

COWPER'S GARDEN PROGENY

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'God made the country, and man made the town.'¹ Among the most famous quotations in the language, this comes of course from Cowper's *The Task* (l. 749). In a sense, however, and up to a point, Cowper made the country; for nature, whether cultivated or uncultivated, as it appears in his writings, is mediated through his consciousness, or, more accurately, emerges through an interaction between his mind and the phenomena around him. Reciprocity between active self and the organic reality of the natural world is important in Cowper both as, so to speak, the mechanics of creativity and as a creed concerning the spiritual health of the individual and the community. What I wish to do in my lecture is to consider this interrelationship under various heads—the several aspects or effects it assumes. These may be listed as the descriptive, the philosophical, the sociological, and the psychological. The categories, though they can usefully be isolated in this way, do, as we shall see, often overlap and run together.

Laburnum, rich
In streaming gold; syringa, iv'ry pure;
The scentless and the scented rose; this red
And of a humbler growth, the other tall,
And throwing up into the darkest gloom
Of neigh'ring cypress, or more sable yew,
Her silver globes, light as the foamy surf
That the wind severs from the broken wave;
The lilac, various in array, now white,
Now sanguine, and her beauteous head now set
With purple spikes pyramidal, as if,
Studious of ornament, yet unresolv'd
Which hue she most approv'd, she chose them all;
Copious of flow'rs the woodbine, pale and wan,
But well compensating her sickly looks
With never-cloying odours, early and late;
Hypericum, all bloom, so thick a swarm
Of flow'rs, like flies clothing her slender rods,
That scarce a leaf appears; mezerion, too,
Though leafless, well attir'd, and thick beset
With blushing wreaths, investing ev'ry spray;
Althaea with the purple eye; the broom,
Yellow and bright, as bullion unalloy'd,
Her blossoms; and, luxuriant above all,
The jasmine, throwing wide her elegant sweets,
The deep dark green of whose unvarnish'd leaf
Makes more conspicuous, and illumines more
The bright profusion of her scatter'd stars.—

(*Task*, vi. 149-76)

This is the pageant of spring and summer glories that follows on, in the last book of *The Task*, from Cowper's picture of the 'naked shoots' and 'cold stagnation' of the winter scene. The first thing we notice about the passage perhaps is the closeness of his observation of the several plants—his fidelity to their shape, colour, habit, scent. Cowper knows his shrubs—syringa (or mock orange), the standing and the climbing rose, lilacs of different shades, the woodbine (or wild honeysuckle), the hypericum, the mezerion (or daphne), broom, the summer jasmine. There is one hardy annual, althaea, which is

the hollyhock; the laburnum is a small ornamental tree, and two commanding arboreal types, the cypress and the yew, provide architectural breadth and support. Reading Cowper makes you a better gardener, familiarizing you with the species, their appearances and other properties, and giving ideas for local horticultural design.

Yet that, obviously, is not all. As well as describing distinct generic characteristics—the racemes of the laburnum and the hypericum’s mass of stamens are good examples—Cowper draws a broad pattern of contrast and similarity, embracing high and low, dark and bright, round and sharp, and so on. Beyond this aesthetic dimension a figurative language interrelates the natural and the human spheres (‘purity’, humility and pride are there, and the blooms frequently suggest female beauty), while comparisons with the surf, a swarm of flies and, in the case of the jasmine, ‘scatter’d stars’ insist on associations among parts of nature itself. This kaleidoscopic landscape constitutes what in classical thought would be termed a *discordia concors*, order-in-variety. It is Cowper’s tribute to the abundance and coherence of God’s Creation—and as such is a philosophic statement. Just afterwards he makes a didactic point, seeing in the seasonal cycle a lesson in ‘heav’nly truth’:

From dearth to plenty, and from death to life,
Is Nature’s progress when she lectures man
In heav’nly truth; evincing, as she makes
The grand transition, that there lives and works
A soul in all things, and that soul is God.

(*Task*, VI. 181-85)

Such utterances in Cowper strike me as hardly convincing as arguments in favour of the existence of God. They are indeed assertion rather than argument, and exhibit a dubious circularity: there is a God that performs miracles of renovation, and to observe these miracles is to know there is a God. But this weakness—if thus it can be called—does nothing to undermine the overall force of the poetry either as an affirmation that there is a ‘soul’, a life, of some kind in Nature (a point I shall return to later) or as an act of contemplation and worship involving Cowper’s rich sensibility, which P.M. Spacks, in her study of *The Task*, describes as the expression of ‘his desire for peace, for beauty, piety; his emotional and religious yearnings, his intellectual convictions’.² There is even an erotic element at work, as the lilac is perceived as raising ‘her beauteous head’ and the jasmine throws ‘wide her elegant sweets’. In these features of the text we begin to discern the complex personal side of Cowper’s garden poetry.

For Cowper, God was both the source and the end of heightened perception: ‘Acquaint thyself with God, if thou would’st taste / His works. Admitted once to his embrace, / Thou shalt perceive that thou wast blind before’ (*Task*, V. 779-81). This concept was precious to him experientially, for it meant that in exercising his capacity for powerful response to the Creation, as he ubiquitously does in *The Task*, he was attesting his state of grace, and thus countering the conviction of damnation which haunted him, the ‘stricken deer’, and which is the best-known fact of his biography. In the traditional manner of Puritan autobiographers, Cowper stabilizes his troubled inner life through writing, through seeking evidences of his well-being. In addition to being strategic in this way, however, his engagements with nature yield immediate inward benefits, bringing experiences of calm, renewal and stimulation. Here is a telling instance, again from Book VI:

I again perceive
The soothing influence of the wafted strains,

And settle in soft musings as I tread
 The walk, still verdant, under oaks and elms,
 Whose outspread branches overarch the glade.
 The roof, though moveable through all its length
 As the wind sways it, has yet well suffic'd,
 And, intercepting in their silent fall
 The frequent flakes, has kept a path for me.
 No noise is here, or none that hinders thought.
 The redbreast warbles still, but is content
 With slender notes, and more than half suppress'd:
 Pleas'd with his solitude, and flitting light
 From spray to spray, where'er he rests he shakes
 From many a twig the pendent drops of ice,
 That tinkle in the wither'd leaves below.
 Stillness, accompanied with sounds so soft,
 Charms more than silence. Meditation here
 May think down hours to moments. Here the heart
 May give an useful lesson to the head,
 And learning wiser grow without his books.

(*Task*, VI. 67-87)

If anyone wonders what a walk in the open beneath oaks and elms has to do with gardens, it can be said that to Cowper the countryside as a whole was a garden in the very special respect that it retained traces of Eden, the world before the Fall. In this episode he seems to be at once in a temple, meditating and communing with the 'soul in all things', and in an earthly paradise, creating and enjoying. It is interesting to note that, in contrast to his recurrent nightmare of being pursued to death or to death-in-life by some adverse force, he perceives nature as operating on his behalf, sheltering him and keeping 'a path', a way forward, for him. He is of nature's elect. The redbreast is his double, happy amidst solitude and at home in a recess of beautiful forms, making music from quiet yet lively intercourse with his surroundings, singing in harmony with the objects there—not the captive and fated bird of 'On the Death of Mrs. Throckmorton's Bulfinch', which, reflecting Cowper's nightmare of sudden destruction, is killed in its cage at night by a foraging rat. The imagery of psychic terror has been reversed into that of privilege, contentment and freedom.

Small spaces are a recurrent motif in Cowper's writings. They can be places of confinement or horror, not only the cage that is the site of imprisonment and death, say, but the 'fleshly tomb' within which the despairing Calvinist, with searing directness, feels himself buried alive in the lines 'Hatred and vengeance, my eternal portion', the verses Cowper wrote during a period of insanity. Even the garden can have its unpleasant surprises, as when, recorded in 'The Colubriad', a viper suddenly invades the territory of the unsuspecting poet. Though the serpent, which is both literal and a figuring of the dark, demonic side of Cowper's own mind, is quickly put to flight in a display of humorous mock-heroic bravado—'With out-stretch'd hoe I slew him at the door, / And taught him NEVER TO COME THERE NO MORE' (ll. 40-41)—the poem remains a sharp memorial to the precariousness of existence, a point Cowper elegantly summarized in one of his letters: 'It is a sort of paradox but it is true.—We are never more in danger than when we think ourselves most secure.'³ Yet Orchard Side is overwhelmingly a sanctuary and a breeding-ground for Cowper, as he memorably indicates in a sequence in his correspondence when he constructs out of his summerhouse a series of nooks within nooks leading to the ultimate hideaway that is also the secret locus of writerly creation: the summerhouse becomes, by turns, 'hermitage', 'refuge', a 'nutshell', and 'a nest ... [wherein] I brood and hatch, and in due time my progeny takes wing and whistles'.⁴ The summerhouse lies of course at

the heart of Cowper's garden; his 'progeny' are the poems and letters to which he gave birth in this setting.

It is in the third book of *The Task* that 'The Garden' (which is the subtitle of the book) becomes most immediately and consistently the location and subject-matter of the poetry. What feats of imagination, language and intellect are performed in this *petit cachot*, this little corner of the universe! At a relatively simple level, though one by no means easy to attain, the routine and objects of the garden—cucumbers, 'stercoraceous heap' (or dunghill), and all—offer the occasion for some of Cowper's most adept exploitation of the disparity between high style and low subjects, that humorous magnification of Olney minutiae which is one means by which he elevates and shares his day-to-day experience with his readers. This might be termed a poetry of opportunistic happenstance, the democratisation of epic ambitions. Then there is the therapeutic dimension, with Cowper satisfying his need to create illusions of stature and of mastery over his milieu; the role of gardener shades into that of a second Adam, or God-surrogate, exercising care of his kingdom. (We may recall in this regard Claude Levi-Strauss's reflection that the act of miniaturization 'diminishes or eliminates the resistance that reality poses to the ordering instincts of the human mind.')

⁵ Most important of all, however, is the larger mythopoeic quality of book III, where Cowper weaves parables of how human beings should function in the world and visions of how the world should ideally be. He does this against the background of, and in answer to, his strong apprehension of how 'civilization' was re-forming itself on acquisitive principles, a basis of manufacture, consumerism, and commercial enterprise, so that, for instance, merchants 'Incorporated ... / Build factories with blood' and the 'Midas finger of the state' reaches from its urban stronghold even into rural villages, making debauchery bleed gold for the exchequer, 'for ministers to sport away' (*Task*, IV. 500-08, 678-81). Cowper saw the modern socio-economic system as one of dehumanising excess (in book II he actually mounts a sustained attack upon the evils of 'Profusion') and a corrupt polity (he declares later that 'th'age of virtuous politics is past, / And we are deep in that of cold pretence' [v. 493-94]). Over against this new Fall he fashions in his accounts of the innocent and fruitful pursuits of the sequestered man a wholesome myth of optimal existence which embraces many values, including friendship and cultivation of the mind, but stresses above all the fertile cooperation—in his words, 'glad espousals' (III. 543)—of Art and Nature.

In Cowper's garden these two great principles, the skills of man and the energies of nature, are seen in a perfectly balanced and productive unity that represents the pinnacle of the relationship of humankind with its environment. This accord is depicted and allegorised on one level in the work, the *tasks*, of the expert and sensitive labourer. Sometimes nature has primacy, as in the passage on growing cucumbers, where art follows its example and assists its processes:

when summer shines,

The bee transports the fertilizing meal

From flow'r to flow'r, and ev'n the breathing air

Wafts the rich prize to its appointed use.

Not so when winter scowls. Assistant art

Then acts in nature's office, brings to pass

The glad espousals, and ensures the crop.

(*Task*, III. 537-43)

Sometimes, on the other hand, the initiative falls to art, even to the extent of remedying nature's defects:

What is weak,
Distemper'd, or hast lost prolific pow'rs,
Impair'd by age, his unrelenting hand
Dooms to the knife: ...

...The rest, no portion left
That may disgrace his art, or disappoint
Large expectation, he disposes neat
At measur'd distances, that air and sun,
Admitted freely, may afford their aid ...

(*Task*, III. 414-17, 421-25)

Disorders are thus corrected and improvements made through acts of incision and rearrangement; but there is no discord; and the triumphs of art, though they may involve radical intervention, are never an affront to nature, never a violation.

However, the creative union of art and nature operates also in the work of the true poet, which is imaginative labour above and parallel to the handiwork of the gardener. Cowper ultimately traces in his hinterland the lineaments of a goodly social order:

Few self-supported flow'rs endure the wind
Uninjur'd, but expect th'upholding aid
Of the smooth-shaven prop, and neatly tied,
Are wedded thus, like beauty to old age,
For int'rest sake, the living to the dead.
Some clothe the soil that feeds them, far diffus'd
And lowly creeping, modest and yet fair,
Like virtue, thriving most where little seen;
Some, more aspiring, catch the neighbour shrub
With clasping tendrils, and invest his branch,
Else unadorn'd, with many a gay festoon

And frequent chaplet, recompensing well
The strength they borrow with the grace they lend.
All hate the rank society of weeds,
Noisome, and ever greedy to exhaust
Th'impov'rish'd earth; an overbearing race,
That, like the multitude made faction-mad,
Disturb good order and degrade true worth.

(*Task*, III. 657-74)

This shows forth a society where 'interest' is not that of selfish profit but of mutuality—the interdependence of young and old, needy and strong, vigorous and graceful, past generations and present. The lowly are uncorrupted, the high truly noble. Undesirable elements, the 'weeds', are present but as hated exceptions to the golden rule. Groups that Cowper attacks elsewhere in his poetry are rendered subordinate and expelled to the margins: the greedy that would 'exhaust' the land ('improvers', absentee landlords, agricultural speculators), politicians ('an overbearing race'), and the mob roused by 'faction' (Cowper, though Protestant, had in 'Table Talk' fiercely condemned the anti-Catholic Gordon riots of 1780). We have an alternative ideology of community, honourably conservative, to set over against the brutal actualities of materialism and the spirit of acquisition, a brash and shabby modernity. This is of course a utopian dream, but dreams are important. Such moments of visionary insight bring into focus one of the major messages of the poem—that imagination, which gives access to the ideal and the beautiful, is superior to every other form of production. Cowper reinforces the importance of the role of the poet, making the periphery of his sequestration not only a centre of attention in its own right but the bastion of moral, spiritual and aesthetic worth (while in other aspects of his work he also opened up the less comforting seam of post-Enlightenment subjectivity, that is, the condition of ceaseless mental struggle for stability, of which a near analogue is the existentialism of Lord Byron). The task of the contemplative writer, whom the world might consider a mere idler, is in the end the most significant 'business' of all, for it keeps people alive to surpassing wisdom and the best they may aim for.

We have travelled in this lecture from Cowper's gift for close description to some of the far-reaching implications of his nature poetry. If we think back to the epiphanic interchanges with nature that we considered earlier, we may remind ourselves that Cowper's starting-point was a desire to reaffirm the reality of the God of revelation as opposed to the God of the Deists, who would reduce him to a mere mechanic cause, or banish him to the reaches of space where he stokes the engines of the universe: 'there lives and works / A soul in all things, and that soul is God.' But Cowper ended up, in practice, doing something else, which moves us away from conventional religion. He founded a 'natural faith' and theory of the 'one Life within us and abroad' (to quote a well-known phrase from one of Cowper's disciples in this regard, Samuel Taylor Coleridge⁶), where what matters, as I have said, is respect for the living organic reality of nature and reciprocity with it. I would like finally to underscore two emphases within this creed.

One of these is the salient place of ‘meditation’, where Cowper subordinates the ‘wisdom’ and ‘truth’ that are won from books by ‘slow solicitation’ to those which, amidst nature, ‘seize at once / The roving thought, and fix it on themselves’ (*Task*, VI. 114-17). This plainly predicts William Wordsworth’s celebration of ‘wise passiveness’, when we learn more from absorbing impulses from the phenomena around us than we can from all the sages, and of that state of receptivity when the life of nature ‘flash[es] upon that inward eye / Which is the bliss of solitude’.⁷ Yet Cowper, and again Wordsworth after him, also prized proactive sympathy, with nonsentient as well as sentient objects; the latter poet in cherishing that ‘blessed mood’ in which ‘We see into the life of things’,⁸ the former in events like that during which he becomes interior to the livingness of a single blade of grass buried beneath the snow:

Earth receives

Gladly the thick’ning mantle; and the green

And tender blade, that fear’d the chilling blast,

Escapes unhurt beneath so warm a veil.

(*Task*, IV. 329-32)

This is no parochial sentimental witness. The consciousness that constitutes these lines, and that runs through the larger poetic project of which they are an arresting instant, contests not only the rule of materialistic socio-economic culture but the claims of two of the most influential philosophies of the Enlightenment, Newtonian physics, which indicated particles of matter moving in space as the primary reality, and the similarly mechanistic psychology of John Locke, which made the mind a sort of computer processing sense-data and rendered the objects of our perception mere illusion. Cowper and those who followed and developed his lead, in the Romantic period and beyond, sought to redeem the universe and the self from the shadow of encroaching scientific death. We still, perhaps more than ever, can feel the urgency of the quest to preserve spiritual meaning and value, and the numinous, in the world we inhabit. The most immediate and far-reaching manifestation of this effort and this need in our own time may well be the ecological movement. We can turn to and appreciate Cowper now as one of the ‘greenest’ of our poets—which makes it surprising that he gets hardly a mention in Jonathan Bate’s recent popular book of literary ecocriticism, *The Song of the Earth*.⁹ Is it in this particular context that his future standing especially lies?

NOTES

1. This paper was delivered at the first annual Cowper and Newton symposium, Olney, 28 April 2001, which was devoted to the theme of ‘Cowper and the Garden’. It has been slightly revised for publication. All references to the poetry are from Cowper, *Poetical Works*, ed. H.S. Milford, 4th edn, revised Norma Russell (London: Oxford University Press, 1967).
2. Patricia Meyer Spacks, *The Poetry of Vision: Five Eighteenth-Century Poets* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 206.
3. To William Unwin, 3 August 1782: *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, ed. James King and Charles Ryskamp, 5 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979-86), II, 68.

4. *Letters*, I, 507, II, 346, 360, 569.
5. See Claude Levi-Strauss, *La Pensée Sauvage* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1962), pp. 34-35. I quote the summary of Levi-Strauss's position by Bruce Redford, *The Converse of the Pen: Acts of Intimacy in the Eighteenth-Century Familiar Letter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 55.
6. Coleridge, 'The Eolian Harp', l. 25.
7. See Wordsworth, 'The Tables Turned' ('Come forth into the light of things, / Let Nature be your teacher') and 'I wandered lonely as a cloud' (ll. 21-22).
8. 'Tintern Abbey', ll. 41-49.
9. Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (London: Picador, 2000).