

Cowper's Task: An Unexpected Reference

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While tidying some personal papers recently I rediscovered a letter I received in 1990 from the poet and critic Philip Hobsbaum, then teaching at the University of Glasgow. One of his reasons for writing was to tell me of a reference to Cowper he had come across unexpectedly in the autobiography of Annie S. Swan, a Scottish author of romantic fiction whose work had once been highly popular and much loved by his mother.

The daughter of a potato merchant and small-scale farmer, Annie Shepherd Swan lived from 1859 to 1943. She achieved her greatest success with *Aldersyde* (1883), a novel set in the Scottish Borders, and wrote also under the pseudonym of David Lyall and her married name of Mrs Burnett Smith. The mention of Cowper comes towards the end of the opening chapter of *My Life* (1937), which covers her early years at home in and around Edinburgh:

My mother? . . . She was very partially educated, but hers was by far the finer nature of that queerly assorted pair. I remember finding her at the baking-board one day, with an open book turned downwards on the table. I lifted it eagerly to see what was powerful enough to engage her attention. It was Cowper's *Task*, a book far beyond my comprehension or interest.¹

The incident is among the most graphic of Annie Swan's memories of this period of her life. From a Cowperian viewpoint it has both a sociological and a geographical significance. Cowper's appearance in a Scottish provincial kitchen, being read by a woman 'very partially educated', reflects his widespread popularity in the nineteenth century. Writing in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1812, Francis Jeffrey estimated the size of the middle-class reading public at about 200,000, compared with 20,000 of a more cultured, presumably upper-class background.² Cowper did lack readers in the latter category but was singularly successful in attracting the former. It is doubtless these Thomas Carlyle had in mind when describing Cowper, in 1829, as a poet beloved of 'the religious classes'.³ Religion certainly seems to explain Cowper's presence in a household whose 'life', as Annie Swan tells us, 'was all bound up in 'the little Evangelical Church at Leith' which her father helped to found and run (pp. 19-20). Cowper's overarching piety and strong moral sense, along with such factors as his attention to the virtues of sober domesticity, won him entry even into places which knew no other books except the Bible, Milton, and *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Bunyan's allegory, Macaulay reminds us in his review of Southey's edition of 1830, brought pleasure no less to 'the peasantry' in 'wildest parts of Scotland' than to the metropolitan figure of Dr Samuel Johnson.⁴ Cowper does not have this range. Mrs Swan at her baking is hardly a far-flung peasant. All the same the image gives a clear idea of his outreach, social and physical, especially when we recall that Jane Austen, the Brontës, and other prominent authors were elsewhere also enthusiasts for his work.⁵

The *Task*, however, is not the only book Mrs Swan is reported to have read:

Once she surprised us all by retreating to her room for a whole day, abandoning everything. The mystery was explained by a copy of *East Lynne*, which had been brought surreptitiously into the house, and in which she became so engrossed that she ceased to 'care a bang', as we expressed it, for anything or anybody. (p. 22)

'Surreptitiously.' Is the word simply Annie Swan's way of saying that her mother did not tell the others about the book? Or was Mrs Swan secretly and perhaps guiltily indulging herself? Were novels frowned upon in this God-fearing household? Whatever the case, the nature of Mrs Henry Wood's *East Lynne*, which appeared in 1861 and became a massive best-seller, raises interesting possibilities for interpreting Mrs Swan's evidently keen desire to begin and

to finish reading it. On one level it seems the perfect book for devout middle-class adults, for it advocates in no uncertain terms the importance of marital fidelity, the heroine, Lady Isabel Carlyle, reaping only prolonged misery from her renewed liaison with an old flame. The moral is pressed firmly home: 'Lady — wife — mother! Should you ever be tempted to abandon your home, so will you awaken! Whatever trials may be the lot of your married life . . . resolve to bear them: fall down upon your knees and pray to be enabled to bear them: pray for patience . . . to resist the demon that would urge you to escape . . .' (book XI, p. 1), and so on. Yet in the course of its narrative this aptly termed 'sensation novel' puts the reader in close touch with the compulsions and illicit conduct that formally it condemns. There is a corresponding ambiguity in the character of Annie Swan's mother. She is on the one hand the model of a conventional housewife, responsive to 'the beauty in humanity', blessed with 'endless patience', a 'tireless worker in . . . baking, cooking, washing, mending, and making' (pp. 21-22). On the other side lies the veiled self, an element of which kept her that day — with whatever precise motivations and feelings — engrossed in the cautionary yet lurid story of a woman who became an adulteress.

Annie Swan says she has 'often thought of all that must have been repressed and hidden in that still nature' but follows this with an example of her mother's ability to find 'compensations' for 'what she had to suffer from us all' that is very different from shutting herself away with a copy of *East Lynne*:

I have seen her standing on the doorstep, looking away across the wide landscape to the sea, with an expression of still rapture on her face. When spoken to, it is as if she came back with a startled air from some region beyond, lovely and desirable, to the stark reality of daily living. (p. 22)

This returns us to Cowper. We cannot know what dimension of *The Task* most appealed to Mrs Swan but the vignette suggests it might well have been the landscape descriptions. The distant prospect of 'slant hills' and 'woods' early in Book VI (ll. 57ff.) springs to mind, not least because it leads on to reflections on the subject of reverie or contemplation. 'Meditation here / May think down hours to moments. Here the heart / May give an useful lesson to the head' (VI. 84-86). Communion with nature was always for Cowper a crucial source of inward release and renovation, and on this occasion he adds a celebration of the enlightenment it can bring to the receptive spirit, as opposed to the knowledge we garner laboriously from books. Annie Swan for her part depicts a pure joy, a 'rapture', which she then envisions, not at all implausibly, as the expression of a driven capacity in her mother for finding intermittent liberation from the narrow confines of her routine existence.

The sea supplies an interesting detail. It has a place, we may recollect, in the obsessive imagination of Cowper's *Crazy Kate* (*Task*, I. 534-56), who longs in vain for the return of the sailor to whom she is bound, goes mad when she hears of his death, and so prefigures later studies in female erotomania of which Jane Austen's Marianne Dashwood and Dickens's Miss Havisham are notable instances.⁶ For Annie Swan it seemingly represents the farthest reach of her mother's inner, as well as actual, gaze and the horizon of a world of freedom and potentiality beyond the constrictions of orthodox domestic life. It signifies both boundary and gateway, both limitation and desire. While Mrs Swan's own view of her situation must remain a secret, such scenarios, as well as more directly the phrase 'all that must have been repressed', leave us in no doubt of her daughter's feminist leanings. That, though, is another story.

Notes

1 Annie S. Swan, *My Life: An Autobiography* (London: Ivor Nicholson & Watson, 1937), p. 21. Further references are bracketed within the text.

2 Francis Jeffrey, *Review of Crabbe's Tales*, *Edinburgh Review*, 20 (July-Nov. 1812), 280.

3 *Correspondence between Goethe and Carlyle*, ed. C.E. Norton (London, 1887), p. 161.

4 Thomas Babington Macaulay, *Review of Robert Southey's edition of The Pilgrim's Progress*, *Edinburgh Review*, 54 (Dec. 1831), 452.

5 See, for example, Lodwick Hartley, *William Cowper: The Continuing Revaluation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1960), pp. 3-15.

6 See Philip W. Martin, *Mad Women in Romantic Writing* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1987), pp. 19-22.