

**‘The Contrite Heart’
Cowper and George Herbert**

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When asked what it is which attracts me, as a poet, to the work of William Cowper, I can do no better than allow him to answer for me. In a letter to William Unwin (17January 1782) he wrote

Every man conversant with Verse-writing knows, and knows by painfull experience, that the familiar stile, is of all stiles the most difficult to succeed in. To make verse speak the language of prose without being prosaic, to marshal the words of it in such order as they might naturally take in falling from the lips of an extemporary speaker, yet without meanness, harmoniously, elegantly and without seeming to displace a syllable for the sake of the rhyme, is one of the most arduous tasks a poet can undertake.

It is a task which, as we see from his poem bearing that title, he succeeded in as few others have, and as someone ‘conversant with Verse-making’, I can only marvel at the wisdom of what he says and also at the perspicuity of his prose.

In the *Olney Hymns*, published in 1779, John Newton gathered together the hymns which he and William Cowper had written to be sung at their twice-weekly prayer meetings. Psalms, being the word of God, were still regarded by the Church of England at that time as the only words fit for divine service, but as these meetings were held not in the church, but in what was called the Great House, the proceedings were much more informal, and it was this informality which was behind the growing popularity of hymn-singing.

However, not all the hymns Newton published had actually been written for such gatherings, or perhaps sung at them. We know from Cowper’s letter to his aunt, Judith Madan, dated 10 December 1767, that he had begun writing the famous lines, ‘Oh! for a closer walk with God’, ‘Yesterday Morning before Daybreak’, and what was then uppermost in his mind was his anxiety over the state of Mrs Unwin’s health.¹ This all took place some four years before Newton even suggested their collaboration, and while ‘Oh! for a closer walk with God’ is still sung as a hymn today, it seems it did not set out as one, but as a poem.

A few pages later in Newton’s collection, when we come to ‘The Contrite Heart’, another work by Cowper, a different question is raised. Could this *ever* have been sung?

The Contrite Heart²

The LORD will happiness divine
On contrite hearts bestow:
Then tell me, gracious God, is mine
A contrite heart, or no?

I hear, but seem to hear in vain,
Insensible as steel;
If ought is felt, ’tis only pain,
To find I cannot feel.

I sometimes think myself inclin’d

To love thee, if I could;
 But often feel another mind,
 Averse to all that's good.

My best desires are faint and few,
 I fain would strive for more;
 But when I cry, 'My strength renew',
 Seem weaker than before.

The saints are comforted I know,
 And love thy house of pray'r;
 I therefore go where others go,
 But find no comfort there.

O make this heart rejoice, or ache;
 Decide this doubt for me;
 And if it be not broken, break,
 And heal it, if it be.

The difference between a poem and a hymn was nicely stated by Norman Nicholson in his book on Cowper. A hymn, he wrote, should be, 'simple in language, direct in thought, broad in imagery and unified in theme'.³ Newton himself was very much of the same mind, arguing in his Preface that 'Perspicuity, simplicity and ease, should be chiefly attended to; and the imagery and coloring of poetry, if admitted at all, should be indulged very sparingly and with great judgment.'⁴ Viewed in this light, 'The Contrite Heart' looks to be a failure as a hymn. It is by no means simple in language, or direct in thought.

Olney was once described as a place 'inhabited chiefly by the half-starved and ragged of the earth', so it is highly unlikely that words such as 'averse' (l. 12) were part of everyone's daily vocabulary, and if the practice of 'lining-out' was used, as it was when the congregation was largely illiterate, then line 23 would, by itself, be meaningless.⁵

The opening statement made in the first two lines is clear and simple, but what follows is not only complex, it is also intensely personal. Hymns which use the generalized 'I', such as 'When I survey the wond'rous cross', present a congregation with no problem; it is a statement and an emotion with which they can all identify, but Cowper's 'I' is not only personal, it is individual. We know that there were times when he himself found little comfort in the church, but it is hardly reasonable to attribute such a feeling to an entire congregation and expect them to join in singing

Thy saints are comforted I know,
 And love thy house of pray'r;
 I therefore go where others go,
 But find no comfort there.

And how would their curate have reacted to such a protest?

Cowper's lines are giving voice to, and relating, an intensely personal spiritual struggle. The dilemma facing him was, 'is mine / A contrite heart, or no?' He hears the word of God, but seems unable to 'feel' it. He is 'inclin'd' to love Him, but then feels inside himself 'another mind, / Averse to all that's good'. Would the 'half-starved and ragged' really have coped with such concepts?

This is a spiritual struggle not unlike those we encounter in the poems of George Herbert, and we remember that Herbert was the only poet Cowper greatly valued. In his autobiographical memoir he wrote:

At length with Herbert's poems, gothic and uncouth as they were, I yet found in them a strain of piety which I could not but admire. This was the only author I had any delight in reading. I poured upon him all day long and though I found not there what I might have found, a cure for my malady, yet it never seemed so much alleviated as while I was reading him.⁶

And in a letter to William Unwin, dated 24 November 1781, he claims, 'I have not read an English poet these thirteen years, and but One these twenty years.'⁷ Was that one poet George Herbert? The easy conversational tone he adopts when speaking to God in ll. 3-4 is very Herbertian, recalling such opening gambits of his as 'My God, I heard this day ...'.

The initial question the poem posed had been straightforward, but after many shifts of thought it concludes by leaving the answer ultimately up to God, and Cowper does so in lines of an almost metaphysical complexity, a complexity evident even in his syntax. George Herbert had ended his poem 'Affliction 1' with the line, 'Let me not love thee, if I love thee not', and we are surely reminded of this when Cowper's poem ends:

And if it be not broken, break,
And heal it, if it be.

One can only conclude that as a hymn 'The Contrite Heart' may be a failure, but it fails because it is such an outstandingly fine poem and one which is not shamed by being put alongside the work of George Herbert.

NOTES

1. *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, ed. James King and Charles Ryskamp, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979-86), I, 187.
2. *Cowper: Poetical Works*, ed. H.S. Milford, 4th edn rev. Norma Russell (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 438-9.
3. Norman Nicholson, *William Cowper* (London: John Lehmann, 1951), p.64.
4. *Olney Hymns* (1779), Facsimile of the First Edition (Olney: Cowper and Newton Museum, 1979), pp. vii-viii.
5. 'Lining-out' is explained by Nicholson, *William Cowper*, p. 63: 'for the benefit of those who could not read, each line of the hymn was first read aloud by the preacher or choirmaster and then sung by the congregation.'
6. William Cowper, *Adelphi*, in *Letters and Prose Writings*, ed. King and Ryskamp, I, 9.
7. *Letters and Prose Writings*, I, 542.