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Faith, Doubt and Despair in William Cowper's Selected Poetry and Prose

1. Introduction

1.1. Cowper's Popularity in the Past

From a modern perspective it may seem surprising that William Cowper (1731–1800), occupying a safe but modest place in English literary history as a poet of the Age of Sensibility or a Pre-Romantic, was from the end of the eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth "the most widely read – at least, in England – of any English poet" (Newey 1982: 1). Between 1782 – the year of his literary debut – and 1837 – the year of the publication of Robert Southey's *Life and Works of Cowper* (in fifteen volumes) – there were over a hundred editions of his poetry in Britain, and nearly fifty in America. Although his first individual volume of poems, published when he was fifty one, won no great acclaim (it contained mostly his "Moral Satires"), *The Task* (1785), a poem in six books, written in blank verse, combining mock-heroic with sentimental and moralistic elements, immediately achieved a status of the poet's masterpiece. By 1812 Cowper's publisher Joseph Johnson profited enormously from selling the poet's works (the sale brought him around 10 000 pounds).

The Romantics, especially Byron, saw Cowper's fame as earned mostly due to the spirit of the times: the Evangelical Revival of the late eighteenth century, which promoted humanitarian values and emotional zeal as well as religious rebirth, created an audience for his poetry, unlikely to be so numerous at any other time (Hartley 1960: 6). There is no doubt that most of Cowper's poems are closely related to his faith. As the author of not only Olney Hymns, but of *The Task* and of Moral Satires, he was perceived as the Champion of Christianity and, as such, popular among the readers sympathizing with the Evangelical Movement and defending religious values. His reputation showed a marked decline towards the end of the nineteenth century, but, as a modern critic rightly

points out, "Cowper speaks with an individual [. . .] voice, and although he is unlikely to enjoy any future vogue, he has something to offer which will never fall entirely out of fashion or out of date" (Enright 1966: 387).

1.2. Modern Interest in Cowper

It was not a secret to Cowper's contemporary readers that in the main body of his work there were a few poems that did not seem to breathe a purely Christian spirit. It was known to his friends and publishers that some of his poetry had been inspired by the experience of acute despair that had periodically haunted the poet since he was thirty two. Those attacks of derangement were not originally caused by religion; on the contrary – the recovery from the first severe attack of depression of 1763 (which kept him in its hold for eighteen months) came through religious experience which made him join an evangelical community in Huntington. However, the next attacks of insanity, which appeared roughly every 9–10 years, took the form of religious mania, which in that case was an intense fear that he had been irrevocably excluded from among the elect, that he would not be saved, would not be among those to whom God's mercy might be extended. In my opinion this experience of doubt and despair that haunted the poet who was a deeply religious man may be interesting to modern readers whose own religious views are often touched by skepticism and despondency. The way in which such attitudes are expressed in Cowper's poetry and prose will be the concern of the present paper. The material discussed will include passages from longer didactic poems, as well as short lyrics; the reference will also be made to his autobiographical writings (*Memoir* and letters). The paper will focus on realistic images of mental suffering in Cowper's selected prose passages and some of Cowper's satires, on more impassioned expressions of states of despair in his lyrical verse, as well as on subtle disclosure of fear and distress in congregational singing, i.e. his hymns. In his poems the states of depression and spiritual darkness acquire a poetic representation as personal experience for the first time in the eighteenth century.

2. Realistic Images of Mental Suffering

2.1. Cowper's Memoir

The text that provides reliable information about Cowper's condition at the beginning of his career is his autobiographical *Memoir*, which he

wrote in the years 1766–1767, after the recovery from the derangement of 1763. This first attack of insanity had been triggered off by the perspective of a public examination that Cowper was to undergo in order to get a post of Clerkship of the Journals in the House of Lords. The closer the examination drew, the more restless and fearful he became. In the end, a day before his appearance in public, Cowper tried to commit suicide, but he failed and was confined to an asylum in St. Albans. His *Memoir* reveals to the reader Cowper's growing stress and paranoia: he recalls feeling an increasing fear of the world and men before the approaching public examination and a painful sense of isolation. The poet speaks of these terrifying experiences in simple language, yet modulated in poetic cadences: "I never went into the street, but I thought the people stared and laughed at me. . . . They who knew me seemed to avoid me; and if they spoke to me they seemed to do it in scorn" (*Memoir*: 376). He suffered from lack of sleep and extreme tiredness (typical symptoms of psychosis) and became more and more afraid of men: "I slept generally an hour in the evening . . . and when I awoke, it was some time before I could walk steadily . . . I reeled and staggered like a drunken man. The eyes of men I could not bear . . ." (374). This was accompanied by a death-wish, the vision of death as a delivery from mental and spiritual suffering: "I spent the rest of the day in a kind of stupid insensibility, undetermined as to the manner of dying, but still bent on self-murder, as the only possible deliverance" (376).

When Cowper was in confinement at St. Albans, he received several pieces of advice what to do in order to overcome the state of depression. One of the remedies suggested to him was reading the Bible, but in spite of his willingness to follow this path, the poet could not fight the despair which already at this time was related to his sense of sin (because of attempts at suicide which he thought God would never forgive). Eventually, on one day in June 1764 he "flung [himself] in a chair near the window, and seizing a Bible there, ventured once more to it for comfort and instruction." The text he found was a passage in the Epistle of St Paul (Romans, iii, 25). What happened then was recognized by him as the workings of the grace of God, since his doubts and fears disappeared instantly: "Immediately I received strength to believe, and the full beams of the Sun of Righteousness shone upon me" (Quinlan 1953: 379).

When we look at its form and content, Cowper's *Memoir* reminds us, on the one hand, of the spiritual confessions written by seventeenth-century Puritans (e.g. John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sin-*

ners, 1666), and, on the other, of the autobiographical texts related to the practice of extensive letter-writing which originated in the seventeenth century and was widely pursued in the eighteenth. It is generally known that as a form of a secular autobiography the memoir usually concentrated less on the feelings associated with spiritual experiences and more on external detail and description of the physical condition of the author (Wynne-Davies 1995: 383). Although Cowper's aim in writing his *Memoir* is not entirely secular, there are no mystic experiences described there. What the readers find in this autobiographical piece are the analyses of the author's emotions and descriptions of his activities or of his lethargy. Still, the genre of the spiritual confession provides a more intimate tone to the narrative and a particular perspective to the recorded events. Cowper interprets what he thought and felt at the time of his depression and conversion from the point of view of the final happy solution to his problems, that is God's granting the author the joy and hope of salvation.

2.2. Moral Satires

A parallel to the type of writing represented by Cowper's *Memoir* is found in his Moral Satires, long poems of meditative and didactic character, that formed the bulk of his first individual volume of poetry published in 1782. In two of the Satires, "Hope" and "Retirement," there are descriptions of persons in deep depression. The passage in "Hope" (lines 688–711) is noteworthy because of well-chosen detail of appearance and behaviour:

> Alas, how chang'd! – Expressive of his mind,
> His eyes are sunk, arms folded, head reclin'd;
> Those awful syllables, hell, death, and sin,
> Though whisper'd, plainly tell what works within;
> That conscience there performs her proper part
> And writes a doomsday sentence on his heart! (ll. 688–692, p. 74)[1]

The passage is particularly striking since it reveals not only Cowper's power of observation, but also a touch of personal involvement in the description of a man in the clutches of despair.

> He hears the notice of the clock perplex'd,
> And cries – perhaps eternity strikes next!

[1] All quotations of Cowper's poems come from *The poetical works of William Cowper*, ed. by H.S. Miltord (1911), London: Oxford University Press.

> Sweet music is no longer music here,
> And laughter sounds like madness in his ear:
> His grief the world of all her pow'r disarms;
> Wine has no taste, and beauty has no charms. (ll. 699–704, p. 74)

The passage, however, ends on a hopeful note (appropriate in the poem entitled "Hope"): the poor desperate man will learn that it is only from "God's holy word" that the fountain of hope – leading to a revival of spirit, a rebirth – can come.

The passage from "Retirement" (ll. 343–364), unlike the excerpt from "Hope," is not an apparently neutral, third-person narration and realistic description, but is a direct address to the victim of despair, a "sad sufferer under nameless ill, / That yields not to the touch of human skill" (ll. 343–44). The speaker knowingly refers to the painful symptoms of the illness in the context of the man's inability to experience the beauty of nature:

> To thee the day-spring, and the blaze of noon,
> The purple ev'ning and resplendent moon,
> The starts that, sprinkled o'er the vault of night,
> Seem drops descending in a show'r of light,
> Shine not, or undesir'd and hated shine,
> Seen through the medium of a cloud like thine. (ll. 347–52, p. 117)

But, like in "Hope," the remedy is suggested at the end of the passage: the speaker encourages the afflicted person to look for God's help: "Yet seek him, in his favour life is found / All bliss beside – a shadow or a sound" (ll. 353–54). The joy found in the nature seen through the eyes of the person who has recovered from his affliction reminds the reader of the feelings of happiness expressed in similar circumstances in *Memoir*:

> Nature, assuming a more lovely face,
> Borrowing a beauty from the works of grace,
> Shall be despis'd and overlook'd no more,
> Shall fill the with delights unfelt before. (ll. 357–60, p. 117)

Unfortunately, as we know from Cowper's biography the joy of life he felt as a re-born Christian was not long-lasting. The constitutional depression returned after several years (1773), and although the depression was not so acute as that of 1763 and he did not have to be confined in an asylum, he suffered more after the cloud of derangement was lifted.

He was left much sadder and more bruised after the second fit of insanity because the recurrence of the illness was to him the proof that God did not forgive him. His belief in God's mercy was waning and the feeling of elation and happiness, experienced at the recovery and conversion of 1764, would not be repeated.

2.3. Cowper's Letters

What Cowper felt after the depression of 1763 and 1773, and would feel later in life, when he experienced three more attacks of insanity, is expressed in his letters to the Rev. John Newton, his friend and mentor, an evangelical divine and curate of the parish of Olney, to whose collection of hymns (published in 1779) the poet contributed, but whose religious optimism and vigour he could never share. Among many moving letters that he wrote to Newton the one of 13 January 1784 is particularly worthy of reference in this context. In it Cowper first tells his friend how he views the passed year – 1783:

> I looked back upon all the passages and occurrences of it [the old year], as a traveler looks back upon a wilderness, through which he has passed with weariness, and sorrow of heart [. . .]. For, more unhappy than the traveller with whom I set out, pass through what difficulties I may, through whatever dangers and afflictions, I am not a whit nearer home, unless a dungeon may be called so. (Hadley 1925: 50–51)

It is significant that he speaks of his life – in a traditional Puritan fashion – as a journey through wilderness, here one part of the journey being the year 1783 which has just passed. The juxtaposition of the words "home" and "dungeon" in reference to the destination of his journey is very functional in the description of his spiritual state: home is evocative of safety and comfort, feeling of security and love, whereas dungeon suggests the darkness of spirit, and lack of hope, perhaps even damnation of the soul. The weather that is mentioned in the letter also corresponds to Cowper's depressive mood and he does not believe that the change of season will help him:

> The weather is an exact emblem of my mind in its present state. A thick fog envelops everything, and at the same time it freezes intensely. You will tell me that this cold gloom will be succeeded by a cheerful spring, and endevour to encourage me to hope for a spiritual change resembling it – but it will be lost labour. Nature revives again; but a soul once slain lives no more. (p. 51)

Towards the end of the letter, in anticipation of Newton's consolatory words, Cowper asks several agonizing "why" questions which express his despair over his own case, e.g. "If I am recoverable, why am I thus? Why crippled and made useless in the church, just, at that time of life, when my judgment and experience being matured, I might be most useful?". Cowper knows the answer as well as any other believer, but that cannot lift his spirits. He has not lost his religious faith, but his depression makes him unable to cherish hope that should follow religious belief, namely that his suffering has a meaning and should be unquestionably accepted. The final words of the letter testify to his opinion that his illness will never leave him and there will not be any change for the better in this respect in his earthly life

> I forestall the answer: – God's ways are mysterious, and He giveth no account of His matters: an answer that would serve my purpose as well as theirs that use it. There is a mystery in my destruction, and in time it shall be explained. (p. 52)

3. Poetry of Despair and Doubt

3.1. Poems of Affliction

Among Cowper's lyrical poems that either deal with or allude to his illness the most interesting are the two that illustrate his state of derangement in 1773. There is no doubt about the occasion of their composition as it is mentioned in their titles: "Lines Written During a Short Period of Insanity" (1774) and "The Shrubbery: Written in a Time of Affliction" (1773). These poems – as a few more that he wrote about his condition – are, in fact, unprecedented in English poetry: it is really for the first time that attacks of madness and the feelings they inspired became the subject of lyrical poetry – the poetry that is very personal, almost confessional in character. What is also especially interesting about these two poems is the fact that they present two sides of this acute depression: violent, negative emotions in "Lines" and low spirits, extreme apathy in "The Shrubbery."

As his critics and biographers point out, "Lines Written During a Period of Insanity" was composed in particularly tragic circumstances, just after Cowper tried to drown himself in the river Ouse. Full of violent emotions, such as, for example, self-loathing and indignation, the speaker

bravely faces his situation, describing it in very strong terms from the very beginning of the poem:

> Hatred and vengeance, my eternal portion,
> Scarce can endure delay of execution,
> Wait, with impatient readiness, to seize my
> Soul in a moment. (p. 289)

He considers himself as "damn'd below Judas; more abhorr'd than he was" and in the third stanza gives a desperate estimation of his position, rejected by God and not wanted in Hell:

> Man disavows, and Deity disowns me:
> Hell might afford my miseries a shelter;
> Therefore hell keeps her ever hungry mouth all
> Bolted against me. (p. 290)

The speaker, "weary, faint, trembling with a thousand terrors," knows that he is to receive God's judgment which in his view will be more severe than the sentence passed by God on Abiram, who – a rebel against Moses – was "sent quick and howling" to Hell. The speaker thinks that what he endures is a worse fate because he "in a fleshly tomb" is "buried above ground." The terrifying metaphor thus refers to his state as that of life-in-death, as the condition of isolation and extreme degradation, as agony with no end in view. A modern psychologist would certainly consider the nightmarish imagery of the poem as very well chosen to depict the condition of acute depression, nowadays much better known in scientific terms, but nevertheless equally terrifying to patients and their doctors. The form of the poem was also very well chosen: the poem is written in particularly difficult metre (saphhics), which allows the poet to express the agitation of the mind in the situation of extreme stress and exposure to terrible illusions. It seems unbelievable, also to the critics and biographers, that the poet in such a distressing condition could show such a degree of formal control over the most upsetting matter. Vincent Newey aptly comments on Cowper's skill revealed in this poem admiring the poet's "treading a fine edge between self-command and frenzy, or between art and hysteria" (Newey 1982: 49).

"The Shrubbery," the other poem inspired by the same fit of derangement, begins with a complaint about the speaker's inner turmoil and feeling of restlessness, the beautiful and peaceful natural scene:

Oh, 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! (p. 292)

It soon turns out, however, that the speaker's problem is not really being agitated, but being unable to feel anything apart from overwhelming sadness, experiencing a state of deep melancholy. This casts its shadow over everything near him and separates him from the life around him. What is left with him is apathy, blankness, or dejection – as the Romantics would soon call this emotional condition. To the poet whose greatest pleasure was walking in the country, the beauty of natural surroundings has no value any more: "this glassy stream," "the spreading pine," "those alders quiv'ring to the breeze," "this moss-grown alley" have lost their attraction for him and have no power over him any longer (the fourth stanza). The final (sixth) stanza of this regular, deceitfully peaceful poem sums up the speaker's position as hopeless: no matter where he goes, he cannot find anything but sadness and grief that relate both to his past and his future:

Me fruitful scenes and prospects waste
  Alike admonish not to roam;
These tell me of enjoyment past.
  And those of sorrows yet to come. (p. 293)

3.2. Cowper's Hymns

Olney Hymns, containing nearly 350 poems, included only 67 compositions by William Cowper, the rest having been provided by John Newton who, as the editor of the volume, placed his friend's hymns in the sections entitled "Seeking" and "Conflict." This fact as well as other circumstances connected with the appearance of *Olney Hymns* have encouraged some critics to look for evidence of Cowper's despair also in these religious verses. It was not a secret that the work on the joint volume, started in 1771, soon proved too strenuous and stressful for Cowper and that he could not continue hymn-writing after his recovery from the derangement of 1773. It is also easily noticed that Cowper's poems are generally different in tone and character from those of Newton, which sound much more confident and reassuring. Although it might be tempting to assume that despair must underlie Cowper's religious verse of the early 1770s (cf. Routley 1951: 109; Cecil 1944: 140–41), textual analysis does not con-

firm such opinions. J.R. Watson, the author of the monumental study *The English Hymn*, has convincingly argued that Cowper's hymns often reveal "honest uncertainty," but never despair. (Watson 1999: 282) Still, there is no denying that there are notes of tentativeness and hesitation in them, rather unexpected in congregational singing which – like all popular art – "must have that touch of the obvious" (Nicholson 1960: 14).

Hymns to be sung in the church are expected to be communal expressions of accepted religious dogma and to support the beliefs of the congregation. Looked at from this angle, Cowper's hymns which sound less assertive and more hesitant, appear to be more individualistic and personal and, as such, they invite the reader to look for a biographical context to them. Written by the person who overcame the first attack of insanity and found comfort in religious belief, the hymns reveal – like his *Memoir* – a clear memory of fears and of doubt concerning not the existence of God and God's role in human life, but the poet's own value as a Christian. Obviously, in the hymns – unlike in his secular poetry – there is no mention, nor even any allusion to the agonies of mental affliction the poet had recently suffered. What is found in the hymns are only reflections of the depressive condition on the sentiment the poems express and a generally melancholy and hesitant tone that results from numerous questions or alternative suggestions put forward in the texts of the hymns. Among the poems that express such uncertainties are the best known and most often anthologized hymns, such as "Walking with God" (I), "The Contrite Heart" (IX) and "The Shining Light" (XXXII). A closer look at them will allow us to see how these texts testify to the influence of Cowper's affliction on the contents and style of his religious poems.

"Walking with God" deals with an important evangelical theme – that of closeness to God, expressed as a yearning for divine companionship in life providing aim, peace and security to the speaker:

> Oh! for a closer walk with God,
> A calm and heav'nly frame;
> A light to shine upon the road
> That leads me to the Lamb! (p. 433)

The yearning is intensified through the memories of happiness and joy that the speaker experienced in the past as the state of "blessedness," peacefulness and "the soul-refreshing" contact with the word of Jesus. All these experiences are gone now and, what is significant, "they have left an

aching void / The world can never fill." Although the verse is rhythmical and assured (which evokes regularity in walking) and the wish of the first stanza is repeated as a conclusion to the speaker's appeals ("So shall my walk be close with God . . ."), J.R. Watson is right saying that "the verse implies distance, agitation, and the absence of light" (Watson 1999: 294). The poignant complaint about "an aching void" and a moving plea to the Holy Dove as "Sweet messenger of rest" bring to mind the sense of emptiness and dejection, as well as restlessness which were Cowper's characteristic "companions" during and after the period of his affliction.

Although "The Contrite Heart" is a penitential hymn drawing on Isaiah 57: 17, it is difficult to read and understand it disregarding the biographical context of the poem to which the themes of the verse and its imagery fit very well. Some critics think that "the essence of the poem is conflict" (Newey 1982: 290) since there is a clash between what the speaker knows from Scripture (God's promise that repentant and humble hearts will be revived) and what he feels himself, namely that his own heart has not been made happy. It seems, however, that the structural idea of the poem is that of complaint or reproach directed partly at God, and partly at the speaker himself. The poem has a form of conversation with God, frequently employed in hymns, which in fact turns out to be a monologue: the question addressed to God in the first stanza – "Is mine heart contrite or not?" – is not followed by a confession of sins, which would be in place in a penitential poem, but by complaints – extended to four stanzas – about the speaker's inability to feel:

> I hear, but seem to hear in vain,
> Insensible as steel;
> If ought is felt, 'tis only pain,
> To find I cannot feel. (p. 438)

The speaker is not even sure whether he loves God admitting: "I sometimes think myself inclin'd / To love thee if I could . . ." Even though he follows those who are the Lord's people ("Thy saints"), he cannot find any comfort praying with them in church and his strength (or hope) is leaving him. The situation of the speaker is reminiscent of that described in *Memoir* and in the passages from Cowper's Moral Satires: the characteristic symptoms of depression – emotional numbness or apathy – make him "insensible as steel." It is only the moving cry in the last stanza, which desperately appeals to God for help, that brings feeling back to the

poem. As a result, God's power to change the condition of the speaker – to change his heart by whatever means – is recognized:

> 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. (p. 439)

There is no doubt that "The Shining Light" is a hymn which brings us the closest to the experience of fear and despair depicted by Cowper in his letters and poems of affliction. The diction of the poem recalls the expressions from "Lines Written during the Period of Insanity" and the short, three-syllable verses that run quickly increase the oppressive sense of violence and imminent disaster in the first two stanzas of the hymn:

> 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. (p. 453)

The third stanza alludes to the thoughts of self-annihilation that come to the afflicted mind, suggested by "a friendly whisper" that advises escape from impending doom. The speaker is saved from despair, like from a confinement, by a ray of light glimmering in a distance that is a forerunner of the sunrise:

> I see, or think I see,
> A glimm'ring from afar;
> A beam of day that shines for me,
> To save me from despair. (p. 453)

In spite of its terrifying beginning, "The Shining Light" ends on a note of hope, just like all other Olney hymns. Was it Cowper's recognition of the rules for congregational singing, his acceptance of the form and style of the hymn, or was it his own feeling that in spite of all the problems the light of hope was there for him still? It seems that in the 1770s, although bending under the weight of the third attack of depression, Cowper was

still able to see the glimmering little light at the end of the tunnel. The hymns he wrote which expressed his hesitations, uncertainties or doubts, and which occasionally may have even approached despair, were ultimately the poems of faith.

4. Conclusion

Cowper's position in English literary history, as is generally known, rests on *The Task* – his masterpiece. His greatest poem of despair – "The Castaway," the last original poem he ever wrote, is also highly rated among English lyrical compositions of the late eighteenth century, particularly since it earned considerable admiration from Virginia Woolf. Cowper's work, however, is rich and varied in character and he has much to offer to us, both in his poetry and prose, particularly in his letters that are placed among the best of the period. In the words of his critic and biographer, Lord David Cecil, "he wrote about subjects and emotions which no other writer of comparable merit wrote of at all" (Cecil 1933: 1).

Cowper's poems and prose that have been the concern of this paper do not constitute his greatest achievement, nor do they belong to the most representative of his texts. Still, in my opinion, they are undoubtedly interesting to the reader of the twenty first century because of their biographical context which has been dealt with above. It is a task worthwhile pursuing because a possibility of finding an exact parallel between biographical writings and poetry is rarely encountered in 18th century verse, usually highly conventional and impersonal. Cowper's poems which lend themselves to such an approach are valuable as documents of the times of the Evangelical Revival that prepared the emotional climate for the Romantic trends of the turn of the century. They are also important as texts about the poet's struggle, with the help of his devoted friends, to come to terms with the problems of his life and his faith, which was threatened not by skepticism or unbelief, but by fears of being unworthy and unacceptable to God. The amazing thing about Cowper's poetry written at the time of his affliction or between the attacks of insanity is the poetic skill and control he had over his material, very often upsetting in character. The modern reader, who knows so much more about various kinds of depression and has many medicines at his/her disposal, can have a better, more sympathetic understanding of the poet's acute suffering and can appreciate the real value of his poetry that deals with his personal expe-

rience. Vincent Newey's comment (1982: 48) can be embraced by many modern readers of Cowper's poetry: the critic finds it remarkable and admirable that – "instead overwhelming him, [Cowper's] miseries have become the occasion of highly original poetic statement – and, moreover, a source of personal stature."

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