Cowper, Slave Narratives, and the Antebellum American Reading Public

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The influence of William Cowper's anti-slavery poems on the abolitionist cause has long been acknowledged, but in rather generalised terms that fail to acknowledge the complexity of his impact on anti-slavery discourse and of his reputation at large, especially in America. This essay describes some of the many ways in which Cowper's anti-slavery works were recruited by American abolitionists – both white campaigners and African-American producers of slave narratives – and suggests avenues for further investigation into Cowper's standing in antebellum America.

After almost 200 years of relative critical neglect, Cowper's anti-slavery poems – amongst the earliest written by any author – have in the last decade prompted valuable critical reappraisal, and we have been reminded that Cowper was easily the most widely quoted poet within British and American abolitionist discourse.[1] The tone of such scholarship, however, has been mixed. Marcus Wood, the most influential recent critic of the literature of slavery, acknowledges that Cowper's abolitionist verse 'emerges as formally the most ambitious, intellectually the most thorough, satirically the most tough, and aesthetically the richest body of work by an English poet on the subject of slavery'.[2] Yet Wood finds the poems difficult to admire without qualification – he (like other critics, including Peter Faulkner and Joanne Tong) is unhappy with the sleight of hand by which Cowper, especially in *The Task*, denounces slavery yet celebrates the civilising power of British imperialism.[3] Additionally, Wood skewers the paradox by which literal freedom becomes simply a precondition for 'voluntary re-enslavement to Christianity' (p. 78) in 'Charity,' and he objects to the portrayal of slaves as animals (whether helpless lambs, in the 'Epigram,' or a coarsened 'brute' or 'slave,' as in 'Charity' and *The Task*). Wood also writes perceptively, if rather harshly, about what he perceives as egotism in the letters in which Cowper writes about the slave trade – Cowper's sense of 'a total identification between his own hate-filled and suicidal mental state during depression and the ordeal of the slave on the middle passage' (p. 70) – and he notes that the poems, by contrast, enact a more imaginative range of perspectives. This very range, however, seems also a source, for Wood, of the poems' failure:

> Cowper's abolition verse is finally characterized by a restless desperation. He seeks to play every role, from patriarch abolition liberator, to vicious slave captain, to tortured slave, to urbane social commentator. Yet for all the appropriative experiments, the slave as a psychological entity is finally little more than an open playground. (p. 86)

Arguably, however, this very *openness* renders the poems peculiarly congenial to appropriation by other abolitionist writers, particularly in the genre of African-American slave narrative, which in the past few decades has finally won critical recognition as a foundational contribution to American literature and national identity.[4] Some groundbreaking critical work from the 1980s on African-American slave narratives was greatly exercised by questions of truth, authorship, authenticity, and aesthetic unity – in almost all these areas, in fact, the genre was found wanting by critics such as James Olney and John Sekora.[5] More recent scholarship, especially the work of Nicole Adjoe on West Indian texts, has suggested more accommodating ways of evaluating such texts, ways which require us to abandon our sole author model of literary value, and to adopt a less judgmental approach to authorial and generic hybridity.[6]

Adjoe notes that 'every West Indian slave narrative is explicitly mediated in some way – by a white transcriber, editor, or translator', and is therefore a collaborative text, drawing on more

than one voice (p. 14). Hence, West Indian 'testimonios', unlike most classic autobiographies, require collaboration and often do not focus on the inner self, but rather on communal experience. For instance, an important feature of the testimonio genre is the floating 'I'. The 'I' has the grammatical status of what linguists call a 'shifter', a linguistic function that can be assumed by anyone' (Adjoe, p. 18).

This model is a new and enabling way of looking at African-American slave narratives, and indeed at much of Cowper's own verse, both the explicitly anti-slavery works and his other first-person utterances. Work-ing against the Romantic impulse to read all of Cowper autobiographi-cally, we would do well to recuperate this more universalising property of his work, which surely contributes to his tremendous popularity in such a variety of nineteenth-century contexts.

Olney and Sekora are both dismissive of the slave narratives' penchant for poetic epigraphs; Olney ironically lists 'A poetic epigraph, by preference from William Cowper' as one of the many required ingredients of a slave narrative, apparently one of the most egregious of white add-ons.[7] Yet this focus on authorial integrity (or lack thereof) not only fails to acknowledge the effect of such quotations; it also assumes rather too readily that only a white editor could possibly have been sufficiently literate to come up with a quotation from Cowper (or indeed any of the other poets, British or American, quoted in the texts). Harriet Jacobs, whose *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) has been described as 'the most important antebellum slave woman's narrative available today', entitles the chapter describing her seven years of hiding in a narrow attic space 'The Loophole of Retreat'.[8] Her modern editor notes of this reference to *The Task* that 'Jacobs might have read Cowper … for his religious and antislavery poetry' and is surely right to leave open the loophole of possibility that it was Jacobs herself, not merely her white protector and editor Lydia Maria Child, who was capable of such reading and such quotation.[9]

Of course, Jacobs's text is one of the most literary and sophisticated of the slave narratives. Many of them contain no allusion to any text other than the Bible. Yet a surprising range of antebellum slave narratives make use of Cowper in ways that suggest his reputation as an abolitionist writer and as a writer of hymns was not the preserve of white rescuers alone. Some of the slave narratives cite from the *Olney Hymns* in ways which suggest a longstanding familiarity reaching back into their enslaved lives. Not surprisingly, 'God moves in a mysterious way' is the most cited of the hymns. The *Memoir of Quamino Buccau* describes a pious escaped slave who becomes a fixture in Burlington, New Jersey, and who approaches death from gradual paralysis with quiet fortitude, repeating 'line by line, interspersed with touching and memorable comments, the hymn of Cowper, "God moves in a mysterious way …"'; the slave narrative of Solomon Bayley cites the same lines as a gloss on his call to the ministry; and *The Life of John Thompson a Fugitive Slave* quotes two stanzas from the hymn as a commentary on the sudden death and destruction which strike his evil slave-owner.[10]

Thanks to the collection of 'North American Slave Narratives' digitised by the *Documenting the American South* project sponsored by the University Library of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (<http://docsouth.unc.edu>), it is now possible to read and search all extant slave narratives online, and a trawl through antebellum texts reveals that Cowper is quoted in more interesting and complex ways than has been hitherto assumed; not only is the range of his works quoted more extensive than one might expect, but the effects of such quotation are much more varied.[11] Furthermore, it does not any longer seem safe to affirm

that every quotation from Cowper derives from a white editor. Although much remains to investigate in this area, it seems clear that Cowper's texts – like those of other influential abolitionist writers – may well have been available to literate African Americans who had reached the northern states or Canada.

Important mediating sources for Cowper's works included the various collections of anti-slavery poems published in Britain and America, and the abolitionist newspapers such as William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator*, Frederick Douglass's *North Star*, and Lydia Maria Child's *National Anti-Slavery Standard*. There is tremendous research scope for a full investigation of Cowper's presence in these abolitionist periodicals. A preliminary survey of *The Liberator*, for instance, has discovered a rich tissue of quotation to and allusion from Cowper in the pages of Garrison's journal, as well as some small but intriguing items of information, such as the fact that the New England Anti-Slavery Society appear to have held meetings in the Cowper Committee Room in Boston. Much of the news content of *The Liberator* was gleaned from other newspapers, including British abolitionist ones, so that the lines between British and American news and opinion become creatively blurred. Accounts of meetings in old and New England alike are peppered with quotations from Cowper. Speeches delivered in London by the celebrated British abolitionist George Thompson are reported in *The Liberator*, and Thompson presents himself as being shaped as 'an errand boy and a Sunday-school scholar' by the desire to help 'the oppressed negro', and wandering the streets of London 'repeating to himself the lines of Cowper, commencing – "Forced from home and all its pleasures, Afric's coast I left forlorn"'.[12]

In his 1808 *History* of the abolition movement, Thomas Clarkson recalls famously how 'The Negro's Complaint' was not only distributed in pamphlet form in 'many thousand copies' throughout 'the whole island', but also set to music and widely sung 'as a ballad';[13] and recent scholarship on the circulation of texts in the Atlantic world suggests that the extent of the poem's influence, both written and sung, was likely transatlantic.[14] Abolitionists printed this and others of Cowper's poems in pamphlets, newspapers, magazines, and 'albums' of anti-slavery poetry such as the *Anti-Slavery Album: Selections in Verse from Cowper, Hannah More, Montgomery, Pringle* (London, 1828).

The great range of Cowper's abolitionist verse means that he can be quoted in a variety of contexts and to various different ends. The lofty indignation of 'Charity' is a useful resource for those writers seeking a generalised and highly oratorical denunciation of slavery's evils. *The Light and Truth of Slavery: Aaron's History* (Worcester, MA, 1845) includes in its prefatory remarks of religious denunciation the lines 'Ah me, what wish can prosper, or what prayer, / For merchants rich in cargoes of despair? / Who drive a loathsome traffic, gauge and span, / And buy the muscles and the bones of man' (p. 7) to support its argument that slavery corrupts the enslavers as well as brutalising the enslaved.[15]

Quoting from the more personally troubled renunciation of slavery which opens Book II ('The Time Piece') of *The Task* is an effective way of reaching out to a white reader whose 'soul is sick' (line 6) at the spectacle of slavery. The most oft-quoted lines from 'The Time Piece' are 'He finds his fellow guilty of a skin / Not colour'd like his own' (lines 12-13);[16] 'I would not have a slave to till my ground' (line 29), which seems particularly appealing to the yeoman class in republican America; and the passage beginning with 'Slaves cannot breathe in England' (line 40), which works with brilliant ambiguity to draw a contrast with the tainted air of America but also to suggest a similar free future for the republic. In the closing

stages of the Civil War, *The Liberator* winds up a collage of war reports with a blessing upon Abraham Lincoln:

What an unfading crown will he gain in making the first of January, 1863, the Jubilee of enthralled millions! Oh, that will prove a proud day for America, when Cowper's words respecting England shall be true of our own native land:

Slaves cannot breathe in England … [17]

Several writers of slave narratives use this passage to bolster their ironic critiques of the liberty celebrated in the Declaration of Independence.[18] And it is also found in slave narratives or related texts which describe successful flight to Canadian soil; Hiram Wilson writes to *The Liberator* in 1840 that 'Large numbers have come over the past season, and are now experiencing the blessed boon of British liberty. To apply to them the language of Cowper:– "They touch our country, and their shackles fall"'.[19]

Not surprisingly, several slave narratives whose protagonists eventually end up in England make use of the 'Slaves cannot breathe in England' sequence. The *Narrative of the Life of James Watkins* (Bolton, 1852) describes the protagonist's capture and enslavement following the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act – prior to which he had been a free black – and his eventual escape and safe passage to Liverpool, at the sight of which he is overwhelmed:

I could not help shouting and leaping for joy, and I sung a song of liberty. Some of the bystanders and waiters on declared that a mad black man had just landed from an American ship. They little knew the emotions I was then the subject of. I cannot make them understood by any description; persons must be in similar circumstances to know what they are. To say that I was greatly excited is like saying nothing. My joy was unbounded, and I was able to fully adopt and appreciate the assertion of Cowper, that –

Slaves cannot breathe in England, if their lungs

Receive our air that moment they are free;

They touch our country and their shackles fall.

I could also add with perfect confidence – 'NOW I AM FREE!' (p. 33)

One of the most celebrated slave narratives, published in London in 1860, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or, the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery*, uses the 'Slaves cannot breathe' passage as an epigraph, and also – rather more unusually – later cites from *The Task* and 'Expostulation', invoking Cowper's denunciation of religious hypocrisy to condemn American pro-slavery clergymen. The quotation is in fact a silent welding of passages from the two poems, citing simply 'Cowper' at the end – hence the weird slip into rhyming couplets half-way through:

I venerate the man whose heart is warm,

Whose hands are pure; whose doctrines and whose life

Coincident, exhibit lucid proof

That he is honest in the sacred cause.

But grace abused brings forth the foulest deeds,

As richest soil the most luxuriant weeds.[20]

'The Morning Dream' in its entirety appears in several publications – it is not amenable to partial quotation, since its effect depends upon the sum total of its climactic allegorical vision – and is deployed in slave narratives and other abolitionist publications with the same creative ambiguity as the 'Slaves cannot breathe in England' passage from *The Task*, both rebuking America and yet offering the figure of Britannia as a model for the American future, resolving to have no slaves 'of her own' (line 48).[21]

The 'Epigram' on sugar and blood is rarely used in slave narratives, its ironic weirdness perhaps too remote from the affective needs of the genre. Similarly invisible is the horribly ironic 'Sweet Meat has Sour Sauce', while the opening stanza of 'Pity for Poor Africans' appears occasionally but sometimes in a context which suggests that the overarching irony of the poem as a whole has not been understood.[22]

By far the most widely quoted of Cowper's poems is 'The Negro's Complaint', not surprisingly. Its ventriloquising of dignified defiance makes it particularly amenable to narratives written by or about the escaped slave, while the later stanzas which envisage apocalyptic retribution for the slave trade offer a potent warning to the 'Tyrants' who wilfully continue their practices.[23] A curious text by Benjamin F. Prentiss Esq., a white rescuer, entitled *The Blind African Slave, or memoirs of Boyereau Brinch, nick-named Jeffrey Brace* (St Albans, VT, 1810), offers a first-person rendering of the protagonist's story of capture, middle passage, and enslavement in Barbados and America. The narrative is unsophisticated and offers little insight into Brinch's emotions or his life experiences; however, describing the moment at which he is sold into slavery at Barbados, and clearly feeling the need for some kind of affective rhetoric, the text quotes 'The Negro's Complaint' in its entirety. Cowper's imagined protagonist in this text, as in many others which quote shorter excerpts from the poem, gives a voice – albeit a generalised one – to the fate shared by millions of the voiceless enslaved. The powerful 1831 *History of Mary Prince*, authored by London-based Quaker friends of the escaped West Indian slave, similarly quotes from the poem on its title page. Many texts cite the lines 'Skins may differ, but affection / Dwells in white and black the same' (lines 15-16).[24]

The Experience of a Slave in South Carolina. By John Andrew Jackson was published in London in 1862, encouraging Britain to join the Union Cause and help bring an end to the slave trade which they are guilty of originating. Its preface reminds readers that 'Cowper long ago told his fellow-countryman that "Skins may differ, but affection / Dwells in white and black the same"', and requests both sympathy for the enslaved and indignation at those who use 'a religious cloak to screen their monstrous, foul, and cruel acts' (p. iii).

Other texts cite less obvious and well-known passages from Cowper. Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* (New York, 1853) opens with fourteen lines from Book V of *The Task* beginning 'Such dupes are men to custom' (line 298) on the dangerous use of 'custom' to legitimise slavery. The powerful *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave* (Boston, 1847), which contains some highly aggressive denunciations of slavery, has this title page epigraph which is attributed to Cowper, although in fact it is from Addison's *Cato* – the error is both embarrassing and endearing, and suggests that Cowper was almost too firmly established as the source of such sentiments:

Is there not some chosen curse,

Some hidden thunder in the stores of heaven,

Red with uncommon wrath, to blast the man

Who gains his fortune from the blood of souls?

Some slave narratives offer a veritable collage of poetic quotations denouncing slavery, and in such passages Cowper rubs shoulders with the American poets Montgomery and, in particular, Whittier. This mingling occurs in abolitionist magazines too. Implicitly, a line of descent is being traced from the British poets into the new American generation. A London publication by H. G. Adams entitled *God's Image in Ebony: Being a Series of Biographical Sketches, Facts, Anecdotes, etc., Demonstrative of the Mental Powers and Intellectual Capacities of the Negro Race* opens with a condemnation of those who 'find him guilty of a darker skin' (p. 1) and ends with a poem by Adams himself entitled 'Anti-Slavery Lines, Suggested by Baird's Picture, entitled "A Scene on the Coast of Africa"'; the poem condemns the slave trade and anticipates the 'holy … reward' of its eradication thanks to the influence of the British trinity of Clarkson, Wilberforce and Cowper, whose 'strain / In sweet Montgomery's verse revives again' (p. 164).

To what extent was Cowper's standing in antebellum America compromised by his stand against slavery? The picture that emerges is more complex than the simple North/South divide which one might expect. There was in fact a general reluctance in the North outside abolitionist circles to discuss slavery – this of course was one of the motivating factors behind the whole abolitionist movement – and so it was possible for many readers to enjoy and value Cowper's oeuvre without paying much attention to the anti-slavery poems and utterances within his works as a whole. Most American editions of his poems were simply reprintings of English editions, since there was no international copyright law (a source of much financial jealousy on the part of Dickens). Indeed, reviewing in 1833 a Philadelphia edition of Thomas Taylor's *Life of William Cowper*, the *North American Review* complains not only that 'Mr Taylor was never created to be a biographer of Cowper' but also that 'the publishers do not inform us whether this is a reprint of an English work or not'.[25] American editions tended also to reprint early English prefaces or biographies of Cowper, by Newton, Johnson, Southey, and Stebbing, few of which draw attention to the slavery poems. A notable exception to such reticence is the essay 'On the Genius and Poetry of Cowper' by the Rev. J. W. Cunningham, Vicar of Harrow, used as a preface to the *Poetical Works* edited by Grimshawe (1835-6) and reprinted in New York in 1850. Cunningham waxes eloquent on Cowper's 'deepest sympathy with the sufferings of others' (p. 21), 'his *ardent love of his species*' (p. 25), and his 'intense love of freedom' (p. 26), before launching into a page-long reprise of Cowper's 'noble and heart-stirring' role in the first wave of British protest against 'that horrible traffic in human flesh' (pp. 26-7).

Some original American editorial essays were composed as prefatory material for mid-nineteenth-century editions of the poems. Francis J. Child, later a Harvard professor, contributed a 'Memoir of Cowper' to a three-volume *Poetical Works* (Boston, 1854) which remains silent on the anti-slavery poems. A selection of *Poems of William Cowper* printed in New York in 1860 takes the unusual step of actually removing all the anti-slavery poems except for 'The Negro's Complaint', probably aware at this tense moment in American history that such materials would not bolster national sales.

The reformer and abolitionist George B. Cheever published in 1856 a very balanced series of *Lectures on the Life, Genius, and Insanity of Cowper* (New York, 1856). To some extent concerned to mitigate the image of Cowper as a depressed melancholic which had dominated early nineteenth-century accounts, Cheever (in a chapter on Cowper's satire subtitled 'the balance of faculties in Cowper's mind') presents Cowper's 'abhorrence of slavery' as one of his most impressive attributes, the sentiments 'not of a man merely, but a Christian' (p. 186), and later, with reference to *The Task* and to Cowper's letters to Lady Hesketh, endorses Cowper's celebration of 'freedom as man's birthright from his Creator' (p. 396).

Much work remains to be done, as these preliminary remarks suggest, on the many American editions of Cowper published in the nineteenth century.[26] It is similarly beyond the scope of this article to chart the full reception of Cowper's works and of biographical studies within the American periodical press, but some tentative observations may be offered. In general, early American magazines are more interested in establishing a new national literature than in keeping up with reissues of classic English texts, and in fact in this context Cowper is often used as a touchstone against which emergent American poets are measured. For instance, the *Southern Literary Messenger* in 1841 compares Cowper to Bryant, noting that 'Cowper is *pious* – Bryant is *religious* … Bryant advocates the freedom of *man* – Cowper that of the *slave* only'.[27]

Many journals do, however, take notice of new editions and new series of English poetic classics, and make sweeping pronouncements about the English canon (tending to value Cowper second only to Milton in poetic genius and moral authority).[28] *Graham's Lady's and Gentleman's Magazine* – a Philadelphia-based publication, which at various times boasted Poe, Lowell, and Longfellow as editors – devotes an unusual amount of space to British poetry, in the form of short essays clearly aimed to shape the literary tastes of American readers. Cowper is praised for being 'eminently the poet of the home and the heart', for his ability to elicit 'whatever in man is tender, reverent, social and sympathetic', and for his celebration of 'nature in her kind and quiet aspects' – but readers are kept in the dark as to his views on slavery.[29]

The Richmond-based *Southern Literary Messenger* in its thirty-year existence (1834-64) likewise makes many general references to 'the pious Cowper' and 'the delightful and pathetic strains of Milton, Cowper, Campbell, Burns, and a host of other bards', and in the context of an essay on republican government quotes Cowper's stern remarks on 'the pulpit'.[30] On the whole, the *Southern Literary Messenger* includes Cowper among a host of morally improving British writers, valued especially for his delineation of 'human feelings and human affections', and again his pronouncements on slavery are largely ignored.[31] One passage, however, bucks this general trend of polite silence. Buried in the middle of a cheerfully misogynist essay by Thomas Roderick Dew (who also authored one of the South's most unpleasant defences of plantation slavery), *Dissertation on the Characteristic Differences between the Sexes, and on the Position and Influence of Women in Society*[32], is a warning against women's tendency to wallow in a 'poetic or sentimental' frame of mind and to overexert their sympathetic imaginations:

When this species of association is dwelt on too much the individual is characterized by a sort of sickly, morbid sentimentality, which is both highly unnatural, and very disagreeable. … Those writers whom Dr. Smith in his Theory of Moral Sentiments calls whining philosophers, possess minds of this order. They can never see happiness in one part of the world but to reflect on the misery which is experienced in another. Is our country at peace,

happy and prosperous, then rejoice not at it, for there are millions suffering in China, Japan, Hindostan, and Bengal. Thompson's [*sic*] writings are deeply imbued with this whining philosophy, and so perhaps are Cowper's, as was to be expected from the state of his mind. (687)

There is no overt reference to slavery here, but Dew is clearly implying that Cowper's abolitionist sympathies are a symptom of his insanity and of a dangerously female 'sentimentality'.

While most periodical writers including Dew simply eschew any overt reference to his anti-slavery poems, Garrison's eagle-eyed *Liberator* – pirating its information in turn from the *Portland Transcript* – reported that one Southern editor in 1835 actually called for an expurgated edition of key classroom anthologies; the *Southern Literary Gazette* based in Charleston, South Carolina objected to the 'sickly sentimentality' of passages such as 'I would not have a slave to till my ground' and claimed it was '"stamping its infectious poison" upon the pages of school books'.[33] The role of political poetry in the classroom became something of an obsession for *The Liberator*, which in 1857 praises the unique teaching anthology entitled the *Independent Class Reader*, which naturally includes poems by Cowper, for its 'Anti-Slavery principles, having the honor to be in this nineteenth century the only school-book from which every line referring to the troublesome question has not been carefully erased within the last few years'.[34]

Perhaps the most shocking appropriation of Cowper in the antebellum years is reprinted in *The Liberator* from the *New York Independent* for 6 March 1855. Entitled 'The True Spirit of Slavery', the essay opens as follows:
To the Editors of the Independent:

I enclose you for publication – should you, in consideration of the illustration of slavocracy which it affords, consent to sully your fair pages with it – a copy of verses which represent very forcibly the argument and ideas of the 'Chivalry' in regard to their peculiar institution. The history of the composition is briefly this: A young Virginian lady once asked an English traveller, who was partaking of her father's hospitality, for a contribution to her album. He, in the dearth of originality, but with an honesty and good purpose which excuse him, complied by copying those lines in which Cowper, the great English poet, protests that he would rather *be* than *have* a slave. The next victim of the album was Mr. ——, of Savannah, Ga., and these were the 'rejoinder lines' which he appended. What the 'pinched mechanics' of the North may think of the estimation in which they are held by the 'lordly Norman whites' of Georgia and Virginia, we cannot tell – let them answer for themselves.[35]
There follow eight eight-line stanzas which mock the 'canting dastards' of the North who 'whine / Of common birth and equal rights' (lines 1-2) and attack slavery while their own labouring poor are cruelly neglected. In contrast, the poem's refrain insists, 'Our slaves are warm and fed' (line 64). The argument is a hackneyed Southern defence of slavery which was often directed at British as well as North American critics, but it is rare to find it articulated in verse (Marcus Wood notes that there are almost no pro-slavery poems),[36] and Cowper's reported role in the poem's inception is very revealing of his status not only as a British abolitionist poet, but as a touchstone in the social and even romantic circulation of texts. His compassion for the enslaved is here refigured as ill-informed and foreign effeminacy in need of bracing correction by this spokesperson for Southern manhood.

As this powerfully charged instance of 'writing back' suggests, Cowper's standing in antebellum America was complex and fragmented. Poet of nature, domesticity, picturesque

melancholy and piety, he was also a purveyor of dangerous political ideas which impelled detractors to slur him as effeminate or insane. The many uses to which his abolitionist utterances were put certainly contradict Joanne Tong's recent contention that his anti-slavery ballads gained 'little traction among the reading public' and that they need to be seen as 'poetic failures insofar as they signal an aesthetic retreat from their own affective intention' (130). Tong, like Wood, gives great weight to the letters in which Cowper forswears writing poetry about the 'odious and disgusting subject' of the slave trade – 'I feel it a degradation of poetry to employ her in the description of it'[37] – and compares his remarks to Adorno's pronouncement that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'. It seems disproportionate to attribute to Cowper's private letters this kind of declarative finality. In any case, whether or not he genuinely intended to retreat from the affective power of his own poems, their assimilation into the discourse of abolition and, more broadly, into discussions of public and private virtue in antebellum America was beyond his or anyone's control, and secured him and his works a prominent and lasting place in the cultural map of abolition.[38]

Notes

1 On the poems' neglect, see James G. Basker, ed., *Amazing Grace: An Anthology of Poems about Slavery 1660-1810* (London & New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 294. Basker notes that, even as he is at work on the anthology in 2002, the Oxford *Dictionary of National Biography* 'omits any reference to Cowper's antislavery writings'; and that the fourth edition of the *Norton Anthology of Poetry* represents Cowper 'without so much as a line from any of his antislavery poems (p. xlii), even though he was 'one of the most prolific and influential antislavery poets of the eighteenth century' (p. 294). The more recent fifth edition of Norton is similarly silent; however, the more extensive *Norton Anthology of English Literature* (ninth edition, New York, 2015) has a section entitled 'The Slave Trade and the Literature of Abolition,' which includes 'The Negro's Complaint'. The competing *Broadview Anthology of British Literature* (second edition, Toronto, 2015) has a similar section on 'Contexts: The Abolition of Slavery' and includes 'Sweet Meat' to represent Cowper. The introduction to Marcus Wood's anthology, *The Poetry of Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) usefully outlines the transatlantic context of Cowper's abolitionist importance, noting how the 'foremost anti-slavery journals frequently looked to Britain for their stylistic models and … their contributors' (p. xlvi).

2 Marcus Wood, *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 81.

3 See Peter Faulkner, 'William Cowper and the Poetry of Empire', *Durham University Journal* 52:2 (1991), 165-73; Joanne Tong, '"Pity for the Poor Africans": William Cowper and the Limits of Abolitionist Affect', in *Affect and Abolition in the Anglo-Atlantic, 1770-1830* ed. by Stephen Ahern (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 129-49.

4 The pioneering work of William L. Andrews in studies such as *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986) has been followed by a substantial body of research in the field, including critical surveys and reference works such as *The Cambridge Companion to The African American Slave Narrative*, ed. by Audrey Fisch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), *The Oxford Handbook of the African American Slave Narrative*, ed. by John Ernest (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), as well as numerous excellent critical editions of individual and grouped narratives, such as *Slave Narratives* ed. by William L. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates (New York: Library of America, 2000) and *The Classic Slave Narratives* ed. by Henry Louis Gates (New York: Signet, 2014).

5 James Olney, ' "I Was Born": Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature', *Callaloo* 20 (1984), 46-73. John Sekora, 'Black Message/White Envelope: Genre, Authenticity, and Authority in the Antebellum Slave Narrative', *Callaloo*, 32 (1987), 482-515. Sekora is understandably troubled by the extent to which most slave narratives were edited or indeed wholly written down by white intermediaries, concerned to project an acceptable version of the escaped slave as pious and docile, not angry and dangerous. However, not all slave narratives conform to this model, and – as Sekora himself notes – this exclusive focus on authorship and authenticity precludes useful construction of a new critical framework which can accommodate the complex variety of slave narratives. This critical conundrum, which to some extent boils down to a conflict between aesthetic and authorial integrity on the one hand, and communicative efficacy on the other, inevitably persists in discussion of early African-American literature.

6 Nicole N. Adjoe, *Creole Testimonies: Slave Narratives from the British West Indies, 1709-1838* (Basingstoke & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

7 Olney, '"I Was Born"', p. 50.

8 Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself; with Related Documents*, ed. by Jennifer Fleischner (Boston & New York: Bedford St. Martins, 2010), p. vii.

9 Jacobs, *Incidents*, p. 134.

10 *Memoir of Quamino Buccau, A Pious Methodist* (Philadelphia & London, 1851) by William J. Allinson, p. 25; *A Narrative of Some Remarkable Incidents in the Life of Solomon Bayley* (London, 1825), p. 47; *The Life of John Thompson a Fugitive Slave* (Worcester, MA, 1856), p. 6.

11 Some of the slave narratives found in *Documenting the South* were published in England, though most were published in Northern American cities, especially Boston, Philadelphia and New York. The fact of English publication, however, does not suggest that a solely British readership was envisaged, as the British abolitionists took full advantage of the transatlantic mobility of texts. It is difficult to identify any substantial differences, in terms of content or style, between American and English publications.

12 *Liberator*, 33:40 (2 October 1863), 160.

13 Thomas Clarkson, *History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament* (2 vols, London, 1808), I. 188; quoted in Wood, *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography*, p. 82.

14 On the transatlantic dimensions of the Romantic and early nineteenth-century publishing worlds, see Meredith McGill, *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), Philip Gould, *Barbaric Traffic: Commerce and Antislavery in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), and Jennifer Phegley et al., *Transatlantic Sensations* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012).

15 As often happens, the lines are slightly misquoted, and should read 'But, ah! What wish can prosper, or what pray'r, / For merchants, rich in cargoes of despair, / Who drive a loathsome traffic, gage, and span' (137-40).

16 A fictionalised slave narrative by Mrs Emily Catharine Pierson, *Jamie Parker, the Fugitive* (Hartford, CT, 1851) takes this passage as its title page epigraph.

17 *Liberator*, 32: 49 (5 December 1862), 196.

18 See, for instance, *Life and Adventures of Robert, the Hermit of Massachusetts* (Providence, RI, 1829), p. 31.

19 *Liberator*, 10:52 (25 December 1840), 207.

20 *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or, the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (London, 1860), p. 99, citing from *The Task* II. 372-5 and 'Expostulation' lines 213-14.
21 The poem appears prominently at the beginning of the section entitled 'Pieces in Poetry' within a compendium by the white abolitionist Abigail Mott entitled *Biographical Sketches and Interesting Anecdotes of Persons of Colour* (New York, 1826).
22 See *Chains and Freedom: Or, The Life and Adventures of Peter Wheeler* (New York, 1839), which cites the opening four lines of 'Pity' with apparent unawareness of the poem's later ironic development (p. 15).
23 Adams, *God's Image in Ebony*, p. 5.
24 See, for instance, the title page of the collection of slave narratives made by a Canadian minister, the Rev. William Troy, *Hair-Breadth Escapes from Slavery to Freedom* (Manchester & London, 1861).
25 *NAR*, 38:82 (January 1834), 4.
26 Norma Russell, *A Bibliography of William Cowper to 1837* (Oxford: Oxford Bibliographical Society, 1963) lists almost 100 American items, including various configurations of the poetical works as well as the various biographies. Differences between British and American editions are often minimal.
27 *SLM*, 7:10 (October 1841), 735.
28 See, for instance, *Graham's Lady's and Gentleman's Magazine*, 21 (1842), 342, which notes that Milton is 'admired for his sublime conceptions and his unequaled mastery of languages … but the bard of Olney is loved by the good and the true as a friend'.
29 *Graham's Lady's and Gentleman's Magazine*, 36 (1850), 389-91; 38 (1851), 169.
30 *SLM*, 2:10 (1836); 22; 4:8 (1838), 528; 4:11 (1838), 710.
31 *SLM*, 8:5 (1842), 343.
32 *SLM*, 1:12 (1835), 672-91.
33 *Liberator*, 21:50 (12 December 1851), 50.
34 *Liberator*, 27:3 (6 January 1857), 10. See also *Liberator*, 24:31 (4 August 1854), 122, where a reviewer cites two recent sermons by Theodore Parker delivered in Boston which lament the lack of any anti-slavery poems, except for the 'I would not have a slave to till my ground' passage from *The Task*, in Sunday School anthologies published by the Methodist Episcopal Church.
35 *Liberator*, 25:20 (18 May 1855), 80.
36 Wood, *The Poetry of Slavery*, pp. xii-xiii.
37 Letter to Walter Bagot, 17 June 1788; *The Letters and Prose Writings of William* Cowper, ed. by James King and Charles Ryskamp, 5 vols (Oxford; Clarendon Press, 1979-86), III: 177- 8.
38 The idea of the 'Abolition Map' derives from Clarkson, and Wood develops it as a useful model for the matrix of texts and other cultural productions generated by the topic of slavery in the Atlantic world (Wood, *The Poetry of Slavery*, p. xx).