 'so much should be affirm'd upon so unspeakably better Grounds...of the *Christian state*.' However, in an interesting aside about 3: 9 they qualify this assertion by remarking:

Tho [sic] we may also suppose this Form of Speech might be intended by the Apostle to be understood by the more superficial Professors of Christianity, (who might be generally apt enough to look upon themselves as born of God, and his Children) as *parenetical*, and more *enforcingly hortatory*, in pursuance of his former Scope, to keep them off from their licentious Courses of their Seducers; q.d. *It cannot be*, that you who avow your selves born of God, should do like them. So we usually say, that *cannot but be*, or *cannot be*, which we apprehend more highly and clearly reasonable should be, or not be. *Non pates avelli, &c.* Such Rhetorick the Apostle uses with *Agrippa, I know thou believest*, as if it were impossible he should not.

Although the emphasis remains upon the stated holiness of the believer, the annotators propose that there may be a rhetorical element in 3: 6 and 9 intended to influence less committed Christians, a rhetoric designed to persuade them of their divinely imparted sanctity, and thus encourage their rejection of the 'Seducers.' Alluding to such a group in this manner seems to represent a limited attempt at historical reconstruction by Poole.<sup>429</sup>

---

<sup>429</sup> Matthew Poole, *Annotations upon the Holy Bible*, Volume II., 'The First Epistle of John,' Chapter III, verses 6 - 10. To make a general note here regarding forms of speech, Stanley Fish displays a sensitivity to how, even where there seems to be agreement about 'what someone has said,' there remains dispute about the 'force' of the utterance. Thus, there is always room for this kind of rhetorical play. See *Doing What Comes Naturally*, 'Rhetoric' and 'Force,' pp. 471 - 524.

### **4. 3. Matthew Henry**

For Matthew Henry, who was the next to write (in 1725), chapter 1 verse 7 is a 'beatific communication to us.' The cleansing by Christ's blood 'dischargeth us from the guilt of all sin, both original and actual, inherent and committed; and so far we stand righteous in his sight: and not only so, but his blood procures for us those sacred influences by which sin is to be subdued more and more, 'till it is quite abolished, *Gal. iii. 13, 14.*' Thus, having explained a comprehensive cleansing from sin this commentator declares that the blood has further benefits for Christians, namely the progressive subdual, and eventual abolition, of sin. However, regarding verses 8 to 10 Henry discusses an apostolic supposition that believers 'have yet their sin' (which is precisely the emphasis we find in Wesley's argument that sin 'remains,' though he does not use these verses to pursue it). Justifying that supposition, St. John shows the dreadful consequences of denying sinfulness, not least self-deceit. Henry sees in the apostle's words a recommendation that 'the more we see [our sins], the more we shall esteem and value the remedy' (this is, again, an accent in Wesley's exposition). The Christian religion 'is the religion of sinners; of such as have sinned, and in whom sin, in some measure still dwells.' Therefore, the Christian life is 'a life of continued repentance, humiliation for, and mortification of sin.' Coupled with this self-abasement is a continual faith, thankfulness and love expressed towards 'the Redeemer,' and a hopeful, joyful, expectation of a day of redemption 'in which the believer shall be fully and finally acquitted and sin abolished forever.'

Dealing specifically with the denial of sin in 1: 10, Henry says that God has testified to the 'continued sin and sinfulness of the world' by providing Christ's sacrifice for sin 'which will be needed in all ages.' Furthermore, God's testimony extends 'to the continued sinfulness of believers themselves, by requiring them to confess their sins, and apply themselves by faith to the Blood of that sacrifice.' A denial 'either that we have not sinned or do not yet sin' simply proves the absence of the divine word in both the heart and mind. Penitent confession and acknowledgement

of sin (1: 9) is 'the believer's business, and the means of his deliverance from its guilt.' The 'contrite confessor' will enjoy forgiveness of 'all his sins,' and cleansing 'from the guilt of all unrighteousness; and in due time deliver[ance]...from the power and practice of it.'<sup>430</sup>

It is noteworthy, then, that on the one hand the commentator looks forward to 'a day of glorious redemption' as the occasion when Christians receive full and final acquittal and sin becomes 'abolished forever'; while on the other he appears to refer to a process in this life whereby sin, being 'subdued more and more' by 'sacred influences,' finally becomes 'abolished.' On this latter point, he adds that despite the 'continued sinfulness of believers,' in 'due time' there remains a deliverance both from the 'power' and the 'practice' of sin. Henry writes of the believer's 'obligation to purity.' The Son of God came to 'take away the guilt of [our sins] by the sacrifice of himself,' and to 'take away the commission of them by implanting a new nature in us.'

The exposition of chapter 3: 6 - 9 starts with a statement that the sin referred to in verse 6 is 'the same as to commit sin, *ver.* 8, 9.' We discover that: 'to commit sin is to practice sin. He that abideth in Christ continues not in the practise [sic] of sin. As vital union with the Lord Jesus broke the power of sin in the heart and nature; so continuance therein prevents the regency and prevalence thereof in the life and conduct.' The 'practice of sin and a justified state are inconsistent.' Christ's destruction of the works of the devil (3: 8) prompts the annotator to state: 'Sin will he loosen and dissolve more and more, till he has quite destroyed it. Let not us serve or indulge what the Son of God came to destroy.' There is 'a connexion between regeneration and the relinquishment of sin.' Inward renewal and restoration by the Spirit of God explain the expression 'born of God'; those so born gain 'a holy integrity or rectitude of nature.' The believer 'does not work iniquity and practice disobedience that is contrary to his new nature and the regenerate complexion of his spirit.' This is

---

<sup>430</sup> Matthew Henry, *An Exposition of All the Books of the Old and New Testament* (6 vols. London: Printed for John and Paul Knapton in *Ludgate Street*, Thomas Cox under the *Royal-Exchange*, Richard Ford and Richard Hett both in the *Poultry*, Aaron Ward in *Little-Britain*, and Thomas Longman in *Pater Noster Row*, First Published 1725, Fourth Edition 1738). Volume V, Including 'An Exposition of the First Epistle General of John, With Practical Observations,' chapter I, verses 7 - 10 [This edition does not contain page numbers].

because of the presence of the divine 'seed' in him - a seed defined by Henry as 'either the word of God, in its light and power,' or, 'the spiritual seminal principle of holiness.' As religion is not an art, 'an acquired dexterity and skill,' but rather 'a new nature,' 'the consequence is, the regenerate person *cannot sin*.'

Breaking off his discussion momentarily, Henry makes the following comment:

that he cannot commit an act of sin, I suppose no judicious interpreter understands. That would be contrary to *chap. i. 9*. where it is made our duty to confess our sins, and supposed our privilege thereupon to have our sins forgiven. *He therefore cannot sin*, in the sense that the apostle says, *he cannot commit sin*. He cannot continue in the course and practice of sin.

Thus, this commentator, clearly aware of an interpretive dilemma here, suggests that prudent and sensible interpreters will reject an overtly perfectionist understanding of 3: 9. Moreover, he seeks to maintain an association between 3: 9 and 1: 9, so avoiding contradiction. To reinforce an essential element in his harmonisation of the two verses, that the sin referred to by St. John is that which is continual and practised, Henry proposes that these verses serve to differentiate the saint from the sinner (a differentiation Wesley also wanted to make, but without a direct reference to 1: 8 and 10). The believer 'cannot so sin, as to denominate him as sinner.' He 'cannot sin comparatively, as he did before he was born of God, and as others do that are not so.' The state of being born of God is one that provides an 'inhibition and impediment' to sin. A 'light in his mind' shows the believer 'the evil and malignity of sin.' There is now 'that bias upon his heart, that disposes him to loath and hate sin.' Furthermore, there is

the spiritual, seminal principle or disposition that breaks the force and fulness of the sinful acts. They proceed not from that plenary power of corruption as they do in others, nor obtain that plenitude of heart, spirit and consent, as they do in others. *The Spirit lusteth against the flesh* [Cf Gal. 5: 17 AV]. And therefore in respect to such sin it may be said, *it is no more I that do it but sin that dwelleth in me* [Rom. 7: 17 AV]. It is not reckoned the person's sin in the gospel account, where the bent and frame of the mind and spirit is against it...There is a disposition for humiliation and repentance for sin, when it has been committed.

Henry says that in St. John's assertion of 3: 9 'we may call to mind the usual distinction of natural and moral impotency.' The unregenerate person 'is morally unable for what is religiously good,' but, 'the regenerate person is (happily) disabled for sin.' Operating within the regenerate person is 'a restraint, an embargo (as we may say) laid upon his sinning powers...It goes against him sedately and deliberately to sin.' Just as is 'usually said of a person of known integrity, he cannot lie, he cannot cheat and commit other enormities...so,' declares the commentator, 'they that persist in sinful life, sufficiently demonstrate that they are not born of God.'<sup>431</sup>

#### **4. 4. Philip Doddridge**

Now we must look at two commentaries that appeared during the same period - the 1730s to the 1740s - those of Philip Doddridge and John Guyse. These are the last of the commentaries favoured by Wesley that we will explore (as John Heylyn's 1761 work simply includes a translation of 1 John, so we may pass over it without remark). Turning to the commentary of Philip Doddridge D.D. (first published in 1739), from the first remark on the text we note that Doddridge has realised various interpretive dilemmas in reading 1 John:

In the stile [sic] of this *Apostle* there is a remarkable Peculiarity; and especially in this Epistle. His sentences, considered separately, are exceedingly clear and intelligible; but when we search for their Con-nection [sic], we frequently meet with greater Difficulties than we do even in the Epistles of St Paul [...] His conceptions are apparently delivered to us in the Order in which they arose to his own mind, and are not the Product of artificial Reasoning, or laboured Investigation.<sup>432</sup>

So, says the commentator, it is when we search for the connection between the sentences in 1 John that we meet problems in understanding the Apostle's message. This is, we learn, because the epistle is the product of natural and artless thought rather

---

<sup>431</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter III, verses 4 - 10.

<sup>432</sup> Philip Doddridge, *Family Expositor; Or a Paraphrase and Version of the New Testament, with Critical Notes* (6 vols. London: Printed and sold by J. Waugh and W. Fenner, at the *Turk's-Head* in Lombard Street, and J. Buckland, at the *Buck*, in Pater-Noster Row. First Volume Published in 1739. The copy held by the Bodleian bears the date 1756) Volume VI including 'A General Introduction to the Paraphrase and Notes on the First Catholic Epistle of St. John,' p. 320.

than intellectual artifice. In the subsequent pages Doddridge seeks to correlate these sentences, or as we may say with Iser fill the 'blanks,' 'gaps,' 'places [or 'spots'] of indeterminacy' and 'vacancies' that lie between the 'definable points of instruction.'

Dealing initially with chapter one verse seven, the commentator tells us that it is within the encompass of the light of holiness that we become 'indeed conscious to ourselves of many past Offences, for which so holy a GOD might for ever banish us from his Presence, *and* of many remaining Imperfections, which might discourage our Approaches to him.'<sup>433</sup> However, we have the consolation of the blood cleansing our sins 'be they ever so numerous, or ever so heinous.' This is a consolation 'which we absolutely need' (1: 8). Denial of the need is gross self-deception and a revelation that we 'must be destitute of every good Principle, [and are] are utterly insensible of our own Guilt and Imperfection.'

Confession of our sin (1: 9) 'with a becoming Lowliness and Contrition of spirit' results in forgiveness and cleansing from '*all Unrighteousness* by his atoning Blood, and the Influence of that Sanctifying Spirit, which it has purchased for us.' Our confidence and security may safely rest on this foundation of mercy and grace, and we may 'often renew our Applications to it.' It is 'rash and presumptuous' to say that we have not sinned, in doing so we lie and, moreover, 'make [God] a Lyar.' The 'Constitution of the Gospel' sent by God to all people 'goes on a supposition, that every soul to whom it is addressed, is under Guilt and Condemnation.' Consequently, if we 'assert and maintain our own personal Innocence,' we demonstrate 'that this humbling Message of his Grace has never been cordially received by us, nor hath produced its genuine Effects in our Hearts.'<sup>434</sup>

In the further remarks on the text that appear under the title 'Improvement,' Doddridge writes of the advantage gained from the divine forgiveness that answers confession: 'Instead of being, as we deserved, *Companions* in Condemnation and Ruin, we shall *share together* in that compleat [sic] Freedom from all the penal

---

<sup>433</sup> *Ibid.*, Section I, p. 325.

<sup>434</sup> *Ibid.*, Section I, pp. 325 - 327.



Consequences of Sin, which will be the Portion of all those who truly repent and obey the Gospel.<sup>435</sup> This commentator, then, appears to opt for an interpretation of 1: 7 - 10 that emphasises God's remittal of the believer's sin, and the consequent removal of the threat of judicial punishment.

When we reach the section dealing with chapter three, we discover that the annotator lays the ground for his interpretation of the relevant verses at 3: 5. The manifestation of Christ contained the design to '*take away* the Guilt and Power of *our Sins*.' The atonement and 'Sanctifying Influences of his Spirit' accomplish this design. Christ is entirely pure. He is 'of the most opposite Nature' to sinners. Given the purity of Christ, Doddridge says that '[i]t is plain therefore' that those who abide in him (3: 6) do not sin. They 'cannot make a trade and practice of it.' Everyone 'who thus habitually and allowedly' sins has not seen or known Christ: 'His Views and knowledge of him have been so super-ficial as that they deserve not to be mentioned, since they have not conquered the Love and Prevalence of sin and brought the man to a holy temper and Life.'<sup>436</sup> Regarding the proviso 'Every one who habitually and allowedly sinneth,' we discover that:

It seems absolutely necessary to interpret the expression *thus, not only* to prevent some of the best Christians from falling into Despair, on Account of those Reminders of Sinful Imperfection, which their very *Eminence* in Religion causes them to discern, and to *lament*; while others, evidently their inferiors, are vain and ignorant enough to conclude themselves *perfect* and lacking nothing; but likewise to make one scripture consistent with another, (compare *Jam. iii.2.*) and even to reconcile this assertion to other Passages in the Epistle before us. (See chap. i. 8, - 10.)<sup>437</sup>

So, there is a necessity to gloss 'whosoever abideth in him sinneth not' (3: 6 AV) by making the term 'sin' refer solely to habitual and deliberate transgression. This necessity arises partly from a danger that sensitive Christians reading the verse may misunderstand it, thinking that God required absolute moral perfection, and regard themselves as failing to meet this standard. A contrast exists between these perceptive

---

<sup>435</sup> *Ibid.*, Section I, 'Improvement,' p. 328.

<sup>436</sup> *Ibid.*, Section IV, p. 345.

<sup>437</sup> *Ibid.*, Section IV, p. 346.

believers, acutely sensible of their remaining propensity to sin, and 'inferior' colleagues, who, in their arrogant and unenlightened minds, interpret the verse as a confirmation of the perfection that they imagine that they have attained; the former could suffer despondency by wrongly interpreting the verse, despite the 'eminence' of their piety. However, we must also explain 3: 6 in these terms in order to 'make one scripture consistent with another,' and, this being the significant point for us, 'even to reconcile this assertion [that whoever abides in God does not sin] to other passages in the Epistle' (that is 1: 8 - 10). Believers 'cannot make a trade and practice of it.'

The exegesis of 3: 5 and 6 governs our understanding of 3: 9. Doddridge declares that everyone who is born of God '*doth not practise [sic] Sin.*' The divine 'Seed' abiding in the Christian is 'an immortal Principle implanted by God in the Heart, which will not suffer a Man, who hath received it, entirely to overbear it; *and he cannot sin, in such a Manner and to such a Degree as others.*' It is 'certain,' says the commentator, that we must take the words 'cannot sin' in 'a *qualified Sense.*' If we do not thus qualify the phrase it will serve to prove not only the '*sinless perfection*' of every Christian, 'but also the '*Impeccability* of every such Person, or the '*Impossibility* of his sinning.' According to the commentator 'none have been wild and enthusiastical [sic] enough to assert' this. He remarks: 'It must therefore, I think, be understood only as expressing a *Strong Disinclination* to sin, in the Kind and Degree referred to before.'<sup>438</sup> Concluding his comments in a further 'Improvement,' Doddridge adds regarding 3: 9 and 10:

And instead of flattering ourselves that tho' [sic] we do commit Sin with Allowance, yet there may be some secret Seed of God still concealed in our Hearts, let us judge of our having received this *regenerating Seed*, by its Tendency to preserve us *from Sin*, and the Victories it enables us to gain over its destructive Wiles and insufferable Tyranny.<sup>439</sup>

Doddridge's comments that a regenerate person 'cannot make a trade and practice' of sin, that she or he cannot 'habitually and allowedly' sin, '*cannot sin*, in

---

<sup>438</sup> *Ibid.*, Section IV, pp. 346 - 347.

<sup>439</sup> *Ibid.*, Section IV, 'Improvement,' p. 349.

such a Manner and to such a Degree as others,' bear a similarity to the sort of explication that Wesley denounced as an attempt to modify the perfectionist thrust of 3:9. Indeed, we have perceived this type of reasoning in the commentaries of the theologians we have studied previously. We remember that in the sermon 'Christian Perfection' dated 1741 Wesley spoke of some (unnamed) ministers who had glossed the verse in this way: the one who is born of God 'sinneth not *wilfully*; or he doth not commit sin *habitually*; or, *not as other men do*; or, *not as he did before*.<sup>440</sup> A faithful person does not sin with the liberty of her or his former life, but nonetheless remains subject to the power of sin. Wesley disapproved of such a response to the verse and declared that no annotations of this kind appear 'in any part of [St. John's] writings whatsoever.' Here is an example of an interpretation that the Methodist leader excluded in 1741, even though it came from theologians that he admired. However, our earlier investigations have showed that by 1763 Wesley had moved nearer to this position himself. At that stage, in his effort to refute the notion of sinless or guiltless perfection, he assured his audience that though sin has suffered dethronement at the new birth it '*remains* indeed where [it] once reigned; but remains *in chains*.' It 'in some sense' prosecutes the war against the Christian, but becomes increasingly enfeebled, 'while the believer goes on from strength to strength, conquering and to conquer.'<sup>441</sup>

#### **4. 5. John Guyse**

Finally, we come to the commentary published by John Guyse during the period 1739 - 1742. Walking truly 'in the Light of Gospel-Revelation,' says Guyse of 1:7, Christians may 'then have the best of all Communion,' with God and fellow believers. The 'one great blessing, and even the Foundation' of this communion is the atoning blood of Christ. This blood is 'continually efficacious for cleansing us from the Guilt, Condemnation and Power of all our sins; and, at length, from all remaining

---

440 See note 291.

441 See note 344.

Defilement and In-being of sin, which, for his sake, shall be intirely [sic] purged away.' Sin 'will have no more Place in us, or bad Effects upon us.' However, the entire purification from sin will become effective only on the occasion of Christ's second advent: 'but we shall be as like as possible to him when we shall see him as he is (chap. iii. 2).'<sup>442</sup>

Guyse informs us that 'sin came into the World with us, and can't be utterly extirpated till we die out of it.' It is ignorance, pride, vanity and an act of the imagination that lead believers to suppose that, 'in this present State of Weakness and Mortality by reason of sin,' we have become 'so throughly [sic] cleansed from it, as to have no Reminders of its Workings in us.' To say that we have no sin [1: 8] goes against the 'Truth of God's Word, which abundantly declares the contrary.'<sup>443</sup>

The required confession of sin [1: 9] 'under a humbling sense of our Imperfections and many disallowed Failures,' leads to a comprehensive pardon. Along with this exoneration God will 'purge our Consciences from Guilt; and...cleanse us from the reigning power and Defilement of all our Iniquities by the Sanctification of the Spirit.' This sanctification appears to occur during earthly existence for we note that it will 'purify our Hearts and Lives, that we may be fit for Communion with him in this World, till we be *presented faultless before the Presence of his Glory with exceeding Joy* in the World to come (Jud. Ver. 24).'

To continue 'to assert that we have not transgressed the Law of God, so as to need Pardon' is not to only 'make God himself a Liar [1: 10],' but is also to deny the truth of his Word 'the very nature of which supposes us to be sinners, and is designed to bring us to a humble, penitent Confession of sin...(ver. 9).' Further, this Word holds the divine aim to bring us to 'Faith in the Redeemer's Blood for the Remission of

---

<sup>442</sup> John Guyse, *A Practical Exposition of the Epistle to the Galatians And from thence forward to the End of Revelation, in the Form of a Paraphrase, with Occasional Notes*. 3 vols. London: Printed for John Oswald, at the *Rose and Crown* in the Poultry. First Published 1739 - 1742. The Bodleian Edition dated 1752), Volume III, containing 'The First Epistle General of St. John,' p. 674.

<sup>443</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 674.

it, (*ver.* 7) and for Victory over it, till we shall be completely delivered from the Whole of Sin in that heavenly *Jerusalem*...<sup>444</sup>

Making additional comments on chapter one in a division he calls 'Recollections,' Guyse writes of the 'Blood of Christ...effectually applied to us for the Remission of all our sins, and for subduing their power within us.' In faithfulness and justice God will 'pass by our Transgressions...and gradually sanctify and cleanse us from all iniquity; 'till, at length, in a better world, we shall *be holy, and without Blemish; not having spot, or Wrinkle, or any such Thing* [Cf. Eph. 5: 27 AV].'<sup>445</sup> So, it seems that this commentator envisioned a gradual progression in holiness culminating in a perfection granted to the believer in a future 'better world.'<sup>445</sup> This view is diametrically opposite to that held by Wesley in 1741. For the Methodist leader the affirmation of 4: 17 - 'as he is, so are we in this world' [AV] - is enough to counter the idea that believers may only enjoy Christian perfection in heaven. Recalling this assertion from the sermon 'Christian Perfection' Wesley says that the verse appears in the text as if St. John had foreseen the same sort of evasion now perpetrated by certain annotators 'and set himself to overturn it from the foundation.' The verses 1: 5 - 9 prove 'exactly agreeable' to 4: 17 in that the Apostle evidently 'speaks of a deliverance wrought "in this world."<sup>446</sup> The 'cleansing' spoken of in chapter one is the turning point in a person's life when she or he begins to live a life free from sin's power as depicted by 3: 6 and 9. Despite this disagreement, Wesley would concur with Guyse in the notion of a gradual sanctification and cleansing taking place in the Christian's life, though he would add that God may perform these actions in an instant should it please him to do so.

A 'strict and proper notion of sin' for Guyse is 'a Deviation from, or contrariety in Thought, Word, or Deed to, the Law of God, that in-changeable Rule of Righteousness, which is a Transcript of his holy Nature and Will.' The commentator focuses on those who 'liv[e] in any known sin, as a wilful Evil doer, or Worker of

---

<sup>444</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter I, verses 7 - 10, pp 674 - 675.

<sup>445</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter I, 'Recollections,' p. 676.

<sup>446</sup> See note 301.

Iniquity [3: 4].<sup>447</sup> He especially refers to 'the allowed Practice of any sin' as such sin 'is utterly inconsistent with good Hope of seeing Christ, and being like him, at his second coming.' It is 'evident' that sin of this deliberate kind militates against 'the whole Tenor of the Gospel.' Christ became manifest [3: 5] and sacrificed himself that 'he might effectually deliver us from the Guilt, and in consequence thereof, from the Power, and at length, from all Defilement and In-being of our sins.' From this 'it plainly follows' that whoever abides in him 'doth not deliberately, habitually, presumptuously and willingly sin [3: 6].'<sup>447</sup>

Now Guyse directs us to a lengthy footnote. 'We are not to imagine,' he declares, 'the Apostle's Meaning to be, that a true Christian never sins.' As in the case with the other commentators we have studied, this annotator's concern is with the text's consistency. To understand 3: 6 and 9 in terms of sinlessness would be:

to make [St. John] contradict what he had said, *Chap. i. 8, 9*, about *deceiving ourselves, if we say we have no sin*, and about the duty of *confessing our sins*, which supposes us to have Occasion to do so. And therefore *he sinneth not* must be understood in some such sense...and is sufficiently explained in several other Verses of this context.<sup>448</sup>

Referring to the Greek text, Guyse informs us that the expressions ποιῶν and ποιεῖ ἁμαρτίαν are 'very strong.' They signify 'committing [sin] as *Practisers, Workers, or Doers* of it with Freedom and Choice, like persons who make a Trade of it.' Moreover, Guyse declares:

[I]t is the very same Expression that our Lord used when he said, (*John viii. 34*) *Whoever committeth Sin* (ὁ ποιῶν τὴν ἁμαρτίαν) *is the Servant of Sin;* and our Apostle says, *ver. 8, He that committeth Sin* (ὁ ποιῶν [τὴν] ἁμαρτίαν) *is of the Devil,* and *ver. 9, whoever is born of God doth not commit Sin* (ἁμαρτίαν οὐ ποιεῖ).<sup>449</sup>

---

<sup>447</sup> John Guyse, *A Practical Exposition of the Epistle to the Galatians And from thence forward to the End of Revelation, in the Form of a Paraphrase, with Occasional Notes*, Chapter III, verses 4 - 9, p 688

<sup>448</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter III, verse 6, Footnote, p. 688.

<sup>449</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter III, verse 6, Footnote, p. 688.

Resuming the main text, this commentator reaches his judgement on the one who sins 'deliberately, habitually, presumptuously and willingly.' Guyse pronounces: 'He that sinneth, at this Rate, has never had any realizing [sic] View by Faith of him, nor any experimental and saving Acquaintance, or Communion with him.'<sup>450</sup> He has already effectively sought to reassure us that the Apostle does not require sinlessness. However the annotator emphasises that a purposeful inclination to sin receives St. John's condemnation. The believer, according to Guyse, may enjoy a measure of liberation from sin in this life, and full deliverance in heaven. Yet, it seems that there is a tension in this commenator, as in the others we have studied, as to the extent of the holiness achievable by divine grace during earthly life. We note this tension in Guyse's concluding comments. God's purpose remains thus:

[That] they, who believe in Christ Jesus, and hope to live with him, and to be like him for ever...may be delivered from the Guilt and Dominion of sin, and live no longer in it here; and might, at length, be intirely [sic] freed from all Remainders of it, and from all its dreadful Fruits and Effects for ever hereafter.

Whosoever he be that is a partaker of a divine nature by the regenerating Spirit, is no longer a Doer or a worker of Iniquity like other Men, or like the Devil...For that divine Principle of Grace, which is infused into him, by means of the incorruptible Seed of the Word (1 *Pet.* i. 23) has an abiding Root and Residence in him, to rule and govern him; and he has such a thorough Hatred of all Iniquity, that he cannot give himself Liberty to sin with Deliberation and full Consent, as he used to do...he cannot love and live in sin.<sup>451</sup>

Should the believer sin through 'Temptation, Surprize [sic], or Inadvertence,' on the instant of conviction he 'cannot but sorely repent' as did David and Peter. This is because he has received 'a Principle of Grace, that wills and works in direct Opposition to all Sin.' He certainly cannot sin 'as though his new birth were a Licence for it, or had any Tendency towards it.'<sup>452</sup>

---

<sup>450</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter III, verse 6, p. 688.

<sup>451</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter III, verses 8 and 9, Footnote, pp. 689 - 690.

<sup>452</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter III, verse 9, p. 690.

## **4. 6. The Exegeses of Wesley and His Luminaries -**

### **A Brief Comparison**

We have now completed our survey of the commentaries favoured by Wesley. It seems that there are two associated points of divergence between Wesley and the theologians that he admired. These are: i) the sphere of application of 1: 8 and 10; and, ii) the extent to which believers enjoy freedom from sin in this life. It appears also that there are points of convergence, such as: a) the necessity of holiness in the life of the believer; b) the perceived importance to maintain the coherence of the text; and, c) the belief that the text has an inherent meaning that is readily accessible to all, though it may need some explanation. Moreover, we may contend that there is some evidence that the Methodist leader modified his stance on perfectionism in line with the interpretations put forward by the annotators he had studied. On this point, we could say that he used several of their explanations to counter those who propounded sinless, or guiltless, perfection. He consequently affirmed that sin, and the propensity to sin, not only dwells in the individual before conversion, but remains in her or him after new birth. However, Wesley continued to claim that God may graciously grant release from sin during the Christian's lifetime, either by degrees or instantaneously. Taking our entire survey into account I propose that, despite any differences among them, Wesley stands as part of this interpretive community of theologians whom he regarded as aids in promoting his 'third alternative' against those who, in his eyes, advanced a new doctrine.

Concerning the solution to our problem, we have seen how the annotators endorsed by Wesley have used 1: 8 and 10 as the touchstone for their exegesis of 3: 6 and 9. Because the verses in the first chapter apply, they say, to the post - as well as pre - conversion state, it must be the case that St. John intended the verses in the third chapter to mean that believers can enjoy a form of relief from the power of sin, but certainly not a complete emancipation from it. Thus, the overriding concern of these theologians is to ensure that the perceived congruity of the scriptures remains intact.



The verses in chapter three cannot mean that the believer can no longer sin for they would thus contradict those in the first chapter.

Our opening words by William Cowper encapsulate something of the interpretive stance of Wesley and his affiliates. To them, the hypotheses of certain other biblical critics were indeed 'absurd and vain.' Wesley, we remember, called his rivals' interpretations 'strange assertions, drawn from examples recorded in the word of God.'<sup>453</sup> Bengel had said of others that they 'put upon *isolated* passages of Scripture their own forced (mystical) construction.' He, however, would 'insist upon the full and comprehensive force of Scripture in its whole connection.'<sup>454</sup> The custodians of Poole's commentary seemingly spent their careers 'abhorring the impious arts of those who pervert the Scriptures from their Pure and native sense, to give colour and countenance to their private fancies.' Poole's colleagues were able to declare: 'Our sincere design and endeavours have been to search and unfold the meaning of the Sacred Oracles.'<sup>455</sup> When referring to the New Testament, Wesley could speak of the 'precise expression of [its] meaning.'<sup>456</sup> He would agree that any contrary hypotheses to Christian perfection had indeed 'fill'd with fumes' the brains of those that propounded them. For Wesley and his colleagues the meaning of the text of 1 John is 'plain.' If a commentator did not understand the text it was simply because he held a 'darling whim' that the text ran contrary to. A 'whim' (or we might say an assumption) cherished by a commentator simply served to render the text obscure. Because Wesley and his luminaries came to the text without assumptions they allowed the obvious meaning to emerge.

As we will soon deal with twentieth century solutions to our problem, I wish to suggest that the stance of our eighteenth century theologians regarding the status of a text represents for us an archetype of the position maintained by later interpreters: just as Wesley and those he venerated pointed to the text as the accessible repository of the

---

<sup>453</sup> See note 380.

<sup>454</sup> See note 408.

<sup>455</sup> See note 427.

<sup>456</sup> See note 397.

author's intention and meaning, so also their colleagues over two centuries later claim to discover authorial purpose. Moreover, scholars in our era assert that they can discover from the Johannine text the material to reconstruct with some accuracy the first or second century historical background to our problem.

At this juncture, however, having analysed the relevant works of Wesley and his affiliates, I plan to provide the promised excursus concerning a secular instance of perfectionism. Belonging as they do to the eighteenth century - albeit to its last decade - the philosophical ideas that we will look at in the next section may serve to set Wesley's ideas in another interpretive context.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### AN EXCURSUS:

#### JOHN WESLEY AND 'THE MARCH OF MECHANICS'

Dilke, whom you know to be a Godwin Perfectibil[ity] Man, pleases himself with the idea that America will be the country to take up the human intellect where England leaves off - I differ there with him greatly... [Men such as] Frankli[n] and Washingto[n]...are great but they are not sublime Man - the humanity of the United States can never reach the sublime...<sup>457</sup>

The twenty-three-year-old John Keats thought of himself and Charles Wentworth Dilke as 'capital friends.'<sup>458</sup> However, he disagreed with Dilke concerning some of his friend's perfectionist views (in the case of our opening quotation they differed on the extent to which North Americans are perfectible). After one year had elapsed, by 1819, so entirely had Dilke adopted a form of perfectionism that others from the poet's circle expostulated to Keats about a change that had come over their mutual acquaintance. In another long letter to his brother George and his wife, Keats says: 'Brown<sup>459</sup> complained very much in his Letter to me of yesterday of the great alteration the Disposition of Dilke has undergone - He thinks of nothing but 'Political Justice' and his Boy...He is a Godwin-methodist.'<sup>460</sup> From these two fragmentary remarks we ascertain that work which so transformed Dilke, and the name of its author: *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Morals and*

---

<sup>457</sup> R. Gittings (ed.), *Letters of John Keats* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970. Reprinted with corrections 1977), Letter to George and Georgiana Keats 14 - 31 October 1818, pp. 164 - 165.

<sup>458</sup> Gittings, *John Keats* (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1968. Reprinted with corrections, 1970), p. 170.

<sup>459</sup> Here Keats refers to Charles Armitage Brown. For biographical details of Keats' circle of friends see J. Richardson, *The Everlasting Spell - A Study of Keats and His Friends* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1963).

<sup>460</sup> Gittings (ed.), *Letters of John Keats*, Letter to George and Georgiana Keats 17 - 27 September 1819, p. 326.

*Happiness* by William Godwin. Having described this work we may begin to display the nature and extent of William Godwin's influence.

For the poet to employ the epithet 'methodist' in connection with Godwinian thought is interesting. On the one hand, we may conclude that he simply used the term to indicate that Dilke possessed an expertise in Godwin's system of thought. However, on the other, it is possible to surmise that Keats utilises the designation to satirise his friend's devotion to the philosophical ideal depicted in *Political Justice* - a devotion that supposedly equalled the affection Dilke had for his own son: one akin to the fervency displayed by the acolytes of the late Wesley, perhaps.<sup>461</sup> In his use of the expression, moreover, the poet may also have intended to caricature the perfectionist element in Godwin's philosophy by alluding to Wesleyan notions of holiness. Whatever were the poet's intentions, here was a perfectionism that for its proposer held no Christian connotations. Yet, according to Roy Porter, the pantheism and anarchism of Godwin's adulthood that formed the basis of *Political Justice* emerged from a youthful Dissenting Calvinism.<sup>462</sup> While it is true that we can assume that Keats did not imply a direct connection with John Wesley, a study of Godwin's Dissenting family reveals an association with a person known also by the High Tory Anglican.

From F.K. Brown we learn that the philosopher's grandfather, also known as William Godwin, had charge over the publication of Dr. Philip Doddridge's commentary *Family Expositor; Or a Paraphrase and Version of the New Testament, with Critical Notes* - one of the works favoured by Wesley that we have studied. Also, the next generation of the Godwin family had connections with Doddridge. The youngest son John - William's father - studied for the ministry under the theologian (the eldest son, Edward, became a convert to Christianity through the ministry of George Whitfield and subsequently became a Methodist minister). Furthermore, the philosopher himself - from the age of 17 in 1773 - studied (at the Dissenters' college in Hoxton near London) under Dr. Andrew Kippis who had been a student of Doddridge

---

<sup>461</sup> John Wesley died in 1791.

<sup>462</sup> Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 163.

and became his biographer.<sup>463</sup> As we have noted, Doddridge did not display an overt perfectionism, rather he emphasised that people could arrive at a state whereby they 'cannot make a trade and practice of [sin].' Freedom from sin for the theologian merely meant that a person had a 'strong disinclination' to sin. However, if any of Doddridge's ideas on this theme affected Godwin we do not learn it from him. Indeed, all so-called 'orthodox' Christian concerns soon became irrelevant.

In 1778 Godwin accepted a position as a Dissenting minister at Ware in Hertfordshire and we ascertain from Isaac Kramnic that from this point on Godwin's Calvinist faith started to waver. He began to study the works of the French philosophers, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Paul Heinrich d'Holbach and Claude Adrien Helvétius. Interestingly, he also came under the influence of Joseph Priestley: a rationalist Unitarian whose sermons reveal a perfectionist emphasis. So complete became Godwin's disillusionment that in 1783 he left the ministry. Kramnic makes the comment that 'in 1787 [the philosopher] embraced total religious scepticism.'<sup>464</sup>

After a short and unsuccessful career as a teacher, Godwin embarked upon a half-century of literary activity. In the year that Wesley died, 1791, Godwin started to formulate his ideas for *Political Justice*. The philosopher declares that he undertook the work in reaction to a political study by another French philosopher he had read, C.L. de Secondat de Montesquieu. Godwin says that he 'proceeded on a feeling of the

---

<sup>463</sup> F.K. Brown, *The Life of William Godwin* (London: J.M. Dent and E.P. Dutton, 1926), pp. 2 and 11. Wesley's association with Doddridge went beyond his admiration of the commentary. He visited the theologian at his home in Northampton on Monday 9 September 1745. Furthermore, Doddridge's letters to Wesley dated 15 March 1745 (in which he mentions the forthcoming printing of the third volume of his commentary) and 18 June 1746 reveal a growing friendship between the two men. Doddridge died in 1751 at the age of 49. See: W. Reginald Ward and R.P. Heitzenrater (eds.), *The Works of John Wesley - Journal and Diaries III* (Vol. 20; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), Journal 6, p. 89; and, Frank Baker (ed.), *The Works of John Wesley - Letters II* (Vol. 26; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), pp. 190 - 192; 195 - 196.

<sup>464</sup> I. Kramnic (ed.), *William Godwin, Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Morals and Happiness* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1976, Godwin's work first Published in 1793), Introduction, p. 10. For a discussion of Joseph Priestley's perfectionism see J.J. Hoecker, *Joseph Priestley and the Idea of Progress* (New York: Garland, 1987), Part II, 'The Progress of the Mind,' chapter III, 'The Mechanics of Human Perfectibility,' pp. 84 - 102. In this work Hoecker records Priestley's statement: 'It is...our duty, and will be the concern of every wise and good man, to employ his passions as sails to carry him forwards in his progress towards that perfection and felicity for which his maker has designed him...' p. 99 (Taken from Priestley's sermon 'The Importance of Self-Government,' delivered October 27, 1771. [Underline in Hoecker's text].

imperfections and errors of Montesquieu.<sup>465</sup> The study referred to, F.E.L. Priestley says, is *Esprit des Lois*, published in 1748. Godwin reacted against Montesquieu's ascription of climatic and geographical factors to the appearance of different modes of national government; also, he objected to the Frenchman's idealistic presentation of the English constitution. The onset of the French revolution in June 1789 caused such admirers of the government of England to hope that the French would adopt the same pattern. However, Godwin and others believed that a better system could and should emerge. People of any nation would not discover it by the historical comparative method, Godwin maintained. Neither would they determine it by analysis of existing forms of government. Rather, the best model would follow from a rigorous examination of the philosophic bases of all government. In addressing these issues Godwin took on the role of a political philosopher; that he emphasised virtue and happiness in connection with politics leads to a view of him also as a moral philosopher. Priestley points out that in the third edition of *Political Justice* Godwin changes the name for the seeker after political truth from 'philosopher' to 'moralist.'<sup>466</sup>

Writing this work was a capacious task and it displays colouration from many literary, political and philosophical sources.<sup>467</sup> One major influence Priestley discerns is that of Plato, whose notions suffuse *Political Justice*; he particularly notes an emphasis on eternal and immutable truths that exist independently of the Creator. Such truths serve as a formal cause in the process of creation. Priestley states:

---

<sup>465</sup> See K. Paul, *William Godwin* (London: 1876), Diary 1791, 1. p.67. See also F.E.L. Priestley (ed.), *William Godwin, Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Morals and Happiness* [Toronto: The University of Toronto Press and Geoffrey Cumberlege, Oxford University Press, 1946. Facsimile of the Third Edition.], Volume III, Critical Introduction and Notes, Introduction, p. 4, note 1. The formulation of his ideas involved consolidating various influences on his thought, other than the Greek and French philosophers already mentioned, and these became evident in *Political Justice*: David Hume, John Locke, Jonathan Swift, Jonathan Edwards, David Hartley, Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, Thomas Paine, Raynal, Anthony Ashley Cooper (Lord Shaftesbury), Joseph Butler, Francis Hutcheson, Cesare Beccaria and François Fénelon. See F.K. Brown, *The Life of William Godwin*, p. 54.

<sup>466</sup> F.E.L. Priestley (ed.), *William Godwin, Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Morals and Happiness*, Volume III, Critical Introduction and Notes, Introduction, pp. 4 - 5.

<sup>467</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6 - 100. Here Priestley conducts a comprehensive discussion of the influences on Godwin. Our concern is not to analyse the philosopher's sources but to discuss his formed perfectionist thrust.

The doctrine of eternal truths is of fundamental importance in Godwin's scheme of rational progress, since all progress demands some external standard towards which progress is made, and to which all is relative: rational progress demands as this external standard a system of absolute truths discoverable by reason.<sup>468</sup>

With the intent of ranging over the areas of metaphysics and psychology, moral philosophy, political science and economics, Godwin declared the subject of his enquiry:

The object proposed in the following work is, an investigation concerning that form of public or political society, that system of intercourse and reciprocal action, extending beyond the bounds of a single family, which shall be found most to conduce to the general benefit. How may the peculiar and independent operation of each individual in the social state most effectually be preserved? How may the security each man ought to possess, as to his life, and the employment of his faculties according to the dictates of his own understanding, be most certainly defended from invasion? How may the individuals of the human species be made to contribute most substantially to the general improvement and happiness? The enquiry here undertaken has for its object to facilitate the solution of these interesting questions.<sup>469</sup>

In our effort to understand Godwin's 'solution of these interesting questions,' and thus his form of perfectionism, the use of Priestley's locution 'scheme of rational progress' has much value. The philosopher desired to see the emergence of parochial communities that managed their own affairs. He thought that such co-operative groups could make constant progress towards higher levels of civilisation in political and social matters. J.B. Schneewind describes the central thrust of *Political Justice* that would inform the ethos of these communities; Godwin, he says: 'argued for radical forms of determinism, anarchism, and utilitarianism.' Forms of national government corrupt everyone as they encourage stereotyped thinking and so prevent people from seeing each other as unique individuals. It is merely prejudice and artificial inequality that prevents us from seeing our behaviour as entirely determined, so we must abandon

---

<sup>468</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 8 - 9.

<sup>469</sup> *Ibid.*, Volume I, Book I, 'Of the Powers of Man Considered in his Social capacity,' Chapter I, 'Introduction,' pp. 1 - 2.

these attitudes. Once we adopt a deterministic view of behaviour we begin to see that punishment for what previously counted as wrongdoing becomes pointless. Small anarchistic societies are the only context in which we may see others as they really are - and then come to empathise with them and seek their well-being. Thus, we become virtuous, as virtue is the performance of benevolent acts that spring from sympathetic feelings and have the purpose of bringing the greatest happiness to all affected. So, in daily social intercourse a moral attribute such as truthfulness has a claim on the individual only insofar as it brings happiness to the greater number. Consequently, we have no absolute obligation to keep a promise, for instance. If keeping a promise causes less good than breaking it, there is no reason to keep it. Likewise, to bring happiness to the greater number, given a threat to both one would have to choose to save the life of a great human benefactor rather than one's mother. Godwin held an ideal that codes to regulate morals were unnecessary. Such codes obscure individuality and serve to further impair the sympathetic attitudes that constitute virtue. Similarly, in the idyllic setting envisioned by the philosopher, human rights legislation would be pointless as all members of the communities would act in a sympathetic manner and help one another.<sup>470</sup>

Regarding the deterministic element of Godwin's argument, he avers that:

[T]he actions and dispositions of mankind are the offspring of circumstances and events, and not of any original determination that they bring into the world; a[ls]o...the great stream of our voluntary actions essentially depends, not upon the direct and immediate impulses of sense, but upon the decisions of the understanding.<sup>471</sup>

So, our characters, actions and dispositions do not spring from any bias or tendency that we possess at birth. Rather it is our external circumstances that determine our characters, and our voluntary actions<sup>472</sup> originate in our opinions. Therefore, we may

---

<sup>470</sup> J.B. Schneewind, 'William Godwin' in R. Audi (ed.), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, pp. 300 - 301.

<sup>471</sup> F.E.L. Priestley (ed.), *William Godwin, Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Morals and Happiness*, Volume I, Book I, Chapter IV, 'The Characters of Men Originate in their External Circumstance,' p. 26.

<sup>472</sup> Godwin defined 'voluntary' actions as those that arise from a foresight of the consequences



change and progress. The philosopher believed in the triumph of reason and this aided the 'scheme of rational progress' we referred to above. Godwin declares:

Man is not a vegetable to be governed by [various] sensations...He is a reasonable creature, capable of perceiving what is eligible and right, of fixing indelibly certain principles upon his mind, and adhering inflexibly to the resolutions he has made...[Therefore,] whatever can be adequately brought home to the conviction of the understanding, may be depended upon as affording a secure hold upon the conduct. We are no longer at liberty to consider man as divided between [the] two independent principles [of 'reason' and 'animal sensations'], or to imagine that his inclinations are in any case inaccessible through the medium of his reason. We find the thinking principle within us to be uniform and simple; in consequence of which we are entitled to conclude, that it is in every respect the proper subject of education and persuasion, and is susceptible of unlimited improvement.<sup>473</sup>

Unhindered by any restrictions of nascency, reason and its attendant truth will doubtlessly effect a liberation in the moral lives of men and women:

Sound reasoning and truth, when adequately communicated, must always be victorious over error: Sound reasoning and truth are capable of being so communicated: Truth is omnipotent: The vices and moral weaknesses of man are not invincible: Man is perfectible, or in other words susceptible of perpetual improvement.<sup>474</sup>

It seems that Godwin espoused a form of perfectionism that had at its heart the idea of continuous human progress rather than the ascendancy to a maximal point. Given the required conditions of education and mutual sympathetic admonition and encouragement, women and men may enjoy 'perpetual improvement': their 'vices and moral weaknesses' vulnerable to a reasoned challenge from their peers.

Though these vices and weaknesses 'are not invincible,' Godwin recognised something of the complexities of the human condition that make their defeat

---

resulting from those actions. He also discusses 'involuntary' actions (such as crying), and those that are 'imperfectly voluntary' (such as habits). However, he emphasises that all important actions are 'in some degree voluntary.' *Ibid.*, pp. 63 - 68. See also F.K. Brown, *The Life of William Godwin*, pp. 50 - 52.

<sup>473</sup> F.E.L. Priestley (ed.), *William Godwin, Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Morals and Happiness*, Volume I, Book I, Chapter V, 'The Voluntary Actions of Men Originate in their Opinions,' pp. 79 - 80.

<sup>474</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

occasionally difficult to achieve. Nevertheless, he maintains that the flaws in human nature will eventually succumb to the force of progress. Those that offer sound reasoning and truth may encounter 'sophistry' with its 'plausible appearance' that contrives 'to a certain extent to bewilder the understanding.'<sup>475</sup> However, the philosopher declares, 'it is one of the prerogatives of truth, to follow it in its mazes and strip it of disguise.' Once exposed, the sophistry of those who resist the truth collapses. The important factor is that truth must not be merely 'exhibited,' one must 'adequately communicate' it so that the hearer may 'distinctly apprehend' it. Under these conditions 'the victory is too sure to admit of being controverted by the most inveterate scepticism.'<sup>476</sup> The 'incapacity of human intellect' at times requires a long or repeated presentation of truth by a person who is 'master of his subject.' With 'truth...altogether on his side,' with 'sufficient urbanity to conciliate the good will, and sufficient energy to engage the attention' of the one addressed, the propagator of that truth overcomes any lack of understanding. Then 'no prejudice, no blind reverence for established systems, no false fear of the inferences to be drawn' may resist the progress of truth.<sup>477</sup> In all encounters with these barriers the 'champion' of truth simply 'proceeds from point to point' with his fellow, retracing his argument where necessary until he has 'put out of reach of mistake' every point offered for consideration.<sup>478</sup> So, the philosopher avers, 'it is extremely clear that, if no individual can resist the force of truth, it can only be necessary to apply this proposition from individual to individual, and we shall at length comprehend the whole.'<sup>479</sup> Every new convert made to the cause of truth becomes an 'apostle' who will 'extend its illuminations through a wider sphere.' Moreover, each adequately informed convert will remain steadfast: 'it is barely possible that he should ever fail in his adherence.' Thus, whole societies will

---

<sup>475</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>476</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 86 - 87.

<sup>477</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 87 - 88.

<sup>478</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>479</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

undergo a transformation: 'The advocates of falsehood and mistake must continually diminish, and the well informed adherents of truth incessantly multiply.'<sup>480</sup>

Apart from the impediments to progress that we have noted arising from human ignorance, there are also potential hindrances that spring from institutional corruption, war and calamity. Godwin explains that current civil policy, or 'magnificent emoluments and sinister motives' may impede the impetus towards perfection 'by distracting the attention...[and] caus[ing] the worse reason to pass as if it were the better.' Furthermore, armed conflict and various disastrous events may arise that almost destroy the advocates of truth, and cause it to suffer obscurity, but even a small surviving remnant of champions would ensure that its effects 'will break out in the sequel with double lustre.'<sup>481</sup>

The philosopher acknowledges the potential effects of limited human knowledge to restrict our comprehension of truth:

There may indeed be propositions, which, though true in themselves, may be beyond the sphere of human knowledge, or respecting which human beings have not yet discovered sufficient arguments for their support. In that case, though true in themselves, they are not truths to us. The reasoning by which they are attempted to be established, is not sound reasoning. It may perhaps be found that the human mind is not capable of arriving at absolute certainty upon any subject of enquiry; and it must be admitted that human science is attended with all degrees of certainty, from the highest moral evidence to the slightest balance of probability. But human beings are capable of apprehending and weighing all these degrees; and to know the exact quantity of probability which I ought to ascribe to any proposition, may be said to be in one sense the possessing certain knowledge.<sup>482</sup>

Despite temporal short-falls in knowledge and the uncertainty of the extent of our cognitive abilities, then, we may still possess a form of 'certain knowledge' through our ability to judge probabilities. When faced with intellectual equivocality we have an inherent ability to judge what is true even without the required evidence.

---

<sup>480</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 89 - 90.

<sup>481</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>482</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

Limitations on truth's effect on our conduct, though real because of the 'faculties of our frame,' do not ultimately undermine the change it will effect in us. Within the confines imposed by our humanity, Godwin declares: 'whatever is brought home to the conviction of the understanding, so long as it is present to the mind, possesses an undisputed empire over the conduct.' Furthermore, anyone who is 'sufficiently conversant with the science of intellect' will not act hastily in 'assigning the bounds of our capacity.' There are 'some things which the structure of our bodies will render us for ever unable to effect'; however, the philosopher avers: 'in many cases the lines, which appear to prescribe a term to our efforts, will like the mists that arise from a lake, retire further and further, the more closely we endeavour to approach them.'<sup>483</sup>

So, it seems that Godwin's 'scheme of rational progress' has an inexorable property to it. He explains: 'Vice and weaknesses are founded upon ignorance and error; but truth is more powerful than any champion that can be brought into the field against it; consequently truth has the faculty of expelling weakness and vice, and placing nobler and more beneficent principles in their stead.'<sup>484</sup>

Now that the philosopher has demonstrated the triumph of reason and truth in the life of the individual, and in the consequent transformation of society, he goes on to warn his readers against a possible misunderstanding of his statement that 'Man is perfectible'<sup>485</sup>: 'This proposition needs some explanation,' he says. We have already seen how Godwin modifies his statement by declaring that he wishes it to convey the idea that people are 'susceptible of perpetual improvement.' At this point he adds that by perfectible he does not intend us to understand 'that [man] is capable of being brought to perfection.' For Godwin 'the word seems sufficiently adapted to express the faculty of being continually made better and receiving perpetual improvement.' The term 'perfectible,' thus explained, 'not only does not imply the capacity of being brought to perfection, but stands in express opposition to it'; if we could arrive at

---

<sup>483</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 91 - 92.

<sup>484</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>485</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

perfection 'there would be an end to our improvement.'<sup>486</sup> Yet, one qualification remains in this explanation:

There is however one thing of great importance that it does imply: every perfection or excellence that human beings are competent to conceive, human beings, unless in cases that are palpably and unequivocally excluded by the structure of their frame, are competent to attain.<sup>487</sup>

It seems that while absolute perfection has no place in Godwin's scheme, people may attain a form of perfection, or 'excellence,' in manifold spheres of endeavour. This is an inference drawn from the philosopher's argument concerning the omnipotence of truth. Every truth that people can communicate can effect 'the conviction of the mind'; every principle so effecting that conviction, 'will infallibly produce a correspondent effect upon the conduct.' If it were not for 'something in the nature of man incompatible with absolute perfection,' the 'doctrine of the omnipotence of truth would afford no small probability that he would one day reach it.' The question then arises: 'Why is the perfection of man impossible?'<sup>488</sup>

Godwin answers the point by declaring that: 'The idea of absolute perfection is scarcely within the grasp of human understanding.' He suggests that if science speculated on this issue its practitioners would discover that the notion of absolute perfection is 'pregnant with absurdity and contradiction.' Because we cannot be present in all times and places; because we 'cannot penetrate into the essences of things, or rather we have no sound and satisfactory knowledge of things external to ourselves, but merely of our own sensations'; because we 'cannot discover the causes of things, or ascertain that in the antecedent which connects it with the consequent, and discern nothing but their contiguity' (in other words, because we can know merely that one event will lead to another, but not the chain of causality);<sup>489</sup> for these reasons the

---

<sup>486</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 92 - 93.

<sup>487</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>488</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>489</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 93 - 94. This last phrase represents part of Godwin's principle of 'Necessity': if we possess a knowledge of the complete circumstances prevailing in an intelligent person's life at a given moment, then we may with certainty predict that person's conduct. The phrase itself

philosopher asks: 'With what pretence can a being thus shut in on all sides lay claim to absolute perfection?'

Apart from these considerations, for Godwin 'there is one principle in the human mind, which must for ever exclude us from arriving at a close of our acquisitions, and confine us to perpetual progress.' He says that as far as knowledge about it had progressed to that point, 'the human mind...is nothing but a faculty of perception.' All knowledge and ideas, indeed everything we possess as intelligent beings, 'comes from impression.' Every person's mind begins its existence in absolute ignorance. From this state of unawareness the mind goes on to receive impression upon impression. Our memory aids this accumulation; and combined with the faculty of association, the philosopher explains, our store of experience increases thereby.<sup>490</sup> Accompanying this experience, knowledge and wisdom grows and 'every thing that distinguishes man from what we understand by a "clod of the valley."' Godwin concludes:

This seems to be a simple and incontrovertible history of intellectual being; and, if it be true, then as our accumulations have been incessant in the time that is gone, so, as long as we continue to perceive, to remember or reflect, they must perpetually increase.<sup>491</sup>

People may not achieve absolute perfection, then, because of a principle of constant perception that represents an essential part of the human psyche. As perception never ceases, so the mind incessantly improves, and therefore it remains impossible to conceive of a vertex of achievement. Hence, there is one sense in which

---

prefigures the following passage: 'No experiments we are able to make, no reasonings we are able to deduce, can ever instruct us in the principle of causation, or show us for what reason it is that one event has, in every instance in which it has been known to occur, been the precursor of another event of a given description. Yet this observation does not, in the slightest degree, invalidate our inference from one event to another, or effect the operations of moral prudence and expectation. The nature of the human mind is such, as to oblige us, after having seen two events perpetually conjoined, to pass, as soon as one of them occurs, to the recollection of the other: and, in cases where this transition never misleads us, but the ideal succession is always found to be an exact copy of the future event, it is impossible that this species of foresight should not be converted into a general foundation of inference and reasoning.' We should note that Godwin rejected the idea of 'free will.' See Volume I, Book IV, 'Of the Operation of Opinion in Societies and Individuals,' Chapter VII, 'Of Free Will and Necessity,' pp. 353; 367 - 368.

<sup>490</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>491</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

we may say that Godwin's scheme stands opposed to certain forms of perfectionism: if women and men may reach absolute perfection then his notion of rational improvement proves false. On this issue Brown says that the philosopher's 'divergence from the famous theory of Perfectibility is...notable.' However, we might argue here that though Godwin's definition of perfectionism diverged from those that emphasised attainment to an absolute, it still belongs within its perimeters. His scheme proposes the essential goodness of women and men, and their ascent to ever higher levels of moral and social achievement. Thus, humans are becoming more nearly perfect than they are at present. Brown adds that in its broadest sense the theory 'was a commonplace of radical speculation.'<sup>492</sup>

The comment that perfectibility was 'a commonplace' in radical circles helps us, in F.E.L. Priestley's words, 'to define more accurately Godwin's place in the pattern of eighteenth century thought.'<sup>493</sup> Indeed, that place within radicalism seemed very prominent in the last decade of the century. Priestley records William Hazlitt's memory of the effect Godwin's work had on the English intelligentsia of the mid-1790s:

No work in our time gave such a blow to the philosophical mind of the country as the celebrated *Enquiry into Political Justice*. Tom Paine was considered for the time as a Tom Fool to him, Paley as an old woman, Edmund Burke a flashy sophist. Truth, moral truth, it was supposed, had taken up its abode; and these were the oracles of thought.<sup>494</sup>

Yet there was much opposition to *Political Justice*. From 1795 onwards attacks upon Godwin and his work grew. A 'stream of novels and pamphlets directed against Godwin poured out.' In 1798 these assaults escalated when Thomas Robert Malthus published *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. Furthermore, literati such as Sir

---

<sup>492</sup> F.K. Brown, *The Life of William Godwin*, p. 54. Roy Porter portrays the typical group of radicals that surrounded Godwin and among whom such ideas might circulate: '[T]owards the end of the [Eighteenth] century...something like a self-conscious Enlightenment intelligentsia was coming into being: writers such as Joseph Priestley, Richard Price, James Burgh, William Godwin, Thomas Holcroft, Mary Wollstonecraft [Godwin's wife], William Hazlitt and Arthur Atkin.' See R. Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 83.

<sup>493</sup> F.E.L. Priestley (ed.), *William Godwin, Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Morals and Happiness*, Volume III, Critical Introduction and Notes, Introduction, p. 6.

<sup>494</sup> *Ibid.*, Introduction, Section VII 'The Influence of *Political Justice*,' p. 100.

James Mackintosh (who formerly supported the philosopher) and Samuel Parr assailed various elements of his system.<sup>495</sup> W.A. Speck records William Wordsworth's remark: '[H]uman nature is more effectively illuminated by William Shakespeare than by William Godwin.'<sup>496</sup> Most effective in undermining that system was the sustained 'witty distortion' of Godwinian views in publications such as the *Anti-Jacobin* and the *Anti-Jacobin Review*. Such was the effectiveness of the parody that by the turn of the century many regarded Godwin as the 'ridiculous philosopher.'<sup>497</sup> Educated people had sufficient awareness of the tenets of the philosopher's form of perfectionism that early in the following century (1816) Thomas Love Peacock could write satirically in *Headlong Hall* of a character, Mr Foster, who was a 'perfectibilian.'<sup>498</sup> Peacock, as a friend of Godwin's son-in-law Percy Bysshe Shelly, met the philosopher several times from 1814 onwards.<sup>499</sup> Commenting on the impression of Godwin Peacock gained from these meetings Bryan Burns notes that 'Mr Foster may be related to the optimistic philosopher, William Godwin.'<sup>500</sup> J.B. Priestley adds that the character may also reflect the perfectionist views the poet Shelley had adopted from Godwin and had revealed to Peacock in conversations between the two and Thomas Jefferson Hogg.<sup>501</sup> H. Mills confirms Priestley's point by commenting that at one stage 'Shelley was more Godwinian than Godwin.'<sup>502</sup> It is true that Mr Foster does not represent a portrait by

---

<sup>495</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>496</sup> W.A. Speck, *Literature and Society in Eighteenth Century England - Ideology, Politics and Culture, 1680 - 1820* (London: Addison Wesley Longman, 1998), p. 185.

<sup>497</sup> F.E.L. Priestley (ed.), *William Godwin, Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Morals and Happiness*, Volume III, Critical Introduction and Notes, Introduction, Section VII 'The Influence of *Political Justice*,' p. 107. Cf. M. Butler, *Peacock Displayed - A Satirist in His Context* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), p. 31.

<sup>498</sup> Brett-Smith and Jones (eds.), *The Halliford Edition of the Works of Thomas Love Peacock*, 'Headlong Hall,' p. 8.

<sup>499</sup> *Ibid.*, Biographical Introduction, pp. lix - lx. John Keats met both Godwin and Peacock: the latter he met first on 11 February 1817 [Brett-Smith and Jones (eds.), *The Halliford Edition of the Works of Thomas Love Peacock*, Biographical Introduction, p. lxxx], the former on 18 November of the same year [Gittings, *John Keats*, p. 160]. Cf. Andrew Motion, *Keats* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), p. 116.

<sup>500</sup> B. Burns, *The Novels of Thomas Love Peacock* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), Introduction: Headlong Hall, p. 23.

<sup>501</sup> J.B. Priestley, *Thomas Love Peacock* (London: Macmillan, 1927), p. 33.

<sup>502</sup> H. Mills, *Peacock - His Circle and His Age* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 20. See also C. Dawson, *His Fine Wit - A Study of Thomas Love Peacock* (London: Routledge and Regan Paul, 1970), p. 211.



Peacock of Godwin the man, nor one of Shelley. However, the ideas given voice, and lampooned, through Foster belong to the philosopher.<sup>503</sup>

Two quotations from the novel are enough to help us to understand its tenor. The opening scene of the novel has Foster in conversation with 'Mr. Escot, the deteriorationist; Mr. Jenkison, the statu-quo-ite; and the Reverend Doctor Gaster' [an ecclesiastical Bon vivant]. Peacock allows Foster the first statement concerning all that they see from their carriage as they travel to visit Squire Headlong at his Welsh hall: "In short," says he, "every thing we look on attests the progress of mankind in all the arts of life, and demonstrates their gradual advancement towards a state of unlimited perfection."<sup>504</sup> If this is a quasi-serious presentation of Godwin's scheme, when we arrive at Foster's next substantial comment we know that we have entered the realm of raillery. Mr Escot makes a 'deteriorationist' statement (during breakfast) to the effect that: 'the use of animal food, conjointly with that of fire...[is] one of the principle causes of the present degeneracy of mankind.' This elicits the following response from the perfectibilian:

I cannot agree...in the consequences being so very disastrous. I admit that in some respects the use of animal food retards, though it cannot materially inhibit, the perfectibility of the species. But the use of fire was indispensably necessary, as Æschylus and Virgil expressly assert, to give being to the various arts of life, which, in their rapid and interminable progress, will finally conduct every individual of the race to the philosophic pinnacle of pure and perfect felicity.<sup>505</sup>

This second comment of Foster typifies Peacock's portrayal of Godwin's version of perfectionism. My purpose in quoting it is to illustrate Peacock's confidence that his audience would recognise - even through Foster's ridiculous verbosity in conversation - the doctrines of Godwin, at least as popularly understood. The latter point concerning the popular understanding of the philosopher's scheme is important. We note that Peacock's Foster speaks of the 'arts of life...in their rapid and

---

<sup>503</sup> Butler, *Peacock Displayed - A Satirist in His Context*, pp. 40 - 41.

<sup>504</sup> Brett-Smith and Jones (eds.), *The Halliford Edition of the Works of Thomas Love Peacock*, 'Headlong Hall,' chapter I, 'The Mail,' pp. 9 - 10.

<sup>505</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter II, 'The Squire. - The Breakfast,' pp. 16 - 17.

interminable progress' conducting individuals 'to the philosophic pinnacle of pure and perfect felicity.' However, as our examination of *Political Justice* has shown, Godwin rejected the idea of culmination in the ascent of humankind. On the issue of popular understanding Brown comments that perfectibility remained:

Vaguely used and understood for the most part, it was taken to mean that man could become [absolutely] perfect by his own efforts; and this view was freely attributed to Godwin by those who had not carefully read his work...It was one of the most carelessly misunderstood of all his theories.<sup>506</sup>

A view of Godwin's system that takes up the theme of our human 'faculty of being continually made better and receiving perpetual improvement' would satisfy Brown's desire to correct the perceived misunderstanding. The scheme then loses the colouration given to it by satirists such as Peacock: it ceases to be a manifesto of absolute perfection. We may then begin to regard it, I suggest, as belonging to the same region of perfectionist thought as Wesley's doctrine (at least as far as he publicly expounded it). Recollecting our delineation of the Methodist leader's sermon of 1741 we remember that he declared that we may not conclude that there is 'any absolute perfection on earth.' There is no state of perfection in this life that 'does not admit of a continual increase...[s]o that how much soever any man hath attained, or in how high a degree soever he is perfect, he hath still need to "grow in grace," and daily to advance in the knowledge and love of God his Saviour.' Thus, we discovered that for Wesley perfectionism does not denote an ultimate zenith beyond which there is no further ascension; it is rather a state of continual mounting to higher levels of holiness.<sup>507</sup> So, we may say that Godwin's scheme shares with Wesley's doctrine the idea of continuous improvement rather than attainment. Though there are vast differences in their cognition of the nature of the force that impels people towards improvement - for the philosopher it is a principle of constant perception, whereas for the Methodist leader it is the work of the Holy Spirit - it is possible to argue that in one respect they both

---

<sup>506</sup> F.K. Brown, *The Life of William Godwin*, p. 54.

<sup>507</sup> See note 286.

belong to the same interpretive community. Fishian observations certainly would place each of the men in several disparate communities, but on the issue of the course of perfection such observations lead us to conclude that Godwin and Wesley would acknowledge each other's position.<sup>508</sup> In my introduction I recorded that the bare mention of the word 'perfection' stirred strong responses in readers and hearers.<sup>509</sup> It seems that the response fashioned by their individual and communal cognition of that word caused these two men to regard perfection as both gradual and continual. It is this response that positions them in one interpretive community on this issue.

The action of including Wesley and Godwin within the bounds of a similar interpretive stance causes us to view the Methodist's work as a constituent of the progressive project of the Enlightenment. We have seen that Godwin's form of perfectionism was merely a part of a commonplace radical speculation; but we must also remember that that radicalism itself remained subsumed within the general philosophic, scientific and rational spirit of eighteenth century Europe.<sup>510</sup> I propose that we may likewise define Wesley's Christian perfection as elemental to the ferment of ideas during that era. All those that strove for perfection of any description became, in retrospect, a division within the advancing force of the human genius. In the introduction to the sixty-seventh volume of his 'Standard Novels' Peacock wrote the following summation of the age:

Perfectibilians, deteriorationists, statu-quo-ites, phrenologists, transcendentalists, political economists, theorists in all sciences, projectors in all arts, morbid visionaries, romantic enthusiasts, lovers of music, lovers of the picturesque, and lovers of good dinners, march, and will march for ever, *pari passu* with the march of mechanics, which some facetiously call the march of intellect.<sup>511</sup>

---

<sup>508</sup> See notes 120 and 121.

<sup>509</sup> See note 11.

<sup>510</sup> Margaret Drabble (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, p. 320.

<sup>511</sup> H. Cole (ed.), *The Works of Thomas Love Peacock, Including his Novels, Poems, Fugitive Pieces, Criticisms, Etc., With a Preface by the Right Hon. Lord Houghton, A Biographical Notice by His Grand-daughter, Edith Nicolls, and Portrait*. (London: Richard Bentley and Son, New Burlington Street, 1875), Volume I, Introduction by Thomas Love Peacock dated 4th March 1837, p. vi. It is strange that Peacock should include the 'deteriorationists' in his list of progressives. He did so presumably because they sounded a warning against what they perceived as the inexorable slide of humankind into an abyss brought on by the industrial revolution and advocated progress through a return to 'the primitive dignity of [our] sylvan origin.' See

Despite its satirical timbre Peacock's lines represent a telling reflection of the century. Side by side with protagonists of other theories, and at an equal rate of progress with them, the proponents of perfectionism stride forward: with a certainty analogous to the rise of the new technologies they pursue a perpetual course of intellectual and moral ascent. In that he espouses that women and men may gradually grow in perfection, we see John Wesley in this 'march of mechanics' with William Godwin in the phalanx of the perfectibilians.

Thus, in fulfillment of one of my introductory comments, I have illustrated something of the span of opinion on perfectionism by presenting a secular form that had its roots in the eighteenth century, so setting Wesley's ideas in a wider context.<sup>512</sup> There now remains one further task: to exhibit some late twentieth century solutions to the interpretive problem in 1 John.

---

'Headlong Hall,' chapter I, 'The Mail,' p. 10.

<sup>512</sup> See note 14.

**CHAPTER SIX**  
**EXTANT ACADEMIC CONVENTIONS**  
**REGARDING THE 1 JOHN PROBLEM**

'Be sure of it: give me the ocular proof...  
Make me to see't: or, at the least so prove it  
That the probation bear no hinge or loop  
To hang a doubt on...'513

**6. 1. Prefatory Remarks**

In my closing comments about the solutions to our problem offered by Wesley and those he admired I suggested that their stance regarding the text represents for us an archetype of the position maintained by later interpreters. For the eighteenth-century theologians the text remained determinate and, although the reader had some role in the establishment of meaning, they maintained that it is from the text that the she or he ultimately discovered the author's original intention. As will become apparent, what we have said about the earlier theologians' assumptions on this matter we can also say about those of late twentieth century interpreters. Consequently, we must avoid merely repeating the results of our Fishian standpoint as applied to the modernist appeal to a stable text. Therefore, while still commenting on their claim to discover meaning in the text, I propose to highlight a further assumption held by contemporary interpreters: namely, that from the text they can have access to, and can reconstruct, the historical circumstances that lay behind the composition of 1 John and so provide solutions to the problem between our verses in chapters 1 and 3.

We have already alluded to Robert Kysar's brief outline of current efforts to resolve the apparent contradiction in 1 John.<sup>514</sup> Kysar also supplies a summary of

---

<sup>513</sup> T.J.B. Spencer, S. Wells and K. Muir (eds.), *William Shakespeare, Othello* (London: Penguin Books, The New Penguin Shakespeare, 1968; repr. 1996), Act III, iii, lines 357, 361 - 363, p. 118.

<sup>514</sup> See note 252.

scholarly opinions regarding the setting and purpose of the epistle. Although he consistently uses the language of tentative suggestion, we note that he accepts the premise that investigation of the text facilitates a reconstruction of the historical situation. Moreover, he effectively declares that this assumption governs the majority of scholarship regarding the epistle; he says, 'There is universal agreement that this writing was produced to address a situation brought on by a schism within a Christian community.' The text contains evidence to enable reconstruction of the setting and purpose of the work. Moreover, we learn that it is: '[f]rom I John [that] we gain some impressions of the nature of the separatist group.' Scholars that marshal particular 'explicit references' in the epistle regarding this matter<sup>515</sup> may then judge other verses as authorial 'allusions to the views of the separatists.'<sup>516</sup> Following the assemblage of the information gleaned from the text there 'arises a scenario which may have produced the setting for the writing of 1 John.'

Though the efforts of scholars to identify the separatists with a specific group known elsewhere in the New Testament remain frustrated due to 'the nature of the evidence,'<sup>517</sup> nevertheless historical reconstruction has continued as one of the important stimuli to the study of 1 John. Interestingly, Kysar suggests the use of the imagination in the exercise:

It may be that we should imagine a parent body with a number of smaller gatherings of Christians (perhaps "house churches"). One of the two groups held to a view of Christ and a morality which gradually alienated them from their brothers and sisters in the church until that group eventually withdrew from the community.<sup>518</sup>

Despite this acknowledgement of the need to employ mental creativity, it is to the 'evidence' he sees within the epistle that Kysar finally appeals in order to reconstruct the situation. So, Kysar's introduction tells us that it is precisely this sort

---

<sup>515</sup> Kysar lists these as: 2: 9 - 11, 18 - 23; 3: 8; 4: 2 - 3, 5 - 6, 20 - 21; 5: 5 - 6.

<sup>516</sup> These allusions Kysar sees in 1: 6 - 10; 2: 4, 9; 3: 3 - 10; 4: 6, 20; 5: 16.

<sup>517</sup> Scholars variously propose Jewish, Christian, Gentile, 'proto-Gnostic,' Gnostic or Docetic groups as the dissenting party.

<sup>518</sup> R. Kysar, 'Epistles of John,' *ABD* 3; E1; 905. See note 218.

of appeal to textual evidence that characterises major studies of 1 John and the Johannine corpus at the end of the twentieth century. As modern historical-critical scholars' solutions to our problem rest upon their reconstruction of setting and purpose, it is essential that we describe instances of that reconstruction as well as the solutions themselves. Therefore, we will now conduct a concise examination of recent work on our problem. I do not intend this as an exhaustive inquiry, but rather as a display of typical scholarly approach to the text and as a vehicle to comment on that approach from our chosen perspective.

## **6. 2. John Bogart**

We will begin with the influential 1977 work *Orthodox and Heretical Perfectionism in the Johannine Community as Evident in the First Epistle of John* by John Bogart. In an 'effort to solve this exegetical puzzle,' Bogart's study asks 'a number of historical-critical questions.' This effort results in 'an attempted historical reconstruction of the Johannine community between the time its Gospel was written and the composition of the First Epistle.'<sup>519</sup> In his first chapter, while laying out the nature of his terminological definitions and methodological presuppositions, this scholar declares that:

"Perfectionism" is the term generally applied to the view that man is capable of achieving sinlessness in his present existence. This definition primarily concerns the ethical aspect of perfection, *i.e.*, the achievement of ethical or moral purity; it may, however, be expanded to include spiritual perfection also, *i.e.*, the union with God or the beatific vision.<sup>520</sup>

This scholar excludes from his study the achievement of complete perfectionism only in the after-life. Similarly he rules out the gradual reaching of some measure 'of ethical and / or spiritual good over a long period of time, or of having only intermittent periods of sinlessness.' He deduces that: "'Perfectionism" and "perfection"...are

---

<sup>519</sup> Bogart, *Orthodox and Heretical Perfectionism in the Johannine Community as Evident in the First Epistle of John*, p. 1.

<sup>520</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

necessarily absolute terms. One cannot be "slightly perfect" any more than "slightly dead." However, though the epistle contains perfectionist teaching, it is 'not perfectionist in the absolute sense, since the author anticipates temporary lapses into sin, even among the faithful.'<sup>521</sup>

Bogart describes two forms of perfectionism and these he terms 'Orthodox' and 'Heretical.' He sensitively notes that the 'terms obviously can vary considerably in meaning and content according to the theological predilections of the author employing them.' 'One man's orthodoxy is another man's heresy,' he acknowledges. However, this is not to imply that such designations do not acquire a fixed significance, at least for an interval. This scholar registers his awareness of the temporal development of expressions according to peoples' cognisance of them. As the terms only began to 'gain a specialized meaning from the late second century on' we may not apply them to the New Testament with any appropriateness or accuracy. Nevertheless, a 'mind-set' similar to that found in the second century 'is also evident in the New Testament.' It is a mode of thought that: 'dichotomously divides all doctrine into well-defined categories labeled either "orthodox" or "heretical" (with an occasional middle ground labeled "heterodox").' There is no evidence in 1 John that the author faced opposition from organised schools of 'commonly recognised heretical teaching,' as became manifest in the second century. Moreover, says Bogart: '[I]t is not clear that in the late first century the lines between "orthodoxy" and "heresy" were as clearly drawn as they obviously were by the end of the second century.' Yet, the *tendency* toward drawing such lines...the tendency toward dichotomous or dualistic thinking concerning doctrine, in light of the struggle with opponents who taught dubious doctrines...is already present in 1 John.' Although the term 'orthodox' does not appear in the New Testament, as it originally meant 'straight teaching' Bogart sees 'no great objection to using it when speaking of what the author of 1 John considers correct doctrine.' This is 'provided that no implications of an elaborately organised system of orthodoxy were ascribed to

---

<sup>521</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 7 - 8 and p. 8 note 4.



him, as might be ascribed to the later Patristic writers.' He assures us: 'Of course we wish to avoid terminological anachronisms.'<sup>522</sup>

Further to this assurance Bogart states:

It is anachronistic to apply theological terms born in a later age to theological problems of an earlier age. To do so leads inevitably to a distortion of the understanding of the earlier age...Care must always be taken not to interpret the first century through the eyes of any later century. This ought to be axiomatic, but it is surprising and dismaying how often it is ignored.<sup>523</sup>

We discover that this scholar regards himself as having taken such care, thus avoiding the error of the 'distortion of the understanding of the earlier age.' His approach primarily concerns 'the First Epistle of John as it stands in its final redaction' and how the last redactor 'understood his sources and how he used and remolded them for his own theological and polemical purposes.' Bogart explains that he has used a form-critical method of analysis (along with insights offered by the study of motifs, parallel perfectionist texts, contexts, theology and linguistics). He declares that his use of this method will achieve 'a clearer understanding of the life situation in the Johannine community at the time 1 John was written than would all the source criticism in the world.'<sup>524</sup> Abjuring the application to the Johannine corpus of theological terms born in a later age, this scholar claims to return to the text to reconstruct the life-setting of the Epistles. The means he employs to study the texts 'are capable of yielding positive results for a reliable historical reconstruction.' From the texts he will 'obtain data which will help us understand what changes in the life situation occurred within the community *between* the writing of the Gospel and the Epistles.' Moreover, he will: 'obtain an excellent insight into the life situation...at the time the First Epistle was written by noting the apparent quotations of the author's opponents, and also by analysing the theological content of the author's arguments against his opponents.'<sup>525</sup>

---

<sup>522</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 8 - 9.

<sup>523</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>524</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>525</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 22 - 23.

Bogart accepts that it is impossible to know what the opponents *'literally'* said, short of discovering some hitherto unknown manuscripts.' Yet 'we need not despair of finding out with a reasonable measure of accuracy, what they actually claimed, in spite of any suspicions about either the author's accuracy in quoting his opponents or his possible malice in misquoting them.' We 'may reasonably trust the author of 1 John.'

He 'is obviously giving us only what *he thinks* his opponents were asserting, but his impressions, characterizations or paraphrasings are reliable for this reason: There can be no doubt that his opponents' claims were actually upsetting the community, and causing such a disturbance among the faithful that the author felt obliged, as a good pastor, to write his congregation(s) and set them straight.'<sup>526</sup>

The intense reaction of the author proves that the community understood that the opponents' views represented a genuine threat to their orthodoxy. Bogart informs us of a point 'which is vital to [his] whole research, namely, that the apparent quotations (*verbatim* or not) are *reliable* indicators of the actual, historical teaching of the opponents in 1 John.'<sup>527</sup> This scholar thus attests to his confidence that he can return to the text and discover there, with some exactness, the historical situation of the First Epistle, the veracity of the author's report, and the arguments put forward by the opponents.

Beginning to address the contradiction, Bogart explains:

The first assertion, in 1: 8 ἁμαρτίαν οὐκ ἔχομεν, is cast in the present indicative, which here seems to have a durative function, indicating a permanent state of being, existing not only in the present, but stretching timelessly into both the past and the future. This would mean that the author's opponents claim *always to have been sinless, i.e., intrinsically* sinless, a claim...typical of the "gnosticizing false teachers" in 1 John who claim to be in the light *i.e.,* perfect and sinless.

The second assertion, in 1: 10 οὐχ ἠμαρτήκαμεν, is cast in the perfect, which often indicates the continuance of completed action. This would serve to strengthen the opponents' claim to sinlessness, made in

---

<sup>526</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 28 - 29.

<sup>527</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29 - 30.

the present tense in 1: 8 -- they *never* have sinned at all. No Christian perfectionist would ever make such a claim.<sup>528</sup>

The claims to perfection in 1: 3 and 6, 2: 4, 6 and 7 do 'not imply that the Christian members of the Johannine community never in their past sinned; presumably they were sinners before they were baptized into the Church, after which they claimed a life of perfection, or near perfection, because of their new fellowship with the Father.' It is only a gnostic view of humans as intrinsically part of the Divine that could claim that they had never sinned. Bogart maintains that the opponents' claim represented in verses 1: 8 and 10: 'betrays a doctrine of human nature radically different from the Judeo-Christian one found throughout the whole Bible, and which hardly needs documenting, namely, that man is sinful and in need of redemption.' The 'anthropology' revealed, so 'radically different...from that which underlies the whole biblical doctrine of man,' may 'properly be designated as gnostic.'<sup>529</sup>

To counter this heretical perfectionism, and to strengthen the foundations for his affirmation of the orthodox type, the author introduces a theological concept 'previously unmentioned...in Johannine literature' (that is, previously unmentioned in the Fourth Gospel), the doctrine of the expiation for sin found in verses 1: 7b, 9; 2: 1b - 2. These verses do not qualify the opponents' perfectionist claim. Rather, they refute it. We discover that: 'The presence of this common Christian doctrine of the atonement here in 1 John indicates the author's desire to bring the Johannine community [regarded by Bogart as 'sectarian'] back into line with the great mainline Christian thinking about Christ's death, and so close the mouths of the heretics within the community.'<sup>530</sup> Before the author made this introduction the doctrine of expiation for sin was 'almost unheard of in the Johannine community.'<sup>531</sup> Bogart elucidates for us that the story of the death of Christ in the Fourth Gospel lacks this element and concentrates rather upon

---

<sup>528</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 33 - 34.

<sup>529</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34

<sup>530</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 34 - 35.

<sup>531</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

glorification, exaltation, self-dedication and sanctification. So, the author asserted an emphasis held by the wider Church to demonstrate to the community that it was human sin that made necessary an expiatory element to Christ's death. Therefore, those under gnostic influence were wrong in their claim never to have sinned as to do this was to deny the exigency of that death.<sup>532</sup>

It would be simplistic, however, to reduce the situation to a confrontation between an 'expiationist' author and a gnostically perfectionist opposition; Bogart says that verses like 1: 3ff reveal that the author too 'claims moral purity [as 'a gift to man, not his by right'] for himself and his followers.' This 'is a type of perfectionism, since moral purity is obviously equivalent to sinlessness.' Such assertions of perfectionism advanced by the author may be 'made by any good Johannine Christian, and can be abundantly documented in the Fourth Gospel.'<sup>533</sup> Moreover, besides the 'primitive doctrine of expiation,' to refute the opponents the author deploys 'an emphasis upon the qualifying motifs of *abiding in God* and *being born of God*, found in 3: 6 and 9.' We learn that these two verses 'more than 1: 3ff., provide us with the *locus classicus* of orthodox perfectionism in 1 John.'<sup>534</sup> These motifs, however, have links to an eschatological theme within the epistle. Bogart endorses the view that:

For the author of 1 John, the tension between perfection and sin still exists, as clearly stated in 3: 2, "Beloved, we are now children of God, and it does not yet appear what we shall be." The Christian in 1 John lives the dynamic life of the ever-approaching eschaton: he already has been born of God and abides in Christ, and insofar as he fulfills those two essential provisions, he is sinless (3: 6, 9). But there remains a "not yet," a future expectation of the completion or fulfillment of his moral perfection, and this implies that he may yet lapse back into sin temporarily and have need of the forgiveness which comes through Christ's expiatory sacrifice (1: 7b ff.).<sup>535</sup>

Divine birth and abidance in Christ, then, exist as conditions for the enjoyment of sinlessness. However, even that sinlessness is not consummate. Moral perfection lies

---

<sup>532</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 35 - 37; 136 - 141.

<sup>533</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 37 - 38.

<sup>534</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>535</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

in the future, leaving the believer vulnerable to recidivation and thus reliant upon the benefits of Christ's death. This argument supports Bogart's assertion that any contradiction of 3: 6 and 9 with our verses in chapter one 'is only apparent.'<sup>536</sup>

After providing a summary of academic solutions to the problem, in a section he calls 'The Real Conflict in 1 John,' this scholar explains that 'the apparent conflict between 1: 8ff, and 3: 6 and 9 is due to the author's condemnation of the heretical type of perfectionism in the former and his affirmation of the orthodox type in the latter.' However, he admits, 'there remains an inconsistency in 1 John.' Eagerness to combat heretical perfectionism led the author to employ three stratagems against the opponents. Beside the two already mentioned (the introduction of the doctrine of expiation, and the two important qualifications or provisions for sinlessness in 3: 6 and 9), a third manoeuvre took the form of 'a system of casuistry concerning two kinds of sin, mortal and non-mortal.' A problem arises in that the first and third stratagems, expiation and casuistry, conflict with the second, the conditions of abiding in Christ and being born of God. By introducing the first and third the author 'effectively nullified even his *orthodox* version of perfectionism.' We learn that there 'simply can be no way of harmonizing even the carefully qualified perfectionism of 3: 6 and 9 with the antiperfectionist, gradualist ethic presupposed by expiationism and casuistry.' For, perfection is, by definition, an absolute. Marshalling the doctrine of expiation and the artifice of casuistry proved to be 'overkill' regarding perfectionism: on the one hand 'they must have effectively countered the gnostic doctrine of perfection'; yet 'at the same time...they produced an intolerable tension with the orthodox expression of perfection. Expiation for sin and sinless perfection by abiding in Christ and being born of God are simply irreconcilable doctrines.'<sup>537</sup>

Bogart states at this point:

Now in order to save the author of 1 John from the accusation of being confused, unaware of the obvious inconsistency between expiationism and perfectionism, the only apparent alternative would be to say that he

---

<sup>536</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>537</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

genuinely espoused one of these doctrines, while giving the other only formal acceptance out of a sense of loyalty to his church's teaching. Of the two, it would seem more likely that the author espoused the doctrine of expiation, in which case he could not technically be termed a perfectionist, as we have strictly employed the term. (Perhaps he could be termed a "semi-perfectionist" or a "quasi-perfectionist," since he certainly longed after perfection for his congregation [s]).<sup>538</sup>

Thus, this scholar realises that to rescue the author from readerly allegations of perplexity he must describe an assured authorial stance. Therefore, he portrays him as an expiationist, yet one who maintains some personal and communal aspirations to sinlessness. Bogart's author continues to embrace perfectionism because it belongs to the Johannine Gospel tradition - yet he does so with a gentle clasp. Displaying his insight, this scholar reveals that the 'tension in the author's mind shows up especially in 5: 16ff.,' when discussing intercessory prayer. The 'casuistic' compromise made here by attempting ('rather feebly,' says Bogart) to distinguish between 'mortal' and 'non-mortal' sins would never have been attempted by any thoroughgoing perfectionist, for such a person would affirm that a believer is either sinless or not sinless. Furthermore, we may not find this casuistry in any part of the New Testament dealing with the expiatory sacrifice of Christ. It occurs in this instance due to 'the author's attempt to reconcile two different, and ultimately irreconcilable, concepts of sin, which, in turn, [rest] on two utterly different ethical systems, *viz.*, perfectionism and gradualism.' Under the perfectionist ethic there is only one type of sin, mortal; but under an ethic informed by expiationist theology 'sins could be seen as existing.' The author shows himself to be an expiationist by his belief that there could be such a thing as non-mortal or venial sins.<sup>539</sup>

So, by introducing the doctrine of Christ's expiation for sin, and as a consequence the practice of casuistry, the author 'modified his orthodox perfectionism to the point that it ceased being a thoroughgoing perfectionism in the strict sense.' However, rather than abandoning it altogether he 'carefully qualified it, probably out

---

<sup>538</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>539</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

of loyalty to his heritage.' From our Fishian standpoint it is interesting to note Bogart's confidence that his work represents an insight into the 'Real Conflict' in 1 John. Authorial motive, for instance, becomes clear through sedulous scrutiny of the text. We discover that the expiatory emphasis appears not simply out of pastorally driven polemical concerns but 'also out of the author's personal conviction of its truth.' Likewise, the author retains a modified version of perfectionism not only out of loyalty to his Johannine heritage but also 'to be sure, out of real spiritual longing for his "children."' Because of the juxtaposition of the two mutually incompatible doctrines of expiation and perfection, the author evidently felt 'forced' to construct a compromise: 'a casuistic system which made, for the first time in Christian history, a distinction between mortal and non-mortal sins.'<sup>540</sup> Bogart has discovered the 'real conflict' in the text ('the carefully qualified perfectionism of 3: 6 and 9' set against 'the antiperfectionist, gradualist ethic presupposed by expiationism and casuistry') in contrast to the mistaken perception of others (regarding the seeming authorial self-contradiction represented by our verses in chapters one and three).

Bogart authoritatively assures us that 'we may safely conclude that the origin of the orthodox perfectionism found in 1 John (notably in 3: 6, 9) is rooted exclusively in the Gospel of John itself. No additional hypothesis need be constructed to account for its origin.'<sup>541</sup> From it the believer emerges as a person: born from heaven and of the spirit; possessing the spirit; not of this world; at once abiding in, and being the abode of, Jesus; elect; who is the possession of God; not subject to divine judgement; special to, and loved and honoured by, Jesus and the Father; presently enjoying the eschatological rewards of peace, joy and answered prayer; benefitting from being a friend rather than a slave of Jesus; already owning the life of the new aeon; interceded for by the Son; beloved by the Father; glorified and sanctified; doing the truth; walking in the light; following Jesus; doing God's work; fulfilling and surpassing Jesus' own mission; keeping the commandments; remaining in union and mutual love with the

---

<sup>540</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 48 - 49.

<sup>541</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

community; hated by the world; declared as already pure by the doctrine received; orthodox and in possession 'of the true gnosis of the Father himself.'<sup>542</sup> 'In short,' says Bogart, the believer in the Johannine Gospel 'is perfect.'<sup>543</sup>

Having sought Fourth Gospel proofs of the perfection of the believer this scholar explores various types of pre-Johannine literature: a) for 'evidences of perfectionist tendencies'; b) to 'find the source of the original perfectionism of the Gospel of John'; and c) for 'some clues of how and why it bifurcated into orthodox and heretical types by the time [of the composition of] the First Epistle.'<sup>544</sup> His judgement regarding Hebrew and Jewish literature is that 'only in some writings of Jewish apocalyptic can we find a perfectionism like that found in the Johannine corpus.' Two elements must converge to produce genuine and complete perfectionism and Bogart terms these as: 'imminent eschatological hope and strict ethical dichotomization.'<sup>545</sup> Both Jewish apocalyptic literature and the Johannine Gospel share these elements, but in the latter there is a greater sense of realised eschatology.<sup>546</sup> Thus, the orthodox perfectionism evident in 1 John originated from John's Gospel; moreover, if we trace further backwards we discover that the perfectionism found in the Gospel has 'its ethical dualism and realised eschatology...rooted in a *Sitz-im-Leben* not too different from that of Jewish apocalyptic.'<sup>547</sup> Bogart does not claim that Johannine perfectionism originated out of Jewish apocalyptic, as he admits that 'there would be no way to demonstrate this.' Yet, he does claim that the life-settings 'in both communities were mutually analogous.'<sup>548</sup> Given this background, within the writings of the New Testament and the Apostolic Fathers, this scholar maintains that 'the perfectionism we meet in 1 John 3: 6, 9, which [had its roots] in the Gospel of John, is unique in the New

---

<sup>542</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 63 - 90.

<sup>543</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>544</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>545</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>546</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>547</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>548</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.



Testament.<sup>549</sup> We learn that it 'must be admitted that Johannine perfectionism is *sui generis*' in that body of literature.<sup>550</sup>

Having established the origin of orthodox perfectionism this scholar goes on to determine the source of its heretical variant. Concerning the gnostic literature of the early centuries of the Christian era, Bogart assumes that the Fourth Gospel 'came out of the same world of thought,' though he denies that he has any intention to establish any causal relationship between the two. Moreover, he says that the Gospel's 'use of obviously gnosticising language...[demonstrates that] it was operating in a naive or unselfconscious fashion.'<sup>551</sup> Citing extracts from sources he acknowledges as later than 1 John (The Gospel of Truth, The Gospel of Thomas, The Odes of Solomon, the *Excerpta ex Theodoto*, and evidence from Irenaeus concerning Valentinian perfectionism<sup>552</sup>) Bogart comments that regarding the gnostic evidence he has quoted:

[I]t would not be unreasonable...to hypothesise that it had earlier forbears which could have inspired the perfectionist heretics of 1 John. There can be no direct proof of this, but it is possible, and because of the close match between the Valentinian evidence and 1 John, even probable that some hypothetical early gnostics were responsible for the heretical perfectionism condemned in 1 John.<sup>553</sup>

This scholar eliminates the idea that the heretical perfectionists could have derived their perfectionism from the same Gospel source as their orthodox counterparts. The heretics' ideas were no mere extension of a '*Tendenz*' already found in John's Gospel - a doctrine pushed too far and later declared as heresy. Rather, these ideas, as we gleaned from the earlier grammatical analysis of 1: 8 and 10, had their basis in a radically different anthropology from the 'basically biblical anthropology found in John.' Bogart declares: 'Johannine perfectionism, originating in the Gospel and echoed in the First Epistle, in its orthodox form in 3: 6, 9, was radically *perverted*

---

<sup>549</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>550</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>551</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 114 - 115.

<sup>552</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 114 - 119.

<sup>553</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

by an alien anthropology.'<sup>554</sup> Heretical perfectionism derived from the Gospel of John 'only insofar as its exponents had been members of the Johannine community, and would naturally have inherited this teaching.' These community members 'had been converted (or perverted, from the standpoint of the author of 1 John) to a gnostic anthropology, and hence contaminated their inherited perfectionism with an alien, gnostic view of man.'<sup>555</sup> We discover that from this standpoint:

[T]he heretical perfectionists, by their gnostic view of man, made all perfectionism thoroughly repulsive. The author of 1 John had the task of repudiating his gnostic opponents and trying to save Johannine perfectionism in its original state. This...he accomplished only imperfectly, and in the end perfectionism disappeared from the Johannine community.<sup>556</sup>

So, the bifurcation into orthodox and heretical perfectionism happened because of the seducing influence of an alien, gnostic view of humankind. Moreover, ultimately the whole inclination towards perfectionism ceased as a result of both the claims of the heretics and the 'overkill' response of the author.

For Bogart, the process of ascertaining the identity and claims of the heretics involves not only isolating 'the specific designations of the author,' but also "'reading between the lines" throughout the Epistle in order to discern the controversial background of the author's statements.'<sup>557</sup> By so reading the material this scholar reconstructs the existence of ten 'identifiable categories' of people within the community, all of whom the author seeks to rebuke or correct in some way. Though the heretical perfectionists are a distinguishable category in Bogart's taxonomy, he informs us that the 'subsections overlap.'<sup>558</sup> Consequently, we may, for instance, 'legitimately' identify these opponents with both docetist and libertine parties who also made up the community. He makes this correlation between these categories without

---

<sup>554</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>555</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 120 - 121.

<sup>556</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>557</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>558</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

implying that they held identical views. Despite the initial impression of a plethora of opponents, according to this scholar the differing categories 'all comprised the same group'; therefore, 'the author of 1 John fought on only one front - (discounting his pastoral admonitions to the faint-hearted, etc. *within* his community).' Creating a poly-hyphenated compound term for this group, Bogart describes them as the: 'heretical-perfectionist-docetist-libertine-charismatic-prophetic-itinerant-teachers.'<sup>559</sup>

Concluding his work, this scholar reiterates his views respecting what he regards as three essential areas for his analysis: a) theology; b) anthropology; and, c) soteriology. Elucidating on each of these, he states that there was nothing inherent in the Fourth Gospel presentation of them that led directly to the development of heretical perfectionism, and 'which in turn was a part of a larger gnostic complex.'<sup>560</sup> He states that the Gospel of John 'does *not* contain within itself the seeds of gnostic heresy.' We may not conclude 'that its gnosticizing tendencies could have naturally developed into any full-fledged gnostic system.'<sup>561</sup> Therefore, to speculate that a perfectionist Johannine Christian had a 'mind set' that could easily lead to gnosticism is to indulge in 'psychologizing without firm evidence.'<sup>562</sup> It is true that the Gospel 'employs gnostic myth and language' in some places (exhibited mainly concerning christology and ecclesiology), yet 'it remains consonant with biblical faith.'<sup>563</sup> We do not possess 'definite evidence' of natural vulnerability to gnostic thinking; no 'spiritual autobiographies' have come down to us from community members and so we cannot make any judgement on the issue. The 'evidence available' does not tell us with any exactitude how some Johannine community members became gnostics: whether they did so, for instance, because of an influx of pro-gnostic gentiles who failed to accept the 'basic biblical doctrines of God and man,' or due to the absence within the

---

<sup>559</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>560</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>561</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>562</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>563</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

community of 'an Old Testament background of belief in God as the creator and man as his creature...[w]e cannot tell'<sup>564</sup> He explains:

Not even the authors and redactors of the Johannine literature tell us their "inmost thoughts." If we are to trace influences and countercurrents we must use the only evidence we have on hand, namely, the *texts*, and not what we imagine could have gone on *in the minds* of some rather remote first and second century Christians.<sup>565</sup>

Having made this point it is interesting that Bogart deduces that the opponents of the author espoused heretical perfectionism as a result of the adoption of 'gnostic and alien views,' rather than following a misreading of the Gospel. As we will see shortly, Raymond Brown comes to the opposite conclusion on the basis of the same evidence. We note also that at this stage Bogart renews his claim that he has returned to the text as the solely reliable source of historical reconstruction. However, his assertion that he is making recourse to a text that has a self-evident meaning stands in tension with the interpretive manoeuvres he has found necessary to effect. We remember that the process of ascertaining the identity and claims of the heretics involves not only isolating 'the specific designations of the author,' but also "reading between the lines" throughout the Epistle in order to discern the controversial background of the author's statements.' Additionally, we find in his reconstruction of the identity of the opponents this scholar adds that in 1: 5 - 2: 17 'we meet, "between the lines," a group of worldly persons who are morally indifferent, *i.e.*, libertines.'<sup>566</sup> Despite his admonition that we must not 'imagine [what] could have gone on *in the minds* of some rather remote first and second century Christians,' as we have seen he confidently asserts the transparency of authorial motive. The expiatory emphasis that he sees in the text appears not simply out of pastorally driven polemical concerns but 'also out of the author's personal conviction of its truth.' Also, the author's retention of a modified version of perfectionism emanates not only out of loyalty to his Johannine heritage but

---

<sup>564</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 134 and 135.

<sup>565</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>566</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129. See note 558.

also 'to be sure, out of real spiritual longing for his "children."<sup>567</sup> Similarly, regarding the author's report of the claims of his opponents, he 'is obviously giving us only what *he thinks* his opponents were asserting.'<sup>568</sup> Furthermore, he claims insight into the cerebral processes of some other early believers: while he appeals to the textual authority of 1 John to deny the validity of the search for a 'mind-set' that could easily lead to gnosticism, he prosecutes such a search for the 'mind-set' of various New Testament writers to prove that they divided doctrine into categories equivalent to 'orthodox' or 'heretical.'<sup>569</sup> Thus, we may argue that to reconstruct the history of the Johannine community Bogart must interpret rather than simply demonstrate what is in the texts. Though he avers to read the text exclusively, he must 'read between the lines' and read the mind of the author. In Bogart, then, we find another instance of a scholar claiming not to be interpreting - a move that we have discussed in chapter 2 and noted in the work of Wesley and his luminaries. Our Fishian perspective aids us to discern the rhetoric of objectivity that this scholar uses to recommend his reading. Without implying hermeneutical incoherence, I suggest that we may decry that each of our late twentieth century scholars execute the same move.

### **6. 3. Raymond E. Brown**

Raymond E. Brown, as we have noted, has conducted an ongoing project to reconstruct the historic setting of so-called 'Johannine Christianity' - a project that he began over four decades ago.<sup>570</sup> The frontispiece of his book, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (1979), reveals the compass of Brown's perceived achievement: 'This study in Johannine ecclesiology reconstructs the history of that Christian community whose life from "the beginning" to "the last hour" is reflected in the Gospel and Epistles of John.' In the Preface, Brown modestly declares: 'I warn the reader that my reconstruction claims at most probability; and if sixty percent of my detective work

---

<sup>567</sup> See notes 566 and 541.

<sup>568</sup> See note 527.

<sup>569</sup> See note 523.

<sup>570</sup> See note 221.

is accepted, I shall be happy indeed.<sup>571</sup> This piece, together with his exposition *The Epistles of John* (1982) and his earlier volumes that comprise his commentary *The Gospel According to John*,<sup>572</sup> stands as a major contribution to the field of Johannine studies. We have already noted Barnabas Lindar's commendation of the success of his colleague's efforts in his remark: 'Brown's reconstruction is not definitive, but it is the best on offer.'<sup>573</sup> To explore in his work the factors germane to our purpose we will draw from *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* and *The Epistles of John*.

Brown pays tribute to the pioneers of New Testament ecclesiological reconstruction, J. Wellhausen and R. Bultmann. He 'accept[s] in principle the ability to detect Christian community life beneath the surface Gospel story.' Yet he issues a caveat surrounding the 'methodological difficulties' that may arise in pursuit of the project.<sup>574</sup> The exegete must avoid 'overly imaginative deductions about ecclesiastical history' on the one hand, and 'the argument from silence' on the other.<sup>575</sup> Moreover, she or he must shun a tendency to 'posit non-existent pre-Gospel sources and to determine the theological outlook of the evangelist (and his community) from the way in which he has corrected the source.' Having issued this caveat Brown reassures us that though 'one cannot completely avoid such perils' he is able to promise: 'I shall try to minimize the element of self-deception.' He will build on the foundation of the text of 'the existing Gospel, not on any reconstructed sources.'<sup>576</sup> Considering our Fishian viewpoint the latter intention looks like a version of the 'back-to-the-text' manoeuvre that we have just noted in Bogart's elucidation.

As an historical-critical scholar, Brown assumes as a matter of course that he may discern the meaning and historical setting of the Johannine corpus by means of careful analysis. Moving from his foundation in the Fourth Gospel, he carefully

---

571 R.E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, Frontispiece, and Preface p. 7.

572 R.E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, AC, 2 Volumes, 1966 - 70).

573 See note 233.

574 R.E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, pp. 17 - 18.

575 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

576 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

assembles the pieces of information he sees in the Gospel and goes on to incorporate elements that he observes in the epistles. His endeavours culminate in two charts of Johannine Community history that feature a four-phase time-line and a kind of dramatis personæ of the groups involved. Brown traces the development of the community, beginning in the mid 50s of the first century and on into the second century. He initially follows the course of two Jewish parties who believed in Jesus either as Davidic Messiah or Mosaic leader: one made up of those embracing 'relatively standard expectations' (and who included in their number a personal follower of Jesus eventually known as the Beloved Disciple), and another group who held 'an anti-Temple bias.'<sup>577</sup> The amalgamation of these two parties into a single 'Johannine Christian' group catalysed the development of 'a high pre-existence christology.' Subsequent debates with other Jews concerning monotheism resulted in the expulsion of the 'Johannine Christians' from the synagogues. Alienation drove the Christian group to stress 'a realization of the eschatological promises in Jesus' teaching in compensation for what they had lost in Judaism, and to regard 'the Jews' (those who rejected Jesus) as 'children of the devil.' At the forefront of this transition was the Beloved Disciple, who encouraged others to take the same path. This development represents the end of phase one ('Origins') of the time-line, a closure that Brown sets at the late 80s.<sup>578</sup>

A mission to the Gentiles followed, and the group regarded the conversion of these peoples as God's plan of fulfilment. Brown suggests that the Johannine community may deliberately have moved from their Palestinian place of origin to the Diaspora to teach the Greeks. He says that although this contact with the Greeks served to draw out the universalistic aspects of Johannine thought, the persecution by 'the Jews' and rejection by others led to the group's abjurement of 'the world' as a system under the dominion of Satan, a system that had rejected Jesus. Moreover, the

---

<sup>577</sup> *Ibid.*, Summary Charts One and Two: 'The History of the Johannine Community,' and 'Different Religious Groupings Outside the Johannine Community as Seen Through the Pages of the Fourth Gospel.' Summary Chart One, Phase One: Origins, paragraphs 1 and 2, p. 166.

<sup>578</sup> *Ibid.*, Summary Chart One, Phase One: Origins, paragraph 3, p. 166; Summary Chart Two, Section II, p. 168; Summary Chart Two, Section II, p. 168.

'Crypto-Christian' (a term Brown uses to describe Jewish believers who remained within the synagogue) rejection of the high christology of the Johannine group heralded a breaking of communion between these factions. Fellowship still existed with the 'Apostolic Christians' (Jewish and Gentile believers who counted themselves as heirs of the Apostles' teaching), but strains remained on the issues of christology and church structure. The group began to accentuate christology in order to refute 'the Jews' and the 'Jewish Christians' (Christians who had left the synagogues, who regarded themselves as followers of the tradition of James the brother of the Lord, who rejected Jesus' divinity). However, this resulted in a split within the Johannine community. These events mark the end of phase two ('Gospel') of Brown's time line, and he sets them in the 90s.<sup>579</sup>

From about C.E. 100, a period Brown terms as phase three, 'Epistles,' the Johannine Community divided into two. On the one hand, the 'Secessionists' maintained that Jesus' divinity had been of such an order that he was not fully human. Consequently, he did not belong to the world, and his earthly life, and that of the believer, had no 'salvific import.' Jesus' human existence 'was only a stage in the career of the divine word and not an intrinsic component in redemption.' What Jesus did in Palestine held no importance for the secessionists, including his death on a cross. Salvation would be unchanged if the Word had become incarnate in a different human representative who lived and died in an altered manner. Yet, the knowledge that God's Son came into the world remained vital, and those who believed this already enjoyed salvation. On the other hand, the adherents of the author of the epistles argued that to be a child of God there must be a confession that Jesus came in the flesh. Furthermore, the believer must keep the commandments. The anointing with the Spirit obviates the need for human teachers, and all those who claim to have the Spirit must accept a testing of that claim. This fraternity regarded the 'Secessionists' as children of the devil and the antichrists.<sup>580</sup>

---

<sup>579</sup> *Ibid.*, Summary Chart One, Phase Two: Gospel, paragraphs 1 and 2, pp. 166 - 167; Summary Chart Two, Sections IV, V and VI, p. 169.

<sup>580</sup> *Ibid.*, Summary Chart One, Phase Three: Epistles, paragraphs 1 and 2, p. 167.



Phase four, 'After the Epistles,' Brown describes as a period when the two parties further diverged. The secessionist party followed the 'road to gnosticism,' and gained as followers the larger part of the Johannine Community who accepted their theology. As the schism had completely separated them from the 'moderates,' this company divided three ways: i) to embrace true docetism (moving from belief in 'a not fully human Jesus,' to a mere appearance of humanity); ii) to endorse gnosticism (augmenting their belief in a pre-existent Jesus with the notion of themselves as also pre-existent and as having descended from the heavenly regions); iii) to espouse Montanism (departing from a belief that they possessed the Paraclete to hold that they embodied the Paraclete). According to Brown, this group 'took the Fourth Gospel with them,' and later it became accepted by the Gnostics who commented on it.<sup>581</sup>

Some of those who now followed the Epistles' author, however, became gradually assimilated into a union with the 'Great Church' ('the church catholic'). This assimilation came about because the author's acolytes had failed to combat the secessionists by an appeal to tradition. The group showed itself willing to accept 'authoritative official teachers' in the form of 'presbyter-bishops.' The Great Church simultaneously opened itself to the high Johannine christology. Brown concludes by stating that the Great Church only slowly accepted the Fourth Gospel because of its misuse by the Gnostics.<sup>582</sup>

So, these charts encapsulate this scholar's reconstructive research. Yet it is what lies behind the act of such historical-critical investigation that concerns us rather than every detail of the reconstructive process or the finished historical account. What is important to us is the assumption that the texts contain the evidence to reconstruct such a history, and how that assumption and reconstruction relates to the proffered solution to 1 John's conundrum. In this instance the explanation put forward regarding the problem appears within Brown's treatment of the history as it develops into phase three, 'Epistles.' He reminds us that as readers we discover the putative 'adversaries,

---

<sup>581</sup> *Ibid.*, Summary Chart One, Phase Three: After the Epistles, paragraph 2, p. 167.

<sup>582</sup> *Ibid.*, Summary Chart One, Phase Three: Epistles, paragraph 1, p. 167.

secessionists, or schismatics' through 'the author's point of view.' We use such epithets to characterise that group simply because of the survival of one writing. Therefore, we must exercise caution as '[o]ur only knowledge of them...[we] derive from the assumption that they held the opinions against which the author of 1 John argues, and such a mirror-image approach has many perils.'<sup>583</sup> The two main perils Brown adduces are: a) that it is uncertain that every idea the author opposes actually belongs to the adversaries; and, b) that the author may be using the Epistle to correct wrong ideas irrespective of their source. Despite this prompting to caution, Brown states:

Nevertheless, it is a working hypothesis to separate the statements against which the author directly polemicizes and to see whether, taken together, they represent a consistent body of thought. It is my contention that they do, and in the pages that follow I shall reconstruct the christology, the ethical stance, the eschatology, and the pneumatology...of the Johannine secessionists seen through the eyes of the author of 1 John.<sup>584</sup>

Thus, we find that from the text of 1 John we may discover consonant elements of the adversaries' theological and ethical position. Moreover, we may effect this discovery with clarity as the author's perspective remains available to us. Hence, we learn that the 'author ha[d] gathered [the prepared statements of the adversaries] almost as slogans and used them in his rebuttal.'<sup>585</sup> Regarding these statements and rebuttal, the question arises as to where the parties appealed for the ratification of their respective positions. Rejecting the notion that outside influences lay behind the secessionists' views Brown tells us that it was rather a matter of interpretation of the Johannine form of the Christian message (that readers now possess in the Fourth Gospel). Displaying his sensibility to matters of interpretation, he proposes that the author of 1 John and the adversaries used the same material but construed it differently:

---

<sup>583</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>584</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>585</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

I suspect that the Johannine Gospel, as it came to both the author and to the secessionists, was relatively "neutral" on some of the points that were now coming into dispute, i.e., it did not contain direct answers, for these were new questions. In the tradition there were texts on both sides of the issue; so each of the disputing parties was making the claim that its interpretation of the Gospel was correct.<sup>586</sup>

Brown, though, does not offer a methodical explanation for this difference in understanding of the tradition other than the 'neutrality' of the 'texts,' or their ambiguity. Moreover, if he suspects that the tradition used by the contending parties in the Johannine Community lacked perspicuity on some issues, he does not usually seem to regard the Epistles or the Fourth Gospel in the same light. He treats those texts as sufficiently determinate for his purposes. Respecting our interest, the First Epistle apparently contains the necessary trace elements of the tradition to reconstruct the acute crisis facing the community. The contenders had evidently reduced the tradition to statements and we find them assembled by the author of the First Epistle. Though on the one hand Brown says that the Johannine Gospel tradition was 'neutral' or vague enough for the community to find different meanings in it, on the other he claims that parts of it survive in the New Testament texts in sufficient exactness to facilitate his accurate reconstruction of the disputants' positions. He has confidence, for instance, that he can discern in the texts the presuppositions of the opponents. While 'presenting their views' Brown says that he will 'seek to show that they were not without logic and a certain persuasiveness, *given their presuppositions.*' We can be sure that we may discover those presuppositions as Brown's presentation is seemingly innocent of presupposition on some issues. In this case it will grant us direct access to the group's

---

<sup>586</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 106 - 107. Elsewhere Brown augments this statement by declaring: 'The fact remains, however, that in neither the affirmations of the epistolary author nor in the reconstructed affirmations of the secessionists can one find a direct citation of [the Gospel of John]...Therefore, one cannot prove beyond doubt that either group reflected on the written [Gospel of John] as we now know it, and it is safer to speak of their knowing the proclamation of Christianity known to us through [that Gospel]. *That is what I mean in all that follows when I speak of either side drawing upon [the Gospel of John] or the Johannine tradition.*' R.E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, p. 73. This scholar argues for the existence of a first written version of the Johannine Gospel during the nineties of the first century. It is from this document that Brown's parties drew 'texts' to prove their positions. While not quoting directly from what they read, according to Brown the protagonists' readings of different elements of the Gospel shaped their thinking and eventually led to the formulation of the respective statements and rebuttals.

impulsion. He presents the secessionist case 'not out of any personal sympathy for their position as I reconstruct it, but so that the reader can see the inner motivations of Johannine thought on both sides of the battle line in this civil war.'<sup>587</sup> Furthermore, this scholar aids us to discern the difference between the opponents' mistaken reading of the Gospel tradition and the presuppositions of the writer of the Fourth Gospel. Addressing the possibility of a relativistic presentation of Jesus' humanity in the Gospel, Brown says: 'Let me remind the reader...that I am not explaining what the evangelist meant, but how the Gospel could have been read by the secessionists, at times contrary to the presuppositions of the evangelist...'<sup>588</sup>

Because of Brown's deterministic view of the New Testament texts he is able to assert that the author of the First Epistle 'does not deny the main slogans of his opponents but qualifies them.' The affirmations of the secessionists stand as truth for the author also, because they belong to the tradition. Therefore, to discredit the adversaries the author must demonstrate that they do not live out the implications of Johannine principles.<sup>589</sup> So, Brown proceeds, as we have noted, on the basis that he can discern in the First Epistle the secessionist slogans within what he regards as the author's refutation.

Furthermore, he uses the text of the Fourth Gospel '*exactly as we have it*'<sup>590</sup> to discern the derivations from the tradition made by the respective parties. Though he could, he says, exclude certain passages from the Fourth Gospel because they probably did not exist in the tradition known to the secessionists but are later or anti-secessionist additions by a redactor, Brown chooses to retain them lest he should become subject to a circular argument. If he excised them he would be 'proving that the secessionists drew upon Johannine tradition because [he] would have excluded from [his] main source of that tradition...every statement that seems to contradict the position of the

---

<sup>587</sup> R.E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, p. 104.

<sup>588</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>589</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>590</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

secessionists.<sup>591</sup> Brown assures us of his awareness that the Gospel text bears the marks of the actions of a redactor, although he does not think that any critic knows with certainty where the redactor's additions are (a point that we would agree with as from our perspective these evidences appear in various locations according to the critics' assumptions that place them there). He remarks: 'I regard this added material (some of it ancient) as complementary to the Gospel, and I regard the redactor as a member of a Johannine "school" of writers.'<sup>592</sup> However, he temporarily ignores these imprints 'in order to test whether the position of the secessionists makes sense if they held as Gospel the whole of the Johannine tradition known to us in the Fourth Gospel.'<sup>593</sup> Therefore, under this historical critical explication the history of the texts (both the tradition and the Fourth Gospel) remains available to us for reconstruction along with the history of the community they help to reveal.

Christology, we learn, was the main source of contention between the author and his adversaries, yet its implications for Christian behaviour became a further divisive subject because the 'opponents claimed an intimacy with God to the point of being perfect or sinless.' Brown isolates their 'boasts' in 1 John 1: 8a and 10a, supplying his own translation: 'If we boast, "We are free from the guilt of sin"; 'If we boast, "We have not sinned."<sup>594</sup> Regarding the first of these claims, this theologian states that it does not refer to an 'extreme libertinism.' He deduces rather that 'their claim may have reflected the thesis that actions committed by the believer were not important enough to be sins that could challenge the intimacy with God acquired through belief.'<sup>595</sup> Brown says that this party would argue that any errors perpetrated by Christians 'are not "sins" that can destroy one's salvific state because by faith Christians are irrevocably outside the realm of sin.' Using a cautious tone Brown comments further:

---

591 *Ibid.*, p. 109.

592 *Ibid.*, p. 20 note 25.

593 *Ibid.*, p. 109. Regarding notes 592 - 594 see also R.E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, pp. 72 - 73.

594 *Ibid.*, pp. 123 - 124.

595 R.E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, p. 206.

[T]he problem raised by the boast of 1 John 1: 8a may have been that, in the author's opinion, it was correct to think that upon becoming a believer the Johannine Christian was rendered free from the guilt of sin, but it was wrong to think that this condition automatically remained after belief no matter what one did.<sup>596</sup>

The author, then, may have agreed with the opponents on this issue: freedom from guilt following conversion. His contention with them possibly centred on another question: their claim of future immunity from the opprobrium of sin. Following on from this central statement about the eighth verse, under this scholar's explanation the self-deceit the author speaks of in verse 8b becomes that potentially suffered by community members who, 'under the influence of secessionist propaganda,' might adopt their stance.<sup>597</sup> Furthermore, we discover that the clause that forms 8c concerning truth has its roots in Johannine theology, reflecting that it is people's inmost being that identifies them.<sup>598</sup>

If the first boast involved a denial of the obloquy of believers' wrongdoing, of the second claim in verse 10a Brown says that it involved a denial of 'sins or bad actions' subsequent to conversion.<sup>599</sup> Again, this theologian portrays an author who agrees with the secessionists on the foundation of their assertion, but differs with them on its outworking. He explains that the author viewed 'sins committed after coming to faith in Jesus to be all the more guilty since they are contrary to the believer's status as a child of God,'<sup>600</sup> and yet objected to the denial of the possibility of wrongdoing. We learn that the boasts of the secessionists:

flow from an exaggeration of the same principle, i.e., that at the time of becoming a disciple the believers received enormous privileges - a perfectionist principle thoroughly at home in [the Gospel of] John. Yet the...boasts show a mounting exaggeration of the implications drawn from the perfectionist principle...The claim to have no guilt from sin recognizes that the deeds are wrong but contends that they have no

---

596 *Ibid.*, p. 234.

597 *Ibid.*, p. 206.

598 *Ibid.*, p. 207.

599 *Ibid.*, pp. 211 - 212.

600 *Ibid.*, p. 234.

effect. The claim not to have sinned denies the possibility of wrongdoing.<sup>601</sup>

So, a Johannine 'perfectionist principle' lies behind the secessionist claims. The fault (as Brown's author would have it) rests in an 'exaggeration' of the implications 'drawn from' that principle. To illustrate the principle Brown seeks 'the rationale in John [that is, the Fourth Gospel] for the secessionist position, and then observ[es] how the author of the Epistles responds, also in fidelity to John.'<sup>602</sup> We will now briefly look at facets of this depiction of the perfectionist principle embedded in the Fourth Gospel. Then we will explore his comments on our verses in chapter three. Taking forward our exploration to the conclusion of Brown's treatment of the matter will involve a critique of it in Fishian terms.

The twofold claim by the opponents that they enjoyed a sinless state, Brown says, 'at first glance...may seem foreign to the Johannine tradition' (unlike others such as 1: 6; 2: 4, 6, 9; 4: 20, which this scholar says 'can easily be justified from the Fourth Gospel'). However, the first form of the claim, 'We are free from the guilt of sin,' is 'the easier [of the two] to relate to the Fourth Gospel' as it has a correlation with John 8: 31 - 34 and 9: 34, 41. The Gospel uses the terminology 'slaves of sin' and 'guilty of sin' concerning the non-believer. During Jesus' address to those Jews who had 'inadequately' believed in him the one who acts sinfully receives the designation 'a slave of sin,' whereas the disciples will know the truth and the truth will free them. In the case of the man blind from birth and accused of being born in sin, Jesus grants him enlightenment. In contrast, the Pharisees hear that if they recognised their blindness, they would not 'be guilty of sin,' but because they claim to see, their sin remains. The blind man who recognised his blindness is consequently not guilty of sin, his sin does not remain. Explaining from these instances the rationale for the secessionist position, Brown says that since by contrast with the non-believer, the believer enjoys freedom from sin, the secessionists are simply rephrasing slightly the statement that the truth

---

<sup>601</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 234 - 235.

<sup>602</sup> R.E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, p. 124.

will free the believer. Moreover, the opponents are merely following the wishes of the evangelist, who desired 'the Gospel reader to identify himself with the blind man,' and so regard himself as among 'those who have be[come] enlightened and thus not guilty of sin.'<sup>603</sup>

The second form of the claim, 'We have not sinned,' represents a greater difficulty in the search for parity with the Fourth Gospel. Brown consistently rejects the notion that this constitutes a claim never to have sinned during the whole of life. Rather, he affirms that the opponents professed never to have sinned since conversion. As an aside, it is noteworthy that here Brown remarks in a footnote: 'The distinction would be meaningless to those who would read John 3: 17 - 21 to mean that the light brought by Jesus merely makes visible what people already are, so that "he who acts in truth" refers to one who has been sinless when he encounters Jesus.'<sup>604</sup> The phrase 'those who would read John 3: 17 - 21 to mean...' seems to be an acknowledgement of the reader's role in the creation of meaning and of the plasticity of texts when viewed from different standpoints, and we might link it with what we have already noted regarding Brown's sensibility to interpretation. However, he does not expand on the issue and continues to analyse the texts in a formalist manner. His enquiry concerning the foundation of the opponents' perfectionism resumes in the following way. If the opponents' claim is never to have sinned since conversion, as Brown deems it so to be, then it could, he says, have a basis in John because of an analogy between the Christian and Jesus. Using a variety of verses in John (1: 12; 3: 18; 5: 24; 8: 46; 13: 10; 20: 22 -23) Brown demonstrates this analogy thus: i) Jesus is the Son of God and those that believe in him become 'sons of God' also; ii) as the Son held claim to sinlessness ('Can anyone of you convict me of sin?'), so too the 'sons' become sinless; iii) the 'sons' have received the Spirit who bestows a power over sin; iv) whoever believes in the Son does not suffer judgement; v) Jesus had taught that 'The man who has bathed has no need to wash...he is clean all over.' Such passages, then, may function to sustain the

---

<sup>603</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 124 - 125.

<sup>604</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126 note 247.



secessionists' stance.<sup>605</sup> Accordingly, Brown concludes that the Johannine tradition lends itself to a thesis of post-conversion sinlessness. Yet, as we will now discover, it is not only the secessionists that found in the tradition the basis for a perfectionist claim - the author did also.

Having established the nature and source of the secessionist claims Brown moves on to offer his explanation of our conundrum. The scholar tells us that although the author of the First Epistle rejects the declaration, 'We have not sinned,' he 'comes fairly close to making the same claim himself *precisely in imitation of the sinlessness of Christ*,'<sup>606</sup> thus also demonstrating compatibility with John. Chapter three verses 5 - 6a declare (in Brown's translation): 'You know well that Christ revealed himself to take away sins, and there is nothing sinful in him. Everyone who abides in him does not commit sin.' Connectedly, verse 9, now associating the challenge to sinlessness with being begotten by God, pronounces (again, in Brown's translation): 'Everyone begotten by God does not act sinfully because God's seed remains in him; and so he cannot be a sinner because he has been begotten by God.' Considering these verses Brown asks: 'If both the opponents and the author seem to claim a sinlessness and a perfectionism, what is the difference between them?'<sup>607</sup> For this scholar, then, the question requiring solution in 1 John is not only that there is a perceived contradiction between our verses, but also that on one level they manifest a curious agreement. Taking the phrases 'We are free from the guilt of sin' and 'We have not sinned' from the verses in chapter 1 and placing them alongside the two verses in chapter 3, Brown harmonises the fundamental ethical positions of the disputants. By this action he seeks to confirm that in the epistle we meet two forms of perfectionism that we must distinguish. On this level, then, there is no Iserian 'gap' or indeterminacy between these verses. The pair in chapter 3 merely represent the assertion of a competing model of perfectionism by the author. While maintaining that each disputant held perfectionist

---

<sup>605</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>606</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>607</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

credentials based on a Johannine tradition of post-conversion sinlessness, Brown seeks to describe the difference between them.

Although ostensibly the focus of his attention remains on the text, this scholar's explanation effectively turns on the matter of the assumptions held by the respective readers of the Johannine tradition. Moreover, it depends on his own perception. I suggest that he gives latent acknowledgement of this in the following statement that he intends as a rationalisation of the different models of perfectionism:

The author sees sinlessness as the proper implication of divine begetting and therefore as an *obligation* incumbent on a Christian. I understand his "cannot be a sinner" to mean cannot *consistently* be a sinner, for elsewhere he recognizes that Christians may fall short of the "should." In refutation of his opponents' perfectionism he says, "My little children, I am writing this to keep you from sin. But if anyone does sin, we have Jesus Christ, who is righteous, as an intercessor before the Father" (2: 1). The opponents, on the other hand, in their perfectionism see sinlessness as a realized truth and not simply as an obligation. For them the believer is sinless, and they cannot allow the possibility of the exception, "If anyone does sin."<sup>608</sup>

Pursuing the idea of a latent admission of influential assumptions in Brown's account, we might ask why it is that the author and the secessionists each 'see' different emphases in the perfectionist tradition that results in them taking up opposing positions. For the author sinlessness is an 'obligation.' However, we may note that this party concludes it so because of a judgement that it is the 'proper implication' of God's spiritual procreation of believers. Yet it is an obligation that admits the possibility of human failure. Running in parallel to his explication of the author's position we may observe that this scholar announces the productiveness of his own comprehension in his treatment of 3: 9. It is possible to argue that in addressing this verse Brown: a) maintains the perfectionist standing of the author (in keeping with his hypothesis of the existence of two forms of perfectionism within the Johannine community); and, b) simultaneously ensures the accordant link with 2: 1 (and, by implication, with the element of refutation in 1: 8 and 10). The interpretive manoeuvre he employs to

---

<sup>608</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 126 - 127.

achieve this is to declare that he 'understands' the clause in 3: 9, 'cannot be a sinner,' to mean 'cannot *consistently* be a sinner.' Though Brown ensures that sinlessness is still at the heart of the authorial stance he seeks to demonstrate that the author allows for occasional sin, thus maintaining the consistency of that party's theme. From our Fishian perspective we might take up the theologian's own term and aver that it is Brown's 'understanding' (or his perception born of his assumptions) that produces the harmonious text and that he does not simply demonstrate what is there. He wants us to see that what the author espouses is distinctive from that propounded by the secessionists due to its proviso, but that it is a form of sinlessness nonetheless. In contrast Brown portrays the opponents as those who retain no such proviso. So, we might ask: Why did the secessionists 'see' a different emphasis in the perfectionist tradition? In reply our perspective leads us to emphasise another of Brown's terms. They did so because 'in their perfectionism' (or, we might say, from the standpoint of their perfectionist assumptions) they 'saw' sinlessness as a 'realised truth,' a present reality that precludes error.

If we take up Brown's words that the secessionists' claims 'show a mounting exaggeration of the implications drawn from the perfectionist principle' we may summarise the reasoning underlying this theologian's solution to our problem. Brown argues that the perfectionist principle existed in the traditional texts; he says that both the opponents and the author noted it in those texts; that they each drew implications from that principle regarding sinlessness; but that the secessionists went on to exaggerate those implications, whereas the author maintained an orthodox Johannine position.

Analysing Brown's reconstruction of the historical situation, from our Fishian perspective we may say that the versions of sinlessness that both of the parties 'saw' in the texts simply appeared to them as a result of their assumptions and interpretive strategies. In this case we may again apply Fish's maxim and state that they wrote the traditional texts rather than read them. However, from this viewpoint we must also acknowledge that we actually know nothing of the protagonists' assumptions or

interpretive strategies. The author's and opponents' positions are not available to us in the Fourth Gospel or the First Epistle. We construct their standpoints and, furthermore, their historical situation, from our own interpretive assumptions - an issue that we will remind ourselves of later.

In terms of Brown's reconstruction, of course, the author and the secessionists possess texts that guide them to their opinions, albeit, as he adjudges, texts of somewhat 'neutral' (or, as Fish might say, indeterminate) nature. Moreover, in an advantage over the members of the Johannine Community, Brown believes that he has determinate texts - in his case the Fourth Gospel and the Epistles - from which he draws the material to demonstrate the historical situation. Thus, he is able to claim that the curious agreement that he finds between our verses in chapters one and three receives its explanation in his view that both disputants drew their positions from the same mutually honoured traditional source - one that itself contained perfectionist elements. Yet the incipient problem lay in the interpretation of that source: the particular emphasizes the parties fixed on facets of its teaching. For Brown the difficulty centred on the question of which party's version of perfectionism most accurately reflected the tradition, and which of the two factions demonstrated their fidelity to it by the quality of their life. Positioning the two types of perfectionism in this manner eventually enables Brown to trace (as he considers it) the development of each one.

A Fishian standpoint would lead us to describe this scholar as one who has created the distinctive versions of perfectionism that each party reputedly espoused. He has created the traditional text that they read and formulated their supposed reaction to it. Moreover, he has done so from the assumptions he holds concerning the Fourth Gospel: that it contains discernible elements of the authentic Johannine Gospel tradition, and, furthermore, that it lends itself to a perfectionist thesis; and regarding the First Epistle: that it embodies the contentious statements of two models of perfectionism.

Concluding his elucidation, Brown remarks on the work of John Bogart, with which he is 'partly in agreement and partly in disagreement.' He acknowledges that

both he and Bogart 'recognize the seeds of perfectionism in the Fourth Gospel itself, and a development of perfectionism in different ways in the author and in his opponents.'<sup>609</sup> However, he has reservations about the trend in Bogart's argument that (as we have noted) dismisses the notion that 'heretical perfectionism' is inherent in the Gospel of John, that it 'developed naturally out of it.' Bogart rejects such an idea because he claims that the foundational theology, anthropology and soteriology of that Gospel 'are not gnostic.'<sup>610</sup> In his account of this position Brown says that Bogart 'makes explicit his assumption' that at the time of the composition of 1 John some Johannine Christians had become gnostic, perhaps because of an influx of pro-gnostic Gentiles. Brown seems to imply that few assumptions ground his own explications, however. Bogart's 'assumption is quite unprovable, and, in [Brown's] judgment, quite unnecessary.'<sup>611</sup> For Brown, Bogart introduces into the period between the Gospel and the Epistles a development that Brown 'can document' only in the period subsequent to the Epistles. Indeed, Bogart is merely 'reading into the beginning of the schism the fate of the secessionists after the schism.' Moreover, Brown thinks that Bogart misses a middle road between the two alternatives the latter offers (these alternatives being: a Fourth Gospel that lead inherently and naturally to heretical perfectionism, or the influence of an outside body that lead to the same end).<sup>612</sup> Asserting this 'middle road,' Brown says:

The real question is whether the incipient perfectionism in the Gospel could plausibly (even if wrongly) have been interpreted so as to produce the perfectionism of the secessionists. I have tried to show that it could; but it also could be read so as to produce the perfectionism of the author, and so I agree with Bogart that there is no inherent direction toward secessionist thought in the Gospel.<sup>613</sup>

---

609 *Ibid.*, p. 127.

610 *Ibid.*, p. 127.

611 *Ibid.*, p. 127.

612 *Ibid.*, p. 127.

613 *Ibid.*, p. 127. See also R.E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, p. 72 note 158; pp. 402 - 403; 407 - 408; 430.

Thus, Brown guides us to the 'real question.' One must establish the plausibility of early readers interpreting the inaugural models of perfectionism in the Johannine Gospel tradition in such a way that it evolved into the secessionist version. Such has been Brown's purpose. Yet he has also endeavoured to demonstrate the prospect that those readers might also draw from the material the evidence to produce the reputed authorial stance. Though both men hold that a perfectionist strand exists in the Johannine Gospel, their opinions diverge concerning the catalyst for the opponents' version of sinlessness. Bogart's interrelated dual error, according to Brown, lies in: a) his failure to note the emergence of the secessionist stance from the Gospel tradition; and, b) his mistiming of the Gnostic influence. The assumption that the Gnostic influence began before the Epistles had been written, coupled with a belief that such an influence could be the only source of the heretical perfectionism, results in an inaccurate reconstruction in this instance. In Brown's estimation Bogart correctly judges that there is no intrinsic 'direction' towards secessionist thought in the Gospel. However, Bogart does not seem to consider the possibility of readers interpreting the traditional texts in a manner different from their 'brothers' and so arriving at a variant perfectionism. Taking into account the 'real question' we may now properly understand the background to the intriguing agreement between the verses.

This theologian goes on to discuss further contributions to the debate. Much 'scholarly energy' goes into 'proving that no contradiction exists,' observes Brown. Scholars attempt to do this, he explains, either by arguing from a theory of inspiration that brooks no contradiction between passages of Scripture, or from the idea that we should never assume that ancient authors were stupid or illogical, failing to see discrepancies in their own writings.<sup>614</sup> From our investigations it is possible to say that Brown seems to have affinities with the latter camp as he eliminates the premise of a contradiction by establishing his axiom of 3: 6 and 9 as the author's affirmation of a perfectionism sanctioned by the Johannine Gospel tradition. Verses eight and ten of chapter one represent the refutation of a perfectionism based on a misunderstanding of

---

<sup>614</sup> R.E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, p. 413.

the tradition. There is no issue of authorial stupidity or illogicality to address when we view these sections of the text of 1 John as a defence of the legitimate form of sinlessness.

It is interesting to highlight the language used by Brown. While he describes Bogart's reconstruction as one based on 'assumption' and a consequent 'reading into' the evidence, Brown claims that he 'can document' his own work and therefore arrive at an awareness of the 'real question.' We find similar dismissive language at the finale of his discussion of other scholarly answers. For instance, regarding a proposed lexicological explanation of the perfectionist benefit of the divine begetting, Brown states:

A person thus begotten does not commit sin or act sinfully. (Galtier, Inman, and Stott<sup>615</sup> are among those who argue that *poieinharmartian*, "to do sin," refers to a practice of sin and therefore means more than *harmartanein*, "to sin," so that one has a mounting series of claims in 3: 6a, 9a, 9c - this is quite dubious).<sup>616</sup>

For Brown the dubiety of explanations of our problem is an almost universal condition. In his Anchor Bible Commentary on the Epistles he lists seven 'general approaches' to our enigma: i) That there were two different writers involved. On the one hand the author advised confession of sin in 1: 5ff and intercession for the sinner in 5: 14ff, on the other a redactor later added the profession of sinlessness that formed 3: 9f and 5: 18; ii) That the author directs his statements to two different groups of adversaries. The first statement (1: 8 - 2: 2) against those who held that Christians possess 'gnosis' thus making them invulnerable to sin, the second (chapters 3 and 5) against 'indifferentists' who regarded themselves as above moral command and so treated their commission of sin as of no importance; iii) That the author is thinking of specific kinds of sin when he says that the Christian does not or cannot sin; iv) That the

---

<sup>615</sup> Brown's bibliography lists these authorities as: i) P. Galtier, 'Le chrétien impeccable (1 Jean 3, 6 et 9),' *Mélanges de Science Religieuse* 4 (1947) 137 - 154; ii) V.K. Inman 'Distinctive Johannine Vocabulary and the Interpretation of 1 John 3: 9,' *Westminster Theological Journal* 40 (1977) 136 - 44; iii) J.R.W. Stott, *The Epistles of John* (Tyndale NT 19; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) [no page numbers given]. *Ibid.*, pp. 134; 435.

<sup>616</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 412.

author is thinking only of special or elite Christians when he says that those begotten of God do not or cannot sin; v) That the author means that Christians do not or cannot sin habitually even though there are occasional lapses; vi) That the author is thinking on two different levels, the real or pastoral level in chapter one and the ideal level in chapter three; vii) That the author is speaking in two different literary contexts. In 1: 8, 10 he is exhorting within a kerygmatic passage and reminding readers of the inaugural proclamation of forgiveness that they heard, while in 3: 6, 9 and 5: 18 he is speaking in an apocalyptic context where 'impeccability is realizable because of the intimacy of God's indwelling.'<sup>617</sup>

After cataloguing all of these approaches, Brown discounts the first because, at the time of writing, the theory of author and redactor had 'little following in 1 John scholarship' (or, to repeat the words of The Bible and Culture Collective, it has suffered rejection as: 'A meaning, or an acceptable range of meanings, is...determined by a consensus among the various congregations of historical-critical readers'<sup>618</sup>); moreover, he declares that it is 'a confession to the irreconcilability of the 1 John statements,' something that Brown seemingly finds inadmissible. The second fails as 'there is only one detectable set of adversaries.' Regarding the third and fifth, there is 'nothing in the context of 3: 6, 9 to encourage acceptance' of such approaches that 'confine the statements to particular sins or ways of sinning.'<sup>619</sup> The fourth remains unacceptable as the Johannine idiom 'Everyone who' serves 'to include the whole good side of a dualistically divided world' and thus precludes any limitation of the statements to specific believers. Brown 'to some extent' accepts the overlapping sixth and seventh suggestions. He declares that the seventh is 'closer to the mentality of the author' (again, we note his assumption that this mentality remains available to us through the

---

<sup>617</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 413 - 415.

<sup>618</sup> See note 236.

<sup>619</sup> It is noteworthy here that Brown does not elucidate the relationship between the fifth critical 'general approach' that he rejects - the 'author means that Christians do not or cannot sin habitually even though there are occasional lapses' - and his own earlier statement: 'I understand his "cannot be a sinner" to mean cannot consistently be a sinner, for elsewhere he recognizes that Christians may fall short of the "should."' See notes 618 and 609.



text and, moreover, that he has discerned it). However, even the latter founders under Brown's scrutiny as he judges:

[O]ne may wonder how the author could have phrased his kerygmatic and eschatological / apocalyptic statements with so little nuance that they emerge as almost contradictory. The Christians to whom he addresses the kerygmatic exhortation to acknowledge and confess sins - are they not living in the last hour? And why are the eschatological / apocalyptic statements in 3: 6, 9 left without the distinction made in 3: 2 - a distinction (even in the last hour) between what we are and what we shall be? Undoubtedly there is a truth in suggestions (6) and (7) but serious difficulty remains.<sup>620</sup>

He partly rejects approaches six and seven ostensibly because of their suggestion of two inharmonious statements running in parallel without clear explanation. It seems that he argues thus: Surely the author could not have failed to provide links, however tenuous, for the reader to understand the relationship between the two pairs of verses. Even so, here this scholar introduces a note of doubt concerning the cohesion of the author's theme. In confirmation of the existence of that doubt we find that elsewhere Brown comments: 'No matter what the author thought, the wording of his affirmations about sinlessness and impeccability is not sufficiently nuanced.'<sup>621</sup> So, despite his apparent overall belief in: a) the accessibility of authorial intention and historical setting; and, b) the rhetorical congruity of 1 John, this theologian comes close to admitting that (what we would call) an Iserian gap remains. Therefore, we may say that there is a tension between his insistence on a determinate text and his perception of the need for interpretation.

Remarking on the body of approaches offered by other scholars he comments:

One may debate whether any of the...suggestions really removes the seeming contradiction; and some of them while ingenious are scarcely diagnoses of the texts...No matter how one modifies or relativizes the 1 John claims to sinlessness and impeccability, the truth in those claims comes from the divine principle that begot Christians and that remains active in them.<sup>622</sup>

---

<sup>620</sup> R.E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, p. 415.

<sup>621</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 430.

<sup>622</sup> R.E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, pp. 415 - 416; 430.

Thus, casting doubt on the success of his colleagues' efforts to provide an explanation, Brown implies that the mere ingenuity that some display cannot replace diagnosis of the texts - texts to which he has returned to execute analysis in preference to submitting a product of his own artifice. Furthermore, he intimates that his compeers' attempts involve modification or relativisation of aspects of the text of the First Epistle to achieve their ends. In contrast, by going back to the texts he has established the 'perfectionist principle' present in the tradition and ascertained how the protagonists in the dispute treated that principle. Moreover, he has also illumined the 'truth' within the parties' claims - a truth springing from 'the divine principle' active in generating and maintaining the believers, secessionists and authorial followers alike. Dismissing the rival explications, Brown concludes 'None of them is really satisfactory.'<sup>623</sup>

Though he would assert that he has from a historical-critical perspective demonstrated from the text that 'both sides of the Johannine schism would have been contending that Christians do not commit sin,' at the end of his explication this theologian must acknowledge that he is interpreting rather than simply presenting. Further to his statement that the wording of the author's affirmations 'is not sufficiently nuanced,' Brown cites four authorities in his quest to substantiate the sinlessness expressed in 3: 6 and 9. Augustine, 'struggling to understand' the issue in 1 John, stressed: 'To the extent that the Christian remains in Christ, to that extent he does not sin.'<sup>624</sup> The Greek Church fathers (specifically Severus of Antioch, Didymus the Blind and Maximus the Confessor<sup>625</sup>) regarded the 'seed' referred to in 3: 9 as (to use Brown's words) 'an interior force by which the soul, no longer oriented toward sin, allows itself to be led by a dynamism that makes it incapable of choosing evil.' H.K. La Rondelle states: 'John bases the impossibility of sinning not in the Christian as

---

<sup>623</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 430.

<sup>624</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 430. Cited by Brown from *In Epistolam* 4.8; Sources Chrétiennes 75, 234.

<sup>625</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 430. For the view of the Greek tradition Brown refers us to I. de la Potterie, 'The Impeccability of the Christian according to 1 John 3, 6 - 9,' in *The Christian Lives by the Spirit*, by I. de la Potterie and S. Lyonnet (Staten Island, NY: Alba, 1971), pp. 175 - 196. The French original we may read in *L'Évangile de Jean: Études et problèmes* (RechBib 3; Bruges: Desclée de Brouwer, 1958), pp. 161 - 177.

such, but in the transforming and keeping presence of God's Seed, i.e. in the *Christus praesens* who is "greater than he who is in the world" (4: 4).<sup>626</sup> According to O. Prunet the author of 1 John believed that the new nature imparted by divine generation produces 'a new humanity incapable of sin.' Brown's report of Prunet's comment continues:

To the extent that the principle of life is active, but only to that extent, sin is impossible. One may debate about the precise way in which [the Gospel of John] has portrayed divine begetting as operative, but for 1 John "having been begotten" means more than a terminated divine creative activity of the past. Whether the seed is the word of God or His Holy Spirit...it remains active after it has brought the child of God into being. In John 6: 44 Jesus says: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him"; the drawing toward Jesus continues after one has first come to him.<sup>627</sup>

Having sketched the explanations of these four authorities this scholar concludes: 'One is forced, then, to understand the claims to sinlessness and impeccability in 1 John 3: 6, 9 in the light of the statements on status in 3: 1, 2. We are God's children already, and there is a freedom from sin attached to that state.'<sup>628</sup> A pertinent question at this point is: Who or what is it that exercises 'force' upon Brown to come to such a conclusion? He claims that it is the text. Yet, in advance of his employment of 3: 1, 2 he has assembled the interpretations of respected authorities to act as a conduit through which he presents his understanding. It is not the text that 'forces' Brown to his conclusion about our verses in chapter three. Rather it is his own interpretive strategies born of the assumptions he holds. His consequent remarks are a strategic interpretive manoeuvre. He paraphrases and expands on what he says is the author's message:

"You really are God's children, and so you must do works worthy of God, and not sin which is the work of the devil." But in this last hour he recognises that we are not yet all that we shall be, and so there is a

---

<sup>626</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 431. Brown's reference is: H.K. La Rondelle, *Perfection and Perfectionism* (2nd ed.; Andrews University Monographs: Studies in Religion 3; Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews, 1975), especially pp. 227 - 236 on 3: 9.

<sup>627</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 431.

<sup>628</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 431.

growth in God's children. The divine seed abides and continues to transform the child of God into the image of God's Son which is the image of God Himself, until at the final revelation we are like God Himself. The more this divine seed transforms the Christian, the more impossible it is for the Christian to sin.<sup>629</sup>

Behind this paraphrase and expansion lie four tensive points: a) a conception of 3: 6 and 9 as a perfectionist declaration by the author analogous to that of the secessionists; b) an endorsement of the author's putative view of believers' vulnerability to sin that set this party apart from the opponents; c) an argument for the availability and clarity of each of the contenders' views from within the text; and, d) a concession regarding what he perceives as an authorial lack of nuance. In this statement Brown inserts a preservatory tensility into the text by introducing the idea of a progressive transformation of the Christian. She or he gradually achieves a state of divine holiness through the abiding presence of the 'seed,' and reaches perfection at the close of the age. Part of the design of the First Epistle is, according to Brown, an attack by the author on the 'static understanding of divine begetting' held by the secessionists, 'for whom divine childhood is a once-for-all gift and not a life that has to express itself in the behavior of the Christian.' A 'further corollary for the author is that this life not only expresses itself in action but also grows, and increasing sinlessness is a mark of that growth.'<sup>630</sup> This notion of progressive sinlessness aids the construction of a text without stress-points within its structure.

In an aside T. Wright has alluded to 'the elaborate ideas of Raymond Brown' and acknowledged, regarding the possibility of historical reconstruction from the Fourth Gospel text, that 'there is no agreement on the matter' among scholars. Some scholars, Wright says, 'register doubt as to whether the material can be analysed in this way at all.'<sup>631</sup> If theological savants of the historical-critical guild cast doubt on the viability of the reconstructive project, as we will remind ourselves in due course, Fish

---

<sup>629</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 431.

<sup>630</sup> R.E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, pp. 236; 430 - 431.

<sup>631</sup> S. Neill and T. Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861 - 1986* (1964; 2nd ed. ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). Additional material by Wright: Chapter IX 'History and Theology,' p. 432.

presses the matter to its conclusion. Before we discuss this point, however, we must discuss four elucidations from the past ten years.

#### 6. 4. J. Lieu

J. Lieu in her work *The Theology of the Johannine Epistles* (1991) observes that while other claims to religious experience achieve validity when authenticated by the life of the believer, the claim in 1: 8 - 10 'not to possess sin or not to have sinned (with the emphasis on the subsequent state of being)' suffers a categorical rejection by the author of the epistle. She concurs that the affirmation of sinlessness in chapter 3 verses 6, 8 and 9 represent a marked paradox with the earlier verses.<sup>632</sup> Beginning to address this paradox, Lieu informs us that the 'history of such an affirmation is easy to trace.' Eschatological perspectives from within Judaism attribute a state of freedom from sin to those living in the final age. Such perspectives portray a final conflict between God and the devil or evil one accompanied by their respective acolytes. Lieu comments:

Inevitably, where the sense of the imminence of that conflict is strong, there is no room for the wavering or uncommitted, even less for the renegade; no forgiveness for anyone who "goes over" to the other side. Such a mood is reflected elsewhere in the early Christian tradition and leads to difficulties in coping with the fact of sin.<sup>633</sup>

A strongly realised eschatology of this order that incorporates a sense of the blessings of the new age available in the present leads to a claim of freedom from sin as one of those blessings. However, this is not totally realised eschatology and a future hope remains; thus, 'freedom from sin may be modified by a "not yet" which allows for the reality of actual sin.' Applying these perspectives to the Johannine material, Lieu says that the 'not yet' outlook appears in 1 John 3: 2 ('it does not yet appear what we shall be'). The 'realised' standpoint emerges strongly in the epistle's 'tendency towards the irreversibility of images such as being born from God.' It is inevitable,

---

<sup>632</sup> J. Lieu, *Theology of the Johannine Epistles*, pp. 58 - 59.

<sup>633</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

says Lieu, that a New Testament or Christian writing should wrestle with the meaning of the assertion 'that in Jesus Christ sin and the powers of evil have in some way been defeated or negated, while those who make that victory their own continue to live "normal" lives in this world.'<sup>634</sup>

For this scholar it is 'clear that the "perfectionist" assertions of chapter 3 must be set within the dualistic scheme' that operates throughout the Epistle: the 'Son of God' or 'God' set in opposition to 'the devil'; doing righteousness over against doing sin; the children of God versus the children of the devil. The identification of sin with lawlessness represents a realised eschatology and verse 3: 9b illustrates the potential determinism in the scheme.<sup>635</sup> She comments: 'It is a dualism which could appear timeless and static, with two groups within humankind "from the beginning" (3: 8), those born of God who do not and cannot sin, and those born of the devil.' Indeed, it is 'highly possible' that that 1 John represents a 'reworking' of a source or tradition that exhibits such a fixed dualism. A series of couplets (2: 29b and 3: 4a; also, 3: 6; 3: 7a and 8a; 3: 9a and 3: 10b) testify to the scheme. However, 'the sense of timelessness' disappears with the insertion of the declaration in 3: 8b: 'the Son of God was manifest for this purpose, in order to destroy the deeds of the devil.' This declaration implies the introduction of 'a new situation...whether the new situation breaks the deadlock between the two powers or in fact creates the dualism because prior to that time the devil held sway.'<sup>636</sup> Any problems posed by the dualistic scheme and the author's adoption of it do not receive a solution, says Lieu. This is because the author intends 'not to develop its consequences but to affirm the assured position of the community and to point to the life-pattern which must ensue.' Whatever the authorial opinions on the meaning of sin, and if it signifies more than the absence of mutual love, Lieu declares that 'his concern with the inner life of the community and his use of a

---

<sup>634</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>635</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>636</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 61 - 62.

dualistic scheme possibly not of his own devising are the essential reference points for understanding what is said about sin in chapter 3.<sup>637</sup>

Lieu seeks to establish a link between our verses in chapters three and one thus. The denial of guilt of sinfulness, or the refusal to acknowledge misbehaviour as 'sin,' may have been 'a temptation for the community' (hence the antithetical style in 1: 8 - 10, 'If we say') - an understandable temptation, she thinks, given the tendencies to emphasise realised eschatology. However, the 'author's concern,' she tells us, 'is not simply the recognition of the presence of sin, but the necessity of confession and of seeking forgiveness (1: 9), which are essential parts of the acknowledgement of what God has done and of his demands.'<sup>638</sup> So, the author's efforts to 'affirm the assured position of the community and to point to the life-pattern which must ensue' (efforts encapsulated in 3: 6 and 9) resulted in an unintended temptation to the members to disregard the need for forgiveness. To impede this temptation the author pronounces the repercussions of yielding to it (1: 8b and 10b). Following her effort to establish a link between the verses, this scholar declares: 'Certainly there remains a tension if not contradiction in what 1 John says about sin.' Passages in chapter five reinforce the impression of discrepancy. The author distinguishes between death inducing and non-death inducing sins (5: 16 - 17), yet asserts without modification that the one born from God does not sin (5: 18); even if the deadly sin refers to 'the denial of belief or schism from the community' the 'unequivocal assertion of the inability of the one born from God to sin does not simply refer to this sin but returns to the dualist scheme of chapter 3.' Lieu concludes: 'Thus the tension lies in 1 John's use, particularly in the second part of the letter, of a strongly dualist scheme which is not fully integrated with other aspects of his thought.'<sup>639</sup>

Lieu advises that 'the suggestions of specific situation must be investigated in order to put [the epistle's] thought in context.'<sup>640</sup> This search for the 'specific

---

<sup>637</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>638</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>639</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 64 - 65.

<sup>640</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

situation' must take into account several factors. For instance, we should consider the extent to which we may understand the epistle in the light of the Fourth Gospel - a 'highly significant [exercise] for interpreting the letter.' We may undertake this consideration 'in more than one way.' Moreover, the epistle's 'theology will appear differently when viewed within the acknowledged framework of the Gospel than when taken in isolation from it.'<sup>641</sup>

'Certainly,' declares Lieu, '1 John cannot be interpreted without a prior decision as to whether or not the Gospel is to be presupposed.' Her approach is to assume that 'the structural conformity between Gospel and Epistle is not at all evident.' We may explore 'the relationship of thought' only 'after first studying 1 John.' The considerable differences in emphasis that exist between the two writings 'mean that knowledge of one by the other cannot be taken for granted.' She seeks first to interpret the epistle 'in its own terms,' and then later set it into a wider Johannine framework.<sup>642</sup>

Significantly, we learn that it is 'impossible to understand the thought of 1 John (or any document) without a number of prior decisions, even if only implicit about its nature as a piece of writing.' Yet we may make such a decision only 'on the basis of the text itself.' This scholar declares that 'we are here not relying on early church tradition about the common apostolic authorship of 1 John and the Gospel or about the object of its polemic.' She states that: '1 John can be properly treated as a literary unity and so as theologically coherent. It is also not an abstract tract but written to a specific situation, although its theology cannot be reduced to being determined entirely by that situation.'<sup>643</sup>

Pursuing her avowal to interpret the epistle 'in its own terms,' Lieu tells us that the 'imprecision of the letter has inevitably led to an imprecise and varied depiction of the schismatics.'<sup>644</sup> The 'fact that the letter's literary nature is open to more than one

---

<sup>641</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>642</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>643</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>644</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.



interpretation means a prior decision about it has to be made before the letter can be interpreted, even if we are trying to explore its internal theology as a single text.' The 'prior decision' that this scholar makes is that ('however serious the schism') the 'polemic against specific views and claims of opponents does not control the letter or its thought.' For Lieu, there is no explicit relation of the 'so-called "moral debate"' to the schismatics and therefore it 'should not be interpreted purely as a reaction against them.'<sup>645</sup> Furthermore, she declares that 'to use the debate to reconstruct their beliefs and then to use their reconstructed beliefs to interpret the debate demands a circularity of argument which [one may] only justify if other approaches fail.' Moreover, we must not assume the connection of their reconstructed beliefs to the Fourth Gospel separate from 'a wider consideration of the relationship between the Epistle and the Gospel.' Lieu avers:

The author's failure to spell out his opponents' views and to refute them must be taken seriously - they are not his chief concern. The structure and rhetoric of the letter suggest that while the fact and impact of the schism can hardly be denied - although it may be difficult to separate out fact from interpretation in 2: 18 - 22 and 4: 1 - 3 - its chief result has been to engender a debate within the framework of the author's or community's theology. The recognition that the "opponents'" views could have developed from the Fourth Gospel is due to the fact that they are potential elements within the author's own 'Johannine' theology. The antithetical, debating style is all part of the thought and theological pattern of 1 John. Moreover, since on the basis of the christological debate alone little advance can be made as to the views of the opponents - and after all, we have only the author's own perspective - little is to be gained by the use of such labels as "gnostic" or, of 1 John, "anti-gnostic." It is therefore possible and necessary to explore the theology of the letter without immediate and prior reference to the views of its opponents.<sup>646</sup>

She adds an observation that terms emanating from both parties in the dispute critics have labelled 'gnostic' (such as 'anointing' [2: 20, 27] and 'seed' [3: 9] on the one side, and, despite the supposed anti-gnostic stance of the author, 'born from God' on

---

<sup>645</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>646</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

the other). Lieu declares: 'While These labels are used so loosely, without relation to a total structure of thought that might justify them,...they serve little purpose.'<sup>647</sup>

Thus, Lieu undermines a pillar on which Bogart and Brown base their entire reconstructive projects concerning 1 John - the authorial 'polemic against specific views and claims of opponents.' She argues that because the author has failed to 'spell out his opponents' views and to refute them' this serves as proof that 'they are not his chief concern.' Her deduction is that it is both 'possible' and 'necessary' for the theological exploration of the epistle to advance 'without immediate and prior reference to the views of its opponents.' Also, she avers that any reference to gnostic terminology has little relevance due to its indistinct usage and setting, so invalidating another stay of Bogart's work. However, Lieu implies that she has uncovered the circumstance of the authorial statements. It is 'a debate within the framework of the author's or community's theology' rather than an attack on the adversaries' position.

No external evidence exists to decide on the questions of relationship and priority between 1 John and the Gospel, 'although it may be that 1 John was accepted more easily and sooner than the Gospel by the wider church.' We learn that because the Fourth Gospel 'is a single text and not visibly layered...any reconstruction can only appeal to the texts themselves and to the careful reader's sensitivity towards the texts.'<sup>648</sup> Seemingly, an Iserian approach governs Lieu's analytical prescription: on the one hand, she wishes to give credence to the role of the reader (albeit, a reader who shows care and sensitivity to the text); on the other, she desires to safeguard an appeal to the text. Indeed, it is possible to describe this prescription using Iser's term 'dyadic interaction.' This scholar tells us that any decisions about sequence 'are inseparable from decisions about what is going on behind the Epistle and Gospel, and about the probable sequence of such events in the life of a community.' She recognises that 'in fact these decisions are far more complex than often realised.' In her study of the Epistles she acknowledges the wider Johannine setting and yet avoids using the Gospel

---

<sup>647</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16 note 21.

<sup>648</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

'to elaborate or to settle uncertainties of interpretation.' Though Lieu states that: 'no particular sequence between Gospel and Epistles is being assumed, nor...is any particular reconstruction of the linking historical events,' nevertheless, she finds it necessary to remark: 'It will be clear from what has already been said that this position is no more neutral than any other!'<sup>649</sup> We might argue that a strain exists in Lieu's critique, whereby she aspires both to repudiate and to acknowledge the assumptions governing her reading. However, as we will now see, throughout the remainder of her work she returns to essentialist formulas.

First-century believers from the Johannine community had access to Jewish and Hellenistic texts that encouraged a perfectionist expectation (as we observed earlier, Lieu says that the 'history of such an affirmation is easy to trace'). Using language reminiscent of reader-response examinations, Lieu asks: 'What images or framework did the authors or first readers bring with them which would colour their understanding of the texts?' Despite this awareness of readers' assumptions shaping perception of texts, Lieu continues to address the issue in an essentialist manner. She explains: 'Again we have no other evidence than that provided by the Gospel and Epistles themselves and here there have been sharp swings in fashion.'<sup>650</sup> So, according to this scholar, Johannine authors and readers brought 'images and frameworks' (or, to use our Fishian terms, assumptions and interpretive strategies) to Jewish and Hellenistic texts. These factors affected their perception of them. Therefore, from this we might uphold the idea of the malleability of all texts. Yet, she then directs us to the Epistles and Gospel from which we may discover any resultant 'colouring' - texts that must have an inherent stability enabling the critic to observe within them indications of primitive readerly perception of earlier works. Furthermore, despite her candid admission that her own reading remains as situated as any other, Lieu implies that the critic may have an objective platform from where she or he may examine the shades of meaning imposed on the earlier texts by authors and revealed in their work. Moreover,

---

<sup>649</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>650</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

at this stage Lieu does not elaborate on why there are 'sharp swings in fashion' among biblical critics regarding the 'evidence.' However, we discover something of her thought on this matter during her discussion concerning 'water and blood' in 5: 6. She states: 'Yet here too, as the inability of the interpreters to agree shows, the language of 1 John forbids such precision.'<sup>651</sup> At various junctures it is the language used by the epistle's author that hinders critical efforts to establish meaning.

Authorial imprecision, though, does not end the project to reconstruct the historical setting of the epistle, as we discover as this scholar moves towards the end of her work. We learn that it was inevitable that the 'already / not yet tension in early Christian thought' led to problems once communities faced the actual behaviour of converts. The problem became most marked where there was intense perception of having already entered into the new age or the final conflict. Lieu states that such a situation 'is the context for 1 John's own attempt to grapple with the problem of sin.' The 'unresolved tension' in the author's answer stems from placing sin into two settings. Sin, 'within the context of a sharply dualistic scheme,' pertains to the realm in opposition to God, a realm 'over which Jesus won a decisive victory'; yet, it remains 'a reality of human life, to deny whose existence is to deny the basis on which all people, including believers, stand before God.' The author of 1 John 'joins the majority of NT writers in affirming that in his life and death Jesus dealt with sin completely - once and for all' (and here she cites Rom. 3: 25; 1 Pet. 3: 18; Heb. 10: 12; 1 John 3: 5 as an example of this congruity of thought). Moreover, the author submits a solution for 'the dilemma posed by continuing sin' in presenting Jesus as one who continues to act on behalf of those who, though they ought not to, still fall into sin - but then confess their error.<sup>652</sup>

Lieu confirms that 'The mark of modern study of the Epistles has been an awareness of their original setting and meaning.' However, this does not negate their contemporary significance; that significance, though, 'must be true to the original

---

<sup>651</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>652</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

meaning.' Part of that awareness has been a 'rehabilitation' of 2 and 3 John into the body of evidence contributing to historical reconstruction. This rehabilitation has occurred because:

Their apparently specific references offer the possibility of giving a clearer picture of the circumstances of the Johannine tradition which, in the Gospel and First Epistle, is notoriously difficult to place; in practice this has proved hard to achieve, although...a number of scholars have traced through them the later history of Johannine Christianity. More fruitfully, the tensions and conflict they imply offer a perspective from which Johannine thought and its potential can be evaluated. Since issues of authority, right belief and the boundaries of the community are at the centre of 2 and 3 John, the strengths and weaknesses of the distinctive Johannine approach to these can be explored.<sup>653</sup>

Once we have thus gained 'a clearer picture of the circumstances of the Johannine tradition,' Lieu declares that 'a more precise picture follows' when we place 1 John 'closely in relation to and subsequent to the Gospel.' She promotes the work of Raymond Brown as an example of how this type of linkage may operate. Viewing both pieces together in this way helps us to make discoveries (that unfold 'before our eyes') about community history, religious sociology, and theological development. She disagrees with Brown, however, on the issue that 1 John, 'at least in its original setting,' had the purpose of presenting the definitive way of reading the Gospel. Nevertheless, she concedes that 'it is how it has been used in the history of exegesis'; yet this 'begs the question whether 1 John should continue to act as a control on the interpretation of the Gospel - which is still as diverse in modern as in earlier times.'<sup>654</sup>

What Lieu calls 'that difficult but important dualist passage in 3: 4 - 10,' is, we discover, a declaration 'that the coming of Jesus has brought about the destruction of the power of evil and enables those who believe to live free of that power.' Lieu concludes:

This may sound like fantasy and invite the objection that nothing has changed, that 'all things have continued as they were from the beginning of creation' (2 Pet. 3: 4). The response of 1 John is to appeal to the

---

<sup>653</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>654</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 114 - 115. See also note 9 on p. 115.

religious experience of believers and to point to the inner life of the community - thus offering a demand as well as assurance. The apparent exclusiveness of Johannine Christianity, which is less attractive to the modern reader than it was perhaps inevitable in its original setting, affirms that if Jesus' victory over sin is to be seen anywhere, it must be seen within the personal and even more the corporate life of those who believe.<sup>655</sup>

## **6. 5. John R. Walters**

Next I wish to explore John R. Walters' work, *Perfection in New Testament Theology - Ethics and Eschatology in Relational Dynamic* (1995). In it he charges Bogart with the error of absolutism, and of consequently defining ancient perfectionism 'in modern categories and then exploring its aberrations from that later model.' He summarily dismisses Bogart's work thus: 'The investigation of perfectionism in any document is only as cogent as the method employed...A brief look at his method is in order, if only as a warning against certain unseen pitfalls, all of which certainly no one can avoid'; the 'assumptions' Bogart holds 'clearly affect [his] method [of analysis].' Despite Bogart's statements to the contrary, Walters insists that his fellow scholar has indeed distorted the understanding of the later age by conducting 'his...work with definitions of perfection, sin, and sinlessness based entirely on [a]...Reformation principle.' Bogart is as guilty as others in searching 1 John for the Lutheran idea that the believer remains simultaneously justified and a sinner (*simul justus et peccator*).<sup>656</sup>

The problem with Bogart's reconstruction is that the quest for the origin of the Johannine idea of perfectionism progresses 'all along with the problem of 1 John's "sinlessness contradiction" in mind,' says Walters. 'Perhaps,' he comments, 'it is only we who see the contradiction because of our modern theological heritage. Bogart never raises that possibility.' If we are to avoid the 'anachronistic trap' Walters informs us that 'it is best to begin with [the] theological context of the epistle as the author...[provisionally named John] gives it.' Unlike Bogart, then, Walters will revert to the text without the encumbrances of 'our modern theological heritage.' The

---

<sup>655</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 117 - 118.

<sup>656</sup> J.R. Walters, *Perfection in New Testament Theology - Ethics and Eschatology in Relational Dynamic* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1995), pp. 156 - 157.

author's perspective is certainly accessible to us even if a reconstruction of the opponents' views remains elusive: 'John provides his own backdrop to the assertions he makes. He states certain hypothetical claims to which he wishes to address himself. Whether his opposition can be given any historical concreteness is a question unrelated to what John has to say about anyone who might hold such views.'<sup>657</sup> Of the declarations made by the author he adds:

We only exacerbate the problem by reading our own notions into them. John applies his own distinctive content to each of them, and loads all of them with significance derived from the schism in that situation...Instead of attempting to identify the adversaries and their position, something very difficult to do since 1 John is clearly biased and against them, all that can be attempted is to understand the nature of the dispute as John himself sees it. To do that, the claims being made must be analyzed more closely.<sup>658</sup>

Bogart's approach has hindered understanding by bringing his assumptions to bear upon the text. John has ensured that his declarations contain the nuances required for us to understand his view of the schism. By a more careful examination of the text we can discover that view. The attempted reconstruction of the opponents' position by Bogart is a fruitless exercise because of authorial partiality. However, we may apprehend the author's stance in the dispute.

Walters explains why John allows the assertion of 3: 6 and 9 and disallows that of 1: 8 and 10. The assertion allowed is essentially behavioural: 'children of God do not give expression to sin.' The assertion disallowed is ontological: 'no one can claim never to have sinned, to be inherently sinless in nature.' Affirmation falls on the former because of 'the truth of Jesus' cleansing blood (1: 7 cf. 3: 5).' Opposition claims of constitutional sinlessness invalidate the issue at the centre of God's commission of Christ as the propitiation or expiation of the world's sin (2: 2), such claims turn Christ's teaching and mission and the apostolic tradition into a lie. However, we learn that 'to live sinless lives because of Christ's atoning mission is only

---

<sup>657</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>658</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

proper and accords with the truth, that is, the necessity that he be sent to remove the sins of the world.' On the one hand, John assumes that humanity remains 'inherently or constitutionally unable to avoid having sin(ned)' and thus requires Christ's 'cleansing blood.' On the other, he also assumes that 'by virtue of Christ's blood those who belong to him do not sin.' It is simply their relationship with Christ that differentiates believers from the rest of humanity - a relationship that 'obliterates their sin.' Those who have 'a right relationship with God do not have to deal with the relational barrier that sin presents.' We learn that 'John is working from two assumptions which he regards as compatible but which modern interpreters have trouble holding together.'<sup>659</sup>

It seems that Walters has no such trouble. Thus, because of this perception of concordancy he knows 'precisely Bogart's failing.' The explanation Bogart offers regarding 'the ethical already / not yet...makes no allowance for present moral attainment.'<sup>660</sup> As we have seen, Bogart supports the idea that the believer's ethical situation is such that she or he may occasionally lapse into sin, and that it is only in the eschaton that one may achieve the height of ethical attainment.<sup>661</sup> Walters is unequivocal in his response: 'The problem with this is that John does not countenance a Christian lapsing back into sin (3: 6, 9).' Taking up his colleague's emphasis on the relational nature of sinlessness (being born of God and abiding in Christ), Walters expounds that sin 'is a relational malady more powerful than humanity's strength, not a temporary lapse surfacing from time to time in an unhappy act.' Those who practice sin 'are of the devil,' (3: 8) and the entire world lies under that evil one's power (5: 19). Human strength is inferior to 'the power of Satan; consequently all have sinned (1: 8, 10; 2: 2).'<sup>662</sup> Rather than a doctrine of original sin, this is 'an admission of constitutional limitation before a greater power...a weakness in human ontology'

Walters states:

---

<sup>659</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>660</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>661</sup> See note 536.

<sup>662</sup> J.R. Walters, *Perfection in New Testament Theology*, p. 174.



Bogart's mistake is to regard the eschaton as the ultimate remedy for this continuing problem of human sin, making Christ's expiatory sacrifice amount to a holding action in the interim. This step logically equates sinlessness with no longer needing the atoning remedy of Christ's sacrifice. The human condition of weakness remains in spite of the grace of God that gives the children of God strength, the power to overcome the evil one (1: 14). Even if by God's grace Christians in fact never did sin after conversion, their constitutional weakness would still require the remedial strength Christ's atoning blood provides.<sup>663</sup>

A believer may enjoy a sinless state, therefore, but one that, because of inherent frailty, perpetually depends upon the merits and remedies accruing from Christ's sacrifice. Bogart has erred in that he has elevated the eschaton above the expiation, and so failed to apprehend John's ability to hold the two assumptions in tension. According to the First Epistle, Christ's death is the sole means whereby the Christian may - even in the present life - enter into freedom from sin.

Commenting on the section in Bogart's work that discloses 'the Real Conflict in 1 John' (to wit, 'Expiation for sin and sinless perfection by abiding in Christ and being born of God are simply irreconcilable doctrines'<sup>664</sup>), Walters corrects him by arguing that perfection in the epistle 'is not an absolute state of being but a relational endowment.' Assuredly declaring that 'John's topic is the actualization of love in those who abide in Christ,' Walters informs us that insofar as believers so abide they function according to God's design for humans and are 'actualizing the divine intention.' He quickly moves to qualify this assertion, however, by saying that this situation represents 'a relational growth dynamic rather than any absolute state of being.'<sup>665</sup> This 'dynamic can grow even while at the same time accommodating and overcoming both impurity and immorality.'<sup>666</sup> We learn that 'perfection is divine love in its nascent fullness...'<sup>667</sup> Abiding in Christ, then, provides the believer with an impetus for growth in divine love. In Christ the believer has access to the fullness of

---

<sup>663</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 174 - 175.

<sup>664</sup> See note 538.

<sup>665</sup> J.R. Walters, *Perfection in New Testament Theology*, p. 175.

<sup>666</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>667</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

that love, so producing the context for spiritual advancement. While remaining firmly reliant on the grace of God ('[u]ntil Christians are translated from this world to the next and eternally glorified'<sup>668</sup>), without which she or he 'inevitably succumbs to sin,'<sup>669</sup> the believer becomes 'morally pure through loving.'<sup>670</sup> The message of 1: 8 and 10 is that 'without exception everyone has sin...everyone has sinned.' However, it is wrong of Bogart to conclude that the necessary expiatory emphasis in the epistle is in the least 'antiperfectionistic'; indeed, 'it is the only true basis for any espousal of Christian perfectionism or...sinlessness.'<sup>671</sup>

Walters declares that the declarations of 3: 6 and 5: 18 prove that 'John is perfectionistic and unqualifiedly so.' We learn that:

To the author's mind ἁμαρτίαν οὐ ποιεῖ is equivalent to οὐχ ἁμαρτάνει, and not doing sin or not sinning is attributed to ὁ γεννηθεὶς ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ keeping ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ. By definition, those who have been born of God do not sin. By definition, to sin is not to have been born of God. ἁμαρτάνω is being used in a relational sense; it prevents one from seeing or knowing God and accepting the offer of God's love in Christ.<sup>672</sup>

John certainly recognises the possibility of Christians sinning as evinced by 2:

1. He adds that the proof of knowing God is keeping God's commands (2: 3). Should the believer fail to keep those commands, she or he is guilty of sin or lawlessness (3: 4) and has 'failed to abide by the author's definition of fellowship with God.' Moreover, he effectively defines sin as 'moving out of fellowship with God.' Hence, when the author 'says, οὐ δύναται ἁμαρτάνειν, he is speaking logically rather than ontologically of Christians.' Walters summarises the author's position thus: 'Nothing

---

668 *Ibid.*, p. 175.

669 *Ibid.*, p. 176.

670 *Ibid.*, p. 174.

671 *Ibid.*, p. 176.

672 *Ibid.*, p. 176.

in their being prevents them from sinning, but sinning is not possible in the fellowship of God.'<sup>673</sup>

Objecting to Bogart's accusation that John makes use of casuistry in 5: 16 - 17 and so reveals himself as a 'quasi-perfectionist' who compromises his ideals by differentiating between mortal and venial sins,<sup>674</sup> Walters explains that 'the sin leading to death' is 'characteristic' of the one who does not have the Son of God and therefore does not have 'the life' (5: 12). The author admits both the existence of a category of sin that is not 'mortal' and that a brother might commit it. However, the author is not guilty of casuistry 'for one simple reason: the "brother" is not behaving as a Christian by definition behaves.'<sup>675</sup>

According to this scholar, 'John recognises that people fail to meet up to the standard he sets but he has not thereby lowered his standard.' We may see this stance in the advice to the Christian (for so 'we must presume' him to be) who observes his brother sinning. The onlooker should pray to God, and the outcome will be that God will grant life to the offender. Only God can so bestow life to anyone, and the only one in this hypothetical situation who needs that life is the 'brother' observed in 'venial' sin. Walters states that Bogart has 'failed to notice that even "venial" sins can only be overcome by God granting life to the sinner all over again, without which grace that one would surely die eternally.' We may tell that what the author hypothesises in this instance is a 'sin not leading to death' since 'by prayer life can be granted to the sinner' (through a renewed application of the blood of Christ).<sup>676</sup>

John withholds any suggestion that the believer should similarly pray for one guilty of mortal sin. This 'is because mortal sin, sin which testifies that one does not have the Son of God, can only be overcome by the blood of Christ.' The issue of prayer is irrelevant regarding this case for 'the one in mortal sin has never come under

---

<sup>673</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>674</sup> See note 539.

<sup>675</sup> J.R. Walters, *Perfection in New Testament Theology*, p. 177.

<sup>676</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

Christ's blood in the first place and has not accepted the offer of life at all.' Walters comments:

The distinction between venial and mortal sin in John's mind appears to be [the] standpoint of the cross. All sin is mortal sin to one who has never come under the blood of Christ; intercessory prayer alone cannot impart life to one who is not in Christ's fellowship. Sin thereafter is venial to the one who has claimed fellowship with Christ; intercessory prayer can restore life to a brother or sister in Christ. But all sin is deadly and contrary to being born of God, and it jeopardizes life.<sup>677</sup>

It is interesting that this scholar forms his answer to Bogart around the idea that there is a purposeful distinction 'in John's mind' concerning the offender's salvific status: 5: 16 - 17 refers to the appropriate remedial action regarding a Christian who has fallen into sin. Her or his sin remains pardonable through prayerful intercession by another and recourse to the 'cross.' The wrongdoer may then re-enter a condition of pardon already known by her or him following conversion. Conversely, sin for the unbeliever has the 'mortal' element to it because the one committing it has yet to make the inaugural supplication for forgiveness and undergo conversion. Until this conversion has occurred no intercession by another will avail, so the author declines to advise it. Bogart is wrong to accuse the author of casuistry. John does not employ such a practice. Verses sixteen and seventeen of chapter five are not present in the text because he felt 'forced' to construct a compromise as a result of the juxtaposition of the two mutually incompatible doctrines of expiation and perfection. Rather, we discover, these verses 'are stated by way of exemplifying (perhaps for the readers' specific benefit) God's ready response to requests that accord with the divine will.'<sup>678</sup> Having noted Walters' correction of Bogart on this point, we may observe that to establish this reading he uses the language of insight into the author's mind - the language that Bogart also used but in support of an entirely different reading of the text.

Though we have just discovered that sin 'is venial to the one who has claimed fellowship with Christ,' we have also received exhortation to remember that 'all sin is

---

<sup>677</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>678</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

deadly and contrary to being born of God, and it jeopardizes life.' Yet, in drawing his critique of Bogart to a close Walters carefully seeks to qualify that exhortation. He avers that:

John is able to view a fellow Christian in the paradoxical position of being in sin under the power of the evil one in some area while at the same time abiding in Christ and conquering the evil one in other areas. Perfection in love expresses itself dynamically in this paradox by the true light, the advocacy of Christ, overcoming and causing the darkness to pass away (2: 8, 13). Intercessory prayer aids this process. Perfection in love is living in the light Christ brings. A Christian harbouring ill will for another brings on darkness and blindness, but not necessarily totally (2: 9 - 11). One can actualize divine love toward many while harbouring hate toward the one. Light and darkness can coexist, though not without causing one to stumble. Perfection in love can coexist with sin. No one in the fellowship of Christ is completely in the dark, nor perhaps completely in the light; however, no one in the world outside of Christ's fellowship is in the light at all.<sup>679</sup>

From our exploration of his work we may deduce that Walters views perfectionism in 1 John as existing in the context of the believer's love relationship with Christ and with other Christians. An ebb and flow of sinlessness may occur during the course of that relationship as the Christian responds, or fails to respond, to the virtue of Christ's influence. For Walters, the normal Christian life in the epistle is one characterised by a freedom from sin. However, because of intrinsic human frailty all believers live in permanent reliance upon the expiation. Though they occasionally fail to preserve the sustaining relationship with Christ and thus fall into sin, the intercession of fellow Christians and the grace of God ensure the re-establishment of that relationship.

Opposing Bogart's contention, Walters concludes that 'there is no real conflict in the perfectionist thought of this epistle, only a nuance that we find foreign.' He reiterates that where Bogart 'strays' is in his definition of sin and perfection in absolute terms 'along the lines of modern theology.' This deviation 'causes him to misunderstand the relational nature of ἁμαρτάνω and sinlessness in the epistle and causes him to play havoc with both the eschatological and ethical tensions in 1

---

<sup>679</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178.

John.<sup>680</sup> Walters implies that he has 'analyzed' the text 'more closely' than his colleague and, furthermore, has, unlike him, approached it unencumbered by personal assumptions. He has successfully avoided 'reading [his] own notions into' the author's declarations, and therefore has been able to discern the true balance of the epistle. While Bogart has played 'havoc' with the text, Walters' approach has enabled a more accurate reconstruction of its essential message to emerge.

Walters is as lavish in his praise of Raymond Brown as he is in his disapprobation of Bogart: '[He] is much more circumspect. In fact, his exegesis of the various perfection passages in 1 John is difficult to fault.'<sup>681</sup> Once he has commended Brown for distinguishing accurately many of the emphases in the epistle, however, he goes on to remark that Brown 'has not fully grasped the import of his own words when it comes to understanding the dynamic of Love, or in other words, the epistle's ethics.' Regarding his treatment of the 'sinlessness contradiction,' on the one hand Brown reveals the secessionists as arguing that evils committed by Christians do not constitute sin, for Christians do not sin. On the other he says that the author is 'constrained' to recognise that Christians do indeed sin and continue to need the atoning blood of Christ.<sup>682</sup> Walters comments:

At this point Brown says, "the author is dealing with pastoral reality. Even if this is the last hour, there is a 'not yet' (2: 18, 3: 2)." Here he is referring to the eschatological tension characteristic of the epistle and much of primitive Christianity as a whole. But in recognizing the Christian's ongoing need for the cross as a rationale for pointing forward to the "not yet" of sinlessness, he tacitly gives the cross only temporal efficacy. He deftly removes sinlessness to the eschatological "not yet" to underscore the reality of the sinful "now"...Brown has missed altogether the logic of the author in supplying his own.<sup>683</sup>

It seems that Brown's error is similar to that of Bogart's, who, we remember Walters asserts, makes the mistake of regarding 'the eschaton as the ultimate remedy for this

---

680 *Ibid.*, p. 178.

681 *Ibid.*, p. 178.

682 *Ibid.*, p. 179.

683 *Ibid.*, pp. 179 - 180.

continuing problem of human sin, making Christ's expiatory sacrifice amount to a holding action in the interim.<sup>684</sup> Like Bogart, Brown has effectively limited the scope of influence of the cross to the believer's lifetime. By projecting the occasion of sinlessness into the eschaton Brown has failed to follow the author's logic that remains evident in the text, and instead has imposed his own sequence.

According to Walters, even though John admits that Christians do sin, the 'reality under which he operates' is that those who enjoy fellowship with God cannot sin. The only circumstance in which the author envisions believers sinning is a failure to 'abide in God in some area, in which case they are not living up to the definition of Christianity he espouses.' Quoting chapter three verses 14b - 15 (without providing a linking explanation to his earlier treatment of 5: 16 and 17 where he declared 'one can actualize divine love toward many while harbouring hate toward the one') Walters tells us that for a Christian to harbour hate toward a fellow believer (the apparent situation behind community relations in the epistle) it would be necessary for a deviation from abiding in God's love and from divine birth to take place. 'The fellowship of the Father and of his Son Jesus Christ is one of perfection in love,' a love that actively encompasses others. 'To John's mind,' declares Walters, this 'definitionally' excludes anyone who harbours hate toward another (especially if the source of the rancour is a dispute concerning whether Jesus is the Christ).<sup>685</sup>

## **6. 6. R. B. Edwards**

We turn now to Ruth B. Edwards' study, *The Johannine Epistles* (1996). Edwards' opens her account of the problem by remarking on the difficulties faced by authors in their efforts to explain ideological teaching:

In defining any dogmatic belief it is difficult to ensure that one's statements are both logical and unambiguous - a point to which compilers of ecumenical "agreed statements" would readily assent - all too often what we say is misunderstood by someone who reads or hears it without sharing our presuppositions or immediate concerns. Such

---

<sup>684</sup> See note 664.

<sup>685</sup> J.R. Walters, *Perfection in New Testament Theology*, p. 180.

problems become even more acute with a hortatory text designed to inculcate certain attitudes or effect a particular form of conduct. What may seem perfectly clear and logical to the author(s) may not seem so to the readers. This is especially true if the reader is distanced from the original author(s) by time, space, or culture, as we are from the Johannine epistles.<sup>686</sup>

These epistles 'contain theological tensions and ambiguities which pose difficulties for the modern reader eager to discover their true meaning.' After explaining the nature of our conundrum, Edwards asks: 'Is the author confused? Is he uncritically combining different sources? Can the words bear another meaning? Or is the apparent contradiction to be explained by the writer's rhetorical purpose?'<sup>687</sup>

Contradicting both Bogart and Brown, this scholar explains that 'rather than attacking a specific group of "opponents" who claim to be sinless, the author is warning his own community that they must not make this claim.' She rejects the assumption that any distinctive vocabulary in the epistle originated from opponents; words absent from the Fourth Gospel and found in 1 John one may explain by the idea that the works had different authors; moreover, even if we assume single authorship, the scarcity of written material precludes a decision on whether certain vocabulary came from an outside source.<sup>688</sup> Edwards deduces:

The author nowhere attributes to *opponents* claims to have "community" or spiritual "anointing"; rather he reassures his readers that this is what they themselves have (cf. 1: 3; 2: 20, 26). The idea that 1 John, in its ethical teaching, is attacking a group of charismatic "pneumatics" who profess to be sinless is ill-founded. It is the author's own community for whom he claims special guidance from the Holy Spirit (cf. Jn. 16: 13).<sup>689</sup>

Bogart's assumption that the author of 1 John is reacting against incipient Gnosticism represents a 'real difficulty' as aspects of his thought harmonise with Gnosticism. The following factors represent evidence of this harmony: a) the author's

---

<sup>686</sup> R.B. Edwards, *Johannine Epistles*, p. 16.

<sup>687</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>688</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>689</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 58 - 59.



dualistic approach; b) his opinion of the *kosmos* as evil; c) his instruction to readers not to love the world or to belong to it; d) his ready use of Gnostic terms such as *sperma* and *chrisma*; e) his stress on the importance of knowledge; and, f) his own teaching of a type of perfectionism. Defenders of the author's orthodoxy claim that he meant something different by these terms. Also, they affirm his belief in the incarnation. However, according to Edwards, the author 'is treading a tightrope,' and one cannot entirely allay the suspicion that he has gnostic leanings. She declares that 'He cannot be attacking fully-fledged Gnosticism, for this does not yet exist: if he is attacking some kind of incipient Gnosticism, he goes about it in a strange way.'<sup>690</sup>

We learn that 'the strength of Brown's thesis is that it uses the text itself to determine the views of the "opponents" rather than making them conform to groups known from outside sources.' Yet, Edwards also finds the 'weakness' in Brown's account: it 'lies in its over-ambitious reconstruction of their teaching.' She indicates that Brown wrongly takes 'every possible statement as polemical.' Overall, his work is a 'very hypothetical reconstruction of the history of the Johannine community.' This scholar gives some approval to the chronological priority of the Gospel of John, on which Brown's theory also depends. However, she challenges the assumption that 1 John is polemical ethically as well as christologically.<sup>691</sup>

At this point we meet Edward's claim that she 'will seek to let 1 John speak in its own right, without any presupposition about "opponents," authorship or specific relationship to the Gospel of John.'<sup>692</sup> Typical of the work of historical-critical scholars, here is the claim to return to the text unencumbered by any presupposition. Her unfettered encounter with the text is not without difficulty, however, as 'obscurities' in the text 'mean that our assessment of the Epistles' theology must sometimes be provisional.'<sup>693</sup>

---

<sup>690</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63. Here, and in the rest of my analysis of her work, I have followed Edwards' custom of the Anglicization of the Greek words.

<sup>691</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>692</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>693</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

Writing on issues such as future judgement, the parousia, and Jesus or God as the generative source of the righteous, Edwards discusses the considerable difficulty in understanding 1 John 2: 28 - 3: 3. Even small changes to what she regards as the 'insecure punctuation' in this passage 'could alter the meaning radically.' By discussing this, she wishes 'to illustrate the difficulties in discovering 1 John's precise meaning.' We learn that 'Similar problems occur with many other passages...'. Nevertheless, Edwards still uses phrases such as 'the main burden of 1 John's thought seems to be this...'<sup>694</sup>

Notwithstanding any difficulties in discerning the 'precise meaning,' she tells us that 'In the first half of 1 John (1: 5 - 3: 3) the author's basic meaning was fairly clear, though some details remained obscure. However, we learn that in 'the second part (3: 4 - 5: 12) things get more complicated.' The 'main purpose' of the second part 'seems to be to stress the seriousness of sin.'<sup>695</sup> Candidly, Edwards remarks that 'Every commentator wrestles with the tension - not to say the downright contradiction - between [the] strong statements about sinlessness and the author's earlier claims' of 1: 10 and 2: 1.<sup>696</sup>

Exploring four critical approaches to the tension, this scholar dismisses the first, grammatical analysis, by stating that 'a study of Greek grammar alone is not enough to get out of this conundrum.'<sup>697</sup> Regarding the second, polemical citation, she deliberates on an idea from H.C. Swadling that *sperma* in the sense of 'divine seed' is a 'gnostic commonplace,' and that 3: 6 and 9 are quotations from the slogans of 'gnostic' opponents that alternate in the text with the author's statements and replies (3: 5, 3: 7, 8; 3: 10). The passage becomes thus (in a paraphrase, with the proposed slogans in italics):

(v.5) You know the role of Christ to remove sins - he committed no sin at all.

---

<sup>694</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 97 - 98.

<sup>695</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>696</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>697</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

(v.6) *Anyone who remains in him is sinless - and anyone who sins has not seen him and does not know him.*

(vv. 7 - 8) Little children, let no one mislead you. It is those who act righteously who are righteous, just as Christ is righteous (etc.)...

(v.9) *All those who are born of God do not sin, because they are born of God.*

(v.10) The way to distinguish the children of God and the children of the devil is this: those who do not act rightly are not of God, nor those who do not love their brother.<sup>698</sup>

Setting the verses in this way presents 'the author as "demystifying" the concept of birth from divine seed because opponents had claimed it brought an automatic state of sinlessness.' Rather, the author's argument runs, the reborn must 'keep themselves safe' (a variant reading of 5: 18) and therefore shield themselves from 'habitual sin.'

Edwards questions the effectiveness of this solution:

There is no doubt that ancient authors did sometimes quote opponents' slogans without acknowledgement; but is this really what is happening here? The resultant sequence is jerky in thought; if recited orally a good speaker might indicate the meaning by tone of voice; in a written text one wonders whether readers could have grasped what was happening. It is ironical that the very verses which Swadling assigns to the "opponents" are attributed by both Bogart (1979) and Brown (1982) to the author himself. They see the claims of 3: 6 and 3: 9 as representing "orthodox" perfectionism, and in 1: 6, 8, 10 as directed against "heretical" perfectionism. A final problem for Swadling's view is 5: 18, where he has to slip in the word "habitual" to make his case work. If it can be supplied in 5: 18, why not in 3: 6 and 9? In fact 3: 4 - 10 hang together as a consistent unit, and vv. 7, 8 with their reference to those who "do righteousness" (a semitism), being righteous like God, and those who "do sin" being of the devil, far from countering 3: 6 and 3: 9, reinforce it. The whole passage harmonizes with our author's basic theology that righteousness and sin belong to two different "worlds" and just do not mix.<sup>699</sup>

A third critical approach to the tension is the notion of theological paradox.

Mutually incompatible concepts in biblical study are not uncommon (Edwards lists the following: the present but future kingdom; the statements of Jesus on those against or for him in Mt. 12: 30 and Mk. 9: 40; Christians justified by faith and yet judged

---

<sup>698</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>699</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 100 - 102. Edwards follows H.C. Swadling, 'Sin and Sinlessness in 1 John,' *SJT* 35 (1982), pp. 205 - 211.

according to their deeds; the believer simultaneously righteous and a sinner - Luther's *simul justus et peccator* that we have alluded to earlier). Edwards states:

So the tension in 1 John has been explained by the idea that the Christian as sinner lives under forgiveness, and precisely as one already sharing in salvation overcomes individual acts of sin...But this is a desperate playing with words. Perhaps nearer the mark is the idea that the sinlessness of those who have become God's children is an ideal, as yet imperfectly realized.<sup>700</sup>

The final critical approach centres on the author's rhetorical purpose. Such a purpose has gone unnoticed by scholars as they 'have taken 1 John too literally,' and that literalism has caused numerous problems. Edwards explains that 'Most people make extreme utterances occasionally in particular contexts, and it is not unusual to find logically inconsistent statements within the same political speech or religious address.' Taking the framework of 1 John's discourse as ethical dualism, we may note that in the first part of the epistle (1: 5 - 3: 3) 'the author sets out the need for consistency between what one claims and how one behaves, assuring readers that sins can be forgiven, but exhorting them to "walk in the light" and not to "love the world" (equated with darkness).' The believers live in the turbulent last days. Sin and deceit reign as exemplified in the antichrists. However, the believers enjoy protection because of 'the chrisma' and their status as God's children.<sup>701</sup> In the second part of the epistle (3: 4 - 5: 12) the author 'heightens his contrast between God's children who do not sin, and sinners, the children of the devil' (for the destruction of that evil one's works the manifestation of Jesus took place 3: 8). From several works (*Psalms of Solomon* 17: 32; *1 Enoch*. 5: 8; *Jubilees*. 5: 12; cf. Jer. 31: 33 - 34) we learn of an extensive expectation within Judaism: the cessation of sin among the Elect in the end time. The author sees his 'pupils' within the community as beloved and 'presumably Elect' children of God, living in the 'last hour' (2: 11). Though they face the 'eschatological conflict they are already conquerors (4: 4), because the One that is with them (God) is

---

<sup>700</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101. Here Edwards follows H. Braun, 'Literar-Analyse und theologische Schichtung im ersten Johannesbrief,' *ZTK* 48 (1951): pp. 262 - 291.

<sup>701</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 101 - 102.

stronger than "the one who is in the world" (devil / antichrist)...Surely they should be sinless, as befits the Elect.'<sup>702</sup>

Edwards sums up this approach by commenting:

Assertions like "nobody born of God sins," though grammatically statements of fact in the indicative, serve the function of exhortation: "Nobody born of God ought to sin" (cf. our English usage "Nobody does that" to dissuade someone from what we believe to be wrong). In hyperbolic language the pastor seeks to promote right belief and right conduct: He does not believe that those under instruction are actually perfect; but sinlessness is what is expected of God's children; compare Deut. 18: 13, "You shall be perfect with the Lord your God"; Mt. 5: 48, "You shall be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect."<sup>703</sup>

In her concluding comments this scholar remarks that '1 John's teaching on sin and forgiveness has proved more difficult than a simple summary might suggest.' Sin remains incompatible with God's character and, moreover, with believers' status as God's children. Therefore, 'it is clear' from the text that the author regards sin with the greatest abhorrence. It is in 'the interests of paraenesis' that he has 'articulated his concern in the sharpest possible language, using Jewish categories of thought.' Furthermore, he asserts the forgiveness of sins through 'the atoning death of Jesus.' Any 'philosophical and theological problems raised by this belief lie beyond his scope.'<sup>704</sup>

Edwards maintains that 1 John 'does contain peculiar features,' (and here she lists the terms *chrisma*, *sperma* and 'Antichrist,' the ideas of the impeccability - or sinlessness - of God's children, and the idea of 'sin unto death'). Nevertheless, she questions whether 'these distinctive ideas [are] more numerous or peculiar than those found uniquely in other New Testament documents' (for instance, she submits, baptism for the dead in 1 Corinthians). Even so, the 'ideal of eschatological

---

<sup>702</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>703</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>704</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 104 - 105.

sinlessness...[is] implied by many texts' (for example 1 Thess. 5: 23; Jude 24).<sup>705</sup>

The First Epistle's teaching on sin and atonement 'causes difficulties for some readers.'

Many 'have found hope and encouragement' in its assurances of forgiveness, while

some suffer disturbance or puzzlement by its references to a 'sin unto death' (5: 16 -

17), and 'the assertion that God's children cannot sin, which runs contrary to Christian

experience as well as formally contradicting what was said earlier in this writing.'<sup>706</sup>

Edwards sums up by declaring:

Whatever our reading of the text, the Johannines speak to us of a God who is just and loving, and of a Saviour who gave his life for all humanity. They set before us ideals of righteousness, love and purity of conduct. They offer hope for the future and assure us of the possibility of forgiveness. However great the problems caused by their obscurity of expression or "mythological" modes of thought, they have a message for us today. "Trust in God's Son Jesus Christ and love one another" (1 John 3: 23). "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God" (4: 7).<sup>707</sup>

## **6. 7. D. Rensberger**

D. Rensberger hopes that the research that he undertook for his book *1 John 2 John 3 John* (1997) has allowed him to understand the reason for their composition 'and what their author was trying to say, well enough, at any rate, to bring some clarity to others who study them.' He writes pensively of the obstacles to this task:

For texts so brief, they contain a surprising number of puzzles - linguistic, literary, historical, and theological. I found myself wondering more than once why "the elder" chose to express himself so obscurely, when clarity would have been just as ready to hand. I have not sought to conceal from the reader those places where it seems impossible to be certain exactly what the text means. I have tried to make a decision in every case, but I hope I have not left the impression that I am offering the definitive solutions to these problems. I hope also, however, that I have been able to offer more than a series of problems and solutions.<sup>708</sup>

---

<sup>705</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 109 - 110.

<sup>706</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>707</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>708</sup> Rensberger, *1 John 2 John 3 John*, p. 11.

Rensberger works on the premise of the existence of the Fourth Gospel 'more or less as we know it' (barring, perhaps, chapter 21) prior to the epistles. Some passages in 1 John, he thinks, 'seem to be based on the Gospel of John,' though others 'could be oral Johannine tradition.'<sup>709</sup> Yet, we learn that:

1 John presents a distinctively *Johannine* approach to tradition, a dynamic relationship between tradition and Spirit. The tradition is valid only because it is the testimony of the Spirit of truth. The author himself interprets, reformulates, and adapts the Johannine tradition in many ways, and submits his exhortation to abide in the tradition to the judgement of the anointed community.<sup>710</sup>

The author and his opponents 'were interpreting Johannine tradition in a new situation.' Our passages may represent an appeal 'to the central confessional statements of that tradition' with the purpose of accusing the opponents of contradicting the statements. So, they may not report 'what the opponents themselves actually said.'<sup>711</sup> Interpreting either the written or oral tradition, the opponents may not only have believed that their faith in Christ and possession of the Spirit imbued them with 'spiritual knowledge, an intimate relationship with God, and eternal life, but [also with] a divine nature incapable of sin, no matter what their actions.' 'Some such hypothesis seems necessary to explain the data in 1 John,' says Rensberger. However, he adds that 'ultimately our focus must be on the text itself and not on a hypothetical reconstruction.'<sup>712</sup>

In 1 John the children of God and the children of the devil are 'irrevocably distinct from one another.' One may know those of either party 'absolutely by their conduct (3: 4 - 10; 5: 18).' Thus, we may judge that the epistle 'comes close to a deterministic concept of salvation.' A relief from this apparent determinism emerges in the contradictory statements concerning believers' vulnerability to sin (1: 5; 2: 2; 5: 16 - 17), and the omission of any assertion that the children of the devil remain predestined

---

<sup>709</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>710</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>711</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>712</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

to sin. Indeed, there is scant information regarding how people become offspring of either progenitor, and how a person might change from one category to the other (and here Rensberger notes 2: 19). We learn that the author has no interest in the nature of such origins but rather 'in the behaviors that make the origins plain.' The author may have 'borrowed the deterministic language from his opponents.' However, the tight integration of this language into the epistle indicates 'that he apparently found it an acceptable means of expressing the sharp contrast he saw between the true way and that of the opponents.'<sup>713</sup>

Beginning to address the remaining question of whether Christians can or cannot sin, this scholar sees that the 'author's overriding concern is that the readers, who had not yet gone over to the opponents, should not sin (2: 1).' To achieve this, he affirmed: i) the possibility of sinlessness in acts of love; and, ii) the possibility of failure, along with the certainty of divine forgiveness. Those whom he classes as God's true children evidently love one another - unlike the opponents. That which belongs to the old world, namely sin and death, has suffered defeat by Christ and is passing away (2: 8 - 9, 17; 3: 5, 8; 5: 3 - 5). Yet, says Rensberger, 'this is not an automatic process'; the author exhorts his readers to continue living in love, and he assures them of forgiveness if they do sin. He adds that '[s]omething like this, at any rate, seems to be the point of the troublesome contradictions about sin in 1 John.'<sup>714</sup>

The passage 1: 5 - 2: 2 encapsulates a series of six 'boasts' or claims 'probably based on statements made by the author's opponents, which the author regards as false.'<sup>715</sup> We learn that 'the author generalizes the opponents' claims in order to refute them: it is not only the opponents, but *anyone* who might make such unfounded claims who is in error.' This is a tactic, as in mounting a general refutation the author seeks to make it seem more self-evident. However, he may also have held a genuine concern that his readers were at 'risk of being caught up in these errors.' Furthermore, the

---

<sup>713</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>714</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>715</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.



author employs the 'use of "we" to identify them with himself.' This 'is part of a conscious strategy to draw them securely to his side of the conflict.'<sup>716</sup>

Throughout the New Testament, the expression to 'have sin' appears only in 1: 8 and in the Gospel of John (9: 41; 15:22, 24; 19: 11). As found in the Gospel, it invariably refers to those hostile to Jesus. Consequently, the opponents may have deduced that those who believe in Jesus 'do not have sin' - they 'do not bear the stigma or the guilt of sinfulness, irrespective of their actions (similarly "we have not sinned" in 1: 10).' It is possible to conceive that this group embraced the idea that the new nature imparted in Christ remained incapable of sin. 'For the author, such assertions are sheer delusion,' we discover. Hence, he judges that the adversaries lack 'the truth,' 'the word' or the revelation of God given in Jesus. Rensberger declares that the author's position is 'in accord with the broad biblical understanding that no one is without sin (1 Kgs 8: 46; Ps 14; 143: 2; Eccl 7: 20; Mark 10: 18; Rom 3: 9 - 26).' Though 1 John is singular in its 'explicit treatment of whether, and in what way, Christians can sin,' this scholar observes that 'its statements are also uniquely contradictory, and present perhaps its most difficult problem.'<sup>717</sup>

The author has a 'pastoral and parenetic purpose': the desire to see the believers 'walking in the light' (synonymous with loving one another in Rensberger's analysis; indeed, we find that the 'entire discussion of sin and righteousness in 1 John is...brought under the heading of love'), and to exhort them to holiness - a purpose 'that allows (though it hardly resolves) the contradictory statements.' The conflict with 3: 4 - 10; 5: 18 remains 'especially difficult.' Rensberger suggests that the validity of those passages 'may be that one should be sinless in fact, not only in principle.' Hence, there may not be complete incongruity with verses 1: 8, 10 'if they mean' that when a Christian actually commits sin one 'cannot...[wish it] away by an appeal to principle.'<sup>718</sup> To acknowledge 'what really is,' to confess, provides a contrast to self-deceptive denial of sin (1: 9). We discover that the 'use of the plural "sins" (rather than

---

<sup>716</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>717</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 53 - 54.

<sup>718</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54

"sin," as in 1: 8) represents a reminder that not just an abstract confession of sinfulness but the acknowledgement of specific acts is in mind.<sup>719</sup>

Integrity and self-deception is the overall theme of 1: 5 - 2: 2. The First Epistle stresses 'a kind of ethical realism,' as opposed to the denial of the reality of our own nature or that of Jesus. Any claim to sinlessness runs counter to the realities of human nature. Conversely, the transformation resulting from a 'relationship with God through Jesus Christ must not remain a matter of spiritual fantasy, but is meant to become concrete reality in the ethical character of daily life.' The adversaries' claim to be without sin demonstrates that they do not possess the truth or God's word.<sup>720</sup>

Rensberger informs us that 'in the Johannine writings, "truth" means not simply human honesty, but reality, the reality of God.' A denial of our sinfulness, he says, 'makes even God untrue'; and this is 'not just because God has said (in some unspecified place) that people are sinful.' To deny our sinful nature is to lose our knowledge of God's nature also, even our knowledge of divine forgiveness. Those who claim sinlessness lack the aspect of the truth that God is love (4: 8, 16). Empty, 'self-deifying claims to be without injustice already' prevent cleansing from that injustice, a cleansing only effected by a trust in 'God's loving faithfulness and justice.' The epistle evinces a sense of differentiation between divine and human nature - a sense that appears fundamental to it. It reveals a paradox: we must admit our human nature (our sin) to share in the divine nature (the divine truth). However, we may so admit with complete confidence as 'it is God's nature to love, and to forgive, and...this divine love is incarnate in the human Jesus, the Son of God.'<sup>721</sup>

Rensberger explains that even if the epistle lacked an overtly eschatological reference, its 'sense' would be that the act of sinning reveals those who exist 'on the wrong side of the dualism defined by the distinction between children of God and of the devil.' A 'clear allusion' to John 8: 44 appears in 1 John 3: 8 (Cf. 3: 15). The 'author understands' the Gospel as saying that sinners are offspring of the devil.

---

<sup>719</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>720</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58

<sup>721</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

However, he does not declare that they were 'born' of the devil, or comment on the time or manner of that birth. This scholar tells us that 'First John has no interest in a Gnostic-style myth detailing the origins of those who are saved and those who are not. Its concern is rather to delineate two groups, God's children and the devil's, on the basis of interlocking criteria of belief and action.'<sup>722</sup>

Using an antithetical form, the author in 3: 6 establishes 'two mutually exclusive categories' - those who abide in Jesus and those who sin.<sup>723</sup> In 3: 5 we find 'two warrants' for the assertion of sinlessness: a) 'Christ came to take away sins (i.e., acts of sin)'; and, b) 'was without sin (as a general quality or principle) himself.' We learn that '[t]he phrase "'You know"' probably indicates that the two warrants are drawn from Johannine tradition' (Cf. John 1: 29; 7: 18; 8: 46; chapter 9). Rensberger says that the 'opponents would no doubt have agreed with both of these warrants.' Yet, they may also have claimed their complete fulfilment in them and 'that they now "had no sin."' This scholar informs us that the 'dispute concerned the meaning of Johannine tradition: Did it mean that Christ had made believers automatically sinless, whatever their actions might be; or did it mean that they must pattern their actions after Jesus' sinlessness?' Alternatively, we might ask: '[I]s sinlessness a matter of principle or of practice?' Rensberger maintains that 'the author's interpretation would favour the latter, and would also include the means by which Jesus took away sins, namely his death (1: 7; 2: 2; 4: 10), which the opponents apparently considered to be without theological significance (5: 6 - 8).'<sup>724</sup>

Discussing the 'assertion of sinlessness in 3: 9 raises serious difficulties,' says Rensberger: 'One is what the statement that "his *sperma* abides in him" means.' He comments:

The obvious sense is that those who have been born of God possess in themselves a divine element or principle that shields them against any possibility of committing sin...Considering 1: 10; 2: 14, 24 (also John 5: 38; 8: 31, 37; 15: 7), the abiding *sperma* could be the *logos*, the

---

<sup>722</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>723</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>724</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

word of God (cf. Jas 1: 18; 1 Pet 1: 23). Most likely, however, the *sperma*, like the anointing in 2: 20, 27, is the Spirit, which is the agent of divine birth (John 3: 5 - 8) and is connected with divine abiding (John 14: 16 - 17; 1 John 3: 24; 4: 13). It is of course possible that the author would not distinguish between these two, or meant to combine them. There may also be a reference to the covenant promise of God's law and Spirit being implanted in the people to enable their faithfulness (Jer 31: 31 - 34; Ezek 11: 19 - 20; 36: 26 - 27).<sup>725</sup>

Thus, we discover sinlessness as: 'not an ideal to be attained or a potential to be realized, but the inevitable working out of an implanted principle, something that Christians have apart from, or in spite of, their own wills.' Such an 'extreme form of the idea' Rensberger sees as 'remote from our author's thinking elsewhere' and serves to highlight 'the major difficulty' regarding 3: 6 and 9 and 'the consistency of their assertions of sinlessness with other statements in 1 John.'<sup>726</sup>

Interestingly, he fails to see in the text some of the most important solutions advocated by other scholars we have studied:

There is nothing to show that the contradictory passages are speaking of different kinds of sin...or represent different kinds of perfectionism...Nor do 3: 6, 9 seem to speak of a *possibility* of not sinning that the believer must realize..., or of a *process* of transformation towards sinlessness..., or of a *sinless community* rather than sinless individuals...The inconsistency is also not really a prefiguring of Luther's concept of the Christian as *simul justus et peccator*, righteous and sinner at the same time...the author does not bring the two opposing thoughts into this or any other clear relationship.<sup>727</sup>

Moreover, he declares that 'Other approaches get us little further.' Apropos grammatical explanations, Rensberger judges that the present tense, as used in 3: 6, 9 and 5: 18, 'does generally imply continuous action.' Consequently, he says, 'these verses could mean that Christians do not *habitually* sin'; 'whereas the aorist tense in 2: 1 could refer to single acts of sin into which they might lapse.' However, we learn, 'this does not account for the present tenses in 1: 8 and 5: 16, or the perfect in 1: 10.'

---

<sup>725</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 91 - 92.

<sup>726</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>727</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

Resignedly, he remarks: 'In general, though few things are completely impossible for this writer, it seems unlikely that so significant a distinction would be expressed solely by this grammatical subtlety.' Another approach might seek to 'recall the author's practical purpose of encouraging the readers not to sin, a purpose that could make use of both of the conflicting kinds of statements.' Yet, he discounts this idea too on the grounds that 'even if 1: 5 - 2; 2; 5: 16 - 17 speak practically and 3: 6, 9; 5: 18 speak idealistically..., they still must interact with, and so contradict, each other.'<sup>728</sup>

Rensberger's resigned tone continues: 'It is hard to say whether we have here a paradox that is not to be harmonized, a contradiction that represents the contradictoriness of Christian existence..., or simply the work of an author less concerned with clarity and consistency than we might wish.' On some issues, though, this scholar seems to find in the epistle what he regards as clear and consistent thought. For instance, he maintains the certain importance that the 'continuing and indwelling effect of divine birth' remains the basis for the claim of sinlessness. He sees some possibility that such a claim 'derives ultimately from the opponents, since it so strongly resembles the position rejected in 1: 8, 10.' Should this be so, it represents an agreement by the author with his adversaries that Christians have become transformed people - yet it shows also that he drew 'a different implication from this truth.'<sup>729</sup> Rensberger notes that the author does not claim that there is any imperative on the children of the devil to sin. Rather it 'is the opponents for whom origins determine character or conduct.' We discover that the 'author's point is not to derive conduct from origins, but *to demonstrate origins from conduct.*' Continuing to underlie the ideas here is the thought of John 8: 39 - 47 (and 5: 19, 30). Because a child imitates the parent, one can know someone's parent by the person's actions. This scholar informs us of 'the point' of this section:

God's children are not merely free of sin in principle, irrespective of their actions (a concept similar to some found in Gnosticism: *Adv. Haer.* 1.6. 2 -4). Rather, they must be so in practice. If indeed the

---

<sup>728</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 92 - 93.

<sup>729</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

divine "seed" abides in the believer, then it should manifest itself in freedom from actual deeds of sin. Because Jesus has "destroyed the works of the devil," those who believe in him are set free from those works.<sup>730</sup>

According to Rensberger, the relevant question for the opponents was: 'Who is sinless?' For them the answer was: 'The children of God.' Conversely, the author thought it relevant to ask: 'Who are the children of God?' For him the answer was: 'Those who do not sin' ('that is,' adds Rensberger, 'those who love one another'). John's Gospel always links sin with a refusal to believe in Jesus, and so it presents a situation 'where only those outside the community sin.' Therefore, the 'opponents, in claiming sinlessness for believers in principle, may be superficially truer to that Gospel.' The author, however, provides for 'the other indispensable mark of Johannine Christianity, love for one another. In this way, of course, he also exposes the opponents as really being of the devil, despite their claim of perfection, and this seems to be his fundamental aim here.'<sup>731</sup>

Although the recognition of the author's aim does not entirely remove the difficulty, this scholar tells us that 'at least it lets us see the contradictory statements within their proper frames of reference.' Now that we understand the 'proper frames of reference,' we may go on to observe that the author provides a dual encouragement to the readers to counter the adversaries' claim to be sinless children of God. This dual encouragement involves: a) an 'assurance of forgiveness to those who acknowledge their misdeeds within the framework of the community of love redeemed by the incarnate Christ (1: 5 - 2: 2; 5: 16 - 17)'; b) a recognition of 'God's true children as those who let the daily reality of their lives be transformed by this redemption in the concrete practice of righteousness, which is love (3: 10).' Moreover, Rensberger tells us, 'It is those who reject this visible transformation who reveal themselves to be deceivers and children of the devil.'<sup>732</sup>

---

<sup>730</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>731</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 93 - 94.

<sup>732</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

Three themes in the epistle remain linked: 'true eschatology, true Christology, and true ethics.' The elements of future eschatology do not displace 'the realized eschatology that is inherent in the Christian claim that Jesus is the Messiah.' We may see this, Rensberger says, 'in the continuity between the present nature of God's children and what will be revealed about them at the end':

They *are* like Jesus, and *will be* like God (3: 2 - 7; see also 2: 6 - 8; 4: 17). Therefore, those who hope to be like God then must be like Jesus now - they must live out the eschatological commandment of love, which thus characterizes both present and future. The opponents seem to have focused their realized eschatology on possession of the Spirit; our author focuses his on righteousness, that is, on love.<sup>733</sup>

Returning to his discussion concerning a deterministic concept of salvation,<sup>734</sup> he analyses further the language about 'children of God' and 'children of the devil.' Is such language simply a metaphor for two opposed classes analogous to the 'children of light' and 'children of darkness' (Luke 16: 8; Eph 5: 8; 1 Thess 5: 5)? Alternatively, we might ask if the author regards the offspring of God and the devil in a more literal sense - 'as two groups whose different origins unalterably determine their destinies?' It seems that the author implies just that kind of determinism in 2: 19. Yet, we learn that in a deterministic theology conduct may bear no relevance to the issue of salvation, or 'spiritual genesis' may predestine it. Rensberger declares that the epistle 'may not offer enough evidence for us to decide whether it is deterministic, but in any case it does not accept these conclusions. Rather, for 1 John it is precisely the opponents' deliberate lack of loving actions that reveals their identity as children of the devil.'<sup>735</sup>

Conversely, the author's various exhortations to the imitation of Jesus and of God 'could suggest an attempt to justify oneself in God's sight by good works.' However, his claim that one may identify the children of God as those who do what is right is indeed the antithesis of saying that 'doing righteousness' is the means to become God's child. Furthermore, the imitation of Christ advocated by the author does

---

<sup>733</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>734</sup> See note 714.

<sup>735</sup> Rensberger, *1 John 2 John 3 John*, p. 95.

not mean an artificial mimicry, but rather 'a life and a way of living that flow from the same source as Jesus', namely, the God who is love.'<sup>736</sup>

Nevertheless, we learn that 'it would be wrong to impose on 1 John a theory in which being God's child has nothing to do with being like God and Jesus.' A child of God is one who has received divine love (3: 1). God bestows this love so that its recipients may also love one another (4: 7 - 11). Christians are the offspring of God, therefore they 'resemble God and Jesus in their love.' Because of their status believers 'deliberately seek to create this resemblance'; this explains the author's urging of readers to love one another. Rensberger excludes both a 'theory of meritorious action' and a 'theory of grace or predestination without reference to action' as inadequate to represent the author's position. He states that our 'author cannot imagine achieving the status of child of God by one's own effort; but he also cannot imagine children of God who do not carry out acts of love toward one another.'<sup>737</sup> Moreover:

The author's preference for sinless practice over sinlessness in principle is part of the ethical realism noted earlier in connection with 1: 5 - 2: 2. Of course, most people will find that the claim that the children of God cannot sin conflicts with their own realistic experience. Yet the revelation and the example of Jesus and the abiding presence of God's Spirit do call forth a kind of sinlessness. To become a child of God is not an invisible or a theoretical transformation, nor are the identity and nature of God's children made known only at the end of time. They are present realities...both revealed and maintained in daily conduct. This conduct, moreover, is not a purely personal and individual holiness. Without brothers and sisters to love and be loved by, the real life of the child of God evaporates. In 1 John the whole question of sin and righteousness, of being or not being a child of God, comes down to loving one another concretely within a community, the family of God.<sup>738</sup>

For Rensberger, it is chapter 5 that contains 'perhaps the most difficult contradiction in 1 John.' Having already noted that 2: 28 - 3: 10 'seemed to disallow exactly what 1: 5 - 2: 2 presupposed, that Christians could sin,' he observes that chapter 5 verses 16 - 17 'echo 1: 5 - 2: 2; but verse 18a is virtually an exact repetition of

---

<sup>736</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>737</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>738</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 95 - 96.



3: 9a.' Thus, the author 'draws together the whole thematic involving sin here, and thereby produces an inconsistency of which he cannot possibly have been unaware.' Regarding the meaning of sin, no indication exists of any difference between 5: 16 - 17 and 5: 18 as the author uses 'the same tense of the same verb...in both.' So, Rensberger deduces, 5: 18 'cannot be taken to refer to the "sin that leads to death," as if only outsiders (including the opponents), but not those born of God, could commit it.'<sup>739</sup> He concludes:

As before, the difficulty may be addressed, if not overcome, by keeping in mind the author's concerns. In 1: 5 - 2: 2; 2: 28 - 3: 10, these included identifying the true children of God, promoting sinlessness in practice and not just in principle, and keeping the readers from sinning while assuring them that if they do sin all is not lost. All of these aims are present here. The way in which they are pursued may be considered nonlogical, "affective"; the result, unfortunately, is to seem simply illogical. The readers are encouraged to be confident that freedom from sin is part of their birthright as children of God. Yet if they do find sin in their midst, they must still stand by the sinner - so long as it is not the deadly sin of deliberately abandoning mutual love and true belief.<sup>740</sup>

With this synopsis of David Rensberger's work, I have now completed my survey of late twentieth century solutions to the conundrum. Before I embark on my summary conclusion, I wish to remark on the question of historical reconstruction.

## **6. 8. Some Observations on Historical Reconstruction**

For our present purpose, one of the most interesting (and representative) remarks made by the scholars we have just studied is that of Ruth Edwards' when she writes that: 'What may seem perfectly clear and logical to the author(s) may not seem so to the readers. This is especially true if the reader is distanced from the original author(s) by time, space, or culture, as we are from the Johannine epistles.'<sup>741</sup> To aid our evaluation of the interpretive approach displayed by the scholars in this chapter -

---

<sup>739</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>740</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>741</sup> See note 687.

and to discuss Edwards' remark - we will draw from some of our research featured in chapter two.

We remember the assessment that many biblical critics treat the text as a stable entity with determinate meanings and a real sociohistorical reference point. This seems to receive confirmation in the work of Edwards and her colleagues. In chapter two, I stated that clearly such critics use the text of 1 John as a kind of tableau vivant from which to reassemble the 'actual' setting. The life work of Brown in his project to reconstruct the historic setting of so-called 'Johannine Christianity,' is the prime example of just such a use of the text. To use a Fishian term, our survey confirms that for the biblical scholar, historical reconstruction of a first or early second century setting is the presently recognised interpretive strategy for producing the text. Our group of commentators appeal to a historical context that, they would argue, provides a constraint on biblical interpretation. Concerning the study of 1 John, one could argue in favour of the Bible and Culture Collective's delineation of the prevalent state of scholastic interpretive praxis: 'A meaning, or an acceptable range of meanings, is...determined by a consensus among the various congregations of historical-critical readers.'<sup>742</sup>

An outcome of our examination in this chapter has been the accentuation of some biblical scholars' (albeit, limited) acknowledgement of the readers' role in the apprehension of meaning. This acknowledgement may reflect the influence of reader-centred inquiry within biblical studies, although none of the scholars we have cited refers to reader-response or its proponents. In chapter two we noted that it is not only scholars such as Brown who hold to historical principles when interpreting texts. We recall the Collective's remark that: 'The works of reader-response criticism that biblical scholars have produced surely must appear strange to secular literary critics because of the predominance of historical concerns.'<sup>743</sup> For the Collective much of the activity resulting from this adoption of reader-centred studies has emerged as the consequence

---

<sup>742</sup> See note 236.

<sup>743</sup> See note 237.

of a marriage between Iser's ideas and historical criticism.<sup>744</sup> From the examination we have conducted, we would concur that an admixture of this sort simultaneously tries to give some autonomy to the reader while she or he discovers historical meaning in the text.<sup>745</sup> Brown and his compeers assemble their accounts on the basis that, on the one hand, readers bring their own assumptions to a work; yet, on the other, they presuppose 'the efficacy of the biblical text to guide them to historically verifiable knowledge.'<sup>746</sup> The challenge we discussed in our second chapter was that if we are to use a form of reader-response criticism that reflects present reading agendas, we must disengage the text from this quest to reconstruct original settings. Stanley E. Porter's words seem apposite following our inquiry: 'If the historical question as traditionally posed in Biblical studies is not bracketed, if only temporarily, reader-response criticism will never have a genuine opportunity to contribute to New Testament studies, but will be reader-response criticism virtually in name only.'<sup>747</sup>

Recollecting (with some irony, given his emphases) that it is Iser who provides the opportunity for biblical critics to effect just such a bracketing of the historical question, we highlight again that Iser writes of the 'unmask[ing] [of] the true nature of meaning, which is nothing but a substitute for reality.'<sup>748</sup> We remember that (taking this statement to include the meaning produced by historians) the Bible and Culture Collective reassures us that 'Iser does not necessarily mean, of course, that nothing happened in the past; he only means that one's access to what happened [emerges] through language and through narrative constructs written by historians themselves.'<sup>749</sup> The Collective emphasise that Iser's statement has significance for biblical critics in that it implies that the act of '*writing about* historical events is like writing a fictional account.'<sup>750</sup> At this stage it is appropriate to restate one of Iser's

---

744 See note 238.

745 See note 239.

746 See note 240.

747 See note 241.

748 See note 242.

749 See note 243.

750 See note 244.

later and more explicit comments regarding some features of (empirical) philosophical discourse as it reinforces the significance of the first statement for those engaged in historical reconstruction. He points to the volatile fluctuation in critical attitudes to fiction. Periods when scholars regard fiction as mere invention become quickly superseded by intervals when they treat it as a necessity. Iser records that it became a burden for the discipline of epistemology, because of a difficulty in engaging 'with the dual nature of the fact that make-believe is indispensable for organising that which appears to be given.' He explains that which 'distinguishes fiction in philosophical discourse from fiction in literary discourse.' We learn that this distinguishing element is 'the fact that in the former it remains veiled whereas in the latter it discloses its own fictional nature.'<sup>751</sup> From this the Collective drew the implication that biblical critics 'cannot know the past on its own terms but only through their narrative constructs.'<sup>752</sup>

Such an unveiling of the 'fictional nature' of philosophical discourse by Iser, we recorded, demonstrates a poststructuralist element in his theory that many biblical reader-response critics seem to ignore. Hayden White's exposure of the assumptions of historiography instigated this deduction from his work: 'What they have felt obliged to ignore or repress is the unsettling possibility that "the historical milieux," which really "exist" for historians, are themselves products of their own "fictive capability."<sup>753</sup> Our brief survey of late twentieth century solutions to our problem has demonstrated a pervasive assumption among Johannine scholars: that the historical circumstances surrounding the composition of 1 John remain available to us through the text. Recapitulating the corollary I reached in chapter two: I think it is important to acknowledge that the work of biblical critics and historians alike can only account for past events by reference to their own reading strategies - strategies, moreover, that have both defined the relevant data and predetermined its interpretation.<sup>754</sup> At this culmination of our study we may observe that these reading strategies govern

---

751 See note 245.

752 See note 246.

753 See note 247.

754 See note 248.

Johannine scholars' account of the events surrounding the production of 1 John and the solutions brought to the conundrum.

I contend that a direct correlation exists between Edwards' remark that opens this section and the historical-critical assumption targeted by Fish. In our second chapter we registered the following assertion: To say that readers cannot know the past on its own terms but only through their narrative constructs is to involve *all* readers in an act of construction. Again, it is Iser who furnishes us with a stimulus to adopt this position when he asserts that a text represents a 'recodification of social and historical norms.' He explains that this recodification 'has a double function.' It enables: i) contemporary readers 'to see what they cannot normally see in the ordinary process of day-to-day living'; and, ii) 'subsequent generations of readers...to grasp a reality that was never their own.'<sup>755</sup> However, as we have seen, Iser fails to explore the implications of this observation, whereas, characteristically, Fish presses the issue to a further point.

Fish, we recall, accuses Iser of avoiding the 'hard choice' between historical and ahistorical interpretation. He then makes this key statement that we recollect in full:

The readers contemporary to an author are in no more a privileged position than the readers of later generations; for both sets of readers are provoked to an act of construction rather than an act of retrieval; and since the blue-print for construction is significantly incomplete - it displays gaps and blanks and indeterminacies - no instance of construction is more accurate, in the sense of being truer to an historically embodied meaning, than any other. Even the first reader of a work is called upon to complete the connections left unspecified in the text according to his "individual disposition."<sup>756</sup>

Contrary, then, to one implication of Edwards' remark, chronological proximity to the origin of a text represents no advantage. Applying Fish's argument to Johannine studies, we might aver that 'acts of construction' rather than 'acts of retrieval' took place, and are taking place, during every act of reading; whether we propose any of the following: i) the reading by the author of the Johannine traditions (for the purpose of

---

<sup>755</sup> See note 249.

<sup>756</sup> See note 250.

highlighting their perfectionist passages and so warning his 'brothers' of the perceived deceptions of his adversaries); ii) the reading of the resultant communication by the 'Johannine Community'; iii) the reading of the so-called First Epistle by eighteenth century believers; or, iv) the readings by biblical critics at the cusp of the twenty-first century - at every stage the respective readers create the meaning of the text rather than find it there.

Edwards' statement seemingly acknowledges: a) the regard of an author for the clarity and logic of her or his own work; b) the possibility of authorial obscurity of expression; c) the reader's perceptual faculties as a possible occasion of different understandings of authorial meaning; and, d) the conceivable effects of geographical distance and culture. Nevertheless, she, along with the other scholars we have considered, repeatedly treats the text as the determinate repository of meaning. Furthermore, the close analysis of the text remains the sole means of solution to our problem. Concerning the expression of the author, we have witnessed differing critical attitudes: some claiming that his meaning is entirely clear in certain passages, and some that it is obscure. Yet, we note that whatever the critical attitude is regarding the transparency of the text, the drive to demonstrate its meaning to the reader continues unabated. The demand made by Othello to his 'Ancient' Iago, quoted at the head of this chapter, encapsulates the nature of the impulse of biblical historical-critical scholars. They too desire surety of 'the ocular proof,' but concerning the historical background and message of 1 John. Each one wishes to see it in the text, to corroborate it, to secure their 'probation' of it against any 'doubt.' As has been our constant theme, the challenge of Fish's observations is that whatever we 'see' in the text - in this instance its clarity or obscurity, the historical situation or the authorial message - emerges as a result of one's reading strategies and assumptions. We do not find them embedded in the text. Thus, all readers of First John - whether at the turn of the first century of the Christian era, or in the eighteenth century, or at the end of the twentieth century - stand in equal relation to that text, in that all 'create' it through their own acts of construction born out of their own reading strategies.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### SUMMARY CONCLUSION

Dreamer of dreams, born out of my due time,  
Why should I strive to set the crooked straight?  
Let it suffice me that my murmuring rhyme  
Beats with light wing against the ivory gate,  
telling a tale not too importunate...<sup>757</sup>

I have referred to this thesis as a 'story' of reader-response criticism and the interpretation of particular perfectionist texts.<sup>758</sup> In using this word I have ceded that my observations are merely a construct, a brief abstraction of what is a complex and evolving ratiocination of the act of reading. That I should regard it so receives confirmation in that the Bible and Culture Collective allows that virtually all the theoretical approaches covered in their work we might class as versions of reader-response criticism.<sup>759</sup> Across three chapters that develop my story I have sought to refine an understanding of how people separated by over two centuries have read four verses of the New Testament associated with Christian perfection. A further chapter, an excursus, I have designed as an example of a secular form of perfectionism. The two opening chapters represent the substructure of the story as throughout them I have discussed the idea of the inescapability of interpretation.

As a reader who enjoys a full conclusion to any narrative, I could understand if a sense of frustration arose in some readers of this work because I offer no solution to the 'sinlessness contradiction' in 1 John. However, as one may mark from my introduction and from my declaration at the beginning of chapter two, it was never my

---

<sup>757</sup> A. Briggs (ed.), *William Morris, News from Nowhere and Selected Writings and Designs* (Published in 1962 as *William Morris: Selected Writings and Designs*; repr., London: Penguin, 1986), Envoi to *The Earthly Paradise*, 1868 - 1870, p. 67.

<sup>758</sup> See note 145.

<sup>759</sup> See note 146.

intention to make an intervention of my own into the discussion with the purpose of settling the exegetical problem. Rather, my aim was to analyse the typical hermeneutical moves that interpreters make in such a debate. I wished to conduct that analysis by drawing methodologically on the interplay between the perspectives of the reader-response theorists Iser and Fish. This resulted in a trajectory away from Iser and towards an examination that emphasised Fishian perspectives on the commentators' treatment of the material. I trust that within the scope I have set for my work the reader will experience some sense of completion.

When we consider the three strands of exegesis we have explored: a) that John Wesley gave his attention to the matter of this perceived contradiction as part of his defence of the doctrine of Christian perfection; b) that those whom he admired discussed the subject in their commentaries on 1 John; and, c) that modern scholars pursue a solution to it as part of their endeavour to reconstruct the history of the 'Johannine community,' we may realise that the issue has held, and continues to hold, an importance for a number of those interested in biblical interpretation. Fortunately, we have been able to examine all the major explications of the problem published by Wesley and his luminaries. Regarding the studies proffered by modern scholars, as I stated in my inaugural remarks, I did not set out to give a complete account of twentieth century exegesis of 1 John. I deliberately limited myself to an essay of the annotations of six scholars who have made contributions to the discussion during the last thirty years. Regrettably, this has meant that I have had to exclude the valuable work of other commentators. However, the space and time required to include further significant annotations remains beyond the limits set for this thesis. Moreover, I suggest that the works of the scholars we have considered provide representative examples of the hermeneutical moves made by the guild of Johannine historical-critical scholars.

My narrative began in chapter one with a proposal that we may view reading as a complex feat achieved by individuals who are subject to plural internal and external influences; that a delicate balance of many factors affects our perception of the written word. Following from that proposal, I took up the ideas of the consequent malleability



of words and our role in the production of meaning. From that point I introduced John Wesley as a reader and advocate of perfectionism. Moreover, I announced the leitmotif of my research. Then I accented the existence of secular forms of perfectionism and acknowledged the factors that would contribute to my own bias in reading. A brief history of reader-response criticism ensued: from the reaction to New Critical strictures, to the establishment of a conceptually diverse critical position emphasising (to varying extents) that readers, rather than texts, make meaning. The ideas of, and contention between, Iser and Fish then became central to my account.

My second chapter involved an attempt to re-evaluate and defend Fish's ideas, to prove their relevance to my task. I discussed subjects such as: how interpretations change; interpretive communities; the criteria for accepting interpretations; the critical effort to return to the text; our inability to avoid interpretation; the impossibility of detachment from beliefs and assumptions; and the model of persuasion against that of demonstration. Next, I explained and defended a Fishian form of reader-response analysis that had emerged from our study. Finally, I made a primary exhibition of our verses from the First Epistle and outlined an Iserian and Fishian approach to them.

The third chapter displayed the seven main explications of the verses and Christian perfection by John Wesley. In this chapter, I appraised Wesley's work from a Fishian perspective. Likewise, in chapter four I repeated that process using the commentaries of five theologians that Wesley respected. Then I conducted a brief comparison between the Methodist's exegesis and that of his luminaries. I wrote chapter five as an excursus to argue that the secular philosophical concerns of William Godwin represent a widespread striving for perfection during the eighteenth century. I presented this as an aspiration analogous to that of Wesley's - so setting the Methodist leader's work in a wider interpretive context, placing both men within the same interpretive community. Reaching the culmination of my story, chapter six, I examined six scholars' solutions to the perceived contradiction; these analyses I intended as a depiction of late twentieth century historical-critical investigation in the field of biblical studies.

I think it is appropriate in this summary conclusion to highlight again several aspects of Fish's perspective: to restate the form of reader-response that I have applied to our subject, and reiterate and uphold Fish's estimate of the consequences of its application. As I maintained in chapter two, we must make a distinction between reader-response as a method of practical criticism, like the 'Affective Stylistics' of the early period, and the sort of literary-hermeneutical considerations of the later work by Fish. It is the latter aspect of his standpoint that I have incorporated into my thesis. As we have seen, Fish's account of reading is a self-revising project, and his ideas have evolved considerably over almost three decades. Although still thought of as under the umbrella of reader-response, one could now speak of his recent work as akin to hermeneutics. Fish's present observations apply to reading generally, without offering a method that applies only to particular types of text. The emphasis on the reader remains, but he has adopted a more generalised and abstract reflection on reading. Fish's account now centres upon perception and communication rather than specific word and sentence analysis. Such an account has aided my quest to illustrate how readers have solved the particular interpretive problem in 1 John.

Now that we have applied his literary-hermeneutical observations to our specific case, we must remind ourselves of Fish's reassurance that, in appropriating his paradigm, we still retain 'texts, standards, norms, criteria of judgement, critical histories, and so on' - though not in the same form. He has stated that the acts of convincing others that they are 'wrong,' that one interpretation has merit over another, the citation of evidence for our preferred reading, all these acts continue as before; now, however, we operate with the knowledge that we complete them within a set of institutional assumptions that may themselves turn into disputed objects. The advantage emanating from this model is that we obtain a 'principled account of change' and an explanation, sufficient for ourselves and for others, for intractable interpretive problems.

In defence of Fish, I commented in chapter one on his use of such language as 'making' (as opposed to 'finding') meaning (expressions to the effect that the reader

does not find meaning in the text, she or he creates it out of the interpretive strategies employed in the act of reading). It is germane to remind ourselves that although he uses this kind language to undermine a naive interpretive 'realism' (and a prevalent critical rhetoric), he is not doing so on behalf of a personal belief in some sort of opposing epistemological or metaphysical 'idealism' (that holds as its essence that interpretation 'creates' everything out of nothing); rather, his argument stands outside the realism versus idealism debate. We recall that primarily Fish wishes to indicate that there is no space between 'interpretation' and the 'facts' such that the former could be weighed against the latter.

Moreover, our defence of Fish's work in chapter 2 noted his observations on the typical critical claim not to be 'interpreting' but simply listening to the text without the imposition of an agenda. I posited that in giving voice to these observations Fish is not seeking to mount a covert exposé of supposed hermeneutical incoherence. I suggested that while he undermines the 'back-to-the-text' claim on the basis that the text returned to is simply the one demanded by an interpretation that governs its production, Fish's work illustrates the common use of such hermeneutical rhetoric in interpretive practice. Also, in terms of that rhetoric, his work recognises that there is a degree of inevitability about using this type of language. However, I explained that his remarks on the scholars' claim of going 'back-to-the-text' have the purpose of revealing that claim as a 'move,' a style or gesture that we do not notice because of its seeming naturalness or obviousness. Fish's observations serve to unveil the rhetoric of objectivity or 'truth-telling.' He attends to what readers do in their effort to have their reading prevail, how they commend their work, the type of posture they adopt towards it. I stated that his insights might well make one more guarded about such critical rhetoric, yet it remains doubtful that they could, or should, entirely remove that rhetoric. One cannot commend a reading to others by asserting its non-existence.

Fish proposes a model that places persuasion - based on our beliefs and assumptions rather than on a text that is independent of interpretation - at the centre of interpretive praxis. Using this model, he has told us, serves to provide novel

perspectives on problems concerning the history of literary criticism; where we find attempts at explication previously regarded under the demonstration pattern as unsuccessful, we may now view them as developments born out of a literary culture holding assumptions different - and not inferior - to our own. When we set aside the essentialist notions that inform a demonstration pattern, it permits us to think about the evolution of the literary institution, and to lay bare the interpretive strategies that enabled the production and understanding of its canons.<sup>760</sup>

Fish has answered two hypothetical questions from a poststructuralist standpoint regarding 'the status of [his] own discourse.' First, if all arguments continue within assumptions and presuppositions that are also subject to challenge and change, does not that make Fish's reasoning itself as vulnerable as the claims it seeks to replace? Fish, we remember, nonchalantly dismissed this question: of course his position shares the vulnerability of all argument, the question is irrelevant; no one can claim privilege for her or his standpoint, all must use persuasion. Thus, Fish's essays are themselves not merely presentations, but arguments - they also represent, he says, examples of how the model of persuasion works. It is essential always to contend, to establish our perspective, to anticipate objections regarding the consequences of our contention. Fish has maintained that he has tried to remove all sources of objection and to alleviate the fear of dire consequences. Really, it is only within his position that we can account for the phenomena his essentialist opponents wish to preserve.

We have noted that Fish readily accepts the possibility that the reverse could happen: someone could persuade him that what he wishes to preserve depends upon a position other than his. If this befell he would share the other's belief and position. However, until such an event he would argue for his position with all the certitude that springs from belief - simultaneously acknowledging that under certain conditions in the future he might believe something else. This subjection to the same challenge as that put to his essentialist colleagues is not a weakness in his position but a restatement of it. Indeed, he has said, it is incoherent to conceive of a position that is invulnerable to

---

<sup>760</sup> See note 202.

challenge, unless one accepts the possibility of a position innocent of assumptions. Certainly, Fish does not accept the latter and, therefore, the fact that his assumptions remain subject to dislodgement does not overthrow his argument but confirms it, for it is an extension of it.

In the second hypothetical question, Fish considered the practical consequences of his ideas in the realm of literary criticism. We may recall the terseness with which he stated that there are none whatsoever. As we know, Fish's proposition is that all that seems evident and unequivocal to us 'is only so within some institutional or conventional structure,' therefore, we can never work outside such a structure. Yet, he does not think that anyone could conduct their practical criticism by means of his position - it is purely a matter of theoretical reasoning about assumptions. Once we cease from this reasoning we inhabit our assumptions again and speak about literature from within whatever beliefs we held before. Any thought that Fish's ideas might prevent practical criticism has no basis because for this to happen one would have to have absolutely no belief about authors or texts; such a situation remains impossible as we cannot think of them independently of belief. Our ability to think about these matters safeguards our capacity to speak of them, and to have the confidence to do so. There is no potentiality of any practical consequences of Fish's work as it would involve a perpetual analysis of beliefs, without commitment to any, and that is not a stance anyone can take. Fish has declared, though, that we 'liv[e] *our*' the position he proposes as our firmly held beliefs yield to others, and bring with them a boundless consecution of 'practical activities that we are always able to perform.'

A further question occurred to us surrounding the relevance of Fish's position as a result of his laconic statement. If there are no effects on the way we read and teach literature, why should we concern ourselves with Fish's work? Fish has responded that at the heart of this query is an assumption that to have any interest for us a matter must have a direct effect on our customary experience of literature; connected to this assumption is an anti-theoretical bias akin to the ideological core of New Criticism. Fish, we recall, thinks the question typifies the very parochial view he challenges, and

it damns his argument 'only from [that] point of view.' He further emphasises the importance of elaborating his position by highlighting that the issues he deals with have a pivotal place in the concerns of the literary institution.<sup>761</sup>

Because I have recognised that the issues that Fish deals with indeed have such a pivotal place in the concerns of the guild of Johannine scholars, I have attempted to elaborate his position throughout my story. I will end that elaboration, and my entire thesis, using the quote with which we opened this chapter. William Morris poses a question apposite to our perceived contradiction in 1 John: 'Why should I strive to set the crooked straight?' From our Fishian perspective we answer: Because you must. Interpretation is inevitable; it is impossible to withhold interpretation; no one can escape effecting it; moreover, whatever solution you offer, you do not demonstrate what is in the text; you always persuade others according to your assumptions. To you any perceived line of meaning between our pairs of verses may appear tortuous, direct, or non-existent. Be sure that to others it may not appear thus. What is at stake in any ensuing dispute are the assumptions behind interpretation, rather than the supposed facts in the text. Every reading of a work - and therefore in this instance every solution offered for the 'sinlessness contradiction' - is a function of a reader's interpretive perspective. Similarly, regarding my thesis, to some it may appear as a mere 'murmuring rhyme' that 'beats with light wing against the ivory gate [of Johannine studies], telling a tale not too importunate.' To others it may bear some significance. This situation must 'suffice me,' for, as Stanley Fish has remarked: 'you will agree with me (that is, understand) only if you already agree with me.'<sup>762</sup>

James Howard Williams

---

<sup>761</sup> See note 206.

<sup>762</sup> See notes 169 and 129.

## Bibliography

- Aland, K., Black, M., Martini, C.M., Metzger, B.M., Wikgren, A. (eds.).  
*The Greek New Testament*. 3rd ed. Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1983.
- Aurelius. *The Communings with Himself of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, Emperor of Rome - Together with His Speeches and Sayings*. Translated and edited by C.R. Haines. Loeb Classical Library. London: William Heinemann and G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1916.
- Ayling, S. *John Wesley*. London: Collins, 1979.
- Baker, F. (Editor-in-Chief). *The Works of John Wesley - Letters II*. Vol. 26; Oxford: Clarendon, 1982.
- *The Complete Works of John Wesley - Hymns*. Vol. 7; Nashville: Abingdon, 1982.
- Bauer, W., Gingrich, F.W., and Danker, F. *A Greek - English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979.
- Beerem, W., Crouwel, W., Van Tuyl, G. (Curators). *Ger Van Elk*. Venice Biennale. Translated by R. Koenig Utrecht, Marina Warners, and Paulo Rombardi. Amsterdam: Visual Arts Office for Abroad, June, 1980.
- Bengelii, J. A. *Gnomon Novi Testamenti*. Tübingen: Henr. Philippi Schrammii, 1742. 'In Epistolam Primam Iohannis, Caput I.'
- Bible and Culture Collective. *The Postmodern Bible*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.
- Bogart, J. *Orthodox and Heretical Perfectionism in the Johannine Community as Evident in the First Epistle of John*. Missoula, MT: Scholars Press for The Society of Biblical Literature, 1977.
- Book of Common Prayer. 1662; Repr., Glasgow: Collins, 1968.
- Braun, H. 'Literar-Analyse und theologische Schichtung im ersten Johannesbrief.' *ZTK* 48 (1951): pp. 262 - 291.
- Brett-Smith, F.B. and Jones, C.E. (eds.). *The Halliford Edition of the Works of Thomas Love Peacock - 4 Vols. Volume I, Headlong Hall*. Glasgow: University Press and R. MacLehose; also London: Constable and Gabriel Wells - Limited Edition, 1934. Headlong Hall originally published in 1816.
- Briggs, A. (ed.). *William Morris, News from Nowhere and Selected Writings and Designs*. Published in 1962 as *William Morris: Selected Writings and Designs*; Repr., London: Penguin, 1986.
- Brown, F.K. *The Life of William Godwin*. London: J.M. Dent and E.P. Dutton, 1926.

- Brown, R.E. *The Gospel According to John*. AC; 2 Vols. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966 - 1970.
- *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*. London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1979.
- *The Epistles of John*. AB; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982.
- Burns, B. *The Novels of Thomas Love Peacock*. London: Croom Helm, 1985.
- Butler, M. *Peacock Displayed - A Satirist in His Context*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979.
- Cole, H. (ed.). *The Works of Thomas Love Peacock, Including his Novels, Poems, Fugitive Pieces, Criticisms, Etc., With a Preface by the Right Hon. Lord Houghton, A Biographical Notice by His Grand-daughter, Edith Nicolls, and Portrait*. London: Richard Bentley and Son, New Burlington Street, 1875.
- Davies, M. 'Reader-Response Criticism,' in R.J. Coggins and J.L. Houlden (eds), *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*. London: SCM and Trinity, 1990.
- Dawson, C. *His Fine Wit - A Study of Thomas Love Peacock*. London: Routledge and Regan Paul, 1970.
- de la Potterie, I. 'The Impeccability of the Christian according to 1 John 3, 6 - 9,' in *The Christian Lives by the Spirit*, by I. de la Potterie and S. Lyonnet. Staten Island, NY: Alba, 1971. The French original we may read in *L'Évangile de Jean: Études et problèmes*. RechBib 3; Bruges: Desclée de Brouwer, 1958.
- Doddridge, P. *Family Expositor; Or a Paraphrase and Version of the New Testament, with Critical Notes*. 6 Vols. London: Printed and sold by J. Waugh and W. Fenner, at the Turk's-Head in Lombard Street, and J. Buckland, at the Buck, in Pater-Noster Row, 1739. The Bodleian copy bears the date 1756. Volume VI including 'A General Introduction to the Paraphrase and Notes on the First Catholic Epistle of St. John.'
- Drabble, M. (ed.). *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, London: Oxford University Press, 1985. Repr., London: Guild, 1989.
- Eagleton, T. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996.
- Edwards, R.B. *The Johannine Epistles*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996.
- Esher, G.A. 'M.C. Escher at Work.' Pages 1 - 8 in Coxeter, H.S.M., Emmer, M., Penrose, R., and Teuber, M.L. (eds.). *M.C. Escher: Art and Science. Proceedings of the International Congress on M.C. Escher, Rome Italy, 26 - 28 March, 1985*. Amsterdam: Elsevier Science, 1986.
- Escher, M.C. *The Graphic Work*. Köln: Benedikt Taschen Verlag, 1992. English Translation by J.E. Brigham. Originally Published in 1959 under the title: *M.C. Escher - Grafiek en Tekeningen*. Zwolle: Koninklijke Erven J.J. Tijl N.V.
- Fausset, A.R. (rev. and ed.). *Gnomon of the New Testament by John Albert Bengel*. Translated by Rev. William Fletcher. 6 Vols. Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, 1857 and 1858.



- Fish, S.E. *Is There a Text in This Class?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980.
- 'Why No One's Afraid of Wolfgang Iser.' *Diacritics* 11 (1981): pp. 2 - 13.
- *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech and its a Good Thing Too*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- *Professional Correctness - Literary Studies and Political Change*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1995.
- Fraser, M.R. 'Strains in the Understandings of Christian Perfection in Early British Methodism.' Ph.D. Thesis. Nashville, Tennessee: Vanderbilt University, 1988. Microfiche Order Number: 8910848.
- Freund, E. *The Return of the Reader: Reader-Response Criticism*. London: Methuen, 1987.
- Frost, R. *Complete Poems* (1951). London: Jonathan Cape, 1951.
- Galtier, P. 'Le chrétien impeccable (1 Jean 3, 6 et 9),' *Mélanges de Science Religieuse* 4 (1947): pp. 137 - 154.
- Gittings, R. *John Keats*. 1968; London: Heinemann Educational. Repr. with additions and corrections, 1970; Repr., 1980.
- *Letters of John Keats*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970. Repr. with corrections, 1977.
- Goetz, P.W. (ed.). *The New Encyclopædia Britannica*. 14th ed.; Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 1985. Volume 23.
- Graves, R. *Collected Poems*. London: Cassell, 1959.
- Guysel, R. *A Practical Exposition of the Epistle to the Galatians And from thence forward to the End of Revelation, in the Form of a Paraphrase, with Occasional Notes*. 3 Vols. 1739 - 1742; London: Printed for John Oswald, at the Rose and Crown in the Poultry. The Bodleian copy dated 1752. Volume III, containing 'The First Epistle General of St. John.'
- Hammond, H. *A Paraphrase and Annotations upon all the Books of the New Testament, Briefly Explaining all the Difficult Places Thereof*. London: Printed by J. Flesher for Richard Royston, 1653.
- Hampson, J. *Hampson's Life of Wesley*. 3 Vols. Sunderland: Unnamed Publisher, 1791.
- Henry, M. *An Exposition of All the Books of the Old and New Testament*. 6 Vols. 1725; 4th ed.; London: Printed for John and Paul Knapton in Ludgate Street, Thomas Cox under the Royal-Exchange, Richard Ford and Richard Hett both in the Poultry, Aaron Ward in Little-Britain, and Thomas Longman in Pater Noster Row, 1738. Volume V, Including 'An Exposition of the First Epistle General of John, With Practical Observations.'

- Hoecker, J.J. *Joseph Priestly and the Idea of Progress*. New York: Garland, 1987.
- Hurka, T. *Perfectionism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Inman, V.K. 'Distinctive Johannine Vocabulary and the Interpretation of 1 John 3: 9,' *Westminster Theological Journal* 40 (1977): pp. 136 - 44.
- Iser, W. *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction From Bunyan To Becket*. Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1974. Originally Published as *Der Implizite Leser: Kommunikationsformen des Romans von Bunyan bis Beckett*. Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1972.
- *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978.
- 'Interview.' *Diacritics* 10 (1980): pp. 57 - 74.
- 'Talk Like Whales: A Reply to Stanley Fish.' *Diacritics* 11 (1981): pp. 82 - 87.
- *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology*. Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1989.
- Jackson, T. (ed.). *The Works of John Wesley*. 14 Vols; London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1831 and Third Edition 1878. Repr. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House. Volume XIV: *Grammars, Musical Works, Letters, Scripture Index, Subject Index*.
- Johnson, L.T. *The Writings of the New Testament - An Interpretation*. London: SCM, 1986.
- Kölvig, U. (general ed.) and Mervaud C. (ed.). *Oeuvres Complètes de Voltaire*, 21 Romans. 'Jeannet et Colin' (1764). Paris: Garnier Frères, Libraires-Éditeurs, 1879.
- Kramnic, I. (ed.). *William Godwin, Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Morals and Happiness*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1976. Godwin's work first Published in 1793.
- Kysar, R. 'Epistles of John.' Section B, page 902 in vol. 3 of *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Edited by D.N. Freedman. 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
- Langton, E. *History of the Moravian Church*. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1956.
- La Rondelle, H.K. *Perfection and Perfectionism*. Andrews University Monographs: Studies in Religion 3; 2nd ed., Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews, 1975.
- Lieu, J. *The Theology of the Johannine Epistles*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Lindars, B. *John*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990.
- Lodge, J.G. *Romans 9 - 11, A Reader-Response Analysis*. Atlanta, Georgia: Scholar's Press, 1998.

- Loeb, A.L. 'Polyhedra in the Work of M.C. Escher.' Pages 195 - 199 in Coxeter, H.S.M., Emmer, M., Penrose, R., and Teuber, M.L. (eds.). *M.C. Escher: Art and Science. Proceedings of the International Congress on M.C. Escher, Rome, Italy, 26 - 28 March, 1985*. Amsterdam: Elsevier Science, 1986.
- Milford, H.S. (ed.). *The Poetical Works of William Cowper*. 1905; 4th ed. 1934; Repr., London: Oxford University Press, 1959.
- Miller, G.A. *Psychology - The Science of Mental Life*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966.
- Mills, H. *Peacock - His Circle and His Age*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1969.
- Montmarquet, J.A. 'Perfectionism.' Page 573 in R. Audi (ed.), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Moore, S.D. *Literary Criticism and the Gospels - The Theoretical Challenge*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.
- Motion, A. *Keats*. London: Faber and Faber, 1997.
- Neill, S. and Wright, T. *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861 - 1986*. 1964; 2nd Enl. ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Onions, C.T. (ed.). *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. 2 Vols.; 3rd ed. with etymologies revised by G.W.S. Friedrichsen; Oxford: Clarendon and Oxford University Press, 1973.
- Outler, A.C. (ed.). *The Complete Works of John Wesley - Sermons I. Vol. 1*; Nashville: Abingdon, 1984.
- *The Complete Works of John Wesley - Sermons II. Vol. 2*; Nashville: Abingdon, 1985.
- Patrick, D. *Old Testament Law*. London: SCM, 1985.
- Paul, K. *William Godwin*. London: Publisher Unknown, 1876.
- Perkins, P. 'The Johannine Epistles' in R.E. Brown, J.A. Fitzmyer, R.E. Murphy (eds.). *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*. London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1989. Article 62, Section 9, Topic (V), p. 988.
- Poole, M. *Annotations upon the Holy Bible*. London: Printed for Thomas Parkhurst, Dorman Newman, Johnathan Robinson, Brabazon Ailmer, and Thomas Cockerill, 1688.
- Porter, R. *English Society in the Eighteenth Century*. Rev. ed. London: Penguin Books, 1990.
- Porter, S.E. 'Why Hasn't Reader-Response Criticism Caught on in New Testament Studies?' *Journal of Literature and Theology* 4 (1990): p. 285.
- Posner, R. 'Law and Literature: A Relation Reargued,' *72 Virginia Law Review* 1351 (1986): pp. 1351 - 1379.

- Pratt, M.L. 'Linguistic Utopias' pp. 48 - 66 in *The Linguistics of Writing: Arguments Between Language and Literature*. Nigel Fabb et al (eds.), New York: Methuen, 1987.
- Priestley, F.E.L. (ed.). *William Godwin, Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Morals and Happiness*. 3 Vols. Toronto: The University of Toronto Press and Geoffrey Cumberlege, Oxford University Press, 1946. Facsimile of the Third Edition. Political Justice originally published in 1793.
- Priestley, J.B. *Thomas Love Peacock*. London: Macmillan, 1927.
- Rack, H.D. *Reasonable Enthusiast - John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism*. London: Epworth, 1989.
- Rensberger, D. *1 John 2 John 3 John*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1997.
- Richardson, J. *The Everlasting Spell - A Study of Keats and His Friends*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1963.
- Ruskin, J. *Sesame and Lilies* London: George Allen, 1904.
- Sangster, W.E. *The Path to Perfection*. 1943. Repr., London: Epworth, 1984.
- Schnackenburg, R. *The Johannine Epistles - Introduction and Commentary*. New York: Crossroad, 1992. Translated by R. and I. Fuller. Originally Published as *Die Johannesbriefe*. Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 13/3. Verlag Herder KG Freiburg im Breisgau, 1975.
- Schneewind, J.B. 'William Godwin.' Pages 300 - 301 in Audi, R. (ed.) *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Sinfield, A. *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Smalley, S.S. *1, 2, 3 John*. WBC; Dallas, TX: Word, 1984. Repr., Milton Keynes: Word (UK), 1991.
- Speck, W.A. *Literature and Society in Eighteenth Century England - Ideology, Politics and Culture, 1680 - 1820*. London: Addison Wesley Longman, 1998.
- Spencer, T.J.B., Wells S. and Muir, K. (eds.). *William Shakespeare, Othello*. London: Penguin, New Penguin Shakespeare 1968; Repr. 1996.
- Stanley, C.D. *Paul and the Language of Scripture - Citation Techniques in the Pauline Epistles and Contemporary Literature*. Cambridge: Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series, No. 74, Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Stott, J.R.W. *The Epistles of John*. Tyndale NT 19; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964.
- Swadling, H.C. 'Sin and Sinlessness in 1 John,' *SJT* 35 (1982): pp. 205 - 211.
- Tate, R.W. *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991.

- Tompkins, J.P. (ed.). *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post Structuralism*. Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1980.
- Tyerman, L. *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A., Founder of the Methodists*. 3 Vols. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1870.
- Walters, J.R. *Perfection in New Testament Theology - Ethics and Eschatology in Relational Dynamic*. New York: Edwin Mellen, 1995.
- Ward W. R. and Heitzenrater R.P. (eds.). *The Works of John Wesley - Journal and Diaries III*. Vol. 20; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991.
- Wesley, J. *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*. 1767; Repr., Peterborough: Epworth, 1952; Fourteenth Impression, 1997.
- *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*. 1755; Repr. London: Epworth, 1976.
- White, H. *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978.
- Wimsatt Jr., W.K. and Beardsley, M. *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1954.