

William Cowper (Part II)

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Cowper is a striking instance of a man of mature age, whom true conversion of heart made a great poet. Cowper was kindled into real poetic fervour by the fire off God's altar. Southey has preserved some of his earlier efforts, and it is but truth to say that they are trivial and commonplace. His perception of natural beauty was quickened by grace, and his penetration by the power of the Gospel was the means of the revival of true poetic taste in England. Calvinism, which Coleridge somewhere calls "unimaginative," and which his biographers regard as harsh and narrow, and for which there is no name in their vocabulary too severe, gave the impulse to the most delicate appreciation of the natural world, and of the grace and tenderness of the domestic affections.

While at Olney, Cowper formed a friendship with a lady who not only introduced a new charm into his life, but exercised a fortunate influence over his literary career. This was Lady Austen, a brilliant, lively, charming widow, who paid a summer's visit to her sister who lived in the neighbourhood of Olney. Waiving ceremony, Lady Austen paid the first visit to Mrs Unwin and the poet, which they returned with all due state and ceremony. "They fell in love with each other at once," in the most simple form of the words, and an intimacy sprang up between them there and then. Before many weeks passed, the plan of settling in Olney had entered Lady Austen's mind, and was encouraged by her two friends.

In the autumn of 1782 she became an inmate of the vicarage. This was, no doubt, the happiest time of Cowper's life. Lady Austen sang to him, talked to him, told him stories, and threw a light into the gloom and a variety into the monotony of his life. Some of his most beautiful songs were composed for her harpsichord. We are indebted to her, not only for the noble dirge on "The loss of the Royal George," but for the immortal ballad of John Gilpin. While Gilpin was running a successful career through town and country, Cowper's poem of "The Task," the work which made him the most popular poet of the age, was passing through the press. To Lady Austen belongs the honour of having suggested this finest production of the poet's genius. She had often urged him to try his powers in blank verse, and at last he promised to comply with her request, if she would give him a subject. "Oh," she replied, "you can never be in want of a subject; you can write upon any: write upon this sofa." "The answer," says Southey, "was made with a woman's readiness, and the capabilities of such a theme were apprehended by Cowper with a poet's quickness of perception." It may be noted here that the friendship with Lady Austen, which began in 1781 ended in 1784. What brought it to a close is not known. His biographers throw little or no light on the cause of the rupture. Mr Scott is reported to have said in words which do scant justice to the fairer sex, "Who can be surprised that two women should be continually in the society of one man, and quarrel, sooner or later, with each other?" But as Southey observes, in reference to the coming of Lady Hesketh to Olney, "We shall soon see two women continually in the society of this very man without quarrelling with each other." All that is clearly known about this mysterious interruption to their friendship is that Lady Austen went, and with her went the gleam of light she had brought into the poet's life.

In 1786 Cowper, at the instance of Lady Hesketh, removed from Olney to Weston, a neighbouring village, more cheerful and on higher ground than Olney, where his bright and vivacious cousin rented for him a house belonging to Mr Throckmorton, and close to his grounds. Here he had an abode fit for a poet. It is thus he describes his workshop in the garden—"The grass under my windows is all bespangled with dew-drops, and the birds are singing in the apple-trees among the blossoms. Never poet had a more commodious oratory in which to invoke the muse."

He had a short attack of insanity while at Weston, but the cloud passed, and all was well. He made the acquaintance of Hayley, his future biographer, and of two youths whose enthusiasm was very sweet to him, one of them a relation—John Johnson—and Samuel Rose.

Cowper was now sixty-one, and Mrs Unwin nearly seventy. The last gleams of sunshine were fading out of his life. Mrs Unwin was attacked with paralysis, and her illness added to the poet's dejection and distress. As she was unable to move out of her chair, he became her absolute nurse; and with all the delicacy and tenderness of a woman anticipated her wishes and supplied her wants. Hayley persuaded them to visit him at Eastham, in the vain hope that a change might do Mrs Unwin good. Here Cowper's portrait was painted by Romney, and here the host did all in his power to make his guests happy. But Cowper longed for the quietness of Weston, and to Weston they returned, Mrs Unwin none the better for her journey. Lady Hesketh's health had failed, and she had been obliged to go to Cheltenham and Bath; and he had not the support and comfort of her presence. His condition was deplorable. "He sat still and silent as death," speaking to no one; asking nothing; dwelling in an awful, visionary world of his own diseased and morbid fancies. Hayley now proved himself a true friend; and, in conjunction with Cowper's relations, removed the poet and Mrs Unwin from Weston to North Tuddenham, in Norfolk, to be placed under the affectionate care of Mr Johnson, Cowper's relative and friend. Hoping that both the invalids might derive some benefit from the sea view, Mr Johnson took them to the village of Maudsley, on the Norfolk coast, where "he surrendered himself to the solemn effect which the waves produced, and found something inexpressibly soothing in the monotonous sound of the breakers." They again removed to Dunham Lodge, near Swaffham, and finally to East Dereham, a town in the centre of Norfolk, where, two months after their arrival, Mrs Unwin died at the age of seventy-two. This was in the year 1796. The extreme depression of Cowper's spirits was such that he was barely conscious of his loss. On being taken to see the dead body of his friend, he uttered one passionate cry of grief, and never mentioned her name again.

The last years of Cowper's life were, like the prophet's roll, "written within and without with mourning, lamentation, and woe." The mind, thoroughly unstrung, gave forth no notes but those of darkness and despair; and his last original poem, "The Castaway," founded on an incident in Anson's Voyage, a powerful but painful poem, is, as Southey says, all circumstances considered, one of the most affecting that ever was composed. The first verse runs thus:—

Obscurest night involved the sky,
The Atlantic billows roar'd,
When such a destin'd wretch as I,
Washed headlong from on board;
Of friends, of hope, of all bereft,
His floating home for ever left.

But though he could see nothing above or around him but clouds and darkness, his friends saw a life of humble faith and patience, of meekness, and prayer. It was with him as with Moses when he left the mount where he communed with God. The glory of his face, invisible to himself, was visible to all around. He died so peacefully in the afternoon of April 25, 1800, that of the five persons who stood at the foot and side of the bed, no one knew the moment of his departure. "From that moment till the coffin was closed," Mr. Johnson says, "the expression with which his countenance was settled was that of calmness and composure, mingled, as it were, with holy surprise." The fever of the brain was quenched; the sorrow of the heart over; the aching head was at rest; and the tossing arms were still. There was "beauty for ashes; the oil of joy for mourning; the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness."

The poet was buried in that part of Dereham Church called St Edmund's Chapel. Lady Hesketh caused a monument to be erected over his remains; and Hayley supplied the inscription. There, too, a tablet to the memory of Mrs Unwin was raised by two other friends (it is not said by whom), impressed by a just and deep sense of her extraordinary merit. For this also the inscription was composed by Hayley.

I have preferred to give the above sketch of the salient points in the poet's life without breaking it by any remarks on his poetry, so as not to interrupt its pathetic interest; but this paper would be incomplete without some reference to the poems which have made Cowper celebrated. Mr Goldwin Smith, in his volume in the series of "English Men of Letters," does the poet but scant justice, and hardly gives him, to our thinking, his due place among the great singers. He and the editor of "The English Poets" differ from each other on the question of poetical criticism. The former strangely says: "Poetry can never be the direct expression of emotion"—an opinion which is sufficient to condemn him as a critic; and the latter says that "ascents into the higher music of the great poets demand some moving force of passion, or some inspiring activity of ideas; and for neither of these can we look to him." They both, however, agree in thinking that Cowper is read, "not for his passion or for his ideas, but for his love of Nature, and his faithful rendering of her beauty, and also for the melancholy interest of his life, and for the simplicity and loveliness of his character." Such criticism appears to us very inadequate; and we believe Cowper is read, and will be read, for the charm of his descriptions, for his sincerity and truth, for his delicate wit, for his sunny playfulness and sparkling humour.

"The Task" was the *renaissance* of poetry in England, the first bold departure from the worn-out moulds in which poetical composition had been run for many years. In this poem Cowper cast aside the old traditions, and instead of modelling his verses on the plan of Dryden and Pope, went at once to the fountain-head, and there drank of the pure Castalian spring. Turning away from mere artificial melody of rhythm and mechanical smoothness of versification, he sought to charm the ear and touch the heart through the lofty music of the blank verse with which Milton had delighted his generation. And Nature was his theme, not the Nature of the poets who preceded him—academic, classic, unreal, where every clown became a love-sick shepherd, and every rustic wench a sentimental Chloe, such as we see in the Dresden china figures on our chimney-pieces; but Nature, homely and simple, fresh, and fair, and fragrant, as you may see her in the country every day. With this music he touched and charmed the popular ear and heart. What pictures are set before us in "The Task!" The woodman, with his dog at his side, on his way to the forest; the redbreast warbling on the wintry boughs; the peasant's cottage planted on the side of the leafy hills; the post-boy twanging his horn with a light heart as he crosses the bridge thrown across the swelling flood, and all indifferent to the tidings of joy or sorrow that he carries in his bag; and, again, the

harmony of the village bells as they come softly on the evening gale. And what gives an especial charm to his love for Nature is, that this man, whose religion is so unlovely in the eyes of his biographers, looks with the eye of a Christian on all its scenes. As he gazes on the sky above, or the earth beneath, they wear for him a deeper glory, because, with filial confidence and devout reverence, he can say, "My Father made them all." Every sound comes to his ear laden with some tone of the eternal melodies. In the deep harmonies of ocean he hears the voice of Him who "setteth His bounds to the sea, which it cannot pass;" in the roar of the storm he catches the echoes of *His* footsteps who "walketh on the wings of the wind." He has, too, a love of freedom, a delight in friendship, a passionate scorn of affectation, and vanity, and ambition, a revolt against meanness, and cowardice, and oppression, and a true tenderness for the poor and the feeble, which make his poems as fresh and beautiful today as they were a hundred years ago. His shorter poems are rich in melody, and charm, and spontaneous flow. Is there any need to mention the "Dirge for the Loss of the Royal George," and "Boadicea;" the "Lines supposed to have been written by Alexander Selkirk;" "The Nightingale and the Glow-worm," and "The Needless Alarm;" "The Poplar Field," or "The Shrubbery"? Need I recall the "Lines on his Mother's Picture," so simple and so pathetic; or those "To Mary," written in the Autumn of 1793? This is one of the most touching and perfect of his poems. Hayley believed it to be the last original piece that he produced at Weston, and questions whether any language on earth can exhibit a specimen of verse more exquisitely tender. The reader will not be sorry to have it quoted here.

To Mary.

The twentieth year is well nigh past
Since first our sky was overcast;
Ah! would that this might be the last!
My Mary!

Thy spirits have a fainter flow,
I see thee daily weaker grow;
'Twas my distress that brought thee low,
My Mary!

Thy needles, once a shining store,
For my sake restless heretofore,
Now rust disused, and shine no more,
My Mary!

For though thou gladly wouldst fulfil
The same kind office for me still,
Thy sight now seconds not thy will,
My Mary!

But well thou play'dst the housewife's part,
And all thy threads, with magic art,
Have wound themselves about this heart,
My Mary!

Thy indistinct expressions seem
Like language uttered in a dream;
Yet me they charm, whate'er the theme,
My Mary!

Thy silver locks, once auburn bright,
Are still more lovely in my sight
Than golden beams of orient light,
My Mary!

For could I view nor them nor thee,
What sight worth seeing could I see?
The sun would rise in vain for me,
My Mary!

Partakers of thy sad decline,
Thy hands their little force resign;
Yet gently prest, press gently mine,
My Mary!

Such feebleness of limbs thou provest,
That now at every step thou movest,
Upheld by two, yet still thou lovest,
My Mary!

And still to love, though prest with ill,
In wintry age to feel no chill,
With me is to be lovely still,
My Mary!

But, ah! by constant heed I know,
How oft the sadness that I show
Transforms thy smiles to looks of woe,
My Mary!

And should my future lot be cast
With much resemblance of the past,
Thy worn-out heart will break at last,
My Mary !

And now for a few remarks on the hymns which he contributed to the Olney Collection. They are of unequal merit, and the rhymes are sometimes faulty. But the poet often breaks out; and whatever be the faults of a few, these hymns have become part of the mother tongue; and in every part of the earth, where the English language is spoken, they may be heard in hut and hall, in church and chapel. Some of them come upon us like the sob of a wounded heart. Some thrill with the notes of a triumphant joy. Some are passionate; some are personal; some are devout. But all catch their inspiration from Christ and from His cross.

What thirstings of the soul after the fountain of all good; what earnest pleadings for a fresh baptism of the Spirit, are condensed into that hymn—

Oh, for a closer walk with God,
A calm and heavenly frame.

What noble thoughts clothed in fitting words adorn that gem of sacred poetry called “Light shining after Darkness.” How grandly it opens:—

God moves in a mysterious way,

His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.

What admirable imagery he uses in the same poem to express the beneficent design of affliction—

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take,
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.

Again,

His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.

Our space will not allow of our giving any quotations from his panilations or from his letters, many of which are of consummate beauty, many full of a quiet humour, and many of Horatian wit. Some of the letters that have the appearance of prose to the eye, have the sound of rhyme to the ear; and others are perfect poems in themselves; for often in the midst of his correspondence with a friend, he would throw his thoughts into humorous and spontaneous verse. But we must send the reader to the letters themselves, from the perusal of which we promise them some hours of rich enjoyment, not unmingled with profit.

We shall now quote some extracts from his poems, and in doing so, we cannot do better than begin with his fine description of a true poet.

I know the mind that feels indeed the fire
The muse imparts, and can command the lyre,
Acts with a force, and kindles with a zeal,
Whate'er the theme, that others never feel.
If human woes her soft attention claim,
A tender sympathy pervades the frame,
She pours a sensibility divine
Along the nerve of every feeling line.
But if a deed not tamely to be borne
Fire indignation and a sense of scorn,
The strings are swept with such a power, so loud,
The storm of music shakes the astonish'd crowd.
So when remote futurity is brought
Before the keen enquiry of her thought,
A terrible sagacity informs
The poet's heart; he looks to distant storms,
He hears the thunder e'er the tempest lowers,
And, armed with strength surpassing human powers,
Seizes events as yet unknown to man,
And darts his soul into the dawning plan.
Hence, in a Roman mouth, the graceful name
Of prophet and of poet was the same.
Hence British poets, too, the priesthood shared,

And every hallow'd druid was a bard.

See now what irony he throws into the description of the insincere poet, whose verses do not flow from emotion or feeling, but are “made up” for the occasion, and are utterly artificial and hollow. The conventional poet is treated with caustic severity.

From him who rears a poem lank and long,
To him who strains his all into a song,
Perhaps some bonny Caledonian air,
All birks and braes, though he was never there,
Or, having whelp'd a prologue with great pains,
Feels himself spent, and fumbles for his brains;
A prologue interdash'd with many a stroke,
An art contrived to advertise a joke,
So that the jest is clearly to be seen,
Not in the words—but in the gap between;
Manner is all in all, whate'er is writ,
The substitute for genius, sense, and wit.

Is there in any other religious poem a more beautiful or tender outburst of the Christian spirit than the following? It is full of the rapture of humble, confiding, and adoring love—

All joy to the believer! He can speak—
Trembling yet happy, confident yet meek.
Since the dear hour that brought me to Thy foot,
And cut off all my follies by the root,
I never trusted in an arm but Thine,
Nor hoped but in Thy righteousness divine;
My prayers and arms, imperfect and defiled,
Were but the feeble efforts of a child.
Howe'er performed, it was their brightest part
That they proceeded from a grateful heart;
Cleansed in Thine-own all-purifying blood,
Forgive their evil and accept their good;
I cast them at Thy feet—my only plea
Is what it was, dependence upon Thee;
While struggling in the vale of tears below,
That never fail'd, nor shall it fail me now.

I give the next quotation, not only for its intrinsic truth and beauty, but for the sentiment stated in the lines in *italics*. They prove that Cowper's Calvinism was very different from what his critics declare it to be. It knows nothing either of a limited atonement or of reprobation.¹

But grant the plea, and let it stand for just,
That man makes man his prey because he *must*,
Still there is room for pity to abate
And soothe the sorrows of so sad a state.
A Briton knows, or if he knows it not,
The Scripture placed within his reach, he ought,
That souls have no discriminating hue,
Alike important in their Maker's view,
That none are free from blemish since the fall,

And love divine has paid one price for all.

The wretch that works and weeps without relief
Has one that notices his silent grief.
He from whose hands alone all power proceeds
Ranks its abuse among the foulest deeds,
Considers *all* injustice with a frown,
But *marks* the man that treads his fellow down.
Begone, the whip and bell in that hard hand
Are hateful ensigns of usurped command,
Not Mexico could purchase kings a claim
To scourge him, weariness his only blame.
Remember, Heav'n has an avenging rod;
To smite the poor is treason against God.

The question of slavery was beginning to trouble the great heart of England, and we see in the following passage how Cowper's soul rose in revolt against injustice and wrong; how he sympathized with the oppressed and trodden down, and felt that liberty was amongst the greatest of Divine blessings—

Oh, could I worship aught beneath the skies,
That earth has seen, or fancy can devise,
Thine altar, sacred Liberty, should stand,
Built by no vulgar mercenary hand,
With fragrant turf, and flowers as wild and fair
As ever dress'd a bank, or scented summer air.
Duly, as ever on the mountain's height
The peep of morning shed a dawning light;
Again, when evening in her sober vest
Drew the grey curtain of the fading west,
My soul should yield thee willing thanks and praise
For the chief blessings of my fairest days;
But that were sacrilege—praise is not thine,
But His who gave thee and preserves thee mine.

What a rich and playful humour he throws into the sketch of the man who never knows his own mind, advancing opinions one moment and contradicting them the next:—

Dubious is such a scrupulous good man—
Yes—you may catch him tripping if you can.
He would not, with a peremptory tone,
Assert the nose upon his face his own;
With hesitation admirably slow,
He humbly hopes, presumes it may be so.
His evidence, if he were called by law
To swear to some enormity he saw,
For want of prominence and just relief,
Would hang an honest man and save a thief.
Through constant dread of giving truth offence,
He ties up all his hearers in suspense,
Know what he knows as if he knew it not,
What he remembers seems to have forgot,
His sole opinion, whatsoe'er befall,
Centring at last in having none at all.

Yet, though he tease and balk your list'ning ear,
He makes one useful point exceeding clear;
Howe'er ingenious on his darling theme,
A sceptic in philosophy may seem,
Reduced to practice, his beloved rule
Would only prove him a consummate fool;
Useless alike in him both brain and speech,
Fate having placed all truth above his reach;
His ambiguities his total sum,
He might as well be blind and deaf and dumb.

Here is an equally successful satirical sketch of a hypochondriac, a character unhappily not yet extinct. Every reader will possibly recognize an acquaintance:—

Some men employ their health, an ugly trick,
In making known how oft they have been sick,
And give us in recital of disease
A doctor's trouble, but without the fees;
Relate how many weeks they kept their bed,
How an emetic or cathartic sped,
Nothing is slightly touched, much less forgot,
Nose, ears, and eyes seem present on the spot.
Now the distemper, spite of draught or pill,
Victorious seem'd, and now the doctor's skill;
And now—alas for unforeseen mishaps!
They put on a damp nightcap, and relapse;
They thought they must have died, they were so bad;
Their peevish hearers almost wish they had.

And now follows a description of a fretful, peevish man, the plague of the household, the annoyance of his friends, and the enemy of his own peace. Alas! we are all too familiar with men of this class also:—

Some fretful tempers wince at every touch,
You always do too little, or too much;
You speak with life in hopes to entertain,
Your elevated voice goes through the brain
You fall at once into a lower key;
That's worse—the drone-pipe of a humble bee.
The southern sash admits too strong a light,
You rise and drop the curtain—now 'tis night.
He shakes with cold—you stir the fire and strive
To make a blaze—that's roasting him alive.
Serve him with ven'son and he chooses fish,
With sole—that's just the sort he would not wish,
He takes what he at first professed to loathe,
And in due time feeds heartily on both;
Yet still o'erclouded with a constant frown,
He does not swallow, but he gulps it down.
Your hope to please him, vain on ev'ry plan,
Himself should work that wonder if he can—
Alas! his efforts double his distress,
He likes yours little, and his own still less,
Thus always teasing others, always teased,

His only pleasure is—to be displeased.

We will now give a beautiful passage on the effect of village bells ringing at eventide. We seem to hear them rising and falling on the breeze—

There is in souls a sympathy with sounds,
And as the mind is pitched the ear is pleased
With melting airs or martial, brisk or grave;
Some chord in unison with what we hear
Is touched within us, and the heart replies.
How soft the music of those village bells
Falling at intervals upon the ear
In cadence sweet! Now dying all away,
Now pealing loud again, and louder still,
Clear and sonorous as the gale comes on.
With easy force it opens all the cells
Where mem'ry slept.

Full of power and vigour are the lines in which he does honour to the preacher's throne—the pulpit—and magnifies the office of the ambassador of Christ. Equally full of cutting irony is the portrait that he draws of the clerical coxcomb—

I say the pulpit (in the sober use
Of its legitimate peculiar powers)
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.
He 'stablishes the strong, restores the weak,
Reclaims the wand'rer, binds the broken heart,
And, arm'd himself in panoply complete
Of heavenly temper, furnishes with arms
Bright as his own, and trains by every rule
Of holy discipline to glorious war,
The sacramental host of God's elect.
Are all such teachers? Would to heav'n all were!
But hark—the Doctor's voice—fast wedged between
Two empirics he stands, and with swoln cheeks
Inspires the news, his trumpet. Keener far
Than all invective is his bold harangue,
While through that public organ or report
He hails the clergy, and defying shame,
Announces to the world his own and theirs.
He teaches those to read whom schools dismissed
And colleges untaught; sells accent, tone,
And emphasis in score, and gives to pray'r
Th' *adagio* and *andante* it demands.
He grinds divinity of other days
Down into modern use; transforms old print

To zig-zag manuscript, and cheats the eyes
Of gall'ry critics by a thousand arts.
Are there who purchase of the Doctor's ware?
O name it not in Gath! it cannot be
That grave and learned clerks should need such aid.
He doubtless is in sport and does but droll,
Assuming thus a rank unknown before,
Grand caterer and dry-nurse of the Church.

There is no more noble passage in his poems than his justification of his censures on the injustice and wrong-doing that abound in the world. He grandly vindicates his cause:—

'Twere well, says one, sage, erudite, profound,
Terribly arch'd and aquiline his nose,
And overbuilt with most impending brows,
'Twere well could you permit the world to live
As the world pleases. What's the world to you?
Much. 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.
How then should I and any man that lives
Be strangers to each other? Pierce my vein,
Take of the crimson stream meandering there,
And catechise it well. Apply yon glass,
Search it, and prove now if it be not blood
Congenial with thine own; and if it be,
What edge of subtlety canst thou suppose
Keen enough, wise and skilful as thou art,
To cut the link of brotherhood by which
One common Maker bound me to my kind?
True. I am no proficient, I confess,
In arts like yours. I cannot call the swift
And perilous lightnings from the angry clouds,
And, bid them hide themselves in th' earth beneath;
I cannot analyze the air, nor catch
The parallax of yonder luminous point
That seems half quenched in the immense abyss;
Such powers I boast not—neither can I rest
A silent witness of the headlong rage,
Or heedless folly, by which thousands die,
Bone of my bone, and kindred souls to mine.

Our modern men of science and philosophy might read with advantage the splendid lines upon the unceasing work of God in upholding and sustaining the Creation, of which He is the Great Author. They begin thus:—

Nature is but a name for an effect
Whose cause is God. He feeds the sacred fire
By which the mighty process is maintained,
Who sleeps not, is not weary; in whose sight
Slow-circling ages are as transient days.

We close with a simple sonnet, whose beauty and pathos cannot be exceeded in the language:—

Mary! I want a lyre with other strings,
Such aid from heav'n as some have feigned they drew,
An eloquence scarce given to mortals, new
And undebased by praise of meaner things,
That ere thro' age or woe I shed my wings
I may record thy worth with honour due,
In verse as musical as thou art true,
And that immortalizes whom it sings.
But thou hast little need. There is a book
By seraphs writ in beams of heavenly light,
On which the eyes of God not rarely look,
A chronicle of actions just and bright;
There all thy deeds, my faithful Mary, shine,
And since thou own'st that praise I spare thee mine.

We can only, in drawing this paper to a conclusion, remind the reader of the many verses that are used as familiar quotations.

Speaking of the youth who leaves college for his travels, to “make the grand tour,” and finds all barren from Dan to Beer-sheba, he says:—

Returning, he proclaims by many a grace,
By shrugs and strange contortions of his face,
How much a dunce that has been sent to roam
Excels a dunce that has been kept at home.

Here are other lines “familiar as household words.”

Defend me, therefore, common sense, say I,
From reveries so airy, from the toil
Of dropping buckets into empty wells,
And growing old in drawing nothing up.

We often hear of

The cups
That cheer, but not inebriate:

and

The sacramental host of God's elect.

And this of knowledge and wisdom:—

Knowledge and wisdom, far from being one,
Have oftentimes no connection; knowledge dwells
In heads replete with thoughts of other men;
Wisdom in minds attentive to their own.
Knowledge, a rude, unprofitable mass,
The mere materials with which wisdom builds,
Till smoothed, and squared, and fitted to its place,

Does but remember whom it seems to enrich.

Again:—

United, yet divided, twain at once.

God made the country, and man made the town.

England, with all thy faults, I love thee still.

Presume to lay their hand upon the ark.

O winter! ruler of the inverted year.

He is the freeman whom the truth makes free.

But who, with filial confidence inspired,
Can lift to heaven an unpresumptuous eye,
And smiling, say—My Father made them all.

Just knows, and knows no more, her Bible true.

His wit invites you, by his looks, to come,
But when you knock, it never is at home.

Our wasted oil unprofitably burns.

Beware of desperate steps. The darkest day,
Live till to-morrow, will have passed away.

How beautiful and familiar to most readers is the description of the millennium, when mankind shall become one brotherhood, knit together in the bonds of mutual unity and love. He dwells with delight on the universal regeneration of the race; but it is a regeneration not brought about by art, or literature, or science, or by the gradual amelioration of the world under some new and broader theology, but a regeneration only made possible by the personal advent of Christ. The Saviour comes as the Redeemer, to visit earth in mercy, to descend propitious in His chariot “paved with love.” The world rejoices in an eternal spring. All creatures worship man, and all mankind one Lord, one Father. There is neither sin nor sorrow. All is harmony and peace. “Thus heavenward all things tend. For all were once perfect, and all must be at length restored.”

The whole passage is very beautiful, and full of a deep and passionate emotion—but our space, already trespassed on too far, forbids more. There can be no question that Cowper is a true poet, and a great poet. “The Task” proves his mastery over blank verse, while in his other poems there is a rhythm and cadence, a facility of expression, a use of clear and articulate language, a charm and a fancy, combined with infinite suggestions of beauty, which give him a foremost place amongst our great singers. He has been justly called ‘The Poet of the Affections,’ and he is eminently the Poet of Nature and Christianity. “Everything I see in the fields,” he told Mr Unwin, “is to me an object of delight; and I can look at the same rivulet, or at a handsome tree every day of my life, with new pleasure.” In another letter he says: “I could spend whole days and moonlight nights in feeding on a lovely prospect. My

eyes drink the rivers as they flow.” In the fourth book of “The Task,” he says that his “very dreams were rural.”

No bird could please me, but whose lyre was tuned
To Nature’s praises. Heroes and their feats
Fatigued me: never weary of the pipe
Of Tityrus, assembling, as he sung,
The rustic throng beneath his favourite beech.

Sir James Mackintosh has observed with much truth that Cowper, instead of describing the most beautiful scenes in Nature, “discovers what is most beautiful in ordinary scenes,” and with his “poetical eye and moral heart detected beauty in the sandy flats of Buckinghamshire.”

But Cowper’s inspiration is not only drawn from Nature, but from religion; and his poems, as we have remarked, breathe all the tenderness of the New Testament spirit. By words caught from the Saviour’s life—he warns, comforts, and consoles—leads the heart to God, and elevates the soul to Heaven.

If this paper induces any reader of *THE CHURCHMAN* to take Cowper down from the shelf, where, perhaps, he lies neglected by the side of more brilliant or more sensuous poets, then the writer’s aim will have been accomplished, and that which has been to him “a labour of love,” will have well borne the desired fruit.

(To be continued. – See Churchman 005/2 1881 for Part II)

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Endnotes:

- 1) We have from Cowper’s own pen a statement of the doctrine of Calvinism, as he held it. In his “Fragment of an intended Commentary on ‘Paradise Lost,’” we come upon this sentence. Remarking on the line, “Some I have chosen of peculiar grace,” he says: “But the Scripture, when it speaks of those who shall be saved, and of the means by which their salvation shall be accomplished, holds out the same hope to every man, and asserts the same communication of light and strength to be necessary in all cases equally.”