Sincerity and Dread in William Cowper's Conversion Narratives
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But will sincerity suffice?

William Cowper, 'On Friendship' (1781)[1]

Theoretically and historically sophisticated studies of sincerity have abounded in the last decade of literary criticism.[2] Along with the related concept of authenticity, sincerity is being scrutinised in ways that attempt to dismantle its association with traditional, metaphysical notions of subjectivity. While its definitive features – the correspondence of inner intention and outer expression, and the absence of feigning or affectation – are historically bound up with assumptions of origin and integrity that have been 'severely deconstructed', sincerity itself 'has not been thought through in relation to such', according to Ernst van Alphen and Mieke Bal.[3] Much of the impetus for this new scholarship comes from romanticism, a context in which sincere poetry is valorised as an ideal, but simultaneously ironised and exposed as a performance. Romanticist critics have been spurred by the argument (voiced provocatively by Jerome McGann) that while romantic writers themselves regarded the sincere ideal as a rhetorical stance or set of conventions, subsequent literary historians have all too frequently failed to recognise that 'the famous "true voice of feeling" is an artful construction'.[4] The recent wave of studies reveals critics' desire to reframe and historicise sincerity: it is understood in terms both of its failure and its persistent importance as a concept. Critics typically attempt to restore some compromised, mediated version of sincerity as an act, an effect, or a performance.

The critical reframing of sincerity has not taken into account the texts of William Cowper.[5] That is surprising, given that these studies tend to challenge entrenched versions of literary history. Cowper's association with sincerity is a driving force in his automatic categorisation as a pre- or proto-romantic, and particularly within the narrative that treats him as a forerunner of William Wordsworth. The Wordsworthian comparison, and the identification of Cowper as an exemplar of sincerity, date back to the mid-nineteenth century. As Vincent Newey has demonstrated, an 1855 essay by Walter Bagehot which compares Cowper and Wordsworth sets the tone for one hundred years of criticism by emphasizing the appealing and 'exclusively English' trait in Cowper's poetry of portraying scenery and the calm delights of daily routine with sincere attention to detail.[6] An 1857 essay by the novelist George Eliot contrasts Cowper's sincere art and 'truthfulness of perception' with the 'grandiloquent' rhetoric and 'radical insincerity' of Edward Young, a religious poet from a generation earlier than Cowper.[7] In the early part of the twentieth century, Cowper's reputation as an exceptionally sincere poet was a standard of anthologies and critical editions.[8] When a first wave of sincerity studies emerged in the 1960s and 70s, mainly in reaction to the New Critical exposure of the 'intentional fallacy' in traditional conceptions of authorship, Wordsworth achieved an official reputation as 'our first poet of sincerity' and Cowper was deemed his precursor.[9]

There is, of course, a basis in literary history for that alignment. As poets who valorise sincerity, Cowper and Wordsworth share a critique of Alexander Pope's impact on eighteenth-century poetry and an aversion to outmoded forms. Wordsworth identifies sincerity as an essential trait of English poetry (in his 1810 'Essays upon Epitaphs'), deriving the ideal from a condemnation of the 'mechanical' impositions of poetic techniques that 'change and mould' original sensations and thoughts. He suggests that the 'sparkling and

tuneful' example set by Pope had 'bewitched' the realm of letters.10 Cowper also expresses his strong sense of a debilitating Popean influence, both in his poem 'Table Talk' and in his letters.11 He precedes Wordsworth in deploring the mechanical reproduction of poetic forms.12 Both Cowper and Wordsworth regarded blank verse as a more natural, flexible form than heroic couplets for expressing thought and feeling; The Task's adaptation of blank verse to a relaxed and conversational style, and an open structure, has been treated as a direct influence on The Prelude.13 Unlike Wordsworth's, however, Cowper's particular practices and analyses of sincerity have not been 'rethought' in relation to recent models; nor have they been seen as contributing to such models. Throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, the category continues to be evoked broadly (and often unreflectively) to refer to a wide range of features in his poems, hymns, and letters: his mimetic accuracy and particularity in portraying objects, scenery, and moods; his attention to humble themes; his avoidance of pomposity; his evident empathy and altruism toward all fellow-creatures; the ease and humour of his voice; and the tension and stress conveyed by his swerving syntax.14

The terms 'sincere' and 'sincerity' appear very frequently in Cowper's poems and prose; they are central to his writing at all points of his career. He associates sincerity with integrity and candour, but also with humility, simplicity, and the trajectory of a life oriented precisely and unfailingly toward God. His highest praise is reserved for ideal figures that exemplify sincerity (St. Paul, the evangelist minister George Whitefield, his beloved companion Mary Unwin).15 His bitterest diatribes are reserved for those who exemplify (or much worse, advocate) hypocrisy, such as the fourth Earl of Chesterfield, who in his 1774 Letters to His Son recommends deceitful manners in society.16 The designation of sincerity as an absolute value persists in his late poems as well: the hollowness of the ancient oak in 'Yardley Oak' (1791) is redeemed by the immovable soundness of its 'root sincere' (l. 116; 3, p. 81). An elegiac tribute to the drowned sailor of 'The Cast-away' (1799) is unnecessary because the 'narrative sincere' of the ship's log has been dampened by the captain's tears (l. 50; 3, p. 214).

Cowper's understanding of sincerity, unlike Wordsworth's, is fraught with doubt and distrust of the self. It stems from his attachment to a stringent and difficult ideal, which originated in the Evangelical Calvinism he embraced during the mid-1760s, when he was in his thirties. As the author of a widely read seventeenth-century treatise points out, 'Sincerity is the very heart and substance of Religion.'17 Cowperian sincerity is fundamentally linked to an ideal of rigorous introspection. The epistemological core of the Calvinist framework is knowledge of one's own heart, a necessary ingredient for discerning whether one is regenerate or unregenerate, saved or damned. In a context of predestination, the stakes of such insight into one's spiritual status are very high; as the seventeenth-century preacher John Flavell points out, the resolution of the 'great question' of one's own sincerity with 'a clear result and issue' is 'the desire of our souls'.18 For an evangelical Christian, the satisfaction of this great desire takes the form of an intense realisation that Christ's atonement is personally relevant and sufficient to save the potential convert; certainty concerning one's sincerity entails both discernment of corruption and assurance of divine mercy. A radically subjective basis for knowledge, this inner assurance is sense-based and emotional rather than abstract and intellectual; it is experiential knowledge, or, as it was labelled within the Puritan / Calvinist tradition, 'experimental'. Experimental knowledge of salvation figures as a turning point within the evangelical conversion narrative, a form which had originated in Puritan diaries and oral narratives qualifying converts to join congregations in the seventeenth century, and became in the eighteenth a thriving print practice focusing on the individual conversion experience.19 Prior to his career as a poet, Cowper wrote two such narratives: an

autobiographical memoir describing the experience of his own conversion, and an eyewitness account of his brother John's conversion; intending to splice the two together, he named the project Adelphi, a title now used to designate the memoir alone.

This essay argues that Cowper's various renditions of the conversion narrative (in Adelphi, in his 1782 poem 'Conversation', and in Book V of 1785's The Task) disclose in multiple ways the frustration of the desire for the 'clear result and issue': experiential knowledge of one's sincerity is impossible to complete or stabilise. While in keeping with Puritan religious treatises he explores the nature of hypocrisy, he shifts the paradigm from the traits of 'professors' (those who declare allegiance to ideals they do not practise and/or feel strongly) to a complex affective structure in which a morbid form of dread is masked with cheer, jest, or scorn. The prognostic knowledge that comes from dread – another pervasive term in Cowper's poetry and prose – is produced not through self-examination, but through a process of exposing and projecting into the interior of another self. Cowper disengages from these reflexive processes and their inward movements by shifting his focus from reading the heart to reading the landscape in The Task, in which sincerity is re-envisioned as the correspondence of a purified self with a praise-giving nature. Given the resonance of these investigations both as a critique of the dominant empirical epistemology of the era, and as a path to romanticism based on a radical distrust of self, our understanding of literary sincerity is enriched by a closer attention both to Cowper's conversion narratives, and to the influence of evangelical modes of sincerity in shaping the romantic ideal.[20]

1. An Insincere Cowper

The insights that knowledge of sincerity cannot be completed, and that attributions of sincerity cannot be trusted, render Cowper's status in literary history as a sincere poet, and the assumptions and evidence on which such judgements are based, especially relevant to my argument. Thus, before I begin my analysis proper, I call attention to one more line of criticism, beginning in the 1970s and proceeding to the present day, which brings the standard judgement to the foreground by reversing it, arguing that the poet and/or his poems are insincere. Terms one would not typically associate with Cowper, such as 'histrionic', 'insidious', 'devious', 'manipulator', and 'chameleon', abound in these readings, some of which are surprisingly rancorous. As with many studies of Cowper, critical demonstrations of his insincerity rely very strongly on his biography. They illustrate in a particularly jarring way that fascination with Cowper's biography tends to preclude intellectually sophisticated study – or even close textual readings – of sincerity in his poems. As Deborah Forbes points out, recourse to biographical study is often inevitable when one attempts to assess a poet's sincerity; the problem with such recourse is that it typically 'discounts the possibility that poetry itself embodies a unique form of knowing' (p. 4). Cowper's life story has intensely interested readers since at least 1816, when Adelphi was first published.[21] His recurrent bouts of insanity and their relation to his religious orientation were explored in at least thirty nineteenth-century biographies.[22] Topics of interest in twentieth-century readings include how a 'mad' poet could write so sanely and lucidly, and how a man who considered himself to have been predestined to damnation could produce such inspiring devotional poems that he became (and remains) a spokesman for evangelical Christianity. A recent editor of his poems refers to this inconsistency as 'one of the greatest ironies in our literary history'.[23] Critical readings directly questioning Cowper's sincerity have varied in their tones and methods: while several emphasise the discrepancy between his mad life and his sane art, the most recent example foregrounds the discrepancy between his sane life and his mad art – that is, his self-portrait as mad.

While the impetus to challenge axiomatic perspectives concerning Cowper's literary sincerity is valuable in itself, these readings are severely skewed by their assumption that an author's life and his texts either are or should be directly commensurate forms of knowledge. The assumption tends to collapse any space for a self that is constructed by the text. The identification of flaws in Cowper's writing and character (with the two registers treated as essentially equivalent) is the inevitable proceeding. Two 1970s studies of The Task (by David Boyd and Joseph F. Musser, Jr.) rely on offhand connections between the disunity of the text and of Cowper's psyche, in their attempts to explain the poem's digressive structure.24 Attempting to describe The Task's abrupt juxtapositions and transitions, for example, Boyd defines Cowper's 'problem' as 'getting from one attitude or pose to another while maintaining a tenuous hold on the integrity of his own personality' (p. 17).25 Both Boyd and Priscilla Gilman (who, like Boyd, applies a loose Freudian vocabulary within her 2003 analysis of Cowper's letters), react to the manifestation of 'personae' or 'staged' selves as if such were indecorous or offensive.26 It is a measure of the unreflective emphasis on sincerity in Cowper studies that the presence of personae in his poems would be regarded as personally deceptive, within post-New Critical readings.27

While assessments of Cowper's insincerity play a secondary role within Boyd's, Musser's, and Gilman's essays, Diane Buie's main argument in her essay on Adelphi is that Cowper's written 'portrayal' of an experience of religious melancholy is not authentic, but rather a set of generic traits 'borrowed' from popular treatises on the subject.28 On what she finds to be textual evidence of this borrowing, she hypothesises that his writing stages the symptoms of religious melancholy (regarded in the era as an elevated form of illness because it was spiritual) for the author's own benefit. Beginning with the seventeenth-century Puritan distinction between cases that are genuinely religious and those that are 'mere' or 'general' melancholy, her argument shifts ground to the question of sincerity: was Cowper's affliction 'genuine' or 'feigned'? Any insights derived from a contemporary psychological perspective, or from the overlapping discourses of the period which allow Cowper's soul to become indistinguishable from his psyche, are quickly displaced by the suggestion that he manipulated and exploited the inner circle of Adelphi's readers, seeking to distract their attention from his 'moral failing' of being 'work-shy', and ultimately to reap financial support for his 'retired lifestyle' (pp. 115, 111, 116).29 A related conclusion is reached by Boyd, who describes Cowper as attempting to disguise by means of his poetry his 'inadequacy', his incapacity for 'active moral engagement' (pp. 367, 366). While Buie and Boyd appear to hold opposite assumptions about whether or not Cowper had a mental illness, their attempts to assess the author's sincerity, which rely on dichotomies of genuine versus feigned self-expression, force the critics into a rigid moralism concerning his life of retirement. They return to an opposition between sincerity and hypocrisy, essentially Puritan in its outlook, that had been relinquished by Cowper's own writing in favour of a more sceptical, psychologically complex perspective. Boyd's and Buie's readings find Cowper imposing on the sympathy and credulity of his readers; they react against the judgement that his writing is sincere, and oversimplify in the process. In particular, Buie (whose essay appeared in 2013) ignores recent studies of Cowper that expose her neglect of the self-referential exploration of tensions between work and indolence, and labour and leisure, within his poems.30 Her reading is valuable in that it problematises Adelphi as a text, rather than accepting it as a straightforward account of Cowper's life. However, for her the sole textual interest of his conversion narrative lies in what she believes is its 'heavily borrowed' language of religious melancholy, an inauthentic self-portrait designed to manipulate readers (p. 107). She also remarks reductively that 'much of his poetry' can be viewed in this same

light (pp. 114, 115, 116). In demonstrating that Cowper is insincere, she disregards the relevance of Adelphi's own investigations of the nature of insincerity, within a narrative that attempts to delineate the (re)birth of the sincere Christian.

2. Heart-Reading and Experimental Knowledge in Adelphi

The use of the term 'experimental' to denote the process of deriving reliable knowledge from empirical examination of one's own mental processes marks a point of convergence between the Protestant Reformation and the experientialist epistemology of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Originating in Puritan theology of the sixteenth century and extending into the natural philosophy of the Royal Society and the empiricist writings of Locke and Hume in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the term conveys the privileging of first-hand experience over received knowledge and abstraction. As Peter Harrison demonstrates, experimental knowledge in this era is regarded as sensory, particular, useful, and humbling, as opposed to modes that are speculative, verbal, theoretical, and prideful; the former type of knowledge is frequently described as 'real'.[31] While in Protestant writings the term carries connotations of divine origin and a relation to scripture so integral that (ideally) the two kinds of knowledge are said to be manifestations of one another, there is also a sense of commonality with scientific empiricism, including the bringing of hypotheses to the test of fact. The mutual bearings of religious and scientific epistemology in the seventeenth century are apparent when one considers that the scientists of the Royal Society – who use the term 'sincerity' to evoke not only genuineness and honesty but also empirical fidelity to observed objects – consider the reliance on empirical knowledge as manifesting man's fallen state.[32] Locke makes similar statements concerning the fallibility of human faculties.[33] In the eighteenth century, experimentalism continued to be associated with religion, with a strong emphasis on feeling that developed from the term's appropriation by John Wesley and the Methodists.[34]

The references to experimental knowledge of salvation that occur in Cowper's own conversion narrative and in the story of his brother's conversion emphasise that it was both the necessary 'cure' for his own sense of damnation, and an inducement for every convert to find his own case 'extraordinary'.[35] Without such knowledge, which conventionally follows an unsuccessful attempt to rely on one's own strength to release oneself from sin, the Christian would not advance through the rest of the sequence of salvation – sometimes referred to in Calvinist treatises as the 'golden chain' – which culminates in an awareness of election and justification. Instead, the individual would languish within the transitional state of 'sin-consciousness', which carries a maddening ambiguity: it can be either a preliminary awareness of redemption, or a sign of non-election.[36] Adelphi follows the pattern of other conversion narratives in being organised around an ecstatic moment of saving experimental knowledge. It is triggered by Cowper's reading of a passage from Paul's letter to the Romans, in which he 'instantly' becomes strong enough to grasp the 'sufficiency' of Christ's atonement. Prior to this moment within the text, and unfortunately throughout the rest of his life, Cowper hypothesised his own damnation. The question of whether such an outcome can be known experimentally is a vexed one for Calvinists, and within Adelphi: although his sin-consciousness leads him to become 'assured with the most riveted conviction' that he is damned, in retrospect he defines that sense of certainty as a delusion prompted by mental illness (p. 28). His attempts at self-examination disclose a space from which meanings have been 'struck out', a zone of 'insensibility', 'a stone' (pp. 28, 7, 29). In these passages and in the poems I will examine ('Conversation' and the fifth book of The Task), it seems clear that the cause of his belief in his own reprobation is not the presence of experimental evidence

(from self-examination) but rather its absence, and hence the inability to complete the process of knowing. In so far as private experience fails to communicate the desired meaning, this mode of knowledge fails; hence one's sincerity can never be 'cleared', in Flavell's terms.

The idea that the heart is a text to be closely examined for signs of hypocrisy and falsehood, and for even small detractions from an entire offering of itself to God, originates in the writings of John Calvin himself. As historian John Martin notes in his analysis of sincerity and prudence as rival modes of conceptualising the relation between inner self and outward expression in the Renaissance, Calvin's 'personal emblem' was a 'hand-held heart', extended to readers and to God.[37] Although he believed that the heart's feelings must be expressed and not held back, he advocated the cleansing of the source of expression, the detection and removal of all traces of impurity (Martin, pp. 114-16). Puritan heirs of Calvinist thought, such as John Flavell, whose works were frequently reprinted and anthologised in the eighteenth century, instructed their listeners and readers to regard the heart as a scrutable text that (ideally) yields evidence both of sincerity and of its opposite, hypocrisy. With scripture as the clue within the 'labyrinths of the heart', the Christian should be able to discern whether his spiritual foundation is 'sound' or 'rotten', whether he is a true 'convert' or an 'unregenerate professor' (Flavell, 'Epistle to the Reader', viii; pp. 12, 31).

The term 'professor,' a distinctive Puritan label for a religious hypocrite, implies the disjunction of inner (heart, foundation) and outer ('form' and verbal expression in particular). This vocabulary recurs in the texts of Flavell and Bunyan, provides a basic structure of contrast in the Olney Hymns, and grounds a discussion of the common susceptibility to religious charlatans in a Cowper letter of 1782.[38] Flavell's description of professors as being 'puffed up' rather than humble, pursuing arcane theological controversies rather than searching their own hearts, produces a clear linkage of sincere Christians (non-professors) with experimental knowledge. The unstable element of the Calvinist / Puritan system is that professors, who are described as having 'lukewarm' hearts, cannot always recognise themselves. Though Flavell promises, within his title and at multiple points within The Touchstone of Sincerity: Or the Signs of Grace and Symptoms of Hypocrisy (1679), that he will disclose the 'marks and signs' by which one may distinguish sincerity from hypocrisy, these statements are followed by so many acknowledgements of typical misinterpretations and errors that the reader might find a clear outcome to be hopeless (p. 55). He admits that it is possible for the inward assurance supposedly constitutive of experimental knowledge to be 'blind' and 'ungrounded': the heart 'may be false' even when one is 'strongly confident of it's integrity' (p. 29). Nonetheless the Christian is answerable for the self-knowledge that eludes him: 'It is not enough to clear a man from Hypocrisy, that he knows not himself to be an Hypocrite' (p. 194). It is also possible, conversely, for a good man to have 'more fear than [he] ought' in wilfully ignoring 'evidence of [his] own Graces' (p. 10). Flavell admits the 'evil' of such a figure to be much less serious than hypocritical wickedness, and locates the figure on a psychological plane ('he loseth but his peace and comfort') rather than a moral one. This vacillation demonstrates that the religious systems shaping Cowper's imagination could not clearly account for a case in which the Christian concludes he is damned (pp. 10-11).

The devious and frustrating elements of heart-searching, intrinsic to Calvinist thought, are nearly absent from a more moderate (and extraordinarily influential) 1694 sermon on hypocrisy delivered by John Tillotson. As a tolerant, latitudinarian Archbishop of Canterbury from 1691 to 1694, he wrote works that appealed broadly to all types of Christians. Tillotson regards the reliability of the heart-reading process as proportionate to

the degree of care taken: '[H]e that will carefully observe himself, can hardly be ignorant of the true Spring and Motive of his own Actions' (pp. 6-7). His faith in the process of heart-reading authorises his gesture of setting aside epistemological questions in order to administer practical advice on how to become sincere; however, even this seemingly straightforward agenda is unsettled by the contradictions inherent in the ideal of sincerity. As suggested by the antipathy toward verbal and formal 'professors' (which spread from Puritan writings to all kinds of seventeenth-century texts, including works by Behn and Locke), language poses a threat to the ideal. It counters the virtues of sincerity with flattery, display, and 'noise'; Tillotson's endorsement of silence, simplicity, and calm as the behavioural manifestations of sincerity reveals the slippage in his discourse. Christina Lupton has argued that Tillotson's own modelling of a plain prose style, 'under pressure to conform to its own rules of sincerity', discloses how thoroughly he conflates sincerity with plainness and simplicity, in a formula that became widespread in the eighteenth century.[39] The conflation surfaces in Adelphi: when Cowper intones (and repeats) a childlike optative construction ('I wish He would; I wish He would') in response to a clergyman's suggestion that God would bestow the gift of faith upon him, he values this utterance as being 'very sincere', thereby redeeming it, in effect, from the depravity associated with wishes throughout the narrative (p. 30).

Cowper knew Tillotson's published sermons well (and turned to them at the moment his conviction of being damned first manifested itself, as he testifies in Adelphi); he owned two books by Flavell, whose works were recommended to new converts by John Newton, so it seems very likely that these works were influential as well.[40] Both accounts of heart-reading and the value of Christian sincerity would have reached Cowper at the time when he wrote Adelphi, a period in which he was absorbing a great deal of doctrine. It is the more pessimistic and irrational element of the heart's inscrutability as portrayed by Flavell, however, that seems to have shaped the sceptical, despairing constructions of Adelphi and his other conversion narratives.

The complex energy of the forty-page text of Adelphi comes from its attempt to fuse two stories that ultimately prove incommensurable: a spiritual narrative of sin-consciousness paving the way for conversion, and a psychological narrative of a return to reason after a prolonged episode of psychosis. Cowper's first-person narrator tells the story of his life from birth to the date of writing, but focuses most closely on a two-year period in which he drastically fails to embark on the professional career for which he'd been trained. As a thirty-two year-old law student who has dabbled at a London literary career but comes to realise that he will have to rely on family connections to secure an income, he is nominated for the position of Clerk of the Journals for the House of Lords. Informed that an enemy of the family has mobilised some opposition among the Lords and that he will thus have to undergo examination at the Bar of the House to demonstrate his qualification, he prepares for the event over several months in a state of mortal terror. Unsuccessful in a series of suicide attempts, he reacts to his friends' discovery of the attempts with a prolonged descent into sin-consciousness and certainty of damnation. His despair's intensity provokes his family members to place him in a private asylum at St Albans. He spends eight months there and gradually recovers from his mental illness. Shortly after being inspired by the reading of a Pauline epistle to regard himself as saved rather than damned, he leaves the asylum to begin a new, rural life as a boarder in the home of the Unwin family. Questions related to heart-reading and sincerity drive the lurching, discontinuous movements of the plot, as Cowper's experimental knowledge of his own fate shifts from reprobation to election with equal vehemence of conviction. Especially given that his dreams, his visual and auditory

hallucinations, and his distress are all vividly experiential, there is no real stability (other than religious convention, and his retrospective judgement that his knowledge of reprobation had been a delusion) in the narrative's conclusion, which grants final authority to his subsequent intuition of being saved rather than to his original intuition of being damned.

One of his most intense concerns, staged in the narrative as an ongoing defect, is the inability to pray sincerely. Occasions that call for prayer turn into anxious moments of self-scrutiny in which Cowper encounters a void. Frightened by his lack of feeling even as a child preparing for Confirmation, he focuses on occasions from the distant and recent past in which he cannot pray with feeling, or even summon the memory of his Creed (pp. 7, 28). His consistent view of prayer, throughout all his texts, is that it should be an expression of praise, not of personal need or request. In Adelphi, wishes are dangerous manifestations of the will and the flesh: the wish to die rather than face a painful experience, which turns into a series of unsuccessful suicide attempts, is an uncontrollable plot agency that seems to resolve one dilemma for Cowper (he is liberated from public scrutiny), but then propels him into a far worse one (he believes he is damned for having intended suicide). Fulfilled wishes carry a terrible sting: when a career-minded Cowper speculates that if the current Clerk of the Journals were to die, he might replace him, the man does expire, and Cowper is offered two positions that are even more profitable – the news of which is received as 'a dagger in [his] heart' (p. 14). His wish for 'madness' as the 'only chance' to extricate himself from the pressure of the public demonstration of his capacity is also realised (well after the pressure has already been removed): in keeping with the narrative emphasis on sudden forces that descend from above, the madness arrives all at once, experienced as a 'heavy blow' to the brain (pp. 17, 32).

The reproof of wishes is sustained even to the concluding episode. After a newly converted Cowper has prayed that he might be led 'into the society of those that feared [God's] name and loved the Lord Jesus in sincerity', and believes that prayer to have been answered in the form of the village congregation in Huntingdon, he once again forms a covetous wish, an ultimatum levelled at God: '[G]ive me this blessing or I die' (pp. 42, 46). The confrontational first-person voice of this prayer (that he might dwell as a boarder within the Unwin family) subsequently shifts into a more submissive and self-effacing form – 'The Lord God of truth will do this' – and he is able to act for himself, to 'negotiate the affair' and accomplish his aim (p. 46). The most revealing feature of this final instance of wilful prayer being chastened is that Cowper specifically rejects the model of sincerity as an expression of the heart's language. 'Give me this blessing or I die' is an emanation from his 'mutinous and disobedient heart' (p. 46). A few years later, Cowper revisits this moment in 'Self-Acquaintance', which will become Olney Hymn 43: the prayer 'Give me, or I die' is spoken by 'Presumption' (l. 16; 1, p. 182). The young convert of Adelphi distrusts the heart's expression in his first formulation, and trusts the second one because its source is unfamiliar to him: 'I was effectually convinced that [these words] were not of my own production' (p. 46). Expressivist models of sincerity are not relevant to the estranging functions of language that emerge at various points in the narrative, typically when a scriptural phrase or sentence inexplicably occurs to Cowper, or when he reads a line of text that strikes him as having proceeded from his own heart. Such moments alert us to a paradox that he will mobilise purposefully in the last two books of The Task: one's language can be the most sincere precisely at the moment when it seems to displace one's intention, to come from elsewhere.

3. The Cheer-Dread Model of Hypocrisy: Adelphi and 'Conversation'

The encounter with the heart is an encounter with otherness, as we see in Cowper's perception of his inner self as a stone. That confrontation is portrayed as entrapping and deadly, with outward demeanour and language hopelessly divided from the heart, on occasions that are social (as opposed to the solitude of prayer or reading scripture). The scrutiny of his own heart continues in the midst of recorded conversations with others: a group of Deist companions, a friend who has no knowledge of Cowper's planned suicide on the eve of his public examination, even the kindly doctor who supervises his care at St Albans.41 In keeping with Puritan definitions of hypocrites, the heart is excoriated as a corrupt foundation. But the original emphasis on 'professors' is relegated or replaced by a model that opposes a false front of cheer or jest to an inner core defined primarily by a despairing anticipation of death. The disjunction that defines hypocrisy lies in the realm of affect, and as such, it takes on an epistemological capacity. Cowper's frightful emotions about the future become his knowledge of it, a knowledge he feels he must conceal. Adela Pinch has argued that the eighteenth-century 'revolution in social and philosophical notions of emotions' includes a shift in conceptions of feeling: empiricist thought enables feeling to be categorised as epistemological, as 'a way of knowing', rather than as volitional and produced by the passions.42 The affective knowledge that Cowper labels 'dread', which partakes of that cultural shift, proves untenable – unrecognisable, even – within the predestinarian framework. The instability of dread is particularly evident when its discernment is a transaction between two subjects in dialogue with one another, as opposed to being a solitary enterprise; Adelphi's analyses of hypocrisy expose these dynamics in traumatic plot episodes that cannot be fully assimilated to the formulas of the conversion narrative.

The first episode I wish to examine comes in the first crisis of the story, when Cowper is poised between suicide attempts. An 'intimate friend' visits him the evening before his scheduled examination at the House of Lords and they converse affably: the friend's 'cheerfulness' is said to be 'real', while Cowper's is 'false'. His outward cheer masks the mournful sentence formed in his 'heart': 'I shall see thee no more' (p. 22). The subsequent, severe commentary produces not only an interruption in the narrative, but a different voice: something like what David Paxman identifies in The Task as the 'hard voice of the biblical prophet'.43 Cowper's strongest condemnation is directed at his own insincerity: his suicidal intention reflects his 'rank atheism, rottenness of heart, and rebellion against the blessed God' (p. 22). These corruptions, and Cowper's despair, are undetected by the jovial visitor. His blindness, which causes him to estimate Cowper as a 'good sort of a man' on the basis of his 'decent outside', is treated as representative of the world at large (p. 22). Cowper's portrait of a general societal sanction of hypocrisy is jarring in its linkage of most people's 'good-natured' tendencies with their inability to bear the knowledge of their own damnation: they are 'charitable' in their misrecognition of hypocrisy because they hope that such tolerance will mask their own corruption. '[I]f we are damned', Cowper imagines this societal voice to be asking, then 'who shall be saved?' (p. 23) (my emphasis). This question, which anyone attempting to submit to a religious view based on predestination might ask, is surely Cowper's own, even though he has associated it with the voice of the non-Christian world. The two sides of the apparent opposition between good-natured leniency and clear-eyed accuracy in the estimation of hypocrisy may not be as disparate as the text projects them to be.

The relative proportions of damned and saved souls become much more cryptic when Cowper subjects them to an onerous form of chiasmus. He advises his reader to '[i]nvert' the original formulation, to reverse its syntactical order and thereby its priority of cause and

effect. The inverted question, as he rephrases it, is as follows: '[I]f a good sort of man be saved, who then shall perish?' (p. 23). The implication is that, the world's tolerance of these 'good sort[s]' notwithstanding, it is highly unlikely that such would be counted among the elect, especially if they are 'rotten' within. Cowper writes that the 'reverse' of the question is 'much nearer to the truth': the good sort of man will perish. He concludes this tense, veering paragraph by suggesting that such knowledge is too difficult for the world to endure, and by citing the passage from Matthew's gospel in which Christ declares that the tax collectors and harlots will be saved before most others (p. 23). The reference to Matthew provides a context for his use of chiasmus, which, as Richard Lanham has pointed out, appears repeatedly in the New Testament, in order to 'suggest the fundamental reciprocity of human ethics, the tacit bargain that we ignore at our peril'.[44] Although Cowper subsequently continues the story of his final suicide attempt, it is particularly notable that the inversion works against the conversion. It is not only that the paragraph of diatribe against hypocrisy and good-natured tolerance temporarily derails the story, allowing its narrator to make obscure threats on God's behalf and to refer to a scriptural passage in a non-explanatory manner. It is also that the inversion process works in a larger sense to undermine the ideal of heart-reading on which experimental knowledge of salvation, and thus conversion itself, are based. Heart-reading is subjected to the stagnant dualism of a self-other relation, as the prospective convert deflects the awareness of his own hypocrisy onto an examination of the hypocrisy of others, who in turn assess his heart in relation to their fears about their own hearts. The readings become distorted reflections of one another rather than products of the careful, empirical self-observation recommended by Tillotson; entrapment in a potentially infinite feedback loop disables narrative progression toward individual knowledge of redemption.

The second incident of dialogic heart-reading that I will examine recapitulates some features of the first, but offers a more detailed analysis of dread itself as a form of intellectual transgression against Calvinism. It occurs in the St Albans asylum, where Cowper has been an inmate for five months. Accustomed to despair, he lives 'in continual expectation of the fatal moment' of being 'plunge[d] into the bottomless abyss' (p. 37). His talks with the doctor during this period in which he 'carr[ies] a sentence of irrecoverable doom in [his] heart', like that with the visitor on the eve of his final suicide attempt, are cheerful (p. 37). In this episode Dr Cotton is a figure of the good-natured world, blind to Cowper's hypocrisy as the two exchange amusing anecdotes: 'He observed this seeming alteration with pleasure. Believing as he well might that my smiles were sincere, he thought my recovery well nigh completed, though they were in reality like the green surface of a morass – pleasant indeed to the eye but a cover for nothing but rottenness and filth' (p. 37).

While affable and invested in Cowper's clinical improvement, the doctor is presented as inattentive, in a light nowhere near as positive as that of subsequent references to his 'humanity' that 'sheds rays' and his 'sweet communion' with Cowper regarding 'the things of our salvation', both after the turning point of conversion in Adelphi and in the poem 'Hope'.[45] The metaphor of the relation between Cowper's heart and his physiognomy as a morass and its surface continues the emphasis on concealing filth that characterises his self-portrait during the pre-suicidal conversation with his visitor.

The essential filth of his heart in this instance is his dread. It functions as a negative emotion to be disguised with cheer, but above all it entails comprehension of divine temporality. References to Cowper's certainty regarding his imminent damnation abound in the episode; it is a form of experimental knowledge in which feeling verges on epistemology. Cowper's dread breaches its category to become encompassing knowledge: he has 'a sense of eternity

impressed upon [his] mind which seemed almost to amount to a full comprehension of it' (p. 29). Even to attempt an intellectual inquiry, particularly concerning one's predestined status, would be an act of 'impious speculation', within the Calvinist framework of vast disparity between God's majesty and man's depravity (Boulger, p. 31). Nonetheless, the despair concealed from Dr Cotton is the effect of what is presumed to be certain knowledge concerning Cowper's ultimate outcome. The aspect of Cowper's complex attitude in these encounters that strikes him as being most evil – 'diabolical', even – is that, given the foregone conclusion of his doom, he starts to feel 'sincerely sorry' that he has not spent his whole life indulging 'wicked appetites'. This regret, as he describes it, is very far from being caused by any actual physical appetites: instead it entails a desire to rectify the overwhelming disproportion at the heart of Calvinism. He reflects that if he had been indulging fleshly desires over his life, he would at least have the 'consolation' of knowing that he had 'earned' his 'miserable inheritance' (p. 37). The desire for a more logical relation between himself and God is framed as an instance of complete depravity, with the heart assessed severely as a 'tophet of pollution'. The intellectual transgressions born of dread are categorised not as knowledge but as symptoms of disease: 'the only thing that could promote and effectuate [Cowper's] cure' is an 'experimental knowledge' of his salvation (p. 37). This breakthrough, and the sincerity of heart it entails, are said to come to him three months later, leading the narrative to its hopeful but anxious close.

Sincerity's central place as the definitive trait of converted Christians is recapitulated in the poems of Cowper's first extended composition, the moral satires of 1782, whose primary purpose is to defend the evangelical faith. Particularly within 'Conversation', a poem which is part satire and part guide to elevated dialogue, the dread-based model of hypocrisy recurs as well, attaching as a dark shadow to a passage of extended praise for sincerity. While the passage I will examine focuses on the conversion narrative's turning point of experimental knowledge, and reprises the falsely cheerful dialogue of Adelphi as a heuristic occasion, it also dispenses with the narrative's ultimately positivistic stance toward reading the heart. The logic of subject-object dualism, implicit in Tillotson's model of accurate self-examination and in Adelphi's constructed assurance of salvation, becomes in 'Conversation' a dyadic continuum of subjects unattached to individuating objects. The realistic overlay of Adelphi, with its descriptions of what seem to be actual conversations with people Cowper knew, is replaced by an imaginary encounter with a personified figure of the world. The encounter, ironically, is not a conversation at all but a set of brutal exposures and projections. Experimental knowledge of the heart is displaced into endlessly reflexive relations between subjects of dread.

The extended passage is hard to place within the poem's structure, described by Cowper in a 1781 letter as 'serio-comic': the first, 'jocular' half is a series of satirical portraits of the 'Abuses' of conversation, and the second, 'grave and sober' half is the moral 'Remedy', consisting primarily of the ideal union of Christian hearts.46 While ostensibly the passage fits the 'Remedy' portion, and revolves around an outpouring of praise for sincerity as the distinctive virtue of regenerate hearts, the analysis of the encounter of mutual heart-reading becomes a sustained focus for twenty-one lines (ll. 767-88), and finally gives way to the poet's apology for his own digression. The passage is triggered by a portrait of ideal conversation as that which allows the soul to 'mix with the celestial bands', and a critique of narrowly empirical attitudes held by those who reject spiritual manifestations, 'treat[ing] | All but their own experience as deceit' (ll. 719-720; 1, p. 372). His allegorical antitype is a female figure who '[p]eruses' the face of the 'true Christian' through her spectacles and judges it to be a 'mask of sly grimace' (ll. 743, 744; 1, p. 373). But only 'heart-searching'

God can discern the sincerity of the newborn soul in a postlapsarian world (l. 753; 1, p. 373). An encomium to 'Sincerity' follows, understood as the heart's offering of itself in accordance with God's demands (l. 759; 1, p. 373). It is the Christian's 'only pride', as its absence is the source of his deepest shame (ll. 757, 765; 1, p. 373). If the heart is not 'prove[d] sincere', then the Christian's 'birthright [is] shaken and no longer clear'. The shift of focus from 'blest inhabitants of earth', truly reborn Christians, to an individual self who putatively exemplifies the Christian but seems not to fit the type – he knows the importance of sincerity but seems to lack proof, and risks losing his birthright – is significant. It enables the passage to fixate on the mutual gazing of two such uncertain, potentially reprobate individuals, each of whom feels dread and accuses the other of hypocrisy. Both are hypocrites of the sort Cowper fashions in Adelphi: delusion about oneself, as opposed to deception of others, is the primary trait. Neither is godless; both hold predestinarian views and revere Christians who they believe are elect rather than damned (ll. 787-88; 1, p. 374).47 Thus, as a pair they seem more like doubles than opposites.

Corresponding to Adelphi's moment of inversion, 'Conversation' invites the reader to '[r]etort the charge' upon the accusatory woman and judge what is within her heart (l. 767; 1, p. 373). The energy of heart-reading turns specular, and the viewer is drawn into the continuum of subjects who repeatedly 'lay [the] bosom bare' to expose the heart, thereby '[u]surp[ing] God's office' (l. 745; 1, p. 373). The scrutiny that the woman had applied to the true Christian's face is turned back on her own 'sneer' as well as her 'censures', which are judged an 'insincere' front for her actual feelings: '[a] cold misgiving, and a killing dread' (ll. 783, 784, 785, 770; 1, pp. 374, 373). The intimate knowledge of her affect suggests that the speaker's own dread is being projected into her interior; he exposes her dread, even as his own is vulnerable to exposure. Such readings are products of projection and deflection, not of empirical examination. The dread uncovered by the readings brings compulsive knowledge of a death that already seems to be in process: 'she would not, yet is forc'd to feel' it (l. 786; 1, p. 374). The advancement of this morbid disclosure becomes shockingly visible in an image that emphasises the materiality of the face as a part of the body, while erasing the expressive features through which sincerity must be interpreted. The 'truth' by which the woman had authorised herself to judge the Christian's face and soul is rendered 'dull | And useless as a candle in a scull'' (ll. 779-780; 1, p. 373). Dread exposes this skeletal self in a proleptic apparition that signals, as Cowper writes in the fifth book of The Task, '[f]uture death, | And death still future' (V, ll. 607-608; 2, p. 226). The visionary occurrence – common to the woman, the speaker, and the deranged Cowper of Adelphi – links subjects defined by their dread. Sincerity becomes unrecognisable in this exposure of the doubling and reflexivity that accompany the attempt to discern it.

The transition in the poem that leads to these revelations, created by 'retort[ing]' or inverting a statement back upon its originator, is a type that does not quite fit the categories of 'normal sequence', 'Augustan antithesis', or 'stream-of-consciousness', which have been identified by critics as basic categories for the transitions in Cowper's long poems.48 The 'retorting' transition originates in the narrative of heart-reading, which is part of the larger conversion sequence. Despite its narrative genesis, this dynamic has the effect of diverting and entrapping forward movement, so that both the 'sincere' process of heart-reading and the projected outcome of redemption are blocked. Cowper attempts to pass off the entire sequence (a segment of approximately seventy lines, which opens with references to redemption and 'new birth' but veers precipitously into the old woman's ill-conceived exposure of hypocrisy, the impassioned praise for sincerity, the reversal of accusation, the acknowledgment of 'killing dread', and the image of the candle-lit skull) as an instance of the

modern poetic style of digression. He light-heartedly accuses himself of having claimed the 'right to scamper and run wide', which hardly seems an apt description for the grim proceedings of the passage (l. 794; 1, p. 374). His self-conscious apology for having deferred his poem's topic while he 'struck [a] balance' with the world (l. 798; 1, p. 374) can be compared to similar moments from the third and fourth books of The Task, in which he reproves himself for having strayed or wandered from his purpose (and even for having lost his 'composure' in the process) after indulging in sustained satiric denunciation of society.49 The scorn that masks dread in 'Conversation' is a hostile variant of Adelphi's cheer; in its facilitation of the act of 'lay[ing] bare', it resembles the savage indignation of the satirist, a stance which the speaker both embodies and disavows. The retorting movements and the depiction of scorn in this section of the poem provoke the speaker's ambivalence about his digressive as well as his satiric tendencies; critics have emphasised both sources of ambivalence in studies of The Task.50 In its capacity as the only moral satire that experiments with this style of retort and correction, 'Conversation' comes closer than do the other poems of 1782 to the self-conscious structure of Cowper's 1785 masterwork.

It was typical for self-doubt to be regarded as proof of one's sincerity within the Calvinist system.51 But within the conversion sequence known as the 'golden chain', such doubt is a phase, a passageway to redemptive mercy. In Cowper's writing – though he adapts his experiences to the 'golden chain' in Adelphi, and defines sincerity as the essential trait of regenerate man in 'Conversation' – dread is far from being proof of sincerity. The irredeemable result of heart-reading's epistemological failure, it becomes an index of damnation, and a means of intellectual transgression. The dread described by Cowper in Adelphi is immune to social consolation; his sense of damnation is felt so intensely that 'the united world could not have assured me of being reprieved from Hell one hour longer' (p. 31). Although Cowper's distinctive version of hypocrisy certainly reflects Puritan assumptions that the heart is treacherous and false, it also revises these assumptions quite drastically to define a self hemmed in by dread.

For these reasons, his dread cannot be incorporated easily into the religious system that catalyses it. Flavell admits in his treatise on sincerity that those who falsely regard themselves as damned, denying the evidence of their own grace, are not his targeted audience (p. 11). The certainty of damnation that gripped Cowper during the time depicted in Adelphi and also at many subsequent periods of his life was difficult for John Newton to accommodate within his own understanding of the Calvinist system.52 It is very telling that Cowper's version of hypocrisy focuses less on suppressing evidence of sinfulness than on the difficulty of communicating the dread of damnation. Even if he were to reveal the source of his dread – even when he does reveal it, to his brother John and other Anglican relatives (as depicted in Adelphi), and to fellow evangelicals within his own circle – they refuse to accept his intuition, and try to dissuade him from believing it (pp. 29-30, 38). When his conviction strikes others as being extreme, he is placed in a madhouse. The incommunicability of dread is an element from Cowper's life story that his texts explore relentlessly. His analyses of sincerity and hypocrisy produce subject-positions that are untenable within mainstream Protestantism and Calvinism; they also disrupt the progress of straightforward religious texts. In the process, though, the analyses disclose the emotional complexity and technical inventiveness of Cowper's poetry.

4. Sincerity Converted: The Task

In The Task, a digressive poem that encompasses almost every aspect of contemporary English life, and in which seemingly all facets of the poet's experience are expressed, Cowper investigates sincerity from a broader and richer angle of vision. Particularly within the last two of the poem's six books, he resolves the complexities of heart-reading in formulating a new relation to God: the function of poetry is to praise God by echoing a song heard in nature, satisfying desires that originate and end in heaven, rather than in the self. Sincerity is possible only within the context of this purified language of praise, offered ultimately to him 'whose eye is on the heart', the God of the poem's closing lines (VI, l. 1022; 2, p. 263). The projected world is one 'that does not dread and hate [God's] laws' (VI, l. 826; 2, p. 258). Although it is beyond the scope of this essay to provide more than a sketch of The Task's reorientation of sincerity, I do wish to show how the transformation is prompted by a narrative of conversion. The labyrinthine sequence includes the failure of experimental knowledge and its familiar consequence of dread masked with cheer, but these elements dwindle in importance as Cowper subordinates them to a larger structure based on a re-envisioning of God and the natural world.

Book V, 'The Winter Morning Walk', starts out as a meditation on political liberty and becomes a reflection on the true liberty that comes from grace, a state mediated by the joyful contemplation of nature and culminating in the awareness that 'God is both the source and the end' of such joy.53 This liberating and purifying awareness comes as the saving event in the conversion of 'revolted man', man in a state of sin-consciousness, motivated by an agony of remorse to 'reform' himself. Much of the conversion narrative is set forth as a known failure, in an authoritative tone: gone is the uneasy, 'nervous quality' that D. Bruce Hindmarsh and others have noted in the voice of Adelphi's narrator (p. 285). The Task's narrative expands on the insight of Olney Hymn 11 that 'self-applause creeps in' when the convert attempts to speak of God's mercies toward him; the hymn's speaker perceives that it is impossible to narrate one's achievement of religious sincerity without relinquishing it ('Jehovah Our Righteousness', l. 8; 1, p. 150). The speaker in Book V pushes the insight further to suggest that self-applause taints not only the narration of conversion, but the very supposition that one has reformed.

Peace ensures
But spurious and short-liv'd, the puny child
Of self-congratulating pride, begot
On fancied Innocence. (V, ll. 620-23; 2, pp. 226-227)

This is Cowper's most sceptical statement yet concerning experimental knowledge of sincerity: he suggests that such knowledge is impeded by egocentric habit and by the structure of the mind itself. Because pride misreads itself as rebirth, 'revolted man''s attempt is repeated many times. 'Again he falls, | And fights again' (V, ll. 623-24; 2, p. 227); each fight constitutes a mere 'performance' to be 'scoff[ed]' at' by Nature (V, l. 629; 2, p. 227). He is misled by the successive voices of false teachers until he finally learns to read nature as a disclosure of its creator. He becomes free, finally, when he stops 'inventing' palatable (mild, amused, non-punitive) versions of God and embraces the strict and powerful God who reveals his laws, and also his consolation, in the landscape. The stages that precede this resolution echo the desperation of Adelphi's portrayals of sin-consciousness and heart-reading. The man attempts to stifle the pain of dread's prognostic vision – the 'forebod[ing]' of '[a]ges of hopeless misery. Future death, | And death still future' – by absorbing the false religious views that others offer, including the doctrine of works. The speaker treats this doctrine ironically, denying the truth of the easy formulation that '[i]n the deed, | The

unequivocal authentic deed | We find sound argument, we read the heart' (V, ll. 652-54; 2, p. 227). Through the failure of such perspectives, the suffering man's dread is 'harden'd' into a form similar to what he had depicted in his conversations with Dr Cotton: ''Tis desp'rate, and he sleeps the sleep of death' (V, l. 669; 2, p. 228).

Throughout this tormenting process, the fallen man's dread is unsuccessfully masked by cheer, in a recapitulation of Adelphi's hypocrisy model (V, ll.606-08; 2, p. 226). 'Riot is not loud | Nor drunk enough to drown' the 'scruple' awakened by his fear that scripture, 'a trumpet to his fears', must be true (V, ll. 614-15, 611; 2, p. 226). Nonetheless, '[i]n the midst | Of laughter his compunctions are sincere, | And he abhors the jest by which he shines' (V, ll. 615-17; 2, p. 226). While in Adelphi and 'Conversation' the covering of dread with laughter and jest is the formula for hypocrisy, in this context the narrator deems the fallen man's sense of his guilt to be sincere. Such a revaluation may seem startling in itself, but its true significance emerges only when it is displaced by larger thematic elements – liberty, purity, the relation of God to nature – which allow the reader to understand that sincerity, at least in its traditional Calvinist manifestation of self-scrutiny, is literally beside the point. Definitions of sincerity based on heart-reading are left behind, so that the speaker can define conversion as a shift from incapacity to capacity, from intolerance to gratitude for all that comes from God.

The structure of the conversion narrative changes in accordance with these shifts. Michael Davies has emphasised the surprising deferral of a saving event in this Book V narrative, which 'hangs in a state of suspense' for almost 300 lines, between the first instance of the man's fall and the climactic moment of liberation.54 What intervenes are passages about grace's connection to freedom, a comparison of society's attitudes toward political patriots and religious martyrs, and an extended discussion about God's relation to nature, culminating in the declaration that chance has no bearing on God's laws. The saving event comes when true liberty is defined as a new understanding of God that proceeds from a deliberate rejection of the old one.

Thee we reject, unable to abide
Thy purity, 'till pure as thou art pure,
Made such by thee, we love thee for that cause
For which we shunn'd and hated thee before.
Then we are free. (V, ll. 879-83; 2, p. 233)

Addressing God directly and shifting from the third-person singular perspective of 'revolted man' to the inclusive first-person plural, the speaker makes purity both the original attribute of God and the transforming one of man. It is a new and affirmative formulation for Cowper, in which recognition and love of a divine trait allow man to share in the trait. In this case, the shared trait represents a return to the roots of sincerity; 'purity' is the oldest and most consistently religious definition of the term. The moment of purification is at once liberation and conversion, but it does not close the story; Cowper resumes the narrative to indicate that as liberty '[b]reaks on the soul', the poet is finally able to perceive nature rightly, both as God's creation and as an expression of praise (V, l. 884; 2, p. 233). It is clear that the condition of rebirth has shifted from reading the heart to reading the landscape, and that the new formulation of sincerity proceeds from that shift.

The logic of perceiving and hence sharing in a divine trait recurs in the reading of the landscape, in a manner that frames the perceiver not just as a convert but as a poet,

expressing praise in language. It is this dynamic that makes Cowper's expression of the relation between God and the natural world move beyond a conventionalised 'argument from design' to include the literally resounding experience of the perceiver. The poet does not generate his own song: he 'hears' and 'repeats' the 'loud Hosanna' sent from God's works, 'add[ing] his rapture to the gen'ral praise' (V, ll. 888-890; 2, p. 233). As his utterances join with those of created nature, he becomes part of it, in a perspective that can save him from damnation if he understands it properly. An earlier Book V passage about the beauties of the landscape has made the point that man wrongly reads the glories of this world, spectacular as they are, as being eternal, when in fact they are, like fallen man, transient: God has '[d]oom'd' them 'as insufficient for his praise' (V, l. 565; 2, p. 225). The passage about the 'Hosanna' sent from God's works indicates that the natural world can be sufficient for God's praise; when the poet adds his voice to it, he is redeemed by his mindful association with it, no longer 'doom'd' by his own deficient expressions. Moreover, the very desire to 'read […] nature' in this manner, '[i]lluminate[d]' by 'the lamp of truth', is a desire that 'give[s] assurance of [its] own success', because 'that infused from heav'n, must thither tend' (V, ll. 845-46, 843-44; 2, p. 232). The redemptions occasioned by these dynamics of praise enable a new perspective on Book I's model, in which the speaker refers a claim of sincerity to the perspective of his friend Mary Unwin: 'Thou know'st my praise of nature most sincere, | And that my raptures are not conjured up | To serve occasions of poetic pomp' (I, ll. 150-52; 2, p. 121). Neither praise of nature nor sincerity itself can be sufficiently guaranteed by a transient social claim; furthermore, as soon as poetry designates itself as sincere, it starts to become rhetorical, to serve 'poetic pomp'. Cowper must find a way around those dilemmas by defining sincerity anew, and making God his guarantor.

With the language of praise refined into a repetition of what is heard in nature, the poet himself becomes a channel of God's expression. As Newey has argued, Book V constructs a 'three-fold balance' among self, nature, and God whereby the poet demonstrates his own state of 'divine favour', a state that, according to Newey, bypasses Calvinism: it is 'grace' rather than election (pp. 136, 147). While I would argue that much of Book V's definition of true conversion (and Book VI's millennial visions entailed by that definition) remain consistent with Calvinism, I would also suggest that these features comprise a deliberate disengagement from Calvinist heart-reading.[55] Sincerity is defined not as the heart knowing itself, but as its becoming indistinguishable from the praise it gives. The solutions are not entirely new to The Task; they build on ideals Cowper had drawn in Adelphi, the Olney Hymns, and the moral satires. The insights that prayer should always constitute praise, and that language 'not of [the self's] own production' should be heeded more carefully than the 'voice of presumption', are central to Cowper's early religious writings. The desire to be sincere is rewritten as a desire to distill and thereby to contract the self; The Task establishes that this new form of sincerity, this thinning out of the self, can be achieved only through a right reading of nature that becomes a form of participation in it.

Cowper's moral satires offer a preliminary version of how The Task's model of sincerity would be enacted in language, although the focus in these earlier poems tends to be on prelapsarian ideals. 'The Progress of Error' and 'Conversation' both describe the language of Eden as a 'glow' of gratitude, a direct and unmediated reflection of the desire to praise.[56] In a passage from 'Conversation', Cowper incorporates man's original connection to nature into the praise-giving ideal, treating language as a divinely inspired oral emanation. The mind 'rang[es] where Providence has blest the soil', gather[s] 'treasures' from each flower, 'imbu[es] the tongue with what she sips'," and 'shed[s] the balmy blessing on the lips' (ll. 438-442; 1, p. 365). While in The Task Cowper's treatment of voice and speech is more

ambivalent than the phonocentric model of 'Conversation', it privileges, along with the earlier poem, an immediate, transparent relation between signifier and signified. In The Task the relation is set forth in metaphors that assume the unity of nature and writing. The poem of praise becomes a 'stream of panegyric' that is 'poured […] down | The vale of nature, where it creeps and winds | Among her lovely works' (VI, ll. 720-22; 2, p. 255).[57]

It is the poet's interchange with nature, then, that allows Cowper to balance the inner self with outer expression, to shape a model of sincerity not accompanied by the reflexive scrutiny that brings dread. His arrival at the position of pre-romantic 'poet of sincerity' is driven by a rigorous scepticism concerning the possibility of experimental knowledge of the self; by pushing Calvinist heart-reading to its irrational limits in Adelphi and 'Conversation', he is able to suggest a critique of Enlightenment empiricism as it is turned inward to investigate the mind. His transition to The Task exemplifies the juncture of the late eighteenth-century 'Age of Sensibility' and the romantic era. An aesthetic of sincerity is made possible only through a contraction of the self, as opposed to an aggrandisement; the fundamental Calvinist distrust of the heart is never eradicated from his writing. But the contraction of the self enables a new validation of its perceptual capacity. It is finally a critique of the presumption underlying sincerity itself – that it can be known and claimed – that frees Cowper to shift his gaze outward, and to affirm the creativity of the poet.

Notes

[1] William Cowper, 'On Friendship', in The Poems of William Cowper, ed. John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980-85), 1, p. 447. Further references to this edition will be cited by line, volume, and page numbers, after quotations in the text.

[2] See, for example, Romanticism, Sincerity, and Authenticity, ed. Tim Milnes and Kerry Sininan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); The Rhetoric of Sincerity, ed. Ernst van Alphen, Mieke Bal, and Carel Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008); Deborah Forbes, Sincerity's Shadow: Self-Consciousness in British Romantic and Mid-Twentieth-Century American Poetry (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994); and Literature and Authenticity, 1780-1900: Essays in Honour of Vincent Newey (Ashgate Publishing, 2011).

[3] Rhetoric of Sincerity, Introduction, p. 3.

[4] Jerome McGann, The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 88, 96.

[5] One exception is an essay by Michael Davies ('Authentic Narratives: Cowper and Conversion', in Literature and Authenticity, pp. 9-24). Davies investigates authenticity, a concept related to sincerity. Conrad Brunstrőm's monograph William Cowper: Religion, Satire, Society, (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2004) reinforces Cowper's 'sincere' status. Brunstrőm's important study derives its main claim – that the poet was unwilling to synthesise his experience into a sublime or abstract vision – from George Eliot's contrast of Cowper's sincerity with Young's insincerity.

[6] Vincent Newey, Cowper's Poetry: A Critical Study and Reassessment (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble Books, 1982), pp. 9-15.

7 'Worldliness and Other-Worldiness: The Poet Young', in Selected Essays, Poems, and Other Writings, ed. A. S. Byatt and Nicholas Warren (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 194.

8 See, for example, Nowell C. Smith's preface to Wordsworth's Literary Criticism, ed. Nowell C. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1905), xiv.

9 Forbes, p. 25. A 1974 study of the development of a 'sincere ideal' in the eighteenth century is organised so as to place Cowper directly before the last chapter on Blake and Wordsworth (Leon Guilhamet, The Sincere Ideal (Montreal and London: McGill-Queens University Press, 1974).

10 William Wordsworth, 'Essays upon Epitaphs', in Wordsworth's Literary Criticism, ed. W. J. B. Owen (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), pp. 145, 147, 146.

11 On Pope as a deadening influence, see 'Table Talk', ll. 646-55, in Poems, 1, p. 258. See also the letter of 15 January 1781, The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper, 1, p. 433: Cowper blames Pope for contemporary critics' tendency to 'serve a poem as a cook serves a dead turkey, when she fastens the legs of it to a post, and draws out all the sinews'.

12 See Cowper's 1763 essay 'Dissertation on the Modern Ode' (Letters and Prose Writings, 5, pp. 34-39); see also 'Conversation,' ll. 789-94, in Poems, 1, p. 74; The Task VI, ll. 92-5, in Poems, 2, p. 239.

13 See, for example, Martin Priestman, Cowper's 'Task': Structure and Influence (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 162-98.

14 On his triviality, see John Cann Bailey: 'Probably no poet, in all the history of the art, did so little casting about for a subject. He just took what came. That is the secret of his rare sincerity; it is also, no doubt, the cause of his too frequent triviality' (The Poems of William Cowper, ed. J. C. Bailey (London: Methuen Publishing, 1906), Introduction, xxxiii). On the strained quality of the syntax, treated as a measure of his 'honesty' and 'authenticity', see Newey, p. 29. Most recently, see Richard Arnold, Trinity of Discord: the Hymnal and Poetic Innovations of Isaac Watts, Charles Wesley, and William Cowper (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2012), who argues that the sincerity of Cowper's hymns stems from the disconnect between the 'stylized and smooth surface' and the expression of a 'disturbed' inner self (pp. 93, 99).

15 On St. Paul as a sincere ideal, see The Task II, ll. 395-407, in Poems, 2, p. 149. For related praise of George Whitefield, see 'Hope', ll. 574-87, in Poems, 1, p. 331. In a letter to Samuel Rose, Cowper describes Mrs. Unwin as 'one of the sincerest of the Human race' (29 March 1788; Letters and Prose Writings, 3, p. 136).

16 The condemnation of Chesterfield is in 'The Progress of Error', ll. 335-52, Poems, 1, p. 271.

17 John Tillotson, Of Sincerity Towards God and Man (London: J. and T. Dormer, 1735), p. 5. Further references are provided after quotations in the text.

18 John Flavell, The Touchstone of Sincerity: Or the Signs of Grace and Symptoms of Hypocrisy (Boston: J. Edwards, H. Foster, and J. Pemberton, 1731), p. 180. Further references are provided after quotations in the text.

19 See D. Bruce Hindmarsh, The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

20 For a treatment of the influence of evangelical modes of sincerity on abolitionist discourse, see Kerry Sinanan, 'Too Good to be True? Hannah More, Authenticity, Sincerity, and Evangelical Abolitionism', in Milnes and Sininan, pp. 137-61.

21 The unexpurgated version of Adelphi (a text that Cowper and others suppressed after he wrote it in 1767, less than two years after he left Dr. Nathaniel Cotton's insane asylum) was not available to readers until 1979. See James King, 'Cowper's Adelphi Restored: The Excisions to Cowper's Narrative', Review of English Studies, 30 (August 1979), 291-305.

22 See Lodwick Hartley, William Cowper: The Continuing Revaluation (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 1960), pp. 17-22.

23 Nick Rhodes, William Cowper: Selected Poems, ed. Nick Rhodes (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 11.

24 David Boyd, 'Satire and Pastoral in The Task', Papers on Language and Literature, 10 (Fall 1974), 363-77; and Joseph F. Musser, Jr., 'William Cowper's Rhetoric: The Picturesque and the Personal', Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900 19 (Summer 1979), 515-31.

25 Musser, while less disparaging than Boyd, also finds Cowper to be insincere: he emphasises 'inconsistency' in the scenario of 'a man for whom conversion is impossible counsel[ing] conversion' (p. 524).

26 Priscilla Gilman, 'William Cowper and the "Taste of Critic Appetite",' ELH, 70 (Spring 2003), 89-115.

27 Several recent full-length studies of Cowper attempt to remove such barriers to the study of persona and other formal devices in his work: Newey and Priestman both argue that The Task's great accomplishment is to re-create the poet's self, projecting 'another Cowper altogether from the biographical Cowper who felt that he was damned'. The quotation is from Newey, p. 146. See also Priestman, pp. 4-5; Deborah Heller, 'Cowper's Task and the Writing of a Poet's Salvation', in Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900, 35 (Summer 1995), 375-98; and David Paxman, 'Failure as Authority: Poetic Vision and the Muse of Grace in William Cowper's The Task', in 1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era, vol 5, ed. Kevin Cope (New York: AMS Press, 2000), 203-242.

28 'William Cowper: A Religious Melancholic?', Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies, 36 (2013), 103-119.

29 On the overlap of the soul and the psyche in Adelphi, see Felicity A. Nussbaum, 'Private Subjects in William Cowper's Memoir', in The Age of Johnson: A Scholarly Annual , vol 1, ed. Paul J. Korshin (New York: AMS Press, 1987), pp. 307-26, p. 323.

30 See, for example, Sarah Jordan, The Anxieties of Idleness: Idleness in Eighteenth-Century British Literature and Culture (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2003), pp. 178-216; P. M. S. Dawson, 'Cowper's Equivocations', Essays in Criticism, 33 (January 1983), 19-35.

31 'Experimental Religion and Experimental Science in Early Modern England.' Intellectual History Review, 21, no. 4 (2011), 413-433 (pp. 414, 420, 426).

32 Robert Hooke, the Royal Society's first curator of experiments, laments the 'uncertainty', the 'narrowness' and 'wandering' of the human faculties, and suggests that a 'sincere Hand, and a faithful Eye', for the purpose of 'examin[ing] and record[ing] […] things themselves as they appear', are the right remedy (Micrographia, or, Some Physiological Descriptions of Minute Bodies Made by Magnifying Glasses (London: J. Martyn and J. Allestry, 1665), Preface, 4. On the correspondence of scientific experimentalism to 'the fallen condition of the human race', see Harrison, p. 428.

33 Locke expresses doubt concerning whether natural philosophy, with its reliance on experience, should be regarded as science, given the 'weakness of our faculties in [our] state of mediocrity[…] in this world'(An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, IV.xii.10), qtd. in Harrison, p. 424.

34 See Misty G. Anderson, Imagining Methodism in 18th-Century Britain: Enthusiasm, Belief, and the Borders of the Self (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), p. 7, concerning 'theologies of experience' in relation to the conviction that God can be felt. See also pp. 51-52 for an analysis of the compatibility of experimental religion's assumptions with Locke's thought.

35 Adelphi: An Account of the Conversion of W.C. Esquire, in Letters and Prose Writings, 1, pp. 37, 59 . Further references to this edition are provided after quotations in the text.

36 On the ambiguity of 'sin-consciousness', see James D. Boulger, The Calvinist Temper in English Poetry (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1980), p. 48. On the 'golden chain', see Hindmarsh, p. 35.

37 John Jeffries Martin, Myths of Renaissance Individualism (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 116.

38 See, for example, 'A Living and a Dead Faith', Olney Hymns, Hymn 60, in Poems, 1, p. 199. See also Cowper's letter to William Unwin, c. October 1782, Letters and Prose Writings, 2, pp. 81-82.

39 Christina Lupton, 'Sincere Performances: Franklin, Tillotson, and Steele on the Plain Style', Eighteenth-Century Studies, 40 (Winter 2007), 177-192 (p.187).

40 Adelphi, p. 26. Thomas Wright writes that Cowper's final library contained two quarto editions of works by Flavell: Sermons (1673) and Method of Grace (1699) (The Life of William Cowper, (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1892), p. 659). See Newton's letter to William Wilberforce, 6 March 1786, in which he recommends 'any of Flavell's works' as part of a list of readings for 'plain enquirers'. The Complete Works: Correspondence William Wilberforce, The John Newton Project,

http://www.johnnewton.org/Articles/105261/The_John_Newton/The_Complete_Works/Corr
espondence/William Wilberforce/Letters/-No-3.aspx [accessed 17 August 2012].

41 Cowper depicts his hypocrisy in conversation with Deist friends – in which he insists on
the literal truth of the gospel – as the '[l]amentable inconsistency of a convinced judgement
with an unsanctified heart' (p. 11).

42 Adela Pinch, Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen
(Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 18-19.

43 Paxman, p. 204.

44 Richard D. Lanham, Analysing Prose, 2nd edn. (London and New York: Continuum Press,
2003), p. 122.

45 See Adelphi, p. 40; 'Hope', l. 205; Poems, 1, p. 322.

46 To Mary Newton, c. 6 August 1781, Letters and Prose Writings, 1, p. 506. For a recent
reading of 'Conversation', see W. B. Hutchings, 'Cowper and Conversation', The Cowper
and Newton Journal , 1 (2011), pp. 2-15.

47 Brunstrőm 's readings of the poems 'To Mr. Newton on his Return from Ramsgate' and
'On the Receipt of My Mother's Picture out of Norfolk' support his observation that Cowper
took a 'genuine delight in the idea of redemption of others' (p. 130). 'Conversation''s
emphasis on hypocrisy as a response to those regarded as reprobates might be seen as the
reverse of this attitude.

48 See Priestman, p. 3; he cites the unpublished thesis of Dorothy Hadley Craven, concerning
transitional moments in The Task.

49 The Task III, ll. 1-40; II, ll.163-164; IV, ll. 232-244, 259-260; II, l.193.

50 See, for example, Brunstrőm, pp. 102-105; Paxman, p. 207, pp. 215-18; Newey, p. 60; and
Boyd, passim.

51 Hindmarsh quotes Thomas Payne, the author of a 1781 conversion narrative, who contrasts
the Wesleyan conversion experience with that of the Calvinist: 'I must doubt of my
Justification, which those wretched Casuists lay down, as one great mark of sincerity' (p.
246).

52 Concerning Newton's difficulty interpreting Cowper's religious dread, see James King,
William Cowper: A Biography (Durham: Duke University Press, 1986), pp. 69-70;
Hindmarsh, pp. 285-286, n. 70, and Paxman, p. 228. See also King's 'Adelphi Restored': he
describes the 'bowdleris[ing]' of Cowper's original manuscript of his conversion narrative,
and suggests that Newton himself may have been responsible for the excision of large
portions of the text (p. 293).

53 The quotation is from Newey, p. 133. See also Priestman, pp. 139-140.

54 See note 5, above. The discussion of the saving event's deferral is on pp. 19-20.

55 Cowper's Book V construction of freedom turns on an act of revisiting God in a moment of transformed feeling; the passage about coming back to God is itself a reappraisal, of words from a figure who had been godlike in Cowper's life: John Newton. In a letter to a fellow pastor he writes the following: 'I believe most persons who are truly alive to God, sooner or later meet with some pinches in their experience which constrain them to flee to those doctrines for relief, which perhaps they had formerly dreaded […] In this way I was made a Calvinist myself' (26 July 1775; The Works of the Reverend John Newton, ed. N. Whiting, 4 vols (New Haven: N. Whiting, 1826), 4, p. 370. According to Newton, the definitive Calvinist experience is one of re-envisioning a former source of pain and aversion. Cowper's incorporation of that sequence as a culminating moment within The Task shows that his depictions of religious experience are never very far from his severely authoritative Calvinist God.

56 See 'The Progress of Error', ll. 584-87; 1, pp. 256-57; and 'Conversation', ll. 707-10; 1, p. 372.

57 See Priestman, pp. 123-44, on the kinetic imagery of the stream in The Task.