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Criticism in Cowper's Task

Helen Swezey Cox

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CRITICISM IN COWPER'S TASK

by

Helen Swezey Cox.

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A Thesis Presented for the Degree of
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INTRODUCTION.

There are two main interests in Cowper's *Task*: Nature, and Criticism. The first-named has often been treated, but seldom the latter.

The writer has made a study of the poem to find out what Cowper's views were respecting Society, Religion, Country, Nature, Art, and Literature. These ideas have proved of no great value per se, but are interesting as typical of the views held by the rapidly growing evangelical group in the latter Eighteenth century.

The study is prefaced by a brief statement of the limitations of Cowper as a critic.

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I

LIMITATIONS OF COWPER AS A CRITIC.

Cowper's limitations as a critic are many. The first of these is his ill health from which he suffered all his life. As a child he was weak, near-sighted, timid. So shy and nervous was this child that his parents were compelled to withdraw him from the public school. His education, secured privately, was therefore irregular. Throughout his long life he suffered frequent breaks in his health and spent many years in enforced idleness.

Linked with his physical ill health was his lamentable state of mind. During most of his long life Cowper was definitely insane. These repeated attacks lasted usually for months, sometimes for more than a year. During such periods he secluded himself from friends and books, devoting himself to gardening and to association with his numerous pets. Between insane attacks he was often depressed with melancholia. On at least four occasions he attempted to end his life.

Cowper was so shy that other children picked on him. The playground bully made life miserable for him. Cowper says that one boy in particular so tyrannized over him that he was afraid to lift his eyes to the boy's face. Young Cowper recognized his enemy by his shoe laces, and never looked above his knees.

All biographical facts used in this chapter are taken from Goldwin Smith's Life of Cowper, in English Men of Letters Series.

Cowper lived to be 69 years old. (1731-1800).

Closely linked with his chronic condition of ill health, both of body and mind, was a depressing theology. It is sometimes wrongly asserted that Cowper suffered from religious mania. His first violent attack of insanity came before his conversion and in connection with a qualifying examination for admission to the practice of law, his chosen profession. Cowper was therefore from the first doomed to a life of mental instability. It cannot be doubted, however, that this religious experience and philosophy greatly aggravated his mental tendencies. The gloomy aspects of a strong Calvinistic theology could hardly be expected to brighten a naturally depressed mind. One hallucination Cowper seemed never to be free from--the idea that God had abandoned him. The poet tells us that this conviction came to him as the result of a dream: "One morning as I lay between sleeping and waking, I seemed to myself to be walking in Westminster Abbey, waiting till prayers should begin. Presently, I thought I heard the minister's voice and hastened towards the choir; just as I was upon the point of entering, the iron gate under the organ was flung in my face with a jar that made the Abbey ring; the noise awoke me and a sentence of ex-communication from all the churches upon the earth could not have been so dreadful to me as the interpretation which I could not avoid putting on the dream." The interpretation was that his soul was finally and forever lost. This conviction is the underlying meaning of Cowper's pathetic poem, The Castaway. The generally pessimistic tone of contemporary evangelicalism toward everything worldly, and its emphasis upon another world, was ruinous to Cowper's spirit. Perhaps above everything else, Cowper needed a dash of worldliness as an antidote to

his habit of introspection.

Cowper, on the whole, was unfortunate in his friends and associates. To begin with, he had few friends; indeed he was almost a re-
persons
cluse. The ~~figures~~ who were most with him during the Olney residence were the Unwins, Rev. Newton, and Teedon, the Olney schoolmaster. The Unwins and Newton were pronounced evangelicals who by their influence tended to confirm Cowper in his melancholy. The group spent the greater part of every day and evening in prayer, reading of Scripture, testimony, singing hymns. Newton insisted that it was Cowper's religious duty to conduct public devotions, although the shy poet shrunk from this exercise. This was obviously poor discipline for an already unstable mind. Teedor, a Universalist, also proved to be harmful to Cowper, mentally. Among his friends were happily a few bright exceptions, especially Lady Austin and the Throckmortons⁴. These wholesome worldly people were good for the poet and inspired his best work. It was Lady Austin who definitely suggested and inspired his masterpiece, The Task. The Diverting Adventure of John Gilpin was another fruit of this more wholesome contact. The religious circle inspired the Olney hymns and such poems as the Castaway. If Cowper had done more work like The Task, his place as a poet would be much higher than it is. And if he had kept off his religious hobbies in The Task it would be a measurably finer poem than it is.

⁴The Throckmortons were a Catholic family whom Cowper met frequently on his walks. They were bright, worldly folk who served as a spiritual tonic to the depressed poet.

Cowper's isolated life was a great bar to his work, both as a poet and critic. He shut himself in at the village of Olney, and lived quite apart from the world. He seldom visited London, and had few contacts with the outside world. His extant letters are mainly written to members of his restricted group, and deal largely with the narrow interests that concerned them. There is ⁱⁿ Cowper's work scarcely a reference to contemporary men, events, or movements. Indeed, he was indifferent to contemporary life and often disparaged it in comparison with the past. His theology led him to despise this present life as a means of exalting the life to come. Cowper's retirement has a direct connection with his physical and mental illness. Says he:

I was a stricken deer that left the herd
Long since; with many an arrow deep infix'd
My panting side was charged, when I withdrew
To seek a tranquil death in distant shades.
There was I found by One who had Himself
Been hurt by the archers. In His side He bore,
And in His hands and feet, the cruel scars.
With gentle force soliciting the darts,
He drew them forth, and healed and bade me live.
Since then, with few associates, in remote
And silent woods I wander, far from those
My former partners of the peopled scene;
With few associates, and not wishing more.
Here much I ruminatē, as much I may,
With other views of men and manners now
Than once, and others of a life to come. ✓

This state of mind and manner of life are not conducive to criticism. A critic must be objectively minded, alert, interested in and appreciative of what goes on around him. He may not shun the "peopled scene." Harking to the past and indulging in apocalyptic visions disqualify one seriously for making an intelligent criticism of the present and immediate.

A most important factor in Cowper's career is his love life. He never married, although he made a strong appeal to women, and was deeply interested in a number. His mother's death, which occurred in Cowper's sixth year, ever shadowed his happiness. He had but a faint recollection of her, but a portrait inspired the poet to write a beautiful tribute to motherhood. The tenderness of this poem discloses Cowper's need of mothering. This mate appeal to the mother instinct in women appears to have been the basis of his appeal in several instances. His first recorded love affair was with his cousin, Theodora Cowper. It was a mutual affair, broken up by the girl's father. Cowper's feelings are expressed in a series of poems addressed to Delia. These poems the young woman sealed up, directing that the packet should not be opened until after her death. This occurred in 1824. Theodora never married, and followed Cowper with solicitude during the years of his affliction. It is significant that Cowper never touches upon the subject of love in his poems. Professor Murray thinks this is a silent tribute to this early love of the poet. There is truth in this, but it must be remembered that Cowper's theology frowned upon sexual matters; this may be an added reason for his silence. Another warm attachment was early formed between young Cowper and another cousin, Harriet, a sister of Theodora. Harriet later became Lady Heskith who long devoted herself sympathetically to Cowper in his distressed years. Some of the poet's finest letters are addressed to her.

The most important affair was with Mrs. Mary Unwin. Cowper lived with the Unwins for some years before the death of the Rev.

Unwin. He continued to do so for more than twenty years. He and Mrs. Unwin were inseparable companions. They walked together outdoors and worshipped together indoors. They inevitably fell in love, and planned to be married. Before the time of the wedding arrived, however, Cowper suffered one of his periodical losses of sanity and the ceremony was ^{not} performed. In time Mrs. Unwin herself suffered a stroke of paralysis. They were never married. Cowper's poem, My Mary, addressed to her during her later helpless days, is one of the tenderest poems ever penned.

Still another woman who figured importantly in Cowper's life was Lady Austin. This gay cultured woman was the one bright spot in Cowper's drab career. It was she who inspired Cowper to write his best poem, The Task. Just what the nature of this friendship was we cannot be sure, but letters extant show that Lady Austin was deeply disappointed in some way, and that Mrs. Unwin was unhappy and perhaps jealous. The poet also was greatly embarrassed over the entanglement.

There remains to be mentioned another serious defect in Cowper's critical equipment, i. e. his inadequate training and his limited reading. His education consisted of a few years at the public school, eight years at Westminster, and three years as an understudy in a lawyer's office. His years in public school were hampered by bad eyes and shyness, his Westminster years were darkened by his frustrated love for Delia, and he himself testifies that his three years in the law office was time thrown away. After his first break in mental health in 1763 (Cowper was 32 at the time) he was unable to do much reading--none of a systematic sort. Sometimes for months running he did not open a book. Thus Cowper had a meagre equipment as a poet and critic.

These circumstances, then, hampered Cowper as a critic: his ~~long~~ long life of ill health, his mental instability, his depressing theology, his associations, his isolated life, his unhappy love affairs, and his inadequate education.

When we consider these weaknesses, we are surprised that the man wrote as well as he did, and that he had any sane views at all upon life.

II

SOCIAL CRITICISM.

Much of Cowper's social criticism reflects the prejudices usually present in extreme evangelicalism, wherever and whenever found.

Cowper constantly opposes Virtue and Pleasure, the latter term comprehending all the infractions of his Puritanical code. Pleasure he calls---

That reeling goddess with the zoneless waist
And wandering eyes, still leaning on the arm
Of Novelty, her fickle frail support. ✓

All forms of gaming he frequently and spiritedly denounces.

Cards he calls "tricks that idleness has contrived to fill the void of an unfurnished brain, to palliate dullness, and give time a shove." ✓
He speaks symbolically of the characters ~~SE~~ printed on cards--the clubs are ~~emblems~~ "typical of strife," and the spades are "emblems of untimely graves." ✓
He complains particularly of young girls who play at cards:

Even misses, at whose age their mothers wore
The backstring and the bib, assume the dress

✓ III, 51-54.

✓ IV, 207-210.

✓ IV, 217-220.

Of womanhood, sit pupils in the school
Of card-devoted Time, and night by night
Placed at some vacant corner of the board,
Learn every trick, and soon play all the game. ✓⁴

That Cooper knew the game of cards is obvious for he speaks of "borrowing a hand," "dealing," "shuffling," "dividing," of "mingled suits" and "sequences." ✓⁵ Perhaps this knowledge reflects his life at the Middle Temple before his conversion.

Loss of money at gaming he deplores. Wings, he says, grow on the gamester's elbows that "waft our riches out of sight." ✓⁶

More innocent amusements fall under his displeasure. Checkers, chess, pool, hunting, fishing, feasting, singing, pageantry are under the ban. Even shopping and attending auctions are not to be allowed.

Who then that has a mind well strung and tuned
To contemplation, and within his reach
A scene so friendly to his favorite task,
Would waste attention at the chequered board,
His host of wooden warriors to and fro
Marching and countermarching, with an eye
As fixed as marble, with a forehead ridged

And furrowed into storms, and with a hand

Trembling, as if eternity were hung
In balance on his conduct of a pin?
Nor envies he aught more their idle sport
Who pant with application misapplied
To trivial joys, and, pushing ivory balls
Across a velvet level, feel a joy
Akin to rapture, when the bauble finds
Its destined goal of difficult access.
Nor deems he wiser him who gives his noon
To miss, the mercer's plague, from shop to shop
Wandering, and littering with unfolded silks
The polished counter, and approving none,
Or promising with smiles to call again.
Nor him who, by his vanity seduced,
And soothed into a dream that he discerns
The difference of a Guido from a daub,
Frequents the crowded auction. ✓

Hunting is particularly objectionable because of the "savage din of

✓^{IV}, 226-230.

✓^I, 472-477.

✓^{III}, 761-764.

✓^{VI}, 262-286

the swift pack and clamors of the field." "A detested sport," he characterizes it. The fiddle also is condemned as, in the tavern, it screams plaintive and piteous its wasted tones."

Tobacco smoking is denounced, especially when indulged in at the tavern, where men "sit, involved and lost in curling clouds of Indian fume." In a quaint description of a woodsman, Cowper says--

. . . . stops for naught
But now and then with pressure of his thumb
To adjust the fragrant charge of a short tube
That fumes beneath his nose: the trailing cloud
Screams far behind him, scenting all the air.

Cowper also finds fault with a diet which he believes to be too delicate and refined. After describing a "ramble on the banks of Thames he describes how--his pocket store consumed--he fed on "scarlet hips and stony haws, blushing crabs, berries and sloes." Such a diet he does not deem "unsavory" since his appetite is "undepraved by culinary arts." He opines that the cultivated Londoner does not eat enough because of an over-delicate appetite. "Alas! he picks clean teeth, and, busy as he seems with an old tavern quill, is hungry yet."

Cowper's idea of an enjoyable evening is one devoted to books, to music, to writing poetry, to weaving nets with which to protect fruit from birds, or "twining silken threads round ivory reels." The restricted pleasures and abstemious tastes of the evangelical group to which Cowper belonged is well set forth in the following passage:

III, 325-328.

IV, 477-478.

IV, 473-474

~~II, 625-628.~~

V, 53-58.

~~IV, 260-267.~~

I, 115-125

II, 625-628

IV, 260-267.

Fireside enjoyments, homeborn happiness,
 And all the comforts that the lowly roof
 Of undisturbed retirement, and the hours
 Of long uninterrupted evening know.
 No rattling wheels stop short before these gates;
 No powdered pert, proficient in the art
 Of sounding an alarm, assaults these doors
 Till the street rings; no stationary steeds
 Cough their own knell, while, heedless of the sound,
 The silent circle fan themselves, and quake:
 But here the needle plies its busy task,
 The pattern grows, the well-depicted flower,
 Wrought patiently into the snowy lawn,
 Unfolds its bosom buds, and leaves, and sprigs,
 And curling tendrils, gracefully disposed,
 Follow the nimble finger of the fair;
 A wreath that cannot fade, of flowers that blow
 With most success when all besides decay.
 The poet's or historian's page, by one
 Made vocal for the amusement of the rest;
 The sprightly lyre, whose treasure of sweet sounds
 The touch from many a trembling chord shakes out;
 And the clear voice symphonious, yet distinct,
 And in the charming strife triumphant still;
 Beguile the night, and set a keener edge
 On female industry: the threaded steel
 Flies swiftly, and unfelt the task proceeds.
 The volume closed, the customary rites
 Of the last meal commence. A Roman meal,
 a radish and an egg.
 Themes of a graver tone,
 The dangers we have 'scaped, the broken snare,
 The disappointed foe, deliverance found,
 Fruits of omnipotent eternal love.
 "Oh evenings worthy of the gods!" ¹⁵

As might be expected, Cowper has much to say about drinking and
 drunkenness. It is "quenchless thirst" that prompts men to thievery
 and other crimes, and that "imbrates the man." ¹⁶ He recommends coffee
 as "cups that cheer but not inebriate." ¹⁷ The tavern comes in for severe
 arraignment. Every twentieth pace, he says, one gets a "whiff of stale
 debauch." The places are called "styes that law hath licensed." There

¹⁵ IV, 140-193. The student will notice at once the similarity
 between this passage and passages to be found in Burns's Cotter's
Saturday Night, Goldsmith's Deserted Village, and Whittier's Snowbound.

¹⁶ IV, 459-460.

¹⁷ IV, 39-40.

the lackey, the groom, the smith, the cobbler, the joiner, the baker sit and drink and quarrel and curse and fight. "A public pest," he calls the inns, which, like manured acres, "stink." The exciseman is heartily denounced. "Fattened with the rich result of all this riot." The state does not escape censure for authorizing such business. "Ten thousand casks, forever dribbling out their base contents, touched by the Midas finger of the state, bleed gold for ministers to sport away." Cowper is a prohibitionist. With fine satire he calls upon his countrymen patriotically to--

Drink and be mad then; 'tis your country ~~which~~ bids
Gloriously drunk, obey the important call!
Her cause demands the assistance of your throats;
Ye all can swallow, and she asks no more. ¹⁸

The theatre is described as a crowded place where men "sweat, squeezed and bored with elbow-points through both his sides, outscolds the ranting actor on the stage." ¹⁹ He thinks a person should not need "the pent-up breath of an unsavory throng to thaw him into feeling, or the smart and snappish dialogue that flippanit wits call comedy to prompt him to a smile." The actor is called "self-complacent" and is accused of "stealing side-long glances at a full house." ²⁰

Prostitution, Cowper complains, has become so bold that "it elbows us aside in all our crowded streets." He charges that senates are more concerned with releasing adulteresses from their bonds than serving the purposes of empire. "Cruel, abandoned, glorying in her shame, she chariots along in guilty splendours." It was not always so, Cowper asserts. "Vice and virtue had boundaries in old time," and men

were "nice in honor and judged offenders well." But modernly, "well-dressed, well-bred, well equipped, is ticket enough to pass us readily through every door." ²¹ ✓

Cowper complains of a general collapse of discipline. True to his habit, he reverts to the good old days. "In ancient days, there dwelt a sage called Discipline."

His eye was meek and gentle, and a smile
Played on his lips, and in his speech was heard
Paternal sweetness, dignity, and love
Learning grew beneath his care
The mind was well informed
His frown was full of terror, and his voice
Shook the delinquent with fits of awe. ²² ✓

But all this is changed now.

Discipline, a faithful servant long,
Declined at length into the vale of years;
A palsy struck his arm, his sparkling eye
was quenched his voice unstrung. ²³ ✓

Particularly, Cowper deploras the collapse of discipline in "colleges and halls." Discipline, overlooked and unemployed, "fell sick and died. Then study languished, emulation slept, and virtue fled."

. . . . The schools became a scene
Of solemn farce, where Ignorance in stilts,
His cap well lined with logic not his own,
With parrot-tongue performed the scholar's part,
Proceeding soon a graduated dunce. ²⁴ ✓

With the going of discipline, Cowper complains that "compromise" came, "precedence went in the truck," all bonds were dissolved, "bars and

bolts grew rusty by disuse," and gowns and tasselled cap became "a mockery of the world." College students are characterized as "gamesters, jockeys, brothellers, spendthrifts, and booted sportsmen." ²⁵

Cowper is especially hard on the monitor of the time. No longer do we have monitors that "mother church supplies," but now we "make our own." Keen is the satire of these lines:

A monitor is wood. Plank shaven thin.
We wear it at our backs. There closely braced
And neatly fitted, it compresses hard
The prominent and most unsightly bones,
And binds the shoulders flat
Thus admonished we can walk erect,
One proof at least of manhood. ²⁴

The newspaper comes in for due notice. "This folio of four pages" is satirically called "happy work." It is but "a map of busy life." Here "rills of oily eloquence in soft meanders lubricate," there "cata-racts of declamation thunder." "Forests of no meaning spread the page in which all comprehensions wander lost." The advertising section is characterized as "a wilderness of strange but gay confusion." Among the articles advertised for sale are "roses for the cheeks," "lilies for the brow of faded age," "teeth for the toothless," "ringlets for the bald." Other matters announced are sermons, feasts, balloon ascensions, and magic shows. ²⁷

Cowper is severe in his arraignment of dress.

. . . . We have run
Through every change that fancy at the loom
Exhausted, has had the genius to supply;
And, studious of mutation still, discard
A real elegance, a little used,
For monstrous novelty and strange disguise.
We sacrifice to dress, till household joys
And comforts cease. Dress drains our cellars dry,
And keeps our larder lean; puts out our fires,
And introduces hunger, frost, and woe,

Where peace and hospitality might reign. ²⁸

Fashion, he charges, has been advanced to the "post of Truth," and all authority centered in "modes and customs of our own." The appeal to the good old days is again resorted to--

Would that I had fallen upon those happier days
That poets celebrate: those golden times

. . . .

Nymphs were Dianas then

. . . .

The footprints of simplicity
Then were not all effaced

. . . . Then speech profane, ²⁹
And manners profligate, were rarely found.

But all this is changed. We are "polished" now!

. . . . The rural lass,

Whom once her virgin modesty and grace,
Her artless manner, and her neat attire,
So dignified, that she was hardly less
Than the fair shepherdess of old romance,
Is seen no more. The character is lost.
Her head, adorned with lappets pinned aloft,
And ribands streaming gay, superbly raised,
And magnified beyond all human size,
Indebted to some smart wig-weaver's hand
For more than half the tresses it sustains;
Her elbows ruffled, and her tottering form
Ill propped upon French heels; she might be deemed
(But that the basket dangling on her arm
Interprets her more truly) of a rank
Too proud for dairy work or sale of eggs.
Expect her soon with footboy at her heels,
No longer blushing for her awkward load,
Her train and her umbrella all her care. ³⁰

The male fop gets his share of attention; he is called "a powdered pert."

~~IV, 50-57.~~

²⁸ II, 607-625,

²⁹ IV, 513-525.
~~I, 744-749.~~

³⁰ IV, 534-552.

The gaiety of indulgent society is only apparent, thinks Cowper. Who are the really gay? he asks. The "innocent," he promptly answers. "The lark is gay." "The peasant, too."

But save me from the gaiety of those
Whose headaches nail them to a noontide bed;
And save me too from theirs whose haggard eyes
Flash desperation, and betray their pangs
For property stripped off by cruel chance;
From gaiety that fills the bones with pain,
The mouth with blasphemy, the heart with woe. ³¹

The insincerity, as well as the false gaiety of sophisticates, meets the poet's displeasure. The society lady who "asks her dear five hundred friends, contemns them all, and hates their coming." ³² He speaks bitingly of the "cringe," the "shrug," and the "bow obsequious." He alludes to the "superciliously grand." ³³ Dressed up vice, "though well perfumed and elegantly dressed, like an unburied carcase tricked with flowers, is but a garnished nuisance." ³⁴

Profusion is the source of social decay, Cowper holds.

Profusion unrestrained, with all that's base
In character, has littered all the land,
And bred, within the memory of no few,
A priesthood such as Baal's was of old,
A people such as never was till now.
It is a hungry vice:—it eats up all
That gives society its beauty, strength,
Convenience, and security, and use:
Makes men mere vermin, worthy to be trapped
And gibbeted as fast as catchpole-claws
Can seize the slippery prey: unties the knot
Of union, and converts the sacred band
That holds mankind together, to a scourge.
Profusion deluging a state with lusts
Of grossest nature and of worst effects,
Prepares it for its ruin: hardens, blinds,
And warps the consciences of ~~some~~ public men
Till they can laugh at virtue; mock the fools
That trust them; and, in the end, disclose a face

³¹ I, 300-306.

³² II, 642-644.

³³ VI, 967.

³⁴ VI, 990-993.

That would have shocked credulity itself
Unmasked, vouchsafing this their sole excuse;
Since all alike are selfish--why not they?
This does Profusion, ~~and the accursed cause~~ 35

They/ decaying effects of wealth, "a scrofulous and itchy plague,"
are thus set forth:

Increase of power begets increase of wealth;
Wealth luxury, and luxury excess;
Excess descends
To the next rank contagious, and in time
Taints downward all the graduated scale 36
Of order, from the chariot to the plough.

The love of ease and luxury is another child of profusion.

. . . . ye who borne about
In chariots and sedans, know no fatigue
But that of idleness, and taste no scenes
But such as art contrives. 37

Pride and avarice, he avows, "make man a wolf to man." Another result
of profusion is effeminacy. Contemporary soldiers he brands as "things
as smooth and tender as a girl, all essenced-o'er with odours, and as
profligate as sweet, who love when they should fight." 38 Cowper falls
again into his good old days mood and cites Chatham and Wolfe as ex-
amples of a valor that is gone. "Oh rise some other such!" With de-
licious satire Cowper exclaims:

Now hoist the sail, and let the streamers float
Upon the wanton breezes. Strew the deck
With lavender, and sprinkle liquid sweets,
That no rude savour maritime invade
The nose of nice nobility. Breathe soft,
Ye clarionets, and softer still, ye flutes,
That winds and waters lulled by magic sounds
May bear us smoothly to the Gallic shores. 39

There still remain some honors to Englishmen, Cowper satirically remarks: "We justly boast at least superior jockeyship, and claim the honours of the turf as all our own." ⁴⁰ Other ills that follow in the train of profusion are "peculation, sale of honour, perjury, corruption, frauds by forgery, by subterfuge of law, by tricks and lies as numerous and as keen as the necessities their authors feel." ⁴¹

Thus, through the eyes of Cowper, the zealous evangelical, society is well-nigh wholly degenerate. Its only hope is a spiritual rebirth.

⁴⁰
II, 275-277.

⁴¹
II, 667-675.

III

POLITICAL CRITICISMS.

Cowper was a thorough-going Whig and a zealous defender of the rights of man. In his poetry we find little of kings and heroes, but much of the "patient poor." Throughout The Task there is a procession of commoners, persons "undistinguished by wealth or dignity." There is a postman, a peasant, a mariner, a woodsman, a frugal housewife, gypsies, Crazy Kate. Truly, Cowper is the English Burns.

Cowper loves freedom which he calls "the lustre and the perfume of fleeting life." Freedom is the chief glory of England, which makes up for "a rude clime," "adulterate manners," and lack of "humane address and sweetness."

Yet being free I love thee: for the sake
Of that one feature can be well content.

But without freedom he would bid England farewell. "I could endure chains nowhere patiently, and chains at home where I am free by birth-right, not at all."

Cowper hates tyranny with a passion.

I, 534. This passage reminds one strikingly of Wordsworth's Crazy Margaret.

V, 446.

V, 473-475.

V, 477-478.

That man should thus encroach on fellow-man,
Abridge him of his just and native rights,
Eradicate him, tear him from his hold
Upon the endearments of domestic life
And social, nip his fruitfulness and use,
And doom him for perhaps a heedless word
To barrenness, and solitude, and tears,
Moves indignation, makes the name of king
(Of king whom such preogative can please)
As dreadful as the Manichean God,
Adored through fear, strong only to destroy. ✓

Human slavery was particularly revolting to him. It is a breaking of
"the natural bond of brotherhood"; it is human nature's "broadest,
foulest plot." With sincere passion he cries out:

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 ever earned.
No; dear as freedom is, and in my heart's
Just estimation prized above all price,
I had much rather be myself the slave
And wear the bonds, than fasten them on him. ✓

He pleads for the abolition of slaves in the colonies as well as in
England.

We have no slaves in England. They why abroad?
And they themselves once ferried o'er the wave
That parts us, are emancipate and loosed.
Slaves cannot breathe in England; if their lungs
Receive our air, that moment they are free,
They touch our country, and their shackles fall.
That's noble, and bespeaks a nation proud
And jealous of the blessing. Spread it then,
And let it circulate through every vein
Of all your empire; that where Britain's power
Is felt, mankind may feel her mercy too. ✓

✓ V, 435-445.

✓ II, 29-36.

✓ II, 40-47. Slavery was abolished in England in 1772. It was not
until 1834 that freedom was extended to the colonies.

Cowper's denunciation of war is spirited. It is a "king's game," waged by "heroes whose infirm and baby minds are gratified with mischief, and who spoil, because men suffer it, their toy the world." If subjects were wise, he says, kings would not play the game. ⁸ The motive of war is either revenge or aggrandizement.

War followed for revenge, or to supplant
The envied tenants of some happier spot. ⁹

Other causes mentioned are differences in color and mountains dividing frontiers. In a history of war he dates its beginning with Tubal, "the first artificer of death." ¹⁰ "The tasted sweets of property are the seeds of war."

Cowper is severe in his arraignment of the army and its corrupting influence upon English society. Compulsory military service is hateful to him.

'Tis universal soldiership has stabbed
The heart of merit in the meaner class.
Arms, through the vanity and brainless rage
Of those that bear them, in whatever cause,
Seem most at variance with all moral good,
And incompatible with serious thought. ¹¹

Three years of camp life unfit one for a civilian role, he charges.

And, his three years of heroship expired,
Returns indignant to the slighted plough.
He hates the field, in which no fife or drum
Attends him, drives his cattle to a march,
And sighs for the smart comrades he has left. ¹²

⁹ I, 609-610. ⁸ V, 187-192. ¹⁰ V, 205-230. ¹¹ V, 617-622. ¹² IV, 644-648.

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Camp life is demoralizing. The soldier learns--

To swear, to game, to drink, to show at home
By lewdness, idleness, and Sabbath breach,
The great proficiency he made abroad,
To astonish and to give his gazing friends,
To break some maiden's and his mother's heart,
To be a pest where he was useful once,
Are his sole aim, and all his glory now. ✓¹³

Cowper argues that the camp environment is necessarily degrading.

Man in society is like a flower
Blown in its native bed; 'tis there alone
His faculties, expanded in full bloom,
Shine out; there only reach their proper use.
But man associated and leagued with man
By regal warrant, or self-joined by bond
For interest sake, or swarming into clans
Beneath one head for purposes of war,
Like flowers selected from the rest, and bound
And bundled close to fill some crowded vase,
Fades rapidly, and by compression marred,
Contracts defilement not to be endured. ✓¹⁴

When Cowper reflects upon the war then waging, he exclaims sadly:

Oh for a lodge in some vast wilderness,
Some boundless contiguity of shade,
Where rumour of oppression and deceit,
Of unsuccessful or successful war,
Might never reach me more! My ear is pained,
My soul is sick with every day's report
Of wrong and outrage with which earth is filled.
There is no flesh in man's obdurate heart,
It does not feel for man; the natural bond
Of brotherhood is severed as the flax
That falls asunder at the touch of fire. ✓¹⁵

Cowper is almost bitter in his attitude toward kings. They are
the fruit of war.

✓¹³
IV, 652-653.

✓¹⁴
IV, 659-670.

✓¹⁵
II, 1-10. War with France.

Thus began war on earth; these fought for spoil,
And those in self-defense. Savage at first
The onset, and irregular. At length
One eminent above the rest, for strength,
For strategem, or courage, or for all,
Was chosen leader; him they served in war,
And him in peace, for sake of warlike deeds
Reverenced no less. Who could with him compare?
Or who so worthy to control themselves
As he whose prowess had subdued their foes?
Thus war affording field for the display
Of virtue, made one chief, whom times of peace,
Which have their exigencies too, and call
For skill in government, at length made king. ✓₁₆

Thus began the dependence of the masses upon their chosen leaders.

"They sink and settle lower than they need." "They roll themselves before him in the dust. . . . They demi-deify and fume him so that in due season he forgets it too."

Inflated and astrut with self-conceit,
He gulps the windy diet, and ere long,
Adopting their mistake, profoundly thinks
The world was made in vain, if not for him.
Thenceforth they are his cattle: drudges born
To bear his burdens; drawing in his gears
And sweating in his service; his caprice
Becomes the soul that animates them all.
He deems a thousand, or ten thousand lives,
Spent in the purchase of renown for him,
An easy reckoning, and they think the same.
Thus kings were first invented, and thus kings ~~were~~
Were burnished into heroes, and became
The arbiters of this terraqueous swamp,
Storks among frogs, that have but croaked and died. ✓₁₇

However, Cowper makes it plain that he is not a democrat, or revolutionist. Kings could be innocent and good. What he assails is the abuse of kingship by unworthy men.

We too are friends to loyalty. We love
The king who loves the law, respects his bounds,

And reigns content within them: him we serve
Freely and with delight, who leaves us free:
But recollecting still that he is man,
We trust him not too far. King though he be,
And king in England too, he may be weak,
And vain enough to be ambitious still,
May exercise amiss his proper powers,
Or covet more than freemen chose to grant:
Beyond that mark is treason. He is ours,
To administer, to guard, to adorn the State,
But not to warp or change it. We are his,
To serve him nobly in the common cause,
True to the death, but not to be his slaves.
Mark now the difference, ye that boast your love,
Of kings, between your loyalty and ours:
We love the man, the paltry pageant you;
We the chief patron of the commonwealth,
You the regardless author of its woes;
We, for the sake of liberty, a king,
You chains and bondage for a tyrant's sake.
Our love is principle, and has its root,
In reason, is judicious, manly, free;
Yours, a blind instinct, crouches to the rod,
And licks the foot that treads it in the dust.
Were kingship as true treasure as it seems,
Sterling, and worthy of a wise man's wish,
I would not be a king to be beloved
Causeless, and daubed with undiscerning praise,
Where love is mere attachment to the throne,
Not to the man who fills it as he ought. ¹⁸

It is despotism in kings that [?] exercises Cowper.

Such dupes are men to custom, and so prone
To reverence what is ancient, and can plead
A course of long observance for its use,
That even servitude, the worst of ill,
Because delivered down from sire to son,
Is kept and guarded as a sacred thing.
But is it fit, or can it bear the shock
Of rational discussion, that a man,
Compounded and made up like other men
Of elements tumultuous, in whom lust
And folly in an ample measure meet
As in the bosom of the slaves he rules,
Should be a despot absolute, and boast ¹⁹
Himself the only freeman of his land?

The bastille arouses the poet's ire. "A house of bondage," he calls it, "the abode of broken hearts," "a cage of despair." "There's not an English heart that would not leep to hear that ye were fallen at last." ²⁰

Peculation, graft, corruption of politics, and control of the electorate by patronage are among the public sins condemned by our zealous poet. Citing a typical case of a man who made shipwreck of his provate fortunes, Cowper says--

. . . . Ministerial grace
Deals him out money from the public chest;
Or if that mine be shut, some private purse
Supplies his need with a usurious loan,
To be refunded duly, when his vote,
Well managed, shall have earned its worthy price. ²¹

Cowper thinks "arts" like these are worse than the practice of highwayery. Ambition, avarice, endless riot bring "a world of wandering knights and squires to town." True to his habit, he reverts to the idealized past.

The age of virtuous politics is past,
And we are deep in that of cold pretence.
Patriots are grown too shrewd to be sincere,
And we are wise to trust them. ²²

Continuing in the same vein--

'Tis therefore sober and good men are sad
For England's glory, seeing it wax pale,
And sickly, while her champions wear their hearts
So loose to private duty, that no brain,
Healthful and undisturbed by factious fumes,
Can dream them trusty to the general weal.
Such were not they of old, whose tempered blades
Dispersed the shackles of usurped control,
And hewed them link from link. Then Albion's sons
Were sons indeed. ²³

²⁰ V, 379-800
²¹ III, 795-800. ²² V, 493-496. ²³ V, 509-518.

Despite his caustic criticisms of England--the tyranny of her kings, her tolerance of slavery abroad, her inhuman wars, her political corruption,-- Cowper's heart still beats/warmly for his native land. If not an approved patriot, he is more--an intelligent and constructive critic of his homeland.

England, with all thy faults, I love thee still,
My Country! and while yet a nook is left
Where English minds and manners may be found,
Shall be constrained to love thee. Though thy clime
Be fickle, and thy year, most part, deformed
With dripping rains, or withered by a frost,
I would not exchange thy sullen skies
And fields without a flower, for warmer France
With all her vines; nor for Ausonia's groves
Of golden fruitage, and her myrtle bowers. 24

IV

RELIGIOUS CRITICISMS.

Since he was a religious zealot, it is not surprising to find Cowper repeatedly castigating the church, the minister, and all forms of prevalent unbelief and ungodliness.

At the root of his criticism are the Puritan doctrines of a sovereign God who is to be feared for his summary judgments; a ruling and overruling Providence "employed in all the good and ill that chequer life"; a revealed religion that "satisfies all doubts, explains all mysteries, and illuminates the path of life"; original sin which damns when not repented of and remitted; a blood atonement; a literal acceptance of Holy Writ; the life of grace.

Cowper interprets all history, personal and national, in terms of a sovereign God. Wars, fires, meteors, earthquakes, tidal waves are "frowning signals" that "bespeak displeasure in his breast who smites the earth and heals it." He interprets the disastrous earthquake that visited Sicily in 1832 as punishment for "revelry and dance and show." He intimates that God was displeased because men were acting on the stage, and in anger puts on a show himself. The ocean, he says, was upwrought (tidal wave) not by wind, but by "that voice which winds and waves obey." All these calamities "sin hath wrought," and has kindled such "a flame in heaven that it burns down to earth and in furious inquest lays waste His fairest Works." The disaster in Sicily is for

warning to England, he says. God may choose, if he pleases, to "punish the less to warn the more malignant." ✓

God is especially incensed against atheism. Because of it there are tempests, pestilences, famine, mildew, earthquakes.

In the background of all man's sin is the original offense of Adam in the garden. Before the fall, says Cowper, man was a king with "angel choirs attended." Eden was then "a scene of harmless sport where kindness ruled" and tranquility prevailed. But in willfulness Man sinned and "how terrible the change!" The harmony of nature was destroyed. "Each animal of every name conceived a jealousy and instinctive fear, and fled the abode of man." There began the mutual antipathies of man and beast; there were sown the "seeds of cruelty." Man ceased to be vegetarian and began to prey upon the beast. The beasts likewise became "carnivorous through sin." ✓

This belief in the depravity of man resulting from original sin gave Cowper a profound distrust of man and particularly ^{of} in the mind of man. "Our wayward intellect," he calls it. Also, he greatly distrusted learning. He thought the more we learn of nature the more we overlook her author. He feared that the exercise of the faculty of reason leads to pride and to "conclusions retrograde." "His word" is all one needs for knowledge and guidance. He was jealous of the newest toy of science, the telescope, which he calls the "philosophic tube." Although the telescope brings "planets home into the eye of observation," Cowper charges that it never discovers Him that rules the planet. He even thinks the scientist's attempt to explore the heavens is a kind of impiety.

God never meant that man should scale the heavens
By strides of human wisdom. In his works,
Though wondrous, He commands us in His word,
To seek Him rather where his mercy shines. 3/

The mind is only to be trusted when "enlightened from above." In his attempt to belittle the human mind, Cowper discounts his own parts and attainments.

I am no proficient, I confess,
In arts like yours. I cannot call the swift
And perilous lightnings from the angry clouds
And bid them hide themselves in earth beneath;
I cannot analyse the air, nor catch
The parallax of yonder luminous point
That seems half quenched in the immense abyss;
Such powers I boast not—neither can I rest
A silent witness of the headlong rage
Or heedless folly by which thousands die,
Bone of my bone, and kindred souls to mine. 4/

Holding such views of man and mind, we are not surprised to find in Cowper a belief in the vanity of human endeavor. Men are lost, many of them irrevocably, in sin. "All are wanderers, gone astray each in his own delusions; they are lost in chase of fancied happiness."

. . . . I sum up half mankind
And add two-thirds of the remaining half,
And find the total of their hopes and fears
Dreams, empty dreams. 5/

He regards all intellectual effort futile. "some write a narrative of wars, and feats of heroes little known, and call the rant a history." "Some drill and bore the solid earth, . . . by which we learn that He who made it, and revealed its date to Moses, was mistaken in its age." Others tell us "whence the stars."

. . . . thus they spend
The little wick of life's poor shallow lamp
In playing tricks with nature, giving laws
To distant worlds, and trifling in their own. ✓

"Eternity for bubbles," he cries. "Dropping buckets in empty wells!"

Cowper is especially afraid of philosophy since it is so often, as he believes, opposed to God. It seeks rational explanations when all we need to do is to resolve "all events, with their effects and manifold results, into the will and arbitration wise of the Supreme." Everything is definitely ordered, thinks Cowper.

. . . . could chance
Find place in His dominion, or dispose
One lawless particle to thwart his plan,
Then God might be surprised, and unforeseen
Contingence might alarm him, and disturb
The smooth and equal course of His affairs. ✓

Philosophy, says Cowper, too often "forgets, or disregards, or, more presumptuous still, denies the power that wills it."

Cowper approves Philosophy that is subservient to revelation.

. . . . Philosophy baptized
In the pure fountain of eternal love
Has eyes indeed; and viewing all she sees
As meant to indicate a God to man,
Gives Him His praise, and forfeits not her own. ✓

There were such philosophers in time past, the poet asserts: Newton, Milton, "immortal Hale."

More morality was another bugaboo of Cowper's. The satire of the following lines is obvious:

Now tell me, dignified and sapient sir,
My man of morals, nurtured in the shades

Of Academics, is this false or true?
Is Christ the abler teacher, or the schools?
If Christ, then why resort at every turn
To Athens or to Rome. ✓

As opposed to Philosophy Cowper recommends Revelation which "satisfies all doubts." His distrust of schools, expressed in the above quotation, is to be expected.

At another point we find Cowper at odds with modern science.

Some say that in the origin of things,
When all creation started into birth,
The infant elements received a law
From which they swerve not since. That under force
Of that controlling ordinance they move,
And need not His immediate hand who first
Prescribed their course, to regulate it now.
Thus dream they, and contrive to save a God
The encumbrance of His own concerns, and spare
The great Artificer of all that moves
The stress of a continual act, the pain
Of unremitted vigilance and care,
As too laborious and severe a task.
So man, the moth, is not afraid, it seems,
To span Omnipotence. ✓

It is the "Lord of all," argues Cowper, that "sustains and is the life of all that lives." He dilates upon the omnipotence, the omniscience, the omnipresence of God, "who sleeps not, is not weary."

Cowper also quarrels with "blind antiquity" that "profaned" God by confusing him with "tutelary Gods and Goddesses that were not." ✓

Naturally, holding all these views respecting God and man, Cowper was gloomy. He lives in a world that seems to "Toll the death-knell of its own decease, and by the voice of all its element, to preach the general doom." How like Ecclesiasticus are these lines:

All flesh is grass, and all its glory fades
Like the fair flower dishevelled in the wind;
Riches have wings, and grandeur is a dream;
The man we celebrate must find a tomb,
And we that worship him, ignoble graves.
Nothing is proof against the general curse
Of vanity, that seizes all below.
The only amarinthine flower on earth
Is virtue; the only lasting treasure, truth. 12

He personalized this gloomy philosophy and expressed the desire for early death.

So glide my life away' and so at last,
My share of duties decently fulfilled,
May some disease, not tardy to perform
Its destined office, yet with gentle stroke
Dismiss me weary to a safe retreat,
Beneath the turf that I have often trod. 13

Like most gloomy theologians, Cowper believed in the early reappearing of Christ. He saw about him the "features of the last degenerate times." He anticipated the second coming with joy.

Come then, and added to Thy many crowns,
Receive yet one, the crown of all the earth,
Thou who alone art worthy! 14

He thus pictures the reappearance of the Lord:

For He, whose car the winds are, and the clouds
The dust that waits upon His sultry march,
When sin hath moved Him, and His wrath is hot,
Shall visit earth in mercy; shall descend
Propitious in His chariot paved with love;
And what His storms have blasted and defaced
For man's revolt, shall with a smile repair. 15

Cowper's tender attitude toward dumb animals grows largely out of his theology; partly it is sentimental. He was a strict vegetarian.

He protests against all forms of cruelty, or even thoughtless neglect, toward dumb brutes. No more famous passage is attributable to Cowper than the following:

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. ↙

He excepts from this rule the "creeping vermin, loathsome to the sight" when they intrude into the chamber; it is then "necessary" that they die. "Not so when held within their proper bounds"--the air or spacious field. The right of the lower forms to life is subject only to man's prior right.

. . . . if man's convenience, health,
Or safety interfere, his rights and claims
Are paramount, and must extinguish theirs.
Else they are all--the meanest things that are--
As free to live, and to enjoy that life,
As God was free to form them at the first, ↙
Who in His sovereign wisdom made them all.

One rarely finds a more moving passage than the tribute Cowper pays to one of his pet rabbits:

. . . . One sheltered hare
Has never heard the sanguinary yell
Of cruel man, exulting in her woes.
Innocent partner of my peaceful home,
Whom ten long years' experience of my care
Has made at last familiar, she has lost
Much of her vigilant instinctive dread,
Not needful here, beneath a roof like mine.
Yes,--thou mayst eat thy bread, and lick the hand
~~the hand~~ That feeds thee; thou mayst frolic on the floor
At evening, and at night retire secure
To thy straw couch, and slumber unalarmed;
For I have gained thy confidence, have pledged
All that is human in me to protect
Thine unsuspecting gratitude and love.
If I survive thee I will dig thy grave;

And when I place thee in it, sighing say, ¹⁸
I knew at least one hare that had a friend.

Book VI contains a curious allegory which is intended to prove the wisdom of piety and the folly of atheism. Two men, Misagathus and Evander, are riding. The former symbolizes atheism, the latter piety. As the two ride along Evander plies the ears of his companion with moralizings about piety. Misagathus resents his preaching, grows insolent, and proposes to prove that, unbeliever that he is, he has no fear of death--that he does not need any support from the superstition of religion. He thereupon ^{rides} ~~is~~ headlong toward a precipice and would ^{be} ~~have been~~ dashed to certain death had not his horse ~~shown~~ more sense than his rider, ^{for it stops} ~~and stopped~~ short of the brink. Saved from death, Misagathus grows boastful. But presently a storm comes up, and the further developments are thus related by Cowper:

His horse, as he had caught his master's mood,
Snorting, and starting into sudden rage,
Unbidden, and not now to be controlled,
Rushed to the cliff, and having reached it, stood.
At once the shock unseated him: he flew
Sheer o'er the craggy barrier, and immersed
Deep in the flood, found, when he sought it not,
The death he had deserved, and died alone.
So God wrought double justice; made the fool
The victim of his own tremendous choice, ¹⁹
And taught a brute the way to safe revenge.

One is rather surprised not to find more of the Bible in the poetry of Cowper. Quotations and allusions are not wanting, but they are less numerous than in the work of some other less pious poets. Expectedly, references to the Old Testament predominate.

The most valuable part of Cowper's religious criticism deals with the conditions of the church and the ministry. Doubtless many of these criticisms are colored and interpreted to support his decided prejudices. The poem, however, has value in showing the views of the evangelical section of the English public.

Cowper charges that the contemporary preacher rants, "sells accent, tone and emphasis, and gives to prayer the adagio and andante it demands." He recasts and modernizes the divinity of other days, and practices on the gallery a thousand arts. He is constant at routs, is on good terms with the ladies, is ambitious for preferment, is in love with the world, He "makes of God's work a sinecure," is a slave to his own pleasures. The poet grows sarcastic:

From such apostles! O ye mitred heads,
Preserve the church! and lay not careless hands
On skulls that cannot teach, and will not learn. 20

Cowper draws a picture of the model preacher---such as he imagines Paul would be were he here today; such as his own clerical brother was. This ideal preacher is simple, grave, sincere; in doctrine uncorrupt, in language plain; decent, solemn, chaste; affectionate in look, tender in address. Contrasted with this, note:

Things that mount the rostrum with a skip,
And then skip down again; pronounce a text,
Cry-hem! and reading what they never wrote,
Just fifteen minutes, huddle up their work,
And with a well-bred whisper close the scene! 21

The poet tells us he "loathes affectation"; 'tis his "perfect scorn"; his "implacable disgust."

What! will a man play tricks, will he indulge
A silly fond conceit of his fair form
And just proportion, fashionable mien, ²³
And pretty face, in presence of his God?

Cowper does not appreciate being dazzled by the parson's "tropes,"
or by "the diamond on his lily hand."

Avaunt all attitude and stare,
And start ~~theatrical~~, practiced in the glass.
I seek divine simplicity in him
Who handles things divine. ²³

theatric,

The "nasal twang" is tabooed. Cowper does not like "celestial themes
strained through the pressed nostril." Parsons are vain, he says. No
sooner is the sermon over than "forth comes the pocket mirror."

. . . . First we stroke
An eyebrow; next, compose a straggling lock;
Then with an air, most graciously performed,
Fall back into our seat, extend an arm,
And lay it at its ease with gentle care,
With handkerchief in hand, depending low.
The better hand, more busy, gives the nose
Its bergamot, or aids the indebted eye
With opera-glass to watch the moving scene,
And recognize the slow-retiring fair. ²⁴

Cowper condemns lightness of speech, quips, merry turns, the love of
applause, foppish airs, "histrionic mummery that lets down the pulpit
to the level of the stage." As a result of all these lapses on the part
of the clergy, "the laity runs wild." But more serious charges are
lodged against the "plump convivial parson."

. . . . Examine well
His milk-white hand; the palm is hardly clear,--
But here and there an ugly smutch appears.
Foh! 'twas a bribe that left it: he has touched
-----Gerruption. ²⁵

²³ II, 419-423.

²³ II, 430-434.

²⁴ II, 445-454.

²⁵ IV, 606-610.

The clergy are at fault doctrinally, too. The infidel "has shot his bolts away" and no longer threatens; but "priestly hands" are now the menace, by deserting the faith and counting mysteries useless. They deny the Godhead with a martyr's zeal." "Who will say preach"--

And what they will. All pastors are alike
To wandering sheep, resolved to follow none.
Two gods divide them all, Pleasure and Gain.

Almost violent is the poet's condemnation--

. . . . Lusts in their hearts,
And mischief in their hands, they roam the earth
To prey upon each other; stubborn, fierce,
High-minded, foaming out their own disgrace.
Thy prophets speak of such; and, noting down
The features of the last degenerate times,
Exhibit every lineament of these. 24

✓ VI, 890-901

V

CRITICISM OF CITY AND COUNTRY LIFE

William Cowper wrote one line which alone will assure his poetic fame--

God made the country, man made the town. ✓

In this epigram are disclosed Cowper's preference for the rural, his partiality for the out-of-doors. Throughout this lengthy poem one theme keeps recurring--on every page--the virtue of the countryside, the vice of the city. Cities, he avers, are "proud and gay and gain-devoted." Thither flow, he says,

As to a common and most noisome sewer,
The dregs and feculence of every land.
In cities foul example on most minds
Begets its likeness. Rank abundance breeds
In gross and pampered cities sloth and lust,
And wantonness and gluttonness excess.
In cities vice is hidden with most ease,
Or seen with least reproach. ✓

London, in particular, he brands as "fair but foul," "witty but not yet wise."

She is slack in discipline; more prompt
To avenge than prevent the breach of law;
That she is rigid in denouncing death
On petty robbers, and indulges life,
And liberty, and oftentimes honour too,
To speculators of the public good;
That thieves at home must hang, but he that puts
Into his overgorged and bloated purse

The wealth of Indian provinces, escapes. ³

London, "this queen of cities," has abrogated the ordinances of God and Sabbath rites have dwindled into unrespected forms." ⁴

Ambition, avarice, penury incurred
By endless riot, vanity, the lust
Of pleasure and variety, despatch,
As duly as the swallows disappear,
The world of wandering knights and squires to town.
London engulfs them all. The shark is there,
And the shark's prey; the spendthrift and the leech
That sucks him. There the sycophant, and he
Who, with bareheaded and obsequious bows,
Begs a warm office, doomed to a cold jail,
And groat per diem, if his patron frown.
The levee swarms, as if, in golden pomp,
Were charactered on every statesman's door,
"Battered and bankrupt fortunes mended here."
These are the charms that sully and eclipse
The charms of nature. ⁵

He compares London and Sodom of old--

Oh thou, resort and mart of all the earth,
Chequered with all complexions of mankind,
And spotted with all crimes; in whom I see
Much that I love, and more than I admire,
And all that I abhor; thou freckled fair,
That pleasest and yet shockest me, I can laugh
And I can weep, can hope and can despond,
Feel wrath and pity, when I think on thee! ⁶

In contrast, Cowper thought of the country as a blest "seclusion from the jarring world." There is peace, security from the assaults of evil and temptation, health, leisure, friendship, peace, simplicity, sincerity. Strange, then, that cities,

Attract us, and neglected nature's pines,
Abandoned as unworthy of our love.
But are not wholesome airs, though unperfumed

By roses, and clear suns though scarcely felt,
 And groves, if unharmonious, yet secure
 From clamour, and whose very silence charms,
 To be preferred to smoke, to the eclipse
 That metropolitan volcanoes make,
 Whose Stygian throats breathe darkness all day long,
 And to the stir of Commerce, driving slow,
 And thundering loud, with his ten thousand wheels?
 And they would be, were not madness in the head,
 And folly in the heart. ✓

The poet, as usual, harks back to the imaginary past. "Were England now what England was, plain, hospitable, kind, and undebauched. But we have bid farewell to all the virtues of those better days, and all their honest pleasures." Cowper laments the "citifying" of the countryside. "Shrewd sharpers" and "transient guests" invade the country, denude the forests, erect palaces, level hills, construct valleys, build waterfalls, etc.,--thus destroying the rusticity, the simplicity of the landscape. But worse still the town has "tinged" the country morally. "A stain appears on the vestal's robe." "The fashion runs down into the scenes rural."

Time was when in the pastoral retreat
 The unguarded door was safe; men did not watch
 To invade another's right, or guard their own.
 Then sleep was undisturbed by fear, unscared
 By drunken howlings; and the chilling tale
 Of midnight murder was a wonder heard
 With doubtful credit, told to frighten babes.
 But farewell now to unsuspecting nights,
 And slumbers unalarmed. Now, ere you sleep,
 See that your polished arms be primed with care,
 And drop the nightbolt; ruffians are abroad;
 And the first 'larum of the cock's shrill throat
 May prove a trumpet, summoning your ear
 To horrid sounds of hostile feet within.
 Even daylight has its dangers; and the walk
 Through pathless wastes and woods, unconscious once
 Of other tenants than melodious birds
 Or harmless flocks, is hazardous and bold.
 Lamented changes to which many a cause
 Inveterate, hopeless of a cure, conspires. ✓

Thus the influence of the town contaminates, corrupts the rural scene.

To Cowper "domestic life in rural pleasure passed" is the ideal. He wants it understood that he is a real ruralist--not one of those who "dream they have a taste for fields and groves"; who come hence to hunt the dumb beasts; who "crowd the roads, impatient for the town"

They love the country, and none else, who seek
For their own sakes its silence and its shade;
Delights which who would leave, that has a heart
Susceptible of pity, or a mind
Cultured and capable of sober thought,
For all the savage din of the swift pack, ~~and clamours of the~~
And clamours of the field? Detested sport,
That owes its pleasures to another's pain,
That feeds upon the sobs and dying shrieks
Of harmless nature, dumb, but yet endued
With eloquence that agonies inspire,
Of silent tears and heart-distending sighs! ✓

Strong as were Cowper's prejudices with respect to country and town, they seem to be with him mainly a matter of philosophy, for with all his diatribes against the city he confesses them to be the "nurseries of art," where with implements exact she "calculates, computes, and scans all distance, motion, magnitude, and now measures an atom, and now girds a world." And where, asks he, has commerce "such a mart, so rich, so thronged, and so supplied as London, opulent, enlarged, and still increasing"? Moreover, as highly as he praises the virtue of the rural folk, he frankly admits the pains and hardships incident to that manner of life.

. . . . the dweller in that still retreat
Dearly obtains the refuge it affords.
Its elevated site forbids the wretch
To drink sweet waters of the crystal well;
He dips his bowl into the weedy ditch,
And heavy-laden brings his beverage home, ✓

It sounds hardly like Cowper to hear him saying:

If solitude make scant the means of life,
Society for me!--Thou seeming sweet,
Be still a pleasing object in my view,
My visit still, but never my abode. √

It would appear, then, that Cowper enjoyed the refinements and cultural advantages of town life, especially when inclement weather shut him in; but that he preferred life in the open.

√ I, 248-251

VI

CRITICISM OF LITERATURE AND ART

This must be perforce the shortest chapter in this work for Cowper has little to say on the subject of literature and art. Of all English poets, Cowper perhaps shows the fewest traces of literary influence, and indulges least in criticism of his own art.

Although The Task contains some excellent satirical passages, Cowper apologizes for such, and expresses a disbelief in the efficacy ^{of satire} to accomplish moral ends. His strange doctrine respecting the nature and office of satire is set forth in these lines:

Yet what can satire, whether grave or gay;
It may correct a foible, may chastise
The freaks of fashion, regulate the dress,
Retrench a sword-blade, or displace a patch;
But where are its sublimer trophies found?
What vice has it subdued? whose heart reclaimed
By rigour, or whom laughed into reform?
Alas! Leviathan is not so tamed:
Laughed at, he laughs again; and, stricken hard,
Turns to the stroke his adamantine scales,
That fear no discipline of human hands. ✓

Cowper thinks the occasion requires a more drastic treatment than that of the satirist; no less than the stern offices of the pulpit will suffice. Deliberately, this misguided poet mounts the pulpit and preaches. A truer artist would have done just the reverse.

Excepting incidental references, Cowper speaks critically of only two poets--Milton and Cowley. Of both he speaks with praise and for the same reason--both were pastoral poets. The Milton passage is important for it is the only one in Cowper's works which speaks of an early literary influence upon him.

Then Milton had indeed a poet's charms:
New to my taste, his Paradise surpassed
The struggling efforts of my boyish tongue
To speak its excellence; I danced for joy.
I marvelled much that, at so ripe an age
As twice seven years, his beauties had then first
Engaged my wonder, and admiring still,
And still admiring, with regret supposed
The joy half lost because not sooner found. 3

In another passage he says Milton's "genius had angelic wings, and fed on nanna." Of the other poet, Cowley, Cowper says:

Thee too, enamoured of the life I loved,
Pathetic in its praise, in its pursuit
Determined, and possessing it at last
With transports such as favoured lovers feel,
I studied, prized, and wished that I had known,
Ingenious Cowley¹ and though now reclaimed
By modern lights from an erroneous taste,
I cannot but lament thy splendid wit
Entangled in the cobwebs of the schools;
I still revere thee, courtly though retired,
Though stretched at ease in Chertsey's silent bowers,
Not unemployed, and finding rich amends
For a lost world in solitude and verse. 3

It is significant that Cowper speaks of these two poets with enthusiasm and affection. His praise of Cowley is somewhat qualified by a criticism of poetry in general. He "laments" the fact that Cowley's "splendid wit is entangled in the cobweb of the schools." Cowper regarded poetry as conventionalized, and when he wrote he did so as an

2
IV, 709-717.

3
IV, 718-730.

original. In one passage he speaks in defiance of the "sage dispens-
ers of poetic ^{fame.} ~~art.~~" In the same passage he alludes to his own poetic
talent as "mean."

There is no direct reference to Shakespeare. Once his name is
incidentally mentioned in connection with that of Garrick. There is a
passing mention of the poet Phillips and Alexander Pope. Allusion is
made to Maro and Sidney, both Arcadians. Reference is made to the
gnats of Virgil, and to the frogs and mice of Aristophanes. These few
incidental references indicate the scarcity of literary criticism
in the poem.

Cowper's interest in art is neither lively nor intelligent.
He thinks of art as an inferior imitation of nature.

Strange there should be found
Who, self-imprisoned in their proud saloons,
Renounce the odours of the open field
For the unscented fictions of the ~~loom~~ loom;
Who, satisfied with only pencilled scenes,
Prefer to the performance of a God
The inferior wonders of an artist's hand.

It is not that the artist's work is not lovely; but nature's is "far
lovelier." Cowper's main objection is that there is a kind of impiety
implied in the effort of man to rival the work of God. I admire, he
says,

None more admires, the painter's magic skill,
Who shows me that which I shall never see,
Conveys a distant country into mine,
And throws Italian light on English walls:
But imitative strokes can do no more
Than please the eye--sweet nature every sense.

III, 456-457.

III, 601.

IV, 513-514.

VIII, 452-453.

I, 412-419.

I, 422-427.

Cowper here makes a common critical blunder of supposing the painter "imitates" nature. In another passage he regards nature and art as rival powers, with nature surpassing. After a lengthy description of winter, he exclaims,

Thus Nature works as if to mock at Art,
And in defiance of her rival powers;
By these fortuitous and random strokes
Performing such inimitable feats,
As she with all her rules can never reach. ¹⁹

Painters mentioned by Cowper are Reynolds and Guido; the only sculptor, Bacon. In neither case is there any understanding or appreciation of these men and their arts.

Music receives little notice. The "sprightly lyre" and the "clear voice symphonious" are mentioned with enthusiasm. Handel, the composer is called "the more than Homer of his age." This favorable notice results from the subject of Handel's masterpiece--the Messiah. Again, Cowper disparages the work of man in comparison with that of nature. "The music of her woods--no works of man may rival these." The only musical appreciation which he shows is when speaking of the "music of those village bells falling at intervals upon the ear in cadence sweet."

A scant word of appreciation is uttered for Rascius, the Roman actor, and Garrick, "as renowned as he."

On the whole, The Task has very little to say on the subject of art in its many phases. Possibly no other great poem of equal length is so devoid of this essential interest. Cowper is scarcely more than an inspired theologian and nature lover.

CONCLUSIONS.

1. William Cowper had several serious limitations as a critic: lack of a regular education, a meagre knowledge of poetry and poets; many narrow prejudices born of a severe theology, long years of seclusion, a bad habit of introspection, ill health—both physical and mental.

2. The Task is not of great value for its criticism per se. It does, however, voice the critical opinions of a considerable group known as evangelicals.

3. His social criticism is tinged with his theological prejudices. He denounces cards, theatres, dancing, smoking, checkers, fishing, and other innocent amusements and pastimes. He is on more solid ground when he decries drinking, prostitution, general lack of discipline, social insincerity, wealth, love of luxury. His tirades against dress are obvious prejudices.

4. His political criticisms are the best, on the whole. His arraignment of slavery, war, enforced army are sound and convincing. His criticism of kings and kingdom are unobjectionable. His severe indictment of graft, speculation, corruption in politics is justifiable. His attitude of constructive criticism toward his country is commendable.

5. Cowper's criticism of religious conditions reflect his Puritan theology. His interpretation of all events, personal and national, in terms of a sovereign God meting out justice to disobedient man is typically eighteenth century. His specific charges against the ministry for vanity, love of applause, ease, luxury doubtless have basis in truth. His indictment of Science and scientists on the ground of impiety and impertinence is sheer prejudice.

6. Cowper constantly opposed the country and city--the former possessing all good, the latter all evil. He particularly deplores the corrupting encroachments of town upon countryside.

7. There is ~~no~~ practically no criticism of literature and art in the Task.

8. Despite Cowper's low estimate of satire, the poem contains some excellent satirical passages.