

Review

Conrad Brunström, *William Cowper: Religion, Satire, Society* (Lewisberg: Bucknell University Press, 2004). ISBN 0-8387-5560-7. Hardback. 207pp. \$42.50

William Cowper: Religion, Satire, Society stands admirably as one of few book-length critical explorations of Cowper's poetry. Brunström opens his account with some bold claims too. This is a study, he states, which offers 'a corrective recentering of modern perceptions of eighteenth-century poetry and its ideological concerns' in order to reposition Cowper's poems on a series of levels: religious, intellectual, and poetic. In this way, Brunström aims 'to assist the current reclamation of Cowper as a central and representative voice' of late-eighteenth-century poetry, 'reestablishing Cowper as a central figure' both of and for his own time, in contrast to the idea, established within 'a literary and critical "mainstream"', of Cowper being essentially at odds with the world around him, particularly when it comes to 'religion'. Regarding as inadequate the tradition of valuing Cowper largely as a precursor to English literary Romanticism, the purpose of this study lies in 'rediscovering a remarkable poet who openly expresses contemporary' (rather than 'anachronistic' or simply 'protoromantic') 'religious and existential contradictions', and who, in religious terms, should be seen as 'a Foucauldian rather than a Calvinist subject, a victim not of archaic superstition but of modernity and "enlightenment"'.

To illustrate how Cowper's poetic interests, as well as his religious agonies, emerge from and reflect those of his own age, Brunström begins by introducing some of Cowper's intellectual and poetic contexts. While chapter 2 addresses a range of modes of thought significant for Cowper's own sensibilities, from the philosophy and politics of Hume and Burke to the poetry of Milton and Edward Young, chapter 3 locates Cowper primarily as a satirist whose poetry was to be consistently marked by the aesthetics of the Nonsense Club, the literary society to which Cowper had once belonged. This chapter usefully examines the work of Charles Churchill and Robert Lloyd in their rejection of the poetic styles of Gray, Young, and others, while also offering a discussion of the poet Matthew Prior. These chapters demonstrate Brunström's detailed and wide-ranging knowledge of eighteenth-century poetry and criticism, aesthetics and philosophy, and they serve to establish a background for the 'oscillating' turns Cowper's poetry takes, between satire and religious despair, between engaging with the world and withdrawing from it.

The subsequent chapters of the book examine these contradictory aspects of Cowper's poetry in detail. Chapter 4 (the first to deal directly with Cowper's works) takes the unusual critical step of addressing one of Cowper's earliest and least-discussed poems, *Antithelyphthora*, a satirical attack on Martin Madan's controversial work, *Thelyphthora* (1780). Brunström cites this poem, among Cowper's other early satires, to illustrate two points key to Cowper's subsequent poetic career: first, that a strong satirical strain, promoting 'common sense' and a 'humbly digressive intelligence', in opposition to 'fanciful' poetics or 'overscholastic' philosophy, lies at the heart of Cowper's aesthetics, and secondly, that the notion of 'retirement' in Cowper's poetry is not simply concerned with escaping the world, but rather with finding a better position from which to engage it. Cowper's famous 'stricken deer' passage in *The Task* (III, 108-20), for example, often cited as a bald confessional statement of Cowper's preferred isolation from society and of the comforts of solitude, is shown to be subtly yet firmly rooted in controversy, offering a refutation of Martin Madan's appropriation of Matthew Prior's poetry in *Thelyphthora*, the sophistication of which Brunström illustrates deftly: 'retirement' for Cowper, Brunström can thus suggest, provides 'a strategic vantage point' enabling the 'socially concerned but introspectively inclined individual to negotiate a version of sanity for him or herself'.

This method of re-viewing Cowper's poetry, in terms both of its emphasis on engagement and retirement and in its 'oscillations' between 'pastoral reverie' and antipastoral realism', is developed further in the subsequent two chapters, both of which address Cowper's fraught religious position. Chapter 5, wittily entitled 'A Gardener's Question Time', takes to task the topography both of Cowper's poetry and his theology. Cowper's despair, as a 'refusal to submit to the consolatory authority of religion', nevertheless does not prevent him from envisioning Nature, and especially gardening, as a 'spiritually satisfying' source and form of 'cooperative horticulture' between

humanity and God. While Brunström reveals how Cowper's refusal to accept any religious 'mediation' is ameliorated through his relationship to landscape, gardens, and Nature, in chapter 6 these issues are considered via Cowper's seascapes and his 'oscillatory descriptive methods' when addressing 'maritime' states of safety and loss. Cowper's recurrent use of maritime imagery (of shipwrecks and storms, drownings and safe harbours) offers another means for Brunström to re-examine Cowper's poetry of 'spiritual danger' and its relationship to the spaces of safety and retirement, his aim again being to 'derail' (as he elsewhere puts it) Hazlitt's all-too-comfortable idea of a 'snug' Cowper who uses retirement simply as a means of turning away from society. Cowper's religious isolation and despair are thus repositioned by Brunström in terms of an engagement with an eighteenth-century religious and literary 'language of spirituality', ranging from the 'sublime attitude' of Milton's Satan, on the one hand, to the 'individualized experimentalism that characterized so much of the religious writing of [Cowper's] own day', on the other. In this way, Brunström effectively establishes what is, perhaps, his most important point: that Cowper's despair and the poetry that emerges from it are not rooted simply in an idiosyncratic, 'gloomy Calvinism' but, rather, in 'the epistemology of the divine that had long occupied the mainstream of contemporary ideological discourse'. Brunström's Cowper is thus the 'inheritor, not (primarily) of theological beliefs, but of prevalent rhetorical forms, forms that determine the faith rather than vice versa'.

How far Cowper himself would have viewed his painful religious crises as the consequence not of acute despair but of an accumulation of discourse is a matter for further debate. But this final poststructuralist flourish certainly allows Brunström to furnish his 'Conclusion' with the strident, if not iconoclastic, assertion that in doing away with the 'protoromantic' Cowper it becomes possible to establish a 'postmodernized' one: a Cowper, that is, 'who resists totalization, and whose contradictions reinforce rather than negate his importance', and who thus represents 'a cherishable Cowper fit for the twenty-first century'. Although Brunström admits the playfulness behind the idea of a 'protopostmodern' Cowper, nevertheless these are serious conclusions seriously offered. The problems with them, however, seem clear. On one level, a 'cherishable' postmodern Cowper may well prove a 'perishable' one too, if only because the durability of 'a postmodern frame of reference' and the jargon of poststructuralist literary theory may not remain as long-lasting or as relevant, finally, as Cowper's poetry itself. Moreover, such a conclusion, while speculatively interesting, nevertheless seems largely superfluous to the lasting value of Brunström's book, which lies not in any poststructuralist approach (indeed, the ideas of Foucault, Derrida, and others are applied with admirable restraint in this study) but in its more traditional and no less impressive ability to offer sophisticated and detailed readings of Cowper's poetry against its complex intellectual contexts. Brunström's book is set to promote continuing critical interest in Cowper, beyond any 'postmodernizing', due to the complex yet compelling ways he returns this writer to 'a common stock of ideological and literary assumptions that pervade the creative thought of the period', and in urging us not just to recognize Cowper's 'predicament' but to 'respect above all the *effort* behind the sanity of the poems it produced'.

To offer such a criticism might also suggest a tempering of some of the other aims and claims of this study, though. One might wonder, for instance, whether Cowper really is in such dire need of 'rehabilitation' or an overall critical 'reestablishment', as Brunström suggests, given the on-going and growing critical interest in a Cowper cherished by many as a great poet in his own right (beyond regarding him merely as a precursor to Wordsworth, that is), and the fact that Brunström's study, as he readily acknowledges, clearly builds on the major work published on Cowper's poetry over the last twenty years or so. Equally, it would be improper not to note what is, perhaps, the book's only significant error: the confusion of Tim Fulford (author of *Landscape, Liberty and Authority* (Cambridge, 1996)) with Tom Furniss (author of *Edmund Burke's Aesthetic Ideology* (Cambridge, 1993)) in the Introduction and Bibliography. Such a mistake is unfortunate, but it does not detract anything from the merits of this otherwise finely written, engaging, and perceptive examination of Cowper's poetry. As such, this book confirms the continuing recognition Cowper deserves as an important poet *of* the eighteenth century and *for* the twenty-first.

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