THE ENIGMA OF WILLIAM COWPER: A STUDY OF THE POET'S SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT AS REFLECTED IN HIS FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS, HIS FRIENDSHIPS, HIS INVOLVEMENT IN EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANITY, AND HIS POETRY

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AND HIS POETRY

by

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A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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BIOGRAPHICAL TABLE

1731 November 15 (Old Style) November 26 (New Style)	William Cowper born at Berkhamsted rectory, Hertfordshire: the son of the Rev. John Cowper, and of Anne, daughter of Roger Donne of Ludham Hall, Norfolk.
1737 November 13	Death of his mother.
(?) 1738 to (?) 1740	At Dr Pittman's boarding school at Markyate Street, Herts.
(?) 1740 to (?) 1742	A boarder in the house of Mrs Disney, 'an eminent oculist', in London.
1742 April	Entered Westminster School
1748 April 29	Admitted to the Middle Temple.
1749 May	Left Westminster School, to spend nine months at Berkhamsted.
1750 to (?) 1753	Articled to a London solicitor, Chapman, in whose house Edward Thurlow was a fellow pupil. Both spend much time in the company of Theadora and Harriot (later Lady Hesketh), the daughters of Ashley Cowper, the poet's uncle.
(?) 1753 or 1754	Abandonment of the hope of marriage with Theadora Cowper.
1753 November	Moves to chambers in the Middle Temple, where he experienced his first breakdown, which lasted for a year.
1754 June	Called to the Bar.
1756 July 9	Death of his father.
1757 April 15	Admitted to the Inner Temple.
1763	Three offices in the patronage of his uncle Ashley Cowper fell vacant: the Clerkship of the Journals of the House of Lords, the Reading Clerkship and the Clerkship of the Committees. Cowper was nominated to the second and third offices; but he was allowed to exchange them for the first; its duties, though less profitable, were performed in private. The right of nomination was contested and Cowper was summoned to appear for examination at the bar of the House of Lords. After a minor breakdown, he was sent on holiday.

August or September	Return to work at the House of Lords. Renewal of mental agitation.
November	A committee of the House of Lords set up to investigate Cowper's exchange of offices, which had aroused a suspicion of corruption. The findings were wholly favourable, but in the interval Cowper twice attempted to commit suicide.
December	Third attempt at suicide on the eve of his examination. Resignation of the clerkship. On medical advice removed to Dr Cotton's Collegium Insanorum, a clinic at St Albans.
1764 July	Recovery and conversion to Evangelicalism.
1765 June	Left St Albans and settled at Huntingdon in lodgings.
c. September	First acquaintance with the Unwin family.
November 11	A boarder with the Unwins, Huntingdon.
1767 July	Death of the Rev. Morley Unwin.
October 14	Arrival of Cowper and Mrs Unwin at Olney, where the Rev. John Newton had offered to find a house for them.
1768 February 15	Move to Orchard Side, Olney.
1769	The Rev. William Unwin appointed rector of Stock in Essex.
1770 March 20	Death of his brother John.
1771	Olney Hymns begun, in collaboration with Newton.
1772	Engaged to Mrs Unwin.
1773 January	Severe depression. Engagement broken off.
February	Visited by a dream 'before the recollection of which all consolation vanishes, and it seems to me, must always vanish' (Letter to Newton, 16.10.1785) in which, he believed, he was cut off from God's mercy. Third breakdown follows.
April	Moved to Olney Vicarage, under the care of Newton.
October	Another attempt to commit suicide.
1774 May 23	Return to Orchard Side.
1778 June	Thurlow appointed Lord Chancellor.
1779 February	Olney Hymns, by Cowper and Newton, published.
December 10	Newton inducted as vicar of St Mary Woolnoth in the City of London.
1780 December	The Progress of Error and Truth begun.
1781 January–March	Table Talk and Expostulation written.
Spring	Charity written.

	July	First acquaintance with Lady Austen.
	August	Retirement begun.
1782	March 1	*Poems, by William Cowper, of the Inner Temple, Esq.*, published.
	October	*John Gilpin* written.
1783	(?) October	*The Task* begun.
1784	Spring	Final breach with Lady Austen.
	May	First acquaintance with the Throckmortons.
	October	*The Task* completed.
	November	*Tirocinium* completed. The translation of Homer begun.
1785	July	*The Task* published.
	October	Resumption of correspondence with Lady Hesketh, followed by financial help from her and from 'Anonymous' (her sister Theadora Cowper).
1786	June-November	Lady Hesketh tenant of Olney vicarage.
	November	Move to The Lodge, Weston Underwood, at the invitation of the Throckmortons.
	November 29	Death of the Rev. William Unwin.
1787	January	First acquaintance with Samuel Rose.
	January-June	The fourth breakdown.
1788	September	Translation of the *Odyssey* begun.
1790	January	First acquaintance with his cousin, John Johnson.
	September 8	Translation of the *Odyssey* sent to press.
1791	July	Translation of Homer published.
	September	Translation of Milton's Latin and Italian poems begun (finished in March 1792).
	December	Mrs Unwin's first paralytic stroke.
1792	May	Mrs Unwin's second paralytic stroke. First visit from William Hayley.
	August 1 to September 17	Johnson to Hayley at Eartham Place, Sussex.
	Autumn	Renewed depression.
1793	Autumn	Further deterioration in Mrs Unwin's health. *To Mary* written.
	November	Arrival of Lady Hesketh to take charge of Cowper and his household.
1794	January	Beginning of the fifth breakdown, from which Cowper never wholly recovered.
	April	A pension of £300 a year granted by the King.
	May 17	Mrs Unwin's third paralytic stroke.

1795	July 28	Cowper and Mrs Unwin removed by John Johnson to his house at East Dereham.
96	December 17	Death of Mrs Unwin.
97	November	Revision of translation of Homer begun.
9	March 8	Revision of Homer completed.
	March 19	The Cast-away begun.
1800	January 31	Treated for dropsy.
	February 22	Confined to his rooms.
	April 25	Death of Cowper.
	May 2	Buried in the parish church of East Dereham.

Source: Brian Spiller, Cowper: Poetry and Prose (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1968), pp. 31-35.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In March, 1834, Caroline Bowles wrote the following to Robert Southey:

> You have set my curiosity all on tenterhooks about Cowper, but it is a painful curiosity. I cannot bear to think of him otherwise than as an object of respect and love joined to the tenderest pity.[1]

Because of seeming incongruities in the themes of his poetry, seeming contradictions in his life, and seeming discrepancies in his theology William Cowper (1731-1800) is a puzzling poet, human being, and Christian.

In The Task Cowper wrote a lengthy poem which argues the values of domestic happiness, portrays contentment and retirement in rural living, and demonstrates delight in nature and friendship. The same poet has given us the humorous John Gilpin, the agonizing Hatred and Vengeance, and the despairing Castaway.

Cowper established significant relationships with three women; yet he never married. There is no evidence

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[1] Bowles to Southey, March 27, 1834: Edward Dowden, ed., The Correspondence of Robert Southey with Caroline Bowles (London: Longman's, Green, & Co., 1881), p. 299.

of immorality and much evidence to the contrary. Theadora Cowper chose self-exile when, for obscure reasons, Cowper did not marry her. When Lady Austen entertained romantic notions, Cowper in a gentlemanly but determined manner terminated their friendship. Mrs. Mary Unwin devoted nearly thirty years of her life to Cowper, gave freely of her material fortune, ruined her health, and risked her reputation; yet Cowper did not marry her. The mother-son relationship seems to have been the most satisfying relationship that Cowper enjoyed with women. He said in later life that he had had three mothers - his own mother, his step-mother, and Mrs. Unwin.[2]

Cowper experienced and professed Evangelical conversion. By birth he was, of course, an Anglican; but to the end of his life his theological persuasion was Calvinistic. One of the main tenets of Calvinism is the perseverance of the saints. According to this belief, it is a logical impossibility for one of the elect to fall from grace; thus there is no "castaway" in Calvinism. Yet Cowper, after professing to be one of the elect, believed for twenty-seven years that he was arbitrarily, irrevocably, and eternally damned by God. How are we to explain this paradox?

---

[2]Cowper to Mrs. King, April 12, 1790: Thomas Wright, The Correspondence of William Cowper (New York: A M S Press, 1968), III, 443. Subsequent references to Corr. are to this edition.

Many have searched for a solution to explain the complicated Cowper. The evidence is not readily available. Any hypothetical solution must be adequate to explain the enigma indicated above, plausible, and at all times consistent with the available evidence. There seems to be fragmentary evidence that Cowper possessed a deeply personal problem of a probable sexual nature that could have lain at the root of his anguish. This may have affected Cowper's poetry, influenced his social relationships, complicated his spiritual life, and indeed permeated every area of his existence. Although the exact nature of this specific problem may never be known, there is little point in ignoring its possible influence on his life and work.

In this paper I am attempting an overall view of Cowper's spiritual development as seen in the context of his family relationships, his friendships, his romantic interests, his involvement in Evangelical Christianity, and his poetry. In all of these I see a unity, an orderly progression and, in most cases, a subsequent regression. The climax of all of Cowper's relationships coincides with the zenith of his spiritual progression. A seeming recession in these relationships also parallels his spiritual regression. The one exception to this pattern is in his poetic endeavor. Cowper produced what some consider his greatest poetry during the 'white heat' of

despair, seen particularly in The Castaway. In what has been labelled insanity by some spectators, I see a kind of logic or rationale. In the seeming contradictions of Cowper the poet, Christian, and man I see a unified person whose life may have been greatly affected by a deeply personal problem, the nature of which would be difficult to cope with even in our enlightened twentieth century, but in the setting of the eighteenth century was virtually unmentionable. I submit its possibility as an hypothesis for the purpose of better understanding the enigma that is Cowper.

CHAPTER TWO

A POSSIBLE SOLUTION

1. Physical Malformation

Evidence that William Cowper possessed a unique physical problem is very fragmentary. In fact, most of the allusions made to it only increase the mystery. William Hayley in 1794 questioned Thomas Carwardine concerning "the meaning of some mysterious expressions" in his last letter "concerning our dear Cowper, as it may be useful for me to know everything that relates to him in order to mitigate the horrors of his present most deplorable sufferings."[1] However, in Hayley's subsequent biography of Cowper he did not reveal the most intimate details of Cowper's life.

Forty years later during Robert Southey's research for his Life of Cowper veiled allusions appear in his correspondence:

> A bookseller's parcel is on the way to me, ... But it contains also a packet of letters from Mr. Newton, Cowper's friend, to Mr. Thornton, of which you shall hear more when I have seen their contents.... Through that same channel I

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[1] Hayley to Carwardine, April 19, 1794: G. Carwardine Probert, "The Stricken Deer", Notes and Queries, CLVIII (May 31, 1930), p. 382.

> have been made acquainted with something regarding Cowper much more remarkable than anything that is publicly known concerning him, or indeed than could possibly be imagined. One reason why I can only raise your curiosity without putting you at once in possession of the truth is, that I know not yet whether it can be told. All I can say is, that it renders him far more an object of extraordinary compassion than he already appears to be.[2]
>
> Some of Mr. Newton's correspondence with Mr. Thornton is in my hands at present, and I am to have the rest. In these letters the mystery is revealed, and my mind is made up, after consulting with Wordsworth, that if it ever be made public, it shall not be by me. It had better be discovered hereafter by some hunter after extraordinary facts, than embodied in the Life of so truly amiable and interesting a poet.... Moreover, positive as the testimony is, there is against it so strong an improbability, that I know not which is the weightier.[3]

Southey dismissed Newton's positive testimony and chose rather to believe that the "mystery" was an "improbability", "a mere conception of madness, not the real and primary cause of [Cowper's] insanity, but a hypochondriacal and imaginary effect of it."[4] In so doing, he rejected what

---

[2]Southey to Caroline Bowles, March 13, [1834]: Dowden, op. cit., p. 296.

[3]Southey to Caroline Bowles, April 1834: Ibid., p. 300.

[4]Ibid.

may have been an adequate explanation of Cowper's enigmatic life and also rejected the testimony of one who was in a position to know Cowper's real physical condition while Cowper was a resident of Newton's Vicarage during the critical period of 1773-1774:

> What Newton believed to have been the cause of it, [Southey wrote] was in reality nothing more than an imaginary effect. Had there been any remarkable mal-formation, and more especially such a one, it is impossible that he should have been sent to a public school; impossible that he should have thought of marrying.[5]

On September 18, 1834 the following entry was made in the Greville Diary:

> Henry Taylor brought me a parcel of letters to frank to Southey the other day; they are from Newton, Cowper's nephew, (I think to W. Thornton), and they are to supply Southey with materials for Cowper's Life, which he is writing. There is one curious fact revealed in these letters, which accounts for much of Cowper's morbid state of mind and fits of depression, as well as for the circumstances of his running away from his place in the House of Lords. He was a Hermaphrodite. It relates to some defect in his physical conformation; somebody found out his secret, and probably threatened its exposure.[6]

---

[5]Southey to J.W. Warter, July 11, 1834: Kenneth Curry, ed., New Letters of Robert Southey (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), II, 413.

[6]P.W. Wilson, ed., The Greville Diary (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1927), I, 139-140.

Some of the facts and names are garbled in this account,[7] but a clearer understanding of Cowper's unique physical problem emerges. Cowper may have been an hermaphrodite:

> The next letter (which I have not seen) tells Mr. Thornton a most extraordinary tale - that Cowper was an androgyne, that some person who knew this threatened to oppose his appointment to the Clerkship, by raising the question of his sex, and that the dread of this exposure had been the cause of his first madness. Mrs. Unwin believed this. Newton believed it.[8]

It is significant that two of Cowper's most intimate acquaintances are here said to have believed that Cowper was an hermaphrodite or androgyne. During Cowper's derangement of 1773-1774 Newton probably revealed Cowper's secret to Newton's patron, John Thornton. Actually at the time of the revelation Newton faced quite a dilemma: Cowper refused to leave the Vicarage for thirteen months; it

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[7] John Newton was a friend, not a relative of Cowper. The correspondence was between John Newton and John Thornton, Newton's rich Evangelical friend. According to a letter from Southey to Caroline Bowles as late as February 23, 1839 (see Dowden, op. cit., p. 346) Southey seems to have eventually seen the missing letter. However, it turned out to have been from Thornton to Newton, rather than vice versa. Southey was still unwilling to grant that Cowper possessed a "real" "malformation". Instead, he created a new dilemma for himself - was the "malformation" the effect of a "miserable imagination" or was it a "real malformation" possessed by a kinsman of Cowper of the same name?

[8] Southey to C.W. Williams Wynn, Nov. 6, 1835: Curry, op. cit., p. 432.

became necessary for Mrs. Unwin to attend the deranged poet night and day to prevent suicide. At the same time this was considered ethically improper; Thornton was urging Newton to exclude Cowper and Mrs. Unwin from the Vicarage or to leave himself.

Newton continued loyal to his friends; his explanations must have been sufficient to convince Thornton for Thornton even added substantially to Newton's income during Cowper's sojourn.[9] However, before the revelation of the mystery, some of Newton's perplexity is registered in excerpts from his letters to Thornton, quoted by Southey:

> I can say nothing new about Mrs. Unwin. That she loved him is certain; that her behaviour when he was well, was in some things a little indiscreet cannot be denied; but I have not the least doubt but that as things are at present she is in the path of duty, and that there is no more danger of disagreable consequences than if they lived in different houses.... I do not wonder but Mr Unwin [William, Mrs. Unwin's son] has some unpleasing feelings, nor that he mentions them to you, but I would wish he only spoke of them to such as you.
> .....
> Whatever occasion of suspicions ... there is no ground for just blame, nor (while things continue as they are) any possibility of bad consequence.... appearances must be borne with.
> .....

---

[9] John Newton and Richard Cecil, The Life of the Rev. John Newton Written by Himself to A.D. 1763 and Continued to His Death in 1807 by Rev. Richard Cecil (New York: American Tract Society, n.d.), pp. 156-157. Subsequently referred to as The Life of John Newton.

> I must at a distance have judged as you of the impropriety of single persons sleeping so long in the same room.... in this case I have never had the remotest apprehension that any thing was risked but appearances; and when the exigency of the case shall be fully known this risk likewise will be recovered.[10]

Newton and Mrs. Unwin do not seem to have been the only ones who knew of Cowper's personal problem. Upon the renewal of Cowper and Lady Hesketh's friendship in 1785, the poet wrote a series of letters to her before her initial visit, in which he hints strongly of some defect in his "history":

> Your question, your natural, well warranted, and most reasonable question concerning me and Mrs. Unwin, shall be answered at large when we meet. But to Mrs. Unwin I refer you for that answer; she is most desirous to give you a most explicit one. I have a history, my dear, belonging to me, which I am not the proper person to relate. You have heard somewhat of it, - as much as it was possible for me to write; but that somewhat bears a most inconsiderable proportion to the whole.[11]

> But alas, my dear, instead of wings, I have a chain and a collar; the history of which collar and chain Mrs. Unwin shall give you when you come.... But there are lets and hindrances which no power of man can remove, which will make your poor heart ache, my dear, when you come to know them.[12]

---

[10] Southey to C.W. Williams Wynn, Nov. 6, 1835: Curry, op. cit., pp. 431-2.

[11] Cowper to Lady Hesketh, Feb. 27, 1786: Corr., II, 477.

[12] Cowper to Lady Hesketh, Apr. 10, 1786: Corr., III, 12.

> My depression has a cause.... Mrs. Unwin shall be my expositor.[13]

Southey had attempted to dismiss Newton's testimony on the basis that Cowper's physical problem was indeed not "real", but only an "imaginary effect" of his madness. However, Cowper's awareness that he was in some way physically unique began at a very early age. His boyhood shame at Dr. Pitman's school is registered in some of the opening words of the Memoir, Cowper's deeply personal Evangelical testimony of 1766:

> At six years old I was taken from the nursery, and from the immediate care of a most indulgent mother.... But my chief affliction consisted in my being singled out from all the other boys, by a lad about fifteen years of age, as a proper object upon whom he might let loose the cruelty of his temper.... I well remember being afraid to lift up my eyes upon him, higher than his knees; and that I knew him by his shoe-buckles, better than any other part of his dress.... The cruelty of this boy, which he had long practised in so secret a manner that no creature suspected it, was at length discovered.[14]

Cowper's earliest extant poem, written while he was at Westminster, indicates the seriousness of this encounter with schoolboy ridicule:

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[13] Cowper to Lady Hesketh, May 25, 1786: Ibid., p. 47.

[14] Memoir of the Early Life of William Cowper, Esq. Written by Himself (London: R. Edwards, 1816), pp. 1-3. Subsequently referred to as Memoir.

> He, who could erst with even equal pace
> Pursue his destin'd way with symmetry
> And some proportion form'd, now, on one side,
> Curtail'd and maim'd, the sport of vagrant boys,
> Cursing his frail supporter, treach'rous prop,
> .....
> But that support soon failing, by him left
> On whom he most depended, basely left,
> Betray'd, deserted, from his airy height
> Head-long he falls; and thro' the rest of life
> Drags the dull load of disappointment on.[15]

It is certain that Cowper felt cursed, and this curse seems to have had physical implications. For another indication of the nature of this curse we look again to the Memoir. Cowper felt anguish over the Parable of the Barren Fig Tree:

> I particularly remember, that the parable of the barren fig-tree was to me an inconceivable source of anguish; and I applied it to myself, with a strong persuasion in my mind, that when the Saviour pronounced a curse upon it, he had me in his eye; and pointed that curse directly at me.[16]

Considering the fact that Cowper had had an education in the classics at Westminster, it is possible that the story of the leaves of the fig tree could have had sexual implications for him.

---

[15] "Verses Written at Bath on Finding the Heel of a Shoe", ll. 30-34, 42-46: Cowper: Poetical Works, H.S. Milford, ed., 4th ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 263-4. Subsequently referred to as Poems.

[16] Memoir, p. 47.

The barren tree imagery, beginning with the Memoir in 1766, figures prominently in the Correspondence. There it seems to have varying degrees of physical and spiritual implications:

> Nature revives again; but a soul once slain lives no more. The hedge that has been apparently dead, is not so; it will burst into leaf and blossom at the appointed time; but no such time is appointed for the stake that stands in it. It is as dead as it seems, and will prove itself no dissembler.[17]

> Of myself, who had once both leaves and fruit; but who have now neither, ... I repine at my barrenness, and think it hard to be thus blighted; but when a glimpse of hope breaks in upon me, I am contented to be the sapless thing I am, knowing that He who has commanded me to wither, can command me to flourish again, when He pleases.[18]

> Neither waking nor sleeping have I any communications from God, but am perfectly a withered tree, fruitless and leafless.[19]

Perhaps the most significant evidence that Cowper may have possessed a sexual problem is found in a peculiar autograph in his poetry. A possibly exaggerated emphasis upon masculinity appears in Cowper's first volume of poetry, and it may be revealing:

---

[17] Cowper to Rev. John Newton, Jan. 13, 1784: Corr., II, 147.

[18] Cowper to Rev. John Newton, June 25, 1785: Corr., II, 332.

[19] Cowper to Samuel Teedon, Mar. 14, 1793: Corr., IV, 381.

She rears her fav'rite man of all mankind
.....
..., and masculine of course.[20]

The man that dares traduce, ...:
..., is not a man:[21]

This man was happy - ...
.....
..., if in masculine debate he shar'd,[22]

He that has not usurp'd the name of man ...[23]

What a peculiar thing to say - "usurp'd the name of man"! Peculiar, unless there perhaps was an element of doubt about one's true sex. In The Task, too, the talk of "manhood" may well be a kind of unconvincing posturing:

Forth steps the man - an emblem of myself![24]

we can walk erect -
One proof at least of manhood![25]

I think, articulate, I laugh and weep,
And exercise all functions of a man.[26]

---

[20] "Table Talk", ll. 217, 221: Poems, p. 5.

[21] "Expostulation", ll. 432-33: Poems, p. 53.

[22] "Hope", ll. 678, 686: Poems, p. 74.

[23] "Retirement", l. 319: Poems, p. 116.

[24] The Task, I, l. 213: Poems, p. 133.

[25] Ibid., II, ll. 593-4: Poems, p. 158.

[26] Ibid., III, ll. 198-199: Poems, p. 168.

The emphasis on masculinity would perhaps seem superfluous to a normal man. This hidden autograph could possibly indicate a subconscious compulsion to reveal that which he consciously felt he could not tell.

What exactly could the postulated malformation have been? Since certain proof cannot be produced that Cowper was indeed an hermaphrodite, a detailed description of his "remarkable malformation" cannot be given. The Oxford English Dictionary offers this definition as one of the primary meanings of the word 'hermaphrodite':

> A human being, or one of the higher animals, in which parts characteristic of both sexes are to some extent (really or apparently) combined.[27]

That Cowper called himself a lifeless "stake" with no "leaf" or "blossom"[28] in 1784 and the "withered tree, fruitless and leafless"[29] in 1793 may possibly indicate missing or malformed testes in his sexual configuration.[30]

---

[27] Oxford English Dictionary, V, 243.

[28] Cowper to Rev. John Newton, Jan. 13, 1784: Corr., II, 147.

[29] Cowper to Samuel Teedon, Mar. 14, 1793: Corr., IV, 381.

[30] The best investigation of Cowper's possible "defect" has been made in Charles Ryskamp's William Cowper of the Inner Temple, Esq. (Cambridge: University Press, 1959), pp. 135-144. Subsequently referred to as William Cowper. However, like Southey, Ryskamp accepts the "defect" as a "delusion and part of his mental disorder", not as a

It would seem that Cowper may well have had a secret physical defect that he preferred to be "kept conceal'd". If this hypothesis be true, we may finally have an adequate explanation of Cowper's mental suffering at Dr. Pitman's school and an adequate explanation for his fevered retreat from the Clerkship in the House of Lords.

2. Subsequent Mutilation

During the terrible derangement of 1773 Cowper felt impelled to perform a deed that we will henceforth in this paper call the "sacrifice of Abraham". The Rev. John Newton twice refers to the act; however, in his extant writings he never defines the nature of it:

> Even that attempt he made in October was a proof of [a perfect spirit of obedience]; for it was solely owing to the power the enemy had of impressing upon his disturbed imagination that it was the will of God, he should, after the example of Abraham, perform an expensive act of obedience, and offer not a son, but himself.[31]

> The first temptation the enemy assaulted him with was to offer himself as Abraham his son.... We were obliged to watch with him day and night, and my dear wife, and Mrs. Unwin with whom he lived,

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reality. I am not as interested in a description of the "malformation" as I am in the acceptance of its existence and in its profound effect on every aspect of Cowper's life.

[31] Robert Southey, The Life and Works of William Cowper (New York: AMS Press, 1971), 15 vols. Subsequently referred to as Life and Works. The date of Newton's letter quoted here is given as May 26, 1774 in footnote I, 254.

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> left him not an hour for seven years...:. He had various temptations which it would be very improper for me to mention in this place.[32]

Following the attempt to perform this "expensive act of obedience", Cowper makes allusion to a significant but terrible incident in vague terms: "the event", "the offence", "my fatal fall", and the "terrible" or "horrible" "minute" or "moment". In order to arrive at an hypothesis concerning the nature of this incident we need to explore the context in which we find each of the terms, and to collect whatever other evidence we can about the precise nature of the "event". This I propose to do over the next dozen or so pages.

In 1782 Cowper wrote to Newton concerning "the event". Newton, I believe, was well acquainted with the nature of this incident:

> I suppose no man would despair, if he did not apprehend something singular in the circumstances of his own story, something that discriminates it from that of every other man, and that induces despair as an inevitable consequence.... I must deal with you as I deal with poor Mrs. Unwin, in all our disputes about it, cutting all controversy short by an appeal to the event.[33]

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[32] Mary B. Whiting, "A Burning Bush", Hibbert Journal, XXIV, No. 2 (1926), 306.

[33] Cowper to Rev. John Newton, March 14, 1782: Corr., I, 462-3.

From a twenty-year vantage Cowper viewed "the offence" as unpardonable:

> ... to me, who have unpardonably offended Him...[34]

> I have offended to the forfeiture of all such mercies...[35]

> I dreamed that in our parlour at Olney my thoughts were suddenly carried to the offence of which I have in time past informed you, and from which originated all my misery twenty years since...[36]

It is obvious from these last three quotations that Cowper had entrusted his fearful secret to Samuel Teedon.

Soon after these letters to Teedon, Cowper in the Spiritual Diary of 1795 refers to a tragic circumstance that he calls "my fatal fall". This is related in the same document to his "most fatal snare"[37] which he states definitely as his love of Mrs. Unwin. From 1796 until his final letter on April 11, 1799, Cowper repeatedly spoke of a specific "horrible" or "terrible moment" to both Lady Hesketh and John Newton, both of whom, I believe, were

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[34] Cowper to Samuel Teedon, Jan. 25, 1793: Corr., IV, 361.

[35] Cowper to Samuel Teedon, March 14, 1793: Corr., IV, 381.

[36] Cowper to Samuel Teedon, Jan. 10, 1794: Corr., IV, 486.

[37] K. Povey (ed.), "Cowper's Spiritual Diary", The London Mercury, XV (March 1927), p. 494. Subsequently referred to as Spiritual Diary.

well aware of Cowper's personal problem and the incident of the "moment":

> My cruel destiny denied me the privilege of understanding any thing that, in the horrible moment that came winged with my immediate destruction, might have served to aid me. You know my story far better than I am able to relate it.... Oh, lot of unexampled misery incurred in a moment![38]
>
> It is unnecessary to add that this comes from the most miserable of beings, whom a terrible minute made such.[39]

Sometimes the "terrible moment" has unmistakable physical implications, as in the following quotation:

> In one day, in one moment I should rather have said, she [nature] became an universal blank to me, and, though from a different cause, yet with an effect as difficult to remove, as blindness itself.[40]

Sometimes the "terrible moment" has specific spiritual implications as in his last extant letter, written to Newton:

> Your last letter ... served to embitter, if possible, still more the present moment, by a sad retrospect to those days when I thought myself secure of an eternity.... But I was little aware of what I had to expect, and that a storm was at hand which in one terrible ...

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[38] Cowper to Lady Hesketh, Jan. 22, 1796: Corr., IV, 496-7.

[39] Cowper to Lady Hesketh, May 15, 1797: Corr., IV, p. 500.

[40] Cowper to Lady Hesketh, Oct. 13, 1798: Corr., IV, p. 503.

> moment would darken, and in another still more terrible blot out that prospect for ever.[41]

Cowper in 1786 gives the specific date of this horrible event:

> ... my snuff-box, etc., from Anonymous on the 24th of January, on which day, twelve years ago, I plunged into a melancholy that made me almost an infant.[42]

Paralleling the notations of the "terrible moment" in the Correspondence, the Rev. John Johnson kept a diary in which he recorded the dream-life of Cowper from November 15, 1797 until April 23, 1799. The physical implications of Cowper's problem are overwhelming in the execution imagery of the dreams. In these dreams Cowper constantly anticipates personal execution. This expectation intensifies on and near the anniversary of his "fatal seizure", January 24, 1773, and the "fatal dream" near the end of February, 1773. In order to see Cowper's preoccupation with execution and the progression apparent in the dreams I list excerpts from a number of the dreams along with their respective dates as they appear in the Diary:

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[41] Cowper to Rev. John Newton, April 11, 1799: Corr., IV, 506, 7.

[42] Cowper to Lady Hesketh, April 3, 1786: Corr., III, 9. I know no adequate explanation for the discrepancy in the number of years. More than thirteen years had gone by since January 24, 1773. Wright's authority for this letter was Southey.

December 23, 1797	Monday ... will be the day of execution.
January 1, 1798	I dreamt that I saw a carpenter at work, and asked him: What was he doing? He was preparing for my Execution, he said!
January 8, 1798	I saw myself represented by a Black-guard..... following a dung-cart that was leading him to Execution.
January 21, 1798	The Twenty-fourth.
January 24, 1798	Dreamt that he should be the mockery and the Jest and the Victim of popular fury in a moment.
January 25, 1798	I despaired of mercy in the year seventy three.
February 14, 1798	I saw myself walking to execution
February 28, 1798	They are going to take upon themselves the office of public execution.
March 1, 1798	I ... am going to execution... I dreamed that I was walking in the sunshine, and walking to execution - and now I am going into sunshine to walk to execution.
March 10, 1798	They are the Executioners I saw ... people standing round the Pulpit.[43]
March 23, 1798	The Executioner's mark
March 27, 1798	the day that you have ordered for my execution.
March 29, 1798	Mr. C- had dreamt that he was going to execution.

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[43] The pressure from an ecclesiastical origin should be noted.

May 3, 1798 — Twill be the more direful execution that ever was.

May 11, 1798 — I must go to the Place of execution.

May 25, 1798 — The Executioners are come.[44]

In his poetry Cowper's barren, fruitless-tree imagery combines with the execution imagery. Viciously with his knife, Cowper prunes the barren branches in nature:

> What is weak,
> Distemper'd, or has lost prolific pow'rs,
> Impair'd by age, his unrelenting hand
> Dooms to the knife.....
> .....the sapless branch
> Must fly before the knife; the wither'd leaf
> Must be detach'd...[45]

After January 1, 1773, Cowper never entered the Church of God for the remaining twenty-seven years of his life. This, I believe, is related to the "terrible moment". His word for his non-attendance was "exclusion":

> the sin by which I am excluded from the privileges I once enjoyed, you would account no sin, you would even tell me that it was a duty.... you will think me mad,... I have not even asked a blessing upon my food these ten years, nor do I expect that I shall ever ask it again.[46]

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[44] John Johnson, Pro et Contra. A diary kept of the dreams, voices, and notices of the poet Cowper. Cambridge, MS. Add. 5993 (microfilm), pp. 11-33. Subsequently referred to as Cambridge Diary.

[45] The Task, III, ll. 414-417, 613-615: Poems, pp. 173, 177.

[46] Cowper to Rev. William Bull, Oct. 27, 1782: Corr., II, 15.

Yet it is certain that Rev. John Newton never excluded him from the Church fellowship; rather he appears to have encouraged Cowper to rejoin the fellowship. We can conclude this from Cowper's own letter:

> If I am recoverable, why am I thus? why crippled and made useless in the church, ... why cashiered and turned out of service, ... There is a mystery in my destruction, and in time it shall be explained.[47]

> For what reason it is that I am thus excluded, ... is known to God only.[48]

> I never can forget for a moment my exclusion from the church of God and from all communion with Him.[49]

From Cowper's Correspondence, Newton's Correspondence and Diary, Cowper's Spiritual Diary, and Newton's Funeral Sermon[50] for Cowper it is possible to reconstruct -

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[47] Cowper to Rev. John Newton, Jan. 13, 1784: Corr., II, 147. In this letter the lifeless "stake" with no "leaf" or "blossom" are related to Cowper's being "cashiered out of service".

[48] Cowper to Rev. John Newton, May 20, 1786: Corr., III, 40, 41.

[49] Cowper to Samuel Teedon, Aug. 27, 1792: Corr., IV, 283-4.

[50] We do not have Newton's Funeral Sermon preached in May, 1800. However, the notebook of Hannah Jowett with its notes on Newton's sermon is extant. The notes are contained in Mary B. Whiting's "A Burning Bush".

hypothetically the circumstances that precipitated the "terrible moment" and to reconstruct also the order of the most significant events in Cowper's life during the critical years of 1773-1774. I believe that the "terrible moment" is identical with that which is alluded to by the term - the "sacrifice of Abraham". With this reconstruction I believe that the nature of this "expensive act of obedience" can at least be hypothetically determined.

On New Year's Day, 1773, in Olney Church Cowper heard his last sermon. Newton and Cowper had had tea together in the afternoon.[51] On January 2nd Newton spoke of "an afflicting and critical dispensation at Orchard Side", Cowper's home. On Sunday, January 3rd "appearances were worse".[52] On January 5th Newton determined to take daily walks with Cowper. Newton mentioned one particular walk in the snow:

> I remember one time we were walking together in a very deep snow; the weather was remarkably severe. He desired me to stop and I observed the sweat drop from his face, occasioned by the agony of his mind ...[53]

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[51] Whiting, op. cit., p. 306.

[52] Josiah Bull, John Newton of Olney and St. Mary Woolnoth (London: Rel. Tract Soc., 1868), p. 184.

[53] Whiting, op. cit., p. 306.

After twenty-seven years why should Newton remember a particular cup of tea or a particular walk in the snow and think them significant enough to warrant mention in the Funeral Sermon in 1800 unless the topic of conversation at each of these was of primary importance? Since 1765 Cowper had made his home with the Unwins, first at Huntingdon until the death of Rev. Morley Unwin in 1767, and now with Unwin's widow and their children at Orchard Side in Olney. William Unwin, the son, had become Rector of Stock, Essex in 1769. Miss Susanna Unwin, the daughter, was engaged to marry the Rev. Matthew Powley. With the dwindling household there was evident social and religious pressure that Cowper marry Mrs. Unwin. Both Mrs. Unwin and Newton entertained the view that Cowper planned to marry:

> Now the editor of this volume is able to state that he has again and again heard his father say that Mr. Cowper and Mrs. Unwin were betrothed and about to be married when the melancholy return of Mr. Cowper's malady in 1773 prevented the accomplishment of their purpose; and, moreover, that it was Mrs. Unwin herself who made this statement to his grandfather.[54]
>
> .....
>
> They were congenial spirits, united in the faith and hope of the gospel, and their intimate and growing friendship led them in the course of four or five years to an engagement for marriage, which was well known to me, and to most of their and my friends, and was to have taken place in a

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[54]The grandfather was Rev. William Bull, Cowper's correspondent.

few months, but was prevented by the terrible malady which seized him about that time.[55]

It is entirely possible that on New Year's Day, 1773, not one of even the closest friends of Cowper in Olney knew of his possible physical "malformation" and the consequent impossibility of the fulfillment of marriage. I would suggest that during the tea on New Year's Day and also during the significant walk in the snow, Newton may have been urging Cowper to marry Mrs. Unwin in order to avoid gossip. Cowper did feel like a hunted animal at the time of the "dreadful moment". That this situation was associated with Mrs. Unwin is evident from Cowper's confession in the Spiritual Diary of 1795:

> It is I who have been the hunted hare, and He who turn'd me out to be hunted ...
> One, in her form, my love of whom was [one of] my most fatal snare[s], tells me without disguise that she detests me.[56]
> .....
> Could'st thou see me entangled as I was, and see me so entangled with such a dreadful moment approaching as must necessarily decide my fate for ever...
> .....
> I have been a poor Fly entangled in a thousand webs from the beginning.[57]

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[55] Bull, op. cit., p. 192.

[56] Mrs. Unwin had several strokes that resulted in partial paralysis.

[57] Spiritual Diary, pp. 494-495. The brackets indicate deletions made by Cowper in the original.

Undoubtedly Newton, and perhaps Mrs. Unwin, had no indication of Cowper's fearful secret until the "threatening appearance" of January 24, 1773. Newton makes reference to this most enigmatic circumstance in a non-commital manner in his Diary:

> Sunday, 24th A very alarming turn roused us from our beds, and called us to Orchard Side at four in the morning. I stayed there till eight, before which time the threatening appearance went entirely off, and now things remain much as they were.[58]

If this event on January 24, 1773 was an attempt at suicide, why doesn't Newton state that clearly in his own personal diary? His veiled expressions indicate a fear that someone would read his diary at a later date. In his own personal Memoir Cowper had given in vivid detail his professed attempt at suicide in 1763. Newton possessed one of the original copies of this Memoir.[59] The absence of any specific information concerning the "temptation" in Newton's Diary increases the sense of Cowper's enigmatic character.

For any enlightenment concerning the nature of the "threatening appearance" or the "dreadful moment" we

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[58] Bull, op. cit., p. 185.

[59] Maurice J. Quinlan (ed.), "Memoir of William Cowper", Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society, Vol. 97, No. 4 (September 1953), p. 363.

must examine again the private Spiritual Diary of 1795. This document definitely alludes to two separate crises.[60] The nature of the second crisis is specific: it is the attempt at "suicide" in 1773 and is referred to as the "non-performance of a task" and a "crime" that he was still alive. Death was out of reach because of the vigilance of his friends. The first crisis was eight months previous to the attempted suicide. It is called Cowper's "fatal fall", the "first miscarriage", the "sin committed", a "catastrophe", and a "dreadful moment". Though no details concerning the first crisis are revealed, the "dreadful moment" is obviously a positive committed action in contrast to the failure to commit "suicide" which was the "non-performance of a task". Explaining why he had failed in the second crisis, he alludes as follows to the earlier event:

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[60] Cowper produced the agonizing confessional called the Spiritual Diary in 1795, immediately before he left Weston Underwood for Norfolk, where he spent the remaining five years of his life in the care of Rev. John Johnson. Kenneth Povey, to whom we are indebted for this fragmentary diary, has telescoped the two crises and believes that Cowper refers only to his attempt at suicide. Povey says, "the sin that had earned him this unique distinction was his failure, through lack of faith, to commit suicide when unmistakably bidden to do so by God himself." [p. 493] With all due respect to Povey's scholarship, I still believe that a careful reading reveals the outlines of two events. Newton also seems to telescope the "sacrifice of Abraham" with the attempted suicide in October, 1773. I believe that Newton's reason for doing this was that the "threatening appearance" of January 24, 1773 was virtually unmentionable.

> I perish as I do, that is, as none ever did, for non-performance of a task, which I know by after-experience to have been naturally impossible in the first instance; the [flutter agonizing pulsation] of the heart unnerving and disabling the arm entirely, as it did mine [even] eight months after my fatal fall. As to the second instance, it was hopeless, both from the effects of the first miscarriage which had totally changed my views and character, and as to the third, it is evident from the indefinite terms of the precept, that it was never designed for any thing but a snare to me.[61]

The first event, though more nebulous than the second, seems to have priority in point of importance:

> Can any sin committed in so terrible and tempestuous a moment deserve what I must suffer? for that first sin involved in it all that follow'd as absolutely unavoidable.[62]

The "catastrophe" had definite physical implications that are blamed on the Creator:

> I who must suffer as none ever did, whatever else I may deserve, have not deserved so terrible a doom, and He who made me with such a probable catastrophe in prospect, would have shown himself infinitely more merciful had he never made me at all.[63]

The "terrible moment" appears in exaggerated, almost infinite size:

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[61] Spiritual Diary, p. 494. The brackets indicate deletions made by Cowper in the original.

[62] Ibid., p. 494.

[63] Ibid., p. 494.

> Oh cruel decree! that connected such terrible consequences with the lapse of a moment.[64]

What exactly was the "threatening appearance" of January 24, 1773; what were the "effects of the first miscarriage" that changed Cowper's "views and character"; what were the "indefinite terms of the precept"; what was the "catastrophe" that was associated with how he was made; what happened in the "terrible and tempestuous moment"; what form did the "sacrifice of Abraham" take in a mind that was "in a state of infatuation little short of idiotism"? Cowper wrote of the occasion:

> I was suddenly reduced from my wonted rate of understanding to an almost childish imbecility. I did not indeed lose my senses, but I lost the power to exercise them.[65]

In view of Cowper's preoccupation with execution, the viciousness with which he pruned the unprolific and barren branches in nature, the amazing fact that he felt excluded from the church of God,[66] the social and religious pressure that he marry Mrs. Unwin at this time in spite of his

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[64] Ibid., p. 495.

[65] Cowper to Lady Hesketh, Jan. 16, 1786: Corr., II, p. 442.

[66] Deuteronomy 23:1. He that is wounded in the stones, or hath his privy member cut off, shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord.

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probable incapacity for marriage, I suggest that the "sacrifice of Abraham" may have taken the form of an emasculation:[67]

> My love is slain, and by my crime is slain,
> Ah! now beneath whose wings shall I repose?[68]

Late in February, 1773, Cowper had, what Thomas Wright calls, the "fatal dream". It seems to have been a subjective representation of Cowper's sense of "damnation", confirming his conscious awareness:

> My thoughts are clad in a sober livery, for the most part as grave as that of a bishop's servants. They turn too upon spiritual subjects; but the tallest fellow and the loudest among them all is he who is continually crying with a loud voice, Actum est de te; periisti![69]

> I had a dream twelve years ago, before the recollection of which all consolation vanishes.[70]

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[67] Maurice J. Quinlan, William Cowper: A Critical Life (Minneapolis: University of Minn. Press, 1953). Subsequently referred to as Critical Life. Quinlan does speculate in a footnote (p. 43) on the possibility of an emasculation. However, he does not associate it with the "sacrifice of Abraham". I believe that, if Cowper accomplished this act, he was over forty years old, not thirty as suggested by Quinlan's inquiry.

[68] Southey, Life and Works, I, pp. 258-259. Lines written by Cowper during the derangement of 1773 and recorded by Mr. George Dyer in his History of Cambridge.

[69] Cowper to Rev. John Newton, Aug. 21, 1781: Corr., I, p. 343.

[70] Cowper to Rev. John Newton, Oct. 16, 1785: Corr., II, p. 366.

In April, 1773, Cowper and Mrs. Unwin moved into Newton's Vicarage. Cowper could not be persuaded to leave until thirteen months later.

In spite of Mrs. Unwin's constant vigil which lasted for about seven years,[71] in early October, 1773, while the Rev. and Mrs. Newton were on a journey into Warwickshire, Cowper attempted the suicide to which I have referred. This was the second major event outlined in the Spiritual Diary, eight months after the first crisis:

> What opportunities of Suicide had I, while there was any Hope, except a miserable, a most miserable moment, in 73? ... How are such opportunities to be found where the intention is known, watch'd and guarded against?[72]

In the spring Cowper worked in the garden. On May 5, 1774, Miss Susanna Unwin was finally married to the Rev. Matthew Powley. It has been established that Cowper's relationship with Miss Unwin was never harmonious.[73] Finally, on May 14, 1774,[74] while Cowper was feeding the

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[71] Whiting, op. cit., p. 306.

[72] Spiritual Diary, pp. 493-4.

[73] Thomas Wright, The Life of William Cowper (New York: Haskell House), Reprint of 1892 edition. pp. 253-254. Subsequently referred to as Life.

[74] Ibid., p. 214.

chickens, he was seen to smile for the first time in sixteen months. On May 23, 1773, he returned to Orchard Side with Mrs. Unwin. In 1763 one derangement had released him from taking the examination for the Clerkship in the House of Lords; in 1773 another derangement had apparently released him from the necessity of marrying Mrs. Unwin. Cowper returned to Orchard Side with the mother he craved in Mrs. Unwin. There is no record of further pressure from friend, relative, or evangelical that he marry Mrs. Unwin. He was not committed to a marriage that was physically impossible, but he resented to the end of his life the drastic means of escape. He had paid a big price; he bore in his body the "mark of the Executioner".[75]

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[75] Cambridge Diary, p. 26.

CHAPTER THREE

COWPER'S FAMILY

1. Mother and Father

Greater far than the pride that William Cowper could have rightfully possessed because of royal and literary pedigree was his personal satisfaction that he had been born into a Christian home:

> My boast is not that I deduce my birth
> From loins enthron'd, and rulers of the earth;
> But higher far my proud pretensions rise-
> The son of parents pass'd into the skies.[1]

The Cowper family could boast of a distinguished ancestry whose descent could be traced without interruption to the time of Edward IV. His great-uncle, William Cowper, first Earl Cowper, had been twice Lord Chancellor of Great Britain. Since Sir William Cowper, the first holder of the family title, nearly every Cowper was connected with both politics and poetry. His mother, Ann, daughter of Roger Donne of Ludham Hall, Norfolk, possessing an equally illustrious ancestry, was supposed to be descended from King Henry III through four different lines and from Dr. John Donne, Dean of St. Paul's, the great English poet

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[1] "On the Receipt of My Mother's Picture", ll. 108-111: Poems, p. 396.

and priest.

The Cowper home, a Christian sanctuary for the shy little William, was a "past'ral house", for the Poet's father was Rector of St. Peter's Church at Great Berkhamstead, Hertfordshire, and chaplain to George II:

> Where once we dwelt our name is heard no more,
> Children not thine have trod my nurs'ry floor;
> .....
> That once we call'd the past'ral house our own.
> Short-liv'd possession![2]

Both the mother, made immortal by the poem of her son, and the home were "short-liv'd possessions". After six pregnancies and seven children, there were only two surviving children, William and John. William was only six years old when his mother died, only a few days after the birth of John.

Though Cowper idolized her memory and craved a mother-substitute until he died, the memories necessarily were only of a dream-like character. He remembered her nightly visits to his bedroom and her "vesture's tissued flow'rs"[3]; he remembered the hearse that had taken her away; he remembered the falseness of the nurses who had promised her return. These were the fragmentary memories of a six-year old boy.

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[2] Ibid., ll. 46-7, 53-4: p. 395.

[3] Ibid., l. 75.

Perhaps no child needed the protective care of a mother and the security of the nursery more than the young William. Yet at seven years of age he was exposed to ridicule and abuse at Dr. Pitman's School at Market Street. He reveals his life-long opinion of himself:

> Wretch even then, life's journey just begun.[4]

He was a wretch at six and a wretch at sixty, when he wrote the poem, "On the Receipt of my Mother's Picture".

"Love by absence" became "chill'd into respect"[5] as the father transplanted the sensitive little boy from the home to the public school. Forty years later Cowper gave advice to Rev. William Unwin concerning the education of Unwin's sons. Through this correspondence we can see what happened to the relationship between Cowper and his father:

> At eight or nine years of age the boy goes to school. From that moment he becomes a stranger in his father's house. The course of parental kindness is intercepted. The smiles of his mother, the tender admonitions, and the solicitous care of both his parents, are no longer before his eyes; year after year he feels himself more and more detached from them, till at last he is so effectively weaned from the connection as to find himself happier anywhere than in their company.[6]

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[4] Ibid., l. 24: p. 394.

[5] "Tirocinium", l. 576: Poems, p. 254.

[6] Cowper to the Rev. William Unwin, Sept. 17, 1780: Corr., I, 238.

His father's care had represented a security from embarrassment and harrassment. Witness Cowper's exposure to shame at Dr. Pitman's school:

> He blushes, hangs his head, is shy and strange,
> No longer takes, as once, with fearless ease;
> His fav'rite stand between his father's knees,
> But seeks the corner of some distant seat,
> And eyes the door, and watches a retreat,
> And, least familiar where he should be most,
> Feels all his happiest privileges lost.[7]

The severed relationship between father and son hardened into a sub-conscious bitterness:

> Alas, poor boy! - the natural effect
> Of love by absence chill'd into respect.
> ....
> Thou well deserv'st an alienated son,
> .....
> Add too, that, thus estrang'd, thou canst obtain
> By no kind arts his confidence again;
> That here begins with most that long complaint
> Of filial frankness lost, and love grown faint,
> Which, oft neglected, in life's waning years
> A parent pours into regardless ears.[8]

Cowper had wanted in vain what he could not have:

> Father, and friend, and tutor, all in one,[9]

Though William Cowper would have been too gentlemanly to have admitted it,[10] the elder Cowper had an

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[7] "Tirocinium", ll. 568-574: Poems, p. 254.

[8] Ibid., ll. 575-6, 579, 585-590: pp. 254-255.

[9] Ibid., l. 544: p. 254.

[10] H.K. Gregory, "The Prisoner and His Crimes", Literature and Psychology, VI (May 1956); pp. 53-54. Gregory says, "The true ambivalence of Cowper's feelings toward his father is never openly admitted but is often indirectly betrayed." p. 54.

"estrang'd" and "alienated son". John Cowper, the father, had been dead twenty-five years when his son wrote this poetry and dedicated it to young Unwin. Unwin took Cowper's advice and tutored his sons.

2. John Cowper

> I had a brother once -
> Peace to the mem'ry of a man of worth,
> A man of letters, and of manners too!
> Of manners sweet as virtue always wears,
> When gay good-nature dresses her in smiles.
> He grac'd a college, in which order yet
> Was sacred; and was honour'd, lov'd, and wept,
> By more than one, themselves conspicuous there.[11]

The brothers, William and John Cowper, were very dear to each other. John, "skilled in the Latin, Greek, and Hebrew languages," a perfect master of French and Italian,[12] and a Fellow of Bennet College, Cambridge University, had been most attentive to William's needs while he was at St. Albans during the derangement of 1763. Although he did not share William's evangelical views, he was nevertheless sympathetic and was thankful that Cousin Martin Madan had been able to help William spiritually. During the Huntingdon period the brothers visited each other once or twice a week. However, during the period of John's last illness, we see the exquisiteness of their

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[11] The Task, II, ll. 780-787: Poems, pp. 162-3.

[12] William Cowper, Adelphi (London: C. Whittingham, 1802), p. 7.

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relationship, as William abandoned his usual shyness in seeking the evangelical conversion of his brother. He was rewarded. On the tenth of March, 1770, only six days before his death, John accepted in faith the benefits of the atonement. He left this testimony of his faith:

> What a mercy it is to a man in my condition to know his acceptance; I am completely satisfied of mine ... It is built upon a sense of my own utter insufficiency and the all-sufficiency of Christ.[13]

Interestingly, the brothers were spiritually awakened at approximately the same age; William had been thirty-two; John was thirty-three. Mental illness had afflicted William preceding the time of his conversion; physical suffering had intensified John's sense of need. However, John confessed to his brother that he had been a searcher for a long time:

> He had been five years enquiring after the truth, that is, from the time of my first visit to him after I left St. Albans, and that, from the very day of his ordination, which was ten years ago, he had been dissatisfied with his own views of the gospel.[14]

Without doubt the climax of William's relationship with his brother was at the time of John's conversion:

> This hath God wrought. I ... have felt a joy of heart upon the subject of his death such as I never felt but in my own conversion.[15]

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[13] Ibid., p. 22.

[14] Ibid., p. 20.

[15] Cowper to Rev. William Unwin, March 31, 1770: Corr., I, 120.

3. Lady Hesketh

Lady Hesketh, Cowper's first cousin on his father's side did not share Cowper's evangelical fervour. After she had read Cowper's account of his own conversion in his personal Memoir in 1768, there was a lapse of seventeen years in their correspondence. However, after the publication of The Task and John Gilpin in 1785, she renewed the relationship that had been precious to Cowper since Westminster days:

> I can truly boast of an affection for you, that neither years, nor interrupted intercourse, have at all abated.... The hours that I have spent with you were among the pleasantest of my former days, and are therefore chronicled in my mind so deeply, as to feel no erasure.[16]

In November, 1786, Lady Hesketh took Cowper from Orchard Side, his "old prison and its precincts",[17] "deep in the abyss of Silver-End"[18] and transferred him to pleasant Weston Underwood. The home that had been the scene of the Cowper-Newton friendship and the site of his greatest poetic activity had, since his "damnation", become the symbol of his spiritual depravity:

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[16]Cowper to Lady Hesketh, Oct. 12, 1785: Corr., II, 362.

[17]Cowper to Rev. John Newton, Nov. 17, 1786, Corr., III, 105.

[18]"A Poetical Epistle to Lady Austen", l. 42: Poems, p. 335.

> Once, since we left Olney, I had occasion to call at our old dwelling; and never did I see so forlorn and woeful a spectacle.... The coldness of it, the dreariness, and the dirt, made me think it no inapt resemblance of a soul that God had forsaken.[19]

However, no change of environment nor addition of material comforts could permanently change the mental and spiritual condition of Cowper. Therefore, Lady Hesketh met with a series of frustrations. The climax in his family and social relationships and the crest of his poetic endeavor were over. In 1794 after Mrs. Unwin had had repeated paralytic strokes, she resented Cowper's care of Mrs. Unwin:

> I have not the smallest doubt that his concern for Mrs. Unwin's health and his unwearied attention to her, for a whole year together, laid the foundation of his last cruel attack of the Spirits in the year 1793.[20]

Perhaps Lady Hesketh's major frustration was in the area of his poetic endeavor. After the publication of The Task in 1785, Cowper's major production was a much revised translation of Homer in 1791. Many of his friends had hoped for original creativity. Cowper had planned to

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[19] Cowper to Rev. John Newton, Dec. 16, 1786: Corr., III, 127.

[20] Lady Hesketh to Rev. John Johnson, Sept. 3, 1800: Lady Harriot Hesketh, Letters of Lady Hesketh to the Rev. John Johnson, LL.D. Concerning Their Kinsman William Cowper the Poet, Catherine Bodham Johnson, ed. (London: Jarrold & Sons, 1901), p. 109. Subsequently referred to as Hesketh Letters.

produce another monumental work called The Four Ages. The fragment which survives contains only thirty-eight lines. Lady Hesketh laments to John Johnson:

> I must observe that nothing ever equalled my cruel disappointment when having got the 4 ages in my hand, and seeing your affecting document of "left unfinished".[21]

Certainly Lady Hesketh can be credited with part of the initial enigma connected with Cowper's life:

> It is my wish that while this dear Being [Cowper] is by Mr. Hayley's charming Pen consigned to latest Posterity as the truly Christian Poet, nothing should be brought forward that should cause him to be considered as a Visionary! an Enthusiast! or a Calvinist! for I am very sure he was neither in reality.[22]

It is quite evident that she deliberately withheld information that would have given a much more complete portrayal of Cowper:

> As to the letters of our dear Cousin's to Mrs. Unwin[23] which Mr. Hayley wishes to have, I fear I cannot find them! I know I have seen such things but I am pretty sure I left them in London carefully locked up ... If I had them however, or should I find them here, I by no means

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[21] Ibid., p. 108.

[22] Lady Hesketh to Rev. John Johnson, Jan. 3, 1802: Hesketh Letters, p. 114.

[23] Whether or not Lady Hesketh destroyed the letters from Cowper to Mrs. Unwin, I have not been able to determine. Thomas Wright in his Life of William Cowper quotes from one letter and says: "This letter is the only one that has been preserved from Cowper to this dear friend [Mrs. Unwin]." p. 190.

> wish them to be printed, the Style in which if I remember they are written though quite filial is yet too Enthusiastic.[24]

Notwithstanding, the missing years in their friendship, her frustration, and her withholding valuable information for Cowper's biography, one would dread to think of Cowper's infinite despair in his sunset years without the financial aid and loving care of Lady Hesketh and the Rev. John Johnson.

4. John Johnson

> Kinsman belov'd, and as a son, by me![25]

During much of the last decade of Cowper's life, the time that he was associated with the Rev. John Johnson, Cowper was engaged in the translation and revision of Homer:

> The grief is this, that sunk in Homer's mine
> I lose my precious years, now soon to fail,
> Handling his gold ...[26]

Most of the last five years Cowper lived with Johnson at East Dereham. He lovingly cared for the aged Mrs. Unwin until her death in 1796 and for Cowper until his death in 1800. Johnson has left two significant manuscripts

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[24]Lady Hesketh to the Rev. John Johnson, Jan. 3, 1802: Hesketh Letters, pp. 113-4.

[25]"To John Johnson", l. 1: Poems, p. 422.

[26]Ibid., ll. 9-11.

concerning the last years of the despairing Cowper, those known, respectively, as the Cambridge diary and the Swarthmore diary.[27]

Cowper always liked to remember that his mother was a Donne:

> There is in me, I believe, more of the Donne than of the Cowper ... I deal much in poetry, as did our venerable ancestor, the Dean of St. Paul's, and I think I shall have proved myself a Donne at all points.[28]

And Johnson was a Donne. Cowper was back in a nursery-like situation with his beloved "Johnny of Norfolk"; but, by this time he was consumed with infinite terror and infinite despair. He mined "Homer's gold", but he called it "dross, when balanc'd in the Christian scale."[29] There is a triple level in his grief. He advises the only "son" he would

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[27]Of the two diaries Hoxie Neale Fairchild writes: "The two diaries are entirely distinct and were meant to perform quite different functions. Instead of giving an account of the external events of Cowper's last years, as does the Swarthmore diary, the Cambridge diary devotes itself wholly to the menacing dreams which afflicted the poet, and to the voices prophesying torture and destruction which he imagined that he heard." Hoxie Neale Fairchild, "Additional Notes on John Johnson's Diary", Publications of the Modern Language Association, XLIII (1928), p. 571.

[28]Cowper to Mrs. Bodham, Feb. 27, 1790: Corr., III, 434-5.

[29]"To John Johnson", l. 12: Poems, p. 422.

ever have:

> Be wiser thou - like our fore-father DONNE,
> Seek heav'nly wealth, and work for God alone.[30]

[30] Ibid., ll. 13, 14.

CHAPTER FOUR

COWPER'S FRIENDSHIPS

1. Westminster and Temple Friendships

A cloud of famous names make up the list of Cowper's friendships during his Westminster and Temple days. "In 1787 the Rev. John Newton told Miss Hannah More that the 'present Lord Chancellor [Thurlow], Mr. Coleman of the Haymarket & and late Mr. Bonnel Thornton, were the three persons with whom Mr. Cowper was most intimate, when he resided in the Temple.'"[1] A group of seven former pupils at Westminster, calling themselves the Nonsense Club, dined together every Thursday during the Temple days. Joseph Hill, Cowper's life-long friend who managed many of his financial affairs, was either a member or guest at these meetings. The "Half-Drunk - Half-Mad - and quite stripp'd of all his money"[2] "Charles Churchill undoubtedly took some part in the activities of the society."[3] Ryskamp

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[1] Ryskamp, William Cowper, p. 79. Citing letter from Newton to Hannah More, 11 May 1787: Morgan MSS.

[2] Ibid., p. 93.

[3] Ibid., p. 83.

says that "Men like these were among Cowper's companions, though we do not know that he was ever especially a friend to Churchill; ... Their ribald, hard-drinking, fast-living days and nights were a part of Cowper's life during the Temple years."[4]

> Contemporaries all surpass'd, see one,
> Short his career, indeed, but ably run;
> Churchill; himself unconscious of his pow'rs,
> In penury consum'd his idle hours;
> .....
> Lifted at length, by dignity of thought
> And dint of genius, to an affluent lot,
> He laid his head in luxury's soft lap,
> And took, too often, there his easy nap.[5]

After the derangement of 1763, his recovery, and his evangelical conversion, Cowper turned his back on London and the former life:

> I have not a leg that is not tied to Olney; and if they were all at liberty, not one of them all would hop to London.[6]

2. Dr. N. Cotton and Rev. M. Madan

> COTTON, whose humanity sheds rays
> That make superior skill his second praise.[7]

During the derangement of 1763 the friend, physician, and counselor of Cowper was Dr. Nathaniel Cotton, a former

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[4] Ibid., p. 94.

[5] "Table Talk", ll. 670-3, 676-9: Poems, p. 15.

[6] Cowper to Joseph Hill, March 16, 1780: Corr., I, 177.

[7] "Hope", ll. 205-6; Poems, p. 64.

student of medicine at Leyden. Cowper was attended at the doctor's private "Collegium Insanorum" from December, 1763 until June, 1765. Concerning the good doctor Cowper wrote:

> I was not only treated by him with the greatest tenderness while I was ill, and attended with the utmost diligence, but when my reason was restored to me, and I had so much need of a religious friend to converse with ... the doctor was as ready to administer relief to me in this article likewise, and as well qualified to do it, as in that which was more immediately his province.[8]

Although Dr. Nathaniel Cotton provided asylum for the deranged Cowper during the restoration period and convinced Cowper of the truth of Evangelical Christianity, it would seem that the most outstanding influence on Cowper's conversion was Rev. Martin Madan. Madan, Cowper's first cousin, educated in law at Westminster, was a convert under John Wesley. Madan in 1763 was "a burning and shining light" among the Evangelicals.[9] "Like Boanerges, a son of Thunder, he proclaimed the law from the flaming mountain; and from the summit of Zion's hill he appeared a Barnabus, a son of consolation..... his countenance was majestic, open, and engaging, and his looks commanding veneration: ... his language plain, nervous, pleasing, and memorable; and his arguments strong, bold,

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[8]Cowper to Lady Hesketh, July 4, 1765: Corr., I, 30.

[9]Cowper to Mrs. Maria Cowper, Mar. 11, 1766: Corr., I, 63.

rational, and conclusive: his doctrines were drawn from the sacred fountain: he was mighty in the Scriptures."[10]

Previous to Cowper's conversion Madan had indoctrinated Cowper with the strong tenets of Evangelical Christianity - original sin, the atonement, and justification by faith.[11] After Cowper's conversion and release from St. Alban's during his residence at Huntingdon, Cowper sometimes accompanied the eloquent lawyer-minister on some of his preaching missions.[12]

In 1780 Madan made a fatal error in his otherwise successful career. While Chaplain of the Lock Hospital, Madan, a man very knowledgeable in the Hebrew Scriptures, became obsessed with the idea that polygamy was an answer to many of the social problems of England. Against the strong persuasion of Lady Huntingdon, he published his three-volume Thelyphthora. Understandably, most of the divines of the Evangelical world raised their voices in protest and criticism. It is noteworthy that Wesley and

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[10] [A.C.H. Seymour], The Life and Times of Selina Countess of Huntingdon (London: William Edward Painter, 1844), I, 167. Also Falconer Madan, The Madan Family (London: Oxford, 1933), p. 110.

[11] Memoir, pp. 54-57.

[12] Ryskamp, William Cowper, p. 169.

Newton were among the few who refused to "Mar-Madan". They refrained, not because they countenanced his thesis, but because they respected the integrity and the motives of the man. However, Cowper anonymously raised his poet's pen against the heretical work in his "Anti-Thelyphthora".[13] Cowper ceased to correspond with Madan; his other correspondence is filled with criticism of his cousin during this period.

3. Rev. John Newton

The biography and autobiography of the Rev. John Newton is stranger and more remarkable than fiction:

> That one of the most ignorant, the most miserable, and the most abandoned of slaves, should be plucked from his forlorn state of exile on the coast of Africa, and at length be appointed minister of the parish of the first magistrate of the first city in the world - that he should there not only testify of such grace, but stand up as a singular instance and monument of it - that he should be enabled to record it in his history, preaching, and writings, to the world at large, is a fact I can contemplate with admiration, but never sufficiently estimate.[14]

John Newton,[15] born in 1725, lost his mother when he was seven years old, went to sea with his sea-commander

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[13] In the poem, "Sir Marmadan" was the book reviewer, Samuel Badcock. "Anti-Thelyphthora", l. 136: Poems, p. 320.

[14] The Life of John Newton, p. 178.

[15] Dictionary of the National Biography, "John Newton", XIV, pp. 3[illegible]-398.

father when he was eleven, and made six voyages with him before 1742. Then his father became governor of York Fort in the Hudson's Bay Company. Between 1743 and 1748 events in Newton's life followed in rapid succession: through his father's influence he was made a midshipman on board the H.M.S. Harwick; he deserted; when recaptured, he was degraded to the rank of a common seaman; he transferred to a slave-ship which took him to the coast of Africa in the area of the Sierra Leone River. On one of the Plantane Islands he became a servant to a slave-trader, and was virtually a slave himself under the persecution of the slave-trader's black mistress. Concerned for his son, Newton's father had asked a captain of another vessel to look for him. Miraculously, he was found and rescued. According to his own testimony, by this time Newton had sunk to licentiousness and debauchery.

Influenced by the third Earl of Shaftesbury's Characteristics,[16] and an expert in blasphemy, he was an avowed infidel.[17] Always very fond of books, Newton was profoundly affected by reading Thomas a'Kempis on his return to England. During a near catastrophe at sea in a

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[16]The Life of John Newton, pp. 22, 37.

[17]G.R. Balleine, A History of the Evangelical Party in the Church of England (London: Church Book Room Press, 1951), p. 81.

terrible storm, Newton inadvertently uttered the first prayer-like sentence he had uttered in many years. "If this will not do, the Lord have mercy on us."[18] To the end of his life he observed March 10, 1748 (21st N.S.) as the anniversary of his "great deliverance".[19] He made four voyages between 1748 and 1754, one as first mate and three as captain of slave vessels owned by a Liverpool friend of his father, Mr. Joseph Manesty.[20] In 1750 he married Mary Catlett with whom he had been in love since he was seventeen years of age.[21] Their love relationship has become an historical legend.

Newton was a self-educated man. His accomplishments are astonishing. While in Africa he mastered the first six books of Euclid, drawing the figures on the sand;[22] he learned Horace by heart on board the slave-vessel; he taught himself Latin, reading Virgil, Terence, Livy and Erasmus. He also became a student of the Bible,[23] eventually developing Calvinistic views in theology. He

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[18] The Life of John Newton, p. 80.

[19] Ibid., p. 81.

[20] Dictionary of National Biography, XIV, p. 395.

[21] The Life of John Newton, p. 25.

[22] Ibid., p. 61.

[23] Ibid., p. 115.

later taught himself Greek and had some knowledge of Hebrew and Syriac.[24]

From 1755 to 1760 Newton held the post of surveyor of the tides at Liverpool. He became an enthusiastic disciple of Whitefield[25] and later enjoyed a lasting friendship with Wesley.[26]

Applying for ordination in 1758,[27] he was refused. However, in 1765 with the backing of Lord Dartmouth, the evangelical nobleman, Newton was ordained a priest in the Church of England.[28] His curacy in Olney lasted nearly sixteen[29] years; he served St. Mary Woolnoth in London for twenty-seven years until his death in 1807.[30]

The College of New Jersey, later Princeton University, wished to honor Newton.

> According to the Minutes of the Board of Trustees of April 15, 1791, the degree of "Doctor of Divinity" was conferred on Newton at the same time that Thomas Jefferson, Secretary of State, and Alexander Hamilton, Secretary of the Treasury,

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[24] Ibid., p. 146.

[25] Ibid., p. 135.

[26] The Works of John Wesley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, n.d.), II, 531.

[27] The Life of John Newton, p. 147.

[28] Ibid., p. 150.

[29] Ibid., p. 151.

[30] Bull, op. cit., p. 360.

were made Doctors of Laws. Newton's response to the trustees has not been preserved, but we know that he never permitted anyone to call him "Dr. Newton". Newton wrote to a friend in Scotland: "... the dreary coast of Africa was the university to which the Lord was pleased to send me, and I dare not acknowledge a relation to any other."[31]

In 1767 Cowper and Mrs. Unwin, after the death of Rev. Morley Unwin, moved to Olney to escape the gossiping tongues of Huntingdon and to enjoy the evangelical ministry of the Rev. John Newton. Newton tells of their close personal fellowship and mutual ministry in the parish:

> We were, as I have said, very much together; for, besides our frequent walks and visits at home, occasional journeys seldom parted us. We usually travelled together. He was soon known in many places, and everywhere admired by competent judges as a gentleman and a scholar. He was a great blessing to the Lord's poor and afflicted people at Olney in the still higher and more important character of an eminent and exemplary Christian.... he loved the poor, often visited them in their cottages, conversed with them in a most condescending manner, sympathized with them, counselled and comforted them in their distresses, and those who were seriously disposed were often cheered and animated by his prayers.[32]

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[31] Charles Ryskamp, "William Cowper and His Circle", Princeton Library Chronicle, XXIV (1962), p. 6. Also Bull, op. cit., pp. 315-316.

[32] Bull, op. cit., p. 189.

Cowper's spiritual progression and regression was strangely reflected in his relationship with Newton. In 1767 Cowper's respect for Newton was little short of idolatry:

> I expected that in some Sermon or Exposition I should find him, and that the Lips of this excellent Minister would be the Instrument by which the Lord would work upon & soften my obdurate heart. But he saw my proneness to idolize the Means, and to praise the Creature more than the Creator ...[33]

During 1771 and 1772 the two friends cooperated in the writing of what are known as the Olney Hymns. Cowper contributed sixty-six hymns; the remaining two hundred and eighty-two were written by Newton.

The heartbreaking circumstances connected with Cowper's derangement of 1773 became a water-shed in their friendship. It was also the turning point when Cowper's progression spiritually changed to a regression:

> In humility, simplicity, and devotedness to God, in the clearness of his views of evangelical truth, the strength of the comforts he obtained from them, and the uniform and beautiful example by which he adorned them, I thought he had but few equals.... the Lord who had brought us together so knit our hearts and affections, that for nearly twelve years (that is, till the time that Mr. Newton left Olney) 'we were seldom separated for twelve hours at a time, when we were awake and at home. The first six I passed in daily admiring

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[33] Cowper to Mrs. Madan, Sept. 26, 1767: Thomas Wright, ed., The Unpublished and Uncollected Letters of William Cowper (London: C.J. Farncombe, 1925), p. 15. Subsequently referred to as U. & U.

> and trying to imitate him; during the second six I walked pensively with him in the valley of the shadow of death.'[34]

In 1780 when Newton moved to London, there were still nostalgic remembrances:

> The vicarage-house became a melancholy object, as soon as Mr. Newton had left it; ... As I walked in the garden this evening, I saw the smoke issue from the study chimney, and said to myself, that used to be a sign that Mr. Newton was there, but it is no longer.... Mr. Newton's foot will never he heard upon that staircase again.[35]

In the period from 1780 until 1786 Cowper's attitude towards Newton gradually changes. That which described the "alienated son" relationship also characterized Cowper's relationship to Newton - "love by absence chill'd into respect". The old intimacy was over. To Cowper now Newton was an "apostle", a "Privy Councillor", a "Chief Justice",[36] or "one of the Four Evangelists".[37] Overtones of Ahithophel,[38] the Judas of the Old Testament, creep into one letter:

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[34]Bull, op. cit., p. 158.

[35]Cowper to Mrs. Newton, Mar. 4, 1780: Corr., I, 174.

[36]Cowper to Rev. John Newton, July 30, 1780: Corr., I, 220.

[37]Cowper to Rev. John Newton, Mar. 7, 1783: Corr., II, 52.

[38]Ahithophel was among the conspirators with Absalom who led the rebellion against King David. II. Sam. 15:12; Ps. 55:12-14.

> I have indeed been lately more dejected and more distressed than usual; ... Your friendship...would have made you in some degree a partaker of my woes, ... the friend of my heart, the person with whom I had formerly taken sweet counsel, no longer useful to me as a minister, no longer pleasant to me as a Christian, [your presence] was a spectacle that must necessarily add the bitterness of mortification to the sadness of despair.[39]

The steps in Cowper's alienation from Newton would be increasingly apparent. The one who was replacing Newton as Cowper's intimate friend and religious associate was the son of Mrs. Unwin.

4. Rev. William Unwin

Although the Rev. William Unwin was an evangelical minister, he never attained the stature of Newton. Newton was "a spiritual warrior" of superior "rank and character".[40] Young Unwin had been a convert of Cowper during the Huntingdon period. When comparing the two in 1780, Cowper had this to say:

> Mr. Unwin himself would not be offended if I was to tell him that there is this difference between him and Mr. Newton; that the latter is already an apostle, while he himself is only undergoing the business of an incubation, with a hope that he may be hatched in time.[41]

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[39] Cowper to Rev. John Newton, Sept. 8, 1783: Corr., II, 98-99.

[40] Cowper to Rev. John Newton, May 31, 1781: Corr., I, 303.

[41] Cowper to Rev. John Newton, July 30, 1780: Corr., I, 220.

Cowper's spiritual decline is reflected in the shifting intimacy from Newton to Unwin.

Although Cowper had begun writing The Task in October, 1783, he had intentionally not mentioned for a whole year the writing of it to Newton, who had been "go-between" for the poet and his publisher for the first volume of poetry, published in 1782. Understandably, Newton was disappointed and hurt, as Cowper anticipated that he would be. Indifferent to Newton's sensitivity, he nevertheless was successful in pleasing Unwin by

> eradicating from your mind any little weeds of suspicion, that might still remain in it, that any man living is nearer to me than yourself.... You know now, that neither as poet, nor as man, do I give to any man a precedence in my estimation at your expense.[42]

Cowper continued to take added satisfaction in Newton's mortification that he had been deliberately left out of the poet's confidence. With no effort either to excuse or condemn Newton in this regard, I do wish to illustrate Cowper's alienation from Newton by showing Cowper's satisfaction in Newton's humiliation:

> The moment Mr. Newton knew (and I took care that he should learn it first from me) that I had communicated to you what I had concealed from him, and that you were my authorship's go-between with Johnson on this occasion, he

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[42] Cowper to Rev. William Unwin, Nov. 1, 1784: Corr., II, 262-263.

> sent me a most friendly letter indeed, but one in every line of which I could hear the soft murmur of something like mortification, that could not be entirely suppressed.[43]

> Since I wrote, I have had a letter from Mr. Newton, that did not please me, and returned an answer to it, that possibly may not have pleased him. His was fretful and peevish; and mine, if not chargeable with exactly the same qualities, was, however, dry and unsavoury enough.... at present he is in a state of mortification.... my design was to pay you a whole compliment, and I have done it. If he says more on the subject, I shall speak freely, and perhaps please him less than I have done already.[44]

> I can hardly tell you with any certainty of information upon what terms Mr. Newton and I may be supposed to stand at present.... He was not pleased that my manuscript was not first transmitted to him, and I have cause to suspect that he was even mortified at being informed, that a certain inscribed poem[45] was not inscribed to himself. But we shall jumble together again...[46]

Indifferent to Newton and feeling secure in the friendship of Unwin, Cowper was on the brink of his fourth derangement. Only two weeks after Cowper and Mrs. Unwin were settled in their new home at Weston Underwood, they were informed of the sudden and premature death of William Unwin on November 29, 1786.

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[43] Cowper to Rev. William Unwin, Nov. 29, 1784: Corr., II, 277.

[44] Cowper to Rev. William Unwin, Dec. 18, 1784: Corr., II, 285.

[45] The poetic "Epistle to Joseph Hill, Esquire" was included in the publication of The Task in 1785. The same year Tirocinium was dedicated to the Rev. William Unwin. He wrote Hill in 1785 that he had distinguished by name the majority of his friends in one of his two volumes. (To Joseph Hill, Oct. 11, 1785: Corr., II, 360). The omission of Newton is very significant.

[46] Cowper to Rev. William Unwin, Jan. 15, 1785: Corr., II, 291.

5. Mr. Samuel Teedon

> A visitor who is more tedious than entertaining has rather disconcerted me, and exhausted my spirits.[47]

Spiritually bankrupt, Cowper after Unwin's death turned to Samuel Teedon for his mentor and confidant. Teedon was "an eccentric, rather obtrusive, but devout man, much addicted to long words and interminable narratives, which often caused amusement at Orchardside."[48] It is one of the enigmas of Cowper's life that "the refined and gifted poet got to regard the vain and eccentric schoolmaster as a kind of Delphic oracle."[49] That Cowper could be satisfied with a Teedon after having known a Newton can only be compared with the depravity of King Saul when he consulted with the Witch of Endore after the death of the Prophet Samuel.[50] Teedon considered himself a favorite of God, to whom God entrusted revelations and interpretations. Cowper turned to him for direction in his life and for interpretations of his

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[47] Cowper to Rev. John Newton, Dec. 31, 1781: Corr., I, 419.

[48] Corr., I, 228.

[49] Corr., IV, 120.

[50] I Samuel 28:3-14.

dreams. Teedon "obtained from Heaven that it was certainly expedient that the poet" become editor of a new edition of Milton which included the translation of Milton's Latin poems.[51] Cowper obtained his approval to visit Hayley's residence at Eartham in 1792. What is startling about this visit is that it was one of the few times in twenty-six years that Cowper and Mrs. Unwin stirred from Olney and Weston. The peculiar attachment between Cowper and Teedon is illustrated by the fact that in a period of about two and a half years "no fewer than two hundred and seventy-seven letters passed between Teedon and Cowper or Mrs. Unwin, whilst Teedon's visits to Weston Lodge were also numerous."[52] Teedon's famous diary covers the time from October 17, 1791 to February 1, 1794 and contains scores of references to Cowper and Mrs. Unwin.[53]

Because Teedon was a needy and deserving individual, Cowper and Mrs. Unwin contributed substantially to Teedon's income.[54] He died in 1798.

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[51] Wright, Life, p. 542.

[52] Corr., IV, 121.

[53] Corr., I, 229.

[54] Corr., IV, 121.

6. Mr. William Hayley

Cowper's wheel of friendships had gone full circle when it turned to William Hayley. In the Nonsense Club he had entertained the companionship of Deists;[55] in Hayley he enjoyed the company of the non-religious. A friend of Lady Hesketh's would not describe Mr. Hayley as "'an Infidel, but that there were degrees of Piety and she feared Mr. H. would fall very short of the notions Mr. Cowper had formed on those subjects.'"[56] The friendship began when Cowper consented to edit a new edition of Milton, and Hayley at the same time was engaged in writing a Life of Milton.

Hayley was not content with their complementary work on Milton. He tampered with Cowper's poetic lines:

> Our Cousin [Cowper] carried with him his Translations of Milton's Latin and Italian Poems into Sussex, at Hayley's desire, and accordingly, Hayley revised them, and made so many alterations that when I came to make a fair copy for the Press, I was quite shocked to see some of the bold and forcible language of our dear Bard crossed out, and supplanted by some flimsy tinsel lines of his Brother Poet, and in more instances than one Hayley had absolutely translated a whole Poem -[57]

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[55] Memoir, p. 14.

[56] Lady Hesketh to Rev. John Johnson, Dec. 8, 1790: Hesketh Letters, p. 17.

[57] Rev. John Johnson to his sister, undated: Hesketh Letters, p. 22.

Although the literary atmosphere may not have been the best environment for Cowper, certainly it is fair to say that Hayley was sincere in his endeavors to provide physical and material comfort for Cowper. He took both Cowper and Mrs. Unwin to Eartham, his home, in the hope that it would be beneficial to their health. He was also instrumental in securing a pension of £300 a year for Cowper.

Though Hayley's Life of Cowper, published in 1803, has not been highly esteemed, Lady Hesketh was very pleased with the finished product whose contents she had sufficiently censored:

> I am very impatient for the publication and earnestly wish and hope that the public at large may be as well satisfied with the execution of this arduous work as I am - Hayley's Prose is worthy of Cowper's Poetry and no human being I really think could have handled so delicate a subject - in the manner that he has done! it is indeed the work of a Friend and it is executed ... "Con Spirito e con Amore" ... I do not think I can accuse Hayley of having inserted one word either in Verse or Prose that had been better omitted...[58]

Lady Hesketh and William Hayley had succeeded in creating an image of Cowper so enigmatic that two centuries of research have not yet satisfied the curiosity of the literary world.

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[58] Lady Hesketh to Rev. John Johnson, Dec. 30, 1802: Hesketh Letters, p. 119.

CHAPTER FIVE

COWPER'S RELATIONSHIPS WITH WOMEN

1. Theadora Cowper

After Westminster Cowper spent three years, beginning in 1750, studying law under Mr. Chapman at Ely Place, Holborn. The future Lord Chancellor, Edward Thurlow, was a fellow-student. Cowper's leisure was spent at the home of his uncle, Ashley Cowper, where he fell in love with his beautiful cousin Theadora, the sister of the future Lady Hesketh.

Fact seems to mix with legend when reasons are suggested for the termination of Cowper's earliest love affair. That he loved Theadora seems evident from the "Delia" poems, published after Theadora's death in 1824. James Croft, who edited these poems addressed to Theadora, said that "Ashley Cowper refused to let his daughter marry the poet because they were first cousins."[1] However, Rev. Samuel Greatheed, friend and early biographer of Cowper, said that "William's father 'certainly did not oppose his intended marriage...: there was no obstacle to her

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[1] Quinlan, Critical Life, p. 21.

marriage with C[owper] but his want of income for an establishment suited to their rank. The prospects only ceased at his derangement.'"[2]

The evidence is too inconclusive to determine with any degree of certainty whether the derangement of 1753, soon after Cowper took residence in the Middle Temple, was the cause of the terminated love affair, was its result, or was his defensive alternative to the proposed marriage. We may very well wonder whether with no interference the relationship would have ever culminated in marriage. Whatever the reason, there was no marriage. Cowper made his farewell to Theadora in 1756. By 1758 he already was attracted to another "lovely and beloved little girl" with whom he was "tortured with love".[3] The picture was far different with Theadora. Cowper would always be the "sole partner in my Delia's heart".[4] She would always be "Fix'd in her choice, and faithful – but in vain."[5] Theadora "treasured every tiny relic which had belonged to [Cowper], every scrap of paper on which he had written. She silently aided him during his last years: The

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[2]Ryskamp, William Cowper, pp. 125, 126. Quoted from S. Greatheed, 'Memoranda', f. 2, 3. (See also note on spelling of Theadora's name, p. 119).

[3]Cowper to Clotworthy Rowley, Aug. 1758: Corr., I, 16.

[4]"Hope, like the short-liv'd ray", l. 29: Poems, p. 283.

[5]"On the Death of Sir W. Russell", l. 10: Poems, p. 285.

'Anonymous' who gave him money and gifts - 'the most elegant, the compactest, the most commodious desk', mounted with silver and inlaid with ivory; a snuffbox with a painting of William's three hares on its lid (by Romney); the watch that had belonged to her father."[6]

That Cowper had felt intensely the loss of Theadora is expressed most adequately in his poem "On the Death of Sir W. Russell":

> Doom'd as I am in solitude to waste
> The present moments, and regret the past;
> Depriv'd of ev'ry joy I valued most,
> My friend torn from me, and my mistress lost;
> .....
> See me - ere yet my destin'd course half done,
> Cast forth a wand'rer on a wild unknown!
> See me neglected on the world's rude coast,
> Each dear companion of my voyage lost![7]

Cowper needed, and his life demonstrated, his ability to attract the companionship of both men and women. But did he shy away from actual marriage? It would seem that there is at least circumstantial evidence that he did so on this the first of three occasions.

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[6]Ryskamp, William Cowper, p. 126.

[7]Ll. 1-4, 15-18: Poems, pp. 284-5.

2. Mary Unwin

We have already partially described Cowper's situation twenty years after the derangement of 1753. After Cowper's release from St. Albans in 1765 he took up residence in Huntingdon where he soon formed the friendship of William Unwin and subsequently that of the whole Unwin household. The Rev. Morley Unwin at the time was superintending a small preparatory school for university students. Mrs. Unwin was a person distinguished by a "superior intelligence" with "gaiety and vivacity"[8] and with the manners of "a duchess".[9] Cowper was instrumental in the Evangelical conversion of nearly all of the Unwin family.[10]

Even though Mrs. Unwin was only seven years older than Cowper, their relationship seems to have been that of a mother-son. We have Lady Hesketh's and Cowper's own testimony to support this.[11] The Unwin household with its leisurely and religious schedule provided an asylum for the recovering Cowper:

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[8] Seymour, op. cit., II, 141, 2.

[9] Cowper to Joseph Hill, Oct. 25, 1765: Corr., I, 53.

[10] Seymour, op. cit., II, 142.

[11] Lady Hesketh to Rev. John Johnson, Jan. 3, 1802: Hesketh Letters, p. 114. "Ever since I have been acquainted with Mrs. Unwin I have always considered her in the light of a mother."

> We breakfast commonly between eight and nine; till eleven, we read either the Scripture, or the sermons of some faithful preacher of these holy mysteries; at eleven we attend divine service, which is performed here twice every day; and from twelve to three we separate and amuse ourselves as we please. During that interval I either read in my own apartment, or walk, or ride, or work in the garden. We seldom sit an hour after dinner, but, if the weather permits, adjourn to the garden, where with Mrs. Unwin and her son I have generally the pleasure of religious conversation till tea-time. If it rains, or is too windy for walking, we either converse within doors, or sing some hymns of Martin's collection, and by the help of Mrs. Unwin's harpsichord make up a tolerable concert, in which our hearts, I hope, are the best and most musical performers. After tea we sally forth to walk in good earnest. Mrs. Unwin is a good walker, and we have generally travelled about four miles before we see home again.... At night we read and converse, as before, till supper, and commonly finish the evening either with hymns or a sermon; and last of all, the family are called to prayers.[12]

Cowper had been living with the Unwins about a year and a half when Morley Unwin was violently thrown from a horse on July 2, 1767. Previously, influenced by the semi-Arian Dr. Samuel Clarke, Unwin had denied the divinity of Christ, but just before he died "he was heard to say, 'Jesus Christ is God, and therefore he can save me'" and "Very God of very God — and, Jesus Christ died for us."[13]

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[12]Cowper to Mrs. Maria Cowper, Oct. 20, 1766: Corr., I, 80, 81.

[13]Cowper to Mrs. Madan, July 10, 1767: U. & U., pp. 4, 5.

With the death of Rev. Morley Unwin, Cowper's position in the Unwin household became questionable to the residents of Huntingdon. Cowper had a dual motivation for moving to Olney. He did desire the ministry of the Rev. John Newton, but he also wished to preserve the mother-son relationship that existed between himself and Mrs. Unwin.

> I shall still, by God's leave, continue with Mrs. Unwin, whose behaviour to me has always been that of a mother to a son.[14]

Throughout the many crises of his life Mrs. Unwin remained Cowper's constant companion and mother-substitute. In 1773 marriage seems to have been expected by the family and religious community. Again insanity proved either the retreat from marriage or the reason for its permanent postponement. Mrs. Unwin spent her fortune for Cowper's comfort, suffered her daughter's misunderstanding, endured gossip from her neighbors, and finally lost her health in her sacrificial care of Cowper. Cowper in return gave her filial love, friendship, respect, and loyalty - but he never gave her his name. Mary Unwin was neither Cowper's wife nor his mistress; she was his mother-substitute. The lines "To Mary", written near the close of her life, Tennyson said, were too pathetic to be read aloud:[15]

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[14]Cowper to Mrs. Maria Cowper, July 13, 1767: Corr., I, 95.

[15]Dictionary National Biography, XX, 35.

> The twentieth year is well-nigh past,
> Since first our sky was overcast;[16]
> Ah would that this might be the last![17]

The love of Cowper and Mrs. Unwin had been tested in many crises, not the least of which had been the world's opinion. His testimony as to their relationship stands for all to read:

> I have lately received ... a picture of my own mother. She died when I wanted two days of being six years old; yet I ... have written a poem on the receipt of it: a poem which, one excepted, I had more pleasure in writing than any that I ever wrote. That one was addressed to a lady whom I expect in a few minutes to come down to breakfast, and who has supplied to me the place of my own mother - my own invaluable mother, these six-and-twenty years.[18]

3. Lady Austen

Into Cowper's "sequestered hermitage"[19] one day in 1781 came a lady who was to have a profound effect upon him and his writing - Lady Austen. She was to have a dazzling effect, the effect of a comet, rather than that of a constant star, as Mrs. Unwin had been. When Ann Richardson was only

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[16] Cowper is referring to the derangement of 1773.

[17] "To Mary", ll. 1-4: Poems, p. 427.

[18] Cowper to Mrs. King, Mar. 12, 1790: Corr., III, 443.

[19] Cowper to Rev. John Newton, Aug. 16, 1781: Corr., I, 340.

eighteen or nineteen years of age, she had married a much older man, Sir Robert Austen. After residence in France and her husband's death in 1772, she came to live with her sister, Mrs. Martha Jones, in the neighboring town of Clifton in 1781. As Cowper noted in a letter to William Unwin:

> Since Mr. Newton went, and till this lady came, there was not in the kingdom a retirement more absolutely such than ours. We did not want company, but when it came, we found it agreeable. A person that has seen much of the world, and understands it well, has high spirits, a lively fancy, and great readiness of conversation, introduces a sprightliness into such a scene as this, which, if it was peaceful before, is not the worse for being a little enlivened.[20]

We are indebted to Lady Austen for the inspiration that prompted the writing of John Gilpin and The Sofa and the translation of Homer. At first, Cowper considered Lady Austen's arrival at Olney as providential:

> Mysterious are his ways, ...
> .....
> The hand of the Supremely Wise,
> That guides and governs our affections,
> And plans and orders our connexions.[21]

Cowper wrote a poem which, coming from anyone else, would have ordinarily indicated that he was in love with the

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[20] Cowper to Rev. William Unwin, Aug. 25, 1781: Corr., I, 350.

[21] "A Poetical Epistle to Lady Austen", ll. 29, 34-36: Poems, p. 335.

object of the poem. However, he was only playing with such affection:

> The star that beams on Anna's breast
> Conceals her William's hair,
> .....
> The heart that beats beneath that breast
> Is William's, well I know;
> .....
> The ornament indeed is hers,
> But all the honour mine.[22]

Cowper was assuming too much. He was assuming that he could enjoy the friendship of two women, regard one as a mother and one as a sister, and maintain a status quo. Greatheed, who knew both women personally, was quite frank in his private revelations to William Hayley:

> [Lady Austen's] mind afforded as great a contrast to Mrs. U's as can well be conceived; she entertained no small contempt and aversion for her; and frequently indulged her unequalled turn for satire at Mrs. U's expense, sometimes in her company, but oftener in Mr. C's. At length Mrs. U. who was not always aware of the ridicule designed against her, became apprehensive (perhaps not wholly without occasion) that some ideas were formed of a permanent union between her two Companions; and at her request Mr. C. drop'd all correspondence with Lady A. upon her removal.[23]

Lady Austen was in love with Cowper. When it became increasingly apparent to Cowper that Lady Austen had

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[22] "To a Lady", ll. 1-2, 5-6, 11-12: Poems, p. 352.

[23] Kenneth Povey, "The Banishment of Lady Austen", Review of English Studies, XV (1939), 395.

marriage in mind, the poet wrote a letter to her to dissolve the relationship. She confessed to Hayley in personal interviews in 1806: "in a moment of natural mortification [that] she had burnt this very tender, yet resolute Letter." According to Hayley, "she was willing to devote her life and fortunes to [Cowper's] service and protection."[24] Lord David Cecil makes this observation:

> Of all the pages torn by an indiscriminating fate from the records of Cowper's life this letter is the most tantalizing. He was very proud of it himself.... her hasty passion blazed up: she threw the letter into the grate; and within a few days had left for Bristol.[25]

Again the reasons for Lady Austen's banishment are obscure. Povey attributes the jilted-love story to Hayley's embellishment of Lady Austen's confession: "Cowper himself wished it to be thought that his association with Lady Austen became embarrassing owing to her interference with his writing and ended because she left Olney for the sake of her health; at least, that is the story he tells Lady Hesketh in his letter of January 16, 1786."[26] The fact remains that Lady Austen returned to Clifton in

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[24] Ibid., p. 397.

[25] Lord David Cecil, The Stricken Deer (London: Constable, 1929), reprint 1971, pp. 203-4.

[26] Povey, op. cit., p. 392.

1785 and remained there for over four years; yet she and the poet never met again.[27]

Cowper felt a certain sense of guilt for the broken friendship. He expresses it symbolically in the poem, "The Rose":

> This elegant rose, had I shaken it less,
> Might have bloom'd with its owner awhile.[28]

There were thus three women obviously in love with Cowper; there had been three love relationships of a kind; yet there was no marriage. Theadora spent her life, hovering near insanity, content to be the "Anonymous" who sent Cowper rich and extravagant gifts, and contributing substantially to his living.[29] Mrs. Unwin was satisfied to spend her life, health, fortune[30] and reputation in order to provide a mother-situation for him. But Lady Austen apparently determined that, if the relationship could not culminate in marriage, she would waste no more time on Cowper. "Lady Austen's exit from the stage of Cowper's

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[27] Ibid., p. 395.

[28] Ll. 17, 18: Poems, p. 355.

[29] Cowper to Rev. W. Unwin, July 10, 1786: Corr., III, 71.

[30] Wright, Life, p. 253.

life on that May morning was as abrupt and complete as had been her entrance."[31] Cowper had dismissed Lady Austen without the revelation of his probable secret. There was no retreat into insanity. Her coming to Olney had been "fresh plumes to the wings of time."[32] That was all. Her leaving did not cause him much pain. He still had his Mary.

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[31]Cecil, op. cit., p. 204.

[32]Cowper to the Rev. John Newton, Aug. 21, 1781: Corr., I, 344.

CHAPTER SIX

COWPER AND EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANITY

1. Grudge Against God

The earliest evidence that Cowper had a grudge against deity is registered in "Verses Written at Bath on Finding the Heel of a Shoe". In 1748, when this was written, he was only seventeen years old and a student at Westminster. The line "Curtail'd and maim'd, the sport of vagrant boys"[1] reminds one of his treatment by the bully at Dr. Pitman's school in 1738. God is blamed for something that is missing which will affect the "rest of life"[2]:

> Why not on me that favour, (worthier sure!)
> Conferr'dst thou, Goddess?[3]

In his personal Memoir Cowper confesses that he cursed heaven during the derangement of 1763:

> ... when alone in my chambers, ... I have cried out aloud, and cursed the hour of my birth; lifting up my eyes to heaven, at the same time, not as a suppliant, but in the hellish spirit of rancorous reproach, and blasphemy against my Maker.[4]

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[1] L. 33: Poems, p. 263.

[2] Ibid., l. 45, p. 264.

[3] Ibid., ll. 14, 15, p. 263.

[4] Memoir, p. 24.

Associated with Cowper's anguish in 1763 was the parable of the barren fig tree[5] and his belief that he had committed the unpardonable sin or blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.[6] In all the Biblical references to this particular sin Christ is casting a demon out of a man and healing him.[7] The Pharisees, in turn, while witnessing the miracle, were ascribing the works of God to the Devil. In this context Jesus said:

> Whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come.[8]

By its very nature such a serious blasphemy would indicate a deep-rooted grudge or rebellion.

Cowper does not explain why he felt that Christ had cursed him as he had the fig tree[9] or why he felt he had committed the unpardonable sin against the Holy Spirit. He does not tell us the content of his "rancorous reproach and blasphemy against [his] Maker"[10] or what constituted his

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[5]Luke 13:6-9.

[6]Memoir, pp. 47-54.

[7]Matthew 12:22-32; Mark 3:22-30; Luke 11:14-23.

[8]Matthew 12:32.

[9]Mark 11:13-14, 20-21.

[10]Memoir, p. 24.

serious rebellion. He makes a strange and enigmatic statement which on the surface tells us very little:

> A neglect to improve the mercies of God at Southampton, on the occasion above mentioned, was represented to me as the sin against the Holy Ghost.[11]

Cowper does not give sufficient information in his discussion of this occasion[12] to reconstruct the inner rebellion that could be interpreted as blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. What Cowper does inadvertently reveal by his associating Southampton with this blasphemy is that the underlying cause of the derangement of 1753 and that of the derangement of 1763 could be the same. Southampton Row was the residence of Ashley Cowper and his three daughters - Harriot, Elizabeth, and Theadora. Following Cowper's broken relationship with Theadora and his derangement in 1753 Cowper had found temporary emotional release from his tensions and frustrations by a return to Southampton and the social company of the future Lady Hesketh and her fiancé. That Cowper was unable to marry

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[11] Ibid., p. 51.

[12] A change of scene was recommended to me; and I embraced an opportunity of going with some friends to Southampton where I spent several months.... the sun shone bright upon the sea.... We sat-down upon an eminence, at the end of the arm of the sea, which runs between Southampton and the New Forest.... I felt the weight of all my misery taken off; my heart became light and joyful in a moment;... I think I remember something like a glow of gratitude to

Theadora because of the physical "malformation" may have been the focus of his grudge and the cause of his resulting blasphemy. There is no additional evidence of the intensity of this grudge until the occasion of Cowper's retreat from the examination for the clerkship in the House of Lords in 1763. The grudge and the blasphemy erupt again in full force. With this, Cowper has a soul revelation of the depth of his own grudge and he fears he has committed the unpardonable blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

Parallel in Cowper's mind with the belief that God had cursed him as Christ did the fig tree,[13] was his belief that his father "sided against"[14] him as a child. When Cowper was eleven years old, his father had discussed a book with him on the merits of self-murder or suicide.[15] Cowper, though tempted to commit suicide when he was an adult, argued against it. His father's silence, he interpreted as a sympathy "with the author against" Cowper himself. Gregory, using the tools of psychoanalysis, says

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the Father of mercies, for this unexpected blessing ... But Satan, and my own wicked heart, quickly persuaded me that I was indebted, for my deliverance, to nothing but a change of scene, and the amusing varieties of the place. Memoir, pp. 10-12.

[13] Memoir, p. 47.

[14] Ibid., pp. 27, 28.

[15] Ibid.

that Cowper subjectively believed his father wished him dead.[16] This was the "alienated son" whose "love by absence" had been "chill'd into respect."[17] He did not really know his father. He was only seven years of age when he went to Dr. Pitman's School in 1737; he was eleven when he went to Westminster. He spent nine months at Berkhamsted before being articled to Mr. Chapman in 1750. In 1753 he took up residence in the Middle Temple. In July 1756, upon news of his father's illness, Cowper hurriedly set out for Berkhamsted, but his father died the day before Cowper arrived.[18]

Cowper's father-image and God-image were strangely similar. He believed he had been twice cursed - once when he was made and once when he was sent from home to public school. The two grudges would profoundly affect his life spiritually.

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[16] Gregory, op. cit., p. 55.

[17] "Tirocinium", ll. 576, 579: Poems, p. 254.

[18] Wright, Life, p. 75.

2. Concept of Jehovah and Emmanuel: Evangelical Conversion

In spite of a dread father-God image, whom Cowper called Jehovah, Cowper with his evangelical conversion identified with Emmanuel, the "bleeding sacrifice".[19] In his room at St. Albans late in July, 1764, Cowper flung himself into a chair, and, seeing a Bible close at hand, he opened it for strength and instruction.[20] His eyes and heart fastened on Romans 3:25:

> [Jesus Christ] whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God...

The outstanding concept in this verse is that of propitiation.[21] Cowper accepted in a moment the vicarious and propitiatory sacrifice of Christ and identified with

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[19] "O Lord, I Will Praise Thee", l. 4: Poems, p. 438.

[20] Memoir, pp. 67,68.

[21] The Greek noun for propitiation (hilasterion) is repeated only once in the New Testament; i.e. in Hebrews 9:5. It literally means the "mercy seat" or the golden cover on the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies of the Tabernacle and the subsequent Jewish Temple. On the great Day of Atonement the people were reconciled to God by the sprinkling of blood on the Mercy Seat and the intercession of the High Priest. Christians believe that Jesus Christ on Calvary became the place of propitiation and the blood sacrifice Himself. Propitiation and reconciliation to God is accomplished only by the sprinkling of blood. (Leviticus 16:14-15; Hebrews 9:22). "Propitiation means that God has found a way to uphold the law and safeguard His justice while He extends mercy to a guilty sinner who trusts in Christ." Beacon Bible Commentary (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1968), VIII, 90-92.

Christ's sacrifice. He felt a kinship with Emmanuel who had been wounded by a misunderstanding world, a sinning humanity, and, in a sense, by a vengeful God - the "archers" in the famous "stricken deer" passage :

> I was a stricken deer, that left the herd
> Long since; with many an arrow deep infixt
> My panting side was charg'd, when I withdrew
> To seek a tranquil death in distant shades.
> There was I found by one who had himself
> Been hurt by th' 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 heal'd, and bade me live.[22]

Is it any wonder that Cowper wrote so poignantly in the Olney Hymns about the significance of Jesus' blood in making propitiation possible?

> There is a fountain fill'd with blood
> Drawn from EMMANUEL's veins;
> And sinners, plung'd beneath that flood,
> Lose all their guilty stains.[23]

And in his "A Song of Mercy and Judgment":

> Take the Bloody Seal I give thee,
> Deep impress'd upon thy soul;

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[22] The Task, ll. 108-116: Poems, p. 166. The "stricken deer" is reminiscent of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, prophetic of the Messiah, who is a "stricken lamb":

> Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: Yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.

Isaiah 53:4, 5.

[23] "Praise for the Fountain Opened", ll. 1-4: Poems, p. 442.

God, thy God, will now receive thee,
Faith hath sav'd thee, thou art whole.[24]

In Cowper's fragmentary "Notes on St. John's Gospel" he wrote concerning the sacramental paschal lamb and its fulfillment in the sacrifice of Calvary, John 1:29:

> Behold the Lamb of God. Here the Baptist in one word explains to them the ultimate drift and scope of the sacrament of the paschal lamb.... that deliverance [from Egypt] was itself a type of a greater; and both the deliverance and the sacramental commemoration of it had a further view to that salvation wrought out for us by our Lord, who was the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.[25]

Cowper relates the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus in the dove-like form to the "mercy-seat", which was the place of propitiation:

> The descent of the Holy Ghost upon our Lord, with this tremulous undulatory motion like the wings of a dove, in the appearance of a bright flame, fixes the application of the typical mercy-seat in the holy of holies to Him as the antitype. Over the mercy-seat abode the shechinah of glory, as here upon the head of our Saviour. God is said to have dwelt between the cherubims, and the cherubims of glory shadowed the mercy-seat (Heb. IX.5)[26]

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[24]"A Song of Mercy and Judgment", ll. 45-48: Poems, p. 291.

[25]William Cowper, "Notes on St. John's Gospel", John 1:29, Bull, John Newton, p. 376.

[26]Ibid., John 1:34, p. 377.

In 1773 shortly[27] after Cowper wrote this fragmentary commentary on St. John's Gospel, he felt that he himself must make the "sacrifice of Abraham". In order to understand why he could possibly have felt that he must commit this atrocious crime, we need not only to understand his concept of propitiation but also we must understand his entire concept of God. This is probably best revealed in the Olney Hymns, in the poem, "A Thunder Storm" and in the longer poem "Truth":

> When God in Thunders spoke from Sinai's mount,
> Israel approached with Awe, if Moses then
> Could mediate for the People, and avert
> The great Jehovah's anger, sure, his Son,
> The fam'd Immanuel, the Prince of Peace,
> Can ransom from his wrath and reconcile.[28]

In "The Thunder Storm" God is the God of thunder, the God of Sinai whose primary qualities are justice, judgment and vengeance. His name is Jehovah. His justice is founded in his holiness; judgment and vengeance are actions consistent with his holiness in His attitude toward sin. Cowper sees Jehovah clearly as Moses saw him. However, the Psalmist and Prophets saw not only the holiness of

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[27] Josiah Bull, John Newton, "Notes on St. John's Gospel", p. 373. "Some circumstances indicate that it ["Notes"] was written not long before the return of his unhappy malady."

[28] Wright, Life, pp. 177-179. Wright feels that this is a poem of Cowper in its original crude form. It is not included in the Oxford Standard Edition.

God,[29] but they also had a glimpse of the fatherhood of God.[30] This progressive concept is missing in Cowper, possibly due to the fact that Cowper had "regardless ears"[31] in his attitude towards his own father.

In a truly Christian theology with the revelation of the Son of God, the Father image becomes complete. Jehovah is revealed as Father as well as Judge. His love and mercy are revealed as well as his holiness and justice. That Cowper never fully grasps Jehovah as Father produces distortion in his concept of God. He has a view of Jehovah and a view of Emmanuel, but he never fully realizes that "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself"[32] or that we see "God in the face of Jesus Christ."[33] The concept of God in the Bible is a progressive view, culminating in Jesus Christ. Cowper's concept of God is less than Christian because he skips from Sinai to Calvary. There is a missing piece - and it is the loving Father concept.

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[29] Isaiah 6:1-8.

[30] Ps. 103:13; Jeremiah 31:9.

[31] "Tirocinium", l. 590: Poems, p. 255.

[32] II Corinthians 5:19.

[33] II Corinthians 4:6.

Israel in ancient days,
Not only had a view
Of Sinai in a blaze,
But learn'd the gospel too:
The types and figures were a glass
In which they saw the Saviour's face.

The paschal sacrifice,
And blood-besprinkled door,
Seen with enlighten'd eyes,
And once apply'd with pow'r;
Would teach the need of other blood,
To reconcile an angry GOD.[34]

Jesus, whose blood so freely stream'd
To satisfy the law's demand;
.....
To reconcile offending man,
Make Justice drop her angry rod[35]

I will praise thee ev'ry day
Now thine anger's turn'd away!
Comfortable thoughts arise
From the bleeding sacrifice[36]

Jehovah founded it in blood,
The blood of his incarnate Son.[37]

The two names of Jehovah and Emmanuel are brought together in one poem, consistent with Cowper's Trinitarian views;

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[34]"Old Testament Gospel", ll. 1-12: Poems, pp. 445-6.

[35]"Jehovah - Shalom", ll. 1, 2, 5-6: Poems, p. 436.

[36]"O Lord, I Will Praise Thee", ll. 1-4: Poems, p. 438.

[37]"Jehovah - Shammah", ll. 9, 10: Poems, p. 442.

but Cowper's view is still less than the complete Christian view, i.e. that Emmanuel reveals Jehovah as Holy Love. Here, Jehovah is shown as Sovereign, as He has been shown as Judge in the previous poems, but He still is not recognized as Father:

> Of all the crowns JEHOVAH bears,
> Salvation is his dearest claim;
> That gracious sound well-pleas'd he hears,
> and owns EMMANUEL for his name.[38]

In "Truth" Jehovah is terrifying and there is no Emmanuel to alleviate the picture:

> Marshalling all his terrors as he came;
> Thunder, and earthquake, and devouring flame;
> From Sinai's top Jehovah gave the law -
> Life for obedience - death for ev'ry flaw.[39]

The names of God in Cowper are well chosen. Jehovah is the personal name of God in the Old Testament, an adaptation of YHWH, the great "I Am" of the Burning Bush.[40] Emmanuel, taken from Isaiah's concept and applied to the Incarnate Son by Matthew, means "God with us".[41] The concept that Cowper reiterates in the Olney Hymns is propitiation, the concept he grasped at the moment of his

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[38] "Jehovah - Jesus", ll. 13-16: Poems, p. 449.

[39] "Truth", ll. 547-550: Poems, p. 42.

[40] Exodus 3:14.

[41] Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23.

conversion; i.e., through the death of Christ God's wrath is overcome and his justice is demonstrated. However, the picture of God being appeased like an angry man is a distortion of the doctrine of propitiation. The Biblical view is that God himself puts forward the propitiatory offering for man's sin. God in the Person of Jesus Christ is both Priest and Sacrifice.[42] In Cowper Jehovah and Emmanuel are so separate that they become like two Gods - a vindictive one and a suffering one. The Holy Spirit is rarely mentioned in the Olney Hymns, and He is virtually undefined.[43] After 1772 Cowper is definitely more acquainted with the Lord of the "frowning providence" or Jehovah than he is with the Lord of the "smiling face".[44] It was Jehovah who supposedly demanded the "sacrifice of Abraham".

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[42] Hebrews 9:14. "Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God."

[43] "Abuse of the Gospel", l. 12: Poems, p. 472. 'O, Where's the Spirit's seal?'

[44] "Light Shining out of Darkness", ll. 15-16: Poems, p. 456.

3. The "Sacrifice of Abraham"

The Sacrifice of Abraham, recorded in Genesis 22: 1-18, was a prefiguring of Calvary. Abraham's potential sacrifice has no parallel in the Bible except the Sacrifice of Calvary. All of the other blood sacrifices in the Old Testament - including that of Abel, those made in the Tabernacle, in Solomon's Temple, and in Zerubbabel's Temple that became Herod's Temple - had been animal sacrifices. The Sacrifice of Calvary became the fulfillment and the explanation of all the others. "The Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world". In Abraham's sacrifice we have a unique instance: God had demanded the sacrifice of Isaac; but, in harmony with His revealed nature which included reverence for the sanctity of human life, He had withheld Abraham from taking the life of Isaac. His intervention had been a "voice divine".[45]

We repeat - the Sacrifice of Abraham was a prefiguring of Calvary. The complete picture of God is represented by Jehovah the Judge who demanded the sacrifice and by Abraham the Father who responded to the demand. The cost to Abraham to offer up his son is a shadow of the cost of Atonement within the Godhead.

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[45] "The Castaway", l. 61: Poems, p. 432.

> Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah, and offer him there.
> ...
> My Father ... where is the lamb?
> ...
> My Son, God will provide himself a Lamb...[46]

The Sacrifice of Abraham prefigures the Sacrifice of Calvary, I emphasize again. It is sacramental. The symbols of the knife, fire, and wood represent, respectively, the centurion's spear, the Roman torture, and the crucifixion. Even the site of Mt. Moriah is prophetic: it became the site of the Holy of Holies in the Temple. The length of Abraham's journey paralleled the length of time, by Jewish reckoning, between the crucifixion and resurrection. The father-son relationship foreshadows the greater Father-Son relationship: "They went both of them together."[47] But there was one major difference: Isaac's body was not accepted as propitiation; the Body of Christ became the Place of Propitiation.

> My love is slain, and by my crime is slain
> Ah! now beneath whose wings shall I repose?[48]

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[46] Genesis 22:2, 7, 8.

[47] Genesis 22:6, 8.

[48] Southey, Life and Works, I, 258-259. Lines written by Cowper during the derangement of 1773 and recorded by Mr. George Dyer in his History of Cambridge.

The "sacrifice of Abraham" by William Cowper was a parody of Calvary. I believe that it was his self-justification for committing the atrocity of emasculation.[49] In a fit of insane anger and frustration when he felt physically unqualified to marry Mrs. Unwin in 1773, I believe, William Cowper in his "terrible moment" struck the "malformation" with the same viciousness with which he pruned the "unprolific" in nature. Such an act must have had a rationale in the mind of even the mentally sick.

Why did Cowper feel he must become a "bleeding sacrifice" in 1773? In 1763 he had been able to identify with Emmanuel and by faith to accept the vicarious sacrifice of Calvary and the propitiation that had been accomplished. In a word, the Atonement had been "all sufficient" for William Cowper in 1763:

> I saw the sufficiency of the atonement he had made, my pardon sealed in his blood, and all the fulness and completeness of his justification.[50]

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[49]The "sacrifice of Abraham" cannot be logically equated with suicide as Povey does [op. cit.]. If the Sacrifice of Abraham had been actually accomplished, it would have been filicide, the slaying of Isaac, the "seed of Abraham". Cowper had no "seed" and probably would never have any. Therefore, emasculation is logically a possibility.

[50]Memoir, p. 67. His brother John's testimony at the time of his conversion is similar: "It is built upon a sense of my own utter insufficiency and the all sufficiency of Christ." (Adelphi, p. 22).

In 1773 Cowper did not consider the Atonement "all-sufficient" for his salvation. He confesses this indirectly to Teedon in 1793:

> I told Mrs. U. with many tears that my salvation is impossible ... I recapitulated, in the most impassioned accent and manner, the unexampled severity of God's dealings with me in the course of the last twenty years, especially in the year 73, and again in 86,[51] and concluded all with observing that I must infallibly perish, and that the Scriptures which speak of the insufficiency of man to save himself can never be understood unless I perish.[52]

"The insufficiency of man to save himself" - obviously, he had tried to provide his own salvation. In 1763 his conversion had not only provided spiritual asylum from the guilt of his sins, but by his associations among evangelicals he had also found physical, social, and emotional asylum. In 1773 his fear of the loss of Mrs. Unwin and the possible revelation of his fearful secret robbed him of his physical, emotional, and social asylum, which he had associated with his evangelical conversion. He rejected the "bleeding sacrifice" of Emmanuel, attempted to become a "Christ-figure" himself, and identified with

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[51] The death of the Rev. William Unwin was November 29, 1786. Cowper suffered his fourth derangement January-June, 1787.

[52] Cowper to Samuel Teedon, Feb. 2, 1793: Corr., IV, 365.

Isaac who had also been a potential "bleeding sacrifice". In Cowper's mind Jehovah the terrifying Judge commanded the atrocity: "Abraham" the Priest in the person of Cowper had committed the atrocity. He performed, what he called, the "sacrifice of Abraham". It was a parody of the Crucifixion; he could not provide his own propitiation.

> ... virtue ...
> Lay bleeding ...
> Felt ... a mortal stab ...
> Abhorr'd the sacrifice, and curst the priest.[53]

The missing piece - Where was Abraham the Father? The Father of Love is missing because Cowper's father-image is largely missing or distorted. Cowper was the "alienated son" of the Rev. John Cowper; and his initial grudge against his Maker had been resurrected in gigantic proportions. The Father had become Priest.

4. Rejection of God and Related Alienation from Newton

We do not have to speculate on Cowper's spiritual regression in the period following the "threatening appearance" of January 24, 1773. He has carefully outlined it in his picture of despair, written in 1784:

> I could draw the picture of Despair at any time; I could delineate the country through which he travels, and describe his progress, could trace him from melancholy to rage, from rage to

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[53]"The Progress of Error", ll. 337-340: Poems, p. 24.

obduracy, and from obduracy to indifference about the event; and this I could do in prose or verse with the greatest facility, but to what good purpose?[54]

His rage is exquisitely expressed in his "Lines Written During a Period of Insanity"[55]:

Him the vindictive rod of angry justice
Sent quick and howling to the centre headlong;
I, fed with judgment, in a fleshly tomb, am
Buried above ground.[56]

Ostensibly, Jehovah is arbitrarily damning Cowper in a "moment":

Hatred and vengeance, my eternal portion,
Scarce can endure delay of execution,
Wait, with impatient readiness, to seize my
Soul in a moment.[57]

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[54] Cowper to Rev. John Newton, Mar. 8, 1784: Corr., II, p. 170.

[55] Ryskamp, op. cit., says that this "stark, terrifying poem came out of the wreck of the last year in the Temple", p. 109. True, it was first published in an appendix to the Cox edition of the Memoir in 1816. Since the Memoir supplies a fairly detailed record of the years 1763-1765, the period following the Temple period, it could be assumed that the above poem was written during the derangement of 1763. However, the three Biblical allusions - the person of Judas, the person of Abiram, and the concept of "burial above ground" would seem to determine a date connected with the derangement of 1773. I therefore do concur with the date given in the Oxford Standard Edition (c. 1774) rather than with the opinion of Ryskamp.

[56] "Lines Written During a Period of Insanity", ll. 17-20: Poems, p. 290.

[57] Ibid., ll. 1-4, p. 289.

But Cowper's personal rage and the traitor imagery he applies to himself betray the fact that his own rejection of God was prerequisite to his "damnation". He sees himself in the figure of Judas.[58]

> Damn'd below Judas; more abhorr'd than he was,
> Who for a few pence sold his holy Master.
> Twice betrayed Jesus me, the last delinquent,
> Deems the profanest.[59]

By the figure of Abiram[60] Cowper reveals that he feels guilty of a dual treachery to both God and man:

> I'm called, if vanquish'd, to receive a sentence
> Worse than Abiram's,[61]

In this particular traitor image a Moses overshadows the figure of Abiram. We have already seen that he regarded Newton as an "apostle", a "Privy Councillor", a "Chief Justice"[62] or as one of the "Four Evangelists".[63] He evidently also thought of him in terms of the Lawgiver Moses. We have already traced Cowper's alienation from Newton in the Correspondence. Now a partial explanation

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[58]Judas, one of the Twelve Apostles, betrayed Jesus Christ at the time of the crucifixion.

[59]"Lines Written During a Period of Insanity", ll. 5-8: Poems, p. 290.

[60]Dathan and Abiram led a rebellion against Moses. Numbers 26:9, 10.

[61]"Lines Written During a Period of Insanity", ll. 15, 16: Poems, p. 290.

[62]Cowper to the Rev. John Newton, July 30, 1780: Corr, I, 220.

[63]Cowper to the Rev. John Newton, Mar. 7, 1783: Corr., II, 52.

becomes increasingly clear.

Without trying to overemphasize the image of Abiram, at least one thing is apparent: Cowper resented Newton as Abiram resented Moses. It was inevitable that the former slave trader should not only command love and respect but resentment at times, as well. In 1781, Cowper quoted to Newton the Rev. William Bull's advice to the Rev. Thomas Scott, Newton's successor at Olney, at the time when Scott was attempting to "tread in the steps of Mr. Newton":

> You do well to follow his steps in all other instances; but in this instance you are wrong, and so was he. Mr. Newton trod a path which no man but himself could have used so long as he did, and he wore it out long before he went from Olney. Too much familiarity and condescension cost him the estimation of his people. He thought he should insure their love, to which he had the best possible title, and by those very means he lost it. Be wise, my friend; take warning; make yourself scarce, if you wish that persons of little understanding should know how to prize you.[64]

Cowper had a very personal reason to resent the "familiarity" of Newton. Newton had been the occasion that precipitated the "terrible moment". We will not accuse him of being the cause, because, certainly, he was unaware of Cowper's physical "malformation" when he was urging Cowper to marry Mrs. Unwin. By nature Cowper would not retaliate

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[64] Cowper to the Rev. John Newton, Nov. 7, 1781: Corr., I, 378.

outwardly. Cowper was a perfect gentleman. However, there is evidence that Cowper did consciously or unconsciously punish Newton for disturbing his otherwise peaceful life. He made the Newton household care for and support him for thirteen months during the derangement of 1773-1774 and stubbornly refused to return to Orchard Side for this period of time. He made them rescue him from suicide, and made them reorder their lives in order that he not destroy himself. Cowper valued friends and prided himself that he was an exemplary friend. He felt guilty that he was a traitor to Newton. He called himself Abiram.

No ordinary circumstance could have made Cowper traitor to a friend and traitor to God.

> Man disavows, and Deity disowns me.[65]

It was the pressure he felt at the time of the "terrible moment". He was the "Fly entangled in a thousand webs".[66]

> Hard lot! encompass'd with a thousand dangers;
> Weary, faint, trembling with a thousand terrors[67]

The "thousand dangers" seem to be the circumstances that caused him to reject God; the "thousand terrors" seem to be his "damnation" commensurate with his rejection.

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[65] "Lines Written During a Period of Insanity", l. 9; Poems, p. 290.

[66] Spiritual Diary, p. 495.

[67] "Lines Written During a Period of Insanity", ll. 13, 14; Poems, p. 290.

Part of Cowper's "damnation" is that he has been denied death for twenty-seven years.

> ... hell keeps her ever hungry mouths all
> Bolted against me.[68]

Judas had hanged himself; Abiram had been buried alive; but Cowper "the last delinquent" had been denied suicide. The Newtons and Mrs. Unwin had carefully prevented this day and night for seven years. Cowper was "buried above ground".

> I lived in [Olney] once, but now I am buried in it, and have no business with the world on the outside of my sepulchre ...[69]

In a sense, Cowper consciously or unconsciously punished God, much as he did Newton. As we have shown, Cowper's "damnation" was the inevitable result of his rejection of God. However, by his never giving the reason or circumstance which occasioned his rejection of God, his "damnation" appeared, and he professed it to be, an arbitrary decree by which God in a singular manner "damned" one of the Elect. This would make God appear capricious.

> Adam's approach to the tree of life, after he had sinned, was not more effectually prohibited by the flaming sword that turned every way, than mine to its great Antitype has been now almost these thirteen years ... For what reason

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[68] Ibid., ll. 11, 12.

[69] Cowper to Mrs. Newton, Mar. 4, 1780; Corr., I, 175.

> it is that I am thus excluded, if I am ever again to be admitted, is known to God only. I can say but this: that if He is still my Father, this paternal severity has toward me been such as that I have reason to account unexampled.[70]

Cowper further attempted to punish God, consciously or unconsciously, by placing Him in the unenviable position of "damning" a morally good man who professedly wanted to serve him.

> We are exactly what we were when you saw us last:- I, miserable on account of God's departure from me, which I believe to be final; and [Mrs. Unwin] seeking His return to me in the path of duty, and by continual prayer.[71]

His outward behaviour is an inversion of which might be expected: "During his remaining twenty-seven years he was a man continually occupied in praising a God who had irrevocably damned him."[72]

His true opinion of himself remained the same the rest of his life - he knew he had rejected God before God had damned him:

> He considers me as a traitor.[73]

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[70]Cowper to Rev. John Newton, May 20, 1786: Corr., III, 40, 41.

[71]Cowper to Rev. John Newton, Sept. 30, 1786: Corr., III, 100-101.

[72]Gregory, op. cit., p. 56.

[73]Cowper to Samuel Teedon, 2 Jan. 1794: Corr., IV, 482.

> No terms are to be kept with me whom God ... considers as a traitor.[74]

5. Spiritual Death

> Me miserable! how could I escape
> Infinite wrath and infinite despair!
> Whom Death, Earth, Heaven, and Hell consigned to ruin,
> Whose friend was God, but God swore not to aid me![75]

Cowper registered his bitterness toward God with these words written on a window blind at Weston Underwood on July 27, 1795 when he was leaving to make his home with the Rev. John Johnson of Norfolk. In the fragmentary Spiritual Diary the same year he also wrote:

> Such was not the mercy I expected from Thee, nor that horror and overwhelming misery should be the only means of deliverance left me in a moment so important![76]

Cowper seems to have had an eventual grudge that even surpassed his initial grudge against God over the physical "malformation". What could possibly have constituted this grudge that made spiritual death seem inevitable? A hint is given in his last testimony:

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[74]Cowper to Samuel Teedon, 10 Jan. 1794: Corr., IV, 486.

[75]"Lines Written On a Window-Shutter at Weston", ll. 3-6: Poems, p. 428.

[76]Spiritual Diary, p. 496.

> No voice divine the storm allay'd,
> No light propitious shone;
> When, ...
> We perish'd ...[77]

The figures of Jehovah, Abraham, and Isáac appear again. A "voice divine" had prevented Abraham from slaying Isáac:

> And Abraham stretched for his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.
> And the angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham.... ... Lay not thine hand upon the lad ...[78]

"No voice divine" had stopped Cowper from committing the "sacrifice of Abraham".

Another Biblical figure had been supernaturally arrested by a "voice divine" and "light propitious":

> And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord ... ... came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven:
> And he ... heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?[79]

Cowper was favored with neither a "voice divine" nor a propitious "light". Instead, he accused God of setting him "on the slippery brink of this horrible pit in a state of infatuation little short of idiotism"[80]:

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[77] "The Castaway", ll. 61-64: Poems, p. 432.

[78] Genesis 22:10-12.

[79] Acts 9:1-4.

[80] Spiritual Diary, p. 496.

> What hope was there for me even then, for me, who took the servant that sat up in my room for the Angel Gabriel to such a degree was I infatuated before the day of Trial?[81]

Cowper's plight was pathetic; the social, religious, and emotional pressure he was under was unbearable; in his own words, his perceptions, at the time, were idiotic. However, the physical mutilation was not the "unpardonable sin". He could have been forgiven for the action. What produced spiritual death was his blasphemy against Deity and the grudge he cultivated in his heart. These eroded any possibility of spiritual resurrection:

> Farewell to the remembrance of Thee for ever. I must now suffer thy wrath, but forget that I ever heard thy name. Oh horrible! and still more horrible, that I write these last lines with a hand that is not permitted to tremble![82]

Cowper used a very expressive image to portray his spiritual death - the "castaway". It is both Pauline and Johanine. St. Paul uses it in the context of the highly competitive Greek races. The "castaway" was a participant who had been disqualified, or rejected for some reason. He would not be awarded the crown or the wreath.

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[81] Ibid., p. 495.

[82] Ibid., p. 496. Morris Golden in his In Search for Stability (New York: Bookman Associates, 1960), makes this observation: "His 'Spiritual Diary' is perhaps not a rational product, coming as it does in a time of crisis, but it does develop one of his basic attitudes, rightly generalized by Mr. Fauscet and by Mr. MacLean as a hatred of God.", p. 87.

> But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway.[83]

Cowper's "withered tree, fruitless and leafless" is reminiscent of the "castaway" image in St. John:

> If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.[84]

Cowper, from his own testimony, experienced spiritual death from 1773 until 1799. He experienced physical death on April 25, 1800. Would he experience eternal death? Was William Cowper actually an apostate or was his "damnation" only an effect of a deranged mind? The Rev. John Newton believed fervently that it was delusion. He believed Cowper would experience eternal life:

> My friend, my friend! and have we met again,
> Far from the home of woe, the home of men;
> .....
> Oh! let thy memory wake! I told thee so;
> I told thee thus would end thy heaviest woe;
> I told thee thy God would bring thee here,
> And God's own hand would wipe away thy tear
> While I should claim a mansion by thy side,
> I told thee so - for our Emmanuel died.[85]

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[83] I Corinthians 9:27.

[84] John 15:6.

[85] Thomas Wright, The Loved Haunts of Cowper (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1894), p. 57.

We would like to agree with Newton, but perhaps we must credit his kindness to his theology and to his loyalty as a friend. The evidence that Cowper has left us is much more convincing. Cowper used an image of apostasy as early as 1783 and applied it to himself:

> My brier is a wintry one, the flowers are withered, but the thorn remains.[86]

The "brier and thorn" imagery is quite prominent in the prophecy of Isaiah,[87] but it is even more clearly enunciated in the Book of Hebrews:

> But that which beareth thorns and briers is rejected, and is nigh unto cursing; whose end is to be burned.[88]

The Writer is definitely talking about apostasy:

> For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, And have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, If they shall fall away, to renew them again to repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame.[89]

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[86]Cowper to the Rev. John Newton, April 20, 1783: Corr., II, 60.

[87]Isaiah 5:6; 7:23, 24, 25; 9:18; 10:17; 27:4; 32:13.

[88]Hebrews 6:8.

[89]Hebrews 6:4-6.

Even a Calvinist could not ignore the fearful warning against apostasy.[90] We must accept the evidence: although Cowper continued to write in an acceptable manner concerning the Christian God, Christian ethics, and, in general, Evangelical Christianity; even though he lived a life outwardly conformable to Christian morality; in his heart, according to the evidence, he was an apostate - Cowper had rejected Emmanuel as the Propitiatory Sacrifice and he had rejected Jehovah as his Father.

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[90] Because of the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints, a Calvinist would not allow that one of the Elect could fall from grace. Cowper's last letter to the Rev. John Newton, his last extant letter, April 16, 1799: Corr., IV, 506. "I thought myself secure of an eternity to be spent with the spirits of such men as He whose life afforded the subject of it.... a storm was at hand which ... would blot out that prospect forever."

CHAPTER SEVEN

COWPER'S POETRY

1. His Assurances

Characteristic of one with inner turmoil, Cowper wanted all of his surroundings peaceful, constant, and stable.[1] He was thankful that in the universe there was a Providence[2] active in the affairs of men:

> God moves in a mysterious way,
> His wonders to perform;
> He plants his footsteps in the sea,
> And rides upon the storm.
>
> Deep in unfathomable mines
> Of never failing skill;
> He treasures up his bright designs,
> And works his sovereign will.[3]
>
> Mysterious are his ways, ...
> ... th' allotment of the skies,
> The hand of the Supremely Wise,
> That guides and governs our affections,
> And plans and orders our connexions;

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[1] Morris Golden, op. cit., has seen in Cowper's poetry a search for stability.

[2] Cowper to Lady Hesketh, Sept. 4, 1786: Corr., I, p. 43. "A firm persuasion of the superintendence of Providence over all our concerns is absolutely necessary to our happiness."

[3] "Light Shining Out of Darkness", ll. 1-8: Poems, p. 455.

Directs us in our distant road,
And marks the bounds of our abode.[4]

He was confident that the eternal God of the universe in the person of Jesus Christ had made an appearance in time and in history:

To look at him, who form'd us and redeem'd;
.....
To see a God stretch forth his human hand,
.....
To recollect that, in a form like our's,
He bruis'd beneath his feet th' infernal pow'rs,
Captivity led captive, rose to claim
The wreath he won so dearly in our name...[5]

In Creation Cowper could trace "the unambiguous footsteps of God"[6]:

His are the mountains, and the vallies his,
And the resplendent rivers. His t' enjoy
With a propriety that none can feel,
But who, with filial confidence inspir'd,
Can lift to heaven an unpresumptuous eye,
And smiling say - My Father made them all![7]

The Lord of all, himself through all diffus'd,
Sustains, and is the life of all that lives.
Nature is but a name for an effect,
Whose cause is God.[8]

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[4]"A Poetical Epistle to Lady Austen", ll. 29, 33-38: Poems, p. 335.

[5]"Charity", ll. 579, 581, 583-6; Poems, p. 88.

[6]The Task, V, l. 812: Poems, p. 217.

[7]Ibid., ll. 742-7: Poems, p. 216.

[8]Ibid., VI, ll. 221-4: Poems, p. 224. Cowper's antagonism is not with the God of Nature; it is with the personal God.

Unlike the great Romantic poets who enjoyed the wildness of Nature,[9] Cowper enjoyed cultivated nature:

> God made the country, and man made the town.
> .....
> Our groves were planted to console at noon
> The pensive wand'rer in their shades. At eve
> the moon-beam, sliding softly in between
> The sleeping leaves, is all the light they wish,
> Birds warbling all the music. We can spare
> The splendour of your lamps; they but eclipse
> Our softer satellite. Your songs confound
> Our more harmonious notes: the thrush departs
> Scar'd, and th''offended nightingale is mute.[10]

Cowper appreciated the role of Revelation in answering man's Big Questions:

> Whence is man?
> Why form'd at all? and wherefore as he is?
> Where must he find his Maker? with what rites
> Adore him? Will he hear, accept, and bless?
> Or does he sit regardless of his works?
> Has man within him an immortal seed?
> Or does the tomb take all? If he survive
> His ashes, where? and in what weal or woe?
> Knots worthy of solution, which alone
> A Deity could solve.[11]

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[9] Cowper could not remain long at Eartham Lodge, the "elegant mansion" of William Hayley, because of the wildness in the natural scenery surrounding it. "[Weston] has an air of snug concealment, in which a disposition like mine feels itself peculiarly gratified; whereas here [Eartham] I see from every window woods like forests, and hills like mountains, - a wilderness, in short, that rather increases my natural melancholy." Cowper to Lady Hesketh, Sept. 9, 1792: Corr., IV, 287.

[10] The Task, I, ll. 749, 760-8: Poems, p. 145.

[11] Ibid., II, ll. 512-521: Poems, p. 157.

He sees the Church as the strongest proponent of Virtue and the propagator of Revelation:

> The pulpit (when the satirist has at last,
> Strutting and vap'ring in an empty school,
> Spent all his force and made no proselyte) -
> I say the pulpit (in the sober use
> Of its legitimate, peculiar pow'rs)
> Must stand acknowledg'd, while the world shall stand,
> The most important and effectual guard,
> Support, and ornament, of virtue's cause.
> There stands the messenger of truth: there stands
> The legate of the skies! - His theme divine,
> His office sacred, his credentials clear.
> By him the violated law speaks out
> Its thunders; and by him, in strains as sweet
> As angels use, the gospel whispers peace.[12]

Civilization with its culture and material blessings suited the temperament of Cowper. He acknowledged and cultivated the ideals of temperance, industry, and virtue:

> Blest he, though undistinguish'd from the crowd
> By wealth or dignity, who dwells secure,
> Where man, by nature fierce, has laid aside
> His fierceness, having learnt, though slow to learn,
> The manners and the arts of civil life.
> His wants, indeed, are many; but supply
> Is obvious, plac'd within the easy reach
> Of temp'rate wishes and industrious hands.
> Here virtue thrives as in her proper soil...[13]

As Cowper needed the ideals of authority, control, and dependability in Providence, Nature, Revelation, Church, and Civilization, he needed the assurance of these characteristics in government. His ideal in government was

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[12] Ibid., II, ll. 329-342: Poems, p. 153.

[13] Ibid., I, ll. 592-600: Poems, p. 142.

the limited monarchy; he definitely did not want an absolute monarchy:

> 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....
> .... He is our's,
> T'administer, to guard, t' 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.[14]

The assurance of control at every stratum of life that Cowper craved, he did not find at the level of Home. The deprivation of authority and protection in this area was disastrous, as we have seen throughout this paper. He desired the ideal which, in his case, was unfulfilled:

> Father, and friend, and tutor, all in one.[15]

2. His Anxieties and Asylums

Cowper met every anxiety of his life on the physical, emotional, mental, social, and spiritual levels with a corresponding search for asylum. After Cowper's derangement in 1763, he, like a righteous Lot leaving Sodom, turned his back on London for good:

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[14] Ibid., V, ll. 331-6, 341-5: Poems, p. 207.

[15] "Tirocinium", l. 544: Poems, p. 254.

> Oh thou, resort and mart of all the earth,
> Chequer'd with all complexions of mankind,
> And spotted with all crimes; in whom I see
> Much that I love, and more that I admire,
> And all that I abhor; ...
> .....
> Ten righteous would have sav'd a city once,
> And thou hast many righteous. - Well for thee!
> That salt preserves thee; more corrupted else,
> And therefore more obnoxious, at this hour
> Than Sodom in her day had pow'r to be,
> For whom God heard his Abr'am plead in vain.[16]

His retreat had been his residence at Orchard Side in Olney:

> 'Tis pleasant through the loop-holes of retreat
> To peep at such a world; to see the stir
> Of the great Babel, and not feel the crowd;
> To hear the roar she sends through all her gates
> At a safe distance. ...
> The sound of war
> Has lost its terrors ere it reaches me;
> Grieves, but alarms me not.[17]

Since the rural scene was a major retreat for Cowper, he was disturbed over any encroachment of the city upon the country or the outside world upon his sanctuary. "The town has ting'd the country; and the stain/ Appears a spot upon a vestal's robe,/ The worse for what it soils."[18] The postman who arrives at the beginning of "The Winter

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[16] *The Task*, III, ll. 835-9; 844-8; *Poems*, p. 182.

[17] *Ibid.*, IV, ll. 88-92; 100-2; *Poems*, pp. 184, 5

[18] *Ibid.*, IV, ll. 553-5; *Poems*, p. 194.

Evening" is the "herald of a noisy world", a "messenger of grief/ Perhaps to thousands, and of joy to some;/ To him indiff'rent whether grief or joy."[19] Cowper's solution to this encroachment is to "stir the fire, and close the shutters fast,/ Let fall the curtains..."[20]

The home at Orchard Side was a sanctuary on many levels - it was Cowper's own physical protection from the destructive forces of Nature, so symbolic of the Wrath of God to him; it was in many respect, Cowper's return to Eden. It is not accidental that Cowper calls the third book of The Task - "The Garden":

> Domestic happiness, thou only bliss
> Of Paradise that has surviv'd the fall![21]
>
> O, friendly to the best pursuits of man,
> Friendly to thought, to virtue, and to peace,
> Domestic life in rural leisure pass'd![22]

However, "domestic happiness" held an innate irony for Cowper because he was neither father nor husband. Nevertheless, it was still his emotional asylum because there his role as a son was at last fulfilled.

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[19] Ibid., IV, ll. 5, 13-15: Poems, p. 183.

[20] Ibid., ll. 36-7.

[21] Ibid., III, ll. 41-2: Poems, p. 165.

[22] Ibid., III, ll. 290-2: Poems, p. 170.

> I was born of woman, and drew milk,
> As sweet as charity, from human breasts.
> I think, articulate, I laugh and weep,
> And exercise all functions of a man.[23]

He is a member of the human race; he is a son; but he is not a father or husband. Mrs. Unwin plays an important role as his mother-substitute, providing his creature comforts:

> The morning finds the self-sequester'd man
> Fresh for his task, intend what task he may.
> Whether inclement seasons recommend
> His warm but simple home, where he enjoys,
> With her who shares his pleasures and his heart...[24]

> But well thou play'd'st the housewife's part,
> And all thy threads with magic art
> Have wound themselves about this heart,
> My Mary![25]

Cowper provides shelter from the Forces of Nature for plants in his greenhouse and for animals within his home. Nature with its storms and perennial winters can produce disaster to plant and animal life as well as human life. He sometimes implies that he has been a better Defender against Nature's destructive forces than God or his father had been for him:

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[23] Ibid., III, ll. 196-9: Poems, p. 168.

[24] Ibid., III, ll. 386-390: Poems, p. 172.

[25] "To Mary", ll. 17-20: Poems, p. 427.

See, Mary, what beauties I bring
From the shelter of that sunny shed,
.....
See how they have safely surviv'd
The frowns of a sky so severe ...[26]

One shelter'd 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 may'st eat thy bread, and lick the hand
That feeds thee; thou may'st frolic on the floor
At evening, and at night retire secure
To thy straw couch, and slumber unalarm'd;
For I have gain'd thy confidence, have pledg'd
All this is human in me to protect
Thine unsuspecting gratitude and love.[27]

With almost fatherly care, Cowper provided shelter at one time or the other for three hares, eight pairs of pigeons, a linnet, robins, a magpie, two goldfinches, a jay, a starling, canaries, guinea pigs, besides dogs and cats.[28]

In the midst of the circumstances of this Eden-like paradise Cowper was still a man with mental torture and terrors. He found partial asylum from these through the writing of his poetry:

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[26]"The Winter Nosegay", ll. 5-6, 17-18: Poems, pp. 293-4.

[27]Ibid., III, ll. 334-348: Poems, p. 171.

[28]Quinlan, Critical Life, p. 97.

There is a pleasure in poetic pains
Which only poets know. The shifts and turns,
Th' expedients and inventions, multiform,
To which the mind resorts, in chase of terms
Though apt, yet coy, and difficult to win -
T'arrest the fleeting images that fill
The mirror of the mind, and hold them fast,
And force them sit till he has pencil'd off
A faithful likeness of the forms he views;
.....
Are occupations of the poet's mind
So pleasing, and that steal away the thought
With such address from themes of sad import...[29]

The writing of poetry also gave Cowper a sense of mission. He felt the necessity of being a good steward of his talents. Cowper, an ardent admirer of Milton who was ever in his "great Task-Master's eye",[30] gave the title - The Task - to his greatest work. We cannot ignore its implication:

Me ...
... aware that human life
Is but a loan to be repaid with use,
When he shall call his debtors to account ...[31]
.....
The mind he gave me; driving it, though slack
Too oft, and much impeded in its work
By causes not to be divulg'd in vain,
To its just point - the service of mankind.
He ...
... feels himself engag'd t' achieve
No unimportant, though a silent, task.[32]

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[29] The Task, III, 285-293; 298-300: Poems, p. 152.

[30] John Milton, "On Being Arrived at Twenty-Three Years of Age", l. 14, The English Poems of John Milton, H.C. Beeching, ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 29.

[31] Matthew 25:14-30.

[32] The Task, III, ll. 361, 363-5, 369-373; 377-8: Poems, p. 172.

His poetry furnished a window on and for the outside world. People knew him through his poetry. The seemingly loving and kind poet after the derangement of 1773 was condescending to the ordinary people of Olney:

> Since Mr. Newton went, and till this lady [Lady Austen] came, there was not in the kingdom a retirement more absolutely such than ours.[33]

However, he found a social asylum in his controlled and limited friendships - those to whom he extended friendship. To these he was exceptionally loyal and faithful. Friendship to Cowper was very precious. It gave him a kind of security. Toward those who seemingly betrayed his trust in friendship he felt very indignant. Writing "The Valediction" with Thurlow and Coleman in mind, he expressed his chagrin because neither one of his old friends had acknowledged the gift of his first volume.[34]

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[33] Cowper to Rev. William Unwin, Aug. 25, 1781: Corr., I, p. 350.

[34] "Notes", pp. 672-673. "Thurlow had been his companion when they were studying law together in the same solicitor's office, and Coleman had been at Westminster School with him and was afterwards a fellow-member of the Nonsense Club. Both had prospered - Thurlow was Lord Chancellor, and Coleman was a successful dramatist and Manager of the Haymarket Theatre when Cowper wrote the poem."

FAREWELL, false hearts! whose best affections fail
Like shallow brooks which summer suns exhale,
Forgetful of the man whom once ye chose,
Cold in his cause, and careless of his woes,
I bid you both a long and last adieu,
Cold in my turn and unconcern'd like you.[35]

Evangelical Christianity furnished his greatest spiritual asylum. Unfortunately, it only lasted from July, 1764 until the end of 1772, at most. His anxieties would become his anguish.

3. His Anguish

Certain repetitive themes and imagery indicate the depth of Cowper's "infinite despair"[36] and anguish during his remaining twenty-seven years following the derangement of 1773.

During the interim period of 1779-1780, after Cowper's partial recovery from the derangement of 1773 and the writing of his major poetry, beginning in December 1780, there emerge varying expressions of futility in his shorter poems. This is most often expressed by the phrase "in vain":

He strove so vainly.[37]

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[35] "The Valediction", ll. 1-6: Poems, p. 357.

[36] "Lines Written on a Window-Shutter at Weston", l. 4: Poems, p. 428.

[37] "The Bee and the Pine-Apple", l. 8: Poems, p. 296.

But still in vain, ...
.....
Thus having wasted half the day,
.....
To joys forbidden man aspires,
Consumes his soul with vain desires...[38]

The lapse of time and rivers is the same;
.....
Alike irrevocable both when past,
.....
Though each resemble each in ev'ry part,
A difference strikes at length the musing heart;
Streams never flow in vain...[39]

The frustration that he must have felt at fifty years of age not to have yet discovered his "task" must have been terrible:

> What nature expressly designed me for I have never been able to conjecture; I seem to myself so universally disqualified for the common and customary occupations and amusements of mankind.[40]

Trapped by his destiny, Cowper's uselessness and emptiness exist in spite of his noble birth:

Time was when I was free as air,
The thistle's downy seed my fare,
My drink the morning dew;
I perch'd at will on ev'ry spray,
My form genteel, my plumage gay,
My strains for ever new.

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[38]"The Pine-Apple and the Bee", ll. 9, 11, 15, 16: Poems, p. 297.

[39]"A Comparison", ll. 1, 5, 7-9: Poems, p. 304.

[40]Cowper to Rev. William Unwin, May 28, 1781: Corr., I, 314.

> But gaudy plumage, sprightly strain,
> And form genteel, were all in vain,
> And of a transient date;
> For, caught and cag'd, and starv'd to death,
> In dying sighs my little breath
> Soon pass'd the wiry grate.[41]

Cowper makes an attempt to be reconciled to what he thinks is destiny, or the design of Providence, but everything within him is crying out: My heredity says that I should be more than the "Olney Recluse".[42]

> I learn how just it is and wise,
> To use what Providence supplies,
> To leave fine titles, lordships, graces,
> Rich pensions, dignities, and places,
> Those gifts of a superior kind,
> To those for whom they were design'd.
> I learn that comfort dwells alone
> In that which Heav'n has made our own,
> That fools incur no greater pain,
> Than pleasure coveted in vain.[43]

Cowper's spiritual dilemma is revealed most clearly in his use of imagery of the sea. In 1781 he wrote to the Rev. William Unwin concerning the effect that the ocean always had had upon his spiritual sensitivity:

> ... the most magnificent object under heaven
> is the great deep ... In all its various forms,
> it is an object of all others the most suited
> to affect us with lasting impressions of the
> Awful Power that created and controls it....

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[41] "On a Goldfinch Starved to Death in His Cage", ll. 1-12; Poems, p. 305.

[42] Chapter V in Quinlan's Critical Life is called "The Olney Recluse".

[43] "The Bee and the Pine-Apple", ll. 15-24: Poems, p. 296.

> at a time of life when I gave as little attention to religious subjects as almost any man, I yet remember that the waves would preach to me, and that in the midst of dissipation I had an ear to hear them.[44]

Striving with a destiny that is fraught with futility in 1757 Cowper is separated from one of his best friends by death and from his Theadora by enigmatic circumstances. Since the Sea has "cast" him "forth a wand'rer", it is not too much to conclude that the death and the separation in some way were both "acts of God":

> See me - ere yet my destin'd course half done,
> Cast forth a wand'rer on a wild unknown!
> See me neglected on the world's rude coast,
> Each dear companion of my voyage lost![45]

Cowper sees himself shipwrecked when he compares his spiritual condition with that of the Rev. John Newton in 1780:

> That ocean you of late survey'd,
> Those rocks I too have seen,
> But I, afflicted and dismay'd,
> You, tranquil and serene.
>
> You from the flood-controlling steep
> Saw stretch'd before your view,
> With conscious joy, the threat'ning deep,
> No longer such to you.
>
> To me, the waves that ceaseless broke
> Upon the dang'rous coast,

---

[44] Cowper to the Rev. William Unwin, Sept. 26, 1781: Corr., I, p. 358.

[45] "On the Death of Sir W. Russell", ll. 15-18: Poems, p. 285.

Hoarsely and ominously spoke
Of all my treasure lost.

Your sea of troubles you have past,
And found the peaceful shore;
I, tempest-toss'd, and wreck'd at last,
Come home to port no more.[46]

Cowper's spiritual relationship with God is even more frightening in 1790 when contrasted with that of his idealized mother:

Her beauteous form . . .
. . . . . .
. . . hast reach'd the shore
"Where tempests never beat nor billows roar,"
. . . . . .
But me, . . .
Always from port withheld, always distress'd -
Me howling winds drive devious, tempest toss'd,
Sails ript, seams op'ning wide, and compass lost . . .[47]

As tragic as the imagery of shipwreck is, it does not have the hopelessness and finality of the castaway imagery. While the world laughed at John Gilpin in 1782, and the author was hurled to immediate fame, Cowper was also in the midst of a spiritual storm:

And, strange as it may seem, the most ludicrous lines I ever wrote have been written in the saddest mood, and, but for that saddest mood, perhaps had never been written at all. To say truth, it would be

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[46] "To the Reverend Mr. Newton", ll. 1-16: Poems, pp. 307-8.

[47] "On the Receipt of My Mother's Picture", ll. 93, 96-7, 101-3: Poems, p. 396.

> but a shocking vagary, should the mariners on board a ship buffeted by a terrible storm, employ themselves in fiddling and dancing; yet sometimes much such a part act I.[48]

John Gilpin is an hilarious character from the spectator's point of view, but if that spectator has empathy, he can readily see that Gilpin is actually a "castaway". The chaise that carried the rest of the family to the wedding-anniversary celebration is intact; the family has arrived safely and in good spirits. But the borrowed horse, acting instinctively, irrationally, and capriciously, is in control of Gilpin's situation. Gilpin's destiny on that ill-fated day is totally at the mercy of the horse. He never reaches his intended destination. Gilpin, who has been a respectable, hard-working citizen for twenty years, in one day becomes a misunderstood, ridiculous jest and mockery to his friends and neighbors. His loved ones, unable to give him effectual aid, can only view the spectacle with distress. Gilpin is alone in his situation.

> Away went Gilpin, neck or nought;
> Away went hat and wig!
> He little dreamt, when he set out,
> Of running such a rig!
> .....

---

[48] Cowper to the Rev. William Unwin, Nov. 18, 1782: Corr., II, p. 27.

Away went Gilpin - who but he?
.....
Away went Gilpin, ...
And sore against his will.
.....
Away went Gilpin, and away
.....
Away went Gilpin, and away.[49]

Excruciating, agonizing - John Gilpin is the ludicrous cast-"Away".

Only one day before Cowper began the famous "Castaway" in 1799 he translated into English his Latin "Montes Glaciales". Two of Cowper's strongest images combine in the "Ice Islands". These icebergs are a floating type of "castaway" doomed to oblivion; and, by their very nature, are islands without "herb, fruit, and flow'r".[50]

How can Cowper achieve such an unbelievable combination of images in the context of ice islands? First, he contrasts their appearance with their reality. The icebergs appear as the "richest treasures" from India or ejections from famed volcanoes:

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[49] "John Gilpin", ll. 97-100, 113, 157-8, 229: Poems, pp. 346-351.

[50] "Translation on the Ice Islands Seen Floating in the German Ocean", l. 54: Poems, p. 430-431. "Montes Glaciales" written March 12, 1799.

> What view we now? More wondrous still! Behold!
> Like burnish'd brass they shine, or beaten gold;
> And all around the pearl's pure splendour show,
> And all around the ruby's fiery glow.
> Come they from India? ...
> .....
> Whence sprang they then? Ejected have they come
> From Ves'vius', or from AEtna's burning womb?[51]

Ironically, their value and brilliance are only due to appearance.

> ... they ... but display
> The borrow'd splendours of a cloudless day ...
> With borrow'd beams they shine.[52]

In reality they are "horrid wand'rers of the deep".[53] They are mountains of ice:

> Their lofty summits, crested high, they show,
> With mingled sleet and long-incumbent snow.
> The rest is ice.[54]

The "infant growth" of these dread "mountains" took place where "Bleak winter well-nigh saddens all the year".[55] They were launched as floating islands with tremendous force:

> By pressure of its own enormous weight,
> It left the shelving beach -[56]

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[51] Ibid., ll. 9-13, 17, 21-22.

[52] Ibid., ll. 23-25.

[53] Ibid., l. 57.

[54] Ibid., ll. 29-31.

[55] Ibid., l. 32.

[56] Ibid., ll. 46-47.

Secondly, Cowper contrasts the very nature of these floating ice islands with the floating mythical island of Delos, which was finally moored by Zeus in the Aegean Sea as the birthplace for Apollo:

> But not of ice was Delos. Delos bore
> Herb, fruit, and flow'r.[57]

Delos enjoyed the god's approval, whereas the "ice islands" are doomed to "Cimmerian darkness":

> And Delos was Apollo's fav'rite isle.
> But, horrid wand'rers of the deep, to you
> He deems Cimmerian darkness[58] only due.
> Your hated birth he deign'd not to survey,
> But, scornful, turn'd his glorious eyes away.
> Hence![59]

The floating "ice islands" are doomed to oblivion by the "darts of Phoebus".[60]

The same overtones that are begun in the "Ice Islands" are perfected in "The Castaway". The "ice islands" are:

> for ever lost![61]

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[57] Ibid., ll. 53-54.

[58] The Christian parallel to Homer's "Cimmerian darkness" is "outer darkness". Matt. 22:13. This is one of the two persistent metaphors of Jesus for "hell", the final abode of the damned. The other is "everlasting fire". Matt. 25:41.

[59] Ibid., ll. 56-61.

[60] Ibid., l. 62.

[61] Ibid., l. 64.

The "castaway" is

for ever left.[62]

However, there is a definite change of viewpoint. In "Montes Glaciales" we focus on the intrinsic worthlessness and unproductivity of the "ice islands". The "castaway" has human personality, and we view him in awesome relationship to the "Awful Power" controlling the "Ocean" and in relationship to the "ship" and its crew.

Cowper's anguish reaches its greatest expression in his last original poem - "The Castaway", written March 20-25, 1799. It is possible to see in this great poem an allegory of Cowper's tormented spiritual journey through life. The "castaway" with its combined Johanine[63] and Pauline[64] connotations is placed in the context of the ocean which, for Cowper, brought impressions of "the awful Power that created and controls it".[65] He is totally at the mercy of or the justice of that "awful Power". Ryskamp sees irony in its very form: "To write a poem

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[62]"The Castaway", l. 6: Poems, p. 431.

[63]St. John 15:6. St. John's "castaway": "fruitless" and "withered" tree cast into the fire.

[64]I Corinthians 9:27. St. Paul's "castaway": reject from the Greek reces not winning the crown or wreath.

[65]Cowper to Rev. William Unwin, Sept. 26, 1781: Corr., I, 358.

about being cast off from man and God in a form like that of a hymn: this is the ultimate irony."[66] The pervading atmosphere of the poem is infinite despair coupled with the intensity of hopelessness.

A key note is struck: "Obscurest night". "Night" has eternal dimensions. On the night that Judas betrayed his Master, St. John records the incident and adds:

> He then ... went immediately out: and it was night.[67]

The obscurity of the night indicates that Cowper's spiritual vision is totally blinded. Blame for his lost condition is placed totally on Deity. The storm is the responsibility of "the sky":

> Obscurest night involv'd the sky,
> Th' Atlantic billows roar'd ...[68]

Cowper is a victim of destiny and God controls destiny:

> When such a destin'd wretch as I,
> Wash'd headlong from on board.[69]

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[66] Charles Ryskamp, ed., William Cowper, "The Cast-away" (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 9.

[67] St. John 13:30.

[68] "The Castaway", ll. 1, 2: Poems, p. 431.

[69] Ibid., ll. 3, 4.

God did not supernaturally rescue him from his destiny and therefore he blames God that he is a "castaway" in eternity:

> No voice divine the storm allay'd,
> No light propitious shone ...[70]

"Perishing" has an eternal finality:

> We perish'd ...[71]

There is irony in the word "perishing". For St. John, in the words of Jesus, had given hope to the entire human race:

> For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.[72]

And Cowper believed himself forever lost:

> His floating home for ever left.[73]

There is no evident grudge against Newton exhibited in the poem.[74] Indeed, Cowper pays immortal

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[70] Ibid., ll. 61, 62.

[71] Ibid., l. 64.

[72] St. John 3:16.

[73] "The Castaway", l. 6; Poems, p. 431.

[74] Earlier in this paper we have traced the record of Cowper's alienation from Newton. It should be noted that following the death of William Unwin and Cowper's partial recovery from the derangement of 1787, Cowper's attitude toward Newton changed for the better. He explains his attitude in the 1780's as a type of delusion. This is

tribute to the "dear friend, with feelings that justified the appellation"[75]:

> No braver chief could Albion boast
> Than he with whom he went...[76]

Evangelical Christianity is exonerated:

> Nor ever ship left Albion's coast,
> With warmer wishes sent.[77]

He loved his "apostle"; he loved his "church" but "in vain":

> He lov'd them both, but both in vain,
> Nor him beheld, nor her again.[78]

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not altogether convincing. He says he is "better qualified for [correspondence] than before" by his "belief of your identity, which for thirteen years I did not believe." He said he had had:

> the disagreeable suspicion that I am addressing myself to you as the friend whom I loved and valued so highly in my better days, while in fact you are not that friend, but a stranger.

(Cowper to Rev. John Newton, Oct. 2, 1787: Corr., III, 162) Reassurances of his constant regard continue in his correspondence to Newton:

> I found those comforts in your visit which have formerly sweetened all our interviews, in part restored. I knew you; knew you for the same shepherd who was sent to lead me out of the wilderness into the pasture where the chief Shepherd feeds His flock, and felt my sentiments of affectionate friendship for you the same as ever.

(Cowper to Rev. John Newton, Sept. 2, 1788: Corr., III, 311).

[75] Cowper to Rev. John Newton, April 11, 1799: Corr., IV, 507.

[76] "The Castaway", ll. 7, 8: Poems, p. 431.

[77] Ibid., ll. 9, 10.

[78] Ibid., ll. 11, 12.

He had forgiven Newton for his part in the crisis that had precipitated his spiritual death; he had forgiven any part his evangelical friends had unknowingly contributed to his "terrible moment". He recognized that they had done everything humanly possible to help rescue him from his destiny:

> He shouted: nor his friends had fail'd
> To check the vessel's course,
> .....
> Some succour yet they could afford;
> And, such as storms allow,
> The cask, the coop, the floated cord,
> Delay'd not to bestow.[79]

He pays tribute to the many friends who had been faithful to him during the other "storms" of his life - Mary Unwin, Lady Hesketh, Johnny of Norfolk ...

> His comrades, who before
> Had heard his voice in ev'ry blast, ...[80]

In the "sacrifice of Abraham", we believe and have tried to demonstrate in this paper, Cowper attempted to provide a kind of propitiation or salvation for himself. Again in the "Castaway" we see him battling his destiny in a contest with the "sky" and the "ocean":

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[79] Ibid., ll. 19-20, 25-28: Poems, p. 432.

[80] Ibid., ll. 44-45.

He long survives, who lives an hour
In ocean, self-upheld;
And so long he, with unspent pow'r,
His destiny repell'd ...[81]

There are perhaps three overwhelming emotions in this poem: rage against God that He caused the storm and did not supernaturally rescue Cowper; despair because there is no hope of rescue and his perishing is final; and bitterness because the ship is intact, the "chief" is safe, and his friends are so near and, yet, Cowper is being separated from them by a gulf which is eternally widening:

Nor, cruel as it seem'd, could he
Their haste himself condemn,
Aware that flight, in such a sea,
Alone could rescue them;
Yet bitter felt it still to die
Deserted, and his friends so nigh.[82]

Cowper perished - alone. He faced eternity alone - no friends, no captain, no ship, no hope, and no God:

No voice divine the storm allay'd
No light propitious shone;
When, snatch'd from all effectual aid,
We perish'd, each alone...[83]

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[81] Ibid., ll. 37-40.

[82] Ibid., ll. 31-36.

[83] Ibid., ll. 61-64.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION

Through the poetry and correspondence of William Cowper we see the autograph of a lost soul. He knew he was lost; he knew why he was lost; he knew when he became lost.

Many questions concerning the enigma of Cowper still remain. The literary world eagerly awaits a reliable edition of his letters:

> [Professor Neilson C. Hannay's] rich and comprehensive collection, which includes four hundred letters by Cowper, about a hundred addressed to him by Newton, and Newton's diary from 1773 to 1805, was acquired by Princeton University,[1] where the long-delayed definitive edition of the letters is now being prepared by a member of the Department of English, Professor Charles Ryskamp.[2]

However, I do not expect the enigma of Cowper the Man, Cowper the Christian, or Cowper the Poet to be solved by this work. The incomplete picture of Cowper originates

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[1]Charles Ryskamp describes this collection in "William Cowper and His Circle", op. cit.

[2]Brian Spiller, Cowper: Poetry and Prose (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1968), p. 552.

with the poet himself:

> You have my free permission to [print my letters], but not till I am dead. No, not even then, till you have given them a complete revisal, erasing all that the critics in such matters [style] would condemn.[3]

On the one thousand forty-one letters published in The Correspondence of William Cowper, Thomas Wright compared only approximately four hundred with the originals.[4] According to Spiller, the Hannay Collection contains about four hundred letters by Cowper.

Many letters known to have been written by Cowper are missing. Outstanding among these are the letters to Mrs. Unwin. When Hayley was preparing his biography of Cowper, Lady Hesketh had these in her possession.[5] Wright says that only one has been preserved.[6] Although Cowper himself refers to a correspondence with Lady Austen, none of these letters are extant.[7]

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[3] Cowper to Lady Hesketh, July 5, 1788: Corr., III, 295.

[4] Corr., IV, 531.

[5] Lady Hesketh to John Johnson, Jan. 3, 1802: Hesketh Letters, pp. 113-114.

[6] Wright, Life, p. 190. This letter printed in full by Adelaide Collyer, "Some Unpublished MSS of the Poet Cowper", The Universal Review, June 1890, pp. 279-280.

[7] Cowper to Rev. William Unwin, Feb. 9, 1782: Corr., I, 442-443.

Letters between Cowper's acquaintances, letters that would have furnished informative background for Cowper, are also missing. I have not been able to locate the Newton-Thornton correspondence.[8] The letter, known to Southey, that stated that Cowper was an hermaphrodite is a notably missing letter.

Other letters, necessary for Cowper's background, have been kept in private collections, only recently becoming available in a limited way for scholarly research. I mention in particular the one hundred Newton letters to Cowper now at Princeton University. These letters are still in manuscript form after two hundred years of research and theorizing on the enigmatic Cowper. The writings of Newton, published and republished, make an impressive and lengthy list.[9] And yet Newton's letters to Cowper were not published. Southey believing that many of the Newton letters to Cowper had been destroyed said, "They whose researches have been among such documents know how imperfect the information is that can be gathered from

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[8]Those which I have quoted were excerpts from Southey. Southey had much of this correspondence. Dowden, op. cit., p. 296.

[9]The New Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature, George Watson, ed., Cambridge University Press, 1971, II, 1626-27.

a one-sided correspondence."[10] Bernard Martin testified in 1952 that "thirty-two letters from John Newton to Cowper have been locked away in a lawyer's safe these many years."[11] Other tantalizing documents are Newton's Diaries. In 1868 Josiah Bull edited and printed an unsatisfactory abridgement with commentary. The originals are at Princeton University, and microfilmed copies can be obtained.

Many of these questions may never be answered. Then why my thesis? In many ways I only continue the controversy that has existed for two hundred years over Cowper. Lodwick Hartley has summarized the traditional opposing opinions as to the causes for Cowper's multiple derangements and his consciousness of "damnation":

> Two lines of arguments were immediately established: the one contending that the poet's madness stemmed either from natural causes or from sin in some form, original or personal (actual); the other insisting that the abnormal emotionalism and depressing eschatology of Evangelicalism were the poet's undoing. Since Evangelicalism had its own contrasting if not opposing camps, even a third line was to emerge: namely, that Calvinistic not Arminian theology

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[10] Cited in Bernard Martin, "Fresh Light on William Cowper", Modern Language Quarterly, XIII (1952), p. 253.

[11] Ibid.

> was - if any religious cause could be assigned - the source of trouble. Because, by his own admission, John Newton's reputation for "preaching people mad" was reasonably widespread, this redoubtable divine early became the villain of the anti-Evangelicals.[12]

Noteworthy among those recently to exonerate Newton and Evangelicalism and to suggest the exploration of the possible influence of the physical "malformation" was Hoxie Neale Fairchild in 1942.[13] Charles Ryskamp in his scholarly William Cowper of the Inner Temple, Esq. explores the possibility and dimensions of the "defect" and dismisses it as delusion. In this he follows the opinion of Southey. Nevertheless, a strong impression is made on any reader: Ryskamp spends ten pages in his discussion on this. Quinlan suggests the possibility of an emasculation, and then dismisses it.[14] With recent scholarship discounting Newton as the principal "villain" because the evidence isn't sufficient to support the charge, the enigma of Cowper mushrooms. There has to be an underlying cause for a twenty-seven-year effect. There

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[12]Lodwick Hartley, William Cowper: The Continuing Revaluation (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1960), p. 18.

[13]Hoxie Neale Fairchild, Religious Trends in English Poetry, II (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942), p. 176.

[14]Quinlan, Critical Life, pp. 42-44.

must have been a rebellion, a rejection, a blasphemy of such proportions to have made "damnation" seem a reasonable and inevitable consequence to the mind of William Cowper.

I have tentatively accepted what is suggested by some pieces of evidence - that Cowper was indeed an hermaphrodite or at least appeared so to himself - and have explored a man's possible spiritual reaction to such a problem. I believe that, through the acceptance of this fragmentary evidence, I have been able to see a unity in the life and work of William Cowper.

Someone may ask - why the hypothetical reconstruction of the events surrounding the "sacrifice of Abraham"? Quinlan had suggested the possibility of the emasculation. Hoosag K. Gregory, the psychologist, accepting the possibility of the "malformation", has seen the related dual antagonism with his father and his God.[15] I am an Evangelical. I have long seen that the Sacrifice of Abraham was a prefiguring of the Sacrifice of Calvary. When I discovered that Newton had revealed that Cowper had attempted a "sacrifice of Abraham" in 1773 that he related to his personal "damnation", I concluded that Cowper had attempted his own salvation and failed. "Damnation"

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[15] Gregory, op. cit., pp. 53-59.

therefore seemed inevitable. The totality of his life had a rationale; it was no longer an enigma to me.

The exploration of the morbidity of a lost immortal soul has been a traumatic experience. I love, respect, and pity William Cowper. Newton, like Cowper, lost his mother in early childhood.[16] Newton's rebellion took the form of outward blasphemy, infidelity, licentiousness, and ignominy. Newton's father in 1746, then Governor of York Fort in the Hudson's Bay Company, requested that a captain friend seek his Prodigal son somewhere on the windward coast of Africa. Newton was Providentially, according to his own testimony, located. On the return voyage to England in 1748 he was converted; his "great deliverance" took place. With a seeking father and a seeking God the Parable had been reenacted - "Amazing Grace"![17]

Cowper's rebellion took a different form:

> His warfare is within.[18]

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[16] The Life of John Newton, p. 17.

[17] Newton's "Amazing Grace" has been popularized during the last decade. Olney Hymns in Three Books (London: Thomas Tegg), Book I, XLI, p. 38.

[18] The Task, VI, l. 935: Poems, p. 239. The figure is Isaac.

Rev. John Cowper, the father, prematurely forced Cowper at seven years of age from Home, from Protection, from Love, from Security. Cowper's father-image was irreparable marred. With distorted spiritual vision he failed to see the compassion of God. William Cowper believed himself irrevocably, arbitrarily "damned":

> No wounds like those a wounded spirit feels,
> No cure for such, till God who makes them, heals.
> And thou, sad suff'rer under nameless ill,
> That yields not to the touch of human skill,
> Improve the kind occasion, understand
> A Father's frown, and kiss his chast'ning hand.[19]

[19] "Retirement", ll. 341-6: Poems, p. 116.

ABBREVIATIONS OF PERIODICAL TITLES

MLQ - Modern Language Quarterly

MLR - Modern Language Review

N&Q - Notes and Queries

PMLA - Publications of the Modern Language Association

RES - Review of English Studies

TLS - Times Literary Supplement

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