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John Wesley's *Thoughts upon slavery* and the language of the heart

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It is a commonplace, although one not often examined closely, that John Wesley was a lifelong opponent of slavery. Such claims originate with Wesley himself. 'Ever since I heard of it first', he wrote to Granville Sharp in October 1787, 'I felt a perfect detestation of the horrid Slave Trade'.¹ Whether that is true is impossible to know. What is certain is that Wesley actively opposed the slave trade from the early 1770s onwards. Scholars of both Methodism and of abolitionism have often noted in passing his contributions to the accelerating abolition movement, which have survived in the form of a pamphlet, a group of letters, and a number of *Journal* entries. As yet, however, these contributions have evaded extended analysis.² Accordingly, my intention in this essay is twofold. In the first section, I chart the development of Wesley's views on slavery and assess his place in the development of the British abolition movement. In the second section, I examine Wesley's main contribution to that movement, his pamphlet *Thoughts upon slavery*, written in 1774, and read it not only as polemic, but also as 'literature' to demonstrate that Wesley's sentimental style is as important as his moral, religious and economic arguments. Indeed, Wesley, despite objecting to sentimental writing in his *Journal*, is in fact one of the first major writers on slavery to use a sentimental rhetoric to make arguments against it: an important innovation, since much of the ensuing debate was conducted in exactly those sentimental terms.

¹ *Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, 8 vols, ed. John Telford (London: The Epworth Press, 1931), viii, 17.

² Wesley's biographers typically devote two or three pages to discussion of Wesley's antislavery. For recent examples, see V.H.H. Green, *John Wesley* (London and New York: University Press of America, 1987), 156; Roy Hattersley, *A brand from the burning: the life of John Wesley* (London: Little, Brown, 2002), 390-1; and John Pollock, *Wesley the preacher* (Eastbourne: Kingsway Publications, 2000), 240-3. The best analysis by a historian of slavery is David Brion Davis, *The problem of slavery in western culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1966), 382-90.

Wesley's life coincided with the height of the British transatlantic slave trade. Britain had been a minor participant in the trade since the late sixteenth century. In 1660, Charles II had given the trade systematic government support and British involvement grew at a sharp rate over the following years. With the treaty of Utrecht of 1713, the event which concluded the War of the Spanish Succession (a war which must have been an important news and conversation feature in Wesley's childhood) Britain won the right to supply the lucrative markets of Spanish America with slaves. From that point onwards, Britain was by far the most significant participant in the international slave trade, responsible for transporting thousands of abducted Africans across the Atlantic every year, both to Spanish America and to British colonies in the Caribbean and North America.³ From the start, there had been those who opposed slavery and the slave trade, but their voices were rarely heard until late in the eighteenth century. In the decade following American independence, a public pressure campaign to outlaw the slave trade to the remaining British colonies attracted widespread support from the British public, who made their views known through local meetings, a mass petitioning campaign and a consumer boycott. Hundreds of publications opposing both slavery and the slave trade were printed and distributed between 1785 and 1795. The campaign was not immediately successful but, following a ten-year lull, the British slave trade was abolished by law in 1807. After another vigorous campaign in the 1820s and 1830s, the abolition of slavery in British colonies followed, with the emancipation of slaves taking place by 1838.⁴

Historians are divided on the reasons for the success of these campaigns, variously arguing that it was the reward for diligence of a body of virtuous 'saints' such as William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson, that it was realized that the institution of slavery was no longer profitable, that there was a fundamental shift in popular sensibility, that the campaign was the expression of a new middle-class capitalist ideology that insisted on the importance of free labour in a free market, or that slave resistance

³ For useful general studies of the British slave trade, see, Robin Blackburn, *The making of new world slavery: from the baroque to the modern, 1492-1800* (London: Verso, 1997), Hugh Thomas, *The slave trade: the history of the Atlantic slave trade 1440-1870* (London: Picador, 1997), and James Walvin, *Black ivory: a history of British slavery* (London: HarperCollins, 1992).

⁴ For useful general studies of the British abolition movement, see, Roger Anstey, *The Atlantic slave trade and British abolition, 1760-1810* (London: Macmillan, 1975), Robin Blackburn, *The overthrow of colonial slavery, 1776-1848* (London: Verso, 1988), Clare Midgley, *Women against slavery: the British campaigns, 1780-1870* (London: Routledge, 1992), and David Turley, *The culture of English antislavery, 1780-1860* (London: Routledge, 1991).

made the plantations untenable.⁵ Few historians now doubt that a combination of several of the above led to abolition of the slave trade, with social, economic and cultural factors in the metropolis probably providing the impetus. Nevertheless, this essay, with its emphasis on the contribution to the campaign made by a single individual, might appear to be in danger of supporting the smug Victorian view that abolition was the triumph of a small group of virtuous 'saints'. That danger is certainly inherent in an essay with a biographical focus, yet, clearly, Wesley did not operate in a vacuum, and his antislavery ideas, in advance of the general view though they may have been, nevertheless plainly emerged from existing discourses about slavery. The view that the contribution of individuals to the campaign is not worthy of attention does not seem satisfactory either, while attempts to downplay the supposed 'virtue' of the 'saints' has led to some unnecessary speculation about individual abolitionists' personalities and motivations. Of course, the end of slavery did not mean the end of either racism or imperial expansion, while British opposition to slavery in the age of empire often appears hypocritical and self-serving. Nevertheless, as far as we can tell, the personal motivations of those involved in the campaign to abolish slavery and the slave trade were no better or no worse than the personal motivations of anyone involved in any political or humanitarian campaign. John Wesley may have had many reasons to oppose slavery, some we can guess at and some we can not. In what follows, I seek to examine the part he played in the abolition movement while neither praising him as a saint nor castigating him as a villain.

Wesley and the Abolition Movement

Although Wesley claimed to have been opposed to slavery from the first time he heard of it, we have no way of knowing if this is true. Neither can we know with certainty when he first heard of slavery. He might have come into contact with slaves in England. In the early eighteenth century, it was fashionable for aristocratic women to employ black pageboys, and young liveried slaves were not an uncommon sight. Slaves were also brought to England by visiting colonists and by officers in both the Royal Navy and the merchant marine.⁶ However, if Wesley had encountered slaves such as these, he does not mention it in his letters or *Journals*. Without doubt, he did come into contact with slaves during his period in North America (1736–37). Wesley spent most of his time in the colony of

⁵ The main positions are explored in: *The antislavery debate: capitalism and abolitionism as a problem in historical interpretation*, ed. Thomas Bender (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

⁶ For details of the eighteenth-century black community in England, see Peter Fryer, *Staying power: the history of black people in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1984) and Gretzen Gerzina, *Black England: life before emancipation* (London: J. Murray, 1995).

Georgia, where slavery was illegal until 1751. The law was not always rigorously enforced, nor was it widely supported beyond the Georgia Trustees who hoped to see Georgia settled by 'deserving' poor whites rather than by Africans. Indeed, Georgia's antislavery stance was both unusual and unsentimental. As Alan Taylor has argued, 'driven by concerns for military security and white moral uplift, the antislavery policy expressed neither a principled empathy for enslaved Africans nor an ambition to emancipate slaves elsewhere'.⁷ Although he was a supporter of Georgia's existing antislavery laws, there is no indication that Wesley's views on slavery diverged significantly from those of the Trustees and, as far as we know, he did not actively call for a general end to slavery and the slave trade at this time.⁸ However, because of Georgia's laws, most of his early contacts with slaves took place in neighbouring South Carolina or on the voyage home. In both instances, he showed attentions to slaves that many would have considered unusual and was clear from the start that Africans were both capable of salvation and in need of it. In August 1736, he comments in his *Journal* that he is 'glad to see several Negroes at church' in Charlestown, South Carolina.⁹ In a celebrated letter to George Whitefield, written from Savannah in the following month, Wesley exhorted Whitefield to join him in Georgia where 'a great multitude' was in need of spiritual care: 'here are adults from the farthest parts of Europe and Asia and the inmost kingdoms of Africa'.¹⁰ This is an important point because, even as early as the 1730s, there were those who questioned the humanity of Africans. There were also those — both black and white — who believed that baptism conferred freedom. There was very little legal justification for such a claim, but the belief frequently put slave-owners and missionaries at loggerheads throughout the eighteenth century.¹¹ Whether or not Wesley had reached a final conclusion about the legality and morality of slavery at this point, he had certainly reached a firm conclusion about the humanity of Africans. On his return journey to England, he passed the time on the long transatlantic voyage by 'instructing a negro lad in the principles of Christianity'.¹² Presumably, the young man was a slave.

Until the early 1770s, with the exception of the period in America, references to slavery occur only infrequently in both

⁷ Alan Taylor, *American colonies* (London: Penguin, 2001), 242. See also Davis, *Problem of slavery in western culture*, 144–50.

⁸ *Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, Bicentenary Issue, 8 vols, ed. Nehemiah Curnock (London: The Epworth Press, 1938), i, 244n.

⁹ Wesley, *Journal*, i, 255.

¹⁰ Wesley, *Letters*, i, 205–6.

¹¹ For a succinct discussion of Christianity in the plantations, see Walvin, *Black ivory*, 182–97.

¹² Wesley, *Journal*, i, 413.

Wesley's letters and his *Journal*. On 12 August 1772, however, Wesley records in his *Journal* that he had been reading a 'book, published by an honest Quaker, on that execrable sum of all villainies, commonly called the Slave-trade'.¹³ The book he read was clearly one of Anthony Benezet's works, almost certainly *Some historical account of Guinea*, which had been published in London that year in an edition which anthologized most of the main writings on the subject to date.¹⁴ Benezet was a Philadelphia Quaker, descended from a French Huguenot family, who was the source of much antislavery sentiment in the mid-to-late eighteenth century.¹⁵ As well as inspiring Wesley, his writings were also the first that well-known British abolitionists such as Granville Sharp, Thomas Clarkson, James Ramsay and Samuel Taylor Coleridge turned to when they entered the debate.

It is not coincidental that Wesley was reading Benezet's work at this time. Slavery had been in the news recently following the landmark legal decision in the case of James Somerset.¹⁶ Somerset was a slave, the property of Charles Stewart of Boston, Massachusetts, who had absconded, been recaptured, and was now imprisoned on a ship bound for Jamaica. Following the intervention of Granville Sharp, the captain of the ship was ordered to produce Somerset before the court of King's Bench where Lord Chief Justice Mansfield heard his case. This attracted a great deal of attention in the press, and members of the public donated funds for lawyers on both sides of the argument. On 22 June 1772, Lord Mansfield ruled that: 'no master was ever allowed here to take a slave by force to be sold abroad because he deserted from his service, or for any other reason whatever'. Somerset was discharged, and his supporters, who included both black and white Londoners, immediately celebrated a great victory. In fact, the victory was less than complete. Mansfield had not ruled that slavery was illegal in England, merely that no one had a right 'to take a slave by force to be sold abroad'. Although this made it

¹³ Wesley, *Journal*, v, 446.

¹⁴ Anthony Benezet, *Some historical account of Guinea, its situation, produce, and the general disposition of its inhabitants. With an inquiry into the rise and progress of the slave trade, its nature and lamentable effects. Also a republication of the sentiments of several authors of note on this interesting subject: particularly an extract of a treatise written by Granville Sharp* (London: W. Owen and E. and C. Dilly, 1772).

¹⁵ George S. Brookes, *Friend Anthony Benezet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1937).

¹⁶ An extensive historiography has grown up around this case. The most important contributions are: Jerome Nadelhaft, 'The Somerset case and slavery: myth, reality, and repercussions', *Journal of Negro History*, li (1966), 193-208; Folarin Shyllon, *Black slaves in Britain* (London: Oxford Univ. Press for the Institute of Race Relations, 1974), particularly 77-176; Fryer, *Staying power*, 115-26; James Oldham, 'New light on Mansfield and slavery', *Journal of British Studies* 27 (1988), 45-68; James Oldham, *The Mansfield manuscripts and the growth of English law in the eighteenth century*, 2 vols (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), ii, 1221-44.

almost impossible for slave-owners to maintain power over their slaves if they decided to abscond, slavery still existed in England. Moreover, little provision was made for enforcing the judgement, and slaves were still forcibly taken to the plantations in the years to come.

Clearly, Wesley was interested in the Mansfield judgement, as it is just six weeks later that he records reading Benezet's work. However, this may not have been Wesley's introduction to antislavery sentiment. Wesley's biographers, using the evidence of his journal and correspondence, have traditionally dated his interest in antislavery from this date, but there is evidence to show that he was already corresponding on the subject earlier in the year, if not the previous year. On 14 May 1772, Benezet wrote to Granville Sharp, sending him copies of *Some historical account of Guinea*. In this letter, Benezet tells Sharp that: 'My friend John Westly promises he will consult with thee about the expediency of some weekly publication, in the newspapers, on the origin, nature, and dreadful effects of the slave trade'.¹⁷ There is no evidence that this planned newspaper column ever materialised, yet on this evidence it seems likely that Wesley and Benezet had been communicating from a relatively early date. Wesley's antislavery activity before August 1772, and his relationship with both Benezet and Sharp, is confirmed by another letter, dated 30 July 1772, written by Granville Sharp to Robert Hay Drummond, Archbishop of York. In this, Sharp sends the Archbishop a copy of 'one of Mr. Benezet's books' (he doesn't say which one) and surveys the attitudes of various Christian sects towards slavery. He notes that 'the Methodists are also highly offended at the scandalous toleration of slavery in our colonies, if I may judge by the sentiments of one of their principal teachers, Mr. Wesley — though, indeed, I have never had any communication with that gentleman but on this particular point'.¹⁸ Although the earliest surviving letters between Wesley and Sharp date from 1787, clearly, they are already in touch by the summer of 1772.

In both cases, the correspondence suggests that Wesley was already interested in antislavery by the time he read the 'honest Quaker's' work in August 1772. It also raises a question over which book he was reading. It may well have been Sharp's edition of Benezet's *Some historical account of Guinea*. And yet, if Wesley and Benezet had corresponded earlier, and given Benezet's habit of enclosing copies of his own work, it may well be that Wesley was reading a Philadelphia imprint of Benezet's book. In either case, the book struck a chord, as Wesley decided also to contribute to

¹⁷ Brookes, *Friend Anthony Benezet*, 291.

¹⁸ Prince Hoare, *Memoirs of Granville Sharp, Esq.* composed from his own manuscripts, and other authentic documents (London: Henry Colburn, 1820), 185.

the debate. Accordingly, early in 1774, a short fifty-three-page pamphlet appeared with the simple title of *Thoughts upon slavery by John Wesley, A.M.*¹⁹ The book starts by following a similar pattern to Benezet's *Some historical account of Guinea*. Indeed, as Benezet's biographer George Brookes has put it, 'in a century of free plagiarism, the opening chapter of Wesley's treatise required little exercise of thought'.²⁰ Brookes's snipe at Wesley is rather unfair. It seems unlikely that Wesley was motivated by a desire to pass off Benezet's work as his own. Instead, it seems more plausible that he thought he could bring Benezet's work to a larger audience, in particular, an audience of metropolitan Anglicans — a group more empowered to bring an end to the slave trade than colonial dissenters. This was certainly the spirit in which the original author received it. By May 1774, a copy had found its way to Philadelphia. When it reached Benezet's hands, he was flattered rather than offended by the imitation, and sent Wesley a long letter in which he remarked that the appearance of *Thoughts upon slavery* 'afforded me much satisfaction'; so much so, in fact, that Benezet 'immediately agreed with the Printer to have it republished here'.²¹ The remainder of the letter is taken up with corrections to Wesley's text, thoughts on strategy for the future of the campaign, and examples of 'the inhumanity with which the poor Negroes are treated. Of these, Benezet included the text of two shocking advertisements, calling for the return of runaway slaves, which offered rewards of £5 for the person who could recover the slaves alive or £20 for the person who could produce the slaves' severed heads.²² Wesley received Benezet's letter at Reigate on 30 November 1774, and immediately wrote to *The Monthly Review* to observe that 'the general spirit of American slave-holders is observed in a letter from Philadelphia now before me'. The substance of this letter was a slightly altered transcription of the advertisements which Benezet had quoted. *The Monthly Review* which, despite priding itself on its impartiality in all debates, had always and would always take an antislavery line, had favourably reviewed *Thoughts upon slavery* in its September issue.²³ They were happy to insert the letter in the December issue.²⁴

The exchange is an astonishing example of the way that political statements reverberated across the Atlantic, even in an age of painfully slow communications. It is also a model of the way that

¹⁹ John Wesley, *Thoughts upon slavery* (London: R. Hawes, 1774). A reliable electronic text of the 1784 Philadelphia edition can be found on-line at the University of North Carolina 'Documenting the American South' project: <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/wesley/menu.html>>

²⁰ Brookes, *Friend Anthony Benezet*, 84.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 318.

²² *Ibid.*, 320.

²³ *The Monthly Review* 51 (July–December 1774), 234–7.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 487–8.

antislavery debate tended to take place in the years before the formation of the Abolition Society in 1787 — by networks of friends and correspondents sharing private information, making mutually supportive public statements, and arranging to republish one another's work. Indeed, we might almost speak of a first Abolition Society at this point. It may not have had a formal structure, and its opportunities to expand were severely disrupted by the outbreak of war between England and her American colonies, but the correspondence between Benezet, Sharp and Wesley was almost certainly the most significant grouping in the early campaign against slavery. This fact has been rather masked by Thomas Clarkson, who in 1808 wrote a famous and best-selling *History of the rise, progress, and accomplishment of the abolition of the African slave trade*. Clarkson's history has for many years been the starting point for all historians of the abolition movement. Clarkson mentions the correspondence between Benezet and both Sharp and Wesley, but it is a passing comment and rather downplays the extent to which the three worked in concert. Clarkson tells us that Benezet 'opened a correspondence with George Whitefield and John Wesley, that these might assist him in promoting the cause of the oppressed'.²⁵ Clarkson seems to misunderstand that Whitefield was no abolitionist — indeed, he was one of the most prominent campaigners against Georgia's antislavery laws and owned a plantation and seventy-five slaves — yet Clarkson does backdate Wesley's commitment to antislavery, noting that: 'From the year 1762, ministers, who were in the connection of John Wesley, began to be settled in America, and that as these were friends to the oppressed Africans also, so they contributed in their turn to promote a softness of feeling towards them among those of their own persuasion'.²⁶

The date of 1762 approximately corresponds with the earliest significant Methodist activity in North America, but somewhat predates Wesley's personal interest in managing American Methodism. The impression one receives from this cursory discussion is that Clarkson was neither well informed about, nor interested in, Wesley's part in the abolition movement. The passage, indeed, damns with faint praise. According to Clarkson, Wesley's supporters did not promote abolition of either slavery or the slave trade, but merely promoted 'a softness of feeling' towards the slaves. Such an approach was consistent with the 'ameliorationist' position taken by some, mostly novelists, who

²⁵ Thomas Clarkson, *History of the rise, progress and accomplishment of the abolition of the African slave trade*, 2 vols (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees and Orme, 1808), i, 170–1.

²⁶ Clarkson, i, 184.

wrote about slavery in the 1760s and 70s.²⁷ By the mid 1780s, however, most abolitionists argued that slavery could not be ameliorated but must be abolished. Clarkson clearly saw Wesley as a minor participant in the abolition campaign, and one who was a follower of Benezet rather than an original force. Consequently, later historians of abolition have tended to do likewise.

Nevertheless, although Clarkson considerably underplays it, Wesley's influence was not merely confined to his supporters in the Church, and his views on slavery continued to be significant throughout his later life. *Thoughts upon slavery* sold well, going through four editions in two years, which meant that it would have been one of the most widely-read books on slavery before the publication of James Ramsay's *Essay on the treatment and conversion of African slaves* in 1784, the first mainstream abolitionist text of the 1780s.²⁸ Plainly, Wesley's book had not been forgotten since, in August 1787, he wrote to the Executive Committee of the newly formed Society for Effecting the Abolition of the African Slave Trade to express his support, and he pledged to reprint the tract in 'a new large edition'.²⁹ For some reason this fifth edition did not appear until 1792, a year after Wesley's death, but clearly the pamphlet was in his mind at the time since in 1788 he used the arguments it contained, as well as some of its language, in an abolitionist sermon he preached in Bristol, one of the foremost slave trading ports. In such a location, at such a time, an antislavery sermon could not have been preached without considerable personal risk to the preacher. Indeed, during the sermon a disturbance took place, which Wesley recorded in his *Journal*:

About the middle of the discourse, while there was on every side attention still as night, a vehement noise arose, none could tell why, and shot like lightening through the whole congregation. The terror and confusion were inexpressible. You might have imagined it was a city taken by storm. The people rushed upon each other with the utmost violence; the benches were broke in pieces, and nine-tenths of the congregation appeared to be struck with the same panic.³⁰

Wesley ascribed the confusion to 'some preternatural influence. Satan fought, lest his kingdom should be delivered up'. While it is possible that a sudden thunderstorm or other natural phenomenon was the cause of the panic he describes, a more likely

²⁷ Amelioration as a political position has not been widely discussed by historians, particularly since its most potent expression in the 1760s and 70s was in novels rather than in political tracts. For an important recent discussion, see George Bouloukos, 'The grateful slave: a history of slave plantation reform in the British novel, 1750–1780', *The Eighteenth-Century Novel* 1 (2001), 161–79.

²⁸ James Ramsay, *An essay on the treatment and conversion of African slaves in the British sugar colonies* (London: J. Phillips, 1784).

²⁹ Wesley, *Letters*, viii, 7.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, vii, 359–60.

explanation, perhaps, was a plot by slave-traders, anxious to disrupt a piece of abolitionist rhetoric being sounded deep in their territory. How strong this rhetoric was is impossible to tell, as the 1788 sermon has not survived. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to assume that it was based in some measure on his pamphlet *Thoughts upon slavery* — almost any part of which might have inflamed passions in Bristol. There is some textual evidence that the *Thoughts upon slavery* formed the basis of the 1788 sermon as well: both the pamphlet and Wesley's journal entry describing the sermon express the hope that God will free the slaves and, in an unusual phrase, burst 'their chains in sunder'.³¹

The Bristol sermon testifies to the strength of Wesley's abolitionist feeling in the last years of his life, and suggests that he might have played a more extensive role had he been able. He died at the height of the anti-slave trade agitation, in March 1791, when there was still plenty of reason to expect that the institution would be abolished within months. Clearly the topic was on his mind at the last because — as is often noted — his last letter was to William Wilberforce; the parliamentary leader of the abolition campaign, while on his deathbed he was reading *The interesting narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*. This autobiography of a former slave was a bestseller in the eighteenth century, and is still widely read. Yet, as is only infrequently remarked upon, Equiano's book is not only a slave narrative, but is also a conversion narrative. Equiano became a Methodist in the year 1774, the same year in which Wesley published *Thoughts upon slavery*.³² Likewise, Wilberforce, though no Methodist, was an evangelical and in sympathy with much that Wesley stood for. On this evidence it is plain to see that Wesley's opposition to slavery derived from, rather than preceded, his spiritual mission.

Wesley and the Literary Context of Thoughts upon Slavery

Wesley's *Thoughts upon slavery* was written in 1774, at the height of what literary critics have come to refer to as 'the age of sensibility'.³³ Over the past twenty years, much has been written about the literature of sensibility (also referred to as sentimental literature) as well as its associated culture and ideology.³⁴ This discussion is too extensive to be reproduced here but, in essence,

³¹ Wesley, *Thoughts upon slavery*, 53; *Journal*, vii, 359–60.

³² Olaudah Equiano, *The interesting narrative and other writings*, ed. Vincent Carretta, second edition (London: Penguin, 2003). The account of his conversion occupies most of chapter 10 (181–97).

³³ A phrase coined by Northrop Frye in his important article 'Towards defining an age of sensibility', *English Literary History* 23 (1956), 144–52.

³⁴ The best general introduction to the literature of sensibility is still Janet Todd, *Sensibility: an introduction* (London: Methuen, 1986).

it is agreed that sentimental literature was particularly concerned with emotions, both the emotions of the characters portrayed and the emotions of the reader whom, sentimental authors hoped, could be reduced to tears by descriptions of moving circumstances and tender scenes. None of this was exactly new — classical orators had recognized pathos as an important component of rhetoric for example — but both the extent and the popularity of sentimental literature were unprecedented. Thousands of sentimental novels, poems and plays were published between 1740 and 1800; many extremely concentrated in their sentimentality. Sentimental writing was not merely entertaining, however. Several critics have commented on the part played by sensibility in political writing and the political process. Among others, Markman Ellis, Chris Jones and John Mullan have shown that sentimentalism was both grounded in the moral sense philosophy of Francis Hutcheson, David Hume and Adam Smith, and utilized by supporters of several social and political projects.³⁵ Of these projects, Ellis pays particular attention to ‘sentimentalism and the problem of slavery’, arguing that the sentimental novel, in its ‘attempt to reformulate social attitudes to inequality through the development of a new humanitarian sensibility’ was forced to engage with slavery as being ‘the most scandalous and impassioned example of inequality available’.³⁶ Ellis’s reading of slavery and the sentimental novel follows on from work by Wylie Sypher in the 1940s and David Brion Davis in the 1960s and 70s, both of whom assumed a direct link between sentimentalism and the emerging antislavery movement.³⁷ All three hint at, but do not make explicit, the extent to which political writers took up this literary sentimentalism and fashioned a sentimental rhetoric seemingly tailor-made for articulating opposition to slavery and the slave trade. Indeed, from the early 1780s onwards, the rhetoric of sensibility was the most common mode employed by those who wished to question slavery, whether in verse, fiction or polemic.³⁸

Sermons and theological writings are also unavoidably part of the literary culture of their time and are generally subject to the same fashions. Laurence Sterne, for example, was not only a novelist, but also an Anglican cleric and the author of a best-

³⁵ Markman Ellis, *The politics of sensibility: race, gender and commerce in the Sentimental novel* (Cambridge: Univ. Press, 1996); Chris Jones, *Radical sensibility: literature and ideas in the 1790s* (London: Routledge, 1993); John Mullan, *Sentiment and sociability: the language of feeling in the eighteenth century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

³⁶ Ellis, *Politics of sensibility*, 49.

³⁷ Davis, *Problem of slavery in western culture*, 333–64; Wylie Sypher, *Guinea’s captive Kings: British antislavery literature of the eighteenth century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1942), *passim*.

³⁸ For a detailed examination of this rhetoric in one political speech of the campaign, see Brycchan Carey, ‘William Wilberforce’s sentimental rhetoric: parliamentary reportage and the abolition speech of 1789’, *The Age of Johnson: a Scholarly Annual* 14 (2003), 281–305.

selling collection of sermons, *The sermons of Mr. Yorick* (1760–69), which is every bit as sentimental as his novels. Sterne was no Methodist, but he did believe in the power of religious feeling — a point emphasized by the critic James Downey who argues that Sterne's theology was 'as much a religion of the heart as was Wesley's'. Wesley argued that true Christians needed an emotional commitment to God, a commitment that was often missing in those who obeyed only the form of Christian worship. He called for a form of continual worship and love of God 'as engrosses the whole heart, as takes up all the affections, as fills the entire capacity of the soul, and employs the utmost extent of all its faculties'.³⁹ Sterne too saw his work, as Downey points out, as 'a theological flap upon the heart'.⁴⁰ Unlike Sterne's, however, Wesley's 'religion of the heart' is not unequivocally sentimental. While Wesley, in his printed sermons, is quite able to draw attention to the 'tender emotions' that interested sentimental writers, very often he is concerned with stronger feelings: passions even. Nonetheless, with its emotional emphasis, Wesley's religion was in accord with the prevailing mood of the 'age of sensibility'. This remains true despite Wesley's avowed objection to sentimental literature. As Markman Ellis has noted, Wesley, although a keen reader of Henry Brooke's sentimental novel *The fool of quality* (1765), articulated strong reservations about the word 'sentimental' itself, as well as passing an unfavourable verdict on Sterne's second novel.⁴¹ In August 1772, Wesley wrote in his *Journal*:

Tues. 11.—I casually took a volume of what is called *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*. *Sentimental!* what is that? It is not English; he might as well say Continental. It is not sense. It conveys no determinate idea; yet one fool makes many. And this nonsensical word (who would believe it?) is become a fashionable one! However, the book agrees full well with the title, for one is as queer as the other. For oddity, uncouthness, and unlikeness to all the world beside, I suppose, the writer is without a rival.⁴²

In Wesley's analysis, Sterne becomes an uncouth imitator of Brooke ('one fool makes many') whose patriotism can be called into question. Sentimental writing is characterized as slippery and indeterminate, and no doubt Wesley found it strange and somewhat puzzling. He clearly preferred writing that he could apply to his own experience or which he could recognize as

³⁹ John Wesley, 'Sermon II: The Almost Christian. Preached at St Mary's, Oxford, Before the University on July 25, 1741', *Wesley's standard sermons*, 2 vols, ed. Edward H. Sugden (London: The Epworth Press, 1921), i, 53–67; 62.

⁴⁰ James Downey, *The eighteenth-century pulpit: a study of the sermons of Butler, Berkeley, Secker, Sterne, Whitefield and Wesley* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 133.

⁴¹ Ellis, *Politics of sensibility*, 36.

⁴² Wesley, *Journal*, v, 445.

conventionally representational. Sterne's 'unlikeness to all the world' betrayed the fact that his work was of limited utility, at least as far as Wesley was concerned. And yet, more useful works were close at hand. Curiously, Wesley's *Journal* entry concerning the antislavery writing of Anthony Benezet came the day after his unfortunate encounter with sentimental literature. Wesley's full entry reads as follows:

Wed. 12.—In returning I read a very different book, published by an honest Quaker, on that execrable sum of all villainies, commonly called the Slave-trade. I read of nothing like it in the heathen world, whether ancient or modern; and it infinitely exceeds, in every instance of barbarity, whatever Christian slaves suffer in Mahometan countries.⁴³

Wesley seems genuinely shocked by what he had just read, almost as if this is the first time he has given the subject serious thought. Perhaps unsurprisingly, his initial reaction is to ascribe the barbarities he reads about to the spiritual failures of the age and, characteristically, his analysis is highly rhetorical, despite this comment being entered into a private journal. By establishing a contrast between the slave-keeping practices of both Christianity and Islam, he is entering into a well-known discourse. In the eighteenth century, a sizable number of Europeans were taken into slavery in North African and, if released, their stories were often published in newspapers or as books.⁴⁴ Europeans naturally saw the taking of Christians into captivity on the Barbary Coast as a shameful act and, with a keen sense of ironic counterpoint, Wesley builds on this sense of shame to reposition these popular representations of the slave trade as the shame of Christendom, not of Islam. In this he anticipates arguments that would sometimes be made by later abolitionists. However, by positing slavery as a problem of 'real' as opposed to 'nominal' Christianity, he also makes use of a construction that was to be used very frequently by antislavery writers in the coming campaign. There are numerous examples. Olaudah Equiano makes use of a form of both of Wesley's strategies when he concludes his description of the middle passage with the appeal: 'O, ye nominal Christians! might not an African ask you, learned you this from your God? who says unto you, Do unto all men as you would men should do unto you?'⁴⁵ William Wilberforce too, an evangelical rather than a Methodist, made it a constant theme in his writings and speeches, and even went as far as to write a book called *A practical view of*

⁴³ Wesley, *Journal*, v, 446.

⁴⁴ The story of European slaves in North Africa is told in: Linda Colley, *Captives: Britain, empire and the world, 1600-1850* (London: Pimlico, 2003) and Stephen Clissold, *The Barbary slaves* (London: Elek Books, 1977).

⁴⁵ Equiano, *Interesting narrative*, 61.

the prevailing religious system of professed Christians in the higher and middle classes of this country contrasted with real Christianity, which appeared in 1797.⁴⁶

Wesley's conflation of evangelical and antislavery thought in this entry was not particularly original, but it was characteristic of the way that the discourses became entwined. On a larger and considerably more complex scale, Wesley repeats the strategy in *Thoughts upon slavery* and here too he anticipates many of the rhetorical strategies that would become central to the coming abolition campaign. Both the importance of Wesley's approach, and its complexity, have been highlighted by David Brion Davis, who has argued that 'there was an important connection between evangelical religion and antislavery, but it was generally blurred, as in the case of Wesley, by an intermixture of mild rationalism, primitivism, and sensibility'.⁴⁷ In fact, the 'mild rationalism' and the primitivism were not Wesley's innovations. As I remarked earlier, *Thoughts upon slavery* follows the Benezet pattern, a pattern that was to become familiar in the literature of abolition. Both Wesley's *Thoughts upon slavery* and Benezet's *Some historical account of Guinea* commence with a discussion of topology and society, drawing an Edenic — primitivist — image of an Africa populated with reasonable and reasoning people, despite the unfortunate fact, in Wesley's version at least, that they are 'Heathens'. Wesley's Africans are neither unusually noble nor sentimental but, rather, 'remarkably sensible, considering the few advantages they have for improving their understanding'.⁴⁸ Benezet's rationalism is sustained as Wesley outlines the method of procuring and transporting slaves. In a hint of what is to come, however, Wesley, who holds white people directly responsible for the slave trade, ascribes the slave trade not only to avarice and doubtful commercial policy, but also to a failure of sensibility: 'Whites, not Blacks, are without natural affection!'⁴⁹ This foregrounding of the affections leads Wesley into a discussion of the brutality of plantation life before he returns to the rational, advancing legal and moral arguments against both slavery and the slave trade. Here, it is shown 'that all slavery is as irreconcilable to Justice as to Mercy'.⁵⁰

In the closing eight pages, the pamphlet concludes first with a direct address to the slave-trader and slave-owner and finally with a prayer. In these pages, Wesley moves away from Benezet's model

⁴⁶ William Wilberforce, *A practical view of the prevailing religious system of professed Christians in the higher and middle classes of this country contrasted with real Christianity* (London: T. Cadell, jun. & W. Davies, 1797).

⁴⁷ Davis, *Problem of slavery in western culture*, 388–9.

⁴⁸ John Wesley, *Thoughts upon slavery* (London: R. Hawes, 1774), 16.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

and writes with more freedom and greater originality. There is a dramatic shift in tone as Wesley departs from the geographical (primitivist) and legal (mildly rational) evidence he has culled from Benezet, and towards a rhetoric of the heart to match his feeling religion. The political tract mutates into both a sermon and a piece of sentimental writing. The language is passionate but, with its insistence on the personal emotional response, and its focus on such effusive signifiers as weeping, sighing, and bleeding, it is also sentimental. Wesley fires questions at the slave-trader, asking:

Are you a *man*? Then you should have an *human* heart. But have you indeed? What is your heart made of? Is there no such principle as Compassion there? Do you never *feel* another's pain? Have you no Sympathy? No sense of human woe? No pity for the miserable? When you saw the flowing eyes, the heaving breasts, or the bleeding sides and tortured limbs of your fellow-creatures, was you a stone, or a brute? Did you look upon them with the eyes of a tiger? When you squeezed the agonizing creatures down in the ship, or when you threw their poor mangled remains into the sea, had you no relenting? Did not one tear drop from your eye, one sigh escape from your breast? Do you feel no relenting *now*? If you do not, you must go on, till the measure of your iniquities is full. Then will the Great GOD deal with *You*, as you have dealt with *them*, and require all their blood at your hands.⁵¹

If this is a sample of the language Wesley used in his 1788 sermon at Bristol, one can readily imagine why a disturbance might have broken out in a congregation formed largely from those who made their living, directly or indirectly, from slavery. In part the tone is fulminating and admonitory, accusing the guilty and holding out threats of eternal justice. To this extent, the passage is well within the tradition of the enthusiastic political sermon or jeremiad. However, inflammatory though it undoubtedly is, it also makes use of many of the conventions of sentimental rhetoric, familiar from the sentimental novel and other more traditionally 'literary' productions. In the first place, it is notable for its use of sentimental markers such as tears and groans, markers which, in a manner typical of the sentimental novel, are mapped onto parts of the body such as the heart, the eyes and the breast. No less characteristic is its overheated and excessively woeful tone, a tone produced by its rhythmic and figurative language as well as by its diction. These aspects emerge from the form of the writing, and yet the argument is equally sentimental. As with much sentimental writing, Wesley is concerned to bring private feelings into the public sphere. Cross-examining a hypothetical planter about his feelings emphasizes, by establishing contrast, the sufferings of the slaves, but it also posits the existence of a sentimental hero, a 'man of feeling'. The passage is seemingly addressed to a slave trader and a man of no

⁵¹ Wesley, *Thoughts upon slavery*, 46-7.

sensibility. However, this is an ironic strategy, and the true implied reader is a man of feeling, a man who is shocked by the slave owner's brute insensibility because he has the sensibility required to be capable of being shocked in that way.

The key to this is the idea of sympathy. Almost all genuinely sentimental arguments in eighteenth-century writing revolve around the central relationship between sensibility, the capacity to feel, and sympathy, the capacity to imagine another's feelings as one's own. Indeed, an important definition of the word 'sympathy' - in Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* (1755) - defines it as 'mutual sensibility'. The nature of sympathy was a matter for some discussion, and it had been theorized in David Hume's then little-read *A treatise of human nature* (1739-40) and, with greater popular success, by Adam Smith in *The theory of moral sentiments* (1759). Interest in the idea of sympathy permeates sentimental literature, from the general assumption that our ability to sympathize with fictional suffering provides the essential aesthetic appeal of sentimental literature, to specific discussion of the idea, illustrated in titles such as Samuel Jackson Pratt's poem *Sympathy; or, a sketch of the social passion* (1781) or William Hill Brown's novel *The power of sympathy* (1789). In *Thoughts upon slavery*, Wesley explicitly signals his acceptance of contemporary ideas about the importance of sympathy when he interrogates his implied slave owner by asking 'Do you never *feel* another's pain? Have you no Sympathy?' This is no mere throwaway use of the word but, rather, a deliberate and controlled deployment of the central intellectual concept of the discourse of sensibility, marked by the use of the word preceded by a precise definition. In a strategy used by many sentimental writers, he simultaneously castigates his villain for his inability to sympathize, while appealing to the reader for sympathy to be extended to the victim of this failure of sensibility. As sentimental writing, it ranks with the best Sterne or Mackenzie had to offer, while as sentimental rhetoric it is convincing and persuasive. Importantly, however, this is one of the very first times that sentimental rhetoric such as this had been used in a piece of political writing that sought to expose the iniquities of the slave trade. Sharp and Benezet's work was legalistic, rational, primitivist and pious, but it was seldom sentimental. Sentimental novelists, such as Sarah Scott in *The history of Sir George Ellison* (1766), had occasionally drawn attention to slavery, but novels are rarely explicitly political in the manner of a pamphlet such as *Thoughts upon slavery*. Wesley's arguments against slavery were not often original, but his major innovation was to introduce a sustained and concentrated sentimental rhetoric into the antislavery debate. Most of the many campaigners against slavery in the coming decades would, wittingly or otherwise, follow his example.