William Cowper: The Waiting Soul

I.

For a while now I have thought of different ways that I could represent the story of William Cowper. His is a story I want very much to tell, though it is by no means a happy one: a man who struggled with mental illness for all of his life and died, by all reports, in incurable despair. Yet his life also bears testament to the power of poetry, providing the English-speaking world as it did with some of the most beautiful poetry and hymns ever written.

His mark on English literature is felt through phrases that have become so prevalent that they are rarely traced back to him: "God moves in mysterious ways" and "The monarch of all he surveys" are both derived from lines from his poetry. Along with his pastor and close friend John Newton he gave the world the Olney Hymns, a vast, rich collection of hymns containing songs as significant as "Amazing Grace" (originally titled "Faith's Review and Expectation") and "There is a Fountain Fill'd with Blood" ("Praise for the Fountain Opened"). His epic masterpiece of blank verse, *The Task*, is credited with inspiring Romanticism; William Blake paid many artistic and poetic tributes to Cowper; William Wordsworth showed Cowper's impact on him in both *The Prelude* and "Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey". In addition, he was a master of comic verse, most famously displayed in the hilarious and highly influential "Diverting History of John Gilpin" but demonstrated also in several lesser-known works.

He also bears for me the curious distinction of being one of the only great Christian writers to have come from a reformed, evangelical position. Though there have been many distinguished Christian poets, novelists and playwrights over the ages, most have been Catholic, High Anglican or Eastern Orthodox. Apart from a handful of Puritans – Sir Philip Sidney, John Milton, John Bunyan – and the occasional Presbyterian (the 20th century boasted Marianne Moore and Frederick Buechner), most reformed evangelicals have pursued either good, honest, hard work or explicit gospel ministry. Few have been artists; few have

been creative or literary writers. William Cowper, like his precursor Isaac Watts, was an exception.

Yet it is this combination of Cowper's theological background with his lifelong struggles with mental illness that makes him a problematic figure. G.K. Chesterton once used him as an example of the destructive power of Calvinism, which he equates with pure, unimaginative logic:

> [O]nly one great English poet went mad, Cowper. And he was definitely driven mad by logic, by the ugly and alien logic of predestination. Poetry was not the disease, but the medicine; poetry partly kept him in health…He was damned by John Calvin; he was almost saved by John Gilpin.[1]

Chesterton's statement is perhaps more polemical than it is true. John Piper has wryly responded that "William Cowper was not driven mad by Calvinism" but "by a mental disease that ran in his family for generations", adding that "he was saved by John Newton, perhaps the humblest, happiest Calvinist who ever lived."[2] Naturally Piper, a highly prominent Calvinist, would want to defend Calvinism, and so he is perhaps no less partial about the subject than Chesterton was. Yet his point is a valuable one, because it brings up two key details about Cowper, first that he had a genetic predisposition towards mental illness which would almost certainly have affected him with or without his evangelical faith, and secondly that his life was in many ways held together by the influence of John Newton who encouraged him in his writing and helped him use it in a way that remains powerful for believers today.

Still, I find it impossible to ignore the fact that Cowper, for all the good that his faith did in his life and in the lives of others, died helpless, convinced he had committed the unforgivable sin, seemingly beyond cure. We can look, certainly, at the fruit of his life and see what was accomplished through it all; we can

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[1] G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 1908.
[2] John Piper, *The Sovereign God of "Elfland" (Why Chesterton's Anti-Calvinism Doesn't Put Me Off)*, DesiringGod.org, January 3, 2012.

reflect on the fact that, had Cowper lived today, he would almost certainly have received medical treatment which could have made a world of difference to his mental health. Yet we cannot brush too quickly over the troubling fact that the God in whom he believed for most of his life chose not heal him. It is this fact, I suspect, which keeps me still from telling Cowper's story fully myself, although I have begun a number of plays and other unfinished literary projects to look at him more closely. Every time I look too closely, I become frightened: by the seeming hopelessness of his story, and by the reflection of my own face in his.

II.

I first encountered Cowper's poetry around the same time that I also discovered Calvinist theology. I use the word "discovered" loosely; I had known of the existence of Calvinism for years and had largely riled against it. It was only when I was living and working in Sabah, Malaysia, that I found myself opening up to the concept that God had chosen me and not the other way around. It was prompted, I remember, by noticing a sermon by John Piper that one of my friends had sent to help me in my devotional life. It was entitled "The Absolute Sovereignty of God: What is Romans 9 About?" Romans 9 had always been one of those thorny passages that I did not want to think about, but one day I remember thinking, "Well, it's in the Bible, so I suppose I should get my head around it." So I set off one day to the park across the road from my house and walked around the park countless times while I listened to a sermon which changed my life and in many ways even saved it.

The pivotal moment, I recall, came when Piper shared the following quote from Jonathan Edwards, so much describing my own situation that it could not fail to arrest me:

> From childhood up, my mind had been full of objections against the doctrine of God's sovereignty, in choosing whom he would to eternal life, and rejecting whom he pleased; leaving them eternally to perish, and be everlastingly tormented in hell. It used to appear like a horrible doctrine to me.

Edwards goes on to describe a point in time, the origins of which he cannot quite trace, when the doctrine was somehow transformed for him:

> I remember the time very well, when I seemed to be convinced, and fully satisfied, as to this sovereignty of God, and his justice in thus eternally disposing of men, according to his sovereign pleasure. But never could give an account, how, or by what means, I was, thus convinced, not in the least imagining at the time, nor a long time after, that there was any extraordinary influence of God's Spirit in it but only that now I saw further, and my reason apprehended the justice and reasonableness of it. However, my mind rested in it; and it put an end to all those cavils and objections. And there has been a wonderful alteration in my mind, in respect to the doctrine of God's sovereignty, from that day to this…The doctrine has very often appeared exceeding pleasant, bright, and sweet. Absolute sovereignty is what I love to ascribe to God.[3]

The idea presented to me that day by Piper and Edwards was that God's sovereignty, rather than being a form of divine tyranny, could in fact be something comforting and beautiful. I remember writing down my emerging thoughts on the subject, focusing on the fact that I knew within myself that there was no way that I could arrive at salvation of my own accord; moreover, there was no way that I could hold onto my salvation; the only way I could be safe and assured was if I knew that God in His wisdom held on to me.

Perhaps it was the coincidence of this realization with the discovery of William Cowper's poetry that made it possible for me to be comforted by what I read in Cowper rather than despair. Like Calvinism, Cowper was presented to me by John Piper, in his book *The Hidden Smile of God*, a discussion of "the fruit of affliction" in the lives of John Bunyan, William Cowper and David Brainerd. Each of those three stories impacted me greatly, but particularly those of Cowper and Bunyan. Bunyan's comforted me because of the hope it contained; Cowper's

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[3] John Piper, *The Absolute Sovereignty of God: What is Romans 9 About?*, DesiringGod.org, November 3, 2002.

arrested me, because of its despair but also because of the comfort that his work went on to give many in spite of his despair.

Piper focuses in particular on one of Cowper's hymns, perhaps his most famous – "Light Shining Out of Darkness". In fact, it is a line from this hymn that gives the book its name:

Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.

The hymn is a *tour-de-force* of imagery in which the title, "Light Shining Out of Darkness", is given particular potency by the fact that Cowper is not talking so much about light *in spite* of darkness but in fact light which is yielded by our experience of darkness. This idea is expressed through the series of dark and troubling images which Cowper offers, only to present through each one the ways in which the dark things of life can display God's grace and glory:

Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never failing skill,
He treasures up his bright designs,
And works his sovereign will.

Perhaps, Cowper seems to be suggesting, darkness confounds our human wisdom, only to replace it with the glorious, sovereign wisdom of a God who is "his own Interpreter" and will, in the end, make all things "plain".

It is this idea which, I would argue, gives us a means of approaching Cowper's work without despairing, for his is a life which, if we were to look at it with human eyes, might cause us to doubt the goodness of the God in whom he believed. Yet, when we look with eyes transformed by grace, we see something altogether different: we see a life sustained by arms somehow invisible yet never departing from him as long as he lived.

III.

There are moments in Cowper's poetry that are dark beyond belief. One of these is his poem, "Lines Written During a Period of Insanity", sometimes called "Sapphics" because of its use of "Sapphic stanzas" with four eleven-syllable lines

and a five-syllable line at the end of each stanza. The poem was reportedly written shortly after Cowper's first suicide attempt and deals with the sense of eternal condemnation that would hound him repeatedly for throughout the remainder of his life:[4]

Hatred and vengeance, my eternal portion,
Scarce can endure delay of execution,
Wait with impatient readiness to seize my
Soul in a moment.

Damned below Judas; more abhorred than he was,
Who for a few pence sold his holy Master.
Twice-betrayed Jesus me, the last delinquent,
Deems the profanest.

Man disavows, and Deity disowns me;
Hell might afford my miseries a shelter;
Therefore Hell keeps her ever-hungry mouths all
Bolted against me.

Hard lot! encompassed with a thousand dangers,
Weary, faint, trembling with a thousand terrors,
I'm called, if vanquished, to receive a sentence
Worse than Abiram's.

Him the vindictive rod of angry Justice
Sent quick and howling to the centre headlong;
I, fed with judgement, in a fleshy tomb, am
Buried above ground.

While it seems most likely that it was Cowper's suicide attempt that prompted this sense of condemnation, a number of writers about Cowper also note that he

[4] Louise B. Risk, *A Portrait of William Cowper: His Own Interpreter in Letters and Poems*, Glen Echo: Bent Branch Publishers, 2004, p. 66.

spent a large portion of his life convinced that he had committed the much-debated "unpardonable sin" (Matthew 12:31-22). Cowper writes in his own memoir that he was "set to inquire, whether I had not been guilty of the unpardonable sin; and was presently persuaded that I had…Satan furnished me so readily with weapons against myself, that neither scripture nor reason could undeceive me".[5] Though this particular obsession seems to have occurred to him prior to his conversion to evangelical Christianity, it nevertheless persisted, with his sense of his own sinfulness, viewing himself as the "vilest sinner", never entirely leaving him.[6]

Yet this poem is by no means the final word on Cowper's work. Nor is it entirely as dark as it seems. The poem is, remarkably, written in a form that is extraordinarily tough to master, particularly in English (Australian poets John Tranter and John Lee have both written satirical poems about the difficulty of writing English Sapphics). The fact that, while writing "during a period of insanity", Cowper was able to construct one of the most masterly sets of Sapphics in English is nothing short of remarkable, a sure testament to the man's genius.

Cowper also progressed beyond the despair that he expressed in his "Sapphics", although the fears expressed there would return at a number of points in his life. One of Cowper's Olney Hymns – "Jehovah-Rophi" – expresses the beautiful cry of one who is altogether weak in themselves but trusts in the mercy of Jesus, looking for inspiration to the stories of other desperate people who found hope in Him:

Remember him who once applied
With trembling for relief;
"Lord, I believe," with tears he cried;
"O help my unbelief!"

She, too, who touched Thee in the press

[5] William Cowper, *Memoir of the Early Life of William Cowper, Esq.*, 1817.
[6] Risk, p. 45.

And healing virtue stole,
Was answered, "Daughter, go in peace;
Thy faith has made thee whole"…

Like her, with hopes and fears we come
To touch Thee if we may;
O send us not despairing home;
Send none unhealed away.

Mark 9:24, with its declaration, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief", was a comfort not only to Cowper but also to countless other hymn writers, including Newton and Isaac Watts, who found in it the perfect remedy for doubt: grasping hold of even the smallest mustard seed of faith and using that as the basis for a cry for more sustaining faith.

Cowper also found comfort, it seems, in writing comic verse, a dimension to his poetry that is often neglected even though one of his comic poems, "John Gilpin", was one of his most successful and popular works during his lifetime. Chesterton pits the writing of "John Gilpin" against Cowper's Calvinism as a kind of polar opposite: "He was damned by John Calvin; he was partly saved by John Gilpin". What Chesterton is referring to here is the common belief that the writing of "John Gilpin" helped Cowper through one of his potential breakdowns. Certainly, Chesterton may be right in saying that Cowper was "partly saved by John Gilpin". The poem is so lively and so celebratory of the quirks of life that Cowper could not help but have been buoyed by the writing of it. Yet what is problematic about Chesterton's statement is its underlying belief that Cowper's Calvinism and his sense of humour were necessarily at odds with each other.

If anything, Cowper's poetry reflects the tendency in poets towards excessive introspection, a tendency which Cowper's comic verse as a rule goes some way towards counteracting. One of Cowper's lesser-known comic poems, "The Poet, the Oyster and the Sensitive Plant", creates an absurd situation in which an oyster, a plant and a poet all discuss their relative pains and troubles. Although the poet is presented as ultimately the most melancholy of the three, and

perhaps the most justifiably so, there is little denying the fact that Cowper has juxtaposed his own griefs as a poet with the absurdist moanings of an oyster and a plant, an artistic choice that surely indicates some degree of self-awareness and irony.

Certainly, there is no easy answer to the problems posed by Cowper's work. At times he seems crippled by his own theology or his own introspection; at times he is liberated by both; and at other times he seems simply to have fun. Yet in all that he does Cowper shows a mastery of poetic form, using regular rhyme and rhythm as though they were the most natural things in the world, achieving, in poems like "Alexander Selkirk", an almost conversational meter within fixed poetic form, and at times being able even to step outside of his own rhythm and meter in order to make a joke at his own expense. If we want an example in English poetry of a writer for whom their poetry proved a great consolation, it is hard to look further than William Cowper, a man in whom despair and hope lived closely together yet whose work carries a timeless beauty which can only be a testament to hope.

It would be possible to look at some of Cowper's poems and see them as more emblematic of his life than others. The hymn "Jehovah-Rophi", for instance, might seem to signify a failed prayer, for it could perhaps be said that in some ways God did indeed "send" Cowper "unhealed away". Then other poems like "The Castaway" and "Sapphics" seem to echo with the apparent irresolution of Cowper's own story. "The Castaway", with its story of a shipwreck and a "destined wretch" who must "die/Deserted", seems particularly pertinent, especially its devastating closing stanzas:

No poet wept him: but the page
Of narrative sincere;
That tells his name, his worth, his age,
Is wet with Anson's tear.
And tears by bards or heroes shed
Alike immortalize the dead.

I therefore purpose not, or dream,
Descanting on his fate,
To give the melancholy theme
A more enduring date:
But misery still delights to trace
Its semblance in another's case.

No voice divine the storm allay'd,
No light propitious shone;
When, snatch'd from all effectual aid,
We perish'd, each alone:
But I beneath a rougher sea,
And whelm'd in deeper gulfs than he.

Suggesting that the castaway's story is told not to be immortalised but to reflect on the way that "misery still delights to trace/Its semblance in another's case", Cowper places himself squarely in the position of one who "beneath a rougher sea" is "whelm'd in deeper gulfs than he", seemingly condemning himself to a story in which "no voice divine" will "allay" the storm.

Yet in emphasising poems like these at the expense of Cowper's whole body of work we risk doing what Cowper himself did at his darkest times; we see only the darkness and not the light that shone through it. Instead, we might look to the expressions of faith that sustained Cowper through much of that darkness and see in those poems and hymns declarations of something he often forgot or doubted yet which remained true nonetheless.

One of the most powerful of these comes from his hymn "The Waiting Soul", a hymn which, like others of Cowper's such as "The Contrite Heart", expresses in stark honesty his feelings of despair in spite of his faith, nevertheless managing, in the manner of a psalm, to arrive at a hopeful conclusion:

I seem forsaken and alone,
I hear the lion roar;
And every door is shut but one,
And that is Mercy's door.

There, till the dear Deliverer come,
I'll wait with humble prayer;
And when He calls His exile home,
The Lord shall find him there.

We can focus on Cowper as the castaway, or as the mad poet consumed in his own guilt and despair. Or we can view him as this hymn presents him: a “waiting soul”, an “exile”, recognising that healing may never come in this life yet looking beyond that to see the world on the other side of mercy’s door. He was all of these things, and a truly great poet too.