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Coordinates of Anglo-American Romanticism: Wesley, Edwards, Carlyle, and Emerson

Richard E. Brantley

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Constructing a transatlantic arc of literature, Brantley explores how John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards provide an empirical as well as evangelical framework for interpreting their spiritual descendants, Thomas Carlyle and Ralph Waldo Emerson. He finds that the four Anglo-American writers share a simultaneously rational and sensationalist reliance on experience as the avenue to knowledge. Wesley (1703-91), founder of British Methodism, and Edwards (1703-58), leader of the American Great Awakening, speak literally to experience in general, including empirical observation, scientific method and apprehension of God-in-nature and the Spirit. Their shared methodology, harking back to the epistemology of John Locke, aligns nature with grace and heralds the "empirical-evangelical" vision shared by Carlyle (1795-1881), the Sage of Chelsea, and Emerson (1803-82), the Sage of Concord. All four balance religious myths and morality with scientific reverence for fact. Brantley's earlier prize-winning work, "Locke, Wesley, and the Method of English Romanticism", explored the influence of Wesley's philosophical theology on British Romanticism. While reaffiriming the optimism of Romantic literature, Brantley here offers another, broader case study in the sociology of ideas. He demonstrates that the creative tension between empiricism and evangelicalism - the sparks that fly from coordinates on the arc - illuminates a noble, yet neglected, Anglo-American sensibility.

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