

# The Olney Hymns

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On 13 October 1928, D.H. Lawrence published in the London Evening News a piece entitled ‘Hymns in a Man’s Life’, in which he described the special influence that hymns had exercised upon his consciousness as a child, and the privileged place they still retained there. Hymns were important to Lawrence because they filled him with ‘wonder’—and ‘when all comes to all, the most precious element in life is wonder’. ‘To me the word Galilee [“O Galilee, sweet Galilee”] has a wonderful sound. The lake of Galilee! I don’t want to know where it is. I never want to go to Palestine’: ‘Just the words, “Sun of my soul, thou Saviour dear”, penetrated me with wonder.’ Lawrence then goes on to remark of ‘wonder’, that you cannot ‘help feeling it in a bean as it starts to grow’, or in ‘the glister of the nucleus of the amoeba’; but my concern is not with the larger world-view, the eco-creed that Lawrence espoused, but with the specific ‘wonder’ of hymns.

Great wonder was felt, great wonders were enacted, just after the middle of the eighteenth century in a small corner of England, the town of Olney in Buckinghamshire, where William Cowper’s house at Orchard Side (now the Cowper and Newton Museum) and the church where John Newton was curate still stand and can be visited. The word ‘wonders’ appears at the beginning of one of Cowper’s best-known hymns in the collection called *Olney Hymns*—‘God moves in a mysterious way, / His wonders to perform’. The hymn by Newton, Cowper’s mentor and collaborator in this project, that comes immediately to mind, though the word differs, is ‘Glorious things of thee are spoken, / Zion, city of our God’ (italics mine). In both instances we at once witness the power of hymns to move and inspire us, to fill us with wonder, irrespective of precise understanding or exact meaning. This is not to say, of course, that hymns require of their authors no skill in prosody (that is, metre and rhyme), diction, imagery, and other qualities we may call ‘poetic’, or that they do not invite close interpretation and attention to what is being said. Indeed the compositions gathered in the first section of *Olney Hymns*, entitled by Newton ‘On Select Texts of Scripture’, encourage a very deliberate interest not only in the words but in those parts of the Word to which they relate. I shall be much concerned with detailed effects. Yet the ineffable ingredient remains – wonder. It does not need a grand, transcendent context for it to arise; it can come in the quietest moments, as in another of Cowper’s enduring hymns, ‘Sometimes a light surprises’ (‘Joy and Peace in Believing’):

In holy contemplation,  
We sweetly then pursue  
The theme of God’s salvation,

The wonder lies in the pure simplicity and unforced inevitability of the inward event, the discovery of the recurrent miracle of divine grace, beautifully caught in the lucid sentence-structure and vocabulary that are those of ordinary speech yet formalized by the rhythm and rhyme, and by the parallelism and juxtaposition of multisyllabic and monosyllabic sounds—‘contemplation’/‘salvation’, ‘pursue’/‘new’, the climax coming surprisingly on the upturn, the light emphasis, of ‘new’. If ‘contemplation’ and ‘salvation’ suggest abstract ideas, a devotional practice and a doctrine, ‘pursue’ and ‘new’ realize the immediacy of acute personal involvement.

*Olney Hymns* was published in 1779, with a preface by Newton. Sixty-seven of the 348 contributions (some of which had been published previously in outside collections) were by Cowper, the remainder by Newton himself, the section ‘On Select Texts of Scripture’ being followed by ones ‘On Occasional Subjects’ and ‘On the Progress and Changes of the Spiritual Life’. The constituents were mostly written in the period after 1771 when Newton had persuaded Cowper to help him in supplying materials for use at local prayer meetings and Sunday School, though a few came somewhat earlier, including ‘Oh! for a closer walk with God’, which is associated with the illness of Cowper’s companion, Mrs Unwin, in late 1767, and another famous hymn of longing, ‘Hark, my soul! it is the Lord’. Cowper, Mary Unwin, and her daughter had settled together in Olney in 1767, principally to be part of the devout circle fostered by Newton, who had taken up the living in 1764 and had befriended Cowper and the others in the aftermath of the death of the Revd. Morley Unwin, Mrs Unwin’s husband, in whose household Cowper had been a lodger at Huntingdon. Cowper had suffered two attacks of suicidal depression in the early 1760s, triggered by anxiety over having to undergo a public examination at the Bar of the House of Lords in connection with his nomination for the post of Clerk of the Journals by his uncle, Ashley Cowper, in whose sphere of influence the office fell. It was during his recovery at Dr Nathaniel Cotton’s asylum at St. Albans, where he remained from 1762 to 1764, that Cowper underwent a conversion to Evangelical Christianity.

This was by no means the end of his difficulties. Religion brought significant support but also, especially through the Calvinist tenets encouraged by Newton, formed a channel for his melancholia to flow in. In February 1773 he was visited in a dream by the words ‘actum est de te, periisti’ – ‘it is all over with thee, thou has perished’ – and was thereafter haunted by a conviction that he was reprobate, not of the elect but chosen for damnation. Later that year he again attempted suicide, and in 1774 wrote the verses ‘Hatred and vengeance, my eternal portion’, in which he describes himself as ‘Damn’d below Judas’. To Cowper’s particular fears and uncertainties I must come in due course. What he first demands of me is to consider the force of his hymns in their congregational aspects, in their teaching and elaboration of doctrine and belief, and in their rendering of fundamental Christian experience, which in any case embraces struggle, absence, distress. Hymns are as it were a second-order liturgy, binding together churches, denominations,

groups, by formulating what is both dogmatically and experientially shared. Cowper is a versatile and accomplished writer in this regard.

‘Jesus, where’er thy people meet’ is a congregational hymn in a special sense, for it was composed for the opening, in April 1769, of the Great Room at Olney for prayer meetings. ‘A noble place, with a parlour behind it’, the Room was part of the Great House, the mansion belonging to the Earl of Dartmouth, that stood unoccupied close by the Church. A small room had hitherto been provided for worship; now Lord Dartmouth gave permission for use of the grander one, which held about 130 people. We know that the gatherings held there were on Tuesday and Sunday evenings. The inaugural event was planned for Tuesday 4 April, but may have been postponed for a week.<sup>2</sup>

These historical specificities ground the hymn, interestingly, in a definite place and time. The wonder is, however, how Cowper at once honours and transcends the occasion, producing an abiding salutation of the ubiquity of Jesus in the lives of his people and in the universe. The way Cowper’s imagination handles the concept of space – near and far, interior and exterior, small and immense, earthly and heavenly, confined and open – is remarkable. There is first the room with its four walls, materially evoked in the formal title, ‘On Opening a Place for Social Prayer’; but it is not the location in itself that is truly important:

Jesus, where’er thy people meet,  
There they behold thy mercy seat;  
Where’er they seek thee thou art found,  
And ev’ry place is hallow’d ground.  
For thou, within no walls confin’d,  
Inhabitest the humble mind; ...

(1-6)

This is emphatically experimental religion. You do not need a church, its rituals, and its appurtenances to be with Jesus, since he inhabits the inside of the self, which leads to the moving image of his being brought to the assembly by each person and then taken back to each individual home – ‘Such ever bring thee, where they come, / And going, take thee to their home’ (7-8). Yet, as the hymn progresses, the Lord is conceived as dwelling also on the outside, not only intimately ‘proclaim[ing] / The sweetness of [his] saving name’ (‘How sweet the name of Jesus sounds / In a believer’s ear’ is Newton’s even more pressing affirmation of this benefaction) but, in majesty and power, able from afar to part the heavens and reach into the affairs of humankind:

Lord we are few, but thou art near;  
Nor short thine arm, nor deaf thine ear;  
Oh rend the heav’ns, come quickly down,  
And make a thousand hearts thine own.

(21-24)

This makes present, above all through the attributes of ‘arm’ and ‘ear’, the almighty god and the personal god, denying by implication the mere Artificer or Mechanic Cause of the Deists, a vague entity driving the machinery of the Creation – a concept Cowper vehemently attacked in his poetry.<sup>3</sup> The literal ‘wider space’ (19) of the new venue, the Great Room, expands into a visionary site of divine visitation, where the Lord

may descend to make ‘a thousand hearts his own’.

John Newton too composed a hymn on the opening of the Great Room:

O Lord, our languid souls inspire,  
For here we trust thou art!  
Send down a coal of heav'nly fire  
To warm each waiting heart!

(1-4)

It would, I think, be too much special pleading to praise these evidently uninspired, though certainly competent, lines for being exactly in tune with the sentiment with which they begin. They seem, rather, to bear out the opinion of James King, in his biography of Cowper, that ‘Newton was a versifier – Cowper a poet’.<sup>4</sup> In fact there is a lot more to Newton as hymnographer than this suggests, as we shall see; but the comparison between the twin pieces does throw into relief one of Cowper’s own most telling qualities, the gift of visualization, in which he follows Isaac Watts (‘There is a land of pure delight, / Where saints immortal reign’, for example), who, with Charles Wesley, was largely responsible for institutionalizing hymn-singing as a core element of devotion in the Nonconformist and the Evangelical churches (where before there had been the chanting of the metrical psalms as set by Sternhold and Hopkins or Tate and Brady). With Cowper, typically, we see as well as hear and understand. This is a feature that stands out in ‘Light Shining out of Darkness’, with its vivid and weighty imagery – its iconography – of the Almighty at work in the Creation:

God moves in a mysterious way,  
His wonders to perform;  
He plants his footsteps in the sea,  
And rides upon the storm.  
Deep in unfathomable mines  
Of never failing skill;  
He treasures up his bright designs,  
And works his sovereign will.

(1-8)

Beyond the visual effect, itself generated primarily by the hard-driving and distinct monosyllabic verbs (‘moves’, ‘plants’, ‘rides’, ‘works’), there is, however, something else, which we may term Cowper’s sacramental vision – his capacity for simultaneously perceiving, and making us perceive, the natural and the supernatural, the physical and the metaphysical, the literal and the spiritual. Thus, ‘moves’ infers both palpable action and the enactment of a numinous plan, ‘mysterious’ both human incomprehension or awe and mystery as an attribute of the Divine, ‘unfathomable’ an actual immensity and that which is beyond our limited mental reach. God is portrayed as piling up ‘treasures’, which are his ultimately benign intentions. His ‘purposes’ ‘unfold’ like a flower (17-18). And so on. In normal allegory events in the secular sphere symbolize sacred truths; in Cowper’s hymn sacred realities are reinforced through conflation with phenomena in nature. God’s greatness apart, the point that Cowper wishes to press home is, of course, that we should take courage in our dark and foreboding hours, since God’s ends,

though hidden from us, are essentially beneficent and for the best; and this tenet, common enough in itself, is given freshness, is defamiliarized, by an audacious turn of wit – the clouds ‘Are big with mercy, and shall break / In blessings on your head’ (11-12) – and a milder, gentler one – ‘Behind a frowning providence / He hides a smiling face’ (15-16). The verses come to rest with a call to patience and to faith, as Cowper succinctly and memorably reaffirms the sense of John 8.7 (‘What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter’): ‘God is his own interpreter, / And he will make it plain.’

In the preface to his *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (1707) Isaac Watts had explained his aims as those of teaching God’s Word and engaging the individual and congregation more fully with the emotions and occurrences of a Christian life. He will appeal to and define ‘the variety of our Passions ... as they are refined into Devotion’, while also exercising ‘the Mind ... that we might all obey the Direction of the Word of God’. He will cover ‘The most frequent Tempers and Changes of our Spirit, and conditions of our Life, ... our Love, our Fear, our Hope’.<sup>5</sup> Cowper clearly carries out a similar manifesto of public duty and office. All the same, there are urgent personal dimensions to several of his hymns. Samuel Greatheed, in his funeral oration of 1800, uncovers one in ‘God moves in a mysterious way’ itself, this apparently most outward-looking of utterances: ‘Our departed friend conceived some presentiment of this sad reverse [the breakdown of 1773]; and during a solitary walk in the fields, he composed a hymn.’<sup>6</sup> Greatheed, an Evangelical minister, presumably means to stress that Cowper, however fearful, clung to a faith in the rightness of God’s actions. In the light, or rather the shadow, of the forthcoming ‘sad reverse’, however, and against the background of a long-standing history of melancholia whose symptoms included a paranoid dread of being singled out for a terrible fate, it is difficult to close our minds (though some critics have) to the problem implicit in the idea of the Deity presented in this hymn. If God likes ‘playing a kind of game with us’ (which is how J.R. Watson responds to the lines ‘Behind a frowning providence, / He hides a smiling face’),<sup>7</sup> then he might quite logically act in unexpectedly severe ways. ‘God moves in a mysterious way’ leaves us with, whatever else, a strong sense of the vulnerability and precariousness of the believer’s situation, and particularly of his or her state of uncertainty.

Uncertainty formed the ineluctable pattern of Cowper’s existence:

When I have thought myself falling into the abyss I have been caught up again; when I have thought myself on the threshold of a happy eternity, I have been thrust down to Hell. ... I have no expectation but of sad vicissitude, and ever believe that the last shock of all will be fatal.<sup>8</sup>

It is unsurprising that spiritual difficulties are a persistent theme in his hymns – though it seems a wonder that he did not sink beneath them but could control them and turn them, in various ways, to creative advantage. At times he commands a prospect of clear-sighted detachment, as in ‘The New Convert’, where, using a favourite device, imagery drawn from nature, he describes a process whereby the convert passes inevitably from innocence to lowness of spirits:

comforts sinking day by day,

What seem'd his own, a self-fed spring,  
Proves but a brook that glides away.

(10-12)

If we see Cowper's hymns as, on one level, his dialogue with himself, then here he gives himself, as well as others, a good reason for the falling-off that succeeds the first flush of elation. The change is God's way of subduing our false self-esteem, teaching us that renewal lies not in our own capacity but in the workings of his grace:

Thus will he bring our spirits down,  
And draw our ebbing comforts low,  
That sav'd by grace, but not our own,  
We may not claim the praise we owe.

(17-20)

Cowper's strongest, most vital voice as poet-hymnodist of soultrouble, however, comes not so much in verses of soteriological (that is, salvation-related) guidance or reassurance as in ones that convey the very psychodrama of doubt, conflict, even dereliction. 'Hark, my soul! it is the Lord' may be placed among these, ending as it does on a note of irresolution, with mixed feelings of unbreakable commitment and inadequacy, yearning and an inability to satisfy it:

Lord, it is my chief complaint,  
That my love is weak and faint;  
Yet I love thee and adore,  
Oh for grace to love thee more!

(21-24)

But it is 'The Contrite Heart' that most compellingly opens up Cowper's private desert places.

It is hardly possible indeed to think of 'The Contrite Heart' as a hymn at all, so much is it a subjective expression of affliction, reminiscent of the poems of George Herbert. It opens with a clash between what is logically known – that God will 'revive the hearts of the contrite ones' (Isaiah 57.15) – and bewilderment – 'Then tell me, gracious God, is mine / A contrite heart or no?' (3-4). The comforting Biblical text is thus, ironically, a starting point for personal doubt. There follows a process of self-examination and meditation that leads the protagonist not out of but deeper into the slough of despond:

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

(5-8)

Critics have noted the relative 'bareness' of the style of this and others of Cowper's best contributions to *Olney Hymns*.<sup>9</sup> How effectively then does the one obvious metaphor, 'Insensible as steel', use provocative point-to-point comparison, like a brief Metaphysical conceit, to specify an inner state – a cold, hard, unbending resistance, an unfeelingness so extreme as to be distinctly experienced. It is not just that nothing happens when Cowper hears God speak through the Word. Such blankness would

be bad enough, but he suffers the anguish of actually feeling that he 'cannot feel'. The third stanza focuses upon a division in his personality; he is literally of two minds, one 'inclin'd' to love the Lord, one 'Averse to all that's good'. His pleas for greater strength leave him 'weaker than before'; and then comes the movingly understated evocation of isolation in the midst of the fellowship of God's people:

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

(13-16)

The tired yet emphatic 'I know' poignantly concedes the futility of mere knowing, as opposed to living out. The direct, unelaborated second two lines acutely echo the disappointment and flat routine of meaningless observance. This is the hidden tragedy in the landscape of 'Jesus, where'er thy people meet' – the outsider, the outcast, amidst the chosen few. The poem then becomes suspended where it had begun, with Cowper pleading, now all the more desperately, for the Lord to decide his doubts:

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

(21-24)

The explosive imperative 'make' signals the fierceness of his desire for a resolution, but the subsequent conditional verb-forms, introduced by 'if', underline his own fundamental passivity, his helplessness to bring one about. Like 'Hark, my soul!', 'The Contrite Heart' finds no point of rest, but remains disturbingly open-ended.

Whatever their standing as congregational hymns (and 'Hark, my soul!' certainly has a secure place in the canon), these works will last even among general readers, for, like Herbert's poetry, they communicate lived experience of a kind with which the secular imagination can engage. There are, on the other hand, elements of the *Olney Hymns* whose success can only be judged within the religious and hymnological context. I wish to mention two principal examples, both of which have caused controversy among critics. 'Praise for the Fountain Opened' has been thought excessive in its language:<sup>10</sup>

There is a fountain fill'd with blood  
Drawn from Emmanuel's veins;  
And sinners, plung'd beneath that flood,  
Lose all their guilty stains.

(1-4)

Cowper pushes at limits, casting doctrine in shockingly literal form. He treads the very edge of decorum, perhaps steps over, in insisting upon an unremittingly physical process, where 'plung'd' images a total immersion. As J.R. Watson puts it, 'the singer has to accommodate the image of swimming in blood'.<sup>11</sup> Such effects, which many readers will find bad taste, can be justified as a way of revivifying response,

among the faithful, to the oft-repeated ideas of salvation, communion and baptism – as a kind of rousing Evangelical baroque or extravaganza. Together with this, however, is the catching up and forging of a special idiom, which is seen also in the next stanza:

The dying thief rejoic'd to see  
That fountain in his day;  
And there have I, as vile as he,  
Wash'd all my sins away.

(5-8)

'Vile', too, is an extreme concept, part of the currency of self-deprecation that runs through Evangelical confessional writing and includes such standard objects of comparison as the 'worm'.<sup>12</sup> There is something similarly distinctive about claiming a place for oneself alongside the thief who died alongside Christ – a sort of high-flying counterpart to the abasement of self. 'Praise for the Fountain Open'd' becomes thus a ritual song of the circumscribed community, nourishing its singular life and attitudes through the exercise of an exclusive discourse. This is a hymn that in particular belongs as firmly and as vitally as ever to the core hymnody of ardent Nonconformism.

The other piece I have in mind is from near the end of the volume, 'I will praise the Lord at all times', which further illustrates the range of genres in which Cowper wrote. This is in the tradition of emblem poems and 'occasional meditation', predicated on the assumption that, in the words of Isaac Ambrose in the seventeenth century, 'if [the heart] be sanctified, it ordinarily distils holy, sweet, and useful meditation out of all objects'.<sup>13</sup> 'All objects', but especially the Creation. John Wesley compared the Book of Nature to the Bible itself, seeing it as 'written in an universal Character, which every man may read', and as consisting 'not of words but Things, which picture out the divine Perfections'.<sup>14</sup> In 'I will praise the Lord' Cowper traces aspects of Christ in the seasons and times of the day:

Winter has a joy for me,  
While the Saviour's charms I read,  
Lowly, meek, from blemish free,  
In the snow-drop's pensive head.

(1-4)

And so on, through the turtle's 'plaintive song' that speaks Christ's 'dying groans' and the 'beams of milder day' that tell of 'his smiling face', to an arresting oxymoron:

Light appears with early dawn;  
While the sun makes haste to rise,  
See his bleeding beauties, drawn  
On the blushes of the skies.

(19-22)

The red sky shows forth the Passion. P.M. Spacks considers the paradox of 'bleeding beauties' to be an 'extravagance', and finds the connection with the 'blushes of the skies' to be 'imperfectly controlled' inasmuch as we cannot avoid heterogeneous thoughts of a blushing face.<sup>15</sup> I prefer to



see these effects as instances of the ingenuity, the risk, that is an ingredient in the art of emblematic reflection. The dawn not only expresses but blushes at the greater beauty of Christ's sacrifice; 'bleeding beauties' is a temperate but still unforgettable version of the literalization of the event of salvation; and we are surely intended to register the pun in 'sun' ('Son'), and the soteriological inferences attaching to a coming 'Light' and a new dawn. Moreover, there is a definite contrast between this penultimate stanza and the next:

Ev'ning, with a silent pace,  
Slowly moving in the west,  
Shews an emblem of his grace,  
Points to an eternal rest.

(21-24)

'See' – 'See his bleeding beauties' – indicates an effort of perception, something worked for; but 'Shews' tells of something given, a truth that comes uncalled, a revelation of both natural and providential process: evening, life, and overarchingly the work of grace itself move steadily and inevitably to their consummation in 'eternal rest'. There is, on the one hand, human perception, trying but not triumphant, fruitful but imperfect; on the other there is divine Perfection.

John Newton wrote many 'occasional' and emblematic hymns. One is 'On the Eclipse of the Moon, July 30, 1776':

The moon in silver glory shone,  
And not a cloud in sight;  
When suddenly a shade begun  
To intercept the light.

How fast across the orb it spread,  
How fast her light withdrew!  
A circle ting'd with languid red,  
Was all appear'd in view.

(1-8)

Newton will not, he says, look upon such phenomena, as others do, with an 'unmeaning eye', but, turning to Christ, will 'meditate on thy eclipse / In sad Gethsemane' (15-16). The darkness that was Jesus's agony in the garden when taking on the sins of the world raises the certain prospect that Newton himself will after death be freed from all gloom:

Then I shall see thee face to face  
And be eclipsed no more.

(31-32)

I choose this hymn because it is spare, logical, tightly disciplined. This is a side of Newton that is not widely recognized, and should be. More often, and on balance rightly, he is characterized as an effusive writer, anxious to get on and to get a great deal in – enthusiastic:

Jesus! My Shepherd, Husband, Friend,  
My Prophet, Priest, and King;  
My Lord, my Life, my Way, my End,  
Accept the praise I bring.

('How sweet the name of Jesus sounds', 17-20)

The scriptural text – ‘I am the way, the truth, and the light’ (John 14.6) – is substantiated in the existence of this individual through the multiple presences and roles that Christ has assumed for him, of shepherd, husbandman, friend, and so on. This is a good example of how the literal and the figurative come together in Newton’s writing, never quite merging though the one modifies the meaning of the other, creating the impression of a life being abundantly lived concurrently in concrete reality and on an intense spiritual plane, and at an intense spiritual pace. A similar commingling occurs in the opening stanzas of the hymn, where ‘soothes his sorrows, heals his wounds’ suggests the application of salves or lotions. Newton revitalizes the formulaic terminology of salvation theory and experience by keeping in mind the appurtenances of the practical world, and setting off against physical properties or process the influence or workings of the Spirit.

‘How sweet the name of Jesus’ raises comparisons between Newton and Cowper. If Cowper’s genius inclined to being selective, in the concentration of his language or his homing in on particular situations, Newton’s was, broadly speaking, eclectic, favouring assortment and inclusion. A further distinction has been pointed out by Donald Davie, for whom Cowper is vastly different from Newton, and from Watts and Wesley, who, all three, utter ‘their hymns as it were from the pulpit, [whereas] Cowper is one of those who sit at their feet, reporting faithfully how it seems to him, there, in the pew’.<sup>16</sup> Certainly, there is an air of authority about Newton which sets him above Cowper, as preacher and curate of Olney, as the poet’s mentor, and as senior partner in the collaboration. It comes out at times in an attitude that some will find unpleasantly hectoring, though considered at a distance it is a perfectly honourable facet of a tough tradition whose adherents knew what hell-fire was:

Stop, poor sinner! Stop and think  
Before you farther go!  
Will you sport upon the brink  
Of everlasting woe?  
Once again I charge you stop!  
For, unless you warning take,  
Ere you are aware, you drop  
Into the burning lake.

(1-8)

The repeated injunction (a variation of the old classical formula of ‘siste viator’, ‘stay traveller’), the emphatic rhymes, the double meaning of ‘farther go’ (not only journeying but persisting in sin) make these lines very dramatic. But Newton’s authority has many accents, not only this strictly didactic one. It is there in the quietly explosive joy of ‘How sweet the name of Jesus sounds / In a believer’s ear’, there, at the other pole, in the grand sweep of ‘Glorious things of thee are spoken, / Zion, city of our God!’.

Cowper often discussed with Newton his feelings of being a ‘soul ... slain’,<sup>17</sup> and many of the latter’s hymns seem to be addressed, wherever else, to his needful friend. Newton’s words, however, are never abstract prescription or untested remedy; though he occupies the pulpit, he does know what it is like down in the pew – except that he has come, been

brought, through his sea of troubles. We witness a dialogue within *Olney Hymns*: if Cowper is so often the voice of authentic uncertainty, Newton is that of authentic confidence. J.R. Watson remarks, aptly, that Newton's best hymns are related to the positive phases of the Christian pilgrimage, 'salvation by faith, belief in Christ as Saviour, and hope of Heaven'.<sup>18</sup> (Strictly, I am not so sure about 'salvation by faith', for the indefatigable Calvinist stresses everywhere the necessity for 'grace'.) This is the exsailor, slave-trader out of Liverpool, who has been rescued by something 'amazing':

Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound!)  
That saved a wretch like me!  
I once was lost, but now am found;  
Was blind but now I see. ...

Through many dangers, toils, and snares,  
I have already come;  
'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,  
And grace will lead me home.

(1-4, 9-12)

'Grace' is given an aura of added potency here by the dual sense of 'amazing': it both amazes – comes as a surprise – and is amazing – miraculous to behold. The parallelism and progress in the structure of the syntax – 'lost ... found', 'blind ... see', 'come ... home' – are important in generating that revitalization of conventional terminology that is a mark of Newton's finest compositions, as frequently of Cowper's. Single words are brilliantly placed for emphasis, especially at the ends of lines, as where the stanza comes to rest at the firm, satisfying destination of 'home', so conflating the emotions of the mariner returned to harbour with the believer's certain hope of refuge in Christ. John Newton is present in these verses as a combination, or synergy, of past, present and future selves – as one whose actual voyaging and conversion colour, indeed dictate, his grasp of the trials and the joys, both immediate and ultimate, of the soul. Sometimes the links with his seafaring life are plain –

With Christ in the vessel  
I smile at the storm.  
(*'Begone unbelief'*, 7-8)

More often it is at an implicit level, that what he proclaims from on high derives force from his own unique history.

Newton himself insists, in his Preface to the volume, upon the personal texture of his contributions to *Olney Hymns*:

I am not conscious of having written a single line with an intention, either to flatter or to offend any party or person upon earth. I have simply declared my own views and feelings, as I might have done if I had composed hymns in some of the newly-discovered islands in the South Seas, where no person had any knowledge of the name of Jesus, but myself.<sup>19</sup>

'I have simply declared my own views and feelings.' He writes, thus, a testimony of 'I' and 'me'. But, as the word testimony suggests, he does articulate this palpable drama of self for the attention and wellbeing

of others. While Evangelical discourse is invigorated by Newton's individual experience, so, vice versa, does the discourse universalize the experience. 'Glorious things of thee are spoken, / Zion, city of our God!' Zion is a given iconography, widely reported, but Newton brings to it his own enthusiastic and elaborative responses. It is the established paradigm of God's greatness, coterminous with his sublimity and everlastingness:

He, whose word cannot be broken,  
Form'd thee for his own abode:  
53  
On the rock of ages founded,  
What can shake thy sure repose?  
With salvation's walls surrounded  
Thou may'st smile at all thy foes.

(3-8)

The object of address – the 'thee' and 'thou' – is of course twofold. It is at once the Heavenly City and the host of God's people, both of which are the creation, dwelling, and expression of Divine Will. The 'sure repose' (another example of the skilful use of line endings) is that of a structure situated on an enduring base, a 'rock', but also that of men and women with assured expectation of a final rest and resting-place. Zion has become as it were a topography of God's plan of salvation, which itself 'cannot be broken'. There,

See! The streams of living waters  
Springing from eternal love;  
Well supply thy sons and daughters,  
And all fear of want remove ...

(9-12)

We have a landscape of this world and a prophecy of the next, where the waters of grace banish faintness in the fearful saints and assuage their 'thirst' (14), that is, their earthly need and their desire for heaven. This is, like the rest of the hymn, stirring allegory – a supreme episode in the fusion of the literal and figurative, the physical and metaphysical planes, in which the Evangelical imagination has excelled.

The verses move at last to a rousing affirmation of personal interest, and then magnificently outwards again to a more general vision:

Saviour, if of Zion's city  
I thro' grace a member am;  
Let the world deride or pity,  
I will glory in thy name:  
Fading is the worldling's pleasure,  
All his boasted pomp and show;  
Solid joys and lasting treasure,  
None but Zion's children know.

(33-40)

'I thro' grace a member am.' Wonderful! The 'I' through grace – not works, not even faith, but grace – takes on privileges and transcendent being – though the tiny word 'if' carefully avoids the presumption of certain election, which a Calvinist could never entertain. The word

‘member’ suggests not only membership of the church of God but a limb of the body of Christ. ‘Worldling’ is the perfect contemptuous designation of the inverse of the Christian character, picturing as it does a petty child of this world and trifling devotee of its ambitions and rewards. J.R. Watson has shown us that ‘Solid’ (where the force comes this time from placement at the beginning of the line) has behind it ‘all the connotations of terra firma for a sailor’;<sup>20</sup> but we may also note how the phrase ‘Zion’s children’ returns us then to the wider perspective, so that we recover, with high crescendo, a sweeping sense of the imperishable foundations of God’s promises and his people’s hope. How could it ever have been said that Newton was no poet?

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I have had a nagging question at the back of my mind ever since I began this address. How could Cowper create such powerful and lasting hymns when he considered himself beyond the bounds of grace? Why did he not just abandon religion, or give up the ghost? Well, for one thing he no doubt had his golden hours, his passages of optimism – ‘Sometimes a light surprises’. Then, for another, his hymns of struggle suggest a deepdown desire for resolution of his life in spiritual, and no other, terms; he could not walk away from the journey of faith, however punishing. The overarching answer, however, may be that he was inspired. He renders the bright, the dark, and the grey areas of the Christian experience with efficacy because, as it has been said, ‘not by art does the poet sing, but by power divine’:

God takes away the minds of poets, and makes them his ministers, as he also uses diviners and holy prophets, in order that we who hear them may know that they speak not of themselves who utter these priceless things ... but that God is the speaker, and that through them he is conversing with us.

Cowper was, like Newton but less straightforwardly, an instrument of God.

The words I have just quoted are not from a Christian theologian but from the *Ion* of the Greek philosopher Plato,<sup>21</sup> where Socrates, in dialogue with the rhapsodist Ion, proves that poets are inspired, using the particular evidence that they express convincingly feelings and situations to which they are not themselves ordinarily interior. (Who is the better poet of war, Homer, who never fought a battle, or a Greek general?) Cowper’s ‘Jesus, wher’er they people meet’ is a specially good, but by no means unique, case of his thus realizing a scenario and emotions from which he was routinely excluded. But the *Ion* presses the point further, through the motif of the Socratic chain whereby inspiration passes from the god to one level, the poet, and then to another, the performer, and then to the audience, and so on. Here today we form such a chain.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> D.H. Lawrence, ‘Hymns in a Man’s Life’, in D.H. Lawrence: Selected Literary Criticism, ed. Anthony Beal (London: Mercury Books, 1961), pp. 7-11.

<sup>2</sup> See Letters by the Reverend John Newton, ed. Josiah Bull (1869), p. 65.

- <sup>3</sup> Cf. *The Task* (1785), book vi, lines 184-85: '... there lives and works / A soul in all things, and that soul is God.'
- <sup>4</sup> James King, *William Cowper: A Biography* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1986), p. 84.
- <sup>5</sup> *The Works of Isaac Watts D.D.*, ed. G. Burder (1810), iv, 254.
- <sup>6</sup> Samuel Greatheed, *Memorial Sermon on Cowper* (1800), p.18.
- <sup>7</sup> J.R. Watson, *The English Hymn: A Critical and Historical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 291. Labourers in the field are everywhere indebted to this study, as also to Watson's earlier sympathetic appraisal, 'Cowper's *Olney Hymns*', *Essays and Studies*, vol. xxxviii, ed. Geoffrey Harlow (London: John Murray, 1985), pp. 45-65.
- <sup>8</sup> Letter to John Newton, 2 Sept. 1788. *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, ed. James King and Charles Ryskamp, vol. iii (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 209.
- <sup>9</sup> For example, P.M. Spacks, *The Poetry of Vision; Five Eighteenth-Century Poets* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), pp. 166-67. See also my *Cowper's Poetry: A Critical Study and Reassessment* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1982), pp. 293-94.
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- <sup>10</sup> Spacks, pp. 169-70.
- <sup>11</sup> Watson, *The English Hymn*, p. 295.
- <sup>12</sup> See Lodwick Hartley, 'The Worm and the Thorn: A Study of Cowper's *Olney Hymns*', *Journal of Religion*, 29 (1949), 220-29.
- <sup>13</sup> Isaac Ambrose, *Prima, Media & Ultima* (1654), ii, 68.
- <sup>14</sup> *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. T. Jackson (London, 1831; rpt. 1872), i, 229.
- <sup>15</sup> Spacks, pp. 171-72.
- <sup>16</sup> Introduction, *The New Oxford Book of Christian Verse*, ed. Donald Davie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. xxv.
- <sup>17</sup> 'You will tell me that this cold gloom will be succeeded by a cheerful spring, and endeavour to encourage me to hope for a spiritual change resembling it. But it will be lost labour: Nature revives again, but a soul once slain, lives no more': letter to Newton, 13 Jan. 1784; *Letters and Prose Writings*, ii, 200.
- <sup>18</sup> Watson, *The English Hymn*, p. 288.
- <sup>19</sup> *Olney Hymns* (London, 1779), p. ix.
- <sup>20</sup> Watson, *The English Hymn*, p. 284.
- <sup>21</sup> Plato, 'Ion', in *The Essential Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, intro. Alain de Botton (London: Book-of-the-Month Club, 1999), pp. 1119-40 (p. 1129).