

## Public and Private in Cowper's *The Task*

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# 1. Public and Private in Cowper's *The Task*

In private life, as well as in public life, a  
certain reticence should be observed.

— Anita Brookner

Cowper lives in the mind as the poet of the domestic life:

Now stir the fire, and close the shutters fast,  
Let fall the curtains, wheel the sofa round,  
And, while the bubbling and loud-hissing urn  
Throws up a steamy column, and the cups  
That cheer but not inebriate, wait on each,  
So let us welcome peaceful evening in. (4:36-41)<sup>1</sup>

This scene of enclosure, with the wheeling of the sofa to enact the closing of the family circle itself and the almost Dickensian cosiness of the steaming urn, is one of a number in *The Task* which have helped to limit the popular conception of Cowper's range and scope in that poem and in his work as a whole. Cowper is commonly regarded as a poet of religious experience and of 'nature' (as found in the Home Counties), a view reinforced by what everybody knows about his personal history: that after losing his reason and finding Evangelical Christianity in the 1760s, he spent the rest of his life in rural seclusion, most of it in and near the run-down lace-spinning town of Olney in northern Buckinghamshire. There is also the point which Cowper himself acknowledges several times in his letters: writing verse keeps melancholia at bay; that is, that Cowper's poems represent therapy. These perceptions are not false, but they represent only a part of the picture. My purpose in this paper is to examine some aspects of the poem which made Cowper famous by way of bringing into clearer focus the interplay of the public and the private in his poetry; in conclusion, to counter the charge that he abdicates social responsibility.<sup>2</sup>

'Public' and 'private' are of course terms which may be used quite legitimately in a variety of different ways. I shall make use of three possible versions of the antinomies: 'private' as embracing the intimate personal experience of an individual, as opposed to that individual's dealings with other individuals and the world at large; 'private' as relating to what happens within doors, 'public' as relating to all actions which might be observed by a stranger; 'private' as relating to a member of society who exercises no defined role within it, as opposed to those who by birth or profession, position or office, play such a role. Rough and ready these distinctions certainly are, but they should serve to open the subject. And they correspond to distinctions within the poem itself.

To start with the inner self, the most intimate instance of the private. Religious experience of the kind that had so radically reshaped Cowper's life in his early thirties is a very personal matter. Each soul is on its own, and by the time Cowper wrote *The Task* he had for a decade been convinced that God had marked down his soul and no other for utter destruction.<sup>3</sup> Cowper sums up the earlier part of his history in this famous passage:

I was a stricken deer that left the herd  
 Long since; with many an arrow deep infix  
 My panting side was charged when I withdrew  
 To seek a tranquil death in distant shades.  
 There was I found by one who had himself  
 Been hurt by 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.  
 Since then, with few associates, in remote  
 And silent woods I wander, far from those  
 My former partners of the peopled scene,  
 With few associates, and not wishing more. (3:108-20)

These lines are both extraordinarily candid and thoroughly reserved.<sup>4</sup> The image of the stricken deer gains much of its poignancy from its transparency; we read through it to the human experience which it so profoundly colours by its suggestion of the inequality of the soul to the world, the technological superiority of the destroyers indifferent to the individuality of their victim.<sup>5</sup> The sketch of the later career of the healed deer is true enough so far as it goes, but it of course conceals the whole

matter of Cowper's conviction of his own subsequent casting away by God. One can only speculate what the motive for this reserve was. A sense that the divine condemnation was too personal, too private, to reveal? A desire not to distress such close friends as John Newton and William Unwin by mentioning a state of mind which they deplored? An unwillingness to imperil the Evangelical cause by revealing a circumstance which would be grist to the mill of its enemies? There is no way to tell.

The story that Cowper does give is one which might be paralleled in many a spiritual autobiography — it is, indeed, the essence of the story that Cowper had himself told in the *Memoir* of about 1767.<sup>6</sup> That story of conversion had never been printed, however; like so many other similar documents, it had been written for circulation in MS. among a fairly small circle of the like-minded, to strengthen faith. Cowper wrote his *Memoir* some years before the terrible attack of 1773 that sent him into despair for the rest of his life; it gives extensive personal details; it recounts his suicide attempts in considerable detail.<sup>7</sup> In a poem written with a view to publication, the story is cut to its bare bones, clothed decently in metaphor, and cut short at the point where if continued it would diverge from the orthodox pattern.

*The Task*, unlike many works of its time, was not published anonymously. The title-page reads, in part: *The Task, a Poem, in Six Books. By William Cowper, of the Inner Temple, Esq.* The relevant heading for the 'stricken deer' passage in the Argument of Book III reads: 'Some account of myself.' The 'I' of the poem thus claims continuity with the individual named as the author on the title page. That was nothing new in 1785. Some of Milton's sonnets, Swift's 'Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift,' Pope's *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*, certain passages in Thomson's *Seasons*; there are many well-known instances in which an author had put himself in some way into a poem, so that the 'I' of the speaker overlaps with the historical personality of the author. But in these poems the subject-matter is broadly social, and the personal passages relate the poet to the world. What distinguishes Cowper's poem is that its subject-matter is the mental experience of the 'I' (William Cowper of the Inner Temple, Esq.) who is the speaker of the poem. As the 'Advertisement' says:

The history of the following production is briefly this. A lady, fond of blank verse, demanded a poem of that kind from the author, and gave him the *SOFA* for a subject. He obeyed; and having much leisure, connected another subject with it; and pursuing the train of thought to which his situation and turn of mind

led him, brought forth at length, instead of the trifle which he at first intended, a serious affair — a Volume.<sup>8</sup>

The poem thus represents the train of thought of a particular mind in particular circumstances, and the mind and the circumstances are confessedly those of William Cowper of the Inner Temple, Esq. The poem could be described as occasional; it was undertaken to meet a request by a friend, who wanted a poem in blank verse on the sofa, but it has grown from a trifle into a serious affair almost by accident. What is missing from this account is any sense of purpose or intention in undertaking the affair, beyond the initial request for a poem on the sofa which is irrelevant to the great bulk of the finished work. We are close here to the concept of *The Task* as an accidental rather than an occasional poem; one that 'just grew' — and this is just the place where a commentator might invoke the therapy idea. Better to stay within the limits of Cowper's own statement, and try to clarify its significance.

The opening of Pope's 'Advertisement' to the *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*, published just half a century before *The Task* in 1735, provides a helpful contrast:

This Paper is a Sort of Bill of Complaint, begun many years since, and drawn up by snatches, as the several Occasions offer'd. I had no thoughts of publishing it, till it pleas'd some Persons of Rank and Fortune [the Authors of *Verses to the Imitator of Horace*, and of an *Epistle to a Doctor of Divinity from a Nobleman at Hampton Court*,] to attack in a very extraordinary manner, not only my Writings (of which being publick the Publick judge) but my *Person, Morals, and Family*, whereof to those who know me not, a truer Information may be requisite. Being divided between the Necessity to say something of *Myself*, and my own Laziness to undertake so awkward a Task, I thought it the shortest way to put the last hand to this Epistle.<sup>9</sup>

For Pope, as he chooses to present himself here, to speak of one's self to the public is an awkward task, to which only the necessity of refuting falsehoods put about by powerful enemies could compel him. This thoroughly traditional view of the boundary between public and private as it affects anyone who takes public positions on matters of concern is plainly irrelevant to Cowper's enterprise in *The Task*; doubly irrelevant, since he was refuting no attack, for no attack had been made, and he avows no rhetorical or persuasive purpose whatsoever. *The Task* has not come into existence to *do* anything, but simply *exists* as the product of leisure and the reflection of the actual personality of the writer.

We have seen that Cowper, in describing his religious history (what Newman calls, in the Preface to the *Apologia*, his 'most private thoughts and feelings') is somewhat less candid than he appears to be. The same qualification applies also to his presentation of the second level of privacy, that of the home and the world. 'Domestic happiness,' he writes early in Book III, 'thou only bliss/Of Paradise that has survived the fall!' (41-2). This is to take a rather more optimistic view of postlapsarian domesticity than that held by the poet who had depicted so eloquently domestic bliss in Paradise itself. The same idea recurs later in the same book:

Oh friendly to the best pursuits of man,  
 Friendly to thought, to virtue, and to peace,  
 Domestic life in rural leisure pass'd!  
 Few know thy value, and few taste thy sweets,  
 Though many boast thy favours, and affect  
 To understand and chuse thee for their own.  
 But foolish man foregoes his proper bliss  
 Ev'n as his first progenitor, and quits,  
 Though placed in paradise (for earth has still  
 Some traces of her youthful beauty left)  
 Substantial happiness for transient joy. (290-300)

To put it more shortly, the foolish man of fashion, as becomes a mighty one in the world, follows Nimrod's example and goes hunting.<sup>10</sup> But the important point here is the close association of domestic life and rural leisure, which resemble each other in that both represent remnants of paradisaical experience in the midst of the fallen world.

God made the country, and man made the town.  
 What wonder then, that health and virtue, gifts  
 That can alone make sweet the bitter draught  
 That life holds out to all, should most abound  
 And least be threatened in the fields and groves?  
 (1:749-53)

The home, the domestic enclosure, is hardly distinguishable, as the domain of health and virtue, from the surrounding countryside, through which the poet walks. And he does not walk alone:

And witness, dear companion of my walks,  
 Whose arm this twentieth winter I perceive  
 Fast lock'd in mine, with pleasure such as love  
 Confirm'd by long experience of thy worth  
 And well-tried virtues could alone inspire —  
 Witness a joy that thou hast doubled long.  
 Thou know'st my praise of nature most sincere,  
 And that my raptures are not conjur'd up  
 To serve occasions of poetic pomp,  
 But genuine, and art partner of them all. (1:144-53)

The dear companion referred to was not a wife, but Mary Unwin, the widow of marriageable age who shared a house without benefit of chaperon with William Cowper for the best part of thirty years. The text, agreeably to the claim of sincerity made in this passage, does not lie, but to the reader of 1785 it might well give a false impression. It is not the only such passage:

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,  
 Sweet converse, sipping calm the fragrant lymph  
 Which neatly she prepares . . . (3:386-92)

These passages offer a pale reflection of the language used by Milton of Adam and Eve: 'Sole partner and sole part of all these joyes' (*P.L.*, 4:411). So Adam addresses Eve, and while Eve does not include fragrant lymph among her preparations for entertaining an archangel to dinner, the 'inoffensive moust' and 'dulcet creams' which she does assemble clearly come from the same linguistic store (*P.L.*, 5:345, 347). Cowper is using the periphrases appropriate to post-miltonic blank verse to disguise the fact that he was living with a woman not his wife.

Cowper's association with Mrs. Unwin was of course known to a number of people, such as family and friends on both sides, even beyond the purlieu of Olney. Once *The Task* made Cowper famous, information about him became interesting to a wider circle of literary persons. The earliest printed allusion to Mrs. Unwin known to me appears in *Public Characters of 1799-1800*,<sup>11</sup> published the year before Cowper died. Hayley's biography made the relationship widely known in 1803. It is

so familiar to readers of Cowper that we tend to take it for granted. But at the time it gave anxiety to Cowper's and Mrs. Unwin's Evangelical friends. They might, like later admirers, entirely believe that Mary and William were as mother to son, and that no impropriety ever had or ever would take place, but would the world believe it? Would the world not smile and conclude that Evangelicals were no better than their neighbours?

There is, then, a real awkwardness in the facts to which Cowper is ostensibly committed. The poem claims, as I believe no previous poem had claimed, to represent its author faithfully and at considerable length, and in doing so it transgresses certain generally recognised limits of privacy. Yet while it does this, it imposes unacknowledged limitations of its own, excluding Cowper's religious despair and using periphrasis to disguise the unconventional nature of his domesticity.

*The Task*, as has been said, makes no statement of purpose, owns no intention behind it. Its author, however, gives a somewhat different impression in a letter to William Unwin of 10 October 1784, accompanying the fair copy of the poem:

In some passages, especially in the second book, you will observe me very Satyrical. Writing on such subjects, I could not be otherwise. I can write nothing without aiming at least at usefulness. It were beneath my years to do it, and still more dishonourable to my religion. I know that a reformation of such abuses as I have censured, is not to be expected from the efforts of a poet; but to contemplate the world, its follies, its vices, its indifference to duty and its strenuous attachment to what is evil, and not to reprehend, were to approve it.<sup>12</sup>

In another statement of purpose, to John Newton, on 27 November, he wrote:

My principal purpose is to allure the Reader by character, by scenery, by imagery and such poetical embellishments, to the Reading of what may profit him [i.e., religious truths]. Subordinately to this, to combat that predilection in favor of a Metropolis that beggars and exhausts the Country by evacuating it of all its principal Inhabitants. And collaterally and as far as is consistent with this double Intention, to have a stroke at Vice, Vanity and folly wherever I find them.<sup>13</sup>

*The Task* itself arose from the poet's domestic situation, and began as a poem on a domestic object. That is the position taken in the Advertisement (quoted above), which suggests an unexpected accretion. Yet that another motive was at work is clear from these excerpts from the letters



cited. Cowper in these letters clearly conceives of himself as a practising poet, a person whose writings are intended to become public, and who therefore has responsibilities to the public which must be discharged. Part of the poet's role as Cowper understands it is to be true to his own convictions, publicly true to his own convictions, even though he has no illusions about having any effect.

In a passage in Book II, Cowper deals with the relationship of the private activity of the poet and his relation to his public. It is appropriate that it should occur here, since the title of the Book is 'The Time-Piece,' and its first concern is the possible imminence of the end of time; it opens with a discussion of recent disturbances in nature which may portend the end of the world. He moves on, to contrast the preceptors of folly with those who would teach wisdom. The passage in question begins at line 285, where he speaks of the 'pleasure in poetic pains/ Which only poets know:'

The shifts and turns,  
 Th' expedients and inventions multiform  
 To which the mind resorts, in chace 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;  
 Then to dispose his copies with such art  
 That each may find its most propitious light,  
 And shine by situation, hardly less,  
 Than by the labor and the skill it cost,  
 Are occupations of the poet's mind  
 So pleasing, and that steal away the thought  
 With such address, from themes of sad import,  
 That lost in his own musings, happy man!  
 He feels th'anxieties of life, denied  
 Their wonted entertainment, all retire.  
 Such joys has he that sings. But ah! not such  
 Or seldom such, the hearers of his song. (286-305)

The hearers, through incapacity, inattention, or indifference, will not appreciate the tokens of poetical skill, and find least amusement where the poet found most.

But is amusement all? studious of song,  
 And yet ambitious not to sing in vain,  
 I would not trifle merely, though the world  
 Be loudest in their praise who do no more.  
 Yet what can satire, whether grave or gay?  
 It may correct a foible, may chastise  
 The freaks of fashion, regulate the dress,  
 Retrench a sword-blade, or displace a patch;  
 But where are its sublimer trophies found?  
 What vice has it subdued? whose heart reclaim'd  
 By rigour, or whom laugh'd into reform?  
 Alas! Leviathan is not so tamed.  
 Laugh'd at, he laughs again; and stricken hard,  
 Turns to the stroke his adamantine scales,  
 That fear no discipline of human hands. (311-325)

The imperviousness of Leviathan to the strokes of satire plainly matches the insensibility of the common reader to the skill of the poet in solving the technical problems of his art. Whereas many earlier satirists, whether of the Juvenalian or grave variety, or the gay Horatian, stressed their inability to restrain their rage or their mockery in face of the abuses they describe, Cowper treats satire as a species of didacticism, and himself draws attention to its ineffectiveness: 'What vice has it subdued? whose heart reclaim'd/ By rigour, or whom laugh'd into reform?/ Alas!' — for these are questions expecting the answer 'none.' We could hardly be further from Pope's triumphant justification of his own power, in the second dialogue of the *Epilogue to the Satires*:

Yes, I am proud; I must be proud to see  
 Men not afraid of God, afraid of me: (208-09)

Yet within Cowper's conception, the powerlessness of the satirist to impress Leviathan (a task for more than human hands) is an important constituent element in his construction of the poet and poetical authority. Cowper the poet speaks as a private person, as an individual voice. The passages I have quoted from Book II are followed by a long discussion of the proper role of the pulpit, that eloquent abstraction, as 'the messenger of truth' (337). The preacher in his pulpit, like the classical poet in his study, is committed to reiterating the truths which have always been; his authority as messenger derives from the claim to universal acknowledgement of his message. The preacher mediates

eternal verities to a congregation in a particular place at a particular time. The poet, as Maynard Mack has written of Pope, takes truths the world has always known, and attempts to refine our understanding of them.<sup>14</sup> Cowper, painfully aware of his particularity, his peculiarity, his status as social and religious outcast, will not act as a mouthpiece for traditional, orthodox strictures. His criticism of society, which is a major component of *The Task*, rests not upon tradition but upon his own ethical perceptions, and it is articulated in the poem not according to traditional topics of invention, but as his mind, playing upon experience, moves from experience to reflection, back and forth, as the period of composition passes by.

Needless to say, Cowper's ethical positions frequently resemble those of earlier and later writers. He had no intention of rejecting ancient wisdom, and his adjurations frequently take the form of recalling his readers to the ways of their ancestors. What is new in *The Task* is the re-ordering of all the elements of the poem on the basis of the experience of the soul which has been converted to the Calvinist Evangelical faith. For that soul, all things are made new, from the natural world to the wisdom of the past. To try to communicate that renewal to others impersonally would be impossible; the vital experience is subjective, private. It can be made public only in the context of private experience recalled and recreated, so far as may be, through language. For Cowper, self-revelation is the necessary first step towards moral education and the reform of society. It is a step which many later writers, from Wordsworth to Robert Lowell, have followed.

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## Notes

- 1 Quotations from *The Task* follow the text of the first edition (London, 1785), and are identified by book and line numbers.
- 2 For a thoroughly unsympathetic view, see Paul Fussell, *The Rhetorical World of Augustan Humanism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965), esp. 32-33.
- 3 For a statement contemporary with the writing of *The Task*, see Cowper's letter to John Newton, 13 January 1784 (James King and Charles Ryskamp, eds., *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, 2 [Oxford: Clarendon, 1981] 200).
- 4 For an early and very enthusiastic response to this passage by a reader who, though not personally acquainted with Cowper, claims a 'distant knowledge' of

his 'history, of his present situation, and peculiar turn of mind,' see A.B., 'Particulars of Mr. Cowper, and His Poems,' *Gentleman's Magazine* 56 (1786): 4-5.

5 For a different religious application of the hunted deer motif, see 'Stanzas . . . Bill of Mortality for the Year 1788,' 21-28.

6 See King and Ryskamp, 1 (1979) 5-48.

7 Many such details have been edited out of most of the MS. copies of the *Memoir*, presumably to avoid offence to readers; see King and Ryskamp, 1. xxv.

8 *The Task* (1785), sig. [A]<sup>3</sup>.

9 *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt (London: Methuen, 1963) 597 (italics reversed).

10 Genesis 10: 8-9.

11 (London, 1799) c. 540 (pagination varies).

12 King and Ryskamp, 2. 284.

13 King and Ryskamp, 2. 301.

14 'Introduction' to Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*, Twickenham ed. (London: Methuen, 1964) lxxvi.