

Nature and Religion in the Writings of William Cowper

[Laura Ralph, a graduate student from Trinity Western University, British Columbia, visited the museum from 8-13 September 2008. Her purpose was to conduct research on books and other documents held by the museum, and to gain a sense of the place where Cowper lived and worked. This will feed into her MA thesis, on Cowper's ecological vision.

Here is her report of the visit, which was made possible by a grant from the Priscilla and Stanford Reid Trust for Reformed and Presbyterian Theological Education in Canada.]'

'A Poet of Place'

I spent my first afternoon in Olney walking its streets and surrounding countryside in order to get a visual, spiritual, and emotional sense of the physical world to which Cowper responds so closely in his writings. I also visited the church where John Newton, with whom Cowper co-wrote the famous *Olney Hymns*, was curate. The next day I was given a tour of the museum. The museum is also the house where Cowper lived from 1768 to 1786, and I was able to see Cowper's bedroom, his garden, the summer-house where he wrote much of his poetry, and the outhouse (the so-called 'Viper Barn') where an incident occurred between a snake and three kittens that inspired his poem 'The Colubriad'. Museum trustee and editor of *The Cowper and Newton Bulletin* Tony Seward remarked as I was touring the garden that 'Cowper is a poet of place', meaning that many of his poems are inspired by the places, people, and things that surrounded him. This is certainly true, and it was therefore invaluable for me, as a Cowper scholar, to be able to situate myself in Cowper's context, to see with my own eyes the things, especially the physical landscapes, that appear in his poetry. On Wednesday, after the museum closed, I went to the nearby village of Weston Underwood to visit 'Cowper's Alcove', a building that appears in his long poem *The Task* as the highest viewpoint and culmination of his countryside walks, and the house where he lived from 1786 until 1795. The experience of actually seeing/smelling/touching/hearing the places and things (particularly the natural landscapes) that Cowper writes about has added, I believe, an extra level of depth to my interpretation of his poetry. Now, for example, when he writes of the river Ouse or the Alcove, I have my own sensory experiences from which to draw.

The Cowper and Newton Museum, Olney, Bucks

On four of the five days of my visit, I conducted primary and secondary source textual research at the Cowper and Newton Museum. The majority of the research was conducted on twenty-four books from Cowper's own library, recently acquired by the museum; however, the museum also houses many extremely rare secondary sources related to Cowper from the 19th and 20th centuries, so some of my time was spent studying these materials. Although I made many interesting discoveries, owing to limitations of space I have listed below only those directly relevant to my thesis.

1. Lawrence, John. *The Clergy-Man's Recreation: Shewing the Pleasure and Profit Of The Art of Gardening*. 2nd Ed. London: Bernard Lintott. c. 1713.

This book is part of Cowper's original library. Lawrence's text functions on two levels: first, it is an instruction manual for gardeners or those who desire to be gardeners. In this sense, it provides chapters on such matters as 'Preparing the ground for planting and sowing', the 'most agreeable Disposition [layout] of a Garden', 'Pruning', 'Grafting and Inoculating', as well as more specific instructions concerning different varieties of trees, such as how to grow them and when their fruit ripens. Second, Lawrence's text continues themes from the Georgic tradition – namely the notion that labour in the garden is profitable for humanity. Much like Cowper, Lawrence adds to the Georgic tradition a spiritual dimension. Considering that Cowper owned and read this text, it can be interpreted as having influenced his own understanding and presentation of the spiritual and physical 'pleasure[s] and profit[s]' of gardening. In his writings, the garden environment is one of the natural spaces that Cowper imagines most resembles humanity's pre-lapsarian state.

2. Hervey, James. *Meditations and Contemplations*. 22nd Ed. London: John, Francis, and Charles Rivington. 1776.

This text is also part of Cowper's original library. The second chapter, 'Reflections on a Flower-Garden', presents the garden and all of the creatures within it as the earthly place that most resembles heaven. This portion also contains his 'eco-theological' vision which is remarkably similar to Cowper's views on the subject, as expressed in *The Task*. In the third chapter, 'A Descant upon Creation', Hervey demonstrates that a consideration of the splendour of the created world should lead the believer to experience the 'languishing lamp of divine love' (149). These portions of the text in particular illuminate my research regarding Cowper's perception of creation and how the human response to nature is connected to one's relationship with and sense of the Divine.²

3. Cowper, William. *The Groans of Creation: A Poem*. Leeds: Binns and Browns. c. 1800.

This poem was published in pamphlet form circa 1800. When I read the poem, I discovered that it is actually an excerpt from Book V of *The Task*, 'The Winter Walk at Noon', that has here been published under a different title. The title page notes Romans 8:22, 'The whole of Creation groaneth and travaileth in Pain together until now', and the poem's epigraph describes 'A View taken of the Restoration of all Things. – An Invocation and an Invitation of HIM who shall bring it to pass.' This is an important discovery relating to the reception history of Cowper's writings, particularly in relation to how his works were viewed, even by his contemporaries, as supporting a holistic vision of creation as valued – indeed, as one day to be restored – by God.

We also know that Cowper possessed copies of the poetry of Milton and Vaughan, both of whose works contain the theme of the restoration of the natural world and whose writings have been recognized by scholars Alan Rudrum and Diane Kelsey McColley to have strongly eco-theological tendencies. One of Vaughan's poems, 'And do they so?', has a similar epigraph (Romans 8:19) to the 1800 publication of Cowper's 'The Groans of Creation', which may be significant considering the fact that the influence of Vaughan's poetics on Cowper has already been loosely traced by L.C. Martin³ This particular pamphlet can thus be viewed as evidence of Cowper's place as the missing link between the early modern poets - Milton, Vaughan and Traherne - and the later Romantic poets – Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge - in relation to the eco-spiritual strain in English Protestant poetics⁴.

4. *Selections from Cowper: Including A Complete Collection of all his Poems Relating to Animals*. London: Review of Reviews, 1897.

This secondary source is important, again, in terms of the reception history of Cowper's works. In relation to my thesis concerning Cowper's vision and treatment of the natural world, this published collection of poems including 'all of his Poems Relating to Animals' demonstrates that even one hundred years ago, Cowper was recognised for his 'tenderness and sympathy' towards the non-human natural world (Preface).

Also related to the theme of reception history, the museum displays a poster from the 1900 centenary celebration of Cowper's death. The poster advertises a speech to be made by Miss E. Evans on 'Cowper and Animals'. Although I was unable to find a written copy of this speech, it does serve as further evidence that Cowper has long been recognized as a poet of the natural world.

5. Westacott, Charles A. *The Animals' Poet Laureate: William Cowper*. Hertfordshire: C.A. Westacott, 1954.

This article is yet another secondary source that validates Cowper's place throughout history as an advocate of the natural world. Charles A. Westacott names William Cowper the 'animals' Poet Laureate' and claims that he was far ahead of his time in his 'commiseration with beings other than

man' (8). Westacott also mentions Cowper's compassion in face of other forms of cruelty, such as racism, classing the poet as an all around humanitarian. He notes Cowper's 'hopeful strain' in regard to creation, referring to Book V in *The Task* where Cowper envisions the restoration of the Earth when 'the lion, and the libbard and the bear. . .' will co-exist with humanity in peace.

County Hall Archives, Aylesbury, Bucks

I also spent one day at the Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies in Aylesbury, where the museum's substantial collection of original documents related to the life and writings of William Cowper is held. Below is a summary of the findings pertinent to my thesis.

1. *A Catalogue of the Library of the late William Cowper Esq. taken by William Barker, Bookseller, East Dereham, Norfolk, October 1800.*

This early 19th century document, written by the bookseller William Barker, compiles a list of books possessed by William Cowper. Barker's catalogue sheds light on the material that Cowper was familiar with and enables these works to be consulted as a frame of reference when interpreting his writings.

However, Barker's catalogue only includes the books possessed by William Cowper at his death. It does not, for example, include Cowper's copy of Henry Vaughan's *Silex Scintillans* (Volume 1), housed at Aberystwyth Library in Wales. Cowper also mentions reading the poems of George Herbert twice in his letters – and it may be safe to assume that he owned a copy of Herbert's *The Temple*. This edition has never been found, nor is it listed in Barker's account. To my knowledge, this is an area of research that has not yet been taken up, and I hope to pursue it in the future.

2. Original manuscript copies of Cowper's poems 'Yardley Oak' and 'The Dog and the Water-Lily. no Fable'.

Viewing the original manuscript of any author's writings is always an illuminating experience. Although I have access to both 'Yardley Oak' and 'The Dog and the Water Lily' in collected editions of Cowper's works, the versions of the poems presented in such collections have been subject to the editorial decisions of only a small handful of scholars (usually one or two at most). This is particularly important in the case of 'Yardley Oak', a poem that Cowper did not finish writing. When I viewed the original manuscript, I was able to see first-hand Cowper's creative process. Some lines are written, crossed out, and replaced with new lines, but in some cases the 'original' lines are still legible. Entire sections of verse have been crossed out and small annotations mark the bottom of certain pages. It is interesting that published versions of 'Yardley Oak' present the poem as a 'complete' and polished work, when in reality each editor is at best only speculating in regard to how Cowper would have envisioned the finished poem. Having had the opportunity to view these original manuscripts, I now understand that when I interpret Cowper's poems, I must be attentive to whether I am interpreting the poem as he actually wrote it, or as an editor chose to publish it in a collected edition.

Conversation

This may seem an odd heading to include under 'research findings', but for an honest account of the value of this trip to my study of Cowper, I must mention the insights and inspiration gleaned from my conversations with the Cowper enthusiasts who attended the 'Friends of the Cowper and Newton Museum' Tea in the Garden event, and with museum trustees, especially Tony Seward, whose knowledge of Cowper's life and works is near-encyclopaedic.

First and foremost, it was both inspirational and energising to be surrounded by people who have read and are devoted to the writings of William Cowper. Many scholars, even Literature scholars, have only a vague knowledge of Cowper and have read perhaps one or two of his most famous works. It was thus stimulating for me to be surrounded by such a high concentration of Cowper enthusiasts.

Related to the previous point, the discussions I was able to have with these individuals had richness to them that it is difficult to find in my own academic circles. I was able to engage in critical dialogues about his life and works that I would not be able to have in my own setting. This has proven extremely valuable in helping me to form and shape my interpretations of Cowper's writings, especially in relation to his perceptions of the intersection between the natural and spiritual realms.

Laura E. Ralph

References

- ¹ The Reid Trust welcomes applications from individuals, Christian congregations, organizations and institutions who have aspirations and plans for lectures, conferences, research projects, educational activities, publications and other programs or events related to theological education in Canada. For application details contact The Reid Trust, 54 Callie Rd., Hamilton, On, L8V 1A2; www.reidtrust.com; or email: inbox@reidtrust.com
- ² Cowper scholar Vincent Newey in 'Cowper and the Description of Nature.' *Essays in Criticism: A Quarterly Journal of Literary Criticism*. 23 (1973), draws attention to Hervey's pervasive influence on Cowper, noting that Hervey's *Meditations and Contemplations* was 'known intimately' by Cowper (105). Like Hervey, Cowper felt 'it his duty to direct "inattentive man" to an enlightened awareness of nature's lessons.'
- ³ Martin, L.C. 'Vaughan and Cowper.' *The Modern Language Review*. 22.1 (1927): 79-84.
- ⁴ David Leigh, in 'Cowper, Wordsworth, and the Sacred Moment of Perception'. *The Fountain Light: Studies in Romanticism and Religion*. Ed. Barth, Robert J. New York: Fordham University Press, 2002., writes that although some justice has been done 'to the poetic nuances of Protestantism at either end of the journey (especially in Milton-Vaughan-Traherne and Blake-Wordsworth-Coleridge), [critics] have failed to travel the intervening distance.' (56) The poet who represents this 'intervening distance', he believes, is Cowper.