

## Research Article

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# An Anglo-Syrian Monk: John Wesley's Reception of Pseudo-Macarius

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**Abstract:** The article offers a methodological reflection on the history of the reception of the works of Pseudo-Macarius (second half of the fourth century AD) in the thought of John Wesley, the English theologian and founder of the Methodist movement. The survey of the state of the art is carried out looking for motives and trends in Wesleyan scholarship. Michel de Certeau's reflections on "reception" guide the analysis of the presence of Pseudo-Macarius in Wesley.

**Keywords:** methodism, hermeneutics, history of historiography, reception of early Christian texts

The reception of the *Homilies* of Pseudo-Macarius in the thought and writings of the English theologian John Wesley (1703–1791), the founder of the Methodist movement, is the perfect place to look for the hermeneutical potential and the difficulties involved in the reception history of an ecclesiastical author. The case for John Wesley's reception of the *Homilies* composed by an unknown author, probably a Syrian monk living in the second half of the fourth century, and attributed to Macarius of Egypt,<sup>1</sup> is very straightforward. Wesley quotes the English translation of the *Homilies*<sup>2</sup> directly a number of times and he includes a selection of the *Homilies* in the first volume of the *Christian Library*, his anthologies of readings proposed to the Methodist preachers. Therefore, the fact of Wesley's reception of Pseudo-Macarius is not questioned. However, taking a closer look at the vast array of studies dedicated to the matter, it is evident that this reception is a matter worth exploring, as it reveals postures and attitudes in Wesley's scholarship, which disagree strongly on the weight that should be given to Pseudo-Macarius' presence in Wesley. Then, I will suggest a definition of "reception" and the ways in which the reception of Pseudo-Macarius helps the understanding of Wesley's posture toward antiquity and the Church, with the help of a passage from Michel de Certeau's insights on "reception."

1 The Pseudo-Macarian corpus is a complex series of works, of which scholars have identified four collections. The most famous in the West is the so-called collection II, Pseudo-Macarius, *Die 50 Geistlichen Homilien*. Part of Collection II are also seven other homilies published by Macarius, "Anecdota." Two of the three remaining collections are edited: Collection I, in Makarios/Symeon, *Reden und Briefe*; and Collection III, in Makarios/Symeon, "Neue Homilien;" and Pseudo-Macaire, *Œuvres Spirituelles*.  
2 Haywood, *Primitive Morality*.

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# 1 The “Macarian problem” and its ecumenical roots

The starting point in the analysis of the “Macarian problem” in Wesley’s bibliography (namely, the presence of Macarius in Wesley as critically reviewed) may be located in Albert Outler (1908–1989), one of the most important Wesleyan scholars of the twentieth century, and one of the leading figures in American Methodism, who was deeply involved in the ecumenical movement, and an observer at the II Vatican Council. Outler’s vision of Wesley’s theology as a quadrilateral of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience became prevalent in Wesley studies. The coinage of the term “quadrilateral” served in Outler’s opinion to summarize John Wesley’s theological genius as rooted in these presuppositions:

It was intended as a metaphor for a four element syndrome, including the four-fold guidelines of authority in Wesley’s theological method. In such a quaternity, Holy Scripture is clearly unique. But this in turn is illuminated by the collective Christian wisdom of other ages and cultures between the Apostolic Age and our own. It also allows for the rescue of the Gospel from obscurantism by means of the disciplines of critical reason. But always, Biblical revelation must be received in the heart by faith: this is the requirement of “experience.”<sup>3</sup>

With these words, written in an article which re-examined the notion of the quadrilateral, Outler defended the validity of the image of the quadrilateral in understanding Wesley’s theology, stressing the role of the “collective wisdom of other ages” in the task of understanding Scripture, in other words, the role of the so-called “tradition.” Outler would thus describe Wesley as a “man of tradition.”<sup>4</sup> Within the framework of this emphasis on the role of “tradition,” he suggested in 1946, in the introduction of his *John Wesley*, the importance of the early Eastern church:

In the thought and piety of the early Church he [Wesley] discovered what he thereafter regarded as the normative pattern of catholic Christianity. He was particularly interested in “Macarius the Egyptian” and Ephraem Syrus. What fascinated him in these men was their description of “perfection” as the goal of the Christian in this life. Their concept of perfection as a process rather than a state gave Wesley a spiritual vision quite different from the static perfectionism in the Roman spiritual theology of the period and the equally static quietism of those Protestants and Catholics whom he deplored as “the mystic writers.” The “Christian Gnostic” of Clement of Alexandria became Wesley’s model of the ideal Christian. Thus it was that the ancient and Eastern tradition of holiness as *disciplined* love became fused in Wesley’s mind with his own Anglican tradition of holiness as *aspiring* love, and thereafter was developed in what he regarded to the end as his own most distinctive doctrinal contribution.<sup>5</sup>

I have quoted this passage in full because it shows clearly how important the impact of the writings of the Early Eastern Church and “Macarius” on Wesley’s thought were for Outler. This and other studies by one of the most influential Methodist scholars and theologians such as Outler opened the way for a plethora of studies on Wesley’s “Eastern connection,” with a clear ecumenical undertone. This important stage of Wesleyan scholarship has been critically outlined by Ted Campbell, a distinguished Wesleyan scholar and ordained Minister of The United Methodist Church. Campbell, who knew Outler very well,<sup>6</sup> drew attention on different occasions to Outler’s role in Wesleyan scholarship, his contribution “in rehabilitating the notion of “tradition” for Protestants, a contribution in which his patristic scholarship, his ecumenical involvement, and his work as an interpreter of the Wesleyan tradition all came together.”<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, he described the notion of “tradition” as depicted by Outler as “an alien concept to John Wesley himself” but at the same time “the most creative contribution that Outler made to contemporary Wesleyan

<sup>3</sup> Outler, “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” 11. Outler’s Quadrilateral has been contested by scholars from various perspectives; the idea of four different sources of theology has been considered problematic, and Wesley’s actual preaching of a similar set of ideas is very discussed. However, the quadrilateral remains a broadly diffused pastoral tools in Methodist churches. See Lancaster, “Current Debates Over Wesley’s Legacy Among his Progeny,” 312–5.

<sup>4</sup> Outler, “A New Future for Wesley Studies,” 47.

<sup>5</sup> Outler, “John Wesley,” 9–10.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Campbell, “Outler and the Heart of the Christian Tradition,” 119: “Outler served as *amicus curiae* (his term) to my dissertation committee.”

<sup>7</sup> Campbell, “Outler and the Heart of the Christian Tradition,” 113.

and Methodist self-understanding.” Campbell outlined clearly how Outler's prominent role in the academic, theological, and ecumenical fields interplayed in a stance that can be summarized with the title of Outler's address presidential address to the 1972 American Catholic Historical Association: “History as Ecumenical Resource: The Protestant Rediscovery of ‘Tradition’.”<sup>8</sup>

Campbell sought to redefine what Outler had categorized as Wesley's concept of “tradition” in his important monograph on Wesley and Christian antiquity<sup>9</sup> and in other writings,<sup>10</sup> looking for a contextualized understanding of this category in Wesley's time and works. Campbell defines Wesley's use of Christian antiquity as “programmatically,” a means of portraying a “model of belief and behavior”<sup>11</sup> set against his contemporaries' Christian life and as “a resource for the renewal and revitalization of the church.”<sup>12</sup> Campbell warns against the idealizing of the Early Church that tends to be involved in this method and he cautions his fellow Methodists not to seek in Wesley a “hidden path that leads to a secret garden of, say, Eastern Orthodoxy or Catholicism or even Anglo-Catholicism,” at the risk of denying Wesley's own complex roots, or overestimating his relevance for the present.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, Wesley's relationship with Pseudo-Macarius was studied as part of this trajectory of Wesleyan studies, which valorized antiquity and ecumenism, and which I have here represented in two major figures, Outler and Campbell. Outler's reference to “Macarius,” whom he, following Werner Jaeger's studies,<sup>14</sup> connected closely with Gregory of Nyssa, was followed by a number of studies interested in broadening Outler's intuition and its ecumenical intent with specific case studies.<sup>15</sup> These works showed in detail similarities and differences between Pseudo-Macarius and Wesley, in the approach typical of systematic theology, which looked at the theologian Wesley, who was understood to mirror the theologian “Macarius.” In the words of Randy Maddox, another protagonist of twentieth century Wesleyan scholarship, and who followed in the footsteps of Outler:

Macarius was clearly influential on Wesley, being cited by him in such crucial contexts as the issue of sin remaining in believers. Thus, it is no surprise that there have been fruitful comparative studies here-though fewer than one might expect. These studies have focused on two basic areas. First, there have been brief positive analyses of the shared synergistic implications of Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace and Macarius's general soteriology. Second, there have been more detailed-and strikingly contrasting-comparisons of Macarius and Wesley on the issue of Christian maturity or perfection. [...] Overall, the similarities are much stronger than the differences, particularly when one deals with the thought of the mature Wesley (which Outler has emphasized) and with the full range of Macarius's work (as the best secondary study has exemplified).<sup>16</sup>

Maddox speaks of *influence* and *similarities*, clearly reasoning in genealogical and morphological terms, and Pseudo-Macarius is here a voice among many other ancient Eastern writers who influenced what Maddox sees as the fundamental Eastern commitment of Wesley's theology. Maddox presented his complete vision of Wesley's theology in his successful volume, *Responsible Grace*, which synthesized in this formula the “Eastern” correction (“responsibility”) made by Wesley of the major Protestant soteriological tenet (“grace”). This reading of Wesley tried to solve the scholarly problem of the dichotomy between a “Protestant” Wesley and a “Catholic” Wesley, and it had a broad influence on Wesleyan studies. Maddox defended the inevitability of choosing an “orienting concern” in Wesley's theology against Kenneth Collins'

<sup>8</sup> Italics my own.

<sup>9</sup> Campbell, *John Wesley and Christian Antiquity*.

<sup>10</sup> Campbell, “The ‘Wesleyan Quadrilateral;” Gunter et al., *Wesley and the Quadrilateral*.

<sup>11</sup> Campbell, “The Interpretive Role of Tradition,” 73.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Jaeger, “Two Rediscovered Works;” Jaeger's estimate on the dependence of the Pseudo-Macarius on Gregory of Nyssa was soon reversed. Werner Jaeger was a brilliant philologist and Classical scholar.

<sup>15</sup> Wakefield, “La littérature Du Desert;” Ford, “Saint Makarios of Egypt and John Wesley;” Snyder, “John Wesley and Macarius the Egyptian;” Lee, “Experiencing the Spirit in Wesley and Macarius.”

<sup>16</sup> Maddox, “John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy,” 31. The best secondary study here referred is Dörries, *Die Theologie des Makarios/Symeon*.

presentation of it as a “conjunctive synthesis,” without a primary orientation; Maddox argues that even in Collins’ reading of Wesley there is a Protestant, orienting address.<sup>17</sup>

Kenneth Collins’ reading of Wesley is certainly one of the most important alternatives to that of Maddox. In this reading, the emphasis is on Wesley’s theological genius in conflating so many different sources (“which drew from Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Pietism, Moravianism, and Anglicanism”), which puzzled his detractors and made him capable of a truly “conjunctive” theology, a “distinctively *Wesleyan via salutis*.” The acknowledgement of this eclecticism includes the identification of Pseudo-Macarius’ presence in Wesley and the latter’s *appropriation* of Macarius:

The genius of John Wesley’s theology consists in his attentiveness not only to the issues of justification and forgiveness, like the sixteenth-century reformers, but also to issues such as the new birth and holiness. Indeed, Wesley not only appropriated the insights of such eastern theologians as Pseudo-Macarius and Ephraem Syrus, but he also, interestingly enough, had already considered the participation motif (redemption entails participation in the life of God) in the writings of “Castaniza-Scupoli, de Renty, Gregory Lopez [and] even William Law,” as well as in the writings of several German Pietists, August Hermann Francke in particular.<sup>18</sup>

In this passage, Collins treats Macarius as one of the many sources *appropriated* by Wesley, alongside many other sources, approving Campbell’s caution concerning Wesley’s use of the Early Church, and emphasizing Wesley’s “programmatic” estimation of it. Moreover, Collins underlined the rather disparaging comments made by Wesley regarding the Eastern Orthodox Church of his time, cautioning against an “Orientalizing” Wesley. In the same vein, Prof. Heizenrater, the General Editor of the Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley, emphasized the rather modest place of the Church Fathers in Wesley’s production (only four selections in the *Christian Library* out of the over 400 hundred titles published) and, following an article by Mark Kurowski,<sup>19</sup> the “de-orientalization” of Pseudo-Macarius made by Wesley, namely that “nearly every time Macarius mentioned a typically Eastern idea, Wesley dropped it out, even though it was present in the Haywood translation.”<sup>20</sup>

Therefore, the groundwork posed by the “Wesleyan Eastern Renaissance” of the 1980s<sup>21</sup> was followed by adjustment and reactions, which followed a clear and continuative trajectory. The focus in the “Outlerian” scholarship centered on the keyword “theosis.” This word condenses an Eastern doctrine which, in recent Finnish scholarship, has been used to read Lutheran theology, normally understood as paradigmatically “Western,” and is now also being used to understand Wesley’s theology.<sup>22</sup> The exploration of the presence of this notion within unexpected contexts continues to provoke scientific interest, as proved by the number of Ph.D. theses and essays dedicated to the subject.<sup>23</sup> One scientific approach that can be seen as a novelty in this panorama is the increasing interest in the Methodist phenomenon from the point of view of literary history, which has drawn attention to the strong presence of Methodism as well as other dissenting and evangelical movements on eighteenth century editorial market. Wesley’s exuberant and massive editorial enterprises are now understood within the context of a very competitive religious market, in which the reading, writing, selling, and distribution of books were an integral part of the Christian life of the faithful. In this sense, works such as the *Christian Library* are an important part of this rediscovery of the readings made by dissenters, Methodists and evangelicals of nonconformist,

<sup>17</sup> Maddox, “Prelude to a Dialogue.”

<sup>18</sup> Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley*.

<sup>19</sup> Kurowski, “The First Step Toward Grace.”

<sup>20</sup> Heizenrater, “John Wesley’s Reading and References,” 29. The Haywood translation was that used by Wesley.

<sup>21</sup> Campbell, “Back to the Future.”

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Christensen Michael and Wittung, *Partakers of the Divine Nature*. For a broad definition of the doctrine of theosis or deification, see Maddox, “John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy,” 39: “Participation, through grace, in the divine life. This participation renews humanity and progressively transfigures us into the image of Christ.”

<sup>23</sup> Walls, *The Influence of the Greek Fathers*; Ford, “A Pure Dwelling Place;” Nam, “John Wesley’s Editing of Pseudo-Macarius’s Spiritual Homilies;” Rackley, “Recovery of the Divine Nature.”

episcopalian, and Roman Catholic books.<sup>24</sup> This approach understands Wesley's editorial works, and therefore also the publication of Pseudo-Macarius, as part of a broader program for the education of the Christian people. The literary methodology could help in overcoming the divide in the theological field. In this field, as we have seen, many theologians, confronted with an enthusiastic stream of studies emphasizing the Macarian inheritance in Wesley, strongly reacted trying to minimize the role of Pseudo-Macarius.

## 2 The eyes of the beholder: The problem of reception

The reception of Pseudo-Macarius is, on the one hand, a clear-cut issue, a *fact*, but its scientific value is debated. There was a clear confessional and ecumenical value in presenting Wesley's Eastern inheritance, but does this value justify the accent posed on it?

In order to discuss the usefulness of studying the reception of Pseudo-Macarius for a better understanding of Wesley the theologian and the publisher, I would like to introduce into the debate the reflections on reception of Michel de Certeau (1925–1986) in one of his posthumously published works. The Jesuit intellectual's interdisciplinary skill allowed him to integrate fruitfully the history of mystical spirituality, sociology, psychoanalysis, and anthropology. I choose this specific approach in the framework of the broader field of theoretical studies on reception, represented in Germany by the group gathered around Hans Robert Jauss and in France by Paul Ricoeur and Certeau, as particularly clear and useful in this context, in that it stresses the creative aspect of reception and the “agency of recipients.”<sup>25</sup>

In Certeau's *The Mystic Fable II*, there is a chapter dedicated to “the work of Jean-Joseph Surin” as “being inhabited by that of John of the Cross.” It provides therefore a problem of *reception* and *tradition*, with I will present briefly here, with the aim to glean the insights provided by a seventeenth century-mystic of one of the sixteenth century for the sake of our study of Wesley's reception of Pseudo-Macarius. The case presented by Certeau is particularly appropriate since it pertains the reception of mystical literature, as it is in our case.

Certeau states:

[...] the understanding of one mystic by another implies a relation of difference and of continuity, but ultimately of *appropriation* (a term by which Gadamer defines hermeneutics) of the former by the latter. Is not the relation of the tradition with the books of the New Testament, or of the Christian experience with its “sources,” a relation of this kind?<sup>26</sup>

Thus, reading is appropriating: this postulation has penetrated New Testament and Patristic reception studies deeply in the latest decades, constituting somewhat of a keyword in describing the relationship between respective “sources.” As already seen, in Wesleyan studies this perspective has emerged strongly with Campbell, who was very careful in emphasizing the non-neutral perspective of Wesley in his use of antiquity. Certeau reminds us that this is somewhat inevitable.

Some lines afterwards, Certeau continues:

I will leave aside all question of *influence* here. That problematic risk being misleading, since it considers each work only by the aspect of it that concerns the other. This play of mirrors assumes that each work is what the other sees; it implies that one can judge their relation on the basis of what each has retained of the other. We would thus be led to recognize neither John of the Cross nor Surin, as the direct result of a scrutiny that takes in each work what is alien to it and never grasps it in and for itself. Only their publisher can place John of the Cross' *Complete Works* and Surin's *Correspondence* next to one another on the shelves on which it has assembled the monuments of its series “European Library.”<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> See Rivers, *Vanity Fair and the Celestial City*, which allows us to reconstruct the literary culture of different, competing minorities in 18th century England.

<sup>25</sup> Burke, “The History and Theory of Reception,” 25.

<sup>26</sup> de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, 98.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 99.

This caution takes us a bit further. Certeau admonishes about the risk of seeing an author as a “*result* of various influences, an experience that is reduced to its outside and its prior materials and that is ultimately nonexistent,” as he says a few lines later. This warning points to a specific weight, a *proprium* of the “author” that needs to be preserved. This is certainly in line with, for instance, Collins’ need to emphasize the unique contribution of Wesley’s proposal.

But how do we reach this understanding? Certeau provides an answer, saying that:

in order to understand how the works enrich one another mutually and how experiences (considered in each case in their own coherence and therefore in an essential difference with respect to others) are inscribed in a spiritual reciprocity, we must place ourselves deliberately in *this* or *that* specific place, i.e., open a particular volume, and not eliminate a priori in a work the very thing that constitutes it, namely, the fact that it *exists*. Thus, I take the *Correspondence* out of its box to inventory what is *said* about John of the Cross in the network of “correspondences” that weave the work and milieu of Surin. In other words, it is a question no longer of ascertaining what it is that *remains* of John of the Cross in these seventeenth-century Bordeaux texts, but rather of finding out *who* Surin’s John of the Cross is.<sup>28</sup>

Who was Wesley’s Pseudo-Macarius? This is the question that Certeau poses to the historians. It is a question more useful than the question of “what remains of” Pseudo-Macarius, and one that takes into full consideration the ever-active role of the reader, to understand the “spiritual reciprocity” that is established between the reading and the reader. Still following Certeau’s text, we read that:

Every reading (Surin’s, for example) reuses the text; it invents a meaning and it betrays earlier readings; it is docile to the received text, however, but in the mode of saying either the same thing in other terms, or something else in the same terms. It “receives” this and not that. In doing so it conducts a triage; it reorganizes, judges, checks, and verifies. It thus produces a different *version* of the text.<sup>29</sup>

The relationship between text and reader is a balance between forced docility and active choice of selection, resulting in a *tertium* which is something new. Moreover, the reading of spiritual texts poses a particular challenge, disguised as what Certeau calls an “illusion”:

Perhaps we should put in parentheses the hypothesis [...] according to which individual experience is *something we can apprehend* behind the texts. In reality, all that is readable of any given spiritual experience is what is received of it. And what is received of it at a given moment is one version of the text. Let us broaden the problem. All spiritual experience that expresses itself, the moment it is expressed, is “alienated,” so to speak, in language. First, it uses the words of others; it therefore is subject to the concomitant constraints. John of the Cross, Surin, or the man of today speaks only a language received from others. The words – and their laws – cannot be freely invented. They are “given” to experience, which does not exist anywhere else than where it is said. Moreover, that expression is submitted to an “obligatory passage,” namely, the triage and pressure of a group. Its only existence is by leave of the passport issued by the community in which it is accepted. Spiritual literature shows this in a thousand and one ways. [...] A spiritual writing gives only the “I” of experience taken in the “we” of a language; from this point of view, the author or the subject appears only as already subjected to the law of a community. This is what makes his experience into a language. Every writing is therefore of an “ecclesial” structure. Therefore the “primitive” experience is today, in our historiography, what we, for our part, “receive” and what we contrast with what others, in the past, have “received.”<sup>30</sup>

This passage is of extreme importance for our subject. The re-reading of Pseudo-Macarius by Wesley does not happen in a vacuum: it happened “alienated” in texts. Even what Heizenrater calls Wesley’s de-Orientalizing of the English translation of the *Homilies* of Macarius made by Haywood does not mean an “autonomy” from the “obligatory passage” of the “law of the community.” Wesley was subject to a law of the community, which, in my opinion, is here his mother-tongue, the language of the Church of England, in the broadest possible sense: its self-narrative, its modality of speaking of the self, the community, the gospel, and God. Wesley’s distinctive discourse can be negotiated only sometimes wrestling with and

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 99–100.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 100–1.



sometimes yielding to the readings of this mother tongue and all the other encounters with other actors of the same re-reading.

In other words, speaking more of reception than of influence allows us to freely address Wesley's re-reading of Macarius, and determine the borders of his portrait, without making the mistake of thinking of this relationship in terms of communicating vessels, looking for the leaks, what "remains" of the one in the other. However, the awareness of the linguistic nature of the exchange, in which religious experiences separated by more than a millennium are paralleled, also means the need to understand the religious atmosphere and the textual context in which this reading happens. In the case of Wesley and Pseudo-Macarius, this means a proper appreciation of Haywood's translation, the study of the Pietist appropriation of Pseudo-Macarius, the contact between Wesley and the Pietists, and, finally, the close study of Wesley's editing of the *Homilies* in the *Christian Library*. This, however, is not the appropriate place for this task.<sup>31</sup>

This "ecclesial structure" reveals, however, a problem, which emerged clearly in Maddox's answer to Collins, cited above. Every reading of Wesley, and of Wesley's reception of Pseudo-Macarius, has at its core a presupposition about what we can call the fundamental concern, the "axis" (as Collins does), the familial resemblance, the mother tongue. In other words, what does Wesley intend when he speaks of grace and freedom? The alternatives, especially in the matter of soteriology, are not many: in the history of Christianity, this alternative can be conjugated as Origen vs Augustine, Erasmus vs Luther, Arminius vs Calvin, Eastern vs Western, and all that stands in the middle, but the cards at play are more or less the same. Wesley would have read the *Homilies* with one of these options in his mind and on his tongue, and in this vein the modern interpreter will read Wesley. Finally, another problem is constituted by the fact that we, as historians, recognize in Wesley a starting point of something different, this time in ecclesiastical terms: the Methodist movement. Thus, in this case the temptation of projecting backwards the ecclesiastical history and doctrinal developments of Methodism into Wesley's interpretation is very strong. On the other hand, the practical nature of Wesley's theology, its pastoral inclination, and the constant evolution of his thought means the necessity of always contextualizing the assessment of his works.

What is the utility, in conclusion, of studying Wesley's reception of Pseudo-Macarius? Through Wesley's use and appropriation of the ancient Syrian monk's *Homilies*, we see a *translation*, a landfall on the English soil of words which are subjugated and adopted. This operation and its motives interrogate us on the mother tongue of the active subject of the translation, who translates with more or less effort depending on the malleability of the object translated, its greater or lesser distance from the translator. This translation, in other words, is favored by "something" in the object translated which simplifies the translation and makes easier, let us say, for Erasmus to quote Origen on salvation than for Luther, but not so strange, for instance, for both to quote Origen on the Trinity. The historian's task is to detect and describe the "spiritual reciprocity" between texts that can happen in the act of reception.

The spiritual reciprocity between Pseudo-Macarius and Wesley has been noted and detailed many times: Snyder, for instance, spoke of "the complex of ideas on perfection" of Wesley as "strikingly similar" to those of Pseudo-Macarius.<sup>32</sup> These similarities concern a vision of salvation as the restoration of the divine image; the recognition of the human free will, which synergistically strives to attain perfection; perfection as participation through love in the divine nature.<sup>33</sup> Snyder describes this similarity as Wesley getting in touch with a "tradition of teaching on perfection – a perfection ideal – that was Eastern rather

<sup>31</sup> Wesley's Pietist background is a very well-known subject; there are some important studies on the fortune of Pseudo-Macarius in Germany and in particular in Pietism (see Benz, *Die Protestantische Thebais*). Pseudo-Macarius was a favorite reading in Protestant circles that were attracted to monastic and eremitic life; the radical Pietist Gottfried Arnold published a German translation of the *Homilies* in 1715–6. Haywood's translation of the *Homilies*, which is the one that Wesley uses, has receives little scientific attention. My Ph.D. thesis, dedicated to the concept of progress in Wesley's *Christian Library*, through an analysis of the presence in it of Pseudo-Macarius and the Cambridge Platonists in the Library, tries to attempt this interconnected analysis of Wesley's reception; see Fallica, *Progresso*.

<sup>32</sup> And those of Gregory of Nyssa; Snyder acknowledges the debated nature of the relationship between Pseudo-Macarius and Gregory of Nyssa, but stresses the similarities between them. See Snyder, "John Wesley and Macarius the Egyptian," 59.

<sup>33</sup> Snyder, "John Wesley and Macarius the Egyptian," 56–7.

than Western, that reached back before Augustine, and that represented the high point of Eastern ascetical teaching.”<sup>34</sup> The central importance of the above-mentioned points in Wesley’s thought makes this connection all the more relevant. John English describes the valuable ideas which Wesley found in Pseudo-Macarius as such: “(i) the Christian is dependent upon the Holy Spirit at all times; (ii) persons of faith engage in constant prayer; and (iii) perfection in this life is possible,” but above all “his account of the Christian’s knowledge of God,”<sup>35</sup> in connection with the Macarian doctrine of *plerophoria*.<sup>36</sup> Scholars have signaled the similarities with Pseudo-Macarius in paradigmatic sermons by Wesley, such as sermon 85, *On Working Out Our Own Salvation* (1785),<sup>37</sup> and *The Scripture Way of Salvation*, which I will discuss shortly. Spiritual reciprocity between Pseudo-Macarius and Wesley is a given.

Therefore, my object here has not been to assess whether Wesley’s theological leanings are more Eastern or Western, in all the possible reformulations of these alternatives, but to point out the efficacy of a case study like this to reveal stances: Wesley’s and ours.

### 3 Macarius testifies for the children of God

How exactly did Macarius, fourteen hundred years ago, describe the present experience of the children of God! “The unskillful,” or unexperienced, “when grace operates, presently imagine they have no more sin. Whereas they that have discretion cannot deny, that even we who have the grace of God may be molested again. For we have often had instances of some among the brethren, who have experienced such grace as to affirm that they had no sin in them; and yet, after all, when they thought themselves entirely freed from it, the corruption that lurked within was stirred up anew, and they were well-nigh burned up.”<sup>38</sup>

In this passage from the 1765 sermon *The Scripture Way of Salvation* Wesley invokes the testimony of Macarius in his presentation of the “two parts of salvation,” namely, “justification and sanctification.” Having equated justification with God’s pardon and the new birth, Wesley describes the experience of the pardoned as imagining,

that all sin is gone; that it is utterly rooted out of their heart, and has no more any place therein! How easily do they draw that inference, “I feel no sin; therefore, I have none: It does not stir; therefore, it does not exist: It has no motion; therefore, it has no being!”

But the appearance of temptations and new sins soon discourage these believers. Wesley addresses them with Macarius’ words, which testify to the inevitability of this experience of sin. This naturally introduces the discourse on “the gradual work of sanctification,” the gradual healing and enabling of human nature to perfection. Therefore, sanctification is a constant process for John Wesley, with thanks to Macarius.

We find here some relevant features of the reception process: in the first place, Wesley’s call for testimony, a very old procedure in the history of Christianity, is intrinsically linked with the construction of “catholicity.” In fact, the revindication of catholicity is linked to the appeal to the authority of the ancients from all sides of the world, as support to the truth of the doctrines proposed. Second is the theological problem of the permanence of sin in the believer after justification. The cruciality of this point is seen in other sermons, such as sermon 14, “The repentance of believers,” which, in Maddox’s opinion, could also have been influenced by Pseudo-Macarius. The debated term, which Wesley could have taken from Pseudo-Macarius, is the “rooting out” of the sin, a terminology which could lead to thinking that a

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>35</sup> English, “The Path to Perfection in Pseudo-Macarius and John Wesley,” 61.

<sup>36</sup> The highest degree of faith, characterized by fullness and assurance.

<sup>37</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, indicates as the two probable sources of this sermon a homily of the Anglican Tilly and Pseudo-Macarius homily 15 (n. 7 in Wesley, *Christian Library*, 1, 108–10).

<sup>38</sup> Wesley, “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” 159.



sinless life is possible;<sup>39</sup> a statement refused through Pseudo-Macarius himself in *The Scripture Way of Salvation*. The fluctuations on this point, both in Pseudo-Macarius and Wesley, if can call into question a direct influence of Pseudo-Macarius, takes nothing away from the appropriation made by Wesley of the words and testimony of Macarius for his doctrine.

In fact, the words with which Wesley introduces the passage from Pseudo-Macarius in *The Scripture Way of Salvation* recall for us the presupposition of every theological adventure: the possibility of speaking from a distance, to jump over centuries and places, and encounter companions. Some companions are more suitable than others, and thus are appropriated for the journey; for instance, Wesley would always despise the all-pervasive presence of Augustine in the history of Western Christianity. The elusive experience of faith made by the Pseudo-Macarius is felt as similar and exemplary by Wesley and proposed to his readers. Certeau's pages help us understand how Wesley's Pseudo-Macarius, a Syrian monk who now speaks in the English of Thomas Haywood, is a version, domesticated and translated, of the original spiritual experience of the text, which is lost for Wesley and for us. However, this translated and appropriated version operates in the soil in which it lands, thanks to a spiritual reciprocity that overflows from the pages. To study Pseudo-Macarius' presence (namely, his textual occurrences) in Wesley and the latter's appropriation of Pseudo-Macarius' thought and figure does not mean to see Wesley as the result of the specific influence of the "East," impersonated by Pseudo-Macarius. Bearing in mind Certeau's reminder, we have stayed in Wesley's place, trying to understand what in the Pseudo-Macarius spoke to him.

Their spiritual reciprocity is thus clearer: Wesley's meta-textual appeal to Macarius pretends to speak directly with the ghost of Macarius, who is summoned back to speak of his experience. In this experience, Wesley's contemporaries can and must mirror themselves. Macarius testifies for the people called Methodists. To the historian, it remains the task of decrypting the séance.

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<sup>39</sup> Pseudo-Macarius homily 26 (14 in Wesley's, *Christian Library*).

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