

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF WILLIAM COWPER'S POEMS

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We hereby recommend that the thesis prepared under
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PREFACE

When I began my study of William Cowper, I was amazed and almost overwhelmed by him; the gentleness of his nature I mistook for effeminacy; his religious turmoils, for fanaticism; his desire for seclusion, for eccentricity. The more I read, however, the more fascinated I became. It was only after I had read his works that I began to understand him as a person. I learned that he was fearless in seeking the truth, that he believed in the integrity of his own judgment, hated insincerity and affectation, and genuinely loved his fellow man. I came to admire his regard for justice and his very real sympathy for the poor--their hardships and suffering--as evidenced in his letters and his poetry. His work served to elevate humble life to an honorable and stately place as poetic material. His love of freedom was apparent in many issues but was most startling in his desire to give the political freedom of Englishmen to all slaves everywhere and to give the freedom of Christians to all people held in spiritual bondage. It was clear that Cowper conceived of Christianity as a means for righting the wrongs of the world. It is unfortunate that he became so entangled in his own fears and doubts that his entire life was influenced by them.

Few men have been the center of more controversy than has William Cowper. His life is a pathetic story of a shy and timid genius who found the world of men too rough and who withdrew to nature like a wounded animal. The events in his life are few but remarkable. He was the victim of fear, doubt, melancholy, and madness. He was a man of fine taste, tender feelings, and plain sincerity; he wrote about the simpler things of life that interested and touched him. He has been called the most sensitive and morbidly serious of all the English poets. His position as the first English poet to champion the new missionary impulse extensively in his verse seems to be unchallenged. He is also known as one of the greatest of the English letter writers.

Scholars have devoted themselves to a study of this extremely shy and painfully fearful man. Definite reasons for his recurring seizures of melancholy and insanity have been sought and proposed but never established. In this study I do not offer any conclusions or reasons of my own concerning this psychological problem, although I am attempting primarily to study the background and organic structure of the poetry of Cowper. I show that his thoughts, words, and deeds were tinged with the feelings of self-doubt, the fear of damnation, the absence of salvation, and the uncertainty of the everlasting grace of God in his own life.

I acknowledge my debt to the biographers of William Cowper--Thomas Wright, Lord David Cecil, Lodwick Hartley, and Maurice Quinlan--and to the editors of the letters and poetical works of William Cowper. I am grateful to the librarians of Texas Woman's University for their courtesy and patience and to the committee members who read this thesis: Dr. Constance Beach and Dr. Gladys Maddocks. I wish also to express my sincere appreciation to Dr. Autrey Nell Wiley, whose aid and encouragement were invaluable to me.

Most of all, I wish to thank my husband, my children, and my steadfast friend for being my wastebasket-emptiers, my argument-settlers, and my sympathetic listeners, and for sharing their home and patience with a lowly researcher for such a long while. It was they who really made this thesis possible.

Juanita Mohon Helm

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CHAPTER I

THE POET SPEAKING

William Cowper, eighteenth-century letter writer and poet, was one of the links between Pope and the romantic revival, between the neoclassicists and the romanticists. In his early career he accepted the literary fashions inherited from the neoclassicists. Later, as for example in The Task, he was less dependent upon his predecessors; he delighted in nature and in homely characters; he was subjective and his classicism was modified by romantic feelings; nevertheless, he is usually regarded as more reminiscent of the classical age than anticipative of the romantic. It is these manifestations--feelings and ideas--literary modes, that this study of Cowper is most concerned with.

Cowper began writing poetry at Bath when he was seventeen years old. He found the heel of a shoe and began a poem about it. In a half-mocking, half-bantering tone, he adopted the convention of addressing Fortune and speaking of his Muse:

Fortune, I thank thee: gentle Goddess, thanks!
Not that my Muse, though bashful, shall deny
She would have thanked thee rather hadst thou cast
A treasure in her way; for neither need
Of early breakfast, to dispel the fumes
And bowel-raking pains of emptiness,
Nor noontide feast, nor evening's cool repast,

Hopes she from this, presumptuousness,--though perhaps
 The cobbler, leather-carving artist, might.
 Nathless she thanks thee, and accepts thy boon,
 Whatever; not as erst the fabled cock,
 Vain-glorious fool, unknowing what he found,
 Spurned the rich gem thou gavest him. Wherefore, ah!
 Why not on me that favour (worthier sure!)
 Conferrest thou, Goddess? Thou art blind, thou say'st:
 Enough! thy blindness shall excuse the deed.¹

In the first few lines he imitates; he follows conventions.
 He talks about the man who lost the shoe heel, then lapses
 into the conventional pattern once again. He illustrates and
 moralizes:

Thus fares it oft with other than the feet
 Of humble villager: the statesman thus,
 Up the steep road where proud ambition leads,
 Aspiring, first uninterrupted winds
 His prosperous way; nor fears miscarriage foul.
 While policy prevails and friends prove true:
 But that support soon failing, by him left,
 Betrayed, deserted,--from his airy height
 Headlong he falls, and through the rest of life
 Drags the dull load of disappointment on.²

Again in these lines we see the social and ethical ideas of
 the day; we recognize the old theme of fallen greatness; and
 we know Cowper is not attempting to develop a style of his
 own; he has something to say and he is trying to say it.
 This first poem written while he was still a student was an
 imitation of John Phillip's "Splendid Shilling." "Its easy

¹The Poetical Works of William Cowper, ed. William
 Benham (London: Macmillan and Company, Limited, 1924), p. 1,
 ll. 1-16. Because all quotations from the poems are from
 this volume, thenceforth it will be cited by the short title,
The Poetical Works.

²Ibid., pp. 1-2, ll. 36-45.

and finished rhythm suggests that it was by no means the only attempt of the kind."¹

After writing this first highly imitative poem, Cowper left Westminster and was articled to a solicitor, Mr. Chapman, of Ely Place, Holborn. Not far off in Southampton Row, lived his uncle Ashley Cowper and his three daughters. It was arranged that William should visit his uncle's household every Sunday. Before long he fell deeply in love with his cousin, Theodora, to whom he began writing love poems. Addressed to "Delia" and "Celia," these love songs are the record of his courtship. From the evidence of his verse and his letters, we believe that Cowper was deeply in love with Theodora. To all appearances, she returned his love. They quarreled often; they laughed and joked about the quarrels and reconciliations; and we see the poet as a gay young man, happily in love. He had cast aside all the doubts and fears of life that had assailed him before. He had changed, and the changes are evident in his works. In one of his poems, he reveals himself and, at the same time, keeps his seriousness blended with just the right amount of fun at his own expense:

William was once a bashful youth;
His modesty was such,
That one might say (to say the truth)
He rather had too much.

¹William Benham, Introduction, The Poetical Works, p. xxv.

Some said that it was want of sense,
 And others want of spirit,
 (So blest a thing is impudence,)
 While others could not bear it.

But some a different notion had,
 And at each other winking,
 Observed, that though he little said,
 He paid it off with thinking.

Howe'er it happened, by degrees,
 He mended and grew perter;
 In company was more at ease,
 And dressed a little smarter.

Nay, now and then would look quite gay,
 As other people do;
 And sometimes said, or tried to say,
 A witty thing or so.

He eyed the women, and made free
 To comment on their shapes;
 So that there was, or seemed to be,
 No fear of a relapse.

The women said, who thought him rough
 But now no longer foolish
 "The creatures may do well enough,
 But wants a deal of polish."

At length, improved from head to heel,
 'Twere scarce too much to say,
 No dancing bear was so genteel,
 Or half so d  gag  .

Now that a miracle so strange
 May not in vain be shown,
 Let the dear maid who wrought change
 E'er claim him for her own.¹

Cowper never forgot the hours which he and Edward
 Thurlow spent at Southampton Row; nor did he forget all the
 polishing, coaching, and enjoyment he had received under the
 able supervision of Harriet and Theodora Cowper. In a letter

¹The Poetical Works, p. 3.

to Harriet, written after she had become Lady Hesketh and dated April 12, 1786, he wrote:

. . . I did actually live three years with Mr. Chapman, a solicitor, that is to say, I slept three years in his house; but I lived, that is to say, I spent my days in Southampton Row, as you well remember. There was I, and the future Lord Chancellor, constantly employed from morning till night in giggling and making giggle, instead of studying law . . .¹

So far we have seen only the poet in love, but there is another side of this poet to be considered, a more serious or gloomy side. If we examine his early poetry closely, we find melancholy moralizing. One of his pieces he chose to entitle "The Certainty of Death," four-line stanzas totaling twenty-four lines in which we hear the poet say:

Mortals! around your destined heads
Thick fly the shafts of Death
And lo! the savage spoiler spreads
A thousand toils beneath.

In vain we trifle with our fate;
Try every art in vain;
And best we but prolong the date,
And lengthen out our pain.

Fondly we think all danger fled,
For Death is over nigh;
Outstrips our unavailing speed,
Or meets us as we fly.

Thus the wrecked mariner may strive
Some desert shore to gain,
Secure of life, if he survive
The fury of the main.

But there, to famine doomed a prey,
Finds the mistaken wretch

¹The Letters of William Cowper, ed. William Hadley (London: E. P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1926), p. 11.

He but escaped the troubled sea,
To perish on the beach.

Since then in vain we strive to guard
Our frailty from the foe,
Lord, let me live not unprepared
To meet the fatal blow.¹

We are aware of the conventional images in the first stanza of the poem; we know the conventionality of the wrecked mariner; but we cannot help feeling that Cowper used these conventions and the dark and hopeless-sounding words to convey to the reader his dreary and fearful outlook. Since an author may allow his emotions to permeate his works, is Cowper's poem on death an expression of an emotion that held him captive long enough to grow into a poem? Or does it express his personal opinion about death and the morbidity or futility of life? We feel that he is really speaking from his heart about a subject which is extremely real and terrorizing to him.

In one poem written later in this period, "Ode, Supposed to be Written on the Marriage of a Friend,"² we see a deeper note that reveals the poet at his sincerest:

Ah me! how long bewildered and astray,
Lost and benighted, did my footsteps rove,
Till sent by Heaven to cheer my pathless way,
A star arose--the radiant star of love.
The God propitious joined our willing hands,
As Hymen wreathed us in his rosy bands.

¹The Poetical Works, p. 3.

²Ibid., p. 10.

Yet not the beaming eye, or placid brow,
 Or golden tresses hid the subtle dart;
 To charms superior far than those I bow,
 And nobler worth enslave my vanquished heart;
 The beauty, elegance, and grace combined,
 Which beam transcendent from that angel mind.
 (Ll. 19-30)

The diction is conservative and conventional, but the reader, passing beyond the artificial language, believes the poem to be expressing Cowper's real and true feelings toward Theodora and toward love itself. The reader sees a lonely young man, wandering through youth, searching for some security.

The last part of this poem causes us to pause for reflection; we suspect that Cowper's conception of love was not that of the average sensual man. As we read, we see that he thought of marriage in terms of a mutual companionship. The lines express or suggest the courtly love convention; the poet is assuming a pose; the love is clearly spiritual love, not physical love; but the words reveal the poet:

While vulgar passions, meteors of a day,
 Expire before the chilling blasts of age,
 Our holy flame with pure and steady ray,
 Its gloom shall brighten, and its pangs assuage;
 By Virtue (sacred vestal) fed, shall shine,
 And warm our fainting souls with energy divine.
 (Ll. 31-36)

Do these lines explain, perhaps, the reason Cowper accepted his uncle's forbiddance of any matrimonial union between the two cousins? Do they explain, also, the reason Cowper never married even though he had several chances to do so in his remaining years? These words, conventional though they are,

might well be the clue to the future events of the young man's life.

A note of insecurity begins to sound as he writes to Delia in the lines "Written After Leaving Her at New Burns":¹

How quick the change from joy to woe!
How chequered is our lot below!
Seldom we view the prospect fair,
Dark clouds of sorrow, pain and care
Some pleasing intervals between,
Scowl over more than half the scene. (Ll. 1-6)

In another poem, "To Delia"² written after a minor lover's quarrel, Cowper says:

Happy! when we but seek to endure
A little pain, then find a cure
By double joy requited;
For friendship, like a severed bone
Improves and gains a stronger tone
When aptly reunited. (Ll. 19-24)

He was to have occasion to remember these lines in later years. All his voiced insecurities and doubts were to come back into focus as the friendships of his lifetime were severed and reunited, and some severed never again to be reunited.

His last poem, "To Delia,"³ reveals his final despair as he compares himself to a mariner:

The seaman thus, his shattered vessel lost,
Still strives to shun the threatening death;
And while he thinks to gain the friendly coast,
And drops his feet, and feels the sand beneath.

¹Ibid., p. 11.

²Ibid., p. 7.

³Ibid., p. 15.

Borne by the wave steep-sloping from the shore,
 Back to the inclement deep, again he beats
 The surge aside, and seems to tread secure;
 And now the refluent wave his baffled toil defeats.

Had you, my love, forbade me to pursue
 My fond attempt; disdainfully retired,
 And with proud scorn compelled me to subdue
 The ill-fated passion by yourself inspired;

Then haply to some distant spot removed,
 Hopeless to gain, unwilling to molest
 With fond entreaties whom I dearly loved,
 Despair or absence had redeemed my rest.

But now, sole partner in my Delia's heart,
 Yet doomed far off in exile to complain,
 Eternal absence cannot ease my smart,
 And Hope subsists but to prolong my pain.

Oh then, kind Heaven, be this my latest breath!
 Here end my life, or make it worth my care;
 Absence from whom we love is worse than death,
 And frustrate hope severer than despair. (Ll. 13-36)

Defeated, tired, the despondent old-young man of twenty-five has suffered much. Early, he lost his mother. Later, he was forced into a profession that he detested, he survived a fit of madness, he lost his best friend, now he has given up his love.

In these early poems we meet the young poet. We sympathize with him in his dilemma, but we are perhaps most interested in the cause of his melancholy, the loss of his mistress. In 1756, Ashley Cowper forbade the marriage of Theodora to Cowper for no recorded reasons. Gilbert Thomas suggests: "Ashley Cowper may have forbidden the union on the grounds of consanguinity. He may have been skeptical about his nephew's prospects. He may even have detected hints of

his latent morbidity."¹

William Cowper reacted to the ban against a marriage with Theodora: "Here end my life, or make it worth my care;/ Absence from whom we love is worse than death,/ And frustrate hope severer than despair" (ll. 34-36).² In spite of his expressed desire for death, life did not end when he wrote these lines (probably in 1757), and we cannot be sure that life was made worth his care. We do know that thereafter he spent much of his life in constant fear of death and in agony at the thought of being separated from those whom he loved.³ Gradually, he became a connoisseur of "frustrate hope" that, indeed, grew "severer than despair" as he watched and anticipated each day, each event, each hour, and wondered how he would rise to meet the next challenge.

The poet whom we have become acquainted with through his early poems is destined to become even more familiar to us. In 1752, the doubts, fears, and insecurities that we have watched him accumulate suddenly became too much for him to bear, and he was enveloped in madness. We know that he had melancholy fits at school,⁴ and the opening lines of his

¹Gilbert Thomas, William Cowper and the Eighteenth Century (London: George Allen and Unwin Limited, 1948), p. 68.

²The Poetical Works, p. 15.

³Thomas, p. 68.

⁴Lord David Cecil, The Stricken Deer (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1930), passim.

"Epistle to Lloyd,"¹ written in 1754, show that these fits had taken an intenser form:

. . . That, with a black infernal train,
Make cruel inroads in my brain,
And daily threaten to drive thence
My little garrison of sense. (Ll. 16-19)

His fear of poverty more than likely increased his anxieties and made matters much worse. In his "Lines Written under the Influence of Delirium," the poet reveals in agonizing Sapphics the torture he endured while he was insane:

Hatred and vengeance,--my eternal portion
Scarcely can endure delay of execution,--
Wait with impatient readiness to seize my
Soul in a moment.

Damned below Judas; more abhorred than he was,
Who for a few pence sold his holy Master!
Twice-betrayed Jesus me, the last delinquent,
Deems the profanest.

Man disavows, and Deity disowns me,
Hell might afford my miseries a shelter;
Therefore, Hell keeps her ever-hungry mouths all
Bolted against me.

Hard lot! encompassed with a thousand dangers;
Weary, faint, trembling with a thousand terrors,
I'm called, if vanquished! to receive a sentence
Worse than Abiram's.

Him the vindictive rod of angry Justice
Sent quick and howling to the centre headlong;
I, fed with judgment, in a fleshly tomb, am
Buried above ground.²

This dirge of despair with its note of finality conveys the impression that its author was beyond hope of recovery. Yet,

¹The Poetical Works, p. 9.

²Ibid., p. 23.

through the influence of Evangelical religion, Cowper was again to find pleasure in living.¹ In 1765, shortly after his recovery in the asylum at St. Alban's headed by Dr. Cotton, he wrote a poem called "A Song of Mercy and Judgment." In these lines we hear the recovered poet express the peace, comfort, and exultation of a soul reborn. We know by his words that he experienced a great and happy change when he was converted to Evangelicalism:

Me thro' waves of deep affliction
Dearest Saviour! Thou hast brought,
Fiery deeps of dark conviction
Hard to bear and passing thought.
Sweet the sound of grace Divine,
Sweet the grace that made me Thine.

Bound and watched, lest, life abhorring,
I should my own death procure,
For to me the pit of roaring
Seemed more easy to endure.
Grace divine, how sweet the sound!
Sweet the grace which I have found.

But at length a word of healing,
Sweeter than an angel's note,
From the Saviour's lips distilling,
Chased despair and changed my lot.
Sweet the sound of grace Divine,
Sweet the grace that makes me Thine.

"Take this bloody seal I give thee
Deep impressed upon thy soul;
God, thy God, will now receive thee,
Faith hath saved thee, thou art whole."
Grace divine, how sweet the sound!
Sweet the grace which I have found.

¹Maurice J. Quinlan, William Cowper: A Critical Life (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1953), pp. 55-57.

All at once my chains were broken,
 From my feet my fetters fell,
 And that word in pity spoken,
 Snatched me from the gates of Hell.
 Grace divine, how sweet the sound!
 Sweet the grace which I have found.¹

This poem leads us into Cowper's second period of writing, the period of the Olney Hymns (1779), which he composed in cooperation with the Reverend John Newton. Since Cowper was one of the most widely read of all the Evangelical writers,² acquaintance with the history and background of the Evangelical religion is essential to an understanding of the poet as he speaks during this period.

The term "evangelical" refers to the Gospel and its teaching. It is used by those Christian churches which emphasize the teachings and authority of the Scriptures, especially of the New Testament, in opposition to that of the church itself or of reason. It is also used in connection with certain movements in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which stressed the importance of the personal experience of guilt for sin and of reconciliation to God through Christ. It is with this eighteenth-century Evangelical movement that we are concerned. It is not my intention to set forth Cowper's religious principles or condemnations; for, as we know from his letters and his biographies, he was

¹Ibid., pp. 56-57.

²Ibid., p. 57.

very tolerant of other religions. His tolerance is shown in his friendship with the Throckmortons, who were Roman Catholics. It is my aim, rather, to show that Cowper was a certain kind of poet who wrote and felt a certain way. Like all men of any era, he was influenced by his times.

With the accession of the Hanoverian line, the church entered on a period of feeble life and inaction; many church fabrics were neglected; daily services were discontinued; holy days were disregarded; Holy Communion was infrequent; the poor were little cared for; and though the church remained popular, the clergymen did not perform their regular functions and duties. The church was regarded as subservient to the state; and it was treated by politicians as though its principal function was to support the government. The church was inactive in practical work, but it showed vigor in the intellectual defense of Christianity.¹

In 1739 a clergyman named John Wesley² began his devotion to evangelization. While he urged his followers to adhere to the church, he could not himself work in subordination to discipline; the Methodist organization which he founded was independent of the church's system, and it soon

¹C. Sydney Carter, The English Church in the Eighteenth Century (London: Church Book Room Press Limited, 1948), passim.

²Thomas S. Kepler, Christian Perfection as Believed and Taught by John Wesley (New York: The World Publishing Co., 1954), passim.

drifted into separation. Nevertheless, he did much to bring about a revival of life in the church. A number of the clergy were his allies, and these became the fathers of the Evangelical party. They differed from the Methodists in remaining in the church and working on the parochial system. The Evangelicals soon grew in number, and their influence for good was extensive. They laid stress on the importance of conscious conversion, giving prominence to the necessity of personal salvation rather than of incorporation with and abiding in the church of the redeemed. The Anglican Evangelist gradually drew off more and more completely from the Methodists. The church was active; the Sunday School movement, which began in 1780, flourished; the crusade against the slave trade was vigorously supported by Evangelicals; and the Church Missionary Society was founded.

After the Methodists had separated from the Anglican Church, their Evangelism was taken up by those Anglicans who were dissatisfied with the rationalism of their colleagues.¹ It was members of this group who powerfully impressed William Cowper; it was in their interests that Cowper played an important part in arousing the conscience of the country. Against this background, let us look at the author of the Olney Hymns.

Cowper first came into contact with the Evangelicals through his stay at Dr. Cotton's asylum for the insane.

¹Quinlan, p. 57.

Dr. Cotton was a man of deep religious convictions, a mild Evangelical, who wrote poetry and composed sermons in addition to carrying on a regular medical practice. For the first six months at St. Albans, Dr. Cotton's asylum, Cowper was filled with despair. He felt as though he were doomed, forever barred from salvation. After a period of time, he began to think that perhaps divine vengeance might be deferred, and some slight ray of hope permeated his being. This ray of hope grew into reality when he began to read the Bible which Dr. Cotton had left in his quarters in the hope that Cowper would find it, read it, and accept its promises. The reading of the Bible marked Cowper's recovery from despair.

Cowper remained at Dr. Cotton's for over a year after he was recovered from his seizure. His conversion profoundly affected his personal habits and tastes; he had no desire to return to London, which he regarded as a center of iniquity. We hear, in his poem "Retirement," his determination to find some quiet, remote, and peaceful home where he can meditate and be close to God and nature:

Far from the world, O Lord, I flee,
 From strife and tumult far;
 From scenes where Satan wages still
 His most successful war.

The calm retreat, the silent shade,
 With prayer and praise agree;
 And seem by thy sweet bounty made
 For those who follow thee.

There, if thy spirit touch the soul,
 And grace her mean abode,

Oh! with what peace, and joy, and love,
She communes with her God!

There like the nightingale she pours
Her solitary lays;
Nor asks a witness of her song,
Nor thirst for human praise.

Author and guardian of my life,
Sweet source of light divine,
And--all harmonious names in one--
My Saviour! thou art mine!

What thanks I owe thee, and what love,
A boundless, endless store,
Shall echo through the realms above,
When time shall be no more.¹

In these lines it is not difficult to see the poet's relief at not returning to London. Cowper did not merely wish to escape; he loved nature and the country, and he wanted to withdraw from the artificial world into one of tranquility. This message, however, is not confined to the period of his hymns; he shall hear it in later periods. We shall especially enjoy it in The Task.

In the hymns we hear the voice of a happy man. In "The Happy Change"² he says:

The soul, a dreary province once
Of Satan's dark domain,
Feels an empire formed within,
And owns a heavenly reign. (Ll. 13-16)

We hear the voice of the converted man in "Lively Hope and Gracious Fear":³

¹The Poetical Works, p. 37.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., p. 39.

I was a groveling creature once,
And basely cleaved to earth;
I wanted spirit to renounce
The clod that gave me birth.

But God has breathed upon a worm,
And sent me from above
Wings such as clothe an angel's form,
The wings of joy and love. (Ll. 1-8)

In another hymn, "For the Poor,"² we recognize the words of a man whose father was a minister, and a man who knows the Bible when we read:

When Hagar found the bottle spent,
And wept o'er Ishmael,
A message from the Lord was sent
To guide her to a well. (Ll. 1-4)

Some of his hymns suggest that he was more Calvinistic than is usually assumed, because he occasionally seemed to think of himself as specially chosen of God. He wrote in "The Hidden Life":²

To tell the Savior all my wants,
How pleasing is the task!
Nor less to praise him when he grants
Beyond what I can ask. (Ll. 1-4)

We hear the sermon of Cowper, the preacher, when he wrote in "Not of Works":³

Grace, triumphant in the throne,
Scorns a rival reigns alone;
Come and bow beneath her sway,
Cast your idol works away!

¹Ibid.

²Ibid., p. 38.

³Ibid., p. 42.

Works of man, when made his plea,
 Never shall accepted be;
 Fruits of pride (vain-glorious worm!)
 Are the best he can perform. (Ll. 1-8)

In "The Contrite Heart," however, Cowper begins to doubt himself and his faith:

The Lord will happiness divine
 On contrite hearts bestow;
 Then tell me, gracious God, is mine
 A contrite heart, or no?

I hear, but seem to hear in vain,
 Insensible as steel;
 If aught is felt, 'tis only pain,
 To find I cannot feel.

I sometimes think myself inclined
 To love thee, if I could;
 But often feel another mind,
 Averse to all that's good.

My best desires are faint and few,
 I fain would strive for more;
 But when I cry "My strength renew!"
 Seem weaker than before.

Thy saints comforted, I know,
 And love thy house of prayer;
 I therefore go where others go,
 But find no comfort there.

Oh make this heart rejoice or ache;
 Decide this doubt for me;
 And if it be not broken, break,--
 And heal it if it be.¹

He reflects this growing doubt in poem after poem. He is convinced of his sin, and he feels that he has suffered a loss of favor with God. In "Walking With God," he begins to brood and becomes morbid, and his morbid self-doubts show a strain of Calvinism:

¹Ibid., p. 26.

Oh for a closer walk with God;
 A calm and heavenly frame;
 A light to shine upon the road
 That leads me to the lamb!

Where is the blessedness I knew
 When first I saw the Lord?
 Where is the soul-refreshing view
 Of Jesus and his word?

What peaceful hours I once enjoyed!
 How sweet their memory still!
 But they have left an aching void
 The world can never fill.

Return, O holy Dove, return,
 Sweet messenger of rest!
 I hate the sins that made thee mourn,
 And drove me from thy breast.

The dearest idol I have known,
 Whate'er that idol be,
 Help me to tear it from thy throne,
 And worship only thee.

So shall my walk be close with God,
 Calm and serene my frame;
 So purer light shall mark the road
 That leads me to the Lamb.¹

His mind oscillates fearfully on the balance between assurance of salvation and assurance of perdition until his whole being reels and totters. In "The Shining Light" we hear:

My former hopes are fled,
 My terror now begins;
 I feel, alas! that I am dead
 In trespasses and sins.

Ah, whither shall I fly?
 I hear the thunder roar;
 The law proclaims destruction nigh,
 And vengeance at the door.

When I review my ways,
 I dread impending doom:

¹Ibid., p. 24.

But sure a friendly whisper says,
 "Flee from the wrath to come."

I see, or think I see,
 A glimmering from afar:
 A beam of day, that shines for me,
 To save me from despair.

Forerunner of the sun,
 It marks a pilgrim's way;
 I'll gaze upon it while I run,
 And watch the rising day.¹

Long before the completion of the Olney Hymns, Cowper was
 once more insane.

If we need to sum up what we have learned about the
 poet's religious life up to this latest illness, we may
 allow his hymn, "The Heart Healed and Changed by Mercy,"
 to speak for us:

Sin enslaved me many years,
 And led me bound and blind;
 Till at length a thousand fears
 Came swarming o'er my mind.
 "Where," said I, in deep distress,
 "Will these sinful pleasures end?
 How shall I secure my peace,
 And make the Lord my friend."

Friends and ministers said much
 The Gospel to enforce;
 But my blindness still was such,
 I chose a legal course:

Much I fasted, watched, and strove,
 Scarce would show my face abroad,
 Feared almost to speak or move,
 A stranger still to God.

Thus afraid to trust his grace,
 Long time did I rebel:
 Till despairing of my case,
 Down at his feet I fell:

¹Ibid., p. 33.

Then my stubborn heart he broke,
 And subdued me to his sway:
 By a simple word he spoke,
 "Thy sins are done away."¹

In this last poem we feel that Cowper has found redemption at last; he feels a certainty of forgiveness of sin; and he is assured of return to the grace of God. All his hymns tend to show a strong personal sense of relationship to God.

In these poems composed from 1767 to 1771, the poet is a troubled soul. His poetry is intensely and rigorously pietistic, and it seems always to be searching the mind and the heart. His progressive despondency, however, can be seen more clearly in his letters than in his poetry. In March, 1771, he wrote his friend, Newton, who was visiting in London: "If you find yourself hindered by an outside bustle, I am equally hindered by a bustle within. The Lord, I trust, will give peace of mind in his own time: but I can truly say for the most part that my soul is among lions."²

Peace of mind, however, was not to return. Instead, he became more despondent. Since leaving St. Albans he had become friends with the Unwin family, had moved with them to Olney, and had contemplated marriage with the widowed Mrs. Unwin, seven years his senior. As the time for the marriage approached, he became more harassed, and finally sank back

¹Ibid., p. 40.

²Josiah Bull, "The Early Years of the Poet Cowper at Olney," The Sunday at Home, A Family Magazine, 1866, p. 379.

into the depths of insanity. On New Year's Day, 1773, he heard his last sermon; the next day he was overcome by hallucinations. His devoted friend, the Reverend John Newton, pastor of the Evangelical Church at Olney, attended him every day, took him walking, and finally took the poet into his own home. Cowper recovered slowly and quietly. Mrs. Unwin, who was to have been his wife, never left his side. In May, 1774, he surprised his friends by suddenly agreeing to go home.

Cowper, however, did not renew his attendance at church services and prayer meetings. He devoted his attention to his garden and a variety of small animals: three leverets, several pairs of pigeons, a linnet, robins, a magpie, two goldfinches, a jay, a starling and canaries, as well as guinea pigs, dogs, and cats. His interest in these animals led him to carpentry; he built cages or houses for them. He built a greenhouse where he grew pineapples and other delicacies. He developed an interest in drawing; his pictures reflected the simple life around him; they showed nothing of the religious fervor that had marked his poems.

From 1774 until 1776, Cowper wrote little poetry, but he gradually resumed his letter writing. Late in the year of 1776 he gained another correspondent when Reverend Newton received a call to a church in London and accepted.

Although Cowper was desolate without his friend, the separation was fortunate. Newton, with his strong religious bent, felt that composition of secular verse was a worldly, time-wasting occupation. With Newton out of the way, Cowper was free to devote his talent in writing to whatever subject he wished. Mrs. Unwin, fearful of the effect that the loss of Newton as a friend and counselor might have upon him, persuaded Cowper to write a moral satire, after the fashion of Pope and other contemporary writers who were finding new subject matter in social themes and morals and manners. Cowper responded with "Progress of Error," which was followed rapidly by "Table Talk," "Expostulation," "Hope," "Charity," "Conversation," and "Retirement."

The short poems of this period are, for the most part, delightful in their simplicity, truthfulness, and revelations about the poet himself. In his "Ode to Peace" he says:

Come peace of mind, delightful guest!
Return and make thy downy nest
Once more in this sad heart:
Nor riches I, nor power pursue,
Nor hold forbidden joys in view;
We therefore need not part.

Where wilt thou dwell, if not with me,
From avarice and ambition free,
And pleasure's fatal wiles?
For whom, alas! dost thou prepare
The sweets that I was wont to share,
The banquet of thy smiles?

The great, the gay, shall they partake
The heaven that thou alone canst make,
And wilt thou quit the stream

That murmurs through the dewy mead,
 The grove and the sequestered shed,
 To be a guest with them?

For thee I panted, thee I prized,
 For thee I gladly sacrificed
 Whate'er I loved before,
 And shall I see thee start away,
 And helpless, hopeless, hear thee say,
 "Farewell! we meet no more"?¹

The tune is melancholy and plaintive; the voice betrays a soul yet filled with some despair; but the undertone is one of quiet satisfaction. In "The Shrubbery," written during this period, the poet speaks as a man who found nature a great source of pleasure and solace when his mind was not tortured, but tells us that nature could not serve as a refuge in his darkest moments:

O Happy shades! to me unblest!
 Friendly to peace, but not to me!
 How ill the scene that offers rest,
 And heart than cannot rest, agree!

This glassy stream, that spreading pine,
 Those alders quivering in the breeze,
 Might soothe a soul less hurt than mine
 And please, if anything could please.

But fixed unalterable Care
 Foregoes not what she feels within,
 Shows the same sadness everywhere,
 And slights the season and the scene.

For all that pleased in wood or lawn,
 While Peace possessed these silent bowers,
 Her animating smile withdrawn,
 Has lost its beauties and its powers.

The saint or moralist should tread
 This moss-grown alley, musing, slow;
 They seek like me the secret shade,
 But not, like me, to nourish woe!

¹The Poetical Works, p. 165.

Me fruitful scenes and prospects waste
 Alike admonish not to roam;
 These tell me of enjoyments past,
 And those of sorrows yet to come.¹

In this poem Cowper admires and loves nature, but his melancholy is so great that he cannot completely lose himself in nature or respond to it as he does in the later periods of his life when his mind is relatively peaceful. Perhaps in this period Cowper is trying to throw off his religious despondency and has turned to nature as an outlet. Many of his other poems of this time are also concerned with nature. In "The Winter Nosegay," we meet the poet as he picks a bunch of hothouse pinks in the middle of winter;² in "The Pineapple and the Bee," he observes a bee trying to light on a row of pineapples under a glass frame of the hothouse. The poet turns moralizer and compares the incident to man's temptation to search for or steal the forbidden joys of life.³

In these poems Cowper shows depth and breadth of sympathy and interest in all nature. He loved animals, birds, and all nature's creatures. We have only to check the index of a book of his poetry to prove this; better still we can note the many times he mentions birds, animals, and the other forms of wildlife as we read his poetry.

¹Ibid., p. 173.

²Ibid., p. 174.

³Ibid., p. 171.

Through his poems we learn that he loved the simple and gentle events of life. He was a shy and sensitive person. This does not mean, however, that he could not or would not rise to defend what he thought was right, as we shall see in the defense of the slaves, the Olney lace-makers, and other incidents.

When persuaded to write his moral satire, Cowper used the progress of error as the theme, not for one poem alone, but for virtually the whole volume. In "The Progress of Error,"¹ he reflected upon the world. We must remember that he, from his seclusion, had only brief glimpses of the world. Perhaps this, in part, accounts for his belief that the world was a corrupt place and that it was growing steadily worse. Of man in general he said:

Placed for his trial on this bustling stage,
From thoughtless youth to ruminating age,
Free in his will to choose or refuse,
Man may improve the crisis, or abuse;
Else, on the fatalist's unrighteous plan,
Say, to what bar amenable were man? (Ll. 23-28)

Of wisdom, knowledge, and learning he said:

Accomplishments have taken virtue's place,
And wisdom falls before exterior grace;
We slight the precious kernels of stone,
And toil to polish its rough coat alone.
A just deportment, manners graced with ease,
Elegant phrase, and figure formed to please,
Are qualities that seem to comprehend
Whatever parents, guardians, schools intend.
Hence an unfurnished and listless mind,
Though busy, trifling; empty, though refined;

¹Ibid., pp. 64-76.

Hence all that interferes, and dares to clash
 With indolence and luxury, is trash;
 While learning, once the man's exclusive pride,
 Seems verging fast toward the female side.
 (Ll. 417-430)

In spite of all the wickedness of the world and his reflection upon them, he does not entirely fail to insert an occasional note of optimism, as in:

Like trout pursued, the critic in despair
 Darts to the mud and finds his safety there.
 (Ll. 501-503)

Through this poem we learn that the poet could take some of life's evils for granted, but he continued his belief that man was an utterly depraved creature:

Thus men go wrong with an ingenious skill,
 Bend the straight rule to their own crooked will,
 And with a clear and shining lamp supplied,
 First put it out, then take it out for a guide.
 Halting on crutches of unequal size,
 One leg by truth supported, one by lies,
 They sidle to the goal with awkward pace,
 Secure of nothing but to lose the race.
 Faults in the life breed errors in the brain,
 And these reciprocally, those again.
 The mind and conduct mutually imprint
 And stamp their image on each other's mint;
 Each sire and dam of an infernal race
 Begetting and conceiving all that's base. (Ll. 556-569)

The poem ends with the voice of the poet as a preacher, making one last plea for man to improve his ways, and we hear briefly an echo of the poet, composer of hymns:

The Cross once seen is death to every vice:
 Else he that hung there suffered all His pain.
 Bled, groaned and agonized, and died in vain.
 (Ll. 622-624)

If we read "The Progress of Error" with the idea of finding a philosophical disquisition, we will be somewhat

misled. In the poem the poet expresses his opinion that gluttony, reading of bad novels, intemperance, card-playing and bad habits are the causes of man's error. In all sincerity he says, "He that hates truth shall be the dupe of lies." (L. 607)

The poems of this period contain traces of remaining evidences of the poet's Evangelical ideals. In his new poem "Truth,"¹ he laments the sinfulness of man:

Man, on the dubious waves of error tossed,
His ship half-foundered, and his compass lost,
Sees, far as human option may command,
A sleeping fog, and fancies it dry land:
Spreads all his canvas, every sinew plies;
Pants for it, aims at it, enters it, and dies.
Then farewell all self-satisfying schemes,
His well-built systems, philosophic dreams,
Deceitful views of future bliss, farewell!
He reads his sentence at the flames of Hell.
(Ll. 1-10)

He reminds us of the perfection of God:

Oh, how unlike the complex works of man,
Heaven's easy, artless, unencumbered plan!
No meretricious graces to beguile
No clustering ornaments to clog the pile;
From ostentation as from weakness free,
It stands like the caerulean arch we see,
Majestic in its own simplicity. (Ll. 23-27)

Finally, he tells us of the need of the propitiation of Christ:

When the great Sovereign would his will express,
He gives a perfect rule; what can He less?
And guards it with a sanction as severe
As vengeance can inflict, or sinners fear?
Else his own glorious rights he would disclaim,

¹Ibid., pp. 76-87.

He bids him glow with unremitting love
 To all on earth, and to Himself above;
 Condemns the injurious deed, the slanderous tongue,
 The thought that meditates a brother's wrong:
 Brings not alone the more conspicuous part,
 His conduct to the test, but tries his heart.
 (Ll. 551-562)

In "Expostulation" the poet speaks as a man who loves his country and is pleading with her to avoid the sin, and the consequent ruin, of the Jews.¹ Then in "Hope" his tone changes and becomes more pleasing and kindly. We hear the same voice as before, but it is softened by nature and the simple and gentle side of life.²

"Charity"³ is the poet's plea for mankind to adopt as a keyword or a goal the

Fairest and foremost of the train that wait
 On man's most dignified and happy state,
 Whether we name thee Charity or Love,
 Chief grace below, and all in all above. (Ll. 1-4)

When we read "Conversation,"⁴ we are captivated by the poet's lighter tone; yet we recognize the goodness and wisdom of the words of the speaker:

Though Nature weigh our talents, and dispense
 To every man his modicum of sense,
 And Conservation in its better part
 May be esteemed as a gift, and not as an art,
 Yet much depends, as in the tiller's toil,
 On culture, and the sowing of the soil.

¹Ibid., pp. 87-101.

²Ibid., pp. 102-116.

³Ibid., p. 117.

⁴Ibid., p. 129.

Words learned by rote a parrot may rehearse,
 Not more distinct from harmony divine
 The constant creaking of a country sign.
 As alphabets in ivory employ,
 Hour after hour, the yet unlettered boy,
 Sorting and puzzling with a deal of glee
 Those seeds of science called his A B C,
 So language in the mouths of the adult,
 Witness its insignificant result,
 Too often proves an implement of play,
 A toy to sport with, and pass time away. (Ll. 1-18)

Cowper's next poem, "Retirement,"¹ is a graceful and picturesque poem that allows the reader to gaze in longing or amazement at the place of retirement painted by the poet when he assumes his natural role of a gentle, peace-loving man who sees the busy world around him but has no desire to partake of its activities:

Opening the map of God's extensive plan,
 We find a little isle, this life of man;
 Eternity's unknown expanse appears
 Circling around and limiting his years.
 The busy race examine and explore
 Each creek and cavern of the dangerous shore,
 With care collect what in their eyes excels,
 Some shining pebbles, and some weeds and shells;
 Thus laden, dream that they are rich and great,
 And happiest he that groans beneath his weight:
 The waves o'ertake them in their serious play,
 And every hour sweeps multitudes away;
 They shriek and shrink, survivors start and weep
 Pursue their sport and follow to the deep.
 A few forsake the throng; with lifted eyes
 Ask wealth of Heaven, and gain a real prize.
 Truth, wisdom, grace, and peace like that above,
 Sealed with his signet whom they serve and love;
 Scorned by the rest, with patient hope they wait
 A kind release from their imperfect state,
 And unregretted are soon snatched away
 From scenes of sorrow into glorious day.
 Nor these alone prefer a life recluse,
 Who seek retirement for its proper use;

¹Ibid., p. 147.

The love of change that lives in every breast,
 Genius, and temper, and desire of rest,
 Discordant motives in one centre meet,
 And each inclines its votary to retreat.
 Some minds by nature are averse to noise,
 And hate the tumult half the world enjoys,
 The lure of avarice, or the pompous prize,
 That courts display before ambitious eyes;
 The fruits that hang on pleasure's flowery stem,
 Whate'er enchanted them, are no snares to them.
 To them the deep recess of dusky groves,
 Or forests where the deer securely roves,
 The fall of waters and the song of birds,
 And hills that echo to the distant herds,
 Are luxuries excelling all the glare
 The world can boast, and her chief favourites share,
 With eager step and carelessly arrayed,
 For such a cause the poet seeks the shade. (Ll. 147-188)

Many times in letters to his friends, Cowper spoke of his preference for the country and his fondness for retirement.¹ The closing lines of "Retirement"² summarize his purpose or message:

Me poetry (or rather notes that aim
 Feebly and faintly at poetic fame)
 Employs, shut out from more important views,
 Fast by the banks of the slow-winding Ouse:
 Content if thus sequestered I may raise
 A monitor's, though not a poet's praise,
 And while I teach an art too little known,
 To close life wisely, may not waste my own. (Ll. 801-808)

If we dwell for a moment on the poetry of this period of Cowper's first published volume of poetry, we find many hints of the future. The major poems of this period are called moral satires and were designed to praise the Evangelical moral principles and spread the Evangelical message.

¹The Selected Letters of William Cowper, ed. Mark Van Doren (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, Inc., 1950), pp. 44-47, 50.

²The Poetical Works, p. 162.

However, in them there are hints of the romantic poet, who will speak to us more vividly in the near future. In "Conversation" there are fewer Evangelical precepts than in the other poems; in "Retirement" there are indications of the excellent nature poetry that we find in the next period when he begins his long poem, The Task; he admits to us that religion is not so consuming and forbidding that it bans such enjoyable acts as tilling and cultivating the soil, painting beautiful pictures of the countryside, or contemplating nature.¹

As we go into the fourth period of Cowper's poetry (1781-1787), we carry with us lasting impressions made by the speaker. We remember the fox-hunting clergyman in "The Progress of Error," the sketch of Sir Smug in "Hope," the proser in "Conversation," or the ancient prude in "Truth."

At the beginning of this part of Cowper's life we encounter the influence of a woman, Lady Jane Austen. I do not wish to imply that the influence of Mrs. Unwin upon Cowper was slight. On the contrary, Mrs. Unwin was his lifetime friend and perhaps his greatest help in time of need.² But this new influence cast a glow of romance over his life that was to be far-reaching in effect. In the summer of 1781, while he was writing the last of his moral satires, he

¹Ibid., ll. 783-800.

²The Selected Letters of William Cowper, ed. William Hadley, pp. 155-156.

met the charming widow who was later to set off a chain of reactions in the poet.¹ For a description of their meeting, we turn to Cowper's "Epistle to Lady Austen,"² written in his last period:

A transient visit intervening,
And made almost without a meaning,
(Hardly the effect of inclination,
Much less of pleasing expectation,)
Produced a friendship, then begun,
That has cemented us in one. (Ll. 97-102)

Greater detail of their acquaintance need not concern us here; we need only to know that Lady Austen, having been an evangelical for several years, shared a religious bond with the sensitive poet. She shared the pleasures of outdoor life and the love and enjoyment of nature with Cowper and Mrs. Unwin. But most of all, her brilliant conversation and taste for verse made a definite place for her in our study.

Upon one occasion when low spirits overtook Cowper, she told him the story of an unfortunate London citizen who managed to become the victim of all sorts of strange happenings. Cowper was so much entertained and amused that he turned the story into a ballad, "John Gilpin." In this poem, speaking entirely as an entertainer, Cowper acts a new and singular role.³

¹Quinlan, pp. 125-135.

²The Poetical Works, p. 339.

³Ibid., pp. 306-309.

Lady Austen's next successful attempt to get Cowper to write brought him his great poem and his second published volume. She had often begged him to try writing in blank verse. One day, he agreed to write if she would furnish the subject. She suggested writing about the sofa. The result was The Task.¹ The poem rambles on from topic to topic to the extent of nearly five thousand lines. In these lines we hear and come to know best, the real poet.

We know that Cowper began the poem to please Lady Austin; he had no definite purpose in mind. Knowing this, we admire him for rising to meet such a challenge. We have not read far into the first book of this poem before we discover the gallant or, perhaps, grateful poet, who pays tribute to Mrs. Unwin:

And witness, dear companion of my walks,
Whose arm this twentieth winter I perceive
Fast locked in mine, with pleasure such as love,
Confirmed by long experience of thy worth
And well-tried virtues, could alone inspire,
Witness a joy that thou hast doubled long.
Thy knowest my praise of nature most sincere,
And that my raptures are not conjured up
To serve occasions of poetic pomp,
But genuine, and art partner of them all.
How often upon yon eminence our pace
Has slackened to a pause, and we have borne
The ruffling wind, scarce conscious that it blew,
While admiration feeding at the eye,
And still unsated, dwelt upon the scene.
Thence with what pleasure have we just discerned
The distant plow slow moving, and beside
His laboring team, that swerved not from the track,
The sturdy swain diminished to a boy. (L1. 144-162)

¹Ibid., pp. 183-285.

Though few now taste thee unimpaired and pure,
 Thou art the nurse of Virtue. (Ll. 41-48)

And in the beginning of "The Winter Evening" we hear the poet say, "Now stir the fire, and close the shutters fast" (l. 36), and we feel secure and warm as we compare our evening at the fireside with the bustling activity of an evening in the city.

Though in seclusion, Cowper proves that he kept up with world happenings (ll. 235-254); in the evening he read a folio of four pages" (l. 50 in "The Winter Morning Walk"); he wrote of the Bastille with prophetic insight more than five years before the fateful July 14, 1789 (ll. 389-392); in "The Time-Piece" he kept up with the events of the French Revolution, and he had definite views and opinions concerning the turmoil (ll. 263-265); he expressed himself on the issue of East Indian patronage in "The Sofa" (ll. 736-738) and in "The Winter Evening" (ll. 28-30); he took great interest in the social conditions around him.

If we listen, in "The Winter Walk at Noon," we can hear the voice of the poet expressing a tenderness toward all living things:

I would not enter on my list of friends
 (Though graced with polished manners and fine sense,
 Yet wanting sensibility) the man
 Who needlessly sets foot upon a worm. (Ll. 560-563)

We can hear his sympathy with the weak and oppressed. This may well be illustrated by his humanitarian attitude toward

the slave question. He spoke out strongly in his poem, "Charity." Again, in The Task he returned to the attack. When the subject of the slave trade was engaging the attention of the government in 1788 and 1789, he was among the foremost in the attempt to influence public opinion on behalf of the Negroes. In the second book of The Task he wrote:

I would not have a slave to till my ground,
To carry me, to fan me while I sleep
And tremble, when I wake, for all the wealth
That sinews bought and sold have earned. (Ll. 29-32)

His sympathetic nature is evidenced in the fourth book of The Task when his heart goes out to the poor, enduring the rigor of the winter night (ll. 374-406). He abhorred the plight of the Olney lace-makers and wrote about their destitution in "Truth,"¹ and, trying to get social conditions in the town improved, in "The Winter Evening"² he wrote:

Pass where we may, through city or through town,
Village or hamlet, of this merry land,
Though lean and beggared, every twentieth pace
Conducts the unguarded nose to such a whiff
Of stale debauch, forth issuing from the styes
That law has licenses, as makes temperance reel.
(Ll. 466-471)

It would not be erroneous to propose that Cowper did for Olney and the vicinity what Wordsworth was later to do for the Lake District. He described the countryside and the people so minutely that the reader feels a sense of belonging

¹Ibid., p. 82, ll. 317-322.

²Ibid., pp. 240-241.

as we read the lines of The Task. In "The Winter Walk at Noon," we recognize the common "overgrown with fern, and rough with prickly goss"; we are familiar with the wilderness at Weston (ll. 149-151) and we can form an accurate mental image of the poet's greenhouse, his garden, the sounds around him; we can sense his true love of nature by the way he speaks to us. We realize that it was his power of graphically and faithfully depicting the scenes and objects with which he was in daily communion that made him so important a figure in the Romantic Revival.

Time permitting, we could learn much about William Cowper from a detailed study of his second published volume, The Task. He was a man of intrigue and pathos. His changing moods and his nervous disposition lead the reader to explore and delve into the deepest and darkest recesses of his writings. The Task is all about himself. He takes us into his confidence, and we long to listen to his pleasant conversation, his interesting views; and the revelations he makes are all about himself. Much of this pleasantry is lost in his later writings.

The fifth and last division of Cowper's works is characterized by a growing despair of life and doubts and uncertainties about religion. These do not appear suddenly; they are steps in a slow process. As soon as Cowper completed The Task in 1784, he decided to publish it and include in the

published volume his "John Gilpin" and a second poem entitled "Tirocinium."¹ The last is a satire that has been customarily referred to as an attack on public schools. It was inspired by Cowper's meditation upon his childhood. His return to early memories may or may not have led him to dejection. Biographers agree that his school days in early childhood were unhappy, but his days at Westminster, as we have already seen, appear to have been fairly normal and pleasurable. Throughout the poem we hear the poet pleading with fathers to realize their responsibilities and exercise their duties to their sons. His tone is wistful when he describes what he feels a true father should be. He realizes the public school system has changed, and he blames the parents, especially the fathers, for its decline. It would be necessary here to quote the entire poem to show the many poses of the poet. Not only the lines but the message between the lines is necessary for complete meaning and understanding of the poet's message as he speaks.

With a few minor allowances, this protest and criticism of public schools might have been written in modern times. Cowper makes some good points that are applicable today. He sees many of the moral dangers in public school education; he realizes that the school is responsible for the competitive spirit that lies at the root of many social

¹Ibid., pp. 288-306.

evils; and he shows his feelings toward men who climb into responsible positions through their friendships and connections formed at school.¹

Three or four days after finishing "Tirocinium," while he was suffering an attack of melancholy Cowper began a translation of Homer as a diversion. Each time he had an attack, he turned to his translating. Soon he took up the work as regular employment. It was during this uncertain period of his life that he composed the poems that reveal him as one who believed that he was vainly seeking communion with God, and was destined to have no comfort in life. In his "Lines to the Reverend Mr. Newton,"² he wrote:

That ocean you late surveyed,
Those rocks I too have seen,
But I afflicted and dismayed,
You tranquil and serene.

Your sea of trouble you have past,
And found the peaceful shore;
I, tempest-tossed, and wrecked at last,
Come home to port no more. (Ll. 1-8)

In "Song of Peace," we know the poet's despair:

No longer I follow a sound;
No longer a dream I pursue;
Oh Happiness! not to be found,
Unattainable treasure, adieu!

I have sought thee in splendour and dress,
In the regions of pleasure and taste;
I have sought thee, and seemed to possess,
But have proved thee a vision at last.

¹Thomas, p. 63.

²The Poetical Works, p. 328.

An humble ambition and hope
 The voice of true Wisdom inspires;
 'Tis sufficient, if Peace be the scope,
 And the summit of all our desires.

Peace may be the lot of the mind
 That seeks it in meekness and love;
 But rapture and bliss are confined
 To the gloried spirit above.¹

We hear the occasional voice of the lover of nature rising out of depression and viewing life in gayer terms. We meet a saddened man who turns to childhood memories and recollections when we read "On the Receipt of My Mother's Picture out of Norfolk."² Once more, we hear the voice of the poet speaking out against slavery;³ we hear the tender and appreciative poet who pays the highest tribute to his dearest friend and companion in "My Mary"⁴ and his sonnet called "To Mrs. Unwin."⁵ With warm and tender words Cowper pays tributes to his friends in the poems written during this last period. We do not doubt the sincerity of his phrases; we are deeply impressed.

In his poem, "The Yardley Oak," he compares man's slowly ebbing life with the life of the oak tree. Just as man is slowly being reduced from his present state to

¹Ibid., p. 347.

²Ibid., pp. 321-322.

³Ibid., pp. 361-363.

⁴Ibid., pp. 395-396.

⁵Ibid., p. 390.

nothingness, so is the great tree being destroyed by time and the elements. The sole support of the aged tree is its strong roots; so it is also with man and with a kingdom.¹

Cowper, like the great Yardley Oak that withstood many of life's ills and man's cruel abuses, suffered much at the mercy of his own tormented mind. At last, he fell into unutterable despair. In his last original poem, "The Cast-away,"² we hear the poet's voice of despair:

Obscurest night involved the sky,
The Atlantic billows roared,
When such a destined wretch as I
Washed headlong from on board,
Of friends, of hope, of all bereft,
His floating home forever left.

No braver chief could Albion boast
Than he with whom he went,
Nor ever ship left Albion's coast
With warmer wishes sent.
He loved them both, but in vain,
Nor him beheld, nor her again.

Not long beneath the whelming brine,
Expert to swim he lay;
Nor soon he felt his strength decline,
Or courage die away;
But wage with death a lasting strife,
Supported by desire of life.

He shouted: nor his friends had failed
To check the vessel's course,
But so the furious blast prevailed,
That, pitiless perforce,
They left their outcast mate behind,
And scudded still before the wind.

Some succor yet they could afford;
And such as storms allow,

¹Ibid., pp. 380-383.

²Ibid., p. 400.

The cask, the coop, the floated cord,
 Delayed not to bestow.
 But he (they knew) nor ship nor shore,
 Whate'er they have, should visit more.

Nor, cruel as it seemed, could he
 Their haste himself condemn,
 Aware that flight, in such a sea,
 Alone could rescue them;
 Yet bitter felt it still to die
 Deserted, and his friends so nigh.

He long survives, who lives an hour
 In ocean, self-upheld;
 And so long he, with unspent power,
 His destiny repelled;
 And ever, as the minutes flew,
 Entreated help, or cried "Adieu!"

At length, his transient respite past,
 His comrades, who before
 Had heard his voice in every blast,
 Could catch the sound no more:
 For then, by toil subdued, he drank
 The stifling wave, and then he sank.

No poet wept him; but the page
 Of narrative sincere,
 That tells his name, his worth, his age,
 Is wet with Anson's tear:
 And tears by bards or heroes shed
 Alike immortalize the dead.

I therefore purpose not, or dream,
 Descanting on his fate,
 To give the melancholy theme
 A more enduring date:
 But misery still delights to trace
 Its semblance in another's case.

No voice divine the storm allayed,
 No light propitious shone,
 When, snatched from all effectual aid,
 We perished, each alone:
 But I beneath a rougher sea,
 And whelmed in deeper gulfs than he.

The poet spoke no more.

CHAPTER II

CONNOTATION THROUGH ALLUSION IN COWPER'S POETRY

Cowper adds to the connotative meanings of his poetry through the use of allusion. The associational meanings and feelings of the allusions add to the richness and emotional intensity of his subject. The effectiveness of the allusions as connotative devices depends upon their drawing upon the reader's intellectual background and upon their causing him to use his constructive imagination. The three kinds of allusions which concern us most in this study may be identified according to source: the Biblical, the mythological, and the historical. These allusions, as used, are both a challenge to the reader's background and an illustration of the extensive background upon which the poet drew for inspiration and subject matter.

Being a member of a deeply religious and ministerial family, Cowper knew the Bible. As a product of the schools of the eighteenth century, he was acquainted with the classical writers and with history; and as a sensitive member of eighteenth century society, he took considerable interest in public affairs and current events. From the composition of his first poem, "Verses Written at Bath" (1748), to his last

original poem, "The Castaway" (1800), the Biblical allusions outnumber the mythological and historical allusions, respectively.

In 1763, while recovering from a fit of madness, Cowper composed "Lines Written Under the Influence of Delirium."¹ In this poem his Biblical allusions begin. He believes himself

Damned below Judas; more abhorred than he was,
Who for a few pence sold his holy Master! (Ll. 5-6)

Through this allusion we know how miserable he must have felt in his madness and throughout his slow recovery. Judas Iscariot, the man who betrayed Jesus, was the lowest of the low; if Cowper was "damned below Judas," he felt he had no place to go, no one to turn to. His hopeless plight was like Abiram's:

Weary, faint, trembling with a thousand terrors,
I'm called, if vanquished! to receive a sentence
Worse than Abiram's. (Ll. 14-16)

Dejected and melancholy, he intended for his reader to recall Abiram, the son of Eliab, one of the revolters against Moses. Abiram and his friends, followers, and leaders were punished when the Lord made the earth "open up her mouth and swallow them."² In the last verse of "Lines Written Under the Influence of Delirium,"³ the poet showed his utter despair:

¹The Poetical Works, p. 23.

²Num. 16: 1-50.

³The Poetical Works, p. 23.

Him the vindictive rod of angry justice
Sent quick and howling to the centre headlong;
I, fed with judgment, in a fleshly tomb, am
Buried above ground. (Ll. 17-20)

In "fed with judgment," he alludes to the story of the shepherds who fed themselves, but not their flocks. The Lord said He would seek out and care for the flocks and in doing so would take away the food of the shepherds.¹ Cowper compares himself to the shepherds; he feels his chance of being taken back into grace to be small indeed. He feels that the fate of the shepherds is synonymous with his own.

After his conversion in 1764, Cowper's writings become markedly different from his previous work, as can readily be seen in one of his hymns, "The Lord Will Provide." He expresses hope and faith and gladness in

The saints should never be dismayed,
Nor sink in hopeless fear;
For when they least expect his aid,
The Saviour will appear.

This Abraham found; he raised the knife;
God saw and said, "Forbear!
Yon ram shall yield his meaner life;
Behold the victim there."

Once David seemed Saul's certain prey;
But hark! the foe's at hand;
Saul turns his arms another way,
To save the invaded land.

When Jonah sunk beneath the wave,
He thought to rise no more;
But God prepared a fish to save,
And bear him to the shore.

¹Ezek. 34:15.

Blest proofs of power and grace divine,
 That meet us in his word!
 May every deep-felt care of mine
 Be trusted with the Lord.

Wait for his seasonable aid,
 And though it tarry, wait;
 The promise may be long delayed,
 But cannot come too late.¹

In this poem, Cowper uses three Biblical allusions referring to the story of Abraham,² the struggle between David and Saul,³ and Jonah and the whale.⁴ In each, the Savior comes to the aid of people in trouble. To Cowper these are omens that he can safely trust "every deep-felt care" to the Lord and surely wait His "seasonable aid." A man's faith will see him through all trials and tribulations to glory and salvation.

In another hymn of this type, "The Lord My Banner," Cowper again uses the story of David⁵ to prove that everything man possesses, everything that man gains, is gained through God. He asks:

By whom was David taught
 To aim the deadly blow,
 When he and Goliath fought,
 And laid the Gittite low?
 Nor sword nor spear the stripling took,
 But chose a pebble from the brook.

¹The Poetical Works, p. 24.

²Gen. 22: 1-24.

³I Sam. 9-31.

⁴I Sam. 24: 1-22.

⁵Exod. 17:15.

'Twas Israel's God and King
 Who sent him to the fight;
 Who gave him strength to sling,
 And skill to aim aright.
 Ye feeble saints, your strength endures,
 Because young David's God is yours.

Who ordered Gideon forth
 To storm the invaders' camp,
 With arms of little worth,
 A pitcher and a lamp?
 The trumpets made his coming known,
 And all the host was overthrown.

Oh! I have seen the day,
 When with a single word,
 God helping me to say,
 "My trust is in the Lord,"
 My soul hath quelled a thousand foes,
 Fearless of all that could oppose.

But unbelief, self-will,
 Self-righteousness, and pride,
 How oft do they steal
 My weapons from my side!
 Yet David's Lord, and Gideon's friend,
 Will help his servant to the end.¹

Unswerving trust in the Lord is expressed. In spite of
 "unbelief, self-will,/Self-righteousness, and pride" David's
 Lord in the end will provide, chart the course.

In "Exhortation to Prayer,"² Cowper endeavors to
 prove the efficacy of prayer:

Prayer makes the darkened cloud withdraw,
 Prayer climbs the ladder Jacob saw,
 Gives exercise to faith and love,
 Brings every blessing from above. (Ll. 5-8)

¹The Poetical Works, p. 25.

²Ibid., p. 32.

Jacob's ladder, in this instance, comes from the Biblical story of Jacob and Esau. Jacob dreamed he saw a ladder set up on the earth; the top of it reached to Heaven and he saw the angels of God ascending and descending on it.¹ If Jacob's ladder reached all the way to heaven and prayer could climb the ladder, then prayers are certain to reach heaven if we offer them.

In the fourth stanza of "Exhortation to Prayer,"² Cowper wrote:

While Moses stood with arms spread wide,
Success was found on Israel's side. (Ll. 13-14)

The allusion here is to the crossing of the Red Sea by Moses. As the story in the Bible is told, Moses, leading the children out of bondage in Egypt, was pursued by the Pharoah, the Egyptian king. The Israelites were trapped against the Red Sea when the Lord appeared to Moses, told him to stretch out his hands over the sea, and then rolled back the waters for the Israelites a safe path across the sea.³ The almost impossible, the dividing of a sea to save a people, was accomplished through faith and prayer.

Cowper's hymns are replete with Biblical allusions. In "Lively Hope and Gracious Fear,"⁴ he expresses his joy at

¹Gen. 28: 1-22.

²The Poetical Works, p. 32.

³Exod. 14: 1-31.

⁴The Poetical Works, p. 39.

being converted when he says:

With these to Pisgah's top I fly;
And there delighted stand,
To view beneath a shining sky
The spacious promised land. (Ll. 9-12)

His renewed hope and confidence and his faith in God have given him wings, and he feels that he can fly to "Pisgah's top" and view "the promised land." The Bible states that Moses saw the Promised Land from Pisgah, a mountain range in the Near East.¹

In "For the Poor,"² Cowper again makes a plea for his fellow men to give up their wicked ways and take their burdens to the Lord. He points out the things the Lord has done for others:

When Hagar found the bottle spent,
And wept o'er Ishmael,
A message from the Lord was sent
To guide her to a well.

Should not Elijah's cake and cruse
Convince us at this day,
A gracious God will not refuse
Provisions by the way. (Ll. 1-8)

Two allusions are used in these verses. Hagar, the Egyptian concubine of Abraham, and her son, Ishmael, were driven into the desert where they wandered for days as outcasts and almost perished with thirst. When Hagar cried to God, the Lord sent an angel to direct her to a well.³ Elijah, hiding from his

¹Deut. 34:1.

²The Poetical Works, p. 39.

³Gen. 21: 9-21.

enemy, Ahab, was supplied "cake and cruse" by a poor widow whose supplies never failed through the Lord's provision.¹ In this poem Cowper is promising eternal love and care from the Savior; the allusions prove his point that the Lord provides for those who are His own.

Varied in theme, the Olney Hymns reflect Cowper's feelings about his religious life. Through them, the changes of mood, tone, mental and physical well-being of the author can be noted. His prayers, his pleas, his sermons, reveal much. But not all his Biblical allusions are found in his religious hymns. In "Truth," his Biblical allusions include the Pharisees, Jewish people who lived in Judea in Palestine in the time of Jesus,² and Adam, the father of Seth, Abel, and Cain, and according to the Bible, the first man of creation.³ In "Expostulation,"⁴ he alludes to the prophet Jeremiah:

The prophet wept for Israel; wished his eyes
Were fountains fed with infinite supplies:
For Israel dealt in robbery and wrong;
.....
He saw his people slaves to every lust,
Lewd, avaricious, arrogant, unjust;
He heard the wheels of an avenging God
Groan heavily along the distant road;
Saw Babylon set wide her two-leaved brass

¹I Kings 17: 1-24.

²The Poetical Works, p. 77, l. 44.

³Ibid., p. 79, l. 183.

⁴Ibid., pp. 88-101.

To let the military deluge pass;
 Jerusalem a prey, her glory soiled,
 Her princes captive and her treasures spoiled.
 (Ll. 35-62)

By this allusion, Cowper proves the power of man through faith in God, His mercy and justice. In this same poem, he uses a Biblical allusion to the Levites to illustrate the precariousness of life, of man, of a country, and of the entire universe:

O Israel, of all nations most undone!
 Thy diadem displaced, thy sceptre gone;
 Thy temple, once thy glory, fallen and rased,
 And thou a worshipper e'en where thou mayst;
 Thy services, once holy without spot,
 Mere shadows now, their ancient pomp forgot;
 Thy Levites, once a consecrated host,
 No longer Levites, and their lineage lost;
 And thou thyself o'er every country sown,
 With none on earth that thou canst call thine own;
 Cry aloud, thou that sittest in the dust,
 Cry to the proud, the cruel, and unjust;
 Knock at the gates of nations, rouse their fears;
 Say wrath is coming, and the storm appears;
 But raise the shrillest cry in British ears.
 (Ll. 257-271)

In many of his works Cowper uses the life of Saint Paul, one of the greatest preachers and organizers of the early Christian Church, to show the need for a deep and true faith, the rewards of a good life, and the joy of trusting in the Lord. In "The Progress of Error,"¹ the allusion to Paul shows the avariciousness and inconstancy of man:

He from Italian songsters takes his cue;
 Set Paul to music, he shall quote him too.
 He takes the field, the master of the pack
 Cries--"Well done, saint!" and claps him on
 the back. (Ll. 113-115)

¹Ibid., p. 66.

The desired dominant characteristics of man as illustrated by some members of the priestly brotherhood are discussed in "Expostulation."¹ Boldness in regulated proportions should be displayed by good men. In the words of the poet man should be "as bold as in Agrippa's presence Paul" (l. 445). Here the allusion is to the trial of Saint Paul when he was brought by Festus before Herod Agrippa II, king of the provinces of Philip, and with honesty, faith, and courage cleared himself of the charges brought against him as told in the book of Acts 25:12 and 26:32.

In "Hope," Cowper alludes to Paul of Tarsus and the spread of Christianity² to prove that man can exist as a mere living unit, but cannot live without wisdom, change, hope, prophecy, and a desire for the truths of life, now and hereafter. Later in this same poem, man is given some of Paul's characteristics: his love of Christ, his "steadiness unbribed," his "apostolic charity," his quest for truth.³

In "Conversation," allusion is made to the travels and observations of Paul on his journeys.⁴ Man is endowed with valuable gifts when he is born; he is expected to acquire other traits as he grows older. The wise man follows this

¹Ibid., p. 96.

²Ibid., p. 107, l. 257.

³Ibid., p. 113, ll. 580-583.

⁴Ibid., p. 130, l. 155.

pattern and places his trust in God as Paul did; the foolish man errs and flounders by the wayside, never realizing fully the blessings of the Lord.

In "The Time-Piece,"¹ Paul's honesty, sincerity, judgment, mercy, and loyalty to God are set out as ideal aims for man as a negotiator between God and his fellow men. The author expresses his feeling toward Paul when he says:

Would I describe a preacher, such as Paul,
Were he on earth, would hear, approve, and own,
Paul should himself direct me. I would trace
His master-strokes, and draw from his design.
I would express him simple, grave, sincere;
In doctrine uncorrupt; in language plain,
And plain in manner; decent, solemn, chaste,
And natural in gesture; much impressed
Himself, as conscious of his awful charge,
And anxious mainly that the flock he feeds
May feel it too; affectionate in look,
And tender in address, as well becomes
A messenger of grace to guilty men. (Ll. 395-407)

In Cowper's posthumous poems written from 1779 through 1800, the Biblical allusions differ from the allusions in his earlier works. Instead of serving to win people to Christ or to depict the wonders of heaven, they serve to show discouragement, forlornness, and loss of hope. In the poems of this last period Cowper often used Gideon, judge and hero of Israel, to illustrate his declining faith; whereas in his earlier compositions the allusions to Gideon proved the power and wisdom of the Lord. In a hymn entitled "The Lord My Banner,"² Gideon's power through God is told:

¹Ibid., p. 207, ll. 463-472.

²Ibid., p. 25.

Who ordered Gideon forth
 To storm the invaders' camp,
 With arms of little worth,
 A pitcher and a lamp?
 And trumpets made his coming known,
 And all the host was overthrown. (Ll. 13-18)

In "Table Talk,"¹ the allusion shows the victories and triumphs of God through Gideon:

. . . When Providence means mercy to a land.
 He speaks, and they appear; to Him they owe
 Skill to direct, and strength to strike the blow,
 To manage with address, to seize with power
 The crisis of a dark decisive hour.
 So Gideon earned a victory not his own,
 Subserviency his praise, and that alone. (Ll. 355-361)

Man is but a tool or a piece of clay to be molded in all ways after the will of God.

When in later life Cowper writes "To an Afflicted Protestant Lady in France,"² evidences of his waning faith and futile grasping for religious comfort are revealed. In this instance the allusion to Gideon shows a wistfulness for the feelings and assurances of the past:

Ah, be not sad, although thy lot be cast
 Far from the flock and in a boundless waste!
 No shepherds' tent within thy view appear,
 But the Chief Shepherd even there is near;
 Thy tender sorrow and thy plaintive strain
 Flow in a foreign land, but not in vain;
 Thy tears all issue from a source divine,
 And every drop bespeaks a Saviour thine.
 So once in Gideon's fleece the dews were found,
 And drought on all the dropping herbs around.
 (Ll. 41-50)

¹Ibid., p. 56.

²Ibid., p. 354.

Here the mention of shepherds and flocks is reminiscent of previous allusions during a period when Cowper felt he was doomed to despair; the tears are indicative of the hopelessness that he must have felt before his conversion, during his fits of insanity and delirium, and during the times of his "rejection." The allusion to "Gideon's fleece" presents a ray of hope that salvation might be forthcoming.

This same wistful feeling is expressed in "To a Young Friend":

If Gideon's fleece, which drenched with dew he found,
While moisture none refreshed the herbs around,
Might fitly represent the Church endowed
With heavenly gifts to heathens not allowed;
In pledge, perhaps, of favours from on high,
Thy locks were wet when others' locks were dry.
Heaven grant us half the omen,--may we see
Not drought on others, but much dew on thee!¹

The allusion to "Gideon's fleece" reveals Cowper's half-hope that miracles may be repeated and that faith is everlasting.

During this period Cowper was, for the most part, moody and dejected. He had lost his interest in religion; he felt that he had failed in every test given him by the Lord and that he was doomed to failure. His friends tried to cheer him and revive some spark of interest, but apparently to no avail. Finally, Mr. Bean, the curate of Olney, asked him to write a hymn for Sunday School, and Cowper consented. In the "Hymn" is heard a sad and wistful voice

¹Ibid., p. 390.

that hopes, yet dares not hope too much. His next religious poem, entitled "Stanzas,"¹ shows his increasing melancholy:

Like crowded forest-trees we stand,
And some are marked to fall;
The axe will smite at God's command,
And soon shall smite us all.

Green as the bay-tree, ever green,
With its new foliage on,
The gay, the thoughtless, have I seen;
I passed--and they were gone.

Read, ye that run, the awful truth
With which I charge my page;
A worm is in the bud of youth,
And at the root of age.

No present health can health ensure
For yet an hour to come;
No medicine, though oft can cure,
Can always balk the tomb.

And oh! that humble as my lot,
And scorned as is my strain,
These truths, though known, too much forgot,
I may not teach in vain.

So prays your Clerk with all his heart,
And ere he quits the pen,
Begs you for once to take his part,
And answer all--"Amen!" (Ll. 13-36)

In the last stanza of the poem "On a Similar Occasion,"² written in 1788, Cowper says:

Learn then, ye living! by the mouth be taught
Of all those sepulchres, instructors true,
That soon or late, death also is your lot,
And the next opening grave may yawn for you.
(Ll. 33-36)

¹Ibid., p. 366.

²Ibid., p. 367.

In 1792, in another religious poem, "On a Similar Occasion,"¹ he tries to find the reason for man's fear of death. He concludes:

'Tis judgment shakes him; there's the fear
That prompts the wish to stay:
He has incurred a long arrear,
And must despair to pay. (Ll. 29-32)

His last religious poem "On a Similar Occasion," was written in 1793:

He who lives to God, alone,
And all are dead beside;
For other source than God is none
Whence life can be supplied.

To live to God is to requite
His love as best we may;
To make His precepts our delight,
His promises our stay.

But life, within a narrow ring
Of giddy joys comprised,
Is falsely named, and no such thing,
But rather death disguised.

Can life in them deserve the name,
Who only live to prove
For what poor toys they can disclaim
An endless life above?

Who, much diseased, yet nothing feel;
Much menaced, nothing dread;
Have wounds which only God can heal,
Yet never ask His aid?

Who deem His house a useless place,
Faith, want of common sense,
And ardour in the Christian race
A hypocrite's pretence?

Who trample order; and the day
Which God asserts his own

¹Ibid., p. 369.

Dishonour with unhallowed play,
And worship chance alone?

If scorn of God's commands, impressed
On word and deed, imply
The better part of man unblessed
With life that cannot die;

Such want it: and that want, uncured
Till man resigns his breath,
Speak him a criminal, assured
Of everlasting death.

Sad period to a pleasant course!
Yet so will God repay
Sabbaths profaned without remorse,
And Mercy cast away.¹

The poem is a summation of Cowper's views and a perfect example of his ever-increasing feeling of hopelessness and despair. The religious feelings of the poet are clearly revealed not only in this poem, but in much of his other poetry. Another side of his nature, the scholarly and intellectual side, reveals itself in his many mythological allusions.

In his early poetry, Cowper employs frequent allusions to mythology. Familiar with Greek and Roman mythology, he draws freely on these sources for his poetry, alluding to Phoebus, Hymen, Eurydice, Hebrus, Philomel, Parnassus, the nymphs, and any number of the more familiar mythological deities of the ancient world.

In the first two lines of his first poem, "Verses Written at Bath,"² he says:

¹Ibid., p. 369.

²Ibid., p. 1.

Fortune! I thank thee: gentle Goddess, thanks!
 Not that my Muse, though bashful shall deny.
 (L1. 1-2)

"My Muse" here is the goddess who inspired Cowper to write poetry. Fortune, he feels, has put the shoe heel in his path; for this his Muse is grateful in that new subject matter is provided. Since the gods and goddesses reign over the heavens, Cowper knows that "Fortune" has maneuvered circumstances and made it possible for him to find the shoe heel and be motivated to write a poem about it. In a later poem written to Theodora, "An Apology,"¹ the poet says:

Did not my Muse (what can she less?)
 Perceive her own unworthiness,
 Could she by some well-chosen theme
 But hope to merit your esteem. (L1. 1-4)

In a short poem, "In a Letter to C. P., Esquire,"² written in his youth, Cowper pleads for a gentle patient Muse who would be content "to visit oft the still Lethean lake" instead of seeking the "pernicious height" of the "tall Parnassian cliff." The allusion to the Muse is used effectively and meaningfully in this poem written to someone ill with rheumatism. The slow, gentle, soothing movement of the words, images, and rhythm has a calming effect on the reader.

In lines "Addressed to Miss Macartney"³ after reading her poem, "Prayer for Indifference," Cowper employs an

¹Ibid., p. 4.

²Ibid., p. 7.

³Ibid., pp. 20-21.

allusion to the Muse to pay tribute to Miss Macartney and her poem:

The Arts come smiling in the close,
And lend celestial fire;
The marble breathes, the canvas glows,
The Muses sweep the lyre. (Ll. 80-84)

In "Table Talk,"¹ the Muse is often used to prove a point or make clearer a comparison:

I know the mind that feels indeed the fire
The Muse imparts, and can command the lyre,
Acts with a force, and kindles with a zeal,
Whate'er the theme, that others never feel.
(Ll. 480-483)

In discussing the subjects of poets and poetry later in this same poem, Cowper alludes again to the Muse to show the futility of effort if a poet cannot write about a good solid subject that will be a credit to the labors of the Muse.² Later in the poem the conversation between A. and B. turns to the various poets; and the impatience, rudeness, and disrespect of one poet are shown through an allusion to the Muse:

Surly and slovenly, and bold and coarse,
Too proud for art, and trusting in mere force,
Spendthrift alike of money and of wit,
Always at speed, and never drawing bit,
He struck the lyre in such a careless mood,
And so disdained the rules he understood,
The laurel seemed to wait on his command,
He snatched it rudely from the Muses' hand.
(Ll. 682-689)

"The Progress of Error"³ begins in a conventional address to

¹Ibid., p. 58.

²Ibid., p. 59.

³Ibid., p. 64.

the Muse:

Sing, Muse (if such a theme, so dark, so long,
May find a Muse to grace it with a song),
By what unseen and unsuspected arts
The serpent Error twines round human hearts.
(Ll. 1-4)

Cowper asks the goddess presiding over poetry and song, the power supposed to inspire the poet, for grace and blessing on his poem. In this same tradition the opening lines of "Expostulation"¹ read:

Why weeps the Muse for England? What appears
In England's case to move the Muse to tears?
From side to side of her delightful isle
Is she not clothed with a perpetual smile?
Can Nature add a charm, or art confer
A new-found luxury not seen in her?
Where under heaven is pleasure more pursued,
Or where does cold reflection less intrude?
Her fields a rich expanse of wavy corn,
Poured out from Plenty's overflowing horn;
Ambrosial gardens, in which Art supplies
The fervour and the force of Indian skies;
Her peaceful shores, where busy Commerce waits
To pour his golden tide through all her gates,
Whom fiery suns, that scorch the russet spice
Of Eastern groves, and oceans floored with ice,
Forbid in vain to push his daring way
To darker climes, or climes of brighter day;
Whom the winds waft where'er the billows roll,
From the world's girdle to the frozen pole;
The chariots bounding in her wheel-worn streets,
Her vaults below, where every vintage meets;
Her theatres, her revels, and her sports;
The scenes to which not youth alone resorts,
But age, in spite of weakness and of pain,
Still haunts, in hope to dream of youth again;
All speak her happy: let the Muse look round
From East to West, no sorrow can be found:
Or only what, in cottages confined,
Sighs unregarded to the passing wind.
Then wherefore weep for England? What appears
In England's case to move the Muse to tears?
(Ll. 1-32)

¹Ibid., pp. 87-101.

Thus this passage sets the stage for the poem. A question has been proposed, not just to a mortal, but to the goddess of the heavens, the ruler of destiny and fortune. In the course of the poem the author appeals to man to stand up for his rights, his integrity, his country, and his God; he addresses the Muse:

Muse, hang this harp upon yon aged beech,
Still murmuring with the solemn truths I teach;
And while at intervals a cold blast sings
Through the dry leaves, and pants upon the strings,
My soul shall sigh in secret, and lament
A nation scourged, yet tardy to repent. (Ll. 718-723)

The first verse penned by Cowper contains an address to the Muse. Many of the poems during the productive periods of his life, it has been noticed, contain these same addresses. When he writes The Task, he alludes to the Muse many times. In speaking of his love of nature and of the country and his poetic efforts in "The Winter Evening,"¹ he says:

My very dreams were rural, rural too
The firstborn efforts of my youthful muse,
Sportive, and jingling her poetic bells
Ere yet her ear was mistress of their powers.
(Ll. 700-703)

In "The Winter Morning Walk,"² the shortcomings of man are discussed. It is concluded that a good and wise man is what he becomes through the guidance of God and that the truthful man, the honest man, the patriot becomes immortal in sculpture and a proud treasure of "the historic Muse" (l. 707).

¹Ibid., p. 245.

²Ibid., p. 261.

In "Tirocinium,"¹ Cowper again poses an important question to the Muse:

Say, Muse (for, education made the song,
No Muse can hesitate, or linger long),
What causes move us, knowing as we must,
That these menageries all fail their trust,
To send our sons to scout and scamper there,
While colts and puppies cost us so much care?
(Ll. 290-295)

Later in the poem, after much discussion of parents, education, and schools, and after the author is quite disillusioned, he says:

'But, courage, man!' methought the Muse replied,
'Mankind are various, and the world is wide.'
(Ll. 787-788)

After the publication of his long poem, The Task, Cowper wrote many shorter poems. Mythology plays a great part in these poems also. In "The Death of Mrs. Throckmorton's Bullfinch"² he relates the horrible death of the bird who was eaten by a rat. The event was so tragic that even the author pleads:

'Ah, Muse! forbear to speak'
The Muses mourn. . . . (Ll. 51-61)

When the dreadful crime was committed, even the Muses mourned the loss of the bullfinch.

In the poem, "To Sir Joshua Reynolds,"³ two allusions

¹Ibid., p. 294.

²Ibid., p. 311.

³Ibid., p. 329.

to the Muses are used to intensify his creative versatility:

You cannot with grace decline
A special mandate of the Nine--
Yourself, whatever task you choose,
So much indebted to the Muse. (Ll. 7-10)

"The Cock-Fighter's Garland"¹ shows Cowper's sympathy toward all nature's creatures. He is perturbed by the cruelty to the bird and he calls:

Muse, hide his name of whom I sing,
Lest his surviving house thou bring
For his sake into scorn;
Nor speak the school from which he drew
The much or little that he knew,
Nor place where he was born.
(Ll. 1-6)

The nature of his prayer to the Muse suggests the enormity of the act. In "On a Mischievous Bull,"² the author is greatly annoyed at the animal for disturbing the peaceful surroundings with his pugnacious display of prowess. Cowper's anger is so great that he calls for more than human castigation:

I care not whether east or north,
So I no more may find thee;
The angry Muse thus sings thee forth,
And claps the gate behind thee. (Ll. 21-24)

In "To Dr. Austen, of Cecil Street, London,"³ Cowper heightens his deep appreciation to Dr. Austen for his solicitious attention to Mrs. Unwin in her illness through a poem inspired by the Muses:

¹Ibid., pp. 371-372.

²Ibid., pp. 363-364.

³Ibid., p. 384.

Austen! accept a grateful verse from me,
 The poet's treasure, no inglorious fee.
 Loved by the Muses, thy ingenious mind
 Pleasing requital in a verse may find. (Ll. 1-4)

In "Catharina: On Her Marriage to George Courtenay, Esquire,"¹ Cowper compares the oracular power of a poet to the Muse:

Believe it or not, as you chuse [sic],
 The doctrine is certainly true,
 That the future is known to the Muse,
 And poets are oracles too. (Ll. 1-4)

He had wished for the marriage of Catharina to George; the Muses approving, had made it come true; now the poet decides to use his power to wish for a family. In the very short late poem, "On a Letter to Miss Fanshawe,"² Cowper feels his own human emotional capacity is insufficient for the situation and he calls upon the Muse to give the emotional intensity that the occasion demands whatever the emotion be. Here he alludes to the Muse to pay Miss Fanshawe a compliment:

Her pen drops eloquence as sweet
 As any Muse's tongue can speak;
 Nor need a scribe, like her, regret,
 Her want of Latin or of Greek. (Ll. 1-4)

A similar principle is the basis of his compliment to Theodora. In "Song,"³ written to his mistress, he uses mythology to aid in describing her beauty, charm, and grace:

¹Ibid., p. 386.

²Ibid., p. 394.

³Ibid., p. 5.

Glossy looks, and brows serene,
 Venus' smiles, Diana's mien,
 All meet in you, and you alone. (Ll. 3-6)

These words were addressed to Delia, Cowper's first love.

The key to her beauty is the allusion to the goddesses; she has two outstanding characteristics which set her apart from other women, "Venus' smiles" and "Diana's mien." Venus is the "sweetly smiling Venus or Aphrodite," goddess of love and beauty who ruled the hearts of men with her smiles and stole the wits of even the wise. Diana (Artemis), twin sister of Apollo, is the goddess of the chase and the moon. She epitomized maidenly virtue. Delia, then we know, was a beautiful woman, beautiful as a moon goddess is beautiful, possessor of all the beguiling ways and feminine charms that a goddess can bestow.

Another poem which uses allusions to Greek mythology is entitled "Upon a Venerable Rival." Here Cowper uses a common theme, youth and age, to satirize love:

Full thirty frosts since thou were young
 Have chilled the withered grove,
 Thou wretch! and hast thou lived so long,
 Nor yet forgot to love!

Ye Sages! spite of your pretences
 To wisdom, you must own
 Your folly frequently commences
 When you acknowledge none.

Not that I deem it weak to love,
 Or folly to admire;
 But ah! the pangs we lovers prove
 Far other years require.

Unheeded on the youthful brow
 The beams of Phoebus play;
 Then unsupported age stoops low
 Beneath the sultry ray.

For once, then, if untutored youth,
 Youth unapproved by years,
 May chance to deviate into truth,
 When your experience errs;

For once attempt not to despise
 What I esteem a rule;
 Who early loves, though young, is wise,--
 Who old, though grey, a fool.¹

The poem is a direct statement until we reach the fourth stanza, beginning with

Unheeded on the youthful brow
 The beams of Phoebus play,

and it extends our experience through allusion to Phoebus (Apollo), the god of light who drove the chariot of the sun, who brought back the sunshine in the spring. He was the god of song and poetry, the ideal of manly beauty. The "beams of Phoebus [that] play" on the "youthful brow" suggest that youth is represented, but there is also the implication that the life-giving beams cannot remain forever. "Unsupported age" creeps up, and the life-giving beams fade. Through this allusion the poet has caused us to summon up feelings for youth and what happens to youth when the "frosts" come; he has caused us also to detect a hint of cynical bitterness toward life, love, the world, or the so-called "wise men" of

¹Ibid., p. 6.

the world who are ready to sit in judgment of youth and its errors.

In his "Ode"¹ written on the marriage of a friend, Cowper uses allusions to describe how he felt about marriage and love. The first stanza draws upon mythology:

Thou magic lyre, whose fascinating sound
Seduced the savage monsters from their cave
Drew rocks and trees, and forms uncouth around,
And bade wild Hebrus hush his listening wave;
No more thy undulating warbling flow
O'er Thracian wilds of everlasting snow! (Ll. 1-6)

Here is the familiar lyre of Grecian mythology, the lyre that could seduce monsters from their caves, draw rocks and uncouth forms around, bid "wild Hebrus hush his listening wave," and prevent him from flowing "o'er Thracian wilds of everlasting snow." But now the magic lyre's song has ceased; the beloved friend has won his prize. In its place is a new song, a new note:

Awake to sweeter sounds, thou magic lyre,
And paint a lover's bliss--a lover's pain!
Far nobler triumphs now thy notes inspire,
For see, Eurydice attends thy strain;
Her smile, a prize beyond the conjurer's aim,
Superior to the canceled breath of fame. (Ll. 7-12)

The lyre now sings of a lover's bliss fulfilled, of the pain that comes from loving and losing. Eurydice, the beloved wife of Orpheus in Grecian mythology, suffers a snake-bite, dies, goes to Hades, is brought out by Orpheus only to be lost again. Her name here shows a "lover's pain," and the

¹Ibid., p. 10.

song of the lyre is nobler because of the suffering endured. At the same time, Eurydice has chased "the gloom of care," checked the tears, and touched the springs of rapture and of love.

Abruptly the song of the lyre fades as the poet inserts a personal note:

Ah me! how long bewildered and astray,
 Lost and benighted did my footsteps rove,
 Till sent by Heaven to cheer my pathless way,
 A star arose--the radiant star of love.
 The God propitious joined our willing hands,
 And Hymen wreathed us in his rosy bands.
 (Ll. 19-24)

Cowper pictures himself, "lost and benighted," wandering aimlessly about until he falls in love with Theodora. He suggests that the match was favored by God and blessed by Hymen the god of marriage. Here the mythological allusion to Hymen is used to show blessing and happiness.

In "An Ode"¹ written shortly before he suffered his first attack of delirium, Cowper draws upon mythology many times. "Sweetly warbling Philomel" alludes to the Greek mythological Philomela, who was turned into a nightingale (l. 51); "when the bright sun now gilds his morning beams" (l. 60) is an allusion to Phoebus (Apollo), the god of light who drove the chariot of the sun; the sunset is described as "sinking on his Thetis' breast," Thetis being the chief of the sea-mymphs (Nereids) (l. 61). The author boasts, "I

¹Ibid., pp. 22-23.

crown the summit of Parnassus' hill (l. 64)." When he has reached the top of Mount Parnassus, sacred to Apollo and the Muses, symbolic of poetic inspiration and achievement, he has attained great heights as a poet.

The allusions of the period of the Olney Hymns (1771-1779) are chiefly Biblical allusions, but with the beginning of Cowper's moral satires (1780) the mythological allusions reappear. "Table Talk,"¹ the first of the satires, opens with an allusion to a very old superstition that lightning would not strike laurel:

Strange doctrine this! that without scruple tears
The laurel that the very lightning spares. (Ll. 5-6)

This superstition is so old that the Emperor Tiberius wore a wreath of laurel when a thunderstorm threatened. Preserved through the ages, the superstition appeared again in the works of Byron:

For the true laurel wreath which glory weaves
Is of the tree no bolt of thunder cleaves.²

Since the days of the ancient Greeks the laurel has been used as the symbol of victory and as a crown for victors of their games. This sacred tree of Apollo, connected with success in literature, and Parnassus, the sacred mountain of the Muses, form the basis of the next two allusions in "Table

¹Ibid., p. 49.

²George Gordon Byron, Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, IV, 41.

Talk"¹ when Cowper turns from superstition to mythology:

Let laurels, drenched in Parnassian dews,
Reward his memory, dear to every Muse. (Ll. 13-14)

Later in the poem Cowper uses two other mythological allusions to clarify a topical event:

Not Brindley nor Bridgewater would essay
To turn the course of Helicon that way;
Nor would the Nine consent the sacred tide.
(Ll. 182-184)

These lines are B.'s answer to A.'s hint that B. might turn his verse to useful account by propounding some plan for paying the national debt. "Bridgewater" refers to Francis, third and last Duke of Bridgewater, who is called the father of British internal navigation. "Brindley" is James Brindley, an engineer who specialized in the building of canals. The first English canal (1761), constructed to transport coal, was created through the enterprise of the Duke of Bridgewater and of his engineer, James Brindley.² In the lines Cowper is saying that men as good at drawing plans and building canals for the improvement of commerce and industry as Brindley and Bridgewater would not consider trying to channel poetic inspiration or "the course of Helicon" in any other course except its natural one. The words "that way" allude to the point of the whole conversation about a plan to pay

¹The Poetical Works, p. 49.

²R. B. Mowat, England in the Eighteenth Century (London: George G. Harrap and Company, Limited, 1932), p. 268.

the national debt. And even the Nine, referring to the nine goddesses of the arts and sciences in Greek mythology, would not want the sacred tide of Helicon to be changed.

In "The Progress of Error,"¹ Cowper gives his views on the causes of Error; he lists the many temptations faced, yielded to, or resisted by man. Among these foibles in disguise is the charm of "Bacchanalian madness" (l. 56). Here, a mythological allusion to the ancient Roman festival in honor of Bacchus, god of wine and revelry, identified with the Greek god Dionysus, is used to signify indulging in orgies, carousing, or being uproariously drunk. The allusion is devoid, however, of any suggestion of the old pagan Bacchanalian or Dionysiac ritual.

Line 184 of "Progress of Error" contains a literary allusion with a basis in mythology. This allusion, "Let Comus rise Archbishop of the land," is an allusion to Milton's Comus, a young man of revelry, god of mirth, represented by Milton as the son of Bacchus and Circe. In line 231 the poet speaks of "the fabled Tantalus." He is asking if man is placed in the center of activities and pleasures that he likes and desires and restrained from touching them or tasting them as was Tantalus, who was sent to suffer in the Lower World because he killed his son Pelops and served him to the gods to eat. Tantalus was given a great thirst

¹The Poetical Works, p. 65.

and hunger and made to stand in water that reached to his chin and gaze upon delightful, unreachable food.¹ In the latter part of the poem Cowper uses a mythological allusion to warn man against the foolish deeds and ill habits posed by life: "With caution taste the sweet Circean cup," he advises. The magic cup belonged to the beautiful sorceress, Circe, in Greek mythology who used her magic powers and songs to attract sailors to her island where she changed them into animals by her magic.

"Truth" contains fewer allusions than the other poems of this period. In it Cowper's main concern is to make man's sinfulness clear, to impress upon man the perfection of God, and to assert the need of the propitiation of Christ. His chief mythological allusion is to Niobe,² daughter of Tantalus and mother of seven strong sons and seven beautiful daughters who allowed her pride to inflict anger upon Leto, thus bringing death for her children and causing herself to be turned to stone. In the poem Cowper points out the mendaciousness of mankind. Through the allusion to Niobe he concretizes his meaning and purpose.

Three special allusions in "Expostulation"³ illustrate

¹Charles Mills Gayley, The Classic Myths in English Literature and Art (New York: Ginn and Company, 1930), pp. 99, 166, 275, 358.

²The Poetical Works, p. 79, l. 174.

³Ibid., p. 97.

the varied sources upon which Cowper drew for his poetry.

He wrote:

Thy Druids struck the well-strung harps they bore
 With fingers deeply dyed in human gore;
 And, while the victim slowly bled to death,
 Upon the tolling chords rung out his dying breath.
 (Ll. 496-499)

The Druids, priests who lived in Gaul and Britain until shortly after the death of Christ, had the same gods as those worshipped by the Greeks and Romans but gave them different names. These Druids were reputed to have practiced various forms of magic, to have exercised sovereignty above rulers, to have believed in the excommunication of persons, to have indulged in the teaching of immorality and transmigration, and to have originated the veneration of the oak tree with mistletoe on it; unwilling to brook their power, the Romans adopted the policy of extermination.¹ Several lines later, in "Expostulation,"² Cowper makes two allusions to Northern mythology:

But still light reached thee; and those gods of thine,
 Woden and Thor, each tottering in his shrine,
 Fell broken and defaced at his own door. (Ll. 504-506)

Woden, the German name for Odin, was the chief god of the mythology of Northern Europe, as Zeus was the ruler in Greek legend, and Jupiter in Roman. The Scandinavians called him Odin also. This god was the father of all the gods of Norse

¹Frank Chapin Bray, The World of Myths (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1935), p. 11.

²The Poetical Works, p. 97.

mythology and represented wisdom and victory. Thor, god of thunder in Northern mythology, was the oldest son of Odin and the strongest of the gods. He was the hero who fought the battles of the gods against the giants.

In "Hope," Cowper develops the same theme that provides the main informing idea of "Truth." It is perhaps more pleasant to read; it is kinder in tone, and it contains few allusions. The allusions in "Charity" and "Conversation" are, for the most part, Biblical, but with the composition of "Retirement,"¹ Cowper uses mythological allusions to prove his love of the country and nature. The poem opens with a revelation of his wish for solitude and peace. In discussing the subject of retirement, Cowper refers to the "disencumbered Atlas of the state" (l. 394). In Greek mythology Atlas was a great Titan who rebelled against Zeus, only to be conquered by Zeus and made to bear the heavens on his shoulders. Cowper's allusion is thus designed to show the burdens of society or responsibility that man is forced to carry. When man retires, he is "disencumbered" of his burdens.

In 1783, when Cowper began writing The Task, he launched into the most important part of his career. The poem is all about Cowper; he tells about his religious meditations, his health, his pets, his friends, his views and ideas, his likes and dislikes. Throughout the poem, he uses

¹Ibid., p. 154.

mythological allusions to solidify his observations and beliefs. In the second book of The Task, entitled "The Time-Piece,"¹ he alludes to "Juno's heaven" (l. 660) to show that husbands and wives do not realize that they waste their lives and happiness until with their last "poor pittance" they make a desperate offering to Fortune who is far costlier than "all that held their routs in Juno's heaven." Since Juno (Hera to the Greeks) was the leading goddess, the queen of the gods and of heaven and the wife of Jupiter, it is clear that this final offering of mortals to appease the goddesses is inadequate.

In the allusion to the "priesthood of Baal" (l. 677), is the first Canaanite myth in Cowper's poetry. Baal was the name of an ancient god worshipped by the Hebrews; the Hebrews borrowed this worship of Baal from the Canaanites, who looked upon the god as the chief Sun-god representing male productive power, fertility, and generation. The worship resembled the pagan and grossly sensual Dionysiac ritualistic orgies of ancient Greece. Here is the heathen sinfulness against which prophets inveighed. Cowper uses the allusion to show the fate of a society dominated by greed, vice, subterfuge, frauds, and corruption. Cowper, like the Israelite prophets, denounces the evils of his day in tones of righteous indignation.

¹Ibid., p. 211.

In "The Garden"¹ the poet is concerned with the subject of domestic happiness. He feels that real happiness can come only through faith, trust, and loving God. Such people as have lived wise and Christian lives are the ones who are able to utter true prayers and thereby improve man's lot. These prayers, which flow from "lips wet with Castalian dew," (l. 251) are the purest and holiest of prayers because the waters flowing from the fountain spring of Castalia have wonderful power and magic to impart.

In line 587, Cowper speaks again of the Orphean lyre. The allusion here is used as a possible explanation for all the lovely blooms in the greenhouse. They may have come from many far-away places, or they may have been summoned by the magic of the Orphean lyre.

Cowper discusses the city at some length in the poem. He gives the disadvantages of the city and emphasizes his dislike with his final thrust in line 738: "Stygian throats breathe darkness all day long." The mythological allusion to the river Styx, one of the five rivers surrounding Hades, turns the city into a dark, gloomy, infernal place filled with hate and lust.

The next book of The Task,² "The Winter Evening," consists of descriptions of nature, domestic scenes, and sketches of enjoyable people. Cowper uses mythological

¹Ibid., p. 220.

²Ibid., pp. 234-270.

allusions to make his descriptions more poignant. When the winter evening begins and the lamps are lighted, Cowper describes their glow and reflection as one in which Goliath could see his giant bulk "whole without stopping" (l. 271). He describes the poorer section of town, the people and their indulgences. He does not state directly that the people were lazy or slovenly; he says they have taken a "Lethean leave of all their toil" (l. 475). He employs an allusion to Lethe, a river in Hades whose water induces forgetfulness of all previous existence in those who drink of it. Therefore, if the workers take a "Lethean leave," they have no conscious conception of working or earning a living; they fit their surroundings.

In "The Winter Morning Walk,"¹ the descriptions of the cattle, the woodman, the sun, the soil, and the snow produce a feeling of closeness to nature even though the poet expounds his views on liberty and his opinions as a Whig. Early in the poem, Cowper describes the beauties of nature, a frozen land, sparkling in the early wintry sun. The land, to the poet, looks like a marble palace. He alludes to Aristaeus, son of Apollo and tutelary deity of herdsmen and beekeepers, to substantiate his description:

In such a place Aristaeus found
Cyrene, when he bore the plaintive tale

¹Ibid., p. 250, ll. 135-139.

Of his lost bees to her maternal ear:
 In such a palace poetry might place
 The armoury of Winter. (Ll. 135-139)

In the "Winter Walk at Noon,"¹ as Cowper walks along the paths and winding roads, through the partially melted snow and ice, he tries to imagine what the countryside will look like when spring blankets the world in her blossoms and vivid colors. He sees the world as God's one big creation, but thinks of the tutelary goddesses and gods such as Pomona,² the Greek goddess of fruit and trees; Pan,³ the Greek god of the forest and meadows; Flora,⁴ the Roman goddess of flowers and spring; and Vertumnus,⁵ the Roman goddess of the changing seasons and growing plants.

In "Tirocinium,"⁶ Cowper expresses his feelings about schools and education. As he describes the schools, methods of learning, disciplinary practices, and other problems of education, he uses references to mythology once again to make his meaning clear. When he discusses the many practices and habits acquired by school boys, he speaks of the tawery waiter's "bacchanalian lays" (l. 214) and shows his contempt

¹Ibid., pp. 265-285.

²Ibid., l. 233.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., l. 234.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid., pp. 288-306.

for lewdness and drunkenness. Considering the role of a father, he says fathers should spend time with their sons and acquaint them with the wonders of nature and the world about them. A boy might learn of the vastness of the universe by being shown "the moons of Jove, and Saturn's belted ball"(l. 634). Here the mythological allusions to Jove (Jupiter), the god of lightning and weather, and to Saturn (Cronus), the youngest son of Heaven and Earth who ruled the world in its Golden Age, are used to suggest the immensity of creation. In this poem also he advises the use of tales and fables of old as a necessary part of a child's education and background.

In the poems of Cowper's later life all the allusions are used to show his despair, his melancholy, and his final resignation to fate. Allusions to Christianity and to mythology constitute much of the matter; historical allusions in both his works and letters give evidence of his historical knowledge and interest. In a letter to the Reverend William Unwin, dated May 8, 1770, he tells of his readings in history:

. . . From a general recollection of Lord Clarendon's History of the Rebellion, I thought (and I remember I told you so) that there was a striking resemblance between that period and the present. But I am now reading, and have read three volumes of Hume's History. . . .¹

¹William Cowper, The Selected Letters of William Cowper, ed. William Hadley (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, Incorporated, 1926), pp. 304-305.

In Cowper's works, there are more frequent and more important allusions to historical persons and places than to historical events. Of the major eighty-six allusions to persons and places, sixty-two occur in the poetry belonging to the productive period beginning with the "Progress of Error" (1780) and extending through the completion of The Task (1784); twenty of the allusions appear in the posthumous poems of middle and later life; two allusions occur in the period of the Olney Hymns and two in his early poetic career, which began at the age of seventeen.

In "Hope,"¹ Cowper discusses the meaning of human life. He asserts that nowhere but in "feigned Arcadian scenes" (l. 9) can the poor find any taste of happiness. In "The Winter Nosegay,"² he has gathered a bouquet of pinks from his greenhouse and has presented them to Mary:

'Tis a bower of Arcadian sweets,
Where Flora is still in her Prime,
A fortress to which she retreats
From the cruel assaults of the clime. (ll. 9-12)

In "The Winter Evening,"³ he expresses a wish that he could have lived in the "happier days," the "golden times"; he wishes for the "Arcadian scenes" (l. 215). Allusions to Arcadia, the name which the ancient Greeks gave to the

¹The Poetical Works, p. 102.

²Ibid., p. 174.

³Ibid., p. 241.

picturesque mountain region in the central part of the Peloponnesus, symbolize rustic simplicity and happiness. Arcadia is the almost perfect place; the worship of the shepherd god Pan began there; to the poet it is a place for seclusion and retirement.

Many of the references to historical places in Cowper's poetry may also be found in the Bible. In "Hope,"¹ he speaks about slander, malice, and crimes "such as Sodom never knew" (l. 562). In "The Garden,"² he tells of the vastness, the desecration, the poverty, and the cruelties of London; he says the city is more obnoxious "than Sodom in her day had power to be" (l. 847). Both these allusions to the ancient city of Sodom on the plain around the Dead Sea, which during early Bible times was so fertile it was compared to the "garden of the Lord," draw their full meaning from the story in the Old Testament about God's destruction of Sodom and the neighboring city of Gomorrah because the people were so sinful, greedy, and wicked.

Occasionally in Cowper's poetry there is a geographical allusion, the primary connotation of which is an historical one. The place referred to often suggests a whole culture, an historical event, or a civilization instead of just a geographical place or location. In "Anti-

¹Ibid., p. 112.

²Ibid., p. 231.

Thelyphthora,"¹ the attire, conduct, and duties of knights are described, and the reader is told that famed "cedars of Lebanon" which grew on the slopes of the Lebanon Mountains in Bible times, furnished the wood for the well-poised lance of the knight. Philistia, a region of ancient Palestine on the Mediterranean Coast, was inhabited by the Philistines in Bible times. Cowper alludes to the historical city in "Expostulation."² In "The Winter Morning Walk,"³ he speaks of the magnificent and cultured city of Babel (l. 193) and later of Babylon (l. 40). Babel is the Hebrew name for the city of Babylon, and the name "Babel" comes from the Babylonian language, in which it means "gate of God." The name has now come to mean any great, rich, luxurious, or wicked city. In the hymn, "Prayer for Patience,"⁴ he speaks of a "Babylonish vest" (l. 15) as a possible cause of an offense to God. In "Charity,"⁵ he alludes to Sparta (l. 271), which was at one time the most powerful city state of ancient Greece, famous for its military power and its loyal soldiers. The allusion carries the connotation of Spartan endurance, scorn of luxuries, unyielding firmness as desirable Spartan virtues feasible to man.

¹Ibid., p. 97.

²Ibid., l. 507.

³Ibid., pp. 251-255.

⁴Ibid., p. 37.

⁵Ibid., p. 122.

Often in his poetry Cowper alludes to famous rivers. In "The Winter Walk at Noon,"¹ he speaks of the Avon (l. 681), made famous by Shakespeare, the "Bard of Avon." In "The Progress of Error,"² he alludes to the river Cam (l. 369); in "The Sofa,"³ he describes the Ouse and its slow wind through the countryside (ll. 163-180); and in one of his earliest poems, "Written in a Quarrel,"⁴ he calls the Thames the "purest stream" (l. 1) and compares it to his love. In "Valediction,"⁵ he alludes to the third largest river in Africa, famous for its good passage for ships:

Farewell, false hearts! whose best affections fail,
Like shallow brooks which summer suns exhale!
Forgetful of the man whom once ye chose,
Cold in his cause, and careless of his woes,
I bid you both a long and last adieu,
Cold in my turn, and unconcerned like you.
First, farewell Niger! whom, now duly proved,
I disregard as much as once I loved. (Ll. 1-8)

In "An Ode,"⁶ he views some of the problems of a poet and establishes a feeling of strange calm on a river bank by an allusion to "the sluggish waves by Granta's shore" (l. 20). While revealing his patriotic feelings and views toward his country in "Expostulation,"⁷ he displays also a knowledge of

¹Ibid., p. 278.

²Ibid., p. 71.

³Ibid., p. 186.

⁴Ibid., p. 8.

⁵Ibid., p. 352.

⁶Ibid., p. 22.

⁷Ibid., p. 97.

the history of the struggles affecting his country in his allusion to the Tiber River:

But Rome with sorceries and magic wand
Soon raised a cloud that darkened every land;
And thine was smothered in the stench and fog
Of Tiber's marshes and the papal bog. (Ll. 508-511)

In "On the Ice Islands,"¹ written during the latter part of his life, Cowper uses allusions to unify the descriptions of the poem into one large picture of vast depth and scope. He describes the ice islands, then endeavors to establish their origin. He considers splendid India, but rejects this idea that such a dazzling sight "had left, unseen, the Ganges' peopled shore" (ll. 13-18). Next, he considers Mount Vesuvius or "Aetna's burning womb" (l. 22). The poem concludes with the sinking of the ponderous mass of ice, and the next allusion is to the Aegean Sea and the civilization and culture which grew up in ancient times on its islands and shores. In conjunction with this feeling of blackness and mystery of the sea and ages past, in the phrase "Cimmerian darkness" (l. 118), the poet alludes to the historical race of people who lived along the northern shore of the Black Sea, the Cimmerians.

Cowper's allusions to persons in Greek and Roman history are evidence of his interest in that field of learning. He draws frequently upon this source. In "The Garden," he speaks of Roscius,² a Roman actor who was so famous in his day

¹Ibid., pp. 398-399.

²Ibid., p. 226, l. 597.

that his name came to stand for "great actor"; in "The Progress of Error,"¹ he speaks of the sharp tongue and satire of Petronious, the Roman satirist under whose name we have some considerable fragments of a remarkable satire or satirical romance:

Petronious! all the Muses weep for thee,
But every tear shall scald thy memory.
(Ll. 335-336)

In "The Time-Piece,"² the variety and expense of clothing are being discussed, and Cowper alludes to Lucullus, a Roman consul who was proverbial for his wealth, to show the value of some fashions. These elegant habits are "costlier than Lucullus wore" (l. 596).

Many allusions to some of the great men in history add interest and variety to his poetry. In "The Progress of Error,"³ he measures time by the fading of "Caesar's image (l. 279) on a coin. In "The Winter Walk at Noon,"⁴ he alludes to Caesar as one of earth's inhabitants who have struggled with and conquered the obstacles to success as a statesman, general, or some high official, but he says these "laurels that Caesar reaps are weeds" (l. 939) when compared with the virtuous and rewarding life lived by a genuinely

¹Ibid., p. 70.

²Ibid., p. 210.

³Ibid., p. 69.

⁴Ibid., p. 283.

good and completely happy man. In "The Cock-Fighter's Garland,"¹ the proud and valiant cock is called the "Caesar of his race" (l. 42). He deems the Roman fabulist Phaedrus and the Greek fabulist Aesop of equal importance. In "Table Talk," the allusion to Demosthenes, great Athenian orator and patriot, illustrates the author's opinion that England has a great need of true patriots like the ones of old. In "Expostulation," he reiterates various outstanding historical accomplishments by great men; here he alludes to the Persian, Cyrus,² who defeated Belshazzar, the last Babylonian king. Belshazzar appears also in "On the Queen's Visit to London," the allusion being to the great banquet, Belshazzar's Feast, at which handwriting, foretelling the downfall of Babylonia, appeared on a wall.³

Cowper, interested in the affairs and history of his own country, frequently alludes to famous British kings, political leaders, and literary figures. In "Table Talk,"⁴ he alludes to Alfred as "the father of his age" (l. 105), and in "The Sofa,"⁵ he gives the historical deduction of

¹Ibid., p. 371.

²Ibid., p. 89, l. 75.

³Ibid., p. 370, l. 51.

⁴Ibid., p. 51.

⁵Ibid., p. 183.

had delighted the patrons of the London coffeehouses and members of the Court of Charles II. His allusion to Matthew Prior's "ease" apparently refers to the active part Prior took in all kinds of governmental affairs and other political affairs and the agility he displayed in helping to negotiate the treaty of Utrecht. In "Tirocinium,"¹ Cowper alludes to Alexander Pope:

Force not my drift beyond its just intent;
I praise a school as Pope a government:
So take my judgment in his language dressed,
'Whate'er is best administered is best.'
(Ll. 505-508)

In "A Mistake in His Translation of Homer,"² he says:

COWPER has sinned with some excuse,
If, found in rhyming tethers,
He had committed their abuse
Of changing ewes for wethers.
But male or female in a trope,
A rather bald misnomer,
That would have startled even Pope,
When he translated Homer. (Ll. 1-8)

One of the passages in "Table Talk"³ provides an allusion to George III (1738-1830):

To pour in Virtue's lap her just reward;
Keep Vice restrained behind a double guard;
To quell the faction that affronts the throne,
By silent magnanimity alone;
To nurse with tender care the thriving Arts,
Watch every beam Philosophy imparts;
To give Religion her unbridled scope,
Nor judge by statute a believer's hope;
With close fidelity and love unfeigned

¹Ibid., p. 298.

²Ibid., p. 400.

³Ibid., p. 50.

To keep the matrimonial bond unstained;
 Covetous only of a virtuous praise,
 His life a lesson to the land he sways;
 To touch the sword with conscientious awe,
 Nor draw it but when duty bids him draw;
 To sheath it in the peace-restoring close
 With joy beyond what victory bestows,--
 Blest country! where these kingly glories shine,
 Blest England! if this happiness be thine. (Ll. 65-82)

George III, who succeeded his grandfather George II in 1760, was ruler of England when the American colonists became an independent nation. He was a man of high moral character; and, unlike the first George, he had no intention of giving over the government to ministers. He was a thorough Englishman with a love of his country and a desire to be a real ruler, although he did not want to rule in the absolute manner of the old Stuart kings. During his reign a bill was introduced and passed which gave the English Roman Catholics the right to purchase and inherit land and made the priests exempt from imprisonment.¹ Later in "Table Talk,"² Cowper alludes to one of the events of George's reign, the Gordon Riots of 1780:

When Tumult lately burst his prison door,
 And set plebeian thousands in a roar,
 When he usurped Authority's just place,
 And dared to look his master in the face,
 When the rude rabble's watchword was, "Destroy!"
 And blazing London seemed a second Troy,
 Liberty blushed and hung her drooping head,
 Beheld their progress with the deepest dread,

¹Mowat, England in the Eighteenth Century, pp. 243-44.

²The Poetical Works, p. 55.

Blushed that effects like these she should produce,
 Worse than the deeds of galley-slaves broke loose.
 She loses in such storms her very mane,
 And fierce Licentiousness should bear the blame.
 (Ll. 318-329)

Here the word "Tumult" is a substitute for the Gordon Riots. These Riots came about when the Anti-Roman Catholic feelings of people were aroused by the 1778 Act under George III. In answer to this act, a Protestant Association was formed in London and Lord George Gordon was elected to be its president. Being a man of violent opinions, he headed an agitation demanding the repeal of the Act. London became a mob scene; chapels were destroyed; houses and businesses were looted and sacked, pillaged and ruined. The end of this destruction came when George III stepped in and ordered the military to suppress the riots; within twenty-four hours peace was restored to London, and the country was saved from a "second Troy."

In "Expostulation,"¹ as Cowper pleads his cause to his country, he alludes to the Test Act of 1673 which endeavored to exclude Papists from power. The Act demanded that all persons holding any civil or military position of trust, or admitted to the Royal Household, receive the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper as observed by the Church of England:

Hast thou by statute shoved from its design
 The Saviour's feast, his own blest bread and wine

¹Ibid., p. 95.

And made the symbols of atoning grace
 An office key, a picklock to a place,
 That infidels may prove their title good
 By an oath dipped in sacramental blood?
 A blot that will be still a blot, in spite
 Of all that grave apologists may write;
 And though a bishop toil to cleanse the stain,
 He wipes and scours the silver cup in vain,
 And hast thou sworn on every slight pretence,
 Till perjuries are common as bad pence,
 While thousands, careless of the damning sin,
 Kiss the book's outside, who ne'er look within?
 (Ll. 376-389)

The Act was not repealed until 1828.

In "Hope," Cowper alludes to the Nicene Creed,¹ which summarized the chief articles of the Christian faith at that time. It is next oldest to the Apostles' Creed. In this instance the poet thinks his own creed of doing one's best is much more effective than all the historical creeds of the famous creed makers.

In "Charity," he alludes to the crushing of a revolt of the islanders in Santo Domingo by Cortez in 1504.² The poem, "On the Loss of the Royal George," contains Cowper's version of the sinking of the Royal George in Portsmouth Harbor with Admiral Kempenfelt and nearly 800 men in 1782. Cowper's version has been declared erroneous; it did not, as Cowper said, sink because of a land-breeze which shook the shrouds; it sank because of its rotten timbers.³

¹Ibid., p. 109, l. 194.

²Ibid., p. 117, l. 40.

³Mowat, England in the Eighteenth Century, p. 97.

Even in his seclusion Cowper read a great deal; therefore, he was aware of the works and accomplishments of many of his predecessors. In "Table Talk," he alludes to Horace, Pope, Addison, Arbuthnot, and Swift, giving his interpretation of their worth and rank in the literary world as A. and B. carry on their discussion in the poem.¹ In "The Progress of Error," he alludes to Sir Isaac Newton, English mathematician, astronomer, and natural philosopher, Boyle, an Irish physicist and chemist noted for his definition of a chemical element and for the famous Boyle's Law, and to John Locke, sometimes called "the intellectual ruler of the eighteenth century" because of his contributions to psychology and education. These allusions show Cowper's wide interest in all the fields of learning.

Further evidence may be found in his frequent allusions to other works of art. In "An Epistle to Joseph Hill," he alludes to one of Terence's comic dramas;² in "Conversation," to the fierce combat between Dares and Entellus in Virgil's Aeneid;³ in "An Epistle to Robert Lloyd, Esquire," to the celebrated comedy of "Gammer Gurton's Needle,"⁴ said to have been written by Bishop Still about the year 1565; in "An

¹The Poetical Works, p. 61, ll. 608-657.

²Ibid., p. 286, l. 6.

³Ibid., p. 133, l. 198.

⁴Ibid., p. 9, ll. 39-46.

Epistle to Joseph Hill, Esquire"¹ and "Lines Addressed to Miss Macartney,"² to characters from two of Shakespeare's plays: Horatio from Hamlet and Oberon from Midsummer Night's Dream; in "Hope," to Chloe, from the Greek pastoral romance attributed to Longus;³ in "Anti-Thelyphyhora," to the works of Chaucer,⁴ probably The Canterbury Tales; in "Hope," to Lothario,⁵ the young Genoese nobleman in Nicholas Rowe's The Fair Penitent; and in "The Needless Alarm," to "Reynard's track (l. 34),⁶ which may have its origin either in Aesop's fables or in Chaucer's "Nun's Priest's Tale." The numerous allusions to Homer in Cowper's poetry indicate his interest in the classics.

Allusions in Cowper's works reveal much about his likes and dislikes, his interests and annoyances, his joys and his sorrows. His allusions to different bodies of traditional knowledge almost always function to express his personal views about religion and its relation to life.

¹Ibid., p. 287, l. 28.

²Ibid., p. 20, ll. 21-22.

³Ibid., p. 107, l. 293.

⁴Ibid., p. 332, l. 84.

⁵Ibid., p. 102, l. 28.

⁶Ibid., p. 318.

CHAPTER III

THE ORGANIC STRUCTURE OF COWPER'S POETRY

The arrangement and the development of all the poetic materials and devices in relation to the theme or the total effect of a poem are its structure. The preceding chapters have presented the matter of Cowper's poetry; this present chapter will be concerned with the organic structure of his poems. It will concern the arranging and holding of the matter in artistic form. It will be an attempt to analyze the manner in which the structuring of the poem grows out of or is inherent in the poetic experience itself and the extent to which it functions to determine the meaning of the poem. The meaning, we may consider, is that end which is produced by the union of matter and structure; it should be matter completely and satisfyingly expressed. Theme is important and must be considered in relation to meaning because it is the main informing or controlling idea of the work; theme is the expression of the poet's main concern or his attitude towards his subject. Such analysis and evaluation should lead to an understanding of the significance of his work.¹

¹In my method I have been influenced by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, Understanding Poetry (New York: Henry

The previous chapters have shown Cowper's main attitude towards his life. His poetic experience is an expression or reflection of his own actual experiences. His poetry is a record of his pietistic life and almost constant suffering from religious despondency evident from his earliest poetic utterances to his last original poem, "The Castaway."

One of the most prevalently recurrent themes of Cowper's poetry is his morbid self-doubt, of which there is a concrete representation in the Olney Hymns, but this theme appears also in works not of a specifically religious nature. It is found, for example, in the opening lines of Book III of The Task¹ in the figure of the person who has lost his way and who wanders in woods and swamp:

As one, who, long in thickets and in brakes
Entangled, winds now this way and now that
His devious course uncertain, seeking home;
Or having long in miry ways been foiled
And sore discomfited, from slough to slough
Plunging, and half despairing to escape,
If chance at length he finds a greensward smooth
And faithful to the foot, his spirits rise,
He cherups brisk his ear-erecting steed,
And winds his way with pleasure and with ease.
(Ll. 1-10)

Holt and Company, 1958), and Fred B. Millet, Reading Poetry (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1950). These writers, of course, have not analyzed Cowper's poems.

¹The Poetical Works, p. 215.

The details of the imagery are patterned to develop idea and at the same time to evoke feeling. The movement of the passage suggests the wandering movement of the person lost. Indirect in order and interrupted and slowed down by qualifying elements, the sentence is predominantly slow and devious in tempo. The formal metric pattern is iambic pentameter; the particular rhythmic movement within this regular measured patterning fits specific sense and feeling and changes as these change. The heavy accenting of long, thickets, and brakes in line 1, for example, creates the impression of a slowed, heavy thrashing movement that comes to a culmination in entangled; here a momentary cessation of any forward movement is dictated by the stress of the word itself and by the syntactical pause before winds. Accentuation in the rest of the second line is lightened, almost neutralized. Winds is quantitatively long but not heavy in stress. "First this way and then that" has little variation of stress and does not move forward easily, smoothly; there is a certain tenseness that is increased by the rather fretfully harsh and unpleasant sound of the words. With the slight lengthening and the somewhat more marked stress of syllables in the rest of the phrase "His dubious course uncertain," there is more movement forward, but there is a tension between the slow, heavy weariness of movement and

the straining forward deviously, uncertainly. The pause before "seeking home" and the length and clear stress make this phrase stand alone, somewhat separated from what precedes it; the effect is particularly significant in developing the meaning of the passage.

The specific imagistic details of the figure blend with the sound and movement to build the meaning denotatively and connotatively. Entangled, for example, focuses the developing image most graphically, concretely and specifically. Clear evocation of sensory experience--visual, tactical and even auditory--combines with emotional connotations and with the specific denotational meaning of the word in its particular context. Certain words and phrases join with the sense of being lost and the feeling of uncertainty to give the impression of a long duration of time: long, now this way and now that and devious; the slowness and deviousness of time suggested by these words and created also by the movement of the passage help to determine and to intensify the particular experience and the specific meaning of the passage.

Cowper has arranged and developed the poetic materials and devices of the passage in order to create its meaning. Such devices as rhythm, sound, sentence patterning, and diction help to give artistic form to the emotional, sensuous, and intellectual materials of the passage. The poetic experience, it is clear, has dictated the particular ordering or

structuring of the materials. Structure is organic, growing as it does out of the poetic experience itself and determining also the meaning of the passage.

Cowper goes on to develop the theme of self-doubt and uncertainty in another similitude, lines 4-6, the centralizing figure of which is the person "mired" in "slough" after "slough" "half despairing of escape." The "Greensward smooth/ And faithful to the foot" that he may chance upon and that may make "his spirits rise" provides "escape" but one that at best seems incomplete and temporary. Cowper says that he, in his poem (and probably in his living), means "to tread" a "Cleanlier road." There is no sense of real release or escape here. In one of his early poems, "The Certainty of Death," Death is the personification of all the torments, doubts, and miseries that surge around him. Life is merely the survival of a tempest and the checker-board of fate:

Mortals! around your destined heads
Thick fly the shafts of Death,
And lo! the savage spoiler spreads
A thousand toils beneath.

In vain we trifle with our fate;
Try every art in vain;
At best we but prolong the date,
And lengthen out our pain.

Fondly we think all danger fled,
For Death is ever nigh;
Outstrips our unavailing speed,
Or meets us as we fly.

Thus the wrecked mariner may strive
 Some desert shore to gain,
 Secure of life, if he survive
 The fury of the main.

But there, to famine doomed a prey,
 Finds the mistaken wretch
 He but escaped the troubled sea,
 To perish on the beach.

Since then in vain we strive to guard
 Our frailty from the foe,
 Lord, let me live not unprepared
 To meet the final blow.¹

For a moment, Cowper may lull himself into thinking that "all danger [is] fled" and that his life will be a "cleanlier road," but in a moment he reviews the hopelessness of his plight and sees hope drawing away until he is left with only a longing for faith in God's everlasting love to guide him safely.

His self-doubt and uncertainty are less, it is true, but his meaning to make them less is what is particularly striking in the lines from The Task and the lines on Death. They seem none the less real and still persistent even though they may be repressed. The tone of The Task up to this point and continuing throughout the poem is persistently, even if somewhat gently, melancholy.

What can be seen here is evidenced throughout Cowper's life and his poetry. Even when he was writing the hymns-- and there were moments of apparent assurance--he was never

¹Ibid., p. 3.

free from the morbid sensations that kept him wavering between hope of salvation and complete damnation.

"Praise for the Fountain Opened" or "The Fountain Filled with Blood," one of Cowper's best-known hymns, expresses a belief that God has reprieved him momentarily from eternal perdition:

There is a fountain filled with blood
 Drawn from Emmanuel's veins;
 And sinners, plunged beneath that flood,
 Lose all their guilty stains.

The dying thief rejoiced to see
 That fountain in his day;
 And there have I, as vile as he,
 Washed all my sins away.

Dear dying Lamb, thy precious blood
 Shall never lose its power,
 Till all the ransomed church of God
 Be saved to sin no more.

E'er since, by faith, I saw the stream
 Thy flowing wounds supply,
 Redeeming love has been my theme,
 And shall be till I die.

Then in a nobler, sweeter song,
 I'll sing thy power to save;
 When this poor lisping, stammering tongue
 Lies silent in the grave.

Lord, I believe thou hast prepared
 (Unworthy though I be)
 For me a blood-bought free reward,
 A golden harp for me!

'Tis strung and tuned for endless years,
 And formed by power divine,
 To sound in God the Father's ears
 No other name but thine.¹

¹Ibid., p. 28.

The title of this hymn gives the first indication of the meaning. In it there is a symbolic epitomization of Christ's sacrificial death for man. Zechariah 13:1 provides the text for the hymn:

In that day there shall be a fountain opened to
the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem
for sin and for uncleanness.

The fountain that is suggested here is a fountain of purgation, the only means by which man's soul can be redeemed. The first two lines allude to the Crucifixion, the sacrificial death of Christ. The "blood / Drawn from Emmanuel's veins" repeats the idea of the "Fountain Opened." The fountain is traditionally the source of life; here the opening of the fountain, filled with Christ's blood, provides for the purgation of man from his unclean and sinful state. The image of the "Fountain Opened" is the piercing of Christ's body to set aflow the cleansing and redeeming blood.

The "Dear dying Lamb," Christ, is the promised new dispensation for sinful man, a substitute for the old Hebraic sacrificial Pascal Lamb of the Passover. The double symbolism here presents the "dying Lamb" as the Hebraic sacrificial Lamb and at the same time Christ the redeeming God as a Lamb submissive to the will of the Father becoming man's sacrificial Lamb.

The "dying thief" who "rejoiced to see / That fountain" alludes to the thief on the Cross whose recognition of Christ

won his salvation. He may also be a symbol for sinful man who needs to be purged of his sins. Cowper likens himself to the "dying thief"; this identification ties Cowper, in his sin and in his need, to the "dying thief" and to sinful man for whom Christ spilled his blood.

The tone is one of assurance of salvation on the part of Cowper. Both the thief and Cowper rejoice in their realization of their salvation. Cowper sees redeeming love as the one significant theme of his saved soul. He concretizes the state of the saved soul after death in the symbol of a "nobler, sweeter song" and of the "blood-bought free reward" of the "golden harp" to sound in praise of God. Cowper's use of the symbol of the golden harp may be an allusion to the "harpers harping with their harps, at the time of the Last Judgment," the song that "no man could learn . . . but the hundred and forty and four thousand which were redeemed from the earth."¹

The figure "blood-bought free reward" concentrates and unifies the various elements of the poem. It looks back to purgation and looks ahead to redemption as the result of purgation, fusing them. The main imagistic details in the first part of the poem relate to the blood-filled fountain. In the image of the sinners "plunged beneath that flood," plunged and flood magnify the fountain to a vastness sufficient

¹Rev. 14: 2-3.

to hold the everlasting supply of precious blood for man
 "Drawn from Emmanuel's veins."

The line, "Dear dying Lamb, thy precious blood," suggests the cost of the divine blood which is being shed. Imagistically the words dear and precious show the love that inspired the sacrifice and also the preciousness of this Lamb to man because it provided the redemption. Precious also suggests the great worth of the sacrificial blood both because of its divineness and because of its worth to man. Closely related to these imagistic details are those which grow out of man's need to be cleansed of his sin: these are epitomized in the guilty stains washed clean in the flood of blood. Imagistically the details build to a climax in washed; this climax is enforced by the length and stress of the word, metrically, in its line: Instead of being the lightly stressed first syllable of the iambic foot, washed receives a long full stress that gives it a slowed sweeping effect.

Structurally, the first three stanzas have built up Christ's redemptive sacrifice for man. Stanza four moves forward to develop the theme that the redeemed soul becomes a hymn of praise to God. The meaning is created through images related to music. The song of the redeemed mortal is sung with the "poor lisping, stammering tongue." Contrasting vividly with this, the song of the redeemed soul in heaven

sounds as a golden harp into a concord of melodious praise of God. The sound and rhythm of the last stanza (the first and third lines particularly) create the effect of the plucked tones of the harp. Cowper develops the matter of the poem until it swells into the song of the redemptive soul in praise of God. The manner in which the hymn has been structured has been determined by the specific religious experience that Cowper recreates. At the same time, the structuring of the poetic matter and devices helps to create the meaning of the hymn. The structure of the hymn is an organic one.

Cowper in the hymn expresses a tone of assurance and joy in anticipation of redemption. A note of doubt intrudes upon his certainty of being saved: "Unworthy though I be" suggests a sense of sin that is not ordinarily felt by one who has experienced complete conversion. This doubt is evident in most of his hymns even though they grow out of the period of his life when he seemed tranquil and secure. In his hymn, "Walking with God,"¹ he expresses a desire: "Oh! for a closer walk with God" (l. 1). His reference to Genesis 5:24 is an allusion to Enoch's walk with God: his godliness and his translation into immortality without suffering a mortal death.

¹The Poetical Works, p. 24.

Cowper feels himself in a state not in union with God at all; he laments the loss of his blessedness:

Where is the blessedness I knew
When first I saw the Lord?
Where is the soul-refreshing view
Of Jesus and his word? (Ll. 5-8)

He pleads to be taken back into the grace of the Lord. The consciousness of sin prevails throughout the hymn. The walk with God that he laments having lost provides the unifying symbol of the poem.

Even though Cowper feels that his relationship with God is very important, in "Light Shining Out of Darkness,"¹ he realizes that God is his own interpreter and He will make it plain; therefore, man cannot attain an understanding of God unless it is His will. Structurally, the whole concept of the hymn builds on light and dark, awareness and unawareness; the images function to show a God who will work out in His own time and His own way, the fate of man, here in a predominantly benign way.

In "The Shining Light," a sense of impending doom is prevalent:

My former hopes are fled,
My terror now begins;
I feel, alas! that I am dead
In trespasses and sins.

Ah, whither shall I fly?
I hear the thunder roar;
The law proclaims destruction nigh,
And vengeance at the door.

¹Ibid., p. 34.

When I review my ways,
 I dread impending doom:
 But sure a friendly whisper says,
 "Flee from the wrath to come."

I see, or think I see,
 A glimmering from afar;
 A beam of day, that shines for me,
 To save me from despair.

Forerunner of the sun,
 It marks the pilgrim's way;
 I'll gaze upon it while I run,
 And watch the rising day.¹

He is wavering between belief and disbelief; he feels there is a providential guidance. The functionally significant image in this hymn is expressed in the last lines:

I'll gaze upon it [a beam of day] while I run,
 And watch the rising day.

Whatever promise he has to save him from despair is only a beam. This beam of light represents a glimpse of the glory and brightness of heaven in contrast to the darkness of his world of sin. The image that impresses itself upon us here is that of a figure running, trying to cling to a beam which is his only hope of being saved from despair.

This is not far, tonally, from the profound religious despair of Cowper's last original poem, "The Castaway," in which religious despair finds its symbol in despair of The Castaway:

Obscurest night involved the sky,
 The Atlantic billows roared,
 When such a destined wretch as I,
 Washed headlong from on board,

¹Ibid., p. 33.

Of friends, of hope, of all bereft,
His floating home forever left.

No braver chief could Albion boast
Than he with whom he went,
Nor ever ship left Albion's coast
With warmer wishes sent.
He loved them both, but both in vain,
Nor him beheld, nor her again.

Not long beneath the whelming brine,
Expert to swim, he lay;
Nor soon he felt his strength decline,
Or courage die away;
But waged with death a lasting strife,
Supported by despair of life.

He shouted: nor his friends had failed
To check the vessel's course,
But so the furious blast prevailed,
That, pitiless perforce,
They left their outcast mate behind,
And scudded still before the wind.

Some succour yet they could afford;
And such as storms allow,
The cask, the coop, the floated cord,
Delayed not to bestow.
But he (they knew) nor ship nor shore,
Whate'er they gave, should visit more.

Nor, cruel as it seemed, could he
Their haste himself condemn,
Aware that flight, in such a sea,
Alone could rescue them;
Yet bitter felt it still to die
Deserted, and his friends so nigh.

He long survives, who lives an hour
In ocean, self-upheld;
And so long he, with unspent power,
His destiny repelled;
And ever, as the minutes flew,
Entreated help, or cried "Adieu!"

At length, his transient respite past,
His comrades, who before
Had heard his voice in every blast,
Could catch the sound no more:
For then, by toil subdued, he drank
The stifling wave, and then he sank.

No poet wept him; but the page
 Of narrative sincere,
 That tells his name, his worth, his age,
 Is wet with Anson's tear:
 And tears by bards or heroes shed
 Alike immortalize the dead.

I therefore purpose not, or dream,
 Descanting on his fate,
 To give the melancholy theme
 A more enduring date:
 But misery still delights to trace
 Its semblance in another's case.

No voice divine the storm allayed,
 No light propitious shone,
 When, snatched from all effectual aid,
 We perished, each alone:
 But I beneath a rougher sea,
 And whelmed in deeper gulfs than he.¹

Here again, Cowper is likening his state to that of the man who is lost at sea from Anson's ship. He establishes an identification between himself and the lost mariner whom he refers to as "such a destined wretch as I." Previous chapters have pointed out that all his life Cowper had felt that he was destined to despair; this sense of impending doom pervades his poetry from the earliest of his works onward to this final expression of fatedness.

The actual story of the seaman's being lost at sea is a straightforward account of a death at sea that is supposedly recorded by Anson in his ship's log. It becomes translated into symbolical meaning as it fuses with the story of Cowper, "The Castaway." The lost seaman and Cowper are

¹Ibid., p. 400.

both castaways lost in a storm, the seaman in a real storm at sea and Cowper in a sea of spiritual despair.

Earlier he could say that "[God] plants his footsteps upon the sea, / And rides upon the storm."¹ For the castaways, however,

No voice divine the storm allayed,
No light propitious shone,
When, snatched from all effectual aid,
[They] perished, each alone.²

They are left without any help from man or God. Cowper has identified his plight with that of the lost seaman because, as he says,

. . . Misery still delights to trace
Its semblance in another's case. (Ll. 59-60)

Cowper expresses a striking feature of their cases when he says: "We perished, each alone." Here we have a sense of a strange comfort. In the "each alone," however, there is a separateness or an unlikeness that shatters the kinship of the two and prepares for the even more striking difference between their cases that develops in the last two lines. The seaman has died a mortal death, the physical horror of which has been pictured in vivid realistic detail. The horror of Cowper's death, we suddenly realize with shocked surprise, is not that of a mortal death but that of the death of his very soul:

¹Ibid., p. 34, "Light Shining Out of Darkness," ll. 3-4.

²Ibid., p. 400, "The Castaway," ll. 61-64.

But I beneath a rougher sea,
 And whelmed in deeper gulfs than he.
 (Ll. 65-66)

The "rougher sea" is the storm that may be equated with the spiritually doomed life. Cowper's struggle for survival in this storm is his spiritual struggle against damnation. The "deeper gulfs" in which he is "whelmed" are the very depths of hell. Significantly, Cowper, in the poem, has not yet died physically. His death has to be a spiritual death. It is the profound irrevocable religious despair of his closing years.

Emphasizing this contrast between the two castaways is the rhythm of the lines that recount their final plight:

For then, by toil subdued, he drank
 The stifling wave, and then he sank.
 (Ll. 47-48)

What little struggle there is in the first line ceases completely with the phrase: "He drank / The stifling wave." There is something very quick and final in the last phrase: "and then he sank." This effect is built by the syntactical pause that comes after the opening phrase, "For then," and after the somewhat longer slowing-down phrase "by toil subdued." The emphasis in stress and end-position of drank causes a breath pause that fits with the meaning, "he drank / The stifling wave." The short and equally stressed words of the final phrase are without tension or strain. There is a sense of simple sinking to rest.

The rhythm of the lines that tell Cowper's fate has no such sense of coming to rest. The movement is that of a turbulent, storm-tossed sea. This effect is created by the qualitative and quantitative variations within the regular iambic tetrameter patterning. The movement of the first line rises and falls with definite accent with a strong rising and lengthening of rough- and dropping with -er sea; whelmed receives the greatest quantitative prolonging and swells even within itself to fall slightly and rise again in deeper, which repeats the movement of rougher of the preceding line; there is a lengthening and flattening out or dropping in gulfs and a rather choppily added-on effect in the final phrase than he. The movement is left somewhat suspended rather than being brought to final rest. At the end of the poem Cowper is left at sea. Ironically, however, the drowned sailor is immortalized through the records of his death in the ship's log, whereas Cowper has no hope of immortality.

In the foregoing study this lack of hope has been evident in the poet's existence and in notable portions of his work. His religious poems, especially, are deeply characteristic of their author. The most frequent organizing concept of his poetry has its basis in a religious spiritual experience. For Cowper, a religious poet, the dominant themes are sin, death, God, and redemption; for Cowper, a nature poet, the themes are seclusion and peace of mind

growing out of and involving inherent religious principles. At times, as we have seen, Cowper the poet was completely absorbed with these themes. He was never free of self-doubts and fears that associated themselves in his mind with the problems of salvation and damnation.

The more our knowledge of Cowper's works broadens and deepens, the greater is our awareness of the poet as a unique personality. He may be reasonably considered, according to Gilbert Thomas, as a "custodian of religious truth,"¹ for the religious impulse was the strongest element in him. His strong love of nature led him to focus his poetic imagination on God and nature. His poetic imagery, drawn from scriptural, mythological, and historical sources furnishes us many clues to a better understanding of William Cowper.

¹Thomas, p. 286.

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