

'MANY A TREMBLING CHORD': LADY AUSTEN AS MUSE

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The friendship between William Cowper and Lady Ann Austen lasted for less than three years — from July 1781 until May 1784 — and even that short period included a rupture of two months in early 1782. Yet this relationship in different ways gave Cowper the starting-point for his greatest popular success *The Diverting History of John Gilpin*, his greatest original poetic achievement, *The Task*, and his largest continuous literary endeavour, the translation of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*¹. All these were suggested — or rather in the case of *The Task* ordered — by Lady Austen. In that very simple sense she deserves to be called Cowper's muse in his most poetically productive period. But why and how did she become so? Later we shall address the literary-critical question of just how — in what ways — Lady Austen influenced *The Task* in particular. But first we need to address the biographical question of just *why* she assumed such a vital creative role in Cowper's life. There were arguably at least three other women more centrally embedded in Cowper's existence than she: his mother who had died when he was six; his cousin Theadora whom he had loved, lost or finally given up; and of course the constant companion of his Olney years and afterwards, Mary Unwin. Quite soon a fourth ubiquitous lady would be added in the form of Theadora's busy sister Lady Hesketh. I will suggest that we can only fully understand Lady Austen's influence, and indeed Cowper's ultimate need to reject her, if we look at his relationship with his mother, Theadora and Mary.

But let us remind ourselves of some basic facts. Lady Austen was a widow in her early forties visiting her sister, the wife of Thomas Jones curate of Clifton Reynes, when Cowper first met her. Hayley's account of the first meeting is well-known with its description of Cowper's spotting Mrs Jones and Lady Austen emerging from a draper's shop opposite Orchard Side and asking Mrs Unwin to ask the two ladies in to tea. George Ella suggests contrariwise that Cowper knew who Lady Austen was in advance and points out that he tells Newton of Lady Austen knocking on the door². Whatever the starting-point, the progression to intimacy between the inhabitants of Clifton Reynes rectory and those of Orchard Side was rapid and included the unprecedented holding of what Cowper knowingly referred to as a *fête champêtre*³, that is a picnic in the Spinney. Just who was this lady who had revolutionized the quiet domestic routines of Orchard Side?

She and her much older husband had lived in France and England until his death in 1772. Thereafter the widow had also alternated, living frugally, between the two countries. A sophisticated and cultivated woman with a great capacity for enjoying life, she had nevertheless discovered in middle life a hunger in herself to be more serious which, as so often in that period, led the genteel seeker for truth towards an Evangelicism intertwined with a desire for a simpler, less artificial lifestyle. She wished to hear the Revd Thomas Scott — who had followed the short, unhappy reign of Mr Page as curate at Olney — preach and, as Cowper himself noted, to leave behind the fashionable world: 'She is a lively agreeable woman, has seen much of the World and accounts it a great Simpleton as it is, she laughs and makes laugh, and keeps up a Conversation without seeming to labor at it.'⁴ Still despite this, despite her self-deprecation of her own appearance and being well past the age when her namesake Jane Austen's heroines lose their bloom, Lady Austen was clearly both a charismatic character and charming company.

What followed is broadly clear, though interpretations differ as to the depth and long-term significance of events. Picnics and visits culminated in very regular social contact in which, in spite of Cowper's attempts to portray himself, Mary and Ann as an equilateral triangle, a strong rapport grew up between Cowper and Lady Austen. All Cowper's attempts to normalize the situation in correspondence could not disguise his enjoyment of close intimacy with this woman who, if she considered herself unattractive, nevertheless made up for it by the sheer vibrancy of her personality and manifest admiration for the poet himself. By the time she returned to London in the autumn the plan for her returning to live in Olney in two years was fully-developed and Cowper could send her a poem such as 'To a Lady Who Wore a Lock of his Hair Set with Diamonds':

The star that beams on Anna's breast
 Conceals her William's hair,
 'Twas lately severed from the rest
 To be promoted there.
 The heart that beats beneath that star
 Is William's, well I know;
 A nobler prize and richer far
 Than India could bestow.
 She thus his favoured lock prefers,
 To make her William shine;
 The ornament indeed is hers,
 But all the honour mine.⁵

Not surprisingly, the lady took such sentiments as a green light for further advances and, in January 1782, made what was tantamount to a proposal by letter. Equally unsurprisingly to anyone who really knew him, Cowper back-pedalled in alarm and wrote a 'corrective' letter setting her right about their relationship (the letter was destroyed by Lady Austen who later admitted that it had been a good one). This letter struck home to the extent of causing a complete rupture which was thought in Olney to be final until the arrival of three pairs of worked ruffles from Lady Austen indicated peace negotiations were about to commence. So by summer 1782, Lady Austen was back at Clifton Reynes apparently in even more intimate contact with the occupants of Orchard Side than before. The removal plan was not only advanced but put into effect in October 1782 when Lady Austen moved into Newton's vicarage just through the gate in the garden wall — not before having managed two short stays at Orchard Side, one due to fear of thieves and the other to sudden illness, incursions which must have put Mary Unwin into a state of amber alert.

Still, things went on happily enough through the next months with regular day and evening contact between the two households. Cowper's letters give some indication of this. To Joseph Hill he could write in December 1782:

How different is the complexion of your Evenings and mine! Yours spent amid the ceaseless Hum that proceeds from the inside of 50 noisy and busy periwigs, mine by a domestic fireside, in a retreat as silent as retirement can make it; where no noise is made but what we make for our own amusement. For instance, here are two Ladies and your humble Servant in company; one of the ladies has been playing on the Harpsichord, while I, with the other have been playing at Battledore and Shuttlecock.⁶

Indeed there is good evidence for thinking that already by October 1782 Lady Austen had been able to help stave off the return of the threatened and dreaded ten-yearly depression by telling Cowper the story that would become *The Diverting History of John Gilpin*. If his moods were sombre it was yet some tribute to Lady Austen that the dark days of January 1783, when he must have been awaiting breakdown, passed off without collapse. By July 1783 the time was propitious for the great suggestion to be made which has come down to us in Hayley's words based on the report of Lady Austen herself:

This lady happened, as an admirer of Milton, to be partial to blank verse, and often solicited her poetical friend to try his powers in that species of composition. After repeated solicitation, he promised her, if she would furnish the subject, to comply with her request. — 'O' she replied 'you can never be in want of a subject: — you can write upon any: — write upon this Sofa!' The poet obeyed her command, and from the lively repartee of familiar conversation arose a Poem of many thousand verses, unexampled perhaps both in origin, and its excellence!⁷

As the next winter wore on *The Task* itself would memorialise the climactic period of their friendship. Again Cowper contrasts the evenings at Orchard Side with the preceding description of a fashionable gathering:

But here the needle plies its busy task,
 The pattern grows, the well-depicted flow'r
 Wrought patiently into the snowy lawn
 Unfolds its bosom, buds and leaves and sprigs
 And curling tendrils, gracefully disposed,
 Follow the nimble finger of the fair,
 A wreath that cannot fade, of flow'rs that blow
 With most success when all besides decay.
 The poet's or historian's page, by one
 Made vocal for th' amusement of the rest;
 The sprightly lyre, whose treasure of sweet sounds
 The touch from many a trembling chord shakes out;
 And the clear voice, symphonious, yet distinct,
 And the charming strife triumphant still,
 Beguile the night, and set a keener edge
 On female industry; the threaded steel
 Flies swiftly and unfelt the task proceeds.

(*Task*, IV, 150-166)

The apparently unselfconscious weaving of the poem's title word 'task' into the beginning and end of this passage surely heightens our feeling of coherence and integration. So what began to fissure and eventually explode this idyll? More than one thing, I think. For a start there was a gradually increasing tension between Lady Austen the muse of *The Task* and Lady Austen the consumer of the time needed to write *The Task*. Sometimes he would only manage to write a few lines in the free hour or so of the morning period left to him. Second, there was the trajectory of Lady Austen herself: for her forward momentum was necessary since the status quo could only confirm her subordination to the dominance of the Unwin-Cowper household. Doubtless it was in these circumstances that she used her secret weapon of satire and ridicule at the expense of the homely Mary. Conversely, Mary Unwin's need was to re-occupy home territory — if William had ever smiled at Ann's wit⁸, surely Mary had ways of making him feel that he was thus betraying the sensitive self which he so much prized? Ultimately, Cowper was being asked to choose not just between two women but literally between two keepers of his own soul. Eventually, Ann made her final gamble in a second 'proposal' in the spring of 1784. Ultimate cataclysm was bound to result and we now know where the fall-out actually fell. By May 1784 she had departed for Bath and would not see Cowper again, despite visiting her sister in Clifton Reynes in the later 1780s.

Why had it to end like this? Why did the apparently acquiescent William make the decisive break, as he had two years ago already foreshadowed? Of course one must acknowledge that Ann Austen herself was a volatile all-or-nothing character. But beneath the witty and sensitive exterior of Cowper lay a need to take radical measures to protect his autonomy. Extreme intimacy and complete breakdown had always been very close in his relationships with women. The one relationship which he could not break, that with Mary Unwin, was the exception which proved this rule. Was not she after all the repair of the original great break in his life - the death of his mother when he was only just six? And this, despite the fact that in reality their ages were only seven years apart. In 1790 in his fifty-ninth year he would suddenly confront his mother's picture again, sent to him by his cousin Anne Bodham from Norfolk: Ann Donne, the slight sensitive woman who had suddenly lost her fiancé and married Cowper's uncommunicative father on the rebound, the woman who had lost her first three children before William was born, who would lose two more by the time William was three-and-a-half and who would of course die having given birth to William's beloved younger brother John. There seems good reason to think that the close relationship of William and his mother was special — and remarkable by the standards of those pre-sensibility times — on her side as well as on that of her son. Without embarrassment the poet, already ageing by eighteenth-century standards as he wrote 'On the Receipt of my Mother's Picture out of Norfolk', could remember pinning the decorative flowers from his mother's dress onto paper with her fondly bending over him, talking to him and stroking his hair:

Could Time, his flight reversed, restore the hours
When, playing with thy vesture's tissued flow'rs,
The violet, the pink, and jessamin,
I prick'd them into paper with a pin,
(And thou wast happier than myself, the while,
Wouldst softly speak, and stroak my head, and smile)
Could those few pleasant days again appear,
Might one wish bring them, would I wish them here?

(74-81)

The actual portrait of his mother, we note, is a good likeness not because it reminds him of how she looked, but because he claims to remember exactly how she looked and to test the picture against it. Henceforward she will be again at the foot of his bed when he wakes and goes to sleep.

But at six the mother was gone who had watched over and validated his exploration of the world. Wordsworth was eight when he lost his mother and had already started to range and wander into a world of nature where he might hope to find a compensatory warm presence. Cowper had only just entered that relatively free period of latency between the traumas of toddlerhood and puberty, when the watching presence that had validated his existence was taken away. Yet he must not mourn, the maids and perhaps his father were determined on that. The maids said that his mother would come back: she did not but he could neither express his anger against this cheating world nor share his guilt that he must have done something wrong. Soon enough he would be away to school and after initial bullying the urge to grow and survive would take over. He would become popular, able and pleasing. As the child psychiatrist Winnicott suggests, loss of the parent's caring observation in childhood can make it difficult for the adult to be alone⁹. But only his strange inability to take decisions, to commit himself to any serious work, betrayed that there was something deeply wounded in the psyche of this urbane young, flirtatious cynic who could in the 1750s not make that choice of life which Johnson's *Rambler* had just put at the centre of both responsible moral being and self-actualization. It is not hard to see young Cowper as one of Johnson's many characters who reveal the fatal consequences that attend trying to remain enclosed from the painful decisions of maturity within one's own fantasies of a wonderful, perfect life.

Theadora was the one who revealed the fatal fissures in his personality. Just because she was so right for him, so attractive, so witty and so melancholy in the ways that he was himself, his relationship with her grew volatile and threatened to tear him apart. In 1756 he fatally lacked the will to assert himself against her father's negation. His poetry took on a deeper and darker tone as he contemplated Theadora's own pain in 'Doom'd, as I am':

And Her — thro' tedious years of doubt and pain,
Fix'd in her choice, and faithful — but in vain!

(9-10)

Less well known is that much later, in 1763 when Ashley Cowper relented and Theadora hoped all would be well that summer in Margate, he could not bring himself to accept her. What did he tell himself? Perhaps that he had now become a world-weary, tough-minded connoisseur of life, who had grown out of the pains of romantic love, perhaps that the husbandly duty of the sexual act would reveal anxieties and inadequacies he must hide. We cannot know: whatever his precise motives he was mounting impressive defences which were in truth a kind of psychological Maginot Line. The only account we have from him is riddling but suggestive. When, much later, Theadora's sister Harriot asked why he did not propose, his reply according to her account ran: 'To this question he replied what I can never forget... "O yes I saw my Paradise before me - but I also saw the flaming Sword that must for ever keep me from it".'¹⁰ Within months of that final break with Theadora his uncle's attempts at patronage to a clerkship at the House of Lords had gone disastrously wrong, and William was sinking into the terror of his first massive breakdown, into suicidal depression and madness.

Many factors, including doubtless hereditary genetic ones, contributed towards the severity of this episode. But was there not some sense in which he had to kill his relationship with Theadora both to re-enact inside and forestall outside the death of his mother — only alone with my loss can I keep my personality alive — even though that must mean that, as with the loss of his mother, he must die himself? Was there not an inexorable progress from this psychological assassination of the love in his own soul to his subsequent suicidal impulses? He must run from the primal, overwhelming death outside himself to self-chosen death: only to find of course that God had refused to let William Cowper take that privilege of allocating death's date from Him.

Mary of course, with her impulses to nurture and care for others, perhaps too with her own need to control life's pains and losses by those impulses, could tap into Cowper's need for attachment far more safely. By a wondrous and highly creative collusion the two of them created the powerful and effective fiction that she was a mother figure. In 1790 he wrote to Mrs King that Mary Unwin had 'supplied to me the place of my own mother, my own invaluable mother, these six and twenty years. Some sons may be said to have had many fathers, but a plurality of mothers is not common.'¹¹ It must have seemed the ultimate security: for Cowper found asymmetric relationships with women most sustaining outside the magic freedom of letter-writing where all could be equal. That is not code for saying he was selfish: he was a wonderful substitute father for William Unwin and when Mary became ill he would in turn care for her even when he himself was failing (morally he seems to me at his finest when trying to head off Lady Hesketh's well-meant attempts to denigrate the failing, and increasingly fretful Mary as a selfish burden to him). That he could compose the grateful 'To Mary' at this time speaks volumes for his capacity for loyalty and fidelity. But the fact remains that the death of his mother had made something in him want to care or be cared for — to be an inner child or parent not a partner.

And yet...and yet...the opposite desire was there and had to be. Already we can see that in the doomed romance with Theadora he had experienced something as wonderful as it was unbearable: the dynamic, unpredictable relationship of a man and woman prepared to take emotional risks together. It was this buried dream that Ann Austen was to crack open in 1781. Despite the elaborate defences of his contemporary correspondence with Newton and William Unwin something in Cowper must have thought that this might be *the* relationship. Unlike Theadora, Ann did not bring a worrying burden of a rival neurosis. Their shared taste for humour and satire provided a sophisticated defence against the most obvious pitfalls of romantic love. In some sense it may have been like a fantasy of what he had imagined as a young man about town: living in the present, holding back time, death and that unimaginable meeting of William Cowper and his God.

Was he not now justified in all this by having at last made the choice of life, not only by committing himself to the poetic vocation but by actually having published a solid book of poems in 1782? Was not this the time for the emergence of the risk-taking, autonomous male he had failed to become twenty years before? Yet something in him demanded the satisfaction of other desires. God wielded death: he had taken Cowper's mother at six and would one day wield this power on Cowper himself. He and the part of Cowper which carried out God's correction on himself must be satisfied. So he must remain within the extreme but workable duality he had learned to call his own: the happy box of domestic bliss which he had built for himself with Mary along with the unbridled power of God eventually to destroy everything. Was it that if he acknowledged God but did not go to church he could maintain the dyke between these two sides of his life and inner self? At any rate he must ultimately reject the vertiginous openness of a relationship with Ann, a relationship not entirely under the control of God which threatened to destroy domesticity, the omnipotent God and the William Cowper who had constructed himself between these two poles.

This shoring up of a *modus vivendi* sounds negative, but creatively, because Cowper was a great artist, it was not. For among many other things, *The Task* became a way of fusing the new dynamic of his life into the old secure framework and producing something new from that fusion. So now at last we can begin to answer the second part of our question: just how was Lady Austen present as muse in *The Task*? Sometimes one finds the assumption that she was the fortuitous occasion of Cowper

producing the kind of poetry he would have written anyway. But I believe there is much more to it than that: a suggestive starting point may be Martin Priestman's comment on the implied reader of *The Task* as 'the reader, whose response hovers inscrutably between the ductile familiarity of Lady Austen and the inescapable judgement of God'.¹² This complex reader we must surely see as responding to elements within the text itself, for in his major work Cowper would imaginatively bring together the worlds of Ann, Mary and God. (Indeed, perhaps if he had consciously realized the epochal greatness of what he had done in the poem the rest of his life would have been happier: but that of course is merely hypothesis.) We can see the integration of Lady Austen in *The Task* both horizontally and vertically. Horizontally, he would show himself a master of thematic development like Haydn, would create a poem in which Lady Austen was present in the beginning, Mary Unwin in the middle and God in the end. But there was also a vertical integration more like that of Bach, where the three voices - Anna's that of playful, flexible networking, Mary's that of domestic, loco-topographic affection and God's that of the Miltonic, theogonic sublime - would interweave.

And so, within the creative tension of the world built on these three, William Cowper would be free to meander with nature and his thoughts. Freed of all the *thou shalt not*s of his life, William could release the principle of organic growth, free association, serendipitous creation, could rejoice in the sheer quiddity of the River Ouse, the trees, the garden, the snowy landscape. In his letters he had already shown how the permission of an imagined other, a unique recipient-listener, could allow him to over-ride self-punishing ordinances. But *The Task* is something else: just as his mother had overseen him so now there was a listener, reader, delightedly and patiently able to accept his explorations, fully accepting of his verbal and mental elaborations. Parenthetically, we may note that Wordsworth in *The Prelude* was arguably able to write the greatest psychological poem in the English language by learning from Cowper's *Task* to address his poem to this implicitly patient, interested female ear, an ear of sisterly sensibility which would collude with the male poet who had left behind the self-important world of male affairs and who in return for her giving him importance, gave importance to her world of minute particulars. We may note an irony here in that Cowper was determinedly trying to neutralize Anna as his 'sister' just at the moment in cultural history when sisters were about to become more emotionally charged for creative men than ever before or since.

It is this quiet yet powerful overheard voice which was Cowper's supreme invention in *The Task*, overheard as it were by the ideal, implicit Ann Austen moving backwards and forwards in concert with his flowing thought. The Horatian retired man speaks now to a feminized implied reader and thus becomes the type of the newly-sensibilist, though sinuous and energetic, male writer of blank verse. We hear this voice confidently opening the final book of *The Task*, 'The Winter Walk at Noon':

There is in souls a sympathy with sounds,
And as the mind is pitch'd the ear is pleas'd
With melting airs or martial, brisk or grave.
Some chord in unison with what we hear
Is touched within us, and the heart replies.
How soft the music of those village bells
Falling at intervals upon the ear
In cadence sweet! now dying all away,
Now pealing loud again and louder still,
Clear and sonorous as the gale comes on.
With easy force it opens all the cells
Where mem'ry slept. Wherever I have heard
A kindred melody, the scene recurs,
And with it all its pleasures and its pains.
Such comprehensive views the spirit takes,
That in a few short moments I retrace
(As in a map the voyager his course)
The windings of my way through many years.

(*Task*, VI, 1-18)

Mary Unwin, we might suppose, fulfilled needs too immediate for him to be able to hear himself speaking to her thus, acting himself on the public stage of poetry. Rather he uses the Ann-like interlocutor as a way of seeing and invoking the role which he has developed through Mary. At last, after many years of living but not articulating this role, Cowper is empowered to make his self-characterization, that of the domestic happy man:

He is the happy man, whose life ev'n now
Shows somewhat of the happier life to come.
Who doomed to an obscure but tranquil state
Is pleased with it, and were he free to chuse,
Would make his fate his choice.

(*Task*, VI, 906-910)

So of course the world of Mary is very much there too: to the Ann-like reader he can now dramatize the self that he has previously lived but not uttered. As a result a completely new kind of literary hero has emerged in *The Task: homo domesticus*, the gardener, the reader of newspapers, the forerunner of a million suburbanites who pull up the drawbridge at night and enter the newly feminized domestic space that can be filled out with contours of a microcosmic world:

Now stir the fire, and close the shutters fast,
Let fall the curtains, wheel the sofa round,
And while the bubbling and loud-hissing urn
Throws up a steamy column, and the cups
That cheer but not inebriate, wait on each,
So let us welcome peaceful evening in.

(*Task*, IV, 36-41)

No wonder that Cowper remained so extraordinarily popular in the unstable and rapidly urbanizing world of the Industrial Revolution: the outside world is dangerous, out of control but the villa, the cottage, the terrace house even, can symbolize security and safety. Of course you need a material sufficiency — Cowper is no sentimentalist about poverty — but with that you can keep the world of politics and war at bay and assert your connection with the universe at large through your garden and your walks. It is a vision of domestic bliss which could come to seem oppressive to later generations but Cowper had invented a domestic iconography which would help thousands to survive the dynamic but unpredictable and unforgiving society of the fifty years after his death. And the image did have its origins in the assertions of female power. After all the Mary Unwin who funded the original of this portrayal is no doll in a doll's house but queen of her territory — as she will prove by ejecting the poet's muse when the latter has served her purpose.

But of course the poem manages to be something else as well as a delightful ramble and a domestic epic. It places itself in the tradition of Cowper's hero Milton, who spoke of the loss and regaining of Paradise. So here the poem ends up as a theogony, a justification of the ways of God to man and an offering to God. Particularly in the last book of *The Task* Cowper's God is seen at his most positive. Without God the poem would be a delightful but endless meander. But He stands behind nature:

Nature is but a name for an effect
Whose cause is God. He feeds the secret fire
By which the mighty process is maintain'd,
Who sleeps not, is not weary; in whose sight
Slow-circling ages are as transient days;
Whose work is without labor, whose designs
No flaw deforms, no difficulty thwarts,
And whose beneficence no charge exhausts.

(*Task*, VI, 223-230)

However random things may seem they have an underlying pattern, however terrible they may be,

they are part of a redemptive order. God in *The Task*, and particularly in Book II 'The Time-Piece', is awesome and powerful but not arbitrary, cruel and unforgiving in the way that the God of Cowper's psyche could be both earlier and later. Why? Because this God is admitted into the poem on terms of equality with a new cultural force of the age of sensibility, not just in Lady Ann or Mary or Cowper's mother but in Cowper himself, a force which Goethe would soon name 'the eternal feminine'. We may also recall here the fact, strangely sidelined by both Cowper's biographers and his critics, that he had been translating in the summers of both 1782 and 1783 the ecstatic Pietist poems of Madam de Guyon. What these poems repeatedly dramatize is the transformative mutual love between the poet and her God:

Perfect Love has pow'r to soften
Cares that might our peace destroy,
Nay does more — transforms them often,
Changing sorrow into joy.
(*'Love Pure and Fervent'*, 9-12)

In a letter to Samuel Teedon, Cowper had epitomized the balance of mercy and justice that characterized the divinity for him at the time he was writing *The Task*: 'God shall judge his people, God shall give his people the blessing of peace.'¹³ The gentle firmness with which in his conclusion he finds his own poem acceptable in his own eyes and hints to God that it should be acceptable in his too is very personal to Cowper but again very much a product of the poem's silent implied audience: after all the poet does not directly address God at the end but communes with his sympathetic hearer *about* his relationship with God:

But all is in his hand whose praise I seek.
In vain the poet sings, and the world hears,
If he regard not, though divine the theme.
'Tis not in artful measures, in the chime
And idle tinkling of a minstrel's lyre
To charm his ear, who eye is on the heart,
Whose frown can disappoint the proudest strain,
Whose approbation — prosper even mine.
(*Task*, VI, 1017-1024)

The poem ends solemnly yet the cunning rhetoric, the self-deprecating self-praise of these final lines, reminds us that poetry involves a subtle and knowing persuasion of an active and willing reader. It is by listening to his creative play and endlessly responding to its variety that Ann Austen becomes, in much more than an occasional sense, Cowper's muse in *The Task*. Earlier in this paper I quoted the passage from Book IV of *The Task* which contains my title phrase 'many a trembling chord' where Cowper probably describes her playing the guitar. (She could also play the harpsichord and he wrote several songs for her including 'On the Loss of the Royal George'). It is not I think too far-fetched to move on from this, and to say in conclusion that we can metaphorically hear her accompaniment and her voice throughout *The Task* and that their presence helps to bring out the best and most sustained expression of Cowper's own vision of life. Ann Austen was not just the instigator but the presiding muse, the silent accompanist, of Cowper's greatest poem.

NOTES

¹This paper was delivered at the annual Cowper and Newton symposium, Olney, 26 April 2003. It has been slightly revised for publication.

²George Melvyn Ella, *William Cowper: Poet of Paradise* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 1993), pp. 334-335.

³To William Unwin, 29 July 1782: *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, ed. James King and Charles Ryskamp, 5 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979-1986), I, 502.

⁴To John Newton, 7 July 1781: *Letters*, I, 495.

⁵All references to the poetry are from *The Poems of William Cowper*, ed. John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980-1995).

⁶To Joseph Hill, 7 December 1782; *Letters*, II, 96.

⁷William Hayley, *The Life and Posthumous Writings of William Cowper, Esqr.*, 3 vols, 1803-1804, I, 135 (Quoted in *Poems*, I, 339).

⁸It seems appropriate, in moving to discuss the deeper dynamics of Cowper's relationships with women, to use Lady Austen's first name more often from this point onwards.

⁹I am grateful to Dr Melvyn Firth for drawing this to my attention in discussion.

¹⁰Letter to Penelope Maitland, 4 June 1804, quoted in James King, *William Cowper: A Biography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1986), p. 24.

¹¹To Mrs King, 12 March 1790: *Letters*, III, 359.

¹²Martin Priestman, *Cowper's Task: Structure and Influence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 161.

¹³To Samuel Teedon, 28 February 1784: *Letters*, II, 218.