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Romanticism and Evangelical Christianity in William Cowper's *The Task*

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ROMANTICISM AND EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANITY

IN WILLIAM COWPER'S THE TASK

(TITLE)

BY

CAROL V. JOHNSON

B. A., Eastern Illinois University, 1975

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1976

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ROMANTICISM AND EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANITY
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ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts at the Graduate School
of Eastern Illinois University

CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS
1976

In The Task, dated 1785, William Cowper clearly anticipates certain major themes in early nineteenth-century British Romantic poetry. In his individual presentation of the central Romantic themes of this "transitional" work, however, Cowper differs significantly from the major Romantic poets whose work his own most resembles. This is largely due to the strain of Evangelical Christianity that pervades the poem, as the result of his contact with the Evangelical Revival that swept England during the second half of the eighteenth century. The orthodox Christian doctrine and morality that underlie the Romantic themes in The Task, together with the spirit of the Revival that inspires the literary use of those themes, become an important consideration in reading Cowper's work as significant nature and humanitarian poetry in its own right.

The first three sections of this paper are devoted to brief identification of some Romantic themes in The Task on the basis of clear similarities to the work of certain Romantic poets, particularly Blake, Wordsworth, and Shelley, and to demonstration of the religious basis for Cowper's individual presentation of those themes. I have discussed The Task first as Wordsworthian nature poetry saturated with the Evangelical message and spirit, then, as humanitarian poetry in which the sympathetic analysis of English manners and morals has its basis in New Testament doctrine. It is also idealist poetry of mankind in which the more universal themes of liberty, brotherhood, the immorality

of war, and the prophetic vision of a perfected world are based on the poet's conviction of the unity of mankind under one God and intensified by his religious fervor. These three sections provide substantial evidence for the positive literary influence of Evangelicalism on Cowper's writing of The Task.

The final section is devoted to investigation of the unfortunate critical tendency to cite Evangelicalism as a limiting factor in Cowper's literary development. It has been suggested that had he not come under the influence of the Revival Cowper's imaginative and poetic powers could have developed more fully. This idea raises the more general critical problem of whether adherence to a conventional theology prevents the serious pursuit and high purposes of the true poet and interferes with the free exercise of the poetic imagination. Although one can probably assume that the orthodox Christian writer's conscious attitude toward his work will differ from that of the non-Christian, there is no evidence that adherence to a conventional theology in itself precludes the writing of imaginative poetry, and in fact, the achievement of such writers as Dante and Milton suggests the opposite. It seems much more plausible to conclude that The Task owes much to its Evangelical Christian strain, and that Cowper was not inherently a creative writer like Wordsworth, but a gifted essayist and letter writer whose personal and emotional religion moved him to poetic expression.

INTRODUCTION

William Cowper's The Task, dated 1785, shows certain marked thematic similarities to the work of the major British Romantic poets of the early nineteenth century. These anticipations, particularly of major themes of Wordsworth, Blake, and Shelley, accord the poem a significant place in the development of English nature and humanitarian poetry. The tendency among literary historians to consider Cowper's major and most mature work as simply an interesting transitional piece, however, has been an unfortunate one. As William N. Free observes in his recent literary biography of Cowper, this tendency is signified by the term "Pre-Romantic" frequently applied to this and other works of its generation. Besides implying, as he suggests, that "such poems as The Task are only a landmark in the journey to Tintern Abbey, and that any true estimate of their value must be made from the perspective of what followed,"¹ this term fails to call sufficient attention to the significant respects in which Cowper differs from the Romantic poets in his treatment of the central Romantic themes of the poem.

These differences, my primary concern in this paper, cannot be satisfactorily accounted for by balancing Cowper's Romantic with his obvious Neo-Classical tendencies, as the term "Pre-Romantic" would also seem to imply. Nor can they

simply be attributed to his individual personality either as man or as poet. Rather, they result more clearly from the simultaneous expression in the poem of the orthodox Christian doctrine and moral values and the religious fervor developed in Cowper through his contact with the great religious movement known as Methodism, or the Evangelical Revival, led by John and Charles Wesley and George Whitefield in the second half of the eighteenth century. Ernest Bernbaum, noted Romantic scholar, describes Romanticism not only in terms of thematic common denominators, but as an "intuitive faith expressed through the emotional and symbolical art of literature."² He comments that "in romantic literature there are found, as underlying assumptions, certain frequently repeated intuitions about the meanings of life and the purposes which lie behind life."³ The more orthodox Christian doctrines of Evangelicalism that underlie the Romantic themes in The Task, together with the spirit of the Revival that inspires the literary use of those themes, become a significant consideration in forming conclusions about Cowper's work as significant nature and humanitarian poetry in its own right.

It is my purpose in this paper to identify briefly some Romantic themes in The Task on the basis of clear similarities to the work of certain nineteenth-century Romantic poets, to show the individuality of Cowper's treatment of these themes on the basis of the pronounced Evangelical Christian strain that permeates all of his writing, and

finally, to form a critical judgment of the literary effect of this strain on this "Pre-Romantic" work. I have undertaken the study of Romantic themes in the poem keeping firmly in mind that the identification of such tendencies is only useful insofar as it helps in more meaningful analysis of the work itself. "Romanticism" is itself, of course, an elusive term, but for my purposes in this project I have used as a guide the Pre-Romantic tendencies in eighteenth-century literature listed by Professor Bernbaum in his Guide Through the Romantic Movement.⁴ I have not attempted to make thorough comparisons and contrasts of Cowper's poem to the vast body of work of the Romantic poets discussed, but have tried only to make some of the most obvious and useful. Nor have I dealt fully with the major critical problem of the total effect of Cowper's contact with the Evangelical Movement on his life and work, or with his reputation as the major poet of the Revival. Rather, I have concentrated my attention on those elements in The Task that most distinguish it from the work of Cowper's contemporaries and later poets, and on their literary value.

I

In Theology in the English Poets Stopford A. Brooke traces several stages in the development of an English "poetry of Nature" since the early and mid-eighteenth-century pastorals of Pope, Thomson, and Young. He shows how nature poetry became more clearly delineated in the work of Burns, Crabbe, and Cowper in the 1780s¹ and reached its "full growth" at the turn of the century in the supreme nature poetry of Wordsworth.² The poets of Cowper's generation had abandoned the Augustan poets' use of landscape description as an artistic convention; the new poetry of Nature showed "Nature studied directly as a whole, Nature loved for her own sake, and therefore Nature conceived as a distinct subject for poetical treatment."³ Cowper's place in this development is readily evident in his work; The Task is probably now remembered best for Cowper's most open and deeply sincere praise of Nature in the poem, and for his enthusiastic refrain declaring the sound benefits to body, mind, and soul of "domestic life in rural leisure pass'd." The poem is structured, albeit loosely, around Cowper's own long, leisurely saunters through the gardens and English countryside surrounding Orchard House, his quiet retreat in the rural lacemaking village of Olney, where he spent the literarily productive later years of his life. As the perambulating

speaker in the poem, Cowper converses continually on the rural sights and sounds that "exhilarate the spirit, and restore / The tone of languid Nature."⁴ His poetic attitude toward nature is shown in Book 1 of The Task in the following remark to his constant walking companion, presumably the poet's lifelong friend Mary Unwin:

Thou know'st my praise of nature most sincere,
And that my raptures are not conjur'd up
To serve occasions of poetic pomp,
But genuine, and art partner of them all.⁵

It was as a poet inspired by the Evangelical Revival that Cowper made his specific individual contribution toward the more theological and devotional English poetry that was to develop in the nineteenth century,⁶ and, more specifically, toward the recovery of a religious theology of nature in poetry. Theology had disappeared from nature poetry after the Natural Theology of Pope, who admired Man and Nature as related parts of God's great System. It did not reappear until after 1800, in the quite different, but deeply religious nature poetry of Wordsworth, in which God and Nature were fused, and Man outside.⁷ This fusion of God and Nature, a theology of Nature alive with the divine spirit, which was to become an important thematic common denominator in nineteenth-century Romantic poetry beginning with Wordsworth, does not actually appear in the work of Cowper. He does, however, take the first step away from the mechanical theory of the Deists, for whom God was strictly outside and remote from an inanimate Nature. Brooke credits this innovation seen in Cowper's work partially to his

Evangelical religious experience, suggesting that he "transferred from his theological creed the doctrine of the personal superintendence of God over every human life to the realm of Nature, and bringing God directly into contact with it, declared that He maintained its course by an unremitting act." He refers to passages in The Task in which Cowper "ceases to interpose laws between Nature and God,"⁸ as he writes,

The Lord of all, himself through all diffus'd,
Sustains, and is the life of all that lives,

and even goes so far as to say,

there lives and works
A soul in all things, and that soul is God.⁹

This theological departure in The Task marks a step forward toward the nature poetry of Wordsworth and later nineteenth-century Romantic poets who, in Brooke's words,

believing in God, saw Him in the loveliness and tenderness and quiet that they loved, and worshipped not the Author of a great system whom they dared not scan, but a Divine Spirit in the Universe--not necessarily personal there, though personal in them--and said, "This Presence which disturbs me with the joy of elevated thoughts, this Wisdom and Beauty, is revealing itself to me. I can listen, I can understand its voice. It is in Nature the same voice, though in a different language, which belongs to God my Father in my heart, and the work it is doing on me is a work of education. Not by reason but by feeling, not by admiration but by love, I make its lessons mine. Therefore I shall give myself wholly, when I am with Nature, to absolute self-forgetful love of her."¹⁰

In examining Cowper's use, both implicit and explicit, of the theme of nature in The Task, I see several additional significant similarities and anticipations of Wordsworth's and later nature poetry. Romantic characteristics are apparent

in Cowper's meditative presence in the passages of natural description in the poem, in his fine sharpness of detail and appreciation for the small, insignificant things in nature for their own sake, and in his praise of nature as a source both of superior wisdom and supreme aesthetic pleasure. Such similarities are accounted for by the general influence of Evangelicalism, with its emphasis on the personal and on intense emotion, on the Romantic Movement,¹¹ and by the more direct and specific influence of Cowper on Wordsworth, indicated by letters of Wordsworth that show great admiration for Cowper.¹² I am convinced, though, that however much Cowper's literary use of the theme of nature in The Task anticipates and may have influenced Wordsworth, Cowper's nature poetry cannot be fully appreciated by being seen simply as a pupa stage in the development of Romantic nature poetry. Cowper takes an explicit Evangelical Christian stance shared by no later Romantic nature poet. This stance cannot be, and certainly has not been, ignored by readers and critics in the evaluation of Cowper's poetic achievement, for, as Frederick C. Gill puts it, "Cowper's work is not merely tinged with Evangelicalism, but saturated with its atmosphere and message."¹³ First, I shall illustrate briefly Cowper's further resemblances to Wordsworth, most frequently cited by critics as his strengths as a nature poet, then show the great extent to which Evangelical spirit and doctrine permeate the presentation of nature in The Task, and finally, explore the degree to which Cowper succeeds

in integrating the Evangelical strain with the Romantic tendencies to produce an individual nature poetry worthy of recognition in its own right.

Cowper achieves a sense of immediacy and intimacy by his own congenial presence in the descriptive passages of The Task, which, as Myra Reynolds comments, "are given warmth and tone by the fact that we go to the poet, and, as it were, hear him talk about the scene as one he has long known and loved, until it takes an added interest from his personality, or we seem to see him in semi-identification with the scenes."¹⁴ An outstanding passage of this type appears in Book 6, "The Winter Walk at Noon":

The vault is blue
Without a cloud, and white without a speck
The dazzling splendour of the scene below.
Again the harmony comes o'er the vale;
And through the trees I view th' embattled tow'r
Whence all the music. I again perceive
The soothing influence of the wafted strains,
And settle in soft musings as I tread
The walk, still verdant, under oaks and elms,
Whose outspread branches overarch the glade.
.
No noise is here, or none that hinders thought.
The redbreast warbles still, but is content
With slender notes, and more than half suppress'd:
Pleas'd with his solitude, and flitting light
From many a twig the pendant drops of ice,
That tinkle in the wither'd leaves below.
Stillness, accompanied with sounds so soft,
Charms more than silence.¹⁵

From this sheltered path Cowper anticipates the meditative voice of Wordsworth on returning to Tintern Abbey:

Once again
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,
That on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect
The landscape with the quiet of the sky.
The day is come when I again repose

Here, under this dark sycamore, and view
 These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard tufts,
 Which at this season, with their unripe fruits,
 Are clad in one green hue, and lose themselves
 'Mid groves and copses. Once again I see
 These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines
 Of sportive wood run wild: these pastoral farms,
 Green to the very door; and wreaths of smoke
 Sent up, in silence from among the trees!¹⁶

Cowper's nature poetry is frequently admired for the great faithfulness to life and sharpness of detail he achieves in his local descriptions, a particular ability which Gill thinks excels that of Wordsworth, "whose work is more expansive, and whose Nature descriptions are less clearly drawn."¹⁷ In one woodland passage Cowper observes,

No tree in all the grove but has its charms,
 Though each its hue peculiar,¹⁸

and then proceeds to describe each tree individually. Coupled with this ability for minute description is his appreciation for the intrinsic value of small things that others would overlook. As he anticipates the coming of spring and the regeneration of the wild flowers, he rejoices that

each, in its peculiar honours clad,
 Shall publish, even to the distant eye,
 Its family and tribe.¹⁹

Wordsworth's lyrics, including the well-known "Lucy" poems, in which he develops an obscure young girl as significant subject matter for poetry, frequently are based on the same appreciation shown by Cowper for the small and the obscure. This stanza is from his "Lines Written in Early Spring":

Through primrose tufts, in that green bower,
 The periwinkle trailed its wreaths;
 And 'tis my faith that every flower
 Enjoys the air it breathes.²⁰

Cowper's long passages that combine meditation and description suggest implicitly his conviction that nature is a source of wisdom superior to the knowledge obtainable from books. Occasionally, he chooses to make this point explicit. Books, he writes, may be instruments of deceit,

By which the magic art of shrewder wits
Holds an unthinking multitude enthralld.

But trees, and rivulets whose rapid course
Defies the check of winter, haunts of deer,
And sheep-walks populous with bleating lambs,
And lanes in which the primrose ere her time
Peeps through the moss that clothes the hawthorn root,
Deceive no student. Wisdom there, and truth,
Not shy, as in the world, and to be won
By slow solicitation, seize at once
The roving thought, and fix it on themselves.²¹

This passage brings to mind Wordsworth's more lyrically-expressed rejection of books in favor of Nature's teaching in "The Tables Turned":

Books! 'tis a dull and endless strife:
Come, hear the woodland linnet,
How sweet this music! on my life,
There's more of wisdom in it.²²

Nature is also for Cowper a "feast," a "universal prize" available to all, providing the highest form of aesthetic enjoyment. The finest "mimic works of art" are only poor substitutes for the art created by God in Nature, and those who prefer "Th' inferior wonders of an artist's hand" are to be wondered at and pitied, for

imitative strokes can do no more
Than please the eye--sweet Nature ev'ry sense.
The air salubrious of her lofty hills,
The cheering fragrance of her dewy vales,
And music of her woods--no works of man
May rival these; these all bespeak a pow'r
Peculiar, and exclusively her own.

He laments that we "waste the breath of praise" in paying honor to great artists, rulers, and statesmen of the day, "to a thing / Doom'd to the dust, or lodg'd already there!" As his eighteenth-century contemporaries and the Romantic poets so frequently did, Cowper, "contented with an humbler theme," "pour'd [his] stream of panegyric down / The vale of nature."²³

Let us now turn our attention to the distinctly Evangelical atmosphere and message which saturates Cowper's work and which distinguishes The Task as nature poetry both from the work of his contemporaries and from the nineteenth-century Romantic nature poetry exemplified by Wordsworth. It would be misleading to suggest that Cowper's love for nature depended entirely on his religious beliefs. He had developed his instinctive love for nature long before his conversion experience, which did not take place until July 1764, when he was already thirty-three years old.²⁴ He writes in The Task that from his early youth, "My very dreams were rural; rural, too / The first-born efforts of my poetic muse."²⁵ But by the summer of 1783,²⁶ when Cowper turned to the writing of serious nature poetry with The Task, he had for a number of years been actively involved with the Calvinist side of the religious movement, and had written poetry specifically for the purposes of the Evangelicals. He had collaborated in 1779 with his friend and mentor, John Newton, curate at Olney, in writing a collection of hymns for use in congregational worship, and had published

in 1782 a volume of didactic poems setting forth Calvinist doctrine.²⁷ The Evangelical preacher's tone assumed by Cowper in this earlier work is occasionally present in The Task, and the poem's passages dealing with nature do not entirely escape this unpoetic intrusion; however, there is substantial evidence in the best nature passages of The Task for the positive literary influence of Evangelicalism's message and spirit on Cowper's instinctive response to natural beauty, and for its effective integration with his Romantic tendencies to produce nature poetry worthy of recognition in its own right.

The doctrines of Evangelicalism combine with Cowper's instinctive love for nature in his position, maintained throughout the poem, that the great joy of first-hand experience of natural beauty is always subordinate to the supreme joy of recognizing her Creator in nature. The following exclamation is typical:

Happy who walks with him! whom what he finds
Of flavour or of scent in fruit or flow'r,
Or what he views of beautiful or grand
To the green blade that twinkles in the sun,
Prompts with remembrance of a present God!
His presence, who made all so fair, perceiv'd,
Makes all still fairer.²⁸

This position is certainly not shared by Wordsworth, who writes in The Prelude how, in the development of his sensibilities, he learned to seek Nature "for her own sake," not as "intervenient" and "secondary."²⁹ Cowper's theology leads him to lament that all too often, "Familiar with th' effect we slight the cause,"³⁰ but Wordsworth does not

subordinate effect to cause or even distinguish between the two. His expression of distress at modern man's apathy toward Nature in "The World is Too Much With Us; Late and Soon" is that we are generally "out of tune; / It moves us not."³¹

For all his Wordsworthian distrust of books and his praise of nature as a superior source of instruction in wisdom, Cowper expresses in several passages the firm and orthodox Christian belief that nature alone is not sufficient to reveal God:

In vain thy creatures testify of thee
Till thou proclaim thyself.

The Word of God serves to illuminate all of Creation, as the lamp

Which whoso sees no longer wanders lost,
With intellects bemaz'd in endless doubt,
But runs the road of wisdom.³²

Indeed, it becomes clear that for Cowper the full apprehension of nature's divine beauty comes only through Christian belief. William N. Free observes that, because of this belief, Cowper "carefully separates [instinctive, emotional] response to nature from religious feeling," and that The Task

attacks the person who ruminates like an animal upon the landscape, or, resting "content / With what he views" and not reading "his wonders, in whose thought the world, / Fair as it is, existed ere it was." The soul that has the grace necessary to see God, that has either received new faculties of observation or learned to use more properly his old powers, soon detaches itself from emotional response and turns to religious truths. Praising nature becomes the threshold to praising God. What emotion is involved in the latter experience is refined of its earthly manifestations and turns about the contemplation of divinity.³³

The poem says that when

liberty, like day,
Breaks on the soul, and by a flash from heav'n
Fires all the faculties with glorious joy,
· · · · ·
In that blest moment Nature, throwing wide
Her veil opaque, discloses with a smile
The author of her beauties.³⁴

Critics are divided in their assessment of the literary effects of Cowper's strong religious convictions on The Task as nature poetry. In the final section of this paper I shall deal more fully with the question of whether Cowper might have developed into a Wordsworth had it not been for the Evangelical strain that persisted in his most mature nature poetry. This has been suggested by certain critics who see the orthodox Christian doctrine he affirms as a confining, limiting factor in his literary development. In concluding this section I shall simply illustrate through a few examples the more positive position that the Evangelical strain that distinguishes Cowper's nature poetry complements the Romantic, or Wordsworthian, elements to produce some of the most individual and inspired passages of the poem.

Earlier in this section I pointed out the conviction of Wordsworth and later Romantic poets that Nature was filled with the divine spirit, was alive, and had a personality of her own. I showed how, even though his orthodox theology showed God directing from outside an inanimate Nature, Cowper was moved by his emotions when writing poetry to transcend doctrine and produce passages in which Nature seems to be moved directly by a divine spirit. Brooke suggests that

besides occupying a significant place in this progression of theology in nature poetry, Cowper had developed a "special personal theology of his own, "which abode in worship of Christ, that carried him still further; and he makes Christ Himself as the Eternal Word, as the acting Thought of God-- the ruler of the universe, and the author of its forms."³⁴ Hoxie Neale Fairchild commends Cowper's ability to "subject to the purest Evangelicalism a nature-feeling much stronger and more genuine than that of his unorthodox sentimental contemporaries. He transforms the eighteenth-century God of Nature into the Crucified Christ. This he can do because his love of nature and his love of Christ are so closely interwoven."³⁵ These statements are illustrated by the following passage, which shows Christ Himself almost physically present in nature:

One spirit--His
 Who wore the platted thorns with bleeding brows--
 Rules universal nature. Not a flow'r
 But shows some touch, in freckle, streak, or stain,
 Of his unrivall'd pencil. He inspires
 Their balmy odours, and imparts their hues,
 And bathes their eyes with nectar, and includes,
 In grains as countless as the sea-side sands,
 The forms with which he sprinkles all the earth.³⁶

Frederick C. Gill cites this passage as the delicate close to a sequence in which Cowper reaches the climax of the poem, linking nature and divine grace to artistic advantage. The man freed by grace is able to apprehend with new eyes the grandeur of nature. His soul is elevated because of new recognition that "higher than Nature is God. . . . God is 'the' source and centre of all minds.'" Gill comments

on the above-quoted passage,

There is no evidence here of reduced imaginative power or poetic energy. Compared with others Cowper may have been in some aspects a subordinate poet. It is a matter of critical opinion and relative values. But unquestionably Cowper himself, in linking together the subjects of Nature and grace, appears to take new fire, and the result is seen in some of his finest lines. If grace, as he suggests, lends Nature beauty, it seems also to add richness to his own work.³⁷

Additional support for Gill's position that Cowper's "Evangelical tendency affects his greatest passages" is supplied by the well-known "stricken deer" passage, where, the critic judges, "the poetic value is distinctly increased, and the imaginative effect heightened, by the extension of the poet's thought to the Divine Passion."³⁸

I was a stricken deer, that left the herd
Long since; with many an arrow deep infixt
My panting side was charg'd, when I withdrew
To seek a tranquil death in distant shades.
There was I found by one who had himself
Been hurt by th' archers. In his side he bore,
And in his hands and feet, the cruel scars.
With gentle force soliciting the darts,
He drew them forth, and heal'd, and bade me live.³⁹

In this passage Cowper has combined natural imagery and intense personal emotion with the essence of the Evangelical Christian message, the healing power of Christ. As Gill observes, "Nowhere has the Evangelical appeal been put more beautifully. In view of such evidence the theory that Cowper's religion reacted restrictively upon his poetry needs careful qualification."⁴⁰

II

Roughly paralleling the development of English nature poetry, what Brooke calls a "poetry of Man" was growing up during the early eighteenth century, taking clear form in its final decades. He describes this as "a poetry which had to do with all the questions which belong to Man as a whole, and to the growth, origin, and destiny of the individual man."¹ Pope had declared the proper study of mankind to be man, but his intellectual approach and that of his successors, Johnson and Akenside, had resulted chiefly in "cold speculation" and "brilliant satire." It lacked sufficient emotion to explore the "whole of Human Nature." The ideas of "the Universal Man, of one common mankind, rising above all distinctions of clan, caste, race, and nation," developing as the Revolution approached, first made it possible for "poetry of Man in the true sense of the word" to be written.² It first became clearly defined in the work of Cowper and Crabbe, in whom, Brooke writes, "the influences which led men to investigate the wrongs and pains of the poor, to extend their human sympathies, to be indignant with oppression, to see the Man in every one, however miserable like the cottager, however degraded like the slave--fell with immense force, and became creative of a new poetry of Man."³

As with the development of nature poetry, Cowper's specific individual contribution to this humanitarian poetry came about through his association with the Evangelical Movement, whose humanitarian ideas his poetry helped to spread. Cowper's affinities to the humanitarian and social ideas of the Romantic poets will become obvious in this section as I show his concern and respect for all men, urban and rural, rich and poor, and examine his recommendation of country life over city and the causes and remedies he suggests for social problems. In the following section I shall focus on the related but larger, more abstract themes of liberty, the brotherhood of all mankind, the immorality of war, and on his final prophetic vision of the universal regeneration of mankind and eternal peace. There is relative agreement among critics that the Evangelical Movement had a positive influence on the depth of the humanitarian sympathy expressed in Cowper's poetry and that it activated the passion to which he rises in embracing the causes of liberty, equality, and brotherhood.

Before the death of Pope there had begun to appear in the poetry of Thomson, Warton, and Gray a more sentimental rather than speculative interest in man, accompanied by the beginnings of poetic interest in the rustic, uneducated man, in man in nature apart from society.⁴ In this period the portrayal of man, like the portrayal of nature, remained essentially a "quiet, contemplative interest," and not the "living, close, direct thing it afterwards became."⁵ Cowper's

substantial contribution toward this progression is indicated in The Task by the numerous sympathetic portraits of his rural neighbors, the thresher, the woodman and his dog, the peasant laborer's family huddled in their drafty but cheerful cabin on a winter evening, the "poor, yet industrious, modest, quiet, neat," who "have a friend in ev'ry feeling heart."⁶ Of particular significance is the "Crazy Kate" episode, which anticipates clearly Wordsworth's leech-gatherer and Cumberland Beggar figures. According to Lodwick C. Hartley, no poet before Cowper had done anything comparable to this portrait.⁷

There often wanders one, whom better days
 Saw better clad, in cloak of satin trimm'd
 With lace, and hat with splendid riband bound.
 A serving maid was she, and fell in love
 With one who left her, went to sea, and died.

 She heard the doleful tidings of his death--
 And never smil'd again! And now she roams
 The dreary waste; there spends the livelong day,
 And there, unless when charity forbids,
 The livelong night. A tatter'd apron hides,
 Worn as a cloak, and hardly hides, a gown
 More tatter'd still; and both but ill conceal
 A bosom heav'd with never-ceasing sighs.
 She begs an idle pin of all she meets,
 And hoards them in her sleeve; but needful food,
 Though press'd with hunger oft, or comelier clothes,
 Though pinch'd with cold, asks never.--Kate is craz'd!⁸

Cowper's place in the development of poetry concerned with one's fellow man is further shown in The Task by his awareness of the corruptive influence of the cities on the manners and morals of the simple country people. Although he was a gentleman living in retirement among rural lace-makers and farmers, he genuinely mourned the loss of their charming, simple ways and modest values. He adopts a humorous

tone here in observing that

the rural lass,
Whom once her virgin modesty and grace,
Her artless manners, and her neat attire,
So dignified, that she was hardly less
Than the fair shepherdess of old romance,
Is seen no more. The character is lost!
Her head, adorn'd with lappets pinn'd aloft,
And ribbands streaming gay, superbly rais'd,
And magnified beyond all human size,
Indebted to some smart wig-weaver's hand
For more than half the tresses it sustains;
Her elbows ruffled, and her tott'ring form
Ill propp'd upon French heels, she might be deem'd
(But that the basket dangling on her arm
Interprets her more truly) of a rank
Too proud for dairy work, or sale of eggs.
Expect her soon with foot-boy at her heels,
No longer blushing for her awkward load,
Her train and her umbrella all her care!

But the sad story of young Luke in Wordsworth's "Michael"
is anticipated in the story of

The clown, the child of nature, without guile,
Blest with an infant's ignorance of all
But his own simple pleasures,

who returns to the village after three years' military
service. Not only has military flair replaced his awkward
manner, but

To swear, to game, to drink; to show at home
By lewdness, idleness, and sabbath-breach,
The great proficiency he made abroad;
T' astonish and to grieve his gazing friends,
To break some maiden's and his mother's heart;
To be a pest where he was useful once;
Are his sole aim, and all his glory, now!

Cowper's concern that "the town has ting'd the country"⁹
is, in B. L. Manning's words, "no mere pastoral lament."¹⁰
Cowper remembers the time when

men did not watch
T' invade another's right, or guard their own.
Then sleep was undisturb'd by fear, unscar'd
By drunken howlings; and the chilling tale

Of midnight murder was a wonder heard
 With doubtful credit, told to frighten babes.

Now, he observes,

Ev'n daylight has its dangers; and the walk
 Through pathless wastes and woods, unconscious once
 Of other tenants than melodious birds,
 Or harmless flocks, is hazardous and bold.¹¹

Cowper's position as a poet living in rural retirement, yet still concerned with the quality of life in the city he has fled, provides further evidence for the place of The Task in the development of poetry concerned with the whole of mankind and of human nature rather than with only certain classes or societies of men. His move from London was not simply an escape from the city. He himself wrote of the poem that

"except the fifth book, which is rather of a political aspect, the whole has one tendency, to discountenance the modern enthusiasm after a London life, and to recommend rural ease and leisure as friendly to the cause of piety and virtue."¹²

He exposes early in the poem the ill effects of the city life of leisure:

It is the constant revolution, stale
 And tasteless, of the same repeated joys,
 That palls and satiates, and makes languid life
 A pedlar's pack, that bows the bearer down.

He pictures the city classes he has left in their salons, playing their endless games of cards. They probably sense that their life is meaningless and stultifying, but they hang onto life anyway. They "fear to die, / Yet scorn the purposes for which they live."¹³ Oswald Doughty considers this unprecedented exposure of city life as misery disguised as pleasure to be Cowper's greatest contribution in the

eighteenth century to literature. He "turned his back upon the sordid rationalism and materialism of 'the Town'; he rejected its paltry, childish amusements, its standards of failure and of success."¹⁴ In the following passage Cowper makes clear his own choice of lifestyles:

Whom call we gay? That honour has been long
 The boast of mere pretenders to the name.
 The innocent are gay--the lark is gay,
 That dries his feathers, saturate with dew,
 Beneath the rosy cloud, while yet the beams
 Of day-spring overshoot his humble nest.
 The peasant too, a witness of his song,
 Himself a songster, is as gay as he.
 But save me from the gaiety of those
 Whose head-aches nail them to a noon-day bed;
 And save me too from their's whose haggard eyes
 Flash desperation, and betray their pangs
 For property stripp'd off by cruel chance;
 From gaiety that fills the bones with pain,
 The mouth with blasphemy, the heart with woe.¹⁵

The later development of this city-country comparison in poetry is illustrated in the seventh book of The Prelude, in which Wordsworth remembers the confusion that surrounded him in his residence in London, where he saw people

Living amid the same perpetual whirl
 Of trivial objects, melted and reduced
 To one identity, by differences
 That have no law, no meaning, and no end--
 Oppression, under which even highest minds
 Must labor, whence the strongest are not free.

In the eighth book he writes,

With deep devotion, Nature, did I feel,
 In that enormous city's turbulent world
 Of men and things, what benefit I owed
 To thee, and those domains of rural peace,
 Where to the sense of beauty first my heart
 Was opened.¹⁶

As Myra Reynolds observes, "The ministry of Nature to human needs is a cardinal principle in Cowper's poetry."

This conception was not merely theoretic but based on personal experience,¹⁷ since Cowper himself had left an active life in London after an attack of insanity and remained in seclusion in Olney the rest of his life. The conception becomes more than theoretical or personal, however; his praise of retirement and of country life, identified by Goldwin Smith as the "perpetual refrain of The Task, if not its definite theme,"¹⁸ rests on a certainty that every man, "immur'd in cities, still retains / His inborn inextinguishable thirst / Of rural scenes." Cowper writes,

The most unfurnish'd with the means of life,
And they that never pass their brick-wall bounds
To range the fields and treat their lungs with air,
Yet feel the burning instinct: over head
Suspend their crazy boxes, planted thick,
And water'd duly. There the pitcher stands
A fragment, and the spoutless tea-pot there;
Sad witnesses how close-pent man regrets
The country, with what ardour he contrives
A peep at nature, when he can no more.

He observes that urban man commonly tries to "import" for himself natural surroundings, with his villas and gardens that

serve him with a hint
That nature lives; that sight-refreshing green
Is still the liv'ry she delights to wear,
Though sickly samples of th' exub'rant whole.

Going beyond traditional satire in his assessment of city life, he offers a personal alternative based on what he believes to be the common human need for a truly wholesome lifestyle:

What we admire we praise; and, when we praise,
Advance it into notice, that, its worth
Acknowledg'd, others may admire it too.
I therefore recommend, though at the risk

Of popular disgust, yet boldly still,

Scenes that I love, and without regret perceive
Forsaken, or through folly not enjoy'd.¹⁹

While The Task, as I have shown, contributes much to the general development of humanitarian poetry, Cowper's decidedly Evangelical Christian beliefs are always behind his analysis of English society, becoming particularly prominent in his interpretation of city corruptions and his recommendation of rural life. Without due emphasis on the pervasiveness of these beliefs, my account of Cowper's social attitudes as expressed in the poem would be grossly inaccurate. Gilbert Thomas shows that Cowper himself stressed a moral, religious motivation behind his social commentary. He enclosed remarks to this effect when he sent the completed manuscript of the poem to William Unwin in October 1784:

"In some passages," he told him, "you will observe me very satirical. Writing on such subjects I could not be otherwise. I can write nothing without aiming at least at usefulness: it were beneath my years to do it, and still more dishonourable to my religion. I know that a reformation of such abuses as I have censured is not to be expected from the efforts of a poet; but to contemplate the world, its follies, its vices, its indifference to duty, and its strenuous attachment to what is evil, and not to reprehend, were to approve it."²⁰

Because of his orthodox conviction of sinful man's universal need of redemption and moral training, made both implicit and explicit in the poem, Cowper's work differs most basically from the humanitarian poetry developed by later writers. The work of Wordsworth, Blake, and Shelley is frequently based on belief in the power of the human Will to suppress the innately good man's evil tendencies and to make Love his

guiding light. For example, Blake's "Auguries of Innocence" blames the corruption and injustice in society on the restraints imposed on innocent creatures. Wordsworth's "Intimations" Ode shows human beings entering the world "trailing clouds of glory," telling how, early in life, "shades of the prison-house [of society] begin to close / Upon the growing boy."²¹ Cowper, in contrast, writes that it is man's "hard condition" that

with severe constraint
 Binds all his faculties, forbids all growth
 Of wisdom, proves a school in which he learns
 Sly circumvention, unrelenting hate,
 Mean self-attachment, and scarce aught beside.²²

Cowper's sympathetic portrayal of rural people, as I have said earlier in this section, represents a distinct contribution to the development of poetry elevating the humble man, but it is marked by his refusal to over-romanticize the poor. Not even they are born innocent. He praises the rural peasants not because they are inherently more virtuous than the townsman, but because they are simply spared the temptations of the city.²³ He goes out of his way to show, in addition to the honest, industrious poor of Olney, the night thief who, driven by the "quenchless thirst / Of ruinous ebriety," lets his family starve. He pictures a "vagabond and useless tribe" camped in the vicinity, describes their sordid way of life, and, being no Rousseau, remarks,

Strange! that a creature rational, and cast
 In human mould, should brutalize by choice
 His nature; and, though capable of arts
 By which the world might profit, and himself,
 Self-banish'd from society, prefer
 Such squalid sloth to honourable toil!²⁴

For the same doctrinal reasons that prevent him from over-romanticizing the rural poor, Cowper cannot recommend rural life as the total answer for men's needs:

Retreat
 Cannot indeed to guilty man restore
 Lost innocence, or cancel follies past,
 But it has peace, and much secures the mind
 From all assaults of evil; proving still
 A faithful barrier; not o'erleaped with ease
 By vicious custom, raging uncontroll'd
 Abroad, and desolating public life.

Unlike Rousseau and his followers, Cowper asserts the potential benefits of life in organized society, that

true worth and virtue in the mild
 And genial soil of cultivated life
 Thrive most, and may perhaps only thrive there.

He gives a distinctly Biblical interpretation to the unfortunate condition of modern urban man:

foolish man foregoes his proper bliss,
 Ev'n as his first progenitor, and quits,
 Though placed in paradise (for earth has still
 Some traces of her youthful beauty left)
 Substantial happiness for transient joy.

It is because of the sad condition of the "proud and gay / And gain-devoted cities" that he thinks that people are better off in the country. He recommends as remedies for these conditions, in what seems a necessary order of importance,

The cause of piety and sacred truth,
 And virtue, and those scenes which God ordain'd
 Should best secure them and promote them most.

His well-known dictum and the lines following summarize his quite orthodox treatment of the city-country theme, a favorite of early Romantic poets:

God made the country and man made the town.

What wonder then that health and virtue, gifts
 That can alone make sweet the bitter draught
 That life holds out to all, should most abound
 And least be threaten'd in the fields and groves?²⁵

Cowper's descriptions of city life, for all his humanitarian interest, are even more plainly moralistic than the portrayal of rural society. He sees people trapped in a world of confusion and misplaced values, where

Wives beggar husbands, husbands starve their wives,
 On fortune's velvet altar off'ring up
 Their last poor pittance--fortune, most severe
 Of goddesses yet known, and costlier far
 Than all that held their routs in Juno's heav'n.--
 So fare we in this prison-house the world.
 And 'tis a fearful spectacle to see
 So many maniacs dancing in their chains.
 They gaze upon the links that hold them fast
 With eyes of anguish, execrate their lot,
 Then shake them in despair, and dance again!²⁶

Blake uses the same prison imagery, but his grief at hearing the "mind-forged manacles" in the cries of the people of London is actually grief for the restraints people are taught to put on themselves, grief for the loss of the human innocence noted before as a basic assumption in nineteenth-century Romantic poetry:

But most through midnight streets I hear
 How the youthful harlot's curse
 Blasts the new-born infant's tear,
 And blights with plagues the marriage hearse.²⁷

Cowper bemoans not lost innocence but the common apathy toward the religious activities that can lead toward the soul's eternal redemption from its state of sin. Observing the many people engaged in endless pursuit of momentary pleasures, or lost in pointless intellectual pursuits, all with no thought for eternity, he asks,

what is life thus spent? and what are they
 But frantic who thus spend it? all for smoke--
 Eternity for bubbles, proves at last
 A senseless bargain.

He compares the city of London itself to the wicked Biblical city of Babylon, a den of sin that tempts the country people to forsake their "honest pleasures":

Ambition, av'rice, penury incurr'd
 By endless riot, vanity, the lust
 Of pleasure and variety, dispatch,
 As duly as the swallows disappear,
 The world of wand'ring knights and squires to town.
 London ingulphs them all! The shark is there,
 And the shark's prey; the spendthrift, and the leech
 That sucks him. There the sycophant, and he
 Who, with bare-headed and obsequious bows,
 Begs a warm office, doom'd to a cold jail
 And groat per diem, if his patron frown.
 The levee swarms, as if, in golden pomp,
 Were character'd on ev'ry statesman's door,
 "Batter'd And Bankrupt Fortunes Mended Here."
 These are the charms that sully and eclipse
 The charms of nature.²⁸

Cowper blames the "plagues" that infest his society in part on "profusion," and on this point the Romantic poets, as well as Rousseau, would probably agree with him. He traces a progression of the disease:

Increase of pow'r begets increase of wealth;
 Wealth luxury, and luxury excess;
 Excess, the scrofulous and itchy plague
 That seizes first the opulent, descends
 To the next rank contagious, and in time
 Taints downward all the graduated scale
 Of order, from the chariot to the plough.²⁹

In "Written in London, Sept. 1802" Wordsworth, writing nearly two decades later, moans that "Plain living and high thinking are no more."³⁰ But when Cowper goes on to identify the deeper causes of the "plagues," such resemblances end, and his Biblical conviction that man is inherently

sinful and in need of training in righteousness is brought out fully. He blames the decline in morality on the decline in respect for learning. When the Discipline of the schools died, "Then study languish'd, emulation slept, / And virtue fled." He deplores the laxity of law enforcement:

We are become so candid and so fair,
So lib'ral in construction, and so rich
In Christian charity, (good-natur'd age!)
That they are safe, sinners of either sex,
Transgress what laws they may.³¹

Worst of all, he says, is the decline in religion in England, primarily the result of affectation and corruption among the clergy. He establishes the pulpit as

The most important and effectual guard,
Support, and ornament, of virtue's cause.
There stands the messenger of truth; there stands
The legate of the skies!--His theme divine,
His office sacred, his credentials clear.
By him the violated law speaks out
Its thunders; and by him, in strains as sweet
As angels use, the gospel whispers peace.
He 'stablishes the strong, restores the weak,
Reclaims the wand'rer, binds the broken heart,
And, arm'd himself in panoply complete
Of heav'nly temper, furnishes with arms,
Bright as his own, and trains, by ev'ry rule
Of holy discipline, to glorious war,
The sacramental host of God's elect!³²

The worldliness of those who should be trying to save the people from their sins has had the worst effect of all, because, as Hoxie Neale Fairchild observes, "the boundaries between virtue and vice have been obscured; the blackest sins are viewed with tolerance; the sources of domestic happiness have been poisoned."³³ Frivolous affectation and substitution of pagan philosophy for the Gospel make

the majority of clergymen poor imitators of the Apostle Paul, the true "messenger of grace to guilty men." The contemporary self-conscious, pseudo-intellectual "messenger of grace"

mocks his Maker, prostitutes and shames
His noble office, and, instead of truth,
Displaying his own beauty, starves his flock!³⁴

While Blake and other Romantic poets rail against the restraints and evils, including institutionalized religion, that work in organized society to stifle the inborn human tendencies toward natural goodness, Cowper's concern with perpetrators of the idleness that breeds evil is motivated by belief in divine judgment and retribution for sin:

When I see such games
Play'd by the creatures of a pow'r who swears
That he will judge the earth, and call the fool
To a sharp reck'ning that has lived in vain;
.
I feel my heart
Dissolve in pity, and account the learn'd,
If this be learning, most of all deceiv'd.

He sees one final remedy for all the evil in society, not in the elimination of social institutions and restraints and the return to a primitive, natural society, but in the cross of Christ. The Evangelicals based their faith on belief in the unique transforming power of the crucified, risen, and living Christ, made available to sinful men by the grace of God. Cowper writes that man, a slave to sin, cannot hope to save himself or his society from the power of evil, but

Grace makes the slave a freeman. 'Tis a change
That turns to ridicule the turgid speech
And stately tone of moralists, who boast

As if, like him of fabulous renown,
 They had indeed ability to smooth
 The shag of savage nature.

.
 transformation of apostate man
 From fool to wise, from earthly to divine,
 Is work for Him that made him. He alone,
 And he by means in philosophic eyes
 Trivial and worthy of disdain, achieves
 The wonder; humanizing what is brute
 In the lost kind, extracting from the lips
 Of asps their venom, overpowering strength
 By weakness, and hostility by love.³⁵

The literary effects of Cowper's Evangelical Christian beliefs on his humanitarian poetry in The Task are generally positive. As I indicated in the first part of this discussion, the humanitarian ideas that he developed specifically through his contact with the Revival enlarged Cowper's poetic sympathy, giving him a respect and concern for men that transcended class and social distinctions and was carried on into the Romantic Period, particularly in the poetry of Blake and of Wordsworth. The orthodox moral aspect of his social commentary, although it at times becomes pedantic, is also motivated by the heart-broadening influence of Evangelicalism. He cannot just let the world live as it pleases, because of the deep conviction of the kinship of all men in "One common Maker" that binds him to mankind. He cannot

rest

A silent witness of the headlong rage
 Or heedless folly by which thousands die,
 Bone of my bone, and kindred souls to mine.³⁶

A clear example of compassion associated with Evangelicalism in the poem is the "stricken deer" passage, from which I quoted in the previous section of this paper. William Free's interpretation of this passage shows its relationship to

humanitarian poetry as well as to nature poetry. He writes that it shows "the man of conscience, so deeply wounded by human ills that he has had to leave society; yet impelled by his own integrity to point out that his fellow men are lost in delusions which only he, by virtue of his superior position, can penetrate."³⁷ Cowper, having been healed of his wounds and returned to life by one wounded in hands, feet, and side by the same archers, is able to feel more deeply the plight of his fellow men, seeing that

all are wanderers, gone astray
Each in his own delusions; they are lost
In chase of fancied happiness, still woo'd
And never won. Dream after dream ensues;
And still they dream that they shall still succeed.
And still are disappointed.³⁸

Cowper's religious belief has certainly become more than bare theology in his humanitarian poetry as well as in his nature passages. As I shall show further in the following section, it moved him as a poet to embrace all of mankind.

III

In addition to his analysis in The Task of the manners and morals of the English people, peasant and gentleman, farmer and city-dweller, and of the diseases and remedies for his own society, Cowper develops humanitarian themes in the poem that involve a much larger vision of collective, universal mankind. In the passages in which he praises liberty, speaks out sharply against oppression and tyranny of several kinds, embraces the cause of world brotherhood, and condemns war without qualification, he anticipates the impassioned cries of the nineteenth-century Romantic poets, idealists in the cause of universal liberty and peace for mankind.

Earlier eighteenth-century writers had dealt with such abstract themes as liberty and brotherhood, but, as Margaret Sherwood points out, there is a difference in degree of emotional intensity between the eighteenth century's "conscious intellectuality, playing about abstract themes" and the poetry of the Romantics, where "there is a certain urgency, a sense of need to fathom the secret of existence, to understand,--as if man had more at stake in the universe." She attributes the difference in part to the fact that by the Romantic Period "life and thought have been molten, welded together in the furnace of the French Revolution;

the tragedy, the suffering of those crucial years is still a central energy."¹ Cowper, writing as the Revolution was approaching, treats the causes it proclaimed with bursts of vigor that provide a contrast with his central mood and theme of retired leisure. Indeed, he seems to build up energy in the poem, beginning with a mock-heroic song of the Sofa, then shifting into praise of nature's restful, restoring virtues, but concluding Book 6 with a final vision of a "universal regeneration of the race," a vision which, according to Brooke, appeared for the first time in English poetry with Cowper's work² and which is taken up in the idealized prophetic visions of the nineteenth-century Romantic poets, most notably the Prometheus Unbound of Shelley.

Cowper's literary use of each of these abstract themes and of the vision of a restored world is not due solely to the atmosphere generated by the approach of the French Revolution, although he does write with a frequent view to France as an example. As I shall show in this section, it is also based explicitly on the fervent Biblical Christian faith the Revival inspired in him. In The Task, the source of all liberty, the defender and avenger against oppression, and the Father of all men as brothers is the God revealed in the Scriptures. Cowper's final vision of a perfected human state of love and universal harmony is based on Biblical prophecy of the return of Christ to restore the world. It was actually his religious beliefs that enabled Cowper to see mankind as a whole,³ making it possible for

him to deal with such universal themes in the poem, and it was the Revival's emotional fervor that moved him to a passion and zeal approaching that of the Romantics.

Liberty is treated in The Task as mankind's most precious possession; it alone "gives the flow'r / Of fleeting life its luster and perfume; / And we are weeds without it."⁴ In his attitude toward liberty Cowper comes very close to the characteristic statements of Blake on liberty. Blake begins "Auguries of Innocence" with the stated conviction that to deprive innocent, helpless creatures of their liberty is the worst sin imaginable:

A robin redbreast in a cage
Puts all Heaven in a rage.⁵

Blake continually exposes the evil effects of restraint, both internal and external, on the human faculties. Cowper, more orthodox than Blake, but just as convinced of the dehumanizing effects of tyranny, writes:

All constraint
Except what wisdom lays on evil men,
Is evil; hurts the faculties, impedes
Their progress in the road of science; blinds
The eyesight of discov'ry; and begets,
In those that suffer it, a sordid mind
Bestial, a meagre intellect, unfit
To be the tenant of man's noble form.⁶

For the English poets beginning with Cowper and his generation, the right to liberty is definitely universal; oppression of any human being is cause for great indignation. In this respect Cowper's work particularly resembles that of Blake, whose The French Revolution contains a vision of the Bastille as a symbol of dehumanizing oppression. It anticipates the

apostrophe to Liberty in Coleridge's "France: An Ode" and suggests the impulse behind Byron's wholehearted involvement in the cause of Greek Independence in its assertion that

he who values liberty confines
His zeal for her predominance within
No narrow bounds; her cause engages him
Wherever pleaded. 'Tis the cause of man.⁷

He shows a disillusionment with the progress of human liberation in his own country as well as abroad, marveling that civilized, rational men are still "babes in the cause of freedom." He calls his countrymen to recognition of the right relation of a king to the people, denouncing the common tendency of Englishmen to deify the king instead of recognizing that he is a man subject to the wishes of the people. Cowper declares his loyalty to the monarch who "loves the law, respects his bounds, / And reigns content within them," but warns against continuing that trust when the king oversteps his bounds: "recollecting still that he is man, / We trust him not too far." If the king, even of England, "exercise amiss his proper pow'rs, / Or covet more than freemen choose to grant," then, says Cowper, "Beyond that mark is treason." The people must be constantly alert, lest the king become selfish and abbreviate their God-given rights:

He is our's,
T' administer, to guard, t' adorn the state,
But not to warp or change it. We are his
To serve him nobly in the common cause,
True to the death, but not to be his slaves.⁸

The abuse of power has become all-too-evident to Cowper in the total disregard for human lives with which

the kings of Europe carry on war. He asks,

is it fit, or can it bear the shock
Of rational discussion, that a man,
Compounded and made up like other men
.....
Should, when he pleases and on whom he will,
Wage war, with any or with no pretence
Of provocation giv'n, or wrong sustain'd,
And force the beggarly last doit, by means
That his own humour dictates, from the clutch
Of poverty, that thus he may procure
His thousands, weary of penurious life,
A splendid opportunity to die?

The institution of universal soldiership has provided kings with plenty of pawns for their games, but Cowper blames the people's servile adoration of the crown even more. They are the king's

cattle; drudges born
To bear his burdens; drawing in his gears,
And sweating in his service, his caprice
Becomes the soul that animates them all.
He deems a thousand, or ten thousand lives,
Spent in the purchase of renown for him,
An easy reck'ning; and they think the same.

The people need to recognize and assert their "just and native rights," for "Whose freedom is by suff'rance, and at will / Of a superior, he is never free."⁹ Blake expresses a similar indignation in "Auguries of Innocence," where he writes:

The game-cock clipped and armed for fight
Does the rising sun affright.
.....
The lamb misused breeds public strife,
And yet forgives the butcher's knife.¹⁰

Cowper gives a most deplorable example of the denial of the fundamental human right to liberty in his attack on slavery, "human nature's broadest, foulest blot," a socially-acceptable abomination by which civilized man

Dooms and devotes [his brother] as his lawful prey.

 Chains him, and tasks him, and exacts his sweat
 With stripes, that mercy, with a bleeding heart,
 Weeps when she sees inflicted on a beast.
 Then what is man? And what man, seeing this,
 And having human feelings, does not blush,
 And hang his head, to think himself a man?

Cowper concludes,

 dear as freedom is, and in my heart's
 Just estimation priz'd above all price,
 I had much rather be myself the slave,
 And wear the bonds, than fasten them on him.¹¹

One is reminded of Coleridge's "To a Young Ass," which does not deal specifically with slavery, but with the "Poor little Foal of an oppressed race," whom the poet calls "Brother," and

 fain would take thee with me, in the dell
 Of peace and mild equality to dwell,
 Where toil shall call the charmer health his bride,
 And laughter tickle plenty's ribless side!¹²

I have shown how Cowper's embracement of Evangelical Christian beliefs broadened the scope of his innate sympathy for the poor and oppressed and moved him to support the cause of liberty not only as the "noblest right of man" but as the "gift of God to Man." As I have shown, the denial of liberty was for Cowper, in Brooke's words, the "most accursed of all sins and God would deliver and avenge the oppressed."¹³ In addition, however, it was through his religious faith that Cowper knew of a higher liberty, praised in The Task as

 a liberty, unsung
 By poets, and by senators unprais'd,
 Which monarchs cannot grant, nor all the pow'rs
 Of earth and hell confed'rate take away;
 A liberty, which persecution, fraud,

Oppression, prisons, have no power to bind;
Which whoso tastes can be enslaved no more.

The liberation of the human soul is the ultimate freedom, defined in the poem in New Testament terms. It is available to all, regardless of earthly position:

He is the freeman whom the truth makes free,
And all are slaves beside.¹⁴

Cowper defines this ultimate freedom more specifically as the freedom from sin, made available through divine grace, the

liberty of heart, deriv'd from heav'n;
Bought with HIS blood who gave it to mankind,
And seal'd with the same token!

The unredeemed and unregenerate man is a slave chained in his own body, "held in silly dotage on created things / Careless of their Creator." He has no future hope, but sinks "in the fathomless abyss / Of folly, plunging in pursuit of death." The soul touched by grace "has wings that neither sickness, pain, / Nor penury, can cripple or confine." He "Appropriates nature as his father's work, / And has a richer use of yours than you." Cowper compares the patriot's cause with the martyr's, and concludes that

A patriot's blood,
Well spent in such a strife, may earn indeed,
And for a time ensure, to his lov'd land,
The sweets of liberty and equal laws;
But martyrs struggle for a brighter prize,
And win it with more pain. Their blood is shed
In confirmation of the noblest claim--
Our claim to feed upon immortal truth,
To walk with God, to be divinely free,
To soar, and to anticipate the skies!¹⁵

His emphasis on this supreme form of freedom enjoyed by the saved Christian soul does not obscure or lessen the

strength of his more general statements on liberty. Rather, as Gilbert Thomas suggests, in regard to the theme of liberty in The Task, "it will be found that Cowper's values have once more become universal values, and that he touches the inward source not only of individual happiness but even of external freedom itself."¹⁶

Cowper's impatience with the slow progress of liberty among civilized peoples is equalled in degree by his grief at the total lack of brotherhood he sees among nations. Watching man's progressive total inhumanity to his fellow man has affected him profoundly:

My ear is pain'd,
My soul is sick, with ev'ry day's report
Of wrong and outrage with which earth is fill'd.
There is no flesh in man's obdurate heart,
It does not feel for man; the nat'ral bond
Of brotherhood is sever'd as the flax
That falls asunder at the touch of fire.

Because of the sad state of human society, he pleads for "social intercourse, / Benevolence, and peace, and mutual aid, / Between the nations," out of a heartfelt conviction that "there should be peace, / And brethren in calamity should love." Instead of joining together for mutual aid, the nations are continually involved in petty wars, the games of the rulers, who "make the sorrows of mankind their sport."¹⁷

Not only has universal soldiership corrupted the individual man and boy, but it has reduced the moral sensibilities of civilized people to the animal level:

Arms, through the vanity and brainless rage
Of those that bear them, in whatever cause,

Seem most at variance with all moral good,
And incompatible with serious thought.

War is like a disease that infests the whole society:

Man in society is like a flow'r
Blown in its native bed: 'tis there alone
His faculties, expanded in full bloom,
Shine out; there only reach their proper use.
But man, associated and leagu'd with man

• • • • •
Beneath one hand for purposes of war,
Like flow'rs selected from the rest, and bound
And bundled close to fill some crowded vase,
Fades rapidly, and by compression marr'd,
Contracts defilement not to be endur'd.¹⁸

In his plea for world brotherhood and recognition of the destructive influence of war, Cowper again anticipates the Romantic poets. Their disillusionment, like his, was not with the noble causes for which wars were fought, but with the bloody, degrading effects of war itself. This disillusionment became more prominent in Romantic poetry after the French Revolution, with its noble ideals that degenerated into a bloody reign of terror. In "France: An Ode" Coleridge remembers how, "When France in wrath her giant limbs upreared," and "Stamped her strong foot and said she would be free," he "hoped and feared!" Later, she emerged,

her front deep-scarred and gory
Concealed with clustering wreaths of glory,
• • • • •
Domestic treason, crushed beneath her fatal stamp,
Writhed like a wounded dragon in his gore,
Then I reproached my fears that would not flee;
"And soon," I said, "shall Wisdom teach her lore
In the low huts of them that toil and groan!"¹⁹

Cowper combines Rousseauistic philosophy with Old Testament history to explain the origins of war in Book 5. He traces it back to the distribution of peoples over the earth after the confounding of languages at the Tower of

Babel. God gave them "fair and equal distribution" and bade them "dwell in peace," which they maintained for a time, sowing and reaping in plenty. But this could not last, Cowper writes, for

violence can never longer sleep
Than human passions please. In ev'ry heart
Are sown the sparks that kindle fi'ry war;
Occasion needs but fan them, and they blaze.

The first murder had already been committed when Cain slew his brother Abel. Cain's son Tybal the smith became the "first artificer of death," who invented the sword and the faulchion. When men were distributed in tribes and clans and began to develop the concept of territorial rights,

The tasted sweets of property begat
Desire of more, and industry in some,
T' improve and cultivate their just demesne,
Made others covet what they saw so fair.
Thus war began on earth; these fought for spoil,
And those in self-defence.

The best warriors were looked up to, and eventually,

war, affording field for the display
Of virtue, made one chief, whom times of peace,
Which have their exigencies too, and call
For skill in government, at length made king.²¹

There is no evidence that Cowper's Evangelical associations had a limiting effect on his treatment of the themes of brotherhood and war, but rather, the opposite has been asserted. As I have indicated, the concept of brotherhood and the hatred for war expressed in the poem are directly related to the poet's religious insight. Gilbert Thomas writes that Cowper "is nowhere more sanely 'Christian,' as a rule, than when discussing the folly and the causes of war," suggesting that Cowper was, in this respect, far

ahead of his time. His analysis of the stupefying and dehumanizing effects of military training is the more persuasive for being humorously framed; . . . and his account of the origin, growth, and survival of warfare loses nothing of essential veracity because it was written by one who soberly accepted the Old Testament as history."²²

Although The Task expresses its author's extreme sorrow for the world's failure even to approach the ideals of universal liberty and brotherhood, Cowper rises, near the end of Book 6, to a note of strong optimism in his world vision of regeneration and perfect harmony, as the Romantic poets were later to do. He has alternated between conversation, compassion, worship, and the indignant voice of the moralist through most of the poem; now he begins speaking in a prophetic voice that looks forward to an end to the "groans of nature in this nether world." He immediately assumes a Biblical context, echoing the tone and words of the Old Testament prophets, particularly Isaiah:

The time of rest, the promis'd sabbath, comes.
Six thousand years of sorrow have well-nigh
Fulfill'd their tardy and disastrous course
Over a sinful world; and what remains
Of this tempestuous state of human things
Is merely as the working of a sea
Before a calm, that rocks itself to rest:
For He, whose car the winds are, and the clouds
The dust that waits upon his sultry march,
When sin hath mov'd him, and his wrath is hot,
Shall visit earth in mercy; shall descend,
Propitious, in his chariot prov'd with love;
And what his storms have blasted and defac'd,
For man's revolt shall with a smile repair.²³

The prospect of the coming of Christ to restore the world, as foretold by the Old Testament prophets, refreshes

his soul. It means eternal spring and all men united in spirit, as

All creatures worship man, and all mankind
 One Lord, one Father. Error has no place:
 That creeping pestilence is driv'n away;
 The breath of heav'n has chas'd it. In the heart
 No passion touches a discordant string,
 But all is harmony and love. Disease
 Is not: the pure and uncontam'nate blood
 Holds its due course, nor fears the frost of age.
 One song employs all nations; and all cry,
 "Worthy the Lamb, for he was slain for us!"

It is this faith in the fulfillment of Scriptural prophecy concerning Christ that enables Cowper to look forward with full confidence to the restoration of the world, "for all were once / Perfect, and all must be at length restor'd / So God has greatly purpos'd." This faith inspires the meticulous observer of men and of nature to real passion, and he cries,

Haste, then, and wheel away a shatter'd world,
 Ye slow-revolving seasons! we would see
 (A sight to which our eyes are strangers yet)
 A world that does not dread and hate his laws,
 And suffer for its crime; would learn how fair
 The creature is that God pronounces good,
 How pleasant in itself what pleases him.²⁴

In the specific conditions of the restored world to which he looks forward Cowper anticipates the Romantic poets, particularly Shelley, who speaks through Demogorgon at the end of Act IV of Prometheus Unbound:

This is the day which down the void abysm
 At the Earth-born's spell yawns for Heaven's despotism,
 And Conquest is dragged captive through the deep:
 Love, from its awful throne of patient power
 In the wise heart, from the last giddy hour
 Of dread endurance, from the slippery, steep,
 And narrow verge of crag-like agony, springs
 And folds over the world its healing wings.

Gentleness, Virtue, Wisdom, and Endurance,--
 These are the seals of that most firm assurance
 Which bars the pit over Destruction's strength;
 And if, with infirm hand, Eternity,
 Mother of many acts and hours, should free
 The serpent that would clasp her with his length,
 These are the spells by which to reassume
 An empire o'er the disentangled doom.²⁵

Compare this vision of Shelley to the longings for a perfect world in The Task:

Oh for a world in principle as chaste
 As this is gross and selfish! over which
 Custom and prejudice shall bear no sway,
 That govern all things here, should'ring aside
 The meek and modest truth, and forcing her
 To seek a refuge from the tongue of strife
 In nooks obscure, far from the ways of men:--
 Where violence shall never lift the sword,
 Nor cunning justify the proud man's wrong,
 Leaving the poor no remedy but tears:--
 Where he that fills an office shall esteem
 Th' occasion it presents of doing good
 More than the perquisite;--where law shall speak
 Seldom, and never but as wisdom prompts
 And equity; not jealous more to guard
 A worthless form, than to decide aright:--
 Where fashion shall not sanctify abuse,
 Nor smooth good-breeding (supplemental grace)
 With lean performance ape the work of love!

Yet, it becomes clear in the lines immediately following that Cowper is specifically anticipating the Christian Millenium, as he addresses Christ:

Come then, and, added to thy many crowns,
 Receive yet one, the crown of all the earth,
 Thou who alone art worthy! It was thine
 By ancient covenant, ere nature's birth;
 And thou has made it thine by purchase since,
 And overpaid its value with thy blood.

The Church is in need of Christ's return, in days when
 "All pastors are alike / To wand'ring sheep, resolved to
 follow none," and "how thy church may fare / The world
 takes little thought. Who will may preach, / And what they

will," and when, as foretold in the Scriptures, people's gods are Pleasure and Gain:

Thy prophets speak of such; and, noting down
The features of the last degen'rate times,
Exhibit ev'ry lineament of these.
Come then, and, added to thy many crowns,
Receive yet one, as radiant as the rest,
Due to thy last and most effectual work,
Thy word fulfill'd, the conquest of a world!²⁶

As he concludes the poem with a vindication of his social criticism, he anticipates the important concept of the poet as a prophet of divine truth that developed in nineteenth-century Romantic poetry, beginning perhaps with Blake's "Introduction" to the Songs of Innocence, in which the Piper is instructed by a voice from the clouds to "'write / In a book, that all may read,'"²⁷ and perhaps reaching its fullest expression in Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," in which the poet has dedicated his powers to the spirit of intellectual beauty, "messenger of sympathies," in hope that "thou wouldst free / This world from its dark slavery."²⁸ As with the other themes I have discussed, Cowper anticipates the Romantics, but his literary use of the theme shows the specific influence of Evangelicalism. He seeks not the world's praise, but writes,

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.²⁹

Cowper's foreshadowing of the poet's role as seen by the Romantic poets is not marred by his Evangelicalism, but in fact motivated by it, by his moral indignation at the state of society and by his faith in Biblical prophecy. Certainly

it would be illogical to disparage the literary influence of Cowper's Evangelicalism on his presentation of this last group of Romantic themes in The Task.

IV

In the first three sections of this paper I have shown how The Task expresses the doctrines, humanitarian sentiment, and spirit of the Evangelical Movement, as well as the thematic elements in the poem that indicate its place in the development of nineteenth-century Romantic poetry. I have also illustrated the literary contribution of Evangelicalism itself to Cowper's individual treatment of certain themes common to later Romantic poetry, suggesting that it provided the inspiration for Cowper's achievement as a nature and humanitarian poet in his own right. This suggestion is not a simple one to make, for the influence of Cowper's religion on his literary development has been a major critical problem complicated by the close relationship of biography to criticism. A full evaluative account of the points of view advanced by scholars on this question would make a substantial paper in itself.¹ Nevertheless, in pursuing the subject at all, I feel it necessary to acknowledge and deal with the unfortunate tendency of certain biographers and critics to see Cowper's Evangelical Christianity only as a limiting factor in his literary development. Basing their judgment primarily on Calvinism's alleged unfortunate effects on the poet's life, they suggest that, had he not come under the influence of the Revival, and particularly

under the influence of John Newton at Olney, Cowper's imaginative and intuitive powers could have developed more fully and made him a great poet.

Hugh I'Anson Fausset develops this negative point of view most fully in his life of Cowper. He denies Evangelicalism any credit at all for Cowper's development as a poet, seeing it as a tragic blot on the poet's life, a crude religion based on blind fear of a tyrannical Old Testament deity and ill-suited to the needs of Cowper's timid and sensitive personality. According to Fausset, this "dogmatic religion which fear tempted him to embrace. . . . taught him to consider as worthless, from the point of view of salvation, the poetical activity which, at its highest, was more truly religious than itself, and in which he might have discovered a real equilibrium."² Fausset suggests that Cowper "lacked the strength to realize the truth which the Romantics were to affirm that for a poet creation is a spiritual adventure transcending creeds as mysticism transcends morality; that the disinterested pursuit of reality involves a truer salvation than the self-interested submission to a creed; and that as theology originated in poets, so every poet must fashion his own."³ He sees in The Task the same "enslavement to theology" that affected Cowper's life,⁴ citing its "explicit moral aim" as "a confession and proof of creative weakness."⁵

Fausset's position might be partially substantiated by references to the several explicitly moralizing sections

of The Task. It would appear well-taken in the light of Cowper's own purposes and intentions regarding the poem, as stated in this comment quoted by Goldwin Smith:

"What there is of a religious cast in the volume I have thrown towards the end of it, for two reasons; first, that I might not revolt the reader at his entrance; and, secondly, that my best impressions might be made last. Were I to write as many volumes as Lope de Vega or Voltaire, not one of them would be without this tincture. If the world like it not, so much the worse for them. I make all the concessions I can, that I may please them, but I will not please them at the expense of conscience."⁶

Even critics who are generally not unfavorable concerning the role of Evangelicalism in Cowper's literary achievement admit that the poem is quite uneven in poetic quality. Oliver Elton compares it to a "park cunningly and irregularly laid out," and remarks that "it is a pity that, do what we will, we should so often, round sudden corners, come on the same uncomely preaching-box amid the greenery."⁷ Smith agrees that those passages "penned by conscience, taken together, form a lamentably large proportion of the poem."⁸

Despite objections such as these, it has become clear to me from this study that The Task, Cowper's most mature work, owes much to its Evangelical strain. While I would avoid making extravagant claims for the work, I find myself agreeing quite readily with Louis Cazamian that Cowper "is indebted in no small way to the religious revival of the eighteenth century for part of the creative force of his inspiration,"⁹ and with Frederick C. Gill that "there is little doubt that Cowper found in Evangelicalism that warmth of both emotional and spiritual exaltation which set his

own soul glowing, kindled his imagination, and prepared him for his greatest work."¹⁰ Roderick Huang declares that Cowper's work "at every point manifests his Evangelicalism, and any attempt in criticism to ignore or belittle this fact arises from a peculiar desire and wish that he had lived under other circumstances than those that actually made him a poet."¹¹

The critical question of Evangelical Christianity's effect on the quality of Cowper's poetry continues to interest me because it raises a more generally significant critical problem. Fausset suggests in his evaluation of Cowper's work that adherence by a poet to a conventional theology prevents the serious pursuit and high purposes of the true poet and interferes with the free exercise of the poetic imagination. He writes that Cowper, because of his adherence to Evangelical doctrines, was "incapable of conceiving of the poet as a dedicated being. At most he could claim that it was 'a noble thing to be a poet, it makes all the world so lively.'" He was "too timid to explore the Universe himself and to realize God in the act of creation. And so poetry remained for him no more than an amusement or a means of forgetting the dark frowns of the Calvinistic God to whose skirts he nevertheless timidly clung."¹² Both these suggestions have elements of validity, as I shall show, but they fail to account for Cowper's limitations as a Romantic poet purely on the basis of his religion.

Fausset's observation that an orthodox Christian poet

is likely to be less serious about his poetry becomes the subject of a lecture by C. S. Lewis, Cambridge literary scholar and Christian apologist, entitled "Christianity and Literature," in which he agrees with Fausset's point of view, in that

The Christian will take literature a little less seriously than the cultured Pagan; he will feel less uneasy with a purely hedonistic standard for at least many kinds of work. The unbeliever is always apt to make a kind of religion of his aesthetic experiences; he feels ethically responsible, perhaps, but he braces his strength to receive responsibilities of another kind which seem to the Christian quite illusory. He has to be 'creative'; he has to obey a mystical amoral law called his artistic conscience; and he commonly wishes to maintain his superiority to the great mass of mankind who turn to books for mere recreation. But the Christian knows from the outset that the salvation of a single soul is more important than the production or preservation of all the epics and tragedies in the world; and as for superiority, he knows that the vulgar since they include most of the poor probably include most of his superiors.¹³

This is not to say, Lewis assures us, that serious poetry is not written or read by Christians,¹⁴ and I do not mean to imply here that because of his religion Cowper wrote less seriously than did other poets, for I am convinced of his sincerity and earnestness. This comparison of the Christian writer to the non-Christian simply shows how Cowper's attitude toward writing would tend to differ from that of the Romantic and later poets, who, although certainly not "unbelievers," departed from the orthodox Christianity represented by Cowper's poetry.

In his theory that Cowper's religion kept him from exercising his imagination freely and developing as a Romantic poet, Fausset touches on another valid difference

between the Christian and the non-Christian writer explored by Lewis earlier in the same lecture. Lewis reports that he finds a "disquieting contrast" "between the whole circle of ideas used in modern criticism and certain ideas recurrent in the New Testament." This is "hardly a question of logical contradictions between clearly defined concepts," but "more a repugnance of atmospheres, a discordance of notes, an incompatibility of temperaments." He notes that the key-words of modern criticism are "Creative, with its opposite derivative; spontaneity, with its opposite convention; freedom, contrasted with rules," and observes that in modern criticism, "we certainly have a general picture of bad work flowing from conformity and discipleship, and of good work bursting out from certain centres of explosive force--apparently self-originating force--which we call men of genius."¹⁵ While he freely acknowledges that the New Testament does not actually discuss literature,¹⁶ Lewis shows that it does repeatedly show a pattern of progressive imitation, of Christ imitating the Father, man imitating Christ, woman imitating man, in creation and in action, in Paul's writings and in the Gospels.¹⁷ He assures us that there is no "absolute logical contradiction" between the two points of view, but thinks that

there is so great a difference of temper that a man whose mind was at one with the mind of the New Testament would not, and indeed could not, fall into the language which most critics now adopt. In the New Testament the art of life itself is an art of imitation: can we, believing this, believe that literature, which must derive from real life, is to aim at being "creative," "original," and "spontaneous." If I have read

the New Testament aright, it leaves no room for "creativity" even in a modified or metaphorical sense.¹⁸

This point developed by Lewis helps to establish the basis for the difference between Cowper and the Romantics in terms of the power of the poetic imagination, since the modern criticism he opposes to the New Testament Christianity adhered to by Cowper is essentially based on the poetics of Coleridge and other Romantics, who were greatly influenced by Kant and other German Idealists. But it does not show that a poet's adherence to conventional theology in itself necessarily precludes the writing of imaginative poetry, as Fausset assumes. While Cowper does differ in his poetic principles both because of the earlier time in which he was writing (ie., before the widespread influence of the Kantian Idealists in England), and because of his orthodox, New Testament religious convictions, his literary limitations are not directly attributable to the Evangelical influence, as Fausset suggests. We have only to look at Milton and Dante, both great imaginative writers working within the Biblical context, for illustration of this point.

A more plausible explanation than Fausset's for Cowper's not having become a Wordsworth is supplied by Gilbert Thomas, who develops the idea that Cowper was simply inherently different in his literary potential from the more imaginative Wordsworth:

I suggest that we miss the whole truth about the author of The Task if we think of him as inherently a creative artist, who, by timidly holding onto a creed, denied in himself the possibilities alike of vital poetic and religious development. Cowper was essentially a critic, not a creator.¹⁹

He suggests that Cowper's true gift was as an essayist and letter writer, contrasting him with Shelley to show that, while "in Shelley, despite his great intellectual endowment, the fundamental impulse was imaginative, so in Cowper, though he did not entirely lack creativeness, the determining motive was critical."²⁰ He thinks that Fausset is accurate in applying his theory that the true poet's art must be his own personal religion to Wordsworth, but disagrees that Cowper made a "fatal" compromise with convention.²¹ "Cowper was not a potentially creative poet whom Evangelicalism destroyed. He was a critic whom Evangelicalism moved to song and sometimes lifted above himself."²²

This last suggestion made by Thomas is supported by the progression seen in Cowper's poetry, from versification for the cause of the Revival in the Olney Hymns, which are of questionable poetic merit, and moral didacticism and exposition of Calvinist doctrine in the 1782 volume of poems, to the true poetry that distinguishes the best passages of The Task. Fausset's statement that "no true poetry is written with a particular design upon people" is demonstrated by the fact that there is, despite Cowper's statement of his purpose, less of this "design" in The Task than in his earlier work. Norman Nicholson identifies this progression in Cowper's poetry, writing that "his imagination and his response to life developed first of all under the stimulus of the Evangelical faith and then gradually moved a little way beyond the restrictions of this faith to find

partial independence." He notes that in the Olney Hymns and in the didactic poems Cowper's work is "strictly Evangelical in subject matter; later, in The Task and many of the minor poems, while still remaining within the framework of Evangelicalism, it explores experience shared by the Romantic Movement as a whole."²⁴

The relatively higher poetic value of The Task is clearly not due to Cowper's having become less Christian before he wrote it, although he had by that time ceased his religious activities. Thomas sees evidence, chiefly through the development of Cowper's humanitarian feeling in the succession of poetry, that he actually grew as a Christian during that time. He contends that, "To suggest that Cowper's religion, as reflected in the homiletic portions of The Task, had ceased to be Evangelical and had become ethical is equivalent to saying that an apple tree is no longer an apple tree when its blossom is shed and the fruit appears. . . . Cowper's poetry becomes most vital when . . . values are allowed to speak implicitly, but the values themselves are there. They find didactic expression in the poet's heavier style: they permeate his better one."²⁵ Louis Cazamian observes that in The Task "there is again evidence of the desire to convince and instruct, but the poem is essentially the expression of a soul; and the free effusion of modern lyricism is the ideal that secretly attracts and guides it."²⁶ Evangelicalism serves both to establish kinship of The Task to the themes and attitudes

of the nineteenth-century Romantic poets, and to distinguish it from them, as it moves Cowper to individual, almost lyrical poetic expression.

NOTES

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21. Task, bk. 5, lines 204-7; 224-29; 238-41.
22. Thomas, p. 269.
23. Task, bk. 6, lines 733-46.
24. Ibid., bk. 6, lines 783-92; 818-20; 823-29.
25. Shelley, from Prometheus Unbound, in the Anthology of Romanticism, act 4, lines 554-69.
26. Task, bk. 6, lines 836-54; 855-60; 890-91; 899-905.
27. Blake, "Introduction" to the Songs of Innocence, in the Anthology of Romanticism, lines 13-14.
28. Shelley, "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," in the Anthology of Romanticism, lines 69-70.
29. Task, bk. 6, lines 1017-19.

Section IV

1. Lodwick C. Hartley presents a summary of these critical viewpoints in William Cowper: The Continuing Re-valuation (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1960).
2. Hugh I'Anson Fausset, William Cowper (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., [1928]), pp. 76-77.
3. Ibid., p. 35.
4. Ibid., p. 243.
5. Ibid., p. 224.
6. Smith, p. 73.
7. Oliver Elton, A Survey of English Literature, 1780-1880, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan Co., 1920), 2: 91.
8. Smith, p. 73.
9. Emile Legouis and Louis Cazamian, A History of

English Literature, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan Co., 1927), vol. 2, Modern Times (1660-1914), by Louis Cazamian, trans. W. D. MacInnes and the author, p. 221.

10. Gill, p. 137.

11. Roderick Huang, William Cowper: Nature Poet (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), pp. 44-45.

12. Fausset, p. 35.

13. Clive S. Lewis, "Christianity and Literature," in Rehabilitations (1st pub. 1939; reprint ed., Essay Index Reprint Series, Freeport, New York: Books For Libraries Press, 1972), pp. 195-96.

14. Ibid., p. 196.

15. Ibid., pp. 185-86.

16. Ibid., p. 187.

17. Ibid., pp. 188-90.

18. Ibid., p. 191.

19. Thomas, p. 79.

20. Ibid., p. 264.

21. Fausset, p. 38.

22. Thomas, p. 81.

23. Fausset, p. 117.

24. Norman Nicholson, William Cowper (London: [John Lehman], 1951), p. 7, cited by Roderick Huang in William Cowper: Nature Poet, p. 15.

25. Thomas, p. 275.

26. Cazamian, p. 222.

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