

full, but there is nothing more—not the slightest reference to the scenery or its suggestions. But the negative testimony of this meagre entry no more disproves the truth of the tradition than it evinces a lack of appreciation of the sublime prospect; while it certainly confirms the fact that the writer was out “on the extreme point of the rocks”—the very spot which so impressively suggests the idea of the extreme brevity of the present, “suspended,” as Chateaubriand has it, “between the past and the future.”* Mr. Charles Wesley’s entries in his journal were usually very brief, and they were rarely of a subjective or meditative character. He was at this time fully occupied with his evangelistic work, and, like St. Paul and his illustrious brother, “in journeys often.” It is not therefore at all surprising that he should omit to record either his impressions of the scene or its esoteric teachings. But the value of the testimony of oral tradition is not dependent upon the support of written evidence. If corroborated by circumstances, and undeniable, it is as trustworthy as written records, which may be as false as any merely oral testimony. To judge correctly in the present case, we have but to consider that we have before us three facts: 1. The contemporary record of a visit by Charles Wesley to the Land’s End; 2. The publication of the hymn, with the peculiar descriptive imagery in the second verse within six years afterwards; 3. The existence of an oral tradition, traceable up to a date within a few years of the publication of the hymn, distinctly connecting its composition with the visit to the spot so strikingly imaged out in it by the poet.

To my own mind the truth of the tradition is sufficiently manifest. It is just one of those cases concerning

* The passage is such a striking parallel to the verse of Charles Wesley, that I subjoin it here in full:

“L’homme est suspendu dans le présent, entre le passé et l’avenir, comme sur un rocher entre deux gouffres, derrière lui, devant lui, tout est ténébreux; à peine aperçoit-il quelques fantômes qui, remontant du fond deux abîmes, surgissent un instant à leur surface, et s’y-replongent.”—*Genie du Christianisme*, tom. 2. p. 159.

which Professor Blackie has well said that “The oral tradition of a whole people, confirmed as it often (and in the case before us certainly) is by existing circumstances, may be of such a nature that no person can possibly believe it to be a lie.”* It is not necessary to believe, as some good reverent, simple-hearted persons in Cornwall do, that Mr. Charles Wesley composed the hymn, or even a single verse of it, on the point itself, in the very words in which we have it before us to-day, though nothing is more probable than that the first lines of the second verse should, then and there, have rushed into his mind. Oral tradition is, from its very nature, inexact, and all that is claimed for it is substantial truthfulness—faithfulness to the main fact, the central idea, which, in this case, is the existence of such a connection between the visit and the hymn, that without the former the latter had not been.

It is curiously interesting to note, in Moore’s “Lalla Rookh,” a passage which seems an expansion of the couplet

“Lo! on a narrow neck of land
Twixt two unbounded seas I stand,”

causing some natural curiosity to know whether the lines of Wesley had ever come under his notice, and left their echo in his heart. Moore’s lines run thus:

“Who that surveys this spau of earth we
press,
This spot of life in Time’s great wilderness,
This narrow isthmus ’twixt two boundless
seas,
The past, the future, two eternities’
Would sully the bright spot or leave it
bare,
When he might build him a proud temple
there.”

On the other hand, we have in the fourth line of the same verse that which seems an echo or adaptation of a verse of Pope’s in his “Essay on Man,” where (Ep. I. l. 72) we find:

“His time a moment, and a point his space.”†

* Homeric Dissertations.

† Cf. also the striking lines of Wordsworth—

“Our noisy years seem moments in the being
Of the eternal silence.”