

COWPER'S *OLNEY HYMNS*: USEFULNESS, LOCALITY, AND THE PURITAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that William Cowper's *Olney Hymns* should primarily be read within their immediate context and according to the intent of their author: as local texts, written to be used for specific purposes by a specific readership and on specific occasions. In proposing this reading, it runs contrary to scholarly convention, which until now has largely understood the hymns to be effusions of spiritual feeling or psychological torment.

This argument is built upon a necessary redressal of our received understanding of Cowper himself, particularly during his hymn-writing period from 1768-72. Challenging traditional depictions of him as the 'sick man of Olney', the introductory section uncovers Cowper's role as an active resident of his local parish, his work as an informal companion in ministry to John Newton, and his standing as a spiritual and theological authority within the Evangelical community at Olney.

Part One situates Cowper's hymns within Olney and posits them as sophisticated and intentionally 'usefull' texts, emerging from their locale and responding to the needs, tastes, and reading contexts of their first readership: the members of John Newton's weekly Evangelical prayer meeting. Part Two considers Cowper's interactions with seventeenth- and eighteenth-century theological thought, and demonstrates that much of the content of his *Olney Hymns* is either influenced by or explicitly engaging with the work of several Puritan and Evangelical divines.

As a historicist and theological reading of *Olney Hymns*, this thesis approaches these issues via careful and extended use of sources close to the poet, authored by him, or belonging to his context.

— For my mother, who taught me to read; and for my father, who taught me to work.

non potest non laetari qui sperat in Dominum

INTRODUCTION

i.

Grounds for Reconsideration: approaches to Cowper and his hymns

[...] the character of Cowper is undetermined; mystery hangs over it; and the opinions formed of him are as various as the minds of enquirers.¹

—John Johnson (1824)

On the morning of Saturday 2 January 1773, the Revd John Newton, curate-in-charge at the Church of Saints Peter and Paul in the town of Olney, Buckinghamshire, was called as a matter of emergency to the bedside of an unwell parishioner. His diary records:

My time and thoughts much engrossed to-day by an afflicting and critical dispensation at Orchard Side. I was sent for early this morning, and returned astonished and grieved. How mysterious are the ways of the Lord! How much seems now at stake! But while all is in His hands all is safe. Could hardly attend to anything else.²

The patient was William Cowper: forty-one years of age, an ex-lawyer, descendant of nobility, and a 'dear friend' of Newton's. Attended by his fiancée, Mary Unwin, who likewise lived at

¹ John Johnson (ed.), *The Private Correspondence of William Cowper, Esq.*, 2 vols (London, 1824), i. p.xi.

² Josiah Bull (ed.), *John Newton of Olney and St. Mary Woolnoth: an autobiography and narrative* (London, 1868), p.184.

Orchard Side, Cowper was hovering on the edge of insanity. 'Sent for again in the morning—an affecting scene', Newton wrote the following day, 'I was told appearances were worse afterwards; but before noon the Lord interposed in mercy'.³ By Tuesday the disposition showed no sign of lifting, though Cowper was able to take a walk. 'I have devoted myself and time as much as possible to attend of Mr. Cowper', Newton's entry begins, and then, forebodingly: 'I shall now have little leisure but for such things as indispensably require attention'.⁴ Such was the severity of the situation that, at the weekly prayer meeting that evening, Newton saw fit to relay the news to its members:

At the Great House I mentioned the case in general terms, and made it the subject of my evening discourse. It was a solemn and affecting time, and I hope earnest prayer was, and will be poured out to the Lord.⁵

A staunch—and, as we shall see, prominent—attender of the weekly meeting, Cowper's absence appears to have been felt keenly. On Wednesday, Newton observes that 'the Lord has laid the case much upon the hearts of the people', and hopes that, 'Surely this is a token for good'. Of Cowper's health, he records on the same day that, 'Much as yesterday', the 'storm is heavy'.⁶

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.*

All expectations that Cowper would recover quickly were repeatedly dashed throughout that first January. On Saturday 16th Newton records that ‘hopes of a speedy deliverance’ were ‘damped’ by the ‘return of the temptation’.⁷ His entry for Sunday 24th, nine days later, reads:

A very alarming turn roused us from our beds, and called us to Orchard Side at four in the morning. I stayed there till eight, before which time the threatening appearance went entirely off, and now things remain much as they were.⁸

After nine years of uninterrupted sanity, in January 1773 Cowper relapsed into severe depression, attended by a ‘temptation’ to commit suicide. A similar extended episode, punctuated by numerous attempts at ‘self-destruction’, had led to his removal from London society and the Inns of Court in 1763, and his internment at Dr Nathaniel Cotton’s *Collegium Insanorum* at St Albans. While recovering, Cowper underwent a conversion experience to Evangelical Christianity in the summer of 1764, and, buoyed by this new-found faith and with his depression and its symptoms apparently behind him, he moved to Huntingdon in 1765, where he came to lodge with the Unwin family: Revd Morley Unwin, his wife, Mary, and their children, William and Susanna.⁹ Upon the death of Revd Unwin and following a visitation from Newton—himself a former slave ship captain and subsequent convert to Evangelicalism—this unlikely “methodist” commune relocated to Olney at his suggestion, to take part in its thriving,

⁷ *ibid*, p.185.

⁸ *ibid*.

⁹ For further information, see: Cowper’s conversion narrative, *Adelphi* (written c.1767, published posthumously in 1816), in, James King and Charles Ryskamp (eds), *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), i, p.3-47 [Hereafter referenced as *Letters*]; and James King, *William Cowper: a biography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1986), p.43-57, p.59-60.

rural, Evangelical society, and to benefit from his ministry.¹⁰ There, surrounded by lacemakers, farm labourers, and artisans, Cowper had entered into a deep friendship with Newton, joining him in his ministerial endeavours, frequenting his various Evangelical meetings, and taking general advantage of the close proximity afforded by his new living arrangements (the vicarage was accessible through a door in the rear wall of Cowper's own garden).¹¹

Newton's diary and correspondence include very little that might be taken as a forewarning of what was to come. 'Dear Sir Cowper is in the depths as much as ever', he wrote in a letter to his wife on Thursday 9 July 1772, suggesting that his friend was at that time in the midst of a season of melancholia, and, somewhat cryptically in a diary entry on Tuesday 19 November 1772: 'Mr. Cowper has been ailing these two or three days, but I hope he is better.'¹² His reports of the event of January 1773 are overwhelmingly characterised by shock at its occurrence. Reflecting upon the situation in a letter sent in August 1773, he writes:

I can hardly form an idea of a closer walk with God than he uniformly maintained. Communion with God and the good of His people seemed to be the only objects he had in view from the beginning to the end of the year, and he was remarkably thriving and happy to the very hour when his trouble overtook him. But the Lord is wise. Mysterious as the dispensation seems, I dare not question its expediency, nor, though it continues so long, can I despond as to the event.¹³

¹⁰ In a letter to his cousin, Mrs Cowper, sent on 20 October 1766, Cowper wrote that the household had 'acquired the name of Methodists' among the people of Huntingdon. *Letters*, i., p.152.

¹¹ This is the subject of the following chapter.

¹² Bull (1868), p.181, p.183.

¹³ *ibid*, p.197-8.

By the time Newton wrote these words, Cowper had been domiciled in the vicarage for several months. Driven out of Orchardside by the noise of the adjacent marketplace and an irrational fear that Mrs Unwin would poison him, Cowper became a patient of the Newtons for just over a year, finally returning to his home in May 1774.¹⁴

In addition to disturbing the two households and causing a stir in the town, Cowper's illness brought an abrupt end to a project upon which he and Newton had been working for several years: hymn composition. What began sporadically had, in 1771, become a regular practice. Published six years after the advent of the illness, *Olney Hymns* (1779) contained 348 hymns, sixty-six of which were authored by Cowper. In his preface to the collection, Newton writes that his own part 'would have been smaller' and that 'the book would have appeared much sooner' were it not for the 'wise, though mysterious providence of God':

We had not proceeded far upon our proposed plan, before my dear friend was prevented, by a long and affecting indisposition, from affording me any farther assistance. My grief and disappointment were great; I hung my harp upon the willows, and for some time thought myself determined to proceed no farther without him. Yet my mind was afterwards led to resume the service. My progress in it, amidst a variety of other engagements, has been slow, yet in a course of years the hymns amounted to a considerable number: And my deference to the judgement and desires of others, has at length overcome the reluctance I long felt to see them in print, while I had so few of my friend's hymns to insert in the collection.¹⁵

¹⁴ King (1986), p.86-9.

¹⁵ *Olney Hymns* (London, 1779), p.vi-vii.

Olney Hymns gained instant popularity, running to eight editions within ten years and even reaching a newly-independent American readership via a store in Lexington, Kentucky.¹⁶ Hymnologist Louis Benson writes that, within time, among Evangelicals in Britain the hymnbook ‘became a people’s manual of Evangelical doctrine and an instrument of spiritual discipline’.¹⁷

Cowper’s recurring and severe mental illness is a significant landmark, and, as such, it cannot help but dominate the surrounding landscape of his life and work. Vincent Newey rightly observes that ‘the twentieth century appears to have cared more for Cowper the man than Cowper the poet.’¹⁸ The same is true of the nineteenth century, which saw thirty biographical publications on the life and the madness of William Cowper.¹⁹ In a popular study published twelve years after his death, *Medical Inquiries and Observations, Upon the Diseases of the Mind* (1812), Benjamin Rush makes an early attempt to locate Cowper’s poor mental health in his comic poem, ‘John Gilpin’. Allowing that ‘there are sometimes flashes of apparent cheerfulness, and even of mirth’ in the writings of Cowper, Rush concludes that veiled within such flashes is ‘a latent depression of the mind.’²⁰ Here, in the works of the man considered to be the “Father of American psychiatry”, are early stirrings of the temptation that has faced

¹⁶ Donald E. Demaray, *The Innovation of John Newton 1825-1807: synergies of word and music in eighteenth-century Evangelicalism* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1988), p.271; Lodwick Hartley, *William Cowper: the continuing revaluation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1960), p.8.

¹⁷ Louis F. Benson, *The English Hymn* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1915), p.338.

¹⁸ Vincent Newey, *Cowper’s Poetry: a critical study and reassessment* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1982), p.11.

¹⁹ Hartley (1960), p.17.

²⁰ Benjamin Rush, *Medical Inquiries and Observations, Upon the Diseases of the Mind* (Philadelphia: Kimber and Richardson, 1812), p.85.

Cowper critics ever since: to take his work as either symptom or attempted treatment, and scan it for expressions—conscious and subconscious—of his ‘depression of the mind’.

Despite the fact that they were written during a period of sanity, nowhere is this more evident than in examinations of Cowper’s *Olney Hymns*. Burdened with the unenviable task of pleasing conflicting factions within and without the Evangelical movement, in his *Life and Posthumous Writings of William Cowper* (1803-4) William Hayley valiantly attempts to give an account of the poet’s theological convictions and practices without overtly identifying him with Evangelicalism: a movement that much of the reading public—not least the Cowper family themselves—felt to be in poor taste. Hayley’s discussion of *Olney Hymns*, which is notably brief, is coloured by the suspicions of Cowper’s cousin, Lady Hesketh.²¹ Despite noting that ‘fellowship in literary labour’ and ‘for the noblest of purposes’ must ‘be delightful indeed’, Hayley suggests that hymn-writing itself had a hand in the breakdown of 1773. It ‘may be doubted’, he ventures, ‘if the intense zeal, with which Cowper embarked in this fascinating pursuit, had not a dangerous tendency to undermine his very delicate health’.²² Backing away from this tentative assertion, Hayley allows that, at any rate, Cowper’s ‘genius’ and ‘virtues’ were ‘calculated to excite’ such ‘temperate passions’ and ‘to the highest degree’. Here he implies that any project, religiously-motivated or not, might have had a similar effect.²³ This conclusion was seconded by William Hazlitt, who, writing in 1818, remarked that:

²¹ In a letter to Hayley dated 30 August 1801, Hesketh writes that the project ‘did infinite injury to our friend’, and that it ‘heated his brain, Sunk his Spirits and brought on that dreadful depression’. Quoted in: John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp (eds), *The Poems of William Cowper*, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), i., p.xvi [Hereafter referenced as *Poems*].

²² William Hayley, *The Life, and Posthumous Writings, of William Cowper, Esqr.* 3 vols (Chichester, 1803), i., p.88-9.

²³ *ibid.*

it is the nature of the poetical temperament to carry every thing to excess, whether it be love, religion, pleasure, or pain, as we may see in the case of Cowper [...], and to find torment or rapture in that in which others merely find a resource from ennui, or a relaxation from common occupation.²⁴

Hayley's cautious proposal of a causal link between the act of hymn-composition and Cowper's breakdown was reinforced by Robert Southey, who, in his *Works of William Cowper* (1835-7) speculates that it was a 'dangerous exercise', into which Cowper was 'led'.²⁵

By the turn of the twentieth century, Cowper's critics had moved beyond mere propositions of causality in the 'exercise' to locating tokens of mental illness within the verses themselves. In his reflections on *Theology and the English Poets* (1905), Stopford A. Brooke labels the hymns 'a terrible record, stained with insanity, wretched with horror and despair'.²⁶ Writing in 1914, James A. Roy echoes this reading: 'These verses', he asserts, 'shadow forth the lurking terror presently to grip Cowper, to overwhelm him in chaos and night'.²⁷ In his widely-referenced work, *William Cowper and the Eighteenth Century* (1935), Gilbert Thomas reintroduces into secular criticism the notion that the hymns constitute a failed attempt by Cowper to rescue his own faith, that they are 'pathetically concerned with his own case', and that in writing them he was seeking 'a spiritual amulet'.²⁸ As a corollary to this reading, Thomas also fields a notion that was to become popular in the succeeding decades—that Cowper's hymns are best

²⁴ William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets* (London, 1818), p.187.

²⁵ Robert Southey (ed.), *Works of William Cowper, and the Life of the Author*, 8 vols (London: H.G. Bohn, 1854) i, p.171.

²⁶ Stopford A. Brooke, *Theology in the English Poets: Cowper, Coleridge, Wordsworth & Burns* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1905), p.48.

²⁷ James A. Roy, *Cowper and His Poetry* (London: George G. Harrap and Company, 1914), p.44.

²⁸ Gilbert Thomas, *William Cowper and the Eighteenth Century* (London: Ivor Nicholson and Watson, 1935), p.189.

understood as personal poems. 'Many of his contributions', he writes, are 'hardly hymns in the strictest sense', and 'some of his "hymns" are *poems* of personal doubt and conflict'.²⁹ Writing in 1946, David Cecil also presents hymn-writing as an intended medicament, finds the hymns themselves to be unintended emblems of a failed treatment, and depicts Cowper's part in the project along familiar, passive lines, writing that he 'dutifully carried out his part in this bleak task'.³⁰ Writing in 1950, W. E. M. Brown develops these themes by implying that Cowper's hymns were not meant to be read by anyone other than their author and his confidantes. 'It is evidently due to Newton that the hymns were offered with a social, above their personal, significance', she writes, adding: 'They may, indeed, be considered, on the whole, unsuitable for congregational use'.³¹

In this concluding comment we see another thread common to the discourse surrounding Cowper's hymns—a confusion over how eighteenth-century hymns in general, and the pieces that came to constitute *Olney Hymns* in particular, were used. Picking up this thread in 1951, Norman Nicholson calls Cowper's hymns a 'comparative failure'.³² The criteria for suitability or success in either case is unclear, but it seems to be built upon the definitively liturgical purpose that hymns came to serve in the nineteenth century and onward. There is no real consideration of the purpose for which Cowper and Newton initially wrote their own hymns, and the manner in which they might have been used in Olney. Returning to themes common to the early discussions of *Olney Hymns* regarding the relationship shared by these two men, Nicholson also implies with Cecil that the former wrote under some form of duress: 'Most of the hymns

²⁹ *ibid*, p.223.

³⁰ David Cecil, *The Stricken Deer: the life of Cowper* (London: Constable and Company, 1946), p.140-1.

³¹ W. E. M. Brown, *The Polished Shaft: studies in the purpose and influence of the Christian writer in the Eighteenth Century*, (London: S. P. C. K., 1950), p.68.

³² Norman Nicholson, *William Cowper* (London: John Lehmann, 1951), p.61.

written by Cowper for this volume are, as might have been expected, luke-warm, uncertain, the forced and mechanical expression of a doctrine which was by now more of an anxiety than a comfort.’³³

The commentary of the succeeding decades perpetuates these themes. Norman Jeffares affirmed in 1963 that Cowper’s hymns are ‘personal poems’, and Patricia Meyer Spacks argued in 1967 that ‘their strength derives almost entirely from the quality of their psychological insight’.³⁴ In 1976, John Betjeman declared that ‘Cowper’s hymns are obsessed with his own spiritual state’, and that as a result ‘many of them are unsuitable for congregational use’.³⁵ Madeleine Forell Marshall and Janet Todd, in their examination of *English Congregational Hymns in the Eighteenth Century* (1982), find that ‘Cowper’s most interesting hymns nevertheless reflect his personal struggles precisely because the imaginative weight of the poetry falls on the unrelieved images of divine wrath, human suffering, fear, and exclusion’.³⁶ Reintroducing the note of hysteria that characterised early-twentieth century studies of *Olney Hymns*, they argue that:

The most terrifying hymns sing of a God of horrible brutality, working his evil will. Across the continuum, we find singers conditioned to abuse, like whipped children or puppies,

³³ Norman Nicholson, *William Cowper* (London: Published for The British Council and The National Book League by Longmans, Green & Co, 1960), p.13.

³⁴ A. Norman Jeffares (ed.), *Cowper: selected poems and letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), p.32; Patricia Meyer Spacks, *The Poetry of Vision: five eighteenth-century poets* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), p.165.

³⁵ Stephen Games (ed.), *The John Betjeman Hymnbook* (London: Continuum, 2011), p.39.

³⁶ Madeleine Forell Marshall and Janet Todd, *English Congregational Hymns in the Eighteenth Century* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1982), p.140.

and the image is always stronger than its counterweight [...]. In the more extreme hymns, Cowper assumes God's brutality and tries to justify such behaviour.³⁷

Writing in the same year, Vincent Newey begins his own examination of Cowper's poetry by insisting that, despite the fact that they are 'coloured always by the circumstances that shaped his real existence' and 'most of all' by 'mental instability', critics ought not simply to treat his verses as 'echoes of his life'.³⁸ Despite having stated this at the outset, Newey re-affirms the idea that hymn-writing was an attempted form of medication—the 'medium through which he strove to surmount' the 'pressures' of 'fears of damnation'—and ultimately finds that, 'Cowper's true, convincing voice is to be found, almost without exception, in expressions of longing, uncertainty, desperation, weakness'.³⁹ James King's 1986 critical biography of Cowper likewise casts the hymns as 'another spiritual biography', one that 'dramatises in vivid detail his relationship with a loving but sadistic God'.⁴⁰

Several more recent examinations of Cowper's *Olney Hymns* echo these approaches, and produce similar findings. Richard Arnold's 2012 study argues that Cowper's 'goal in writing' is 'bifocal': that, 'he writes pious songs of praise and yet also explores his turbulent inner self'.⁴¹ He supplements this suggestion that Cowper is intentionally encoding his own spiritual struggles into the hymns with another old line of argument that the inclusion of their psychological content is at times unintentional and self-conscious.⁴² Arnold also begins to

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ Newey (1982), p.11-2.

³⁹ *ibid.*, p.x, p.287.

⁴⁰ King (1986), p.86.

⁴¹ Richard Arnold, *Trinity of Discord: the hymnal and poetic innovations of Isaac Watts, Charles Wesley, and William Cowper* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2012), p.121.

⁴² *ibid.*, p.99.

introduce some theological commentary into his discussion, though this is presented in general terms and without context: ‘When read closely’, he writes, the hymns ‘reveal Cowper’s inner self as it struggles with uncertainty and impending damnation’.⁴³ Furthermore, and ‘more often than not’, Cowper’s hymns about the Bible ‘betray’ his ‘view of the inapplicability and inherent fallacy of the scriptures they ostensibly represent’.⁴⁴ The idea that at any time in his life Cowper *viewed* the Bible as inherently fallacious—astonishing to anyone who has read his letters, poetry, and indeed the hymns themselves—builds upon a similarly tenuous claim that his composition of ‘only’ twenty-one hymns on the Bible constitutes an unconscious suggestion ‘that the scriptures were somehow not as relevant to his own life as they ideally should be’.⁴⁵ In places, Arnold slightly broadens his purview beyond Cowper’s mental illness, enough to mention in passing what will be the central concern of this thesis: that Cowper ‘intended the hymns to be useful to congregations’, and he ‘wanted them to be neat, useful, and edifying’.⁴⁶ Ultimately, however, he finds with his predecessors that Cowper’s hymns ‘should be examined in light of his extreme psycho-autobiographical circumstances, and his Calvinism’ (though here, as elsewhere, the notion of “examining Cowper’s Calvinism” does not mean studying his extensive reading in and engagement with the complex theological works of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Calvinist divines, but something altogether more shallow and, in the end, psychological).⁴⁷

Though it might seem unnecessarily comprehensive, this summary of the critical landscape is necessary because it reveals the development of a conventional critical approach to Cowper’s

⁴³ *ibid.*

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p.ix.

Olney Hymns. This approach is overwhelmingly defined by one aspect of Cowper's context: his mental illness. Interestingly, at its core is a presupposition that is shared by commentators who are, unlike many of Cowper's literary critics, well disposed towards his religious tradition. Writing in 1826, James Montgomery claims that, 'like all his best compositions', the hymns are 'principally communings with his own heart'.⁴⁸ In his judgement, this renders them 'frequently applicable to every believer's feelings', because 'they touch the most secret springs of joy and sorrow, faith, fear, hope, love, trial, despondency, and triumph.'⁴⁹ Anne Brontë suggests something similar in her poem, 'To Cowper':

Sweet are thy strains, celestial Bard;
And oft, in childhood's years,
I've read them o'er and o'er again,
With floods of silent tears.
The language of my inmost heart,
I traced in every line;
My sins, my sorrows, hopes, and fears,
Were there—and only mine.⁵⁰

Reformed Baptist minister John Piper, writing in 2001, gestures towards the theological complexity and pastoral utility of Cowper's hymns, noting that they contain 'an entire theology of suffering':

⁴⁸ James Montgomery (ed.), *Poems, by William Cowper, Esq.* third edn (Glasgow, 1826), p.xv.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

⁵⁰ Anne Brontë, *Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell* (London: Aylott and Jones, 1846), p.93.

Cowper was sick. But in his sickness he saw things that we so desperately need to see. He saw hell. And sometimes he saw heaven. He knew terror. And sometimes he knew ecstasy. When I stand to welcome the people to worship on Sunday morning, I know that there are William Cowpers in the congregation.⁵¹

Summarising his view of *Olney Hymns*, Piper writes: 'Cowper's mental illness yielded sweet music of the mind for troubled souls'.⁵²

The shared presupposition here is that Cowper's hymns are primarily to be understood as effusions of personal feeling and experience. Indeed, this idea was present at the inauguration of posthumous Cowper criticism in Samuel Greatheed's memorial sermon on the occasion of the poet's death in 1800, where the hymns are described as 'effusions of spiritual gratitude and joy'.⁵³ Four years later, both Hayley and E. W. Brayley characterise them as 'devotional effusions': within *Olney Hymns*, writes the latter, 'the most beautiful imagery and the most devout effusions of piety are happily combined'.⁵⁴ These same words were reprinted and redistributed by James Storer in 1822, and, in his edited re-publication of Hayley's *Life* in 1835, T. S. Grimshawe used the phrase again several times, adding the following commentary to the original:

⁵¹ John Piper, *Tested by Fire: the fruit of suffering in the lives of John Bunyan, William Cowper and David Brainerd* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001), p.167-8.

⁵² *ibid*, p.19.

⁵³ Samuel Greatheed, *A Practical Improvement of the Divine Counsel and Conduct, attempted in a sermon, occasioned by the decease of William Cowper, Esq; preached at Olney, 18 May, 1800* (Newport-Pagnell, 1800), p.15.

⁵⁴ Hayley (1803), i., p.85; E. W. Brayley, *Cowper: illustrated by a series of views* (London, 1804), p.8.

These sentiments and feelings, so descriptive of the exercises of the soul, find a response in every awakened heart; and the church of Christ will never cease to claim its property in effusions like these till the Christian warfare is ended, and the perceptions of erring reason and sense are exchanged for the bright visions of eternity.⁵⁵

Despite noting that he 'left no account' of his hymn-writing exploits, in the introduction to their excellent edition of the *Poems* (1980), John Baird and Charles Ryskamp confidently claim that, in Cowper's mind, 'a hymn was in the first place a vivid effusion of the heart, the record of some episode of God's dealings unto salvation', and that, while 'they might later serve to edify other souls', for Cowper, hymns came 'into being to express the feelings of a grateful spirit'.⁵⁶ They go on to note, however, that Cowper also 'composed hymns which arose not from personal religious experience but from the exigencies of public occasions', and that 'most of his contributions to Book II [...] belong to this second category'.⁵⁷

In this apparent contradiction (did Cowper, according to the definition that they attribute to him, not consider this second group to be hymns in the proper sense?) the problem of the 'effusion' concept is manifest. Some of the hymns seem like mere effusions, and yet some seem as if they might be intended to be something more. Many more of the hymns resist either categorisation, a fact indicated by Baird and Ryskamp's unwillingness to pursue their argument and form definite divisions. This problem is partly rooted in the lack of provenance regarding

⁵⁵ James Storer, *The Rural Walks of Cowper; displayed in a series of views near Olney, Bucks* (London, 1822), p.6; William Hayley, *The Works of William Cowper, His Life and Letters*, ed. by T. S. Grimshawe, 8 vols (London, 1835), i., p.119-20.

⁵⁶ *Poems*, i., p.xvii.

⁵⁷ *ibid*, p.xviii.

the timeline along which the hymns *were* written. Some are meditative pieces that either appear to have been written or we know were written before he arrived at Olney.⁵⁸ Some are meditative pieces written after his arrival at Olney that were either intended or subsequently offered up for communal use. Some are ‘congregational’ hymns, written explicitly for Newton’s various Evangelical meetings. The second and third groups are the subject of this thesis, since they are, contextually speaking, ‘Olney’ hymns. Containing both ‘effusive’ and didactic elements, the majority of these texts fall somewhere between ‘personal’ and ‘public’. As chapter four will show, several hymns that seem obviously to belong in the ‘personal’ category and have traditionally been read as such were actually demonstrably written for a public purpose.

Whatever the approach, Cowper’s verses are commonly defined by their effusive, personal elements. Where more nuanced commentaries tend to just focus on these elements, the less nuanced present the hymns themselves as mere private effusions of feeling and experience: spontaneous discharges of either spiritual fervour or mental instability. Undergirding this premise is a further generally accepted presupposition, which sees Cowper’s psyche as being dominated by what James King terms as his ‘extraordinary passivity’.⁵⁹ Thus, the hymns—with many of his fellow critics, King tellingly calls them ‘poems’—are understood to be the medium whereby he ‘dramatised his helplessness’.⁶⁰ Cowper’s passivity is at the root of the commonly recurring and apparently baseless idea that Newton ‘led’, pushed, or coerced him into writing the hymns. It is also seen in the infantilisation of his engagement with theology and God. David

⁵⁸ These are usually distinguishable either by their known provenance or their references to Cowper’s life at either Huntingdon or St. Albans.

⁵⁹ King (1986), p.84.

⁶⁰ *ibid*, p.85.

Cecil characterises Cowper's Evangelicalism as a 'phase', King writes of 'Cowper's God' as 'Janus-like', 'both the tender Lamb and the cruel Avenger', and Morris Golden describes his attitude as that, 'magnified a million-fold, of the child who has been punished for a wrong based on a system of conduct he has not learned'.⁶¹ It is upon this reductive understanding of Cowper's personality that the effusion concept rests. Whether the wind originates in heaven or in psychological trauma, he is ultimately perceived to be the passive aeolian harp, and his hymns as mere naïve effusions of experience and feeling.

In seeking to challenge this reading, it is not necessary to deny that Cowper's hymns contain effusions of feeling or that they are influenced by his experiences. Elsewhere in his preface, Newton affirms that the collection was 'intended as a monument, to perpetuate the remembrance of an intimate and endeared friendship'.⁶² This friendship, as we shall see in the next chapter, included close and personal conversation of a spiritual nature, covering topics such as spiritual experiences past and present and their respective conversion stories. With this in view, it would be unwise to expunge from our consideration the emotive encounter and shared feeling that formed part of the soil out of which *Olney Hymns* grew. In presenting Cowper's *Olney Hymns* as mere effusions of experience and feeling, however, or in locating their value and significance solely in this single contextual aspect, the conventional reading fails on several fronts. It fails to properly recognise the importance of the local and theological contexts that gave rise to *Olney Hymns*, and, in removing all serious authorial intent from Cowper, it fails to consider that his verses might have been carefully designed for specific purposes related to these contexts. Consequently, it fails to provide an adequate account of

⁶¹ Cecil (1946), p.76; King (1986), p.85; Morris Golden, *In Search of Stability: the poetry of William Cowper* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1960), p.90.

⁶² *Olney Hymns*, p.vi.

the hymns themselves, which are self-evidently more theologically, poetically, and textually sophisticated than has been previously allowed.

It should be noted here that a handful of critics have already identified the superficiality of this reading. In his balanced study of the poet's work, *William Cowper: a critical life* (1953), Maurice J. Quinlan points out that, 'there is a danger [...] in inferring too much in the way of personal references from these religious songs, especially if one fails to keep in mind the plan of the volume'.⁶³ J. R. Watson observes in a 1985 article the creation and perpetuation of a 'modern portrait' of Cowper by critics of his hymns: 'that of a tentative, hesitant, half-believer [...] the unfortunate, muddled, bullied Christian, the victim of too much Newton and too much Calvinistic evangelicalism'.⁶⁴ In his masterful work, *The English Hymn* (1997), Watson further notes that the hymns were 'written at a time when Cowper was in full accord with Newton's robust preaching', that 'at times' they 'handle religious experience with a quiet confidence which is often deceptive', and that it is 'facile to construct a late-twentieth-century version of Cowper' as, in the words of his previous article, 'a proto-existentialist'.⁶⁵

Despite these observations, and despite their allusions to a potential alternative, these critics do not proceed to either paint a new portrait of Cowper or examine his hymns within their local or theological contexts. The aim of this thesis is to pursue this line of inquiry: to redress critical perceptions of Cowper-the-hymnwriter, to delineate the local contextual elements at play in the composition of his *Olney Hymns*, and to read the texts themselves within these new

⁶³ Maurice J. Quinlan, *William Cowper: a critical life* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1953), p.81.

⁶⁴ J. R. Watson, 'Cowper's *Olney Hymns*', *Essays and Studies*, v.38 (1985), pp.45-65, p.46-47.

⁶⁵ J. R. Watson, *The English Hymn: a critical and historical study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.282-3, p.293, p.291; Watson (1985), p.48.

contexts—in short, to thicken the hymns in our understanding. To this end, the argument of this thesis is that, rather composing mere ‘personal poems’ or effusions of feeling, Cowper understood himself to be engaged in the creation of ‘usefull’ texts, and, therefore, that many of his hymns should be first approached as pieces carefully crafted for specific purposes, specific occasions, and a specific readership.

To make this argument and pursue this reading is simply to take seriously Newton’s claim in his preface to *Olney Hymns* that its contents were originally composed for the use and edification of a particular readership. The ‘principal motive’ in ‘this undertaking’, he writes, was a ‘desire of promoting the faith and comfort of sincere Christians’.⁶⁶ Newton goes on to identify this readership, dedicating the collection to ‘dear friends in the parish and neighbourhood of Olney, for whose use the hymns were originally composed’.⁶⁷ In a letter to Lady Hesketh, dated 29 March 1786, Cowper offers the following description of this ‘neighbourhood’: ‘Olney, you are to understand, though much improved since our first acquaintance with it, is rather a poor town, and contains but one house except our own, that is not occupied by a trade’.⁶⁸ Alongside the large number of lacemakers and farm labourers, the occupational composition of the parish was varied:

In addition to essential rural craftsmen such as blacksmiths and carpenters, and small retailers such as grocers, bakers, and butchers, Olney had a large number of cordwainers, watch-makers, straw-workers, tailors, breechesmakers, millers,

⁶⁶ *Olney Hymns*, p.vi.

⁶⁷ *ibid*, p.xii.

⁶⁸ *Letters*, ii., p.503.

fellmongers, innkeepers, and a variety of other trades important to the local economy [...].⁶⁹

To these we might add surgeons, tanners, masons, bricklayers, schoolmasters, maltsters, lacedealers, coopers, wheelwrights, tallow chandlers, brewers, heelmakers, glaziers, drapers, gardeners, hempdressers, hairdressers, sawyers, and basketmakers.⁷⁰

Cowper's *Olney Hymns* were 'originally' composed to, for, and from within this community. Bruce Hindmarsh has argued that neither Cowper nor Newton restricted their authorial gaze to the people of Olney, and has pointed to the publication of a handful of hymns in various magazines as evidence for the fact that each had their eyes on broader publication from the outset.

The hymn-writing task was indeed for Newton first and foremost a response to the spiritual needs of his people, and many hymns arose from the very specific situations in the parish. [...] However, although the occasion might be local and the first audience his own parishioners, he certainly wrote with an awareness of a much wider audience from the beginning [...] his hymns were written with an eye to eventual publication. Newton and Cowper had publication in mind from as early as 1771; both writers published hymns themselves in the *Gospel Magazine* that same year; and throughout the following years dozens of hymns were 'published' in the sense that they were

⁶⁹ Bruce Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the English Evangelical Tradition: between the conversions of Wesley and Wilberforce* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p.171.

⁷⁰ Ian F. W. Beckett, *The Buckinghamshire Posse Comitatus, 1798*, vol.22 (Chippenhams: Buckinghamshire Record Society, 1985), p.282-6.

disseminated through letters and personal exchanges within the informal network of ministers and prominent laymen in which Newton played so key a role.⁷¹

This argument will be dealt with in chapter two, but it suffices to point out here that it is Newton himself who identifies the readership ‘for whose use the hymns were originally composed’ as the people of Olney. Indeed, in the following chapters we will see that—with their use of local imagery and their concern with local pastoral matters and constituencies, with their didacticism and their focus upon particular theological issues—Cowper’s hymns testify to this: that the majority were primarily conceived as local texts for local people, that they were therefore in the main composed on a week-by-week basis for use at a prayer meeting, and that the matter of future publication was a secondary concern for their author.

This argument rests upon a renewed appraisal of Cowper’s character and role within the Olney community between the years 1768-1773. It is to the painting of this fresh portrait that the following introductory chapter is dedicated, recasting him as the ‘sort of curate’ in Olney: a spiritual authority within the Evangelical *koinonia*, possessed with a corresponding pastoral concern for its members. Corollary to this, it will also detail his didactic temperament (what might be better called his propensity, across various written mediums, to homilize) and it will begin to redress his engagement with and grasp of theology. Wholly foreign to convention, such a significant reappraisal of ‘Cowper the man’ is vital not only because it matches the evidence of his early biographers and his correspondence, but also because it allows the hymns

⁷¹ Hindmarsh (1996), p.161-2.

to be read in a totally different authorial context: this, rather than the passive ‘stricken deer’, is the man who authored many of the hymns.

Building upon this renewed portrait of Cowper, in Part One we will examine his hymns within their various local contexts. Beginning with a recovery of the centrality of ‘usefulness’—an Evangelical concept that is significant to Cowper’s understanding of the world, his place within it, and the fruit of his quill—the first chapter demonstrates the potency of this category via a case study: a close and contextual reading of a subsection of his hymns, written ‘for the annual youth meeting’. The second chapter broadens out the scope of our inquiry to those hymns that Cowper wrote to be used at other meetings and for other purposes. Tacking between close reading and contextual analysis, it also begins to examine the various modes that Cowper adopted in the construction of his hymns: supplicatory, exaltative, confessional, devotional, exhortative, and didactic. These last two modes form the focus of the third chapter, which examines the unique role that hymns played in John Newton’s weekly meeting, and the manner in which Cowper composed texts to fit that role: ‘expoundable’ hymns, designed to pair with informal sermons, written in a variety of homiletical modes, and concerned with subjects scriptural and topical. Continuing along this local line of inquiry, Part Two seeks to begin the process of redressing Cowper’s theological context, and his interactions with theology itself. Chapter four explores the influence of John Bunyan on Cowper’s hymns, but also Cowper’s didactic and verse-based engagement with Bunyan in the particular context of the weekly prayer meeting, specifically the hymns he wrote that were designed to augment Newton’s teaching series on *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Our final chapter pivots from Bunyan to a selection of other Puritan divines, all of whom Cowper is known to have read, and examines

the manner in which these theologians shaped the didactic and devotional content of his *Olney Hymns*. In short, this thesis seeks to locate and read Cowper's hymns within *Olney*.

Evangelicalism and eighteenth-century hymnody

Before commencing with this study, it is helpful to give a survey of hymns and their uses in the eighteenth century, and to detail briefly the national currents that swept Cowper and Newton out into the Buckinghamshire countryside and deposited them on the banks of the Ouse. The broad and immediate context for *Olney Hymns* is a series of historical events that took place in Britain, commonly referred to as the 'Evangelical Revival'. Mark Noll explains the latter part of this phrase, 'revival', as a sequence of 'intense periods of unusual response to gospel preaching linked with unusual efforts at godly living'.⁷² The widely-referenced 'Bebbington Quadrilateral' defines 'Evangelicalism'—the name given to the movement, spirituality, and culture birthed by the phenomenon—by the following four qualities: 'conversionism, the belief that lives need to be changed; activism, the expression of the gospel in effort; biblicism, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called crucicentrism, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross'.⁷³ Entering the British Isles from the east throughout the late 1720s and 1730s, the continental pietism of the burgeoning Moravian movement met a storm of pamphlets sweeping in from the west, reports of a 'Great Awakening' in the colonies described in detail by the preacher at its centre, Jonathan Edwards, in a work that since it was published

⁷² I am particularly grateful to Mark Noll, from whose work I took many of the reading cues for this section. See: Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: the age of Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys* (Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 2004), p.15.

⁷³ David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: a history from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p.16.

has never been out of print, *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God* (1737).⁷⁴ At their confluence, these two forces galvanised two latent movements native to Britain: a late-seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century High Church spirituality that expressed itself in ‘primitivism’, which was characterised by asceticism and personal holiness enacted in ‘voluntary religious societies’; and the dissenting Protestant tradition, direct descendants and practitioners of sixteenth-century Calvinist and seventeenth-century Puritan spirituality.⁷⁵

In one sense, the igniting of the revival in Britain is a story of individuals. The conversions of Howel Harris and Daniel Rowland in 1735 led to the birth of the movement in Wales, and the conversions of George Whitefield in the same year and Charles and John Wesley in 1738 resulted in its spread across the British Isles. Whitefield crisscrossed Britain and the Atlantic, and John Wesley travelled an estimated 250,000 miles on horseback, preached more than 40,000 sermons, and founded a complex nationwide organisation, his ‘Methodist Connexion’, within the Church of England.⁷⁶ In another sense, as both Hindmarsh and Noll have pointed out, it is a story of modernity, of networks, of print media enabling both mass distribution of information, argument, and narrative, and the subsequent identification of disparate rural and urban communities with one another and ‘with a larger, imagined community of “real Christians” in places near and far’.⁷⁷ Indeed, Isabel Rivers writes that religious publications

⁷⁴ See: Colin Podmore, *The Moravian Church in England, 1728-1760* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998); Ted A. Campbell, *The Religion of the Heart: a study of European religious life in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries* (Columbia: University Press of South Carolina, 1991); Noll (2004), p.23-68; George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: a life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003) p.150-238.

⁷⁵ See: Noll (2004), p.48-68; Samuel Wesley, *Letters Concerning the Religious Societies* (London, 1700); Eamon Duffy, ‘Primitive Christianity Revived: religious renewal in Augustan England’, *Renaissance and Renewal in Christian History*, ed. by Derek Baker (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977), p.287-300; Bebbington (1989), p.42-43.

⁷⁶ D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Spirit of Early Evangelicalism: true religion in a modern world* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p.50; Bebbington (1989), p.47-48, p.31; Noll (2004), p.93-179. See also: Eifion Evans, *Daniel Rowland and the Great Evangelical Awakening in Wales* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1985); Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

⁷⁷ Noll (2004), p.48-54; Hindmarsh (2018), p.49-50.

‘indisputably constituted the largest part of the publishing market in the period 1695 to 1830’.⁷⁸

When the movement began to experience its first schism in the 1740s, therefore, it can accurately be said to have “played out in the media”, via a flurry of publications beginning in the 1740s and stretching on into the 1770s and 1780s. Initially rooted in an old soteriological debate between the Calvinists and Arminians, this dispute quickly grew to include other doctrinal matters including, but not limited to, the Wesleyan doctrine of Christian Perfection.⁷⁹ By the end of the 1740s, writes David Ceri Jones, ‘the unity of the revival had effectively been shattered’:

Where there had once been a unified renewal movement, there were now three separate groups: the Moravians, the Wesleyans and the Calvinists. They were each equally committed to evangelical renewal, but each now competed for the same space in a religious marketplace that was becoming decidedly overcrowded.⁸⁰

The doctrines, practices, spirituality, and disagreements that characterised the subsections within this movement were encoded and disseminated in an increasingly popular form of verse: the hymn. Discussion of the complexities of this form in the particular case of William

⁷⁸ Isabel Rivers, ‘Religious Publishing’, *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, ed. by Michael F. Suarez and Michael L. Turner, 6 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), v, p.579.

⁷⁹ Noll (2004), p.113; Gordon Rupp, *Religion in England, 1688-1791* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p.483.

⁸⁰ David Ceri Jones, et al., *The Elect Methodists: Calvinistic Methodism in England and Wales, 1735-1811* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012), p.35-36. (NB: Jones proposes the terms ‘Wesleyan-Methodist’ and ‘Calvinistic-Methodist’ to describe these two groups. Elsewhere I have used these terms, but here and throughout this study I have determined to use the term ‘Evangelical’ to describe the revival as a whole, and the revivalist community in Olney. ‘Evangelical’ is a term with which they, being largely of Puritan, Independent, and Baptist descent, would have been more likely to identify.)

Cowper are reserved for chapters one, two, and three, and therefore it will suffice to offer two comments here, selected from three critics. The first, made by Marshall and Todd, is that, despite the 'formal recognisability of hymns as hymns', anyone attempting a 'simple definition of the genre in terms of either its purpose or content encounters immediate difficulty' due to the 'varied uses to which hymns were put and the many different subjects and spiritual states that hymns were designed to treat'.⁸¹ J. R. Watson illustrates this complexity beautifully, writing that:

A hymn exists, not just on the page, but in sound; it functions in a private reading, but also in a church. The building is filled with sound, made by musical instruments and human voices, and the text becomes no longer the marks on the page but a series of sounds in the air. It may be revisited later, and reflected upon, but it is no longer just a text, no longer writing, but something else in addition to writing. In the sense that it exists in a book, and that book may be held in the hand and read, the hymn is there as writing; but it is only there because it is also music, sacred song, congregational praise.⁸²

This definition, broad though it is, is freighted with the clarity and stability of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century hymn tradition (as indeed Watson means it to be). For the majority of eighteenth-century readers, however, talk of 'congregational' singing, of hymns being used 'in a church', and of accompanying 'musical instruments' would have been foreign. 'What could and could not be sung in church', writes Neil Curry, 'was a vexed question in the first half of

⁸¹ Marshall and Todd (1982), p.1.

⁸² Watson (1997), p.23.

the eighteenth century', to which he might well have added that it was a similarly vexed question for much of the second half of the century also.⁸³ Despite the fact that, as Watson points out, hymn-singing had been part of Christian worship from the Early Church through to the Medieval and Reformation eras, during the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries the roles played by these extra-Biblical texts within English liturgical and ecclesiastical settings were wildly variant.⁸⁴ In the established church, verses 'of human composition' had been excluded from authorised worship in favour of metrical psalms, sourced first from the "Old Version" (1562) and then from the *New Version* (1696). For Anglicans, therefore, the hymn—and the hymns in question were usually not contemporary—found its way into common usage only via various and occasional morning and evening prayer services, certain seasonal liturgies, and private devotion.⁸⁵ By contrast, at the turn of the eighteenth century, the corporate singing of contemporary hymns was an accepted part of formal worship in numerous Independent and Baptist churches (whose congregations were largely able to regulate their own worship), with ministers such as Benjamin Keach, Joseph Stennett, and Isaac Watts introducing their own hymns into the baptism and communion services of their respective churches.⁸⁶

⁸³ Curry (2015), p.72.

⁸⁴ Watson (1997), p.8.

⁸⁵ Benson (1915), p.42; Watson (1997), p.84, p.94 [Examples of this include Thomas Ken's *A Manual of Prayers* (1675) and John Mason's *Spiritual Songs, or Songs of Praise to Almighty God* (1693). Benson adds that the *Supplement to the New Version of Psalms by Dr. Brady and Mr. Tate* (London, 1700) contained sixteen hymns that were authorised for use in Churches in 1703 and were presented as a supplement to the metrical psalms (p.79-81). He notes, however, that, though it established the principle that hymns could supplement the use of psalms, this small collection was the 'limit of anything in the nature of an authorised provision for hymn singing in the Church of England during the period', and that, at any rate, it made little headway outside of London (p.81)].

⁸⁶ Benson (1915), p.97-8, p.104. See: Benjamin Keach, *Spiritual melody, containing near three hundred sacred hymns* (London, 1691); Joseph Stennet, *Hymns in Commemoration of the Sufferings of our Blessed Saviour Jesus Christ, compos'd for the Celebration of his Holy Supper* (1697); Isaac Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs [...] Prepared for the Lord's Supper* (London, 1707); and Joseph Stennett, *Hymns compos'd for the Celebration of the Holy Ordinance of Baptism* (1712).

When the Evangelical Revival began in the 1730s-40s, therefore, hymns and hymn-singing meant entirely different things to the different Christian constituencies within Britain, even to different congregations within the same town. While different variations of the practice—the use of choirs, instruments, hymnbooks, lining-out, and other mediums was likewise varied—had been established ‘as the norm of Congregational Praise’ among many dissenters, writes Benson, in the parish churches ‘the use of hymns of any sort was sporadic and occasional’.⁸⁷ Furthermore, when hymn-singing was taken up by those constituencies of the revival that were of Anglican extraction, the practice was not initially combined with authorised worship or situated in churches. Though the Wesleys designed their hymnbooks for a growing national readership and for corporate use, the hymns themselves were not written for formal ecclesiastical settings (although they eventually came to be utilised in in this way), but were intended to be used in the passionate and heated contexts of the Methodist home, society meeting, and later in their ‘chapels in the town and country’.⁸⁸ The Calvinistic wing of the revival, being less autocratic and therefore both less organised and more variegated, had a diverse view of hymnody and its uses. William Romaine—the first Evangelical to hold an incumbency in the established church—wrote polemics against ‘Watts’s whyms’ and the association of earthly verses with worship; George Whitefield encouraged hymn-singing in informal contexts.⁸⁹ Indeed, the Calvinists produced several hymnbooks of their own, including Robert Seagrave’s *Hymns for Christian Worship* (London, 1742), John Cennick’s *Sacred Hymns for the use of Religious Societies* (Bristol, 1743), Whitefield’s own *Hymns for social worship* (1753), and Martin Madan’s *A Collection of Psalms and Hymns* (London, 1760). Here, again, we

⁸⁷ Benson (1915), p.219.

⁸⁸ *ibid*, p.235; Andrew J. Newell, ‘Hymns and Spiritual Songs: ecumenical in practice?’, *Publishing History*, v.82, no.27 (2020), p.40.

⁸⁹ William Romaine, *An Essay on Psalmody* (London, 1775), p.137; Benson (1915), p.316.

see great variety. The majority of these hymnbooks were intended to be used in homes, for ‘social worship’, and by ‘religious societies’.⁹⁰ Madan’s hymnbook, by contrast, was designed for his own fashionable chapel at the Lock Hospital—a unique institution, which catered to both sufferers of venereal disease and the London high society—where it was used in formal worship and, it appears, with accompanying instruments.⁹¹ Indeed, Madan himself published a book of complementary music, *A collection of psalm and hymn tunes* (1769), of which Nicholas Temperley writes: ‘[it] was congregational, but was such as might appeal to those who had frequented the operas, oratorios, and concerts of the time.’⁹²

This diversity of experience is reflected within the stories of Newton and Cowper. Hindmarsh writes that the former was raised ‘in Old Dissent under the hymns of Watts, acquainted with the hymns of later Non-conformists through his renewed contact with Dissent after his conversion’, that he was ‘familiar’ with the hymns of the revival, and that while in Liverpool he used hymns devotionally in private and social settings.⁹³ A product of the Anglican establishment, Cowper—the son of a clergyman and a boarder at Westminster, where he attended worship at the Abbey thrice weekly—was raised with the psalter, and demonstrated a deep familiarity with both the act of psalm-singing and its history in a letter published in the

⁹⁰ Benson (1915), p.317 [The gathering for which Whitefield produced his hymnbook, his congregation at the Tabernacle in London, was not intended to replace Sunday morning worship, and has been described by Stephen A. Marini as a ‘permanent nonecclesiastical fellowship’ that did not follow any liturgical rubrics. See: Stephen A. Marini, ‘Whitefield’s Music: Moorfields Tabernacle, *The Divine Musical Miscellany* (1754), and the fashioning of early evangelical song’, *Yale Journal of Music and Religion*, v.2, no.1 (2016), p.104; and Mark A. Noll, ‘Whitefield, Hymnody, and Evangelical Spirituality’, *George Whitefield: Life, Context, and Legacy*, ed. by Geordan Hammond and David Ceri Jones, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p.249].

⁹¹ See: Linda E. Merians (ed.), ‘The London Lock Hospital and the Lock Asylum for Women’, *The Secret Malady: Venereal Disease in Eighteenth-century Britain and France* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996); and G. R. Balleine, *A History of the Evangelical Party in the Church of England*, 2nd edn. (London: Church book Room Press, 1951), p.48-9.

⁹² Benson (1915), p.63-4.

⁹³ Hindmarsh (1996), p.257-8.

September 1758 edition of *The Gentleman's Magazine*.⁹⁴ Concerning the 'present method' of 'chaunting', he argues that it is 'well contrived' because it 'giv[es] the people sufficient time to consider what they say or sing'.⁹⁵ Regarding the practice itself, he adds, tellingly: 'I am well assured, as well by my own experience, as by that of others, that it can and does animate our devotions'.⁹⁶

Norman Nicholson's cosy assertion that 'he was not really a hymn *singer*', an idea implied by several other critics also, is corrected Cowper himself, whose letters reveal that his own introduction to the practice of hymn-singing was similar to that of other Evangelicals of Anglican extraction. In a letter dated Monday 20 October 1766, he informs his cousin, Mrs Cowper, of the place of hymn-singing in his daily routine at the Unwin household in Huntingdon:

If it rains or is too windy for Walking, we either Converse within Doors, or sing some Hymns of Martin's Collection, and by the Help of Mrs. Unwin's Harpsichord make up a tolerable Concert, in which however our Hearts I hope are the best and most musical Performers.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Charles Ryskamp, *William Cowper of the Inner Temple Esquire: a study of his life and works to the year 1768* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), p.27.

⁹⁵ *Letters*, v., p.29.

⁹⁶ *ibid*, p.30.

⁹⁷ *Letters*, i. p.153.

Hymn-singing finds an additional place within Cowper's homely offices at the close of the day, where, he writes: 'At night we read and Converse as before 'till Supper, and commonly finish the Evening either with Hymns or a Sermon, and last of all the Family are called in to Prayers.'⁹⁸

The influence of both 'Martin's Collection' and its editor upon Cowper has historically been overlooked, presumably due to the latter's anonymous composition and publication of *Anti-thelyphthora* (1781), a criticism of the former's controversial advocacy of polygamy as a solution to the problems of 'female ruin' in his 1780 treatise, *Thelyphthora*. Despite this, Martin Madan, who was Cowper's older cousin, occupies a central role in his conversion narrative, *Adelphi* (written c.1767, published as *Adelphi* in 1816), and it was to him, not Newton, that Cowper first sent the finished draft of the memoir.⁹⁹ On Tuesday 11 March 1766, the poet wrote to his cousin, Mrs Cowper, describing her brother as 'a burning and a shining Light, and as one of those who having turned many to Righteousness, shall shine hereafter as Stars for ever and ever.'¹⁰⁰ Cowper's daily recourse to 'Martin's Collection', as mentioned in his letter of October 1766, acquires a heightened significance when viewed in this context. For Cowper, these 'songs of Sion', collated and imparted by Madan himself, must have become a means of recapturing the ecstatic moment of salvation. The *Collection* also appears to have been the chief means by which he accessed the hymnody of the revival, since it is the only hymnbook mentioned in his correspondence and the only hymnbook recorded in his library.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ *ibid.*

⁹⁹ *ibid.*, p.181.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, p.134.

¹⁰¹ Madan sourced his hymns from various hymnbooks, chiefly those of Watts and the Wesleys, and many of the latter he edited in order to align them with his own Calvinistic spirituality and doctrinal convictions. I have written at length about the influence of Madan and his *Collection* upon Cowper in a chapter that, due to the constraints of the word limit, cannot be included here. It might seem strange that this study, which is towards a contextual redressal of Cowper's *Olney Hymns*, should choose to focus more on the local and Puritan context than the broader context of Evangelical hymnody. There are two reasons for this. Theologically, the Puritan context is more foundational to Cowper's work—Evangelicalism relied heavily upon Puritan thought—and the hymns themselves

It is fascinating that Madan's *Collection*, which, as we have noted, was initially designed for the use of a unique, urban congregation in a chapel, was here being used in a rural, private, familial setting. Also fascinating is what these letters reveal regarding Cowper's first encounters with Evangelical hymn-singing. In the Unwin household the hymn was interchangeable with the sermon, and was therefore presumably seen, in addition to being a means of spiritual expression, as a source of didactic edification. Furthermore, Cowper sang the words with the aid of both a physical hymnbook and an instrument, in this case a harpsichord. This last detail is particularly interesting because it speaks to the musical conventions surrounding eighteenth-century Evangelical hymnody. Madan did not publish his *Collection of psalm and hymn tunes* until 1769, and so, in 1766, Mary Unwin presumably selected an appropriate common tune to accompany the words—a common practice, made possible because the hymns themselves were typically written in common metre.

It is, therefore, with these different experiences of hymn-singing and within this broader context of hymnological variety that Cowper and Newton met and began the composition of their own hymns in Olney. In the light of our discussion in this section, it is clear that critiques of *Olney Hymns* as 'unsuitable', 'not hymns', or 'personal poems' are blind to the flexibility of the practice and the instability of the form at the time at which Newton and Cowper were writing. The question is, 'By what standard ought such a judgement be made?', to which the answer must be, before anything else, according to the primary readership, context, and purpose for which the hymns were originally written: 'the parish and neighbourhood of Olney,

are, as chapters four and five demonstrate, strongly concerned with particular Puritan works. Regarding the form itself, as will become clear in chapters one to three, the hymns are more discernibly influenced by their local context than by the broader Evangelical hymnological context.

for whose use the hymns were originally composed'. The first step in beginning to provide this answer is a reappraisal of Cowper-the-hymnwriter, and it is to this subject that our next chapter is devoted.

ii.
William Cowper: 'curate' of Olney

In his 1986 work, *William Cowper: a biography*—the most recent scholarly treatment of the poet's life—James King only offers a brief account of the five-year period, from late 1767 to early 1773, during which the majority of Cowper's *Olney Hymns* were written. Narrating these early years in Olney, King appears quietly eager to place some distance between the hymns, their author, and the people and occasion for which they were written: 'Cowper's alliance with Newton,' he writes, 'meant that the townspeople felt that they could call upon him as well as the curate for spiritual and temporal advice'.¹⁰² Though it is King's only mention of Cowper's 'pastoral' encounters with the local laity, this brief sentence communicates much. The subtle implication here that it was *only* through his association with Newton that the 'townspeople' felt able to impose themselves upon him for 'advice'—Cowper remained passive, called upon, sought out, and did not himself encourage their advances. King is no less dismissive in his description of the poet's concern for the lives and problems of his overbearing neighbours. Indeed, Cowper's 'vivacious fancy', he reasons, was surely 'more intrigued by the drollery of village life than by its tragedies'.¹⁰³ The 'nature of his ambivalent response' to such tragedies, such as it was, is 'found in the letters which relate the births, marriages, illnesses, and deaths that were part of its existence'.¹⁰⁴ The Cowper that King communicates is, even if only by implication, a distant individual, reluctantly and occasionally coerced into interactions with

¹⁰² King (1986), p.73.

¹⁰³ *ibid*, p.75.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid*, p.74.

provincials in a familiar manner that was foreign and unwelcome. It is within this context, King argues, that the hymns should be read: the poet's 'extraordinary passivity', he writes, is 'evident' in *Olney Hymns*, as is his 'helplessness', which he 'dramatis[es]' in their verses.¹⁰⁵

This is a compelling picture, and, in painting it, James King finds agreement with many critics who have sought to render portraits of Cowper's apparently unfortunate career as a hymnwriter. These likenesses, however, are in profound disagreement with primary and early secondary material relating to those early years at Olney. Cowper's earliest biographers, all of whom knew him, cast him in an entirely different light. They paint an individual who regularly intervened in the lives of his neighbours regarding matters spiritual and practical, who was intimately acquainted with their struggles, and more likely to cross the thresholds of their cottages than wait to be called upon at Orchardside. Taken by themselves, these accounts would be enough to mount a significant challenge to King's depiction of Cowper. Taken with the wealth of material found in the poet's correspondence, however, the claims of Cowper's early biographers acquire enough weight and substance to completely eclipse our received understanding of both the poet's character, and of his relationship with the Evangelicals of Olney. Indeed, the letters reveal an individual endowed with a pastoral sensitivity and authority that manifests itself in epistolary prayers, spiritual counsel, and extended words of comfort. Finally, the letters overwhelmingly demonstrate the poet's care for the people of Olney: his knowledge of the details of their lives; his work to secure them financial and material aid; his awareness of how contemporary national political developments impacted their lives; and his efforts to influence these developments via his contacts.

¹⁰⁵ *ibid*, p.84-5.

The hitherto overlooked reality of Cowper's position as a spiritual and pastoral authority among the Olney Evangelical community is foundational to this thesis. As Part One will demonstrate, a revised view of Cowper makes sense of the hymns themselves, the majority of which bear no trace of the helplessness or passivity described by King and others; instead, they exhibit the same didactic and pastoral characteristics detailed by Cowper's biographers and evidenced by his letters. Building upon a redressed account of Cowper's life from 1767-1773, this thesis will argue that many of his *Olney Hymns* were written from his quasi-ministerial 'office', tailored to the circumstances and crafted for the edification of a readership to whom he was not merely a talented or high-born co-congregant. To that end, this preliminary chapter is devoted to uniting the perspectives of the poet's early biographers with the corresponding material hidden away within his letters, in order to fully render the portrait that they reveal: William Cowper, the unofficial curate of Olney.

'A sort of curate': early biographical accounts

A close friend, co-member of the Eclectic Society, and fellow-associate of the Clapham Sect, Richard Cecil provides several intimate insights into the life of John Newton in his 1808 work, *Memoirs of the Rev. John Newton*. Most relevant to our purpose is his recollection of Newton's comments concerning Cowper's first five years at Olney:

Mr N. told me, that from Mr Cowper's first coming to Olney, it was observed he had studied his Bible with such advantage, and was so well acquainted with its design, that [...], during this period, the inseparable attendants of a lively faith appeared, by Mr

Cowper's exerting himself to the utmost of his power in every benevolent service he could render to his poor neighbours [...].¹⁰⁶

It is as a result of this, he continues, that 'Mr N. used to consider him as a sort of curate, from his constant attendance upon the sick and afflicted in that large and necessitous parish.'¹⁰⁷ The question that naturally emerges from this interesting use of language is: what exactly did Newton mean by the phrase 'a sort of curate'?

As Lodwick Hartley and others have noted, following the poet's death in the year 1800 there commenced a conflict over the details of his biography, with opponents of Evangelicalism seeing enthusiasm as the cause of Cowper's malady, and Evangelicals rushing to the defence of their creed.¹⁰⁸ Though Cecil's volume was published in the midst of this debate, it is interesting that his memory of Newton's words coheres with biographical accounts written by the preacher himself before its commencement. Newton's preface to the poet's first collection, *Poems by William Cowper of the Inner Temple Esq.* runs along similar lines. In it, the preacher names Cowper as a 'friend and counsellor' and 'a blessing to the affectionate poor people, among whom I then lived.'¹⁰⁹ This brief piece of biographical detail was penned shortly after Newton's removal to London with the poet still in residence at Olney, and within ten years of his great breakdown of January 1773. Due to its being judged too enthusiastic for public taste, the text was originally rejected by Cowper's agent and publisher, Joseph Johnson, and

¹⁰⁶ Richard Cecil (ed.), *The Works of the Rev. John Newton* (Edinburgh, 1827), p.70.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Lodwick Hartley, 'Cowper and the Evangelicals: notes on early biographical interpretations', *PMLA*, v.65, no.5 (1950): pp.719-31.

¹⁰⁹ John Newton, 'Preface', William Cowper, *Poems, by William Cowper, of the Inner Temple, Esq.*, fifth edn. (London, 1793), p.v-vi.

only restored by the poet's request in the 1790 edition.¹¹⁰ Despite the fact that enthusiasms of all hues were broadly associated with the unwelcome radicalism of late eighteenth-century politics, Johnson's reason for dismissing Newton's words is most likely that they were too Evangelical, which is to say, in his estimation, not radical enough. Central to the revolutionary publishing scene in London, Johnson's association with critics of the Bible, his Unitarianism, and his publication of the sceptical *Analytical Review*, all point towards this conclusion.¹¹¹ His decision to allow the reinstatement of Newton's preface is, therefore, somewhat mysterious, though it is perhaps best explained by the runaway success—perhaps surprising to him—of *The Task*, which, after some delay, had been published by Johnson in 1785. This aside, whatever reaction Newton's preface might or might not have drawn from the reading public, its receipt of Cowper's blessing eight years after it was written indicates that he at least must have felt that its description of him was accurate.

In a letter to Hannah More, dated 24 May 1800, Newton develops the small but telling details included within his preface, writing of his recently deceased 'dear and intimate friend' that, 'during a part of his life', Cowper was 'greatly' his 'superior', and that, 'both by talents and disposition', he 'seemed qualified' to 'reform the age in which he lived'.¹¹² While the notion of Cowper's being talented is moot, his having been endowed at any point in his life with a 'disposition' to 'reform' anything, never mind the 'age in which he lived', is surely a novel idea to traditional Cowper scholarship, specifically that which deals with *Olney Hymns*. We are left to ask: how did this disposition manifest itself at Olney, and to what extent? To this latter

¹¹⁰ See Cowper's letter to Joseph Johnson, 3 October 1790, *Letters*, iii., p.422.

¹¹¹ Jon Mee, *Dangerous Enthusiasm: William Blake and the culture of radicalism in the 1790s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p.2, p.50-1, p.150.

¹¹² Josiah Bull (ed.), *Letters by the Rev. John Newton* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1869), p.355-6.

question the reply might be offered that Cowper's reformatory vigour was evidently weighty and sustained enough that his friend felt it worthy of note twenty-seven years after it was abruptly curtailed. Newton's funeral sermon, preached earlier in the same month, expands upon these revelatory private reflections. Regarding the poet's 'superiority', Newton made the following statement: 'I don't know a person upon earth I [could] consult upon a Text of Scripture or any point of conscience so much to my Satisfaction as Mr Cowper.'¹¹³ Having repeated his assertion that Cowper 'was not only a comfort to me but a blessing to the Affectionate poor people among whom I then lived', the preacher then goes a step further, offering a small exposition on the nature of that 'blessing', with his recollection that, 'he used frequently to visit them & pray with them'.¹¹⁴ To this new piece of information, Newton adds a final tantalising detail concerning the nature of this pastoral relationship with the local laity: 'they well knew Mr Cowper': 'they knew he was right & from him they could take comfort.'¹¹⁵

The final words that John Newton wrote on Cowper's ministerial role at Olney are found in his unfinished biography of the poet. In addition to labelling him a 'Genius', and 'one of the brightest ornaments of Westminster School', Newton attests once more to his friend's 'humility, simplicity, & devotedness to God', the 'clearness of his views of Evangelical Truth', and the 'blessing' that he imparted, 'both to me & my people by his advice, his conduct, and his prayers'.¹¹⁶ This is supplemented with a further, lengthy description of Cowper's time at Olney, which deserves to be quoted in full:

¹¹³ Transcribed from notes taken by Hannah Jowett, whose father, John, was a friend of Newton's | Aylesbury, Bucks., Buckinghamshire County Archives, Ms.D-Cow/2/3/2 (I am very grateful to Marylynn Rouse, Founder Director of The John Newton Project, for her assistance and direction in locating this manuscript).

¹¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹¹⁶ John Newton, Autograph manuscript of the unfinished memoir of William Cowper | Hamilton, Ontario, Mills Memorial Library, McMaster University, Ms.RC0707.

We were, as I have said, very much together. For besides our frequent walks and visits at home, occasional journeys seldom parted us. We usually [sic] travelled together. He was soon known in many places, and every where admired by competent judges as a Gentleman and a scholar. He was a great blessing to the Lords poor and afflicted people at Olney, in the still higher and more important character, of an Eminent and Exemplary Christian. For he had drunk deeply into the Spirit of his Lord; he loved the Poor, often visited them in their Cottages, conversed with them in the most condescending manner, sympathized with them, counseld and comforted them in their distresses, and those who were seriously disposed, were often cheerd and animated by his prayers.¹¹⁷

Newton's use of the word 'condescending' here, a term that has since gained pejorative connotations, is revealing of the pastoral manner in which Cowper approached the 'poor' of Olney. Samuel Johnson defines 'condescension' as the departure 'from the privileges of superiority by a voluntary submission; to sink willingly to equal terms with inferiours; to sooth by familiarity'.¹¹⁸ Cowper's willingness to enter into the cottages, lives, and 'distresses' of those within his locale 'by a voluntary submission' is either referenced or implied by Newton in each of his accounts. The consistency of these references bespeaks an active ministerial bent within the poet's character that is nowhere present in portraits by critics such as King.

John Newton's memories of Cowper's early years at Olney, consistently reported both before the poet's death and after it, are corroborated by Rev. Samuel Greatheed. A student of William

¹¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹¹⁸ "condescension, *n.*", Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English language*, 2 vols (London, 1755), i.

Bull—himself a close friend of Cowper’s from neighbouring Newport Pagnell, and the grandfather of Josiah Bull, who edited the 1869 edition of Newton’s *Letters*—Greatheed delivered the poet’s funeral sermon in Olney on 18 May 1800. In his address, he attests to the truth of Newton’s preface to the 1782 *Poems*, reading from the document itself before commenting: ‘Those of you who for thirty years past have lived in the fear of God can testify the truth [of] the remark last quoted’.¹¹⁹ The sermon continues: ‘Often have I heard described the amiable condescension with which our deceased friend listened to your religious converse, the sympathy with which he soothed your distresses, and the wisdom with which he imparted needful advice.’¹²⁰ Following a lengthy discourse on Cowper’s private religious devotion, Greatheed returns with further detail to his interactions with the people of Olney. He references the ‘timidity’ and ‘trepidation’ with which he approached the leading of public prayers, and the ‘earnest intercession’ that he offered (of these occasions, and Cowper’s part in them, more in Part One).¹²¹ The preacher also recounts his subject’s charitable work: ‘you my friends’, he exclaims, ‘can testify the exemplary love that he practiced toward his neighbour.’¹²² Concerning this ‘exemplary love’, Greatheed comments further that: ‘To a conduct void of offence toward any individual, and marked with peculiar kindness to all who feared God, was added a beneficence fully proportioned to his ability, and exercised with the greatest modesty and discretion.’¹²³ In his first full biography of Cowper, serialised in the April and May 1803 editions of *The Evangelical Magazine*, Greatheed explains more clearly the nature of this ‘beneficence’, writing that:

¹¹⁹ Samuel Greatheed, *A Practical Improvement of the Divine Counsel and Conduct, attempted in a sermon, occasioned by the decease of William Cowper, Esq; preached at Olney, 18 May, 1800* (Newport-Pagnell, 1800), p.16.

¹²⁰ *ibid*, p.16.

¹²¹ *ibid*.

¹²² *ibid*, p.17.

¹²³ *ibid*.

Mr. Cowper's capacity of doing good to the poor, was enlarged by the liberal assistance of the late Mr. Thornton, who secretly distributed the bounties which the providence of God had signally conferred upon him, by a variety of confidential almoners, exclusive of the sums which he personally administered to the relief of the distressed, and to the advancement of the gospel.¹²⁴

To this explanation, Greatheed adds a small tribute to Cowper's friend and carer, Mary Unwin, who had died five years previously, noting that she employed her own 'income' in the same manner, 'to an unusual degree, in the relief of poor families'.¹²⁵

Much has been made of the wrangling over the poet's life story following his death. In the face of this protracted dispute, and the multiple conflicting biographical works that sprang from it, these early documentations of the life of Cowper are extremely valuable. As we have already pointed out, Newton's earliest reflections on the poet's first five years at Olney were either written while he was alive and approved by the man himself, or shortly after his death in private correspondence or to be preached from his own pulpit. Crucially, each of them was penned well before the controversy began to rage. Indeed, his funeral sermon, unlike Greatheed's, may be judged to have remained completely apolitical, since it was never published, and comes to us via the notes of one who was present, Hannah Jowett. Likewise, Newton's memoir of the poet remained unpublished (and unfinished), and was penned in 1800.¹²⁶ Greatheed's sermon, though it became politicised as the 'basic source for Evangelical comment on Cowper' for

¹²⁴ Samuel Greatheed, 'Memoir of William Cowper, ESQ.', *The Evangelical Magazine* (April, 1803), p.136.

¹²⁵ *ibid.*

¹²⁶ Bull (1869), p.189.

several years after and the basis for at least two memoirs, had similarly humble origins.¹²⁷ Lodwick Hartley writes that it was preached 'while Greatheed was supply pastor for the Reverend Thomas Hillyard's Independent Congregation in Olney',¹²⁸ before going on to be published at a later date. The accuracy of the sermon, and of Greatheed's multiple appeals to listeners, is verified by the letter of thanks printed as its preface, which was written by 'the undersigned inhabitants of Olney'.¹²⁹ The signatures, thirty in total, of those 'present at the delivery' of the 'discourse [...] many of whom were personally acquainted with him', affirm the accuracy of its depiction of Cowper, and his unique relationship with the Evangelicals of Olney.¹³⁰

Though under strict instructions from Lady Hesketh to minimise her late cousin's involvement in Evangelicalism, even William Hayley does not completely erase the ministerial activities so thoroughly documented by Greatheed and Newton. The 'time of Cowper, in his new situation' at Olney, he writes, 'seems to have been chiefly devoted to religious contemplation, to social prayer, and to active charity'.¹³¹ Hayley majors on the latter of these practices, surely the least offensive to those wary of enthusiasm, writing that:

His retirement was ennobled by many private acts of beneficence, and his exemplary virtue was such, that the opulent sometimes delighted to make him their almoner. In his sequestered life at Olney, he ministered abundantly to the wants of the poor, from

¹²⁷ Hartley, p.719

¹²⁸ *ibid.*

¹²⁹ Greatheed (1800), p.i.

¹³⁰ *ibid.*

¹³¹ Hayley (1803), i., p.66.

a fund, with which he was supplied by that model of extensive and unostentatious philanthropy, the late John Thornton, Esqr.¹³²

The author also hints at Cowper's other unofficial ministerial 'social labours', undertaken alongside 'an exemplary Man of God' (Newton), for the 'purpose of promoting simple piety, among the lower classes of the people.'¹³³

In his definition of the word 'Curate', Samuel Johnson focuses on the financial aspect of the role: 'A Curate', he writes, is a 'clergyman hired to perform the duties of another'.¹³⁴ Johnson includes within his definition a basic etymology of the term, noting that it is derived from the Latin, *curator*. His entry for this word, slightly further down the page, is more helpful: 'One that has the care and superintendence of any thing.'¹³⁵ The answer to our question regarding the meaning of the phrase 'a sort of curate' is partially found in this second definition. For Newton, Cowper's curatorial ministry to the Evangelicals of Olney appears to have taken three forms: financial and material aid; a spiritual authority that manifested itself in regular intercessory and pastoral visitations; and, finally, a theological authority that was realised in his becoming a source of counsel. Regarding the first of these, Greatheed and Hayley make explicit mention of the poet's arrangements with certain wealthy philanthropists, which saw him act as their self-appointed almoner. Regarding the second, Newton and Hayley detail his habit of visiting and praying with the 'poor lacemakers' and members of the Evangelical community, 'comfort[ing] them in their distresses' with his 'prayers'. Regarding the third, both Newton and

¹³² *ibid*, p.68.

¹³³ *ibid*, p.86.

¹³⁴ "curate, *n.*" Johnson, *Dictionary* (1755), i.

¹³⁵ *ibid*.

Greatheed offer significant detail concerning the ‘wisdom’ of Cowper’s ‘advice’, his willingness to share his ‘views’ on the ‘peculiar doctrines of the gospel’, and the role he played as a ‘counsellor’ and a ‘blessing [...] by his advice’: there was ‘no one on earth’, said Newton, whom he could ‘consult’ on theology to his ‘satisfaction’ above Cowper.

Within this new portrait there is a set of personal qualities that we are unused to associating with the ‘stricken deer’ of Olney. Foremost among these is an attitude of boldness and theological certitude quite antithetical to the passivity that is the central theme of many depictions of Cowper. The likeness painted by these early biographers is not of a shy poet who was imposed upon at home by an overbearing parson and his uncouth parishioners; instead, it is of one who would voluntarily ‘call upon’ his poor neighbours ‘frequently’, who would give them ‘needful advice’, and who was held by the parson himself to be ‘much [his] superior’. Indeed, Newton’s concluding comment regarding the lacemakers that ‘they well knew Mr. Cowper: they knew he was right’, heavily implies a moral, spiritual authority. Moreover, it is worth noting that this authority and service does not, in the telling of his early biographers, appear to stem from Cowper’s high view of himself or from a sense of *noblesse oblige*, but rather from another quality that has been underestimated in critical considerations of his personality: a deep knowledge of, and sincere and animating belief in, the truth claims of Evangelicalism. It is as a result of this that—rather than documenting either his quiet distaste for or disinterest in the tragedies of their lives—Cowper’s early biographers relate what can only be described as a profound and lasting concern for the Evangelical community of Olney. Greatheed, for example, writes of the ‘exemplary love that he practised towards his neighbour’, while Newton references again and again the ‘comfort’ that Cowper gave to both himself and his congregation.

These revelations regarding Cowper's early years in Olney—particularly concerning his relationship with the Evangelicals who lived there—is of great significance to our study of his hymns. Indeed, if faithful, this renewed portrait ought to form the basis for our approach to the text. Translated into literary terms, these accounts reveal a very particular relationship between an author and his readership, in which the former has a pre-existing duty of 'care and superintendence' for the latter. Before embarking upon an examination of the hymns within this new context, however, it is both necessary to leave no doubts as to its accuracy, and, if possible, to add colour to the outline with which we have been presented. It is to this end that we will now turn to the correspondence.

Cowper's 'benevolent service'

On the 6 February 1781, Cowper penned a letter to his friend and adoptive younger brother, William Unwin, then Rector of Stock and Ramsden Bellhouse. 'We are obliged to you for the Rugs', he writes: 'We have given one to an industrious poor Widow with [four] Children, whose Sister overheard her shiv'ring in the Night, and with some difficulty brought her to confess the next morning that she was half perish'd for want of sufficient covering.'¹³⁶ In this letter there is much to contemplate. Most telling is the detail with which Cowper records the plight of his neighbours. Though the story most probably came to him via the ministrations of Mary Unwin, these words are neither passive nor disinterested; rather, they bespeak a long-standing familiarity and care, even admiration, for the people they describe, and a full grasp of the

¹³⁶ *Letters*, i., p.441.

situation in all its sad detail. 'Her said Sister borrow'd a Rug for her at a Neighbor's immediately, which she had used but one Night when yours arrived', he continues, before concluding, with more than a hint of suggestion: 'I doubt not but we shall meet with others equally indigent and deserving of your Bounty.'¹³⁷

Cowper appears to have let the matter lie for a time, before writing once more to Unwin concerning the subject of charity. This time, 4 November 1782, he is more direct, though no less charming: 'I feel myself disposed to furnish you with an opportunity to Shine in secret', he begins:

We do what we can, but that Can is little. You have rich friends [and] are eloquent on all occasions [...]. The Winter will be severely felt at Olney by many whose sobriety, Industry and honesty, recommend them to charitable notice, and we think we could tell such persons as Mrs. Bouverie or Mr. Smith half a dozen tales of distress that would find their way into hearts as feeling as theirs. You will do as you see good, and we in the mean time shall remain convinced that you will do your best.¹³⁸

This bold request for money on behalf of his underprivileged neighbours, even including a suggestion of potential benefactors, appears to have been met with immediate success. On 18 November 1782, Cowper's letter to Unwin engages him to express thanks to a Mr. Smith 'on the part of the poor', and to confirm that, as per his wishes, the source of the gift will be kept in 'strictest secrecy [sic]'.¹³⁹ Cowper also assures his friend that 'non shall touch' the money,

¹³⁷ *ibid.*

¹³⁸ *Letters*, ii., p.86-7.

¹³⁹ *ibid.*, p.90.

save those that are 'miserably poor, yet at the same time industrious and honest'.¹⁴⁰ These two characteristics, he hastens to add, are 'frequently united here', since 'we make none but the cheapest laces, and the price of them has fallen almost to nothing.'¹⁴¹ It is thanks to this set of circumstances, he concludes, that 'the most watchful and unremitting labour will hardly procure them bread'.¹⁴² Returning to this last point in a later letter, sent on 19 January 1783, Cowper writes with some excitement of the effect that the forty pounds sent by Smith has had upon the community. It has 'paid' their 'debts', and rendered both parents and children 'comfortably clothed', such that 'they are now enabled to maintain themselves'.¹⁴³ With evident relief, Cowper ends this note of gratitude thus: 'Their Labor was almost in vain before, but now it answers. It earns them bread, and all their other wants are plentifully supplied'.¹⁴⁴

Again, what is striking here is Cowper's precise knowledge of the financial situation of the lacemakers: that their industry paid for their food but little else, and that the price of lace had fallen. Also striking is the manner in which the poet identifies with his neighbours, an attitude that is tonally implied throughout, but made grammatically explicit by his use of the first-person plural, 'we'. Indeed, both of these elements are especially evident in Cowper's letters to Robert Smith himself. Having assured the benefactor that his conditions will be met, the poet then expands upon the context in which the gift is received. The letter, sent on 22 January 1784, is here quoted in full:

¹⁴⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁴¹ *ibid.*

¹⁴² *ibid.*

¹⁴³ *ibid.*, p.99.

¹⁴⁴ *ibid.*

It is with real joy that I find myself again engaged to thank you on behalf of the poor of Olney. The Post brought me last night, inclosed in a letter from Mr. Unwin, your donation of 20£, accompanied with a request on your part that it may be disposed of immediately. You may depend upon our punctual compliance. Mrs. Unwin, whom I never saw more delighted than upon this occasion, joins her acknowledgments with mine, and begs your acceptance of them as the genuine expression of her feelings. We reckon ourselves in the number of those who are releived [sic] by your bounty. What we can, we do. But in a place that can only be described by its poverty, our mite is almost lost; confined at least to a few, while many equally deserving, are necessarily unsupplied. The severity of the season added to a sickness of the putrid kind which has never left us since Midsummer, will furnish us with a multitude of objects. The Parish in which the richest are a few farmers who are themselves distressed by frequent levies to a pitiable degree, pays between 6 and 700£ a year to the maintenance of the poor. So that the number of indigent families impoverishes many that might else subsist with comfort. I mention these circumstances just to satisfy you that your alms could hardly be more welcome any where, or more properly directed. I lay myself under a good deal of constraint, and suppress much that I feel lest I should offend your delicacy. I will however add, that we are both proud of the honor of being made your almoners, and that I am, With true esteem and affection, Your most obliged and obedient, Wm Cowper.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵ *ibid*, p.201-2.

Further correspondence with Smith reveals the continuation of Cowper's petitions on behalf of the lacemakers up until his removal to Weston Underwood in 1786. In a letter sent on 31 September 1784, the poet thanks Smith for a gift of twenty pounds on behalf of his 'miserable neighbours, who will very soon be clothed and warmed and fed by your bounty'.¹⁴⁶ A further letter, dated 4 March 1786, informs Smith that the 'Cloaths' purchased 'were all disposed of the second day after their arrival'. Cowper concludes his thanks by reporting that 'Many have assured us, and we have no reason to doubt the truth of it, that they must have perish'd this Winter, but for the Relief that by your means we have been able to afford them.'¹⁴⁷

In addition to an awareness of the precise details of their poverty, Cowper's correspondence also reveals his understanding of the extent to which movements in Westminster affected the lives of his neighbours. When Pitt the Younger raised the duty on candles in 1784, the poet wrote a letter to William Unwin in which he likened the Prime Minister to 'Nero'.¹⁴⁸ Noting that the policy will render the lacemakers unable to afford the candles they require, Cowper unleashes an invective against the Pitt that is at once acerbic and heartfelt, after the manner of the great satirists of the age:

Rejoice therefore Oh ye pennyless! The Minister will indeed send you to bed in the dark, but your remaining halpenny [sic] will be safe; instead of being spent in the useless luxury of candlelight, it will buy you a roll for breakfast, which you will eat no doubt with gratitude to the man who so kindly lessens the number of your disbursements, and while he seems to threaten your money, saves it.—I wish he would

¹⁴⁶ *ibid*, p.315.

¹⁴⁷ *ibid*, p.492.

¹⁴⁸ *ibid*, p.257.

remember that the halfpenny which government imposes, the shop keeper will swell to twopence. I wish he could visit the miserable huts of our lace makers at Olney, and see them working in the Winter months by the light of a farthing candle from four in the afternoon till midnight. [...] I wish in short that he would consider the pockets of the poor as sacred, and that to tax a people already so necessitous, is but to discourage the little industry that is left among us, by driving the laborious to despair.¹⁴⁹

Written four years earlier on 8 July 1780, Cowper's letter to his old friend, Joseph Hill, reaches beyond mere complaint about government policy, in an unlikely attempt to influence it. While voicing relief that the proposed removal of tariffs on Irish goods—which would, he writes, have 'fatally affected' the Olney lace industry—Cowper expresses concern at Lord Stormont's threat of further damaging legislation: 'The Measure', he writes, 'is like a Scythe, and the poor Lacemakers are the Sickly Crop that trembles before the Edge of it.'¹⁵⁰ The poet encourages Hill, who had been made Secretary of Lunatics in 1778,¹⁵¹ to 'take the Tip of the Chancellor's Ear' between 'Finger and Thumb', and 'Whisper into it the Voice of Compassion & Lenity to the Lace Makers'.¹⁵²

Beneath his requests for charity and remonstrations over government policy, Cowper's correspondence consistently witnesses to his genuine and lasting interest in the mundane affairs of the disadvantaged in Olney. One feature of his post-1779 letters is his habit, even after he himself had departed the town, of faithfully reporting local news to John Newton. For

¹⁴⁹ *ibid*, p.258.

¹⁵⁰ *Letters*, i., p.363.

¹⁵¹ *ibid*, p.xxxviii.

¹⁵² *ibid*, p.363.

over a decade after the preacher's removal to London, the poet continued to supply his friend with reports concerning the travails of his ex-parishioners. There are too many instances of this to include here, however a select few will prove useful in providing further insight into the nature of Cowper's relationship with his neighbours. On 5 June 1780, he wrote to Mary Newton:

The Small Pox still Rages here, and many children die of it. Mr. Raban's Boy Daniel has had them very full, but a fine Sort, and is thought to be out of Danger. Hannah has yet Escaped, though two of Mrs. Clarke's Children have had them, and Nanny has been extremely ill. As soon as she began to recover, it was feared she would lose her Sight. Her Eyes were terribly inflamed, and the Sight of one of them almost cover'd by a thick Film. But a few Applications of Elliot's Ointment and Eye water have cured her.¹⁵³

It is worth pausing to observe the level of detail Cowper includes: his concern for 'Nanny', and the care with which he notes the different stages of her illness and the specifics of her treatment; the familiarity with his neighbours's characters and his use of their Christian names; his ability, particularly, to recall the name of the local carpenter's son, 'Daniel', and his kindly description of him as a 'fine sort'.

In addition to their physical health and financial circumstances, Cowper appears to have retained an interest in the spiritual wellbeing of the Olney Evangelicals even after his breakdown in 1773. His letter to Newton on 10 February 1784 reads simply, 'Mary Guthrie is

¹⁵³ *ibid*, p.346.

dead, & I need not tell you gone to heaven'.¹⁵⁴ On 25 June 1785 he informs him of the death of Nathan Sample: 'Poor Nathan', he writes, 'he was no longer the Nathan whom we have so often heard at the Old House, rich in spirit though poor in expression [...]. I believe with you, however that he is safe at Home'.¹⁵⁵ In a letter sent to Newton on 25 September 1783, the poet scoffs at the pretensions of 'French philosophers' and the high born, in his report of the near death of a local tailor named John Line:

He, you know, though a silent has yet been a very steady professor, and therefore though but a Botcher which is somewhat less than a Taylor, seems to have been more than a match for the last Enemy. Oh what things pass in Cottages and hovels, which the Great never dream of. [...] An English Taylor, an Inhabitant of the Dung-hills of Silver End, prays, and his prayer ascends into the Ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. He indeed covers himself with glory, fights battles and gains victories, but makes no noise. Europe is not astonished at his feats, foreign Academics do not seek him for a member, he will never discover the art of flying nor send a globe of Taffata up to heaven, but he will go thither Himself. I am afraid there is hardly a philosopher among them that would be wise enough to change conditions with him if he could, yet certainly there is not one that would not be infinitely a gainer by doing so.¹⁵⁶

Such letters prevent us from explaining away Cowper's relationship with the people of Olney as merely charitable. They read in their tone and content as though they were sent from one minister to another concerning a flock for which both held responsibility: they are the words

¹⁵⁴ *Letters*, ii., p.213.

¹⁵⁵ *ibid*, p.357.

¹⁵⁶ *ibid*, p.162-3.

of 'One that has the care and superintendence' over the people described. Another note to Newton, dated 21 August 1780, informs the preacher of the visit of a 'Mrs. Whitney', who came to Orchardside in search of 'Advice in her disturbed and troublesome Affairs'.¹⁵⁷ Having evidently done all he can, Cowper gently prompts Newton to interfere, reporting that his visitor had spoken of him and his wife 'with great Affection', 'Regretted the Loss' of his 'Instruction', and 'expressed the most Earnest Longings for a Letter'.¹⁵⁸ The significance of this particular letter is found in the glimpse it offers us of the workings of Cowper and Newton's partnership in their ministry to a 'large and necessitous parish': the former providing the latter with a curatorial filter through which certain important pastoral cases might be handed. Moreover, as an early example of the "newsletters" sent by Cowper following Newton's departure to London, it provides us with a hint as to the motive behind the poet's correspondence of this nature. It is not unreasonable to suggest that missals such as this were intended to elicit comforting letters from Newton to his former parishioners, or, at very least, to maintain their place within his private devotions.

This brief examination of Cowper's 'benevolent service' has uncovered much about the poet and his relationship with the people of Olney. His letters offer rich evidence of a man who felt himself to be charged with a duty of care to his disadvantaged neighbours, who knew intimate details about their lives, who understood the effects that individual government policies had upon their situations, and who unabashedly and repeatedly sought and distributed financial aid on their behalf. The correspondence powerfully affirms the reports of Cowper's early biographers, that he 'sympathised' with, 'visited', and cared for the 'affectionate poor people'

¹⁵⁷ *Letters*, i., p.382.

¹⁵⁸ *ibid.*

with whom he lived. Moreover, these letters support the contentions of both Newton and Greatheed that this sense of duty was not generally philanthropic, but arose from Evangelical conviction. They also refute the characteristic 'passivity' imputed to their author, attesting instead to his active and self-induced participation in certain curatorial activities, several of which he appears to have retained following Newton's departure, and even after his own removal to Weston Underwood.

Somewhat disappointingly, however, the letters do not offer direct confirmation of several of the other claims made by his biographers. There have been hints of the 'counsel' that the poet is said to have offered, but only one account of an instance where he gave verbal 'comfort' and 'Advice' to a neighbour, and there is no documentation by his own hand of instances where he 'prayed' with the people of Olney. This is perhaps due to a general lack of letters between the years 1767-1773, when he was presumably most active in his ministerial endeavours; indeed, there are no letters extant from the time describing the practice of writing hymns. From this it might be concluded that he was simply too busy to engage in the epistolary art for which he later became so well known. Despite the paucity of letters from that time through which we might have observed Cowper, in his own words, going from house to house and hearth to hearth, the correspondence written either side of this period is not useless to our endeavour to catch a glimpse of 'Cowper-the-Curate' in action. While we cannot watch the poet 'pray with' and 'comfort' the people of Olney in person, we can watch him do so in writing with family, friends, and acquaintances. From these letters that we shall extrapolate how Cowper might have interacted with those whom he considered to be in his care.

Cowper's 'prayers' and 'comfort'

Cowper's letters written before his 1773 breakdown are peppered with Evangelical invocations. Maria Cowper, upon reading a letter dated 4 May 1767, would have encountered the following brief supplication: 'may the Blessed God who has given it to you, continually build you up & establish you in that most Holy Faith you entertain so warmly'.¹⁵⁹ Her Mother, Mrs. Madan, received a slightly longer prayer, sent on 4 June 1767: 'may the Spirit of Christ dwelling in your Heart, continually testify his Residence there by comforting and peacefull [sic] Influences, 'till at last he fill you ever with Joy unspeakable and full of Glory'.¹⁶⁰ Similarly, in a letter sent to Lady Hesketh on 14 September 1765 we find the following: 'May you love him more and more day by day, as every day while you think upon him, you will find him more worthy of your love, and may you be finally accepted with him for his sake, whose intercession for all his faithful servants cannot but prevail!'.¹⁶¹ There are several initial observations that might be made about these prayers: that they are intertextual, weaving in words and phrases directly alluding to Biblical passages; that they are doxological, prone to indulging in elevated references to the various persons of the Trinity; that they are theologically precise, carefully expressive of particular Evangelical doctrines, and therefore by nature occasionally didactic in tone. Furthermore, there is a certain authoritative undertone within these prayers that is mainly manifested in their directness, as, without a trace of shyness, the poet boldly prays in the direct second person pronoun, 'You'. There is a continuity between Cowper-the-correspondent and Cowper-the-hymnwriter, who composed a number of his *Olney Hymns* with the same directness, sometimes supplicatory in tone, sometimes didactic. To these, also, we will return in greater detail in the following chapters. Likewise, we will encounter hymns

¹⁵⁹ *ibid*, p.164.

¹⁶⁰ *ibid*, p.168.

¹⁶¹ *ibid*, p.116.

where Cowper stands with the congregation, and makes similar pleas on their behalf in the much softer first-person plurals of 'us', 'we', and 'our'. These, too, are prefigured in the poet's epistolary prayers. In another letter to Mrs. Madan, sent on 24 December 1768, he writes: 'May we always be enabled to receive Him with our whole Heart! May we charge our souls continually to lift up their everlasting gates and admit this King of Glory, the Christ of God, in all the fulness of his free salvation.'¹⁶² Elsewhere, and written in a similar register, we find his May 1767 missal to Maria: 'May our Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier conduct us into his own Jerusalem where there shall be no Night neither any Darkness at all, where we shall be free even from innocent Error, and perfect in the Light of the Knowledge of the Glory of God in the Face of Jesus Christ!'¹⁶³

In his reflections on the life and death of the poet, John Newton repeatedly returns to a particular word to describe the ministerial activities of his friend: Cowper, he writes, was a 'comfort'. To the secular reader there is perhaps little of comfort in these words, which might seem more sickly than heartening. For the eighteenth-century Evangelical, however, the repetition of 'truths' and their self-application through prayer was a source of spiritual and emotional comfort. It is within this context that Cowper offers the following condolences to his cousin, Maria, following the death of her husband, Major William Cowper. On 28 August 1768, the poet assured the recently bereaved widow that, 'I bear you and yours upon my Heart before Him Night and Day'.¹⁶⁴ In addition to this statement of his intention to continue in his remembrance of Maria in his private devotions, Cowper also prays for her at length in the body of the letter itself. He beseeches God to 'comfort' her, and to 'sustain this heavy Stroke with

¹⁶² *ibid*, p.205.

¹⁶³ *ibid*, p.143.

¹⁶⁴ *ibid*, p.208.

that Resignation to his Will, which none but himself can give, and which he gives to none but his own Children'.¹⁶⁵ Following a further request for 'Consolation and Peace in the midst of Trouble', Cowper then breaks to offer his cousin a heartfelt reminder, taken from Isaiah 43:2, that, God 'has said, when thou passest through the Fire I will be with thee, and when thro' the Floods, they shall not overflow thee.'¹⁶⁶ He then concludes by returning to his earlier theme and register, praying boldly that 'he will sanctify this Dispensation to you, do you great and everlasting Good by it', and 'open to your View the Glories of a better Country, where there shall be no more Death, neither Sorrow nor pain, but God shall wipe away all Tears from your Eyes for ever.'¹⁶⁷

A paraphrase of Revelation 21:4, this last reassurance is built upon the declaration found in Romans 8:28: 'we know that all things work together for good to them that love God'.¹⁶⁸ This theological concept forms the basis for much of the 'comfort' offered by Cowper, providing him with a common theme in his correspondence and his hymns also. Indeed, when her visit to Hertfordshire in 1781 brought back memories of the grief she had endured in 1768, the poet wrote to Maria Cowper once more in the same terms, suggesting that: 'A day is coming, when I am confident, you will see and know that Mercy to both parties was the principal agent in a Scene the recollection of which is still painfull.'¹⁶⁹ Earlier in the same letter, Cowper gently affirms his cousin's right to grieve, pointing out that Christians 'are not forbidden to regret'.¹⁷⁰ Therefore, he writes, 'we may still pursue with an affectionate remembrance' those 'whom we

¹⁶⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ *ibid.*, p.209.

¹⁶⁸ Stephen Prickett and Robert Carroll (eds), *The Bible: Authorized King James Version* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) [All future quotations are from this edition].

¹⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p.532.

¹⁷⁰ *ibid.*

loved tenderly while living', without 'Rebellion against the Sov'reignty that appointed a Separation [sic].'¹⁷¹ Cowper makes further explicit reference to Romans 8:28 in a letter sent on 8 April 1791 to his distant cousin, Ann Bodham, on receipt of news that her aunt's illness would prevent her from visiting him. Having 'lament[ed]' her 'great and distressing infirmities', he then turns aside to observe that, 'There is One however who orders all things, and all things for the best to those who trust in him.'¹⁷² Taking on an evangelistic tone not a little reminiscent of his letters to Lady Hesketh (the subject of the next section) he continues: 'you, I dare say, are of that happy number, and should That happen which you expect and fear, will remember that whether he gives or takes away, he is equally gracious, and in both cases designs nothing but the welfare of his children.'¹⁷³

Cowper's Calvinistic submission to Providence should not be misunderstood as evidence for passivity of character. To do so would be to miss the extraordinary forwardness of these words. Rather than mutely expressing his condolences in the face of tragedy, either prospective or realised, the poet determines to comfort both Ann Bodham and Maria Cowper by steadily reminding them that God sovereignly 'orders all things' and suggesting that, even in the midst of mourning, there is solace to be found in the belief that those who dwell within time are unable to see all possible outcomes: that, in every event, God ultimately 'designs nothing but the welfare of his children'. What might be judged 'extraordinary' doctrinal passivity should not obscure the boldness of the one who chose to write these words down and send them to both a grieving relation and a mere acquaintance on the edge of bereavement. There is, then, a confidence within these letters, which, fortified by a theological certitude and consistency,

¹⁷¹ *ibid.*

¹⁷² *Letters*, iii., p.498

¹⁷³ *ibid.*

gives some flesh to Newton's comment on those at Olney who knew Cowper: 'they knew he was right, and from him they could take comfort'.

There are at least two major insights offered by the letters presented in this section. The first is that, in the matters of 'benevolent service', 'comfort', and 'prayer', Cowper's early biographers are vindicated by the poet's own hand. Both Newton and Greatheed were accurate in painting him as one who gave 'comfort' to, 'prayed with', and took some pastoral responsibility for the people of Olney. The second insight offered by Cowper's correspondence concerns the manner in which he exercised this self-appointed role. When he does offer comfort to or prayer for the recipient we catch a glimpse of what his interactions with the lacemakers of Olney might have been like, and of Cowper himself as they knew him: an individual who confidently entered into their homes and lives, armed with a kind of authority that made him feel able to give succour, remind them of Scriptural truths, and pray boldly on their behalf. The early biographies assert that this unlikely characteristic was central to the poet's character. Newton and Greatheed make several references to the 'clearness' of Cowper's 'views', his knowledge of the Bible and of 'Evangelical doctrine', and even his tendency to give 'needful advice' and 'counsel'. Indeed, the letters featured thus far reveal something of the didacticism of which he was capable. Our next and final section will be devoted to ascertaining whether this last claim is borne out by Cowper's correspondence.

Cowper's 'counsel'

Early in 1792, Cowper received a letter from a distant acquaintance named Margaret King—an appeal for the now-famous poet to compose some stanzas 'on a pen stolen by a niece of hers

from the Prince of Wales's standish.'¹⁷⁴ In his response to the 'pious lady', Cowper expresses sympathies over the 'excessive pain' caused by her reported ill health.¹⁷⁵ Before handing over the requested verses, he pauses to offer the following comment: 'may I be permitted to observe that your going to Church on Christmass-day immediately after a sharp fit of Rheumatism, was not according to the wisdom with which I believe you to be endued.'¹⁷⁶ He then goes on to point out that, in attending the service while unwell, Mrs. King has failed to apply the same standards to herself as she would have done 'To another', writing that, 'you would I doubt not have suggested that text—I will have mercy and not sacrifice—as implying a gracious dispensation, in circumstances like yours'.¹⁷⁷ Cowper's clever framing of this counsel, which appears to have been unsolicited, bears traces of the legal argumentation that he learned at the Inns of Court. Drawing upon the 'golden rule', 'whatsoever ye would that men should do to you: do ye even so to them', he reasons in reverse that the lady would not do to another what she had done to herself, before making a direct reference to Matthew 9:13: 'go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice'. Cowper applies this verse gently, omitting the first clause and quoting the second, submitting that it implies a 'gracious dispensation', and that Mrs. King would surely have made exactly the same argument herself, had a friend in similar 'circumstances' come to her in search of counsel.

There is a complexity to this comment that is belied by the brevity and ease of Cowper's prose. In these few short lines, we have witnessed him sense the theological and pastoral import of an apparently trivial occurrence, and, rather than letting it pass by unaddressed, take it upon

¹⁷⁴ *Letters*, iv., p.16 [20 February 1792].

¹⁷⁵ *ibid*, p.23.

¹⁷⁶ *ibid*, p.23-4.

¹⁷⁷ *ibid*.

himself to offer a mild yet Biblically-fortified reproach. Elsewhere in his correspondence we find similar instances where he responds to appeals for guidance with detailed and theologically-precise counsel. William Unwin's request for advice as to how he might best 'instruct' a 'young Lady' in 'the manner of keeping the Sabbath' received a lengthy four-point answer, sent on 28 March 1780.¹⁷⁸ Having first pointed out that Sabbath observation is a 'Commandment' that is 'no less binding upon Christians than upon ancient Jews', Cowper proceeds to reverse the perspective once more, forestalling rebuttals concerning the legalistic or onerous nature of this injunction by making the argument that obedience to it is primarily to be understood as a 'Privilege'.¹⁷⁹ Switching to a typological line of reasoning, he then states, thirdly, that Sabbath rest is teleological in nature, representing a 'Sign of that Covenant by which Believers are entitled to a Rest that yet remaineth'.¹⁸⁰ Fourthly, he again draws upon his legal training, this time explicitly with his postulation that Sabbath observance is a 'Sine quâ non of the Christian Character'. Expatiating upon this last point, he continues:

After all, I could ask my Catecheuman one short Question, do you Love the Day, or do you not? If you Love it, you will never enquire how far you may safely deprive yourself of the Enjoyment of it. If you do not Love it, & you find yourself obliged in Conscience to acknowledge it, that is an alarming Symptom, & ought to make you tremble. If you do not Love it, then it is a Weariness to you & you wish it was over.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁸ *Letters*, i., p.327.

¹⁷⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁸¹ *ibid.*, p.328.

Much could be made here of the sophisticated concepts that Cowper brings to bear upon a simple pastoral question. What is significant for our purposes, however, is that his proffered advice, presumably in line with Unwin's request, is less notable for its considerable theological argumentation than it is for the occasion of its being sought. Unwin appears to have required counsel less upon the theological principles themselves and more on the manner in which they ought to be shared with, and applied to, the individual: 'you will know', writes Cowper following the statement of his second point, 'how to dilate upon [this] better than I can tell you.'¹⁸² At least in the eyes of Unwin, Cowper seems to have been held as an authority on how a minister ought to counsel his parishioners, an opinion he had ample opportunity to form in the late 1760s during visits to his mother while a curate in nearby Comberton, Cambridgeshire, when Cowper was at the height of his ministerial powers.¹⁸³

Cowper's correspondence reveals that Unwin often utilised him as a source of counsel on the practice of parish ministry. There are a number of letters to the young vicar sent between his ordination in 1769 and his untimely death in 1786, on questions as diverse as whether a clergyman ought to seek remuneration for a private loan, and how familiar a Christian ought to be when addressing God. Cowper appears to have provided similar advice to his second cousin, John Johnson. He wrote to Johnson regarding best practices in learning while he was a student at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge: 'Pursue what you know to be attainable', he advises, and 'make truth your object'.¹⁸⁴ Concerning his theological education in particular, Cowper offers strongly-worded counsel:

¹⁸² *ibid*, p.327.

¹⁸³ *Poems*, i., p.xli.

¹⁸⁴ *Letters*, iii., p.385.

Let your Divinity, if I may advise, be the Divinity of the glorious Reformation. I mean in contra-distinction to Arminianism and all the *isms* that were ever broached in this world of error and ignorance. The Divinity of the Reformation is called Calvinism but injuriously; it has been that of the Church of Christ in all ages; it is the Divinity of St. Paul and of St. Paul's Master who met him in his way to Damascus.¹⁸⁵

In a later letter, written after Johnson's diaconal ordination on 7 July 1793, the poet sent guidance on how to minister to a congregation, and, in particular, how to preach: 'sooner or later', he writes, the Evangelical preacher will encounter 'that sore place in every heart which can ill endure the touch of apostolic doctrine; somebody will smart in his conscience—and you will hear of it.'¹⁸⁶ Cowper seeks to reassure the young man that such confrontations are 'devoutly to be wished' rather than feared, 'for in general', he continues, 'there is little good done by preachers 'till the world begins to abuse them'.¹⁸⁷ Seeking to avoid overzealous application of this principle, he pauses to note that this should not prompt Johnson to 'give them unnecessary provocation by scolding and railing at them', before concluding:

The self-abasing doctrines of the Gospel will of themselves create you enemies; but remember this for your comfort, they will also in due time transform them into friends, and make them love you as if they were your own children.—God give you many such [. If] you are faithful to his cause, I trust he will.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ *Letters*, iv., p.374-5.

¹⁸⁷ *ibid.*, p.375.

¹⁸⁸ *ibid.*

While it is possible that these words are merely drawn from his observation of Newton's relationship with the Evangelicals of Olney, their wistful tone suggests personal rather than second-hand experience: 'they *knew* Mr Cowper', wrote Newton, 'they well knew he was right and from him they could take comfort'. What is also notable here is the subject on which Cowper has chosen to write: homiletics, its aim, its practice, its reception, and its fruit. Although, as the unfinished biography hints, Newton was accompanied by his friend on several preaching tours during the late 1760s, Cowper is not known to have ever preached a sermon. While, in his autobiographical work, *Adelphi*, he recalls occasions upon which he 'heard the Gospel blasphemed' in public by Deists and sought to 'assert the truth of it with much vehemence of disputation', this is perhaps the only instance where he admits to speaking publicly on matters theological.¹⁸⁹ Indeed, when considering the possibility of 'taking Orders' in October 1766, Cowper realised that this particular ministry would be unsuitable precisely because of his 'Dread of public Exhibitions', which ensured that, even if endowed with the 'Zeal of Moses', he would be in need of 'an Aaron' to be his 'Spokesman'.¹⁹⁰ In lieu of being able to homilize in public, Cowper determined to do so discreetly: 'if it please the Almighty', he concludes in his 20 October letter to Mrs. Cowper, 'I may be an Instrument of turning many to the Truth, in a private way, & hope that my Endeavours in this Way have not been entirely unsuccessfull [sic].'¹⁹¹

What is this 'private way' by which Cowper hoped to turn 'many to the Truth'? At the time of writing, the 'private Endeavours' referenced must surely have been largely limited to his letters. Where he may have been too shy to preach in public, his correspondence with his

¹⁸⁹ *Letters*, i., p.11.

¹⁹⁰ *ibid*, p.153-4.

¹⁹¹ *ibid*, p.153.

cousin, Lady Hesketh, and his friend, lawyer, and financier, Joseph Hill, reveals his willingness to do so in private. The letters of this sort to the former begin with the Cowper's attempt to share with her news of his recent conversion. On 4 January 1765, despite voicing fear that she might 'be apt to think I carry the matter too far', he insisted quite directly that: 'You think I always believed, and I thought so too, but you were deceived, and so was I.'¹⁹² He continues: 'I called myself indeed a Christian, but he who knows my heart knows that I never did a right thing, nor abstained from a wrong one, because I was so.'¹⁹³ Eight days later Cowper wrote once more, with the apparent aim of explaining to his cousin his new understanding of the portent of his recent illness. Reflecting upon the 'dreadful condition' in which he had been languishing prior to his breakdown, Cowper then claims that 'it pleased' God to 'visit' him 'with a chastisement': 'when the hour of discipline was past, and the scourge had done its work,' he concludes, 'He was likewise pleased to visit me with such clear apprehensions of the truth of His Divine Revelation, and such delightful assurances that ail [sic] should be forgiven, and forgot'.¹⁹⁴ At this stage in the letter, Cowper's pen shifts direction, moving away from re-narration and justification to a decidedly more didactic tone. 'It is called enthusiasm by many', he begins, 'but they forget this passage in St. Paul, 'We are saved by grace through faith, and that not of ourselves, it is the Gift of God.''¹⁹⁵ Following this appeal to Ephesians 2:8-9, he proceeds to a light exposition of the text, writing that: 'the heart is so often engaged to vote on the other side' of the argument, that it fails to 'produce conviction till it pleases God to strike upon the rock, and melt it into a sense of its own corruption, and the necessity there is for an atonement.'¹⁹⁶ His exegesis at an end, Cowper concludes with a prayer that directly

¹⁹² *ibid*, p.100.

¹⁹³ *ibid*.

¹⁹⁴ *Letters*, i., p.105 [12 July 1765].

¹⁹⁵ *ibid*.

¹⁹⁶ *ibid*.

applies its content to his correspondent: 'may these everlasting truths be your happiness while you live, and attend you with peace and joy in your last moments!'¹⁹⁷

With its quotation, exposition, and application of a Bible verse, this small passage is structured like a sermon. Setting aside Cowper's expressed hope that the content of his letter would inform his cousin's experience of her 'last moments' on earth, there are, however, still traces of hesitancy and shyness in his tone. Over time this would give way to increasing self-confidence and a willingness to proselytise more directly. In a letter sent on 17 August 1765, he wrote to Lady Hesketh of the 'eminent rank' that 'faith' holds 'among the virtues', arguing for its place as the 'source and parent of them all'.¹⁹⁸ 'There is nothing more infallibly true than this', he concludes emphatically, before citing Christ's pronouncement in John 6:47: 'He that believeth in me hath everlasting life'.¹⁹⁹ On 4 September 1765, Cowper defended the doctrine of Providence in a letter that, by its tone, may be judged to have been written in reply to doubts expressed by his cousin in a previous note. He begins by stating that 'a firm persuasion of the superintendence of Providence over all our concerns, is absolutely necessary to our happiness', and that, 'Without it we cannot be said to believe in the Scripture, or practise any thing like resignation to his will.'²⁰⁰ Warming to his theme, he continues:

He made us, not because we could add to his happiness, which was always perfect, but that we might be happy ourselves; and will he not in all his dispensations towards us, even the minutest, consult that end for which he made us? To suppose the contrary, is

¹⁹⁷ *ibid*, p.105-6.

¹⁹⁸ *ibid*, p.112.

¹⁹⁹ *ibid*.

²⁰⁰ *ibid*, p.114.

(which we are not always aware of) affronting every one of his attributes, and at the same time the certain consequence of disbelieving his care for us, is that we renounce utterly our dependence upon him. In this view it will appear plainly, that the line of duty is not stretched too tight, when we are told, that we ought to accept every thing at his hands as a blessing, and to be thankful even while we smart under the rod of iron with which he sometimes rules us. Without this persuasion, every blessing, however we may think ourselves happy in it, loses its greatest recommendation, and every affliction is intolerable. Death itself must be welcome to him who has this faith, and he who has it not, must aim at it if he is not a madman.²⁰¹

Within this letter are further hints of the growing sophistication of Cowper's grasp upon matters and concepts theological. His reference, for example, to Divine Immutability—the 'perfect' and unchanging 'happiness' of God and his 'attributes'—is rooted in the works of Aquinas, Anselm, and Augustine. Again, however, what is most significant for the purposes of this chapter is, alongside this increased theological knowledge, Cowper's developing confidence both in imparting that knowledge to his correspondents and in his attempts to convince them of its import. Indeed, in a letter sent to Lady Hesketh during the following month, he ends his argument with the following forceful doxological statement, which could well have been spoken from a pulpit: 'Heaven and earth have their destined periods, ten thousand worlds will vanish at the consummation of all things, but the word of God standeth fast, and they who trust in him shall never be confounded'.²⁰²

²⁰¹ *ibid.*

²⁰² *ibid.*, p.119.

Cowper's interactions with Lady Hesketh became infrequent thereafter, presumably due to her displeasure at his bald attempts to convert her. Nevertheless, he grasped what few opportunities came his way in the succeeding years, writing with boldness on the subject of faith and theology. On 6 March 1766, he wrote to her in defence of Evangelical devotional practices, reasoning at the outset that 'If we have no communion with God here, surely we can expect none hereafter.'²⁰³ Writing in the first-person plural, he insists upon the need for each individual to be 'born again':

Let us see, therefore, my dear Cousin, that we do not deceive ourselves in a matter of such infinite moment. The world will be ever telling us, that we are good enough, and the same world will vilify us behind our backs. But it is not the world which tries the heart, that is the prerogative of God alone.²⁰⁴

He concludes this letter by confessing to have often 'prayed for' Lady Hesketh 'behind [her] back', and that now: 'I pray for you to your face'.²⁰⁵ The ardency of his prayer—that she would grow 'in every Christian grace' and 'every thing that may promote and secure' her 'everlasting welfare' —is echoed in a later letter, sent on 30 January 1767.²⁰⁶ On that occasion, Cowper chose to return to that weighty subject, the Eschaton: 'If we stand at the Left Hand of Christ while we live', he writes, with homiletical certainty, 'we shall stand there too in the Judgement'.²⁰⁷ Having prayed that Christ, who 'will then assign to each his everlasting Station', would 'direct and settle All [her] Thoughts upon this important Subject', Cowper ends his letter

²⁰³ *ibid.*, p.131.

²⁰⁴ *ibid.*

²⁰⁵ *ibid.*

²⁰⁶ *ibid.*

²⁰⁷ *ibid.*, p.158.

with a particularly direct exhortation taken from John 5:39: 'Search the Scriptures for in them ye beleive [sic] ye have Eternal Life'.²⁰⁸

Throughout Cowper's correspondence we find similar epistolary sermons addressed to his former colleague at the Inns of Court, Joseph Hill. In a letter sent on 3 April 1766, Cowper expounds upon the soteriological necessity of 'Faith'. He begins by arguing that, 'the Evil of a corrupt nature is too deeply rooted in us all to be extirpated by the puny Efforts of Wit or Genius.'²⁰⁹ Dismissing any notion that human reason might be a means of procuring salvation, Cowper insists that the 'only Way to Virtue' is 'Faith in Christ'.²¹⁰ He then appeals to Scripture, quoting 1 John 5:4 and paraphrasing 1 Corinthians 1:21, before offering the following summary statement: 'To save [humanity] from their Sinfull Nature here and from his Wrath hereafter', he writes, God has proffered 'that plain but despised and rejected Remedy, Faith in Christ.'²¹¹ As in his correspondence with Lady Hesketh, the poet moves from exhortation to intercession, concluding with a prayer that his friend might 'think daily and daily deeper of this only Source of Happiness', and 'arrive at the Knowledge and Love of God through Faith in his blessed Son.'²¹² Cowper's letter sent the following month appears to offer rebuttals to counterarguments presumably sent by Hill in response to his previous missal. He rejects the notion that he has 'ascribe[d] too much' to faith, and he has simply has more of an 'Appetite' for the things of God, pointing out that 'Our Saviour ascribes All to it'.²¹³ The poet then undertakes to support his 'Opinion' on the matter 'by a Text or two from Scripture', before

²⁰⁸ *ibid.*

²⁰⁹ *ibid.*, p.135-6.

²¹⁰ *ibid.*, p.136.

²¹¹ *ibid.*

²¹² *ibid.*

²¹³ *ibid.*, p.144.

once more praying for his friend in the first-person plural: 'Let: us humble our Hearts before God, and beseech him to reveal his Son in us, according to the Scripture Expression, and we shall soon see the Excellence of the Salvation which Christ has purchased for us, and our own utter Insufficiency to be our own Redeemers'.²¹⁴ Cowper finishes this letter with the same text that he would send eight months later to Lady Hesketh, urging Hill to 'Search the Scriptures, for in them we beleive [sic] that we have Eternal Life'.²¹⁵

Cowper's letters to Hill in this vein are too lengthy and varied to receive further detailed examination here. It will serve to note that such epistolary sermons, when Cowper did compose them, remained consistent in their structure and content. On 24 December 1768, he wrote to his friend to 'rejoice' with him at his 'Recovery' from illness, and expressed in as many words his hope that this encounter with mortality had provoked a deeper consideration of eternal matters, with reference to two Biblical texts, Revelation 3:20 and Amos 4:12: the former reads, 'Behold! I stand at the door and knock'; the latter, 'Prepare to Meet Thy God.'²¹⁶ In a similar letter sent on 10 November 1767, Cowper cites Luke 10:27, Matthew 22:37, Hebrews 12:14, and Isaiah 36:6, urging Hill to consider his 'everlasting Interests'. Drawing to a close, he ends his discourse by offering an apologia for its necessity: 'Excuse my Freedom, the Weight and Value of these things is infinite, and must be my Apology, and perhaps I am the only Friend you have in the World that will write thus to you, or give you the least Hint of their Importance.'²¹⁷

²¹⁴ *ibid*, p.145.

²¹⁵ *ibid*.

²¹⁶ *ibid*, p.205-6.

²¹⁷ *ibid*, p.186.

These final words reveal Cowper's keen awareness that such notes were likely to be both unwelcome and received as sermons: 'Pardon my Preaching to you', he wrote to Hill in April 1766, 'but the Hint you dropt in your Letter seemed to require it.'²¹⁸ Despite this admission, Cowper would have demurred at the title of 'preacher': 'I am no preacher', he insists, at the close of his 1782 moral satire, 'The Progress of Error'.²¹⁹ Yet, if anything, the letters lead one to conclude that in designating him as a simple 'counsellor', Newton and Greatheed might not have gone far enough. The correspondence we have reviewed reveals Cowper's penchant for, even skill in, the art of homiletics; his 'counsel' is interwoven with explicit and implicit appeals to Scripture and displays a knowledge of the text, a command of theological questions arising from it, and an ability to apply its sense to the circumstances of the addressed. Cowper's admission to his cousin that he had determined to channel his inclination to 'take orders' into acting 'in Private' as an 'Instrument of turning many to the Truth', may be judged in the final analysis to have been a reference to his epistolary sermons. Indeed, these letters to Lady Hesketh and Joseph Hill are representative only of those extant; his note to Hill on 11 February 1766 confirms that he had 'written' to 'others', but had been met with a 'Wintry kind of Indifference' which seemed to have 'frozen up their Ink:bottles'.²²⁰

In addition to being a 'sort of curate', then, Cowper might also be justifiably termed as a 'sort of preacher'. One of the major themes of this thesis is that the poet's homiletical urges found another outlet in his hymns: an outlet made possible by the unusual manner in which Newton used hymns during his ministry at Olney. On 30 August 1801, Lady Hesketh wrote to William Hayley, remembering with some distaste her cousin's career as a hymnwriter; she describes

²¹⁸ *ibid*, p.136.

²¹⁹ *Poems*, i, p.279.

²²⁰ *Letters*, i., p.130.

him, 'walking for Hours by himself that great rambling Church at Olney, composing these Hymns!'. If he 'left the Church', she continues, 'it was to attend their prayer meetings, and all the enthusiastic conversation which these meetings were sure to occasion'.²²¹ One imagines Cowper pacing the aisles in St Peter and St Paul, eyeing the empty pews where his friends and neighbours would sit, and addressing them with his pen in a manner not dissimilar to his letters, before rushing to the prayer meeting, a freshly-written hymn in hand, to be learned and sung by those for whom it had just now been composed.

Contradicting this notion, Donald Davie, in his discussion of Cowper's *Olney Hymns* at the outset of *The New Oxford Book of Christian Verse* (1981), writes of the poet-hymnwriter that: 'whereas Watts and Wesley and Cowper's Olney collaborator John Newton are uttering their hymns as it were from the pulpit, Cowper is one of those who sit at their feet, reporting faithfully how it seems to him there in the pew'.²²² Though this reading is more nuanced than those that reduce Cowper's hymns to effusions of either melancholia or zeal, the following chapters will take issue with the three characteristics encoded within this metaphor. First, by placing him 'at' the 'feet' of his contemporaries, Davie infantilises Cowper, and ignores the theological conviction with which he often speaks in his verses, suggesting that whatever may be found in them of that nature is either imitative or loosely-held. Secondly, by framing Cowper's participation in the hymn-writing project as 'reporting' how 'it seems to him', Davie downplays both the readership and purpose for which the hymns were written, implying that his compositions were at first private, observational, and reflective. Thirdly, by situating him

²²¹ *Poems*, i., p.xvi.

²²² Donald Davie (ed.), *The New Oxford Book of Christian Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p.xxv.

‘down there in the pew’, Davie denudes Cowper of any authority, and characterises his voice as self-consciously muted, subordinate, and projected from a sedentary position.

Ironically, there is a curious sense in which Davie’s confinement of Cowper to the pew actually chimes with the portrait that we have painted in this chapter. This, however, is only because the pew that Cowper was wont to occupy during church services was in fact situated in a gallery in the north aisle of SS Peter and Paul, overlooking both the congregation and the pulpit.²²³ The aptness of this small detail will become even more apparent in the forthcoming chapters. This thesis does not seek to claim that Cowper wrote from the pulpit in the same manner as his contemporaries. His ‘curacy’ was only ever unofficial and voluntary, his voice and temperament were naturally disinclined to be strident, and so we should not fully place him at either the lectern or even ensconced in the sedilia. That Cowper did, however, write from an eminence, even occasionally rising to his feet to address the congregation in forthright terms, is evidenced in his hymns. In contrast to Davie’s insinuations, the majority of Cowper’s hymns are, like his letters, reflective of an independently held, carefully considered, and theologically informed set of Evangelical convictions, and many of them appear to have been written with the aim of sharing these convictions with his Olney readership. Furthermore, Part One of this thesis will show that, undergirding all of this, Cowper’s Olney hymns—that is, the hymns composed in Olney—were written to be of use to this readership on specific occasions and for specific of purposes: that they were, in short, written with the aim of being useful.

²²³ Wright (1886), p.29.

PART ONE

COWPER'S 'OLNEY' HYMNS: CONTEXT, READERSHIP, PURPOSE

Chapter I

Recovering the 'Usefulness' of Cowper's 'Olney' Hymns

I more particularly dedicate to my dear friends in the parish and neighbourhood of Olney, for whose use the hymns were originally composed [...].

- 'Preface', *Olney Hymns*

Evangelical usefulness: an etymology

Though 'usefulness' might seem a vague, banal, and therefore inappropriate lens through which to examine literature, it is Cowper himself who thrusts it into our line of vision. In a series of letters, sent while he was completing his moral satires in the autumn and winter of 1781, he returns to it repeatedly to describe his motivation for writing, his literary productions, and his hopes for the effect they will have upon his readership. The first occurrence in this series, a letter to William Unwin dated 26 September, 1781, implies rather than states a connection between this word, the poetry, and its author. Unwin's disclosure of his plan to visit the coast draws comment from Cowper, who reveals that he has been 'writing upon the Subject' of the 'modern passion for sea-side entertainments', having 'found occasion towards the close of my last poem, called Retirement'.²²⁴ Cowper's hope is to 'direct' his readers 'to the means by

²²⁴ *Letters*, i., p.522.

which they might be made usefull as well as agreeable'.²²⁵ The lack of explanation as to how 'sea-side entertainments' might prove 'usefull' suggests that, in this case at least, such an explanation was not necessary; Unwin, Cowper assumes, understands his use of the word. To our benefit, however, in the succeeding passage the poet does offer the following comment:

I think with you, that the most magnificent object under heaven is the great deep; and cannot but feel an unpolite species of astonishment, when I consider the multitudes that view it without Emotion, and even without reflection. In all its various forms it is an object of all others the most suited to affect us with lasting impressions of the awfull power that created and controuls it. I am the less inclined to think this negligence excuseable, because at a time of life when I gave as little attention to religious subjects as almost any man, I yet remember that the waves would preach to me, and that in the midst of dissipation I had an ear to hear them.²²⁶

There is a chain of usefulness here. The 'great deep' is useful because the sight of it is 'most suited' to prompting 'reflection' on God: 'the awfull power that created or controuls it'. Therefore, visits to the 'seaside' are useful because they provide an opportunity for the individual to be moved to such reflection by the sight of the sea. Since Cowper's stated aim in the closing section of 'Retirement' is to encourage his readers to make proper 'use' of such visits, we might infer that his own poem is intended to occupy a place within this chain of usefulness: proper use of its verses will galvanise the reader toward extracting the full spiritual

²²⁵ *ibid*, p.522-3.

²²⁶ *ibid*, p.523.

utility of future littoral excursions. Cowper, in short, implies that his aim is to write verses that direct his readers ultimately towards consideration of God— ‘usefull’ poetry.

In a letter to his cousin, Maria Cowper, sent on 19 October 1781, the poet states this aspiration explicitly. Reflecting on the condition of the ‘public taste’—which, in his view, has been ‘debauched’ by ‘Luxury’, ‘Idleness’, and ‘Vice’—he concludes that useful verses are not easily written, and that it is ‘a bold undertaking [...] to step forth into the world in the Character of a Bard’.²²⁷ The general societal depreciation, he goes on to explain, has led to conditions in which ‘nothing hardly is welcome, but childish fiction, or what has at least a tendency to excite a laugh’.²²⁸ Despite the difficulty of the task at hand, Cowper expresses a determination to press on: ‘My sole drift’, he writes, ‘is to be usefull’.²²⁹ Though his use of this word is most frequent in those letters sent between 1780-1782, the broad range of Cowper’s correspondence attests that his desire to be a useful author did not begin or end with the moral satires. On 18 June 1768, shortly before he began to compose occasional verses for the Olney community, he wrote to his cousin, Maria, concerning a recent request from Lady Hesketh to read his ‘Narrative’ (later published as *Adelphi*). Cowper’s original intention that this should be a private document, written for his own edification, for posterity, and to be shared with a select handful of individuals, is swallowed up in the dawning revelation that his quill might be a source of spiritual utility to a broader readership.²³⁰ Having expressed an initial reticence to entrust his conversion story to ‘the Hands of an unenlighten’d Person’, Cowper goes on to recount a conversation with Newton that caused him to change his mind: his narrative ‘may’, he

²²⁷ *ibid*, p.531-2.

²²⁸ *ibid*, p.531.

²²⁹ *ibid*, p.532.

²³⁰ See King and Ryskamp’s textual introduction in: *Letters*, i., xxiii-xxvii.

concludes, 'at some future time be made usefull to her'.²³¹ Sixteen years later, on 10 October 1784, the poet sent '4 quires of verse' (of what was to become *The Task*) to Unwin, along with the following comment: 'I can write nothing without aiming at least at usefullness.'²³² What began tentatively as an accidental realisation had become, by his own admission, a defining characteristic of his mission as a writer.

Despite the abundant clarity of his correspondence, critics and scholars have consistently failed to take seriously Cowper's claims regarding the centrality of usefulness to both his motivation as a poet and his aspirations for his work. John Newton's remarks in his preface to *Olney Hymns* indicate that Cowper-the-hymnwriter composed with a similar preoccupation: 'I more particularly dedicate to my dear friends in the parish and neighbourhood of Olney', he writes, 'for whose *use* the hymns were originally composed'. Part One of this thesis demonstrates that the hymns Cowper wrote for the people of Olney were written with usefulness in mind: that they were written to be useful to a particular readership, on particular occasions, and for particular purposes. Before embarking upon this line of inquiry, however, it is necessary to leave no doubts as to what *exactly* Cowper means by his use of this term. To this end, we will proceed to detail the context for the word 'usefull', or 'usefullness', beginning with the immediate, his friendship with Newton.

A survey of Newton's collected works reveals that he frequently mentioned 'usefulness' in his letters, diaries, and sermons. In various places he prays that God might render him or his work

²³¹ *ibid*, p.196-7.

²³² *Letters*, ii., p.284.

useful to others and he refers to useful knowledge,²³³ useful books,²³⁴ useful writings,²³⁵ useful neighbours,²³⁶ useful troubles,²³⁷ useful societies and gatherings,²³⁸ and useful ministers and ministries.²³⁹ Furthermore, like Cowper, his use of the term is in no way pejorative, nor does it convey limited value; 'useful', in Newton's economy, is highly acclamatory, and weighted with deep feeling. On 5 April 1764, in a letter to Mrs. Newton, he expresses his fervent hope that he might continue to be of spiritual use to her in their marriage: 'And how you will praise [God] for our union', he writes, 'if he is pleased to make me, in any measure, useful to promote your faith and hope!'.²⁴⁰ Elsewhere, Newton describes 'usefulness' as an 'honour' bestowed upon believers by God 'in this life', and bemoans his own failure to take up opportunities to prove himself as such.²⁴¹ In a further letter to his wife, sent on 26 December 1775, he writes:

In the concerns of immortal souls, with eternity in view, and so much depending upon the present moment, what assiduity or importunity can be proportioned to the case? I ought to be always on the wing, seizing any opportunity of aiming to be useful, whether by word or pen, and much more care and diligent than I am to redeem the time.²⁴²

There are two observations arising from Newton's use and understanding of the term 'useful'. The first is that, like the poet, the preacher defines the utility of a thing by its ability to direct the eyes, mind, and feet of the individual toward God. The second observation is the significant

²³³ Richard Cecil (ed.), *The Works of the Rev. John Newton*, 2 vols (New York, 1847) i., p.114.

²³⁴ *ibid*, p.104.

²³⁵ *ibid*, p.285.

²³⁶ Bull (1868), p.148.

²³⁷ *The Works of the Rev. John Newton*, 6 vols (London, 1808), vi., p.69.

²³⁸ *ibid*, p.67.

²³⁹ *ibid*, p.84, 176.

²⁴⁰ *ibid*, v., p.537.

²⁴¹ *ibid*, v., p.523.

²⁴² Bull (1868), p.216.

value that he places upon such utility. Though Cowper is clearly of a similar mind, Newton's expression of this second fact is so pronounced as to be inescapable, reflected in passages such as the following diary entry, in which he writes regarding the forthcoming publication of his letter collection, *Cardiphonia* (1780): 'Surely I ought to prefer being useful to one soul, to the applause of twenty nations and ages'.²⁴³ Set against this backdrop, Newton's statement that the hymns were 'composed' for the 'use' of the people of Olney acquires heightened significance. Rather than a passing comment, these words now read as a declaration regarding the intentions with which the two men approached the writing task.

This high view of utility, shared by both Newton and Cowper, is perhaps in part explained by their contemporaneous philosophical and literary context. David Hume's proto-utilitarianism, expressed in works such as 'Of Luxury' and *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751), invests usefulness with a similarly high degree of value. In the former, Hume argues that utility should form the basis for any judgement of artistic merit (a point to which we shall return shortly), while, in the latter, he observes that 'Usefulness' is foundational to considerations of general worth and value: 'In common Life', he writes, 'the Circumstance of Utility is always appeal'd to; nor is it suppos'd, that a greater Elogy can be given to any Man, than to display his Usefulness to the Public, and enumerate the Services he has perform'd to Mankind and Society'.²⁴⁴ In the same work, Hume further argues that 'usefulness' is foundational in human considerations of what is virtuous. Justice is 'useful to Society and consequently that Part of its Merit, at least, must arise from that Consideration'.²⁴⁵ Likewise, the institution of marriage is virtuous because the 'long and helpless Infancy of Man requires

²⁴³ *ibid*, p.252.

²⁴⁴ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (London, 1751), p.73.

²⁴⁵ *ibid*, p.33.

the Combination of Parents for the Subsistence of their Young; and that Combination requires the Virtue of Chastity or Fidelity to the Marriage-bed'.²⁴⁶ Hume also argues that 'Ideas of Utility' play a 'considerable Part' in determining what is 'handsome or deform'd': 'Broad Shoulders', 'firm Joints', and 'taper Legs' are considered 'beautiful in our Species' because they are 'Signs of Force and Vigour';²⁴⁷ while the 'Eye is pleas'd' by objects 'well contriv'd for Use and Conveniency', such as 'the Prospect of Corn-fields and loaded Vineyards', 'Horses grazing', 'Flocks pasturing', 'a Machine', 'a Piece of Furniture', or 'a Garment'.²⁴⁸

Though they would have balked at much of Hume's other work, it is difficult to imagine Newton and Cowper disagreeing with his pronouncement, 'what Praise is imply'd in the simple Epithet, useful! What Reproach in the contrary!'.²⁴⁹ In addition to this lofty view of utility, there is also a shared understanding of the broad applicability of the term, which, in Hume's estimation, might be used to describe things as various as marriage, books, and vineyards. Furthermore, there is some agreement over how 'usefulness' might be defined. For a thing to be useful, all three men would have agreed that it must serve the best interests of both the individual and the collective, 'mankind and society'. Where Cowper and Newton part with Hume on this matter, however, and also with much of the Latitudinarian feeling of the day, is in their conviction over what constitutes humanity's best interest, a distinction exposed by the question: useful to what end? Rather than perceiving the realisation of individual 'liberty', 'free government',²⁵⁰ an 'increase of humanity',²⁵¹ and other such enlightenment ideals as the

²⁴⁶ *ibid*, p.66.

²⁴⁷ *ibid*, p.133-4.

²⁴⁸ *ibid*, p.27.

²⁴⁹ *ibid*, p.28.

²⁵⁰ David Hume, 'Of Luxury', *Political Discourses* (Edinburgh, 1752), p.34,

²⁵¹ *ibid*, p.27.

summum bonum, for the Evangelicals, the chief end of humanity was to enjoy in eternity ‘a life of joy and peace’ in the presence of God.²⁵² In their estimation, therefore, the usefulness of a thing or action must be measured by its potential to either aid the Christian in their journey toward that end or encourage the non-Christian towards the means of access to it, faith in Christ. These two ends, salvific and then sanctificative, are reflected in two observations made by Newton about a “useful ministry”, one in a letter to an unnamed minister and one in a funeral sermon for Richard Conyers, delivered on 7 May 1786. In the former he writes that, ‘to be useful to the souls of men’ is ‘to be an instrument of reclaiming them from that course of open wickedness, or lifeless formality, in which you see them enslaved; and in a word, to prevail with them to live soberly, righteously, and godly’.²⁵³ In the latter, he describes the ‘mutual affection that subsists between a faithful minister and those to whom the Lord makes him useful’, concluding that such a minister is ‘the instrument of God in saving your souls, in calling you “out of darkness into marvellous light.”’²⁵⁴

Though contemporaneous non-Evangelical works such as those of David Hume are helpful for providing a broader view of the currency that ‘usefulness’, both as a word and a concept, had in mid-to-late-eighteenth-century thought and literature, in order to situate Cowper and Newton’s Evangelical use and understanding of the term (and to use it correctly ourselves) we must turn finally then to their theological context. In *De Doctrina Christiana* (397), Augustine, Bishop of Hippo posits two categories within which all ‘things’ should be placed: ‘things which are to be enjoyed’, and things which are ‘to be used’.²⁵⁵ Arguing that God alone, ‘the eternal

²⁵² *Olney Hymns*, p.54.

²⁵³ Cecil (1847), i., p.252.

²⁵⁴ *Works of Newton* (London, 1808), v., p.176.

²⁵⁵ Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, R. P. H. Green (trans.), *De Doctrina Christiana* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.15-17.

and unchangeable', is to be enjoyed, the theologian concludes that all 'other things are to be used so that we may attain the full enjoyment' of God.²⁵⁶ Augustine's thesis, along with his use of pilgrimage as a metaphor for explaining it, finds its way into Cowper's direct theological context and into his library via the works of several Puritan and Evangelical divines, including John Bunyan (more about whom will be said in chapter four) and Jonathan Edwards, a theologian with whom the poet was well-acquainted.²⁵⁷ In his sermon on 'The True Christian's Life a Journey Towards Heaven', Edwards writes of human beings that, 'we attain our highest end, when we are brought to God'.²⁵⁸ Since God is 'the highest good of the reasonable creature', Edwards posits that the enjoyment of him 'is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied'.²⁵⁹ He goes on to argue that all 'things' other than God exist in order to call the unbeliever to faith (salvific usefulness), and to then prepare the believer for eternal life with God (sanctificative usefulness), writing that 'all that God has here given us, is given to this purpose'.²⁶⁰ Expanding upon Augustine's metaphor, Edwards reasons that:

When a man is on a journey, all the steps he takes are subordinated to the aim of getting to his journey's end. And if he carries money or provisions with him, it is to supply him in his journey. So we ought wholly to subordinate all our other business, and all our temporal enjoyments, to this affair of traveling to heaven. When anything we have becomes a clog and hindrance to us, we should quit it immediately. The use of our worldly enjoyments and possessions, should be with such a view, and in such a

²⁵⁶ *ibid*, p.29.

²⁵⁷ At his death Cowper's library included several works by Edwards. See: Geoffrey Keynes, 'The Library of William Cowper', *Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society*, v.3, no.1 (1959): pp.47-69.

²⁵⁸ Jonathan Edwards, 'The True Christian's Life a Journey Towards Heaven', *The Works of Jonathan Edwards Online*, ed. by Mark Valeri, 26 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957-2008), xvii., p.438.

²⁵⁹ *ibid*, p.438.

²⁶⁰ *ibid*, p.439.

manner, as to further us in our way heavenward. Thus we should eat, and drink, and clothe ourselves, and improve the conversation and enjoyment of friends.²⁶¹

The broad significance of this view to the authors of *Olney Hymns*, particularly its expression in the theme of pilgrimage, will become increasingly clear in the following chapters. For now, it will serve to note that their use of the word ‘useful’ should be understood in these theologically-specific terms. Cowper’s appeals to usefulness as the metric by which ‘things’ as diverse as the sea and his own writings should be measured is fully in line with—indeed, explained by—this teleologically-focused framework. Especially significant for our study, however, is his use of the term in order to appraise texts, and describe his own motivations in writing them. Like the sea, he presents his conversion narrative and his popular poetry as useful ‘things’, able to convey ‘lasting impressions’ of God: the former to a small group of Evangelical friends and family, who might derive encouragement from it on their respective pilgrimages; the latter to a large and unknown readership, the majority of which did not share his ‘enthusiastic’ convictions, and whose members he hoped to usher towards the life of faith.

‘Usefulness’ was, therefore, a central motivation and aspiration for William Cowper throughout his career as a writer. Along with John Newton, Cowper used and understood this word within a particular theological tradition, which measured the value of a thing according to its ability to facilitate encounter with God, either by directing sinners toward salvation or aiding pilgrims on their journey. These insights raise several questions in our study of the hymns that Cowper wrote for the use of the Olney congregation. What exactly, in Cowper’s

²⁶¹ *ibid*, p.436.

mind, made for a useful set of verses? Might these qualities be distilled into a set of principles? Do his hymns appear to have been written in accordance with these principles? Ultimately, we will answer these questions through a careful and comprehensive examination of Cowper's *Olney Hymns*. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to return briefly to Cowper's correspondence in order to further lay the groundwork for this textual exploration.

Needs, tastes, and reading contexts: an anatomy of usefulness

Within his letters, especially those written during the late 1770s and early 1780s, Cowper offers detailed answers to the first of our questions: what makes for a useful set of verses? By drawing together these epistolary reflections on his own poetic endeavours we can distil three general principles. The first of these is that, in order for it to be useful, a text must address the moral and spiritual needs of its readership. That Cowper operated via this principle is evidenced by several of the letters we have already quoted, in which he clearly states both his view that the reading public is in need of 'censure', reformation, and evangelisation, and that his poetry, too, is intended to meet that need. Alongside these zealous proclamations, however, Cowper also makes a number of statements that reveal a keen awareness that bald didacticism alone will likely hinder the message, and that useful ends are aimed at 'in vain' unless the modern poet is willing to be 'likewise entertaining'. To Maria, he wrote:

I have therefore fixed these two strings upon my Bow, and by the help of both have done my best to send my Arrow to the mark. My Readers will hardly have begun to

laugh, before they will find themselves called upon to correct that levity, and peruse me with a more serious air.²⁶²

A letter to Newton sent three days later on 22 October 1781, contains a similar observation: 'I have played the Antic myself for their diversion', he writes, 'for the sake of winning their attention to more usefull matter'.²⁶³ With this brief comment, Cowper refers Newton back to a more detailed excursus, sent earlier that year on 18 February 1781, enclosed with a copy of the recently-completed moral satire, 'Table Talk':

It is a Medley of many things, some that may be usefull, and some that for aught I know may be very divarting [sic]. I am merry that I may decoy people into my Company, and grave that they may be the better for it. Now and then I put on the Garb of a philosopher, and take the Opportunity that disguise procures me, to drop a word in favor of Religion.²⁶⁴

With these descriptions of his endeavours to clothe his Evangelical messaging in a variety of 'entertaining' accoutrements, Cowper reveals a second principle emerging from the first. In order to address the needs of its readership, a useful text must be shaped by the tastes of that readership: usefulness, in other words, is necessarily inclusive of style as well as substance. 'The more they are approved', he wrote to Newton on 16 August 1781, 'the more likely they

²⁶² *Letters*, i., p.532.

²⁶³ *ibid*, p.534.

²⁶⁴ *ibid*, p.444.

are to spread, and consequently the more likely to attain the end of usefulness, which as I said once before, except my present amusement, is the only end I propose.’²⁶⁵

Elsewhere, Cowper identifies the potential pitfalls of this second principle, particularly with regards to the author being diverted in their task and allowing style to overcome substance, leading to the tastes of the reader being met at the expense of their needs. In his letter to Newton sent on 18 February 1781, he wrote of his desire to avoid ‘consult[ing] the Taste of my Readers at the Expence of my own Approbation’.²⁶⁶ Tacking between entertainment and didacticism, between enticement and admonishment, and between meeting the needs of the reader without offending their tastes, he concludes, is ‘a difficult part to act’: ‘One minute’, a poet is ‘obliged to bridle his Humor if he has any, and the next, to clap a Spur to the Sides of it [...], to weep from a Sense of the Importance of his subject, and on a sudden constrain’d to Laugh lest his gravity should be mistaken for Dullness.’²⁶⁷ The tension between these two principles must in the final analysis be contextualised within (and relativised by) a third, rooted in Cowper’s Calvinistic convictions—that the will of God is the deciding factor in whether a text, however many useful qualities it might be judged to have, will ultimately prove to be useful to its reader:

As to the Effect, I leave it in his hands who can alone produce it; neither prose nor Verse, can reform the manners of a dissolute age, much less can they inspire a Sense

²⁶⁵ *ibid*, p.508.

²⁶⁶ *ibid*, p.444.

²⁶⁷ *ibid*, p.445.

of religious obligation, unless assisted and made efficacious by the power who superintends the truth he has vouchsafed to impart.²⁶⁸

If Cowper worked carefully in order to render his poetry maximally useful to his intended readers—meeting their needs while catering for their tastes—then it is reasonable to presuppose that he applied a similar effort and logic to the hymn-writing process, even more so because the man with whom he carried out this project was greatly concerned with utility. Indeed, as we have already noted, in his preface to *Olney Hymns*, Newton confirms that its contents were written with the design of being useful to a particular readership, firmly dedicating his hymnbook to ‘the parish and neighbourhood of Olney, for whose use the hymns were originally composed’. This first local endeavour appears to have been successful in its aims, and upon the basis of this success Newton proceeded to anthologise and publish the hymns, believing that they might achieve the similar success among a broader readership, and, in his words, ‘qualify for usefulness to the weak and poor of [Christ’s] flock’ throughout the nation.²⁶⁹ In attempting to cultivate a larger readership, Newton aims to broaden the geographical rather than social reach of the hymns: ‘though I would not offend readers of taste by a wilful coarseness and negligence’, he declares, ‘I do not write professedly for them’.²⁷⁰ These hymns, Newton informs us, will be most useful to a certain type of reader because they were first composed specifically for the uses, needs, and tastes of such readers.

²⁶⁸ *ibid*, p.532.

²⁶⁹ *Olney Hymns*, p.viii.

²⁷⁰ *ibid*.

Unlike those who bought and read Cowper's later poetry, the small community for whom he wrote his hymns was monolithic: Evangelical, of limited means and education, and lifelong inhabitants of the rural 'parish and neighbourhood of Olney'. Brought together under the aegis and at the invitation of John Newton, each member of this readership enjoyed a unique relationship with both authors. Not only did they know the two hymnwriters personally, but they also viewed them as spiritual authorities, in Cowper's case—as we have already established—as a "sort of curate". Such a readership was likely to accept, even to welcome, expressions of that spiritual authority in the form of openly homiletical verses, where an anonymous and well-read public would not. Already accustomed to Evangelical hymnody, the Evangelicals of Olney would have also expected him to offer consolation, encouragement, and challenge, in a direct manner that poetry readers would have found indecorous or enthusiastic.

In addition to the uniqueness both of this readership and of his relationship with it, Cowper also wrote for a unique reading context. Rather than being intended for quiet and solitary perusal in drawing rooms, coffee houses, and gentlemen's clubs, the hymns were, and remain, group performance texts crafted for a variety of events and uses in Olney: to be sung at a New Year's meeting, a youth meeting, or a weekly prayer meeting; to be sung before or after a sermon delivered by Newton, or at the opening or close of a meeting; to be sung as a prayer, confession, or exhortation, or as an aid to understanding a Biblical passage or precept. Some were even inspired by isolated events, such as the death of a local minister, or the moving of a prayer meeting to a different location. Moreover, where Cowper spent months preparing and editing his moral satires, many of his hymns—at least, according to Lady Hesketh—were composed in the days and hours leading up to the gathering at which they were intended to

be sung. In short, the majority of Cowper's contributions to *Olney Hymns* truly began life as "Olney hymns", for the 'use' of 'the parish and neighbourhood'.

In Part One we will demonstrate that the hymns were shaped both by their reading context—the occasions and uses for which they were written—and by the needs of their readership. Cowper and Newton's perception of these needs was straightforwardly Evangelical. In his preface, the latter states that the hymns were written with a 'desire of promoting the faith and comfort of sincere Christians', and he makes no apologies for the fact that the faith and comfort promoted in his collection are informed by a particular theological tradition.²⁷¹ He goes on to identify that tradition as Evangelical and Calvinistic, declaring that 'the doctrines of grace' are 'essential' to his own 'peace', that he 'could not live comfortably a day or an hour without them', that they are 'friendly to holiness', and that they have 'a direct influence in producing and maintaining a gospel conversation'²⁷² ('conversation', here, means conversion).²⁷³ To this end, he concludes, 'I must not be ashamed of them', or of hymns that express their tenets.²⁷⁴ In Newton's mind, therefore, the Olney readership required hymns that conveyed Evangelical, Calvinist truths, so that 'faith', 'comfort', and knowledge might be promoted in their midst. That Cowper was of a similar mind is evidenced by the tenor and content of his correspondence: his passionate letters to his aunt and cousin, and his advice to John Johnson, already cited, to eschew 'error and ignorance' and pursue Calvinistic theology, 'the Divinity of the glorious Reformation'. These emphases will also come through clearly and with conviction in his contributions to Newton's collection. Cowper's attempts to meet these

²⁷¹ *ibid*, p.vi.

²⁷² *ibid*, p.x.

²⁷³ See: "conversation, *n.*", *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, 2021), accessed 9 June 2021.

²⁷⁴ *Olney Hymns*, p.x.

theological needs went hand-in-hand with his attempts to cater for the tastes of his readership. Eschewing classical and philosophical references (and certainly humour), the hymns contain references to literature and customs that were either local or theologically and culturally familiar. They also invoke the landscape, way of life, and material culture of the town and its environs in order to root lofty or complex theological truths in the experience of their readers.

In his essay, 'Of the Standard of Taste', David Hume writes that 'Every work of art has also a certain end or purpose, for which it is calculated; and is to be deemed more or less perfect, as it is more or less fitted to attain this end'.²⁷⁵ The task of the critic, he argues, is to 'carry' these ends 'constantly in our view, when we peruse any performance; and we must be able to judge how far the means employed are adapted to their respective purposes'.²⁷⁶ Thus far in this thesis, we have sought to recontextualise Cowper and his place among the people of Olney, and to provide a solid basis for the argument that, as with his poems, the hymns that he wrote for this community were calculated towards a certain end: usefulness. We will now examine how Cowper wrote verses 'fitted to this end' by exploring the ways in which he composed within and experimented with the limitations of usefulness and sought to exercise his poetic arm in the service of that fundamental aim. In pursuing this line of inquiry here in Part One, we are concerned with meditational pieces written by Cowper after his arrival at Olney that were subsequently offered up for communal use, and "congregational" hymns written expressly for Newton's various Evangelical meetings. Composed from Cowper's unofficial ministerial office in Olney, these two types of hymn meet Newton's description in his preface, in that they were either implicitly composed for the use of the congregation—since they were produced within

²⁷⁵ David Hume, 'Of the Standard of Taste', *Four Dissertations* (London, 1757), p.226.

²⁷⁶ *ibid*, p.227.

a culture where spiritually autobiographical and reflective pieces were commonly written expressly for the use of a community or readership—or they were composed with the explicit aim of being utilised by that same community within a variety of congregational settings. What remains of this chapter will be dedicated to a case study of Cowper’s hymns written for the annual youth meeting, read via the lens of ‘usefulness’.

Hymns for the annual youth meeting: a case study of usefulness

Among the first actions taken by Newton upon being installed as curate-in-charge at SS Peter and Paul in Olney was the institution of the weekly children’s meeting.²⁷⁷ Held on Thursday mornings, the aim of these meetings was to catechise the village youth in the Evangelical faith. Bruce Hindmarsh notes that this exercise was ‘virtually unrelated to the rite of confirmation’, and that Newton’s motives arose ‘from his Evangelical preoccupation with conversion’, the suggestion being that he was more concerned with instigating Evangelical conversions than he was with raising good Anglicans.²⁷⁸ This fact is reflected in the manner in which these services were organised, often bearing little trace of Anglican liturgy or consistency in structure: ‘At different times’, writes Hindmarsh, ‘he set them hymns to learn by heart, talked to them of the death of a pious young person, preached a series of sermons on Luke, or illustrated the story of the prodigal from own life.’²⁷⁹ Newton’s ecumenism, or what might be better called his prioritisation of Evangelical spirituality over denominational tradition, is further illustrated by the gifts he bestowed upon the children who attended his meetings: for sung worship, he gave them the hymnbooks of Isaac Watts, and for theological direction, James Janeaway’s *A Token*

²⁷⁷ Hindmarsh (1996), p.192.

²⁷⁸ *ibid.*

²⁷⁹ *ibid.*, p.198.

for Children and Philip Doddridge's *Sermons to Young Persons*—all three authors famously members of the dissenting tradition.²⁸⁰

The fruit of Newton's interdenominational Evangelicalism is found in the gradual coordination in ministry between the three local churches: his own Anglican church, the Olney Independent Church, and the Olney Baptist Church. In seeking to break down denominational barriers, Newton followed in the footsteps of George Whitefield, who, despite being an ordained priest in the Church of England, made a habit of preaching to all who would hear and working with all who would cooperate. Whitefield had first visited Olney in 1739, preaching outdoors to a congregation gathered from all three churches, and his preachers had made regular visits to the town over the subsequent fourteen years.²⁸¹ The willingness of the local dissenting congregations to listen to Anglican revivalist preaching is reflective of the broader trend among English Dissenting churches, especially Baptists and Independents, towards revivalist spirituality.²⁸² When Newton arrived in Olney, therefore, he found a parish that was ready to partake in his ministry despite ecclesial differences, dissenting ministers who were prepared to minister alongside him, and dissenting parents comfortable with sending their children to the Anglican minister's Thursday morning catechetical sessions. By April of 1765, writes Hindmarsh, 'Newton had a steady attendance of over 200 children.'²⁸³ The success of these meetings resulted in the institution by Newton of a festival of preaching during the secular New Year holiday. Hindmarsh notes that, for the people of Olney, this became 'the most significant communal religious event of the year,' as, 'on three successive nights the ministers

²⁸⁰ *ibid*, p.197.

²⁸¹ *ibid*, p.183-5.

²⁸² Noll (2004), p.150-1.

²⁸³ Hindmarsh (1996), p.197.

of the three churches would preach to the young people of the town in the presence of the adults'.²⁸⁴ Newton, he adds, 'usually wrote a new hymn' to be sung at the service. On three occasions, so did Cowper.

It is unknown what music Newton used to accompany these hymns, or indeed whether the Evangelicals of Olney, who were used to meeting in various locations, had musical accompaniment when they sang (though, we do know that they had at least one competent musician in Mrs Unwin). It is also unknown how they accessed the words—whether by paper copies (which would seem unlikely), or whether they were lined-out to the gathering. The hymns written for these services are found in two adjoining subsections in Book Two of *Olney Hymns*, under the following headings: 'Hymns before annual Sermons to young people, on new-years evenings',²⁸⁵ and 'Hymns after Sermons to young people, on new-years evenings, suited to the subjects'.²⁸⁶ This case study will be concerned with the former, since Cowper's three hymns are found in it, and he wrote none for the latter. Before examining them, it is worth pausing to survey the sub-section as a whole in order to properly situate Cowper's hymns. In keeping with Evangelical and non-conformist practice, the centrepiece of these services—and indeed all of Newton's informal services—was the sermon. From the advent of the Reformation onward, this medium had taken on a heightened significance within both Christian theology and the Christian experience. Seen in its new place as 'God's quintessential means of salvation', Alexander Bitzel points out that 'a sermon was not a speech about holy things or the contents of faith, but a speech that reached into the life of its audience', a '*verbum*

²⁸⁴ *ibid*, p.193.

²⁸⁵ *Olney Hymns*, p.189.

²⁸⁶ *ibid*, p.204.

efficax, an efficacious word, which moves, realigns and reconstitutes men'.²⁸⁷ He further observes:

According to the Reformers, the sermon is the primary place in which God reached out to his people. The sermon deals with what is most important. The Protestant sermon is thus not a speech like any other. A central confessional document from the Reformed church, the *Confessio Helvetica posterior*, put together by Heinrich Bullinger (1505–1575), summarises this view of the sermon in the following pithy phrase: *Praedicatio verbi dei est verbum dei* (the preaching of the word of God is the word of God). The verb *est* is crucial. A sermon is not automatically the word of God, but becomes it when the spirit of God is bound to what is said in the pulpit. When this alliance between spirit and word occurs, the words of the sermon are no longer the words of man, but are rather the efficacious or newly creating word of God.²⁸⁸

As Joris van Eijnatten points out, for the Evangelicals, a 'sermon failing to appeal to the emotions was considered barren.'²⁸⁹ To that end, he continues, Evangelical preachers 'used every homiletic device at their disposal [...] to achieve their one great aim: saving men and women from hell by confronting them with their own iniquity, awakening their consciences and bringing them to conversion.'²⁹⁰

²⁸⁷ Alexander Bitzel, 'The Theology of the Sermon in the Eighteenth Century', *Preaching, Sermon and Cultural Change in the Long Eighteenth Century*, ed. by Joris van Eijnatten (Boston: Brill, 2009), p.58-9.

²⁸⁸ *ibid.*, p.60.

²⁸⁹ Joris van Eijnatten, 'Reaching Audiences: sermons and oratory in Europe', *Cambridge History of Christianity: Volume VII: Enlightenment, reawakening and revolution 1660-1815*, ed. by S. J. Brown and T. Tackett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p.136.

²⁹⁰ *ibid.*

The centrality of the sermon, and the manner in which the hymns related to it, is illustrated by the titles given to the subsections in *Olney Hymns*; these are hymns written for use ‘before’ or ‘after’ the sermon. Pre-sermon hymns were composed with a single purpose: to prepare those present, particularly the ‘youth’, to hear and understand the words of the preacher. There were two dimensions to this preparation, intellectual and spiritual. Where the former is concerned, Newton’s hymns usually run through the themes of the sermon and include summaries of the scriptural texts upon which it is based. To that end, in a hymn presumably written for one of his sermons on Luke’s Gospel, ‘Casting the Gospel Net’,²⁹¹ Newton includes a synopsis of Luke 5:4:

When Peter thro’ the tedious night
Had often cast his net in vain;
Soon as his Lord appear’d in sight
He gladly let it down again.

Newton offers similar summaries of other passages: in ‘The Shunnamite’²⁹² he versifies the story in 2 Kings 4:51; ‘Elijah’s Prayer’²⁹³ outlines events in 2 Kings 18; the thirty-seventh chapter of Ezekiel is abridged in ‘Preaching to the Dry Bones’;²⁹⁴ ‘Elijah’s Mantle’²⁹⁵ retells the story of 2 Kings 2:11-14; and narratives from Exodus are recounted in ‘The Rod of Moses’²⁹⁶ and ‘God Speaking from Mount Zion’.²⁹⁷

²⁹¹ *Olney Hymns*, p.192-3.

²⁹² *ibid*, p.195-6.

²⁹³ *ibid*, p.196-7.

²⁹⁴ *ibid*, p.198.

²⁹⁵ *ibid*, p.203-4.

²⁹⁶ *ibid*, p.199-200.

²⁹⁷ *ibid*, p.200-201.

In common with his Evangelical peers and their Puritan forbears, Newton was fond of preaching from Old Testament passages, and, since his hymns were designed to accompany his sermons, they too often centre around Old Testament texts. Also in line with his contemporaries and predecessors, Newton's approach to these passages was commonly typological, and this is likewise reflected in the hymns. As the verses progress, 'Elijah's mantle' becomes 'the wonder-working gospel', the 'rod of Moses' becomes the 'gospel-rod' of the preacher and a metaphor for the 'peoples prayers', and the 'sudden flame' called down by Elijah becomes Pentecostal, the 'Spirit's holy fire'. Here, then, is clear indication of the homiletical purpose that Newton's hymns served. In addition to offering a synopsis of the Bible text, the verses provide the congregation with a summary of the sermon itself: a foretaste of how the text could be understood in their time and might be applied to their individual lives and collective dispensation. To serve this function, therefore, the hymns necessarily contain scriptural references, exegesis, application, and theological and doctrinal statements. Their usefulness must be judged by their ability to marry these didactic elements (which are responding to the perceived needs of the congregation), with verse in a manner that is understandable and stirring (or, in accordance with the tastes of the congregation), without compromising upon or obfuscating what will follow in the sermon.

Concerning a second dimension, spiritual preparation, there is one major devotional function that these hymns are designed to perform: they contain prayers, which are to be prayed by the congregation in the act of singing. Since, as Hindmarsh writes, the New Year's services brought with them 'especially high' expectations that 'revival and awakening would attend the

preaching', many of the hymns directly petition God to grant that ecstatic, salvific outcome.²⁹⁸

'Prayer for a Blessing'²⁹⁹ begins with the bold request:

Now, gracious Lord, thine arm reveal,

And make thy glory known;

Now let us all thy presence feel,

And soften hearts of stone!

Other hymns carry a similar sense of urgency, including requests for the 'Spirit's holy fire' to 'Pierce ev'ry heart',³⁰⁰ for 'dry bones' to be filled 'with living breath',³⁰¹ and for 'stony heart[s]' to 'melt'.³⁰² In true Evangelical form, many of Newton's petitions for transformation are also accompanied by confessions of sin. In 'Prayer for a Blessing', Newton has his congregation petition that they might be 'set [...] free' from 'the guilt of former sin', while 'God speaking from Mount Zion'³⁰³ contains a prayer that the singer might be enabled to 'die to sin'. Perhaps the most succinct and well-rounded of Newton's versifications of the Evangelical credo, "repent and believe", to be found in this subsection is featured in the fifth stanza of 'Now may fervent pray'r arise':³⁰⁴

Shew them what their ways have been,

Shew them the desert of sin;

²⁹⁸ Hindmarsh (1996), p.193.

²⁹⁹ *Olney Hymns*, p.189.

³⁰⁰ *ibid*, p.197.

³⁰¹ *ibid*, p.198.

³⁰² *ibid*, p.201.

³⁰³ *ibid*, p.200-1.

³⁰⁴ *ibid*, p.191-2.

Then thy dying love reveal,
This shall melt a heart of steel.

Finally, in addition to such prayers for revival and words of penitence, Newton's hymns also contain prayers of preparation for the preacher himself. In 'The Rod of Moses',³⁰⁵ for example, there is a request for God to 'assist a worm to preach aright', and elsewhere we find petitions for the 'preacher's tongue' to be 'clothe[d] with pow'r'.³⁰⁶

There appear to have been three primary requirements for a hymn composed for use 'before annual Sermons to young people, on new-years evenings'. First, the hymn must prepare the minds of those present by summarising the text upon which the preacher will speak, and perhaps including doctrinal statements that offer a preview of the basic points of the sermon itself. Secondly, the hymn must serve as a prayer, with the aim of spiritually preparing the congregation for the delivery and receipt of the sermon. In line with this, its verses might also include a prayer for the preacher, geared towards preparing him to deliver his message. Thirdly, the hymn must stoke the revival expectations associated with this significant event in the lives of the Olney Evangelicals, and, via versified prayer, draw each into an encounter with Evangelical spirituality: the revelation of personal depravity, and the immanence of redemption through rebirth, repentance, and faith. Lastly, the hymn must perform these three functions in a manner that engages the congregation, with verses that are coherent, stirring, and memorable. These, then, appear to have been the unofficial criteria for a hymn that would

³⁰⁵ *ibid*, p.199.

³⁰⁶ *ibid*, p.202.

prove useful to the congregation assembled at the Olney New Year's service, meeting their needs and tastes, and suitable to their reading context.

There is no evidence extant of Cowper's involvement in these particular occasions other than the hymns that he wrote for them. From what we now know of his ministerial habits from 1767-1773, however, it is likely that he was in attendance. In a letter to Mrs Madan sent shortly after Cowper had arrived in Olney on 26 September 1767, he writes:

On Thursday Morning I attended a Meeting of Children, and found that Passage 'Out of the Mouth of Babes & Sucklings thou hast ordained Praise' Verified in a Sense I little thought of. For at almost every Word they spoke in answer to the several Questions proposed to them, my Heart burned within me, and melted into Tears of Gratitude and Love.³⁰⁷

There is substantial evidence of the poet's fond familiarity with, and pastoral relationship to, the children of Olney. Beyond the references to them in his letters— 'Mr. Raban's boy, Daniel', for example—there are a number of second-hand accounts that confirm what such correspondence implies. Thomas Wright, in his 1886 work, *The Town of Cowper*, notes that there is a general perception that Cowper 'had little sympathy' with the 'troubles or pleasures' of children, due to several verses and letters written while the poet lived at Weston-Underwood which are 'little complimentary to the juvenile world'.³⁰⁸ Though he allows for the

³⁰⁷ *Letters*, i., p.180.

³⁰⁸ Wright (1886), p.63.

possibility that such an attitude might have developed later in life, Wright argues that this impression of the poet is largely erroneous, writing that, ‘it was the reverse of this at Olney’:

as many old persons have testified, he ever had a kind word for children who he came in contact with, and not infrequently, especially at Fair time, made them trifling presents. “Nanny Stowe”, one of the last persons in Olney who remembered the poet, and who died, we believe, some thirty years ago, was proud of telling how, one Cherry Fair (June 29), when she was a child, he gave her money to go into a sway-boat which had been planted just opposite his house, and how they waved hands to each other, he at his parlour window, and she going up and down in the sway-boat.³⁰⁹

In addition to this account of Cowper’s friendly acquaintance with local children, there is copious evidence of his ministerial care for the young, both of his own locale and further afield. His 1784 poem, *Tirocinium*, contains a passionate appeal to parents to refrain from sending their children to public school, and to protect them from the degradations of that system by having them tutored at home, and ‘feed[ing] infant minds with proper fare’.³¹⁰ Moreover, in 1788 the poet wrote a hymn for one of Newton’s successors, Rev. James Bean, for use at the Sunday school, and a year later he composed two hymns for Rowland Hill’s *Divine Hymns in Easy Language for the use of Children*.³¹¹ Cowper further contributed to this anthology by revising its contents before publication in 1790. Wright also attributes to Cowper a verse epitaph, carved into the gravestones of ‘Charles Morgan, who died in 1795, aged seventeen,

³⁰⁹ *ibid.*

³¹⁰ *Poems*, ii., p.274.

³¹¹ Wright (1886), p.40.

and Barbara Morgan, aged four'.³¹² Just as with those he wrote for the adults, it seems that, in composing the children's hymns, he did so for a section of the Olney community that he took interest in, knew personally, and whose spiritual welfare was of concern to him.

Each of Cowper's three hymns share common features with those written by Newton. Both, 'Bestow, dear Lord, upon our youth'³¹³ and 'Gracious Lord, our children see',³¹⁴ begin by summarising Biblical texts. The former versifies Luke 8:4-15, 'The Parable of the Sower', referencing the 'seed of sacred truth' and expressing hope that each Evangelical *spora* cast by the preacher might 'Fall in a fruitful place'. In similar fashion, 'Gracious Lord, our children see'³¹⁵ condenses the events of the twelfth chapter of Exodus: the plight of 'Israel's young ones', the cry of Moses to 'Let the children also go', and the punitive visitation of the 'angel of the Lord', who, 'Drawing forth his dreadful sword,/ Slew, with an avenging hand,/ All the first-born of the land'. Like Newton, Cowper amalgamates narrative with homiletics, skilfully interpreting the stories in their re-telling, and applying the interpretation to the congregation. In 'Gracious Lord, our children see',³¹⁶ for example, he reads the Passover narrative typologically; the 'bloody sign' placed on the 'people's doors' becomes the 'blood of Christ', which, like the blood of the paschal lamb, will cause judgement to pass over the one who bears

³¹² *ibid*, p.32.

³¹³ *Poems*, i., p.162 [Throughout I have referred to each of Cowper's hymns by its first line. It seems likely that Newton was responsible for the peritext surrounding the hymns, including the titles, several of which are not original to Cowper (either provably so, or indicated by the fact that the content does not fit the given title)].

³¹⁴ *ibid*, p.164.

³¹⁵ *ibid*.

³¹⁶ *ibid*.

its mark.³¹⁷ 'Sin has undone our wretched race',³¹⁸ the third of the three children's hymns, is more explicitly homiletical, opening with a direct statement of doctrine:

Sin has undone our wretched race,
But Jesus has restor'd
And brought the sinner face to face
With his forgiving Lord.

In the same hymn, Cowper echoes Newton with his own heartfelt exhortations, commanding the children, in the words of Matthew 3:7 and Amos 4:12, to 'flee the wrath to come!' and 'Prepare to meet thy God!'. Likewise, in 'Bestow, dear Lord, upon our youth', the young congregants are addressed directly, in a manner reminiscent of Cowper's more fervent letters to Lady Hesketh and Joseph Hill:

Ye careless ones, O hear betimes
The voice of sovereign love!
Your youth is stain'd with many crimes,
But mercy reigns above.

³¹⁷ This reading is common throughout church history, and occupies a central position within eighteenth-century Puritan and Evangelical theology. Matthew Henry, the great biblical commentator of the age, writes of the passage: 'The paschal lamb was typical; Christ is our Passover, 1 Cor. V. 7. (i.) It was to be a lamb, and Christ is the Lamb of God [...]. The sprinkling of the blood was typical. (i.) It was not enough that the blood of the lamb was shed, but it must be sprinkled, noting the application of the merits of Christ's death to our souls; we must receive the atonement [...]. The blood thus sprinkled was a means of the preservation of the Israelites from the destroying angel, who had nothing to do there where the blood was. If the blood of Christ be sprinkled upon our consciences, it will be our protection from the wrath of God, the curse of the law, and the damnation of hell [...].' Henry (1737), i., see note to Ex. 12:1-20 [page numbers not included].

³¹⁸ *Poems*, i., p.163.

These warnings, commandments, and didactic features are all in service of the wider aim of the pre-sermon hymn: to prepare those present, particularly the children, for Newton's address. In addition to preparing the mind with previews of the scriptural text and its application, Cowper's hymns also seek to prepare the heart through prayer and stoke revival expectation. 'Bestow, dear Lord, upon our youth'³¹⁹ begins with a prayer that God would 'Bestow' the 'gift of saving grace' upon the youth, and ends with two heartfelt entreaties: 'O shed yourselves a tear' and 'Oh! join the public pray'r!'. Correspondingly, 'Sin has undone our wretched race'³²⁰ contains an appeal to God, that he would grant the children 'an attentive ear' and 'save them by [his] truth'. 'Gracious Lord, our children see',³²¹ likewise, contains the petition that God would 'Hear' the prayers of those present, who are 'Plead[ing] the blood of Christ' for the youth, alongside an additional request that they would be kept 'ever in his sight' and hidden 'safe' from the 'fierce malicious foe'.

Between them, Cowper's three compositions meet the necessary criteria for a pre-sermon hymn to be performed at a children's meeting. They are designed to aid intellectual and spiritual preparation through both the summary and application of relevant Biblical texts, and revivalist prayer and exhortation. Beyond these basic components, however, there are two significant features that differentiate Cowper's hymns from those of Newton. King neatly summarises the essential distinction between the two hymnwriters, arguing that 'Newton was a versifier—Cowper a poet'.³²² Newton himself appears to have felt that this quality rendered him well-suited for the task of hymn-writing, declaring in the Preface to *Olney Hymns* that:

³¹⁹ *ibid*, p.162.

³²⁰ *ibid*, p.163.

³²¹ *ibid*, p.164.

³²² King (1986), p.84.

There is a stile and manner suited to the composition of hymns, which may be more successfully, or at least more easily attained by a versifier, than by a poet. They should be Hymns, not Odes, if designed for public worship, and for the use of plain people. Perspicuity, simplicity and ease, should be chiefly attended to; and the imagery and coloring of poetry, if admitted at all, should be indulged very sparingly and with great judgement.³²³

In the eyes of Newton, a ‘versifier’ is better qualified for the composition of hymns than a poet because the ‘imagery and coloring of poetry’ might hinder ‘plain people’ in their attempts to use and understand the verses, drawing their eyes away from their vital message towards the skill of the one who wrote them. Newton’s fear, in short, is that such poetic incursions into the art of hymn writing might reduce the usefulness of the hymns themselves, leading to style and taste overcoming substance and need. It is one of the overarching arguments of this thesis, however, that it is precisely Cowper’s poetic abilities—albeit used subtly and ‘with great judgement’, though not necessarily ‘sparingly’—that sharpen the utility of his hymns, where Newton’s attempts at mere versification can render his own compositions less so. These abilities are chiefly manifested in two ways throughout the three hymns Cowper wrote for the annual youth service: first, his ability to both use intertextual references and form and manipulate imagery in order to meet the needs and cater for the tastes of his young congregation; and secondly, his understanding of the potential inherent within this unique reading context, and consequent utilisation of ‘directionality’ toward useful ends.

³²³ *Olney Hymns*, p.vii-viii.

Cowper's skill in wielding the 'imagery and coloring of poetry' without compromising the 'style and manner' of the hymn is evident across the three hymns written for the annual New Year's service. The first two verses of 'Bestow, dear Lord, upon our youth'³²⁴ are exemplary:

Bestow, dear Lord, upon our youth

The gift of saving grace;

And let the seed of sacred truth

Fall in a fruitful place.

Grace is a plant, where'er it grows,

Of pure and heav'nly root;

But fairest in the youngest shews,

And yields the sweetest fruit.

Luke 8:4-15, the Parable of the Sower, is a source for several of Cowper's hymns. Though he is not named, Newton will in due course play the part of the sower, and his sermon will contain the 'seed of sacred truth', while God is prevailed upon to prepare the 'place', the minds of those present, and to guide the 'fall' of the seed. In 'Bestow, dear Lord, upon our youth',³²⁵ the poet extends and develops this metaphor into the following verse, as the 'seed' becomes a 'plant' with 'root[s]', that promises to yield 'the sweetest fruit'. This second tranche of agricultural imagery is drawn from the "blessed man" vignettes in Psalm 1:3 and Jeremiah 17:8:

³²⁴ *Poems*, i., p.162.

³²⁵ *ibid.*

in the former, he 'shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season'; in the latter, 'he shall be as a tree planted by the waters, and that spreadeth out her roots by the river', and shall not 'cease from yielding fruit'. Such intertextuality is common to eighteenth-century Evangelical hymns, and a regular feature of Cowper's work. Taken as a unit, this catena constitutes a versified form of systematic theology, in which different scriptural texts are brought together in order to explain one another, service a broader theological theme, and meet a need: in this case, expounding the process of salvation and sanctification. The second effect achieved by this textual collage is the formation of a simple narrative within the hymn, accessible to the children for whom it is intended—a seed of faith, which falls into fertile soil and becomes a sturdy source of fruit. While Cowper's skills as a versifier of systematic theology are considerable, it is perhaps here that his poetic abilities are most evident. The selection of a common biblical trope that marries easily with the rural setting of Olney is not accidental, though his decision to exchange the 'tree' of scripture for a 'plant' speaks perhaps to his burgeoning interest in his own garden as well as his desire to tailor his hymns to the tastes and experiences of particular audience in a particular place. Indeed, the poet's attempt to render the narrative suitable to the young members of the congregation is evident in his selection of the 'plant', which is altogether more youthful in its connotations than the 'tree' of the original texts. The needs of the Olney youth are thus met with clear theological messaging, which is in turn tuned to cater for their tastes and delivered in the form of a story, populated with local and familiar imagery and references.

A similar concern is evident in Cowper's construction of the concluding verse of 'Gracious Lord, our children see',³²⁶ as, once more, he merges images from rural village life with Biblical metaphors, maximising the usefulness of the hymn by locating his message within the landscape of his readership:

Lord we tremble, for we know
How the fierce malicious foe,
Wheeling round his watchful flight,
Keeps them ever in his sight:
Spread thy pinions, King of kings!
Hide them safe beneath thy wings;
Lest the rav'nous bird of prey
Stoop, and bear the brood away.

Like the opening two verses of 'Bestow, dear Lord, upon our youth', this stanza contains a prayer framed in narrative. Here too, the imagery is drawn from a number of sources, with reference to the recurrent scriptural motif that likens God to a bird sheltering its brood. Indeed, with the final request of the verse, 'Hide them safe beneath thy wings', Cowper makes explicit the allusion to two texts in particular: Psalm 91:4, 'He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust'; and the words of Christ in Matthew 23:37, 'how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings'. In selecting this particular trope as the basis for his metaphor, once again Cowper crafts a set

³²⁶ *ibid*, p.164.

of images that harmonises with the local context of those for whom he wrote. The sight of a hen guarding its young against the predations of kestrels, kites, and buzzards would have been familiar to the children of this community in rural Buckinghamshire.

In addition to local pastoral imagery, Cowper also utilises motifs from a literary landscape that was equally familiar to Newton's congregation. In this final verse, for example, the poet reintroduces the antagonistic presence of 'Satan', in the form of a 'rav'nous bird of prey'.³²⁷ His construction of the demonic here is curiously hybridised, a careful marriage of verbs and adjectives that are either avian or human in connotation: 'wheeling' and 'watchful flight' are intertwined with 'malicious', 'foe', and 'stoop'. This sinister, anthropomorphised 'bird of prey' is strongly reminiscent of another literary representation of the Devil, 'Apollyon', the satanic being endowed with 'wings like a dragon' encountered by the protagonist in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.³²⁸ Given the popularity of "Pope Bunyan" and his works in Buckinghamshire—Bedford, his hometown is situated twelve miles from Olney—and Newton's consistent use of *Pilgrim's Progress* throughout his ministry at Olney, Cowper's allusion to this work, and this passage, in particular is unsurprising. Bunyan's influence upon both Newton and Cowper will receive extended treatment in chapter four, and so it will suffice here to make the brief but vital observation that Cowper's allusion here to a text that, other than the Bible, would have been the best known written work to the people of Olney is representative of his desire to produce hymns that would prove useful to that congregation, catering for their tastes in order to meet their needs. Such references would have been of greater use than the vast store of motifs available within the classical oeuvre, which Cowper was well versed in but the

³²⁷ *ibid.*

³²⁸ John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners and Pilgrim's Progress*, ed. by Roger Sharrock (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p.185.

people of Olney were likely not. In carefully selecting and subtly fashioning both the references themselves and the metaphors that he developed around them, Cowper was successfully bringing what Newton warily called the 'imagery and coloring of poetry' into the hymn, and demonstrating his skill as a poet in order to enhance, rather than hinder, the 'perspicuity', 'simplicity', and 'ease' of his verses, all without compromising the 'style and manner suited to the composition of hymns'. That same skill is also demonstrated by Cowper's use of 'directionality' in the three hymns he wrote for the New Year's service, and it is to this that we will now turn.

In his study of eighteenth-century Evangelical homiletics, Bob Tennant uses the term 'directionality' to dissect the grammar of the sermons.³²⁹ Evangelical sermons are particularly complex, he suggests, precisely because they commonly feature drastic directional shifts. Before embarking upon the preaching task the preacher might begin with some sort of prayer, a practice that is indicated by the titles of several of Newton's hymns: 'Prayer for a Blessing', for example. Understood in directional categories, this involves the preacher figuratively standing with his back to the congregation and beseeching God for clarity and insight in his own task, but also on their behalf for understanding and transformation. The congregation affirms the words of the prayer and self-applies them by adopting a prayerful posture during its delivery, and then collectively uttering the phrase, 'amen', or, 'let it be so', at its conclusion. This opening section at an end, the preacher then turns to face the congregation, and proceeds

³²⁹ Bob Tennant, 'The Sermons of the Eighteenth-Century Evangelicals', *The Oxford Handbook of the British Sermon*, ed. by Keith A. Francis et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p.117 [Tom Schwanda (see Bibliography) also uses the term in his brief but informative discussion of Cowper's hymns, however he limits his use of it to 'vertical' and 'horizontal' directionality. I build upon Tennant's work because, though it concerns a different type of text, is ultimately more helpful due to his recognition of the complexity of directionality beyond these two variations].

to address them on behalf of God. Where before God was addressed as 'Thee', 'Thou', and 'Thine', and the congregation referenced as 'They', 'Them', and 'Their'—or perhaps 'us', 'we', and 'our'—now the subject and object have exchanged places as the speaker reverses the direction of his speech. As Tennant writes: 'a sermon might be 'me' preaching to 'you', often about how 'he' (God) asks 'us' (Christians, humankind) to conduct ourselves towards 'them' (some third party).'³³⁰ The sermon at an end, the preacher might then pray to God that his words will alter the lives of those who have heard it, a petition that is echoed by the congregation themselves again via the 'amen', and thus, the direction is altered for the third and final time, and the movement ends.

Hymns are similarly complex in their directionality. A typical hymn might involve 'I' or 'we' (the individual or congregation) singing to 'Thou' (God) about a range of subjects: those relating to 'myself' or 'ourselves', such as confession of sin or expressions of personal gratitude; or those relating to God, lauding him for his acts or attributes. Congregational hymns, or hymns written for the use of a group, necessarily involve more nuanced directional forms. For example, in giving praise to Christ for his salvific grace, the collective might simultaneously declare points of soteriological doctrine to one another, or make petitions or confessions to God on each other's behalf in the collective 'we'. These dynamics are made more complicated by the fact that, in common with liturgical prayers, the words have been written by someone else, who, in the act of writing, has undertaken to pray, praise, preach, and confess on the congregation's behalf beforehand. In much the same fashion that the congregation affirms the prayer of the preacher by bowing their heads for the duration and uttering 'amen' at its conclusion, the

³³⁰ *ibid.*

congregation affirms the hymn of the hymnwriter by consenting to sing the words that have been composed for them.

Newton, as a mere 'versifier', appears to have given little thought to the potential that directional considerations hold for the hymn and its usefulness. As Madeleine Forell Marshall and Janet Todd argue:

the majority of Newton's hymns are flawed by his inability to subordinate his clerical self-consciousness to the hymn-writing task. [...] In too many hymns [...] we hear the preacher address his flock from the pulpit, a kind of address that is fundamentally unsuitable for congregational song. "I" signifies Newton: "you" are his parishioners.³³¹

Though the claim that this is true of the 'majority' is uncharitable, there is a definite inconsistency to the directionality of Newton's hymns. On occasion, the concluding censure levelled at him by Marshall and Todd is found to be true; for example, in 'Preaching to the Dry Bones',³³² one of the hymns written for the youth service, Newton speaks in the first person in a manner wholly unsuitable for a congregation:

Like him, around I cast my eye,
And oh! what heaps of bones appear!
Like him, by Jesus sent, I'll try,
For he can cause the dead to hear.

³³¹ Marshall and Todd (1982), p.92.

³³² *Olney Hymns*, p.198-9.

Newton's hymns are often directionally uncertain. It is often unclear who is addressing whom, and whether the speaker can self-consciously inhabit the 'I' of the verse. Throughout *Olney Hymns* in general and the hymns written for the New Year's service in particular, Newton seems to have largely avoided thorough directional consideration altogether.

Cowper, on the other hand, appears to have thought carefully about the potential role that directionality might have in deepening the impact of his hymns, especially those written for the reading context of the New Year's service. Within each, there is clear evidence of an authorial decision to utilise the congregational dynamic of this unique event for useful ends. Indeed, unlike Newton, the various directions taken by his verses are not only coherent, but consistently fore-fronted within the hymns themselves. 'Gracious Lord, our children see',³³³ for example, begins with the following prayer of preparation:

Gracious Lord, our children see,
By thy mercy we are free;
But shall these, alas! remain
Subjects still of Satan's reign?
Israel's young ones, when of old
Pharaoh threaten'd to withhold,
Then thy messenger said, 'No;
Let the children also go.'

³³³ *Poems*, i., p.164.

Whereas Newton's weekly catechism sessions were attended solely by the youth of Olney, the New Year's services drew their parents also. Cowper exploits this to full effect, employing third-person pronouns in order to separate the two readerships within the reading context of this service. Thus, he creates a directional dynamic between regenerate adults and their wayward offspring during the performance of the hymn. The primary speakers are the parents, who pray to God—addressed either as 'thy' or 'Gracious Lord'—on behalf of the 'young ones', 'our children', petitioning that 'these' might be shown 'mercy', and saved from 'Satan's reign'. Cowper maintains this directional dynamic throughout the entire hymn; each verse is punctuated with plural pronouns that differentiate the primary speakers, 'we' and 'our', from the subjects of the entreaty, 'they' and 'them'. Verse two reads:

When the angel of the Lord
Drawing forth his dreadful sword,
Slew, with an avenging hand,
All the first-born of the land:
Then thy people's doors he pass'd,
Where the bloody sign was plac'd;
Hear us, now, upon our knees,
Plead the blood of Christ for these!

Cowper's use of directionality here increases the impact of the homiletical section at the outset of this verse. Rather than addressing them in his own voice, the poet has one section of the congregation preach to and pray for the other: it is the parents who, speaking from a place of

liberation from sin, apply the Exodus story typologically to their children, likening their plight to that of 'Israel's young ones', and pleading with God that they might be released from captivity 'also' and allowed to join them in the spiritual "promised land".

Cowper recreates the same directional dynamic in each of the three hymns written for this particular gathering. The adult members of the congregation are consistently placed in the position of the primary speaker, while the children form a kind of secondary speaker, an audience within the performance, observing their parents as they offer prayers to God on their behalf, and contemplating their own captive state through the lens of those who are 'free'. Despite its careful and sophisticated construction, 'Gracious Lord, our children see' is less intricate than the other two hymns written for the New Year's service because its directionality is uniform. Throughout, Cowper has his primary speaker face in only one direction, albeit while casting long sideways glances at the secondary speaker. In 'Bestow, dear Lord, upon our youth'³³⁴ and 'Sin has undone our wretched race',³³⁵ however, the poet makes even more complex use of the same dynamic by introducing an alternating subject and object of address. Indeed, the fluctuating directionality of the latter is indicated by the title that Newton gives it in the collection, 'Pleading for and with the Children'. Beginning with a conventional doctrinal statement concerning the ruinous effects of sin and the restoration achieved by the atonement, the hymn moves into the second verse, which reads:

This we repeat from year to year,
And press upon our youth;

³³⁴ *ibid*, p.162.

³³⁵ *ibid*, p.163.

Lord, give them an attentive ear,

Lord, save them by thy truth.

The repetition of 'Lord' at the beginning of each of the last two lines leaves us in no doubt that these petitions are firmly directed at God, yet the first couplet is a little less clear: perhaps God is being addressed here, perhaps the primary speakers are addressing one another? This represents another extended sidelong glance at the secondary speakers, who are surely also being addressed here, if only implicitly. This dynamic continues into the following verse, which sees the primary speaker beseech God for 'blessings' upon the young congregants and for a 'happy hour' of salvation. In verses four and five, however, Cowper shifts the directionality completely:

We feel for your unhappy state,

(May you regard it too)

And would awhile ourselves forget,

To pour out pray'r for you.

We see, tho' you perceive it not,

Th'approaching, awful doom;

O tremble at the solemn thought,

And flee the wrath to come!

Having pled 'for' the youth, Cowper now has the adults plead 'with' them, addressing them in the second person, 'you' and 'your'. The implied directionality hinted at in the first three verses

and throughout 'Gracious Lord, our children see' is made explicit here, as one section of the congregation turns to remonstrate with the other, in a manner reminiscent of Cowper's own letters. Just as he 'prayed to the face' of his correspondents, now Cowper has the parents of Olney do the same with their errant offspring.

'Bestow, dear Lord, upon our youth'³³⁶ is structurally reminiscent of Cowper's correspondence, being arranged in similar fashion to one of the poet's epistolary sermons. Beginning with a prayer at the outset of verse one, the hymn moves to a reflection upon the text of scripture, before transitioning into application and exhortation in verses three, four, and five, and concluding with a final prayer in verse six. At the outset, Cowper has the adults petition God to 'Bestow' the 'gift of saving grace' upon the youth. He then proceeds to a meditation upon the nature of that grace, which, in the second verse, he likens to a 'plant' with 'pure and heavenly root'. Here, once more, the primary speaker's words are directed towards God, with several sideways glances towards the secondary speaker. At times these are quite conspicuous, for example, in the suggestion that Grace shows 'fairest in the *youngest*' and 'yields the sweetest fruit [emphasis my own]'. In the third verse, the primary speaker pivots away from God in order to address the secondary speaker in the strongest of terms, commanding 'Ye careless ones' to 'hear betimes' the 'voice of sovereign love!', and assuring them that while their 'youth is stain'd with many crimes', it is 'mercy' that 'reigns above'. Entering into the fifth stanza, declaration becomes exhortation, as the parents inform their children that the 'public pray'r' is 'made' and the 'secret tear' is shed on their behalf by all adults present, before imploring each to abandon the life of sin, to 'join the public prayer', and to 'shed yourselves a

³³⁶ *ibid*, p.162.

tear'. The hymn concludes with a complex invocation as, rather than simply perform the prayer in front of their children, the poet has the adults address God and the youth simultaneously, in a manner that speaks directly to the former while simultaneously informing the latter that they are doing so:

We pray that you may early prove

The Spirit's power to teach;

You cannot be too young to love

That Jesus whom we preach.

Cowper's use of directionality in these hymns serves to heighten their usefulness, meeting the perceived needs of the youth of Olney and taking full advantage of the reading context of the New Year's service. As with many of his Olney hymns, it is precisely this bespoke quality that renders them ill-suited to any other context, or indeed mass publication. These are hymns written to be sung before the delivery of a particular type of sermon to a particular group of people at a particular occasion. Moreover, they are predicated upon several pre-existing dynamics. The first is the relationship between the Evangelical adults of Olney and their children, and the hopes and expectations of the former that this event might instigate revival among the latter. The second is the relationship between the people of Olney and the landscapes they were familiar with, both literal and literary.

Though there are shades of the structure, content, and tone of Cowper's epistolary sermons here, these hymns are more sophisticated. In his verses, the poet recreates the authoritative, didactic, and exhortative texture of the correspondence while removing his own voice. Rather

than preaching to or praying for the children himself, Cowper increases the emotional impact of each appeal by placing it in the mouths of their parents. While we cannot know whether these hymns had the intended effect or not, the services themselves do appear to have inspired Evangelical conversions among the children of Olney: Newton, on 1st January 1772, wrote that 'several' of the young people 'are awakened and seeking the Lord'.³³⁷ As for the later poetry, usefulness was a central priority for Cowper in the process of composing these hymns, and that, as such, the resulting texts were largely shaped by the occasion, congregation, and reading contexts for which they were written: that they were designed to meet the needs of this specific readership, but also to cater to its tastes. The same is true of the larger body of hymns that Cowper composed for use at John Newton's weekly prayer meetings, as chapter two will now demonstrate.

³³⁷ Bull (1868), p.178.

Chapter II
Hymns for the Weekly Prayer Meeting: occasional, sacramental, liturgical, confessional,
devotional

Occasional, sacramental, and liturgical hymns

In April 1769, John Newton's weekly prayer meeting changed location for the third time in five years. Having outgrown the living room of the vicarage, by the permission of the Earl of Dartmouth proceedings were relocated to a room in the empty Great House in 1768. There it remained until, in the April and May of 1769, Newton was forced to move it to the largest room in the property, sizeable enough for 130 people.³³⁸ One of the earliest hymns that Cowper wrote for the use of the Olney congregation, 'Jesus, where'er thy people meet',³³⁹ was composed for this final relocation. At its heart is a prayer that Christ would 'renew' the 'mercies' experienced in the old venue 'here', in this new meeting place:

Here may we prove the pow'r of pray'r,
To strengthen faith, and sweeten care;
To teach our faint desires to rise,
And bring all heav'n before our eyes.

³³⁸ Wright (1886), p.29; Hindmarsh (1996), p.199.

³³⁹ *Poems*, i., p.166.

The easy construction of this verse—its fusion of rolling iambic tetrameter with alliteration, consonance, and parallelism—belies its quiet complexity. As the prayer develops, Cowper carefully directs it toward specific sanctificative ends. His speaker calls upon God to ‘strengthen’ the collective ‘faith’ of the gathering, to ‘sweeten’ their ‘care’ toward one another, and ‘teach’ their ‘faint desires’ to ‘rise’. Drawing the eye outward and upward, the trajectory of these requests moves from the introspective (an internal growth of personal ‘faith’), to the extrospective (sweetened communal harmony), to the ‘superspective’: spiritual ecstasy, and the unveiling of ‘all heav’n’. This revivalist spirituality is also reflected in the hymn’s conclusion, a petition that God would ‘bless’ the gathering by causing a ‘large encrease’, a fervent prayer that the unsaved of Olney would repent, believe, and join.

Though it is certain that the poet’s words here and elsewhere were in some sense influenced by his own spiritual and psychological experiences, combined textual and contextual study of this hymn leaves no doubt that, for the critic, these experiences should be a secondary consideration. Its careful design and quiet authority, like the hymns thus far examined, is indicative of the controlled and precise intentions of an author who did not write in order to express despair or ecstasy, but to provide his readership with something that would prove useful on a single occasion, meeting a particular set of needs that were dictated by a particular reading context.

While this bespoke and occasional quality need not necessarily negate any mindfulness of potential future publication on Cowper’s part, it is clear that, unlike Charles Wesley, he did not write this hymn for a broader readership beyond his immediate locale. As with his hymns for

the New Year's service, 'Jesus, where'er thy people meet'³⁴⁰ contains several textual clues which, its known provenance aside, point towards its being written for the use of a specific congregation on a specific occasion. Cowper's use of the word 'here' three times roots the hymn in Olney, and the prayer, with its request to 'renew' the 'mercies' of the previous meeting space, is built upon an implied shared experience among the speakers. Furthermore, his reference to 'this wider space' makes the verses unsuitable for a congregation that is simply moving to a different meeting space, and his repeated claim that 'we are few' in verse six precludes the hymn from being used by a large gathering. For other contexts, therefore, 'Jesus, where'er thy people meet' is of limited use. For the context for which it was written, however, it must surely have proved to be profoundly useful: a prayer that the Olney Evangelical community could properly inhabit because it was written for an occasion that they would experience together, tailored to their spirituality, and concerned with desires that they all shared.

The gathering for which Cowper wrote 'Jesus, where'er thy people meet' was instituted by John Newton soon after his arrival in Olney in 1764. Held on Tuesday and Sunday evenings, its aim was to provide a place for the more passionately Evangelical members of the local congregation to grow in their respective faiths.³⁴¹ Such meetings were common practice among the different branches of the revivalist movement during the mid-eighteenth century. Most notably, John Wesley instituted Methodist circuits across the British isles, a series of quasi-diocese made up of numerous 'bands', or meeting groups, and served by itinerant Methodist preachers, each of whom roved throughout his appointed circuit, speaking at

³⁴⁰ *ibid*, p.166.

³⁴¹ Hindmarsh (1996), p.198-9.

different meetings from week to week.³⁴² Though of a piece with this movement, Newton's gatherings must be placed in a slightly different category. As the priest-in-charge at Olney, his meeting did not (either explicitly or implicitly) subvert, compete with, or diverge from the ministry of SS Peter and Paul; rather, it was a key component of the broader sphere and outreach of his church and parish. By contrast, Wesley's societies were consistently poorly received by dioceses across the nation, and his preachers, who were rarely ordained, often came to be viewed by the Methodist laity as an alternative clergy, with Wesley himself functioning in the community as its head. Consequently, though band members were encouraged to attend their local church services, take communion from their local priest, and generally consider themselves *Ecclesia intra Ecclesiam*, many of the Methodist meetings developed a separate culture and practice, and began to operate as *Ecclesia extra Ecclesiam* long before the final split from the Church of England in 1795. Although Newton's meetings became, as Hindmarsh puts it, 'the nerve-centre of his ministry', they were always couched within a broadly faithful Anglican ecclesiology.³⁴³ Those who attended his Sunday and Tuesday evening meetings also attended Sunday morning services, with the liturgy read from the *Book of Common Prayer* and sermons delivered on the lectionary text. Both the gatherings and the services were led by him, and, thus, both were integrated under his presbyterial authority.³⁴⁴

The effects of this integration are evident in *Olney Hymns*, especially in the section in Book II titled, 'Sacramental Hymns', where several pieces are intended to aid in preparation for receipt of Communion. The exact manner in which these hymns were used is unclear, since hymn-

³⁴² Rupp (1986), p.393.

³⁴³ Hindmarsh (1996), p.200.

³⁴⁴ *ibid.*

singing alongside the liturgy proper was not permitted in the Church of England until 1820.³⁴⁵ There is little evidence that, fifty years prior to this, Newton was pairing contemporary hymns with the liturgy at SS Peter and Paul, and the paucity of other Evangelical incumbents who were willing to use such hymns in church (Martin Madan appears to have been an exception, and his situation at the Lock Hospital chapel was unusual in any case) indicates that such an innovation with the service of Holy Communion would have represented an extraordinary, even scandalous, departure from established Anglican practice. It is more likely that the weekly meetings preceding sacrament Sunday were devoted to preparing those present for participation in Communion. Though, as Bruce Hindmarsh points out, there is nothing in either Newton's diaries or correspondence confirming the establishment of this practice at Olney, the combination of his high view of the feast and his introduction of the practice at St Mary Woolnoth renders it not unlikely that he sought to prepare the people of Olney via a similar means: a gathering dedicated to solemn prayer, contemplation, and a sermon, all to ready the faithful for the celebration of the Lord's Supper.³⁴⁶ The strongest positive evidence that Newton inaugurated this practice at Olney, albeit perhaps inconsistently and infrequently, is the 'Sacramental Hymns' themselves, whose existence it is difficult to explain otherwise.

Cowper contributed two hymns to be sung on these occasions: 'This is the feast of heav'nly wine'³⁴⁷ and 'The Saviour! what a noble flame'.³⁴⁸ Both hymns are redolent with the language, themes, and movements of the Holy Communion liturgy in *The Book of Common Prayer*. The

³⁴⁵ Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, 'Evangelical Anglican Hymnists', *Hymns and Hymnody, Volume Two: from Catholic Europe to Protestant Europe*, ed. by Mark A. Lamport et al (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019), p.243-4.

³⁴⁶ For commentary on Newton's view of Communion and inauguration of preparatory services at St Mary Woolnoth, see: Hindmarsh (1996), p.191.

³⁴⁷ *Poems*, i., p.167.

³⁴⁸ *ibid*, p.168.

declaration, 'Lord, we return thee what we can!', in the fourth verse of 'The Saviour! what a noble flame' is a shortened expression of the corporate petitional response given immediately after the communication of the elements, that God would 'mercifully [...] accept this our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving'. Cowper's references to the sacrament as a 'feast' in 'This is the feast of heav'nly wine' is in keeping with the language of the liturgy, and his warning to the faithful that they should not 'dare refuse / The banquet spread for you' is an abbreviation of the same warning found at its outset: 'I bid you all that are here present; and beseech you, for the Lord Jesus Christ's sake, that ye will not refuse to come thereto, being so lovingly called and bidden by God himself'. In his excellent close reading of 'This is the feast of heav'nly wine',³⁴⁹ Philip Seddon notes the 'delight' that Cowper derives from 'taking risks with dangerous language for the sacrament':³⁵⁰

This is the feast of heav'nly wine,

And God invites to sup;

The juices of the living vine

Were press'd, to fill the cup.

Oh, bless the Saviour, ye that eat,

With royal dainties fed;

Not heav'n affords a costlier treat,

For Jesus is the bread!

³⁴⁹ *ibid*, p.167.

³⁵⁰ Philip Seddon, *'And I Shall See His Face': the sacramental hymns of John Newton and William Cowper* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2013), p.17.

Seddon's comment that here Cowper 'refuses to pit a bland realism which threatens to overrule the communion elements [...] against mere metaphor which reduces them to illustrative symbolism' is well observed.³⁵¹ The bread and wine, in Cowper's presentation of them, are substantially ordinary, yet within the context of the 'feast' they take on a 'heav'nly' and 'royal' significance. The poet structures the opening two verses carefully, beginning each with a couplet on physical participation in the sacrament and ending with a reflection on the symbolic significance of such participation: 'The juices of the living vine/ Were press'd, to fill the cup', he writes at the close of the first verse; 'Jesus is the bread!' at the close of the second. This transition, particularly in the first verse, is almost imperceptible. The description of the 'pressed' fruit of 'the living vine' at the end of the verse is commensurate with the contents of the physical communion cup, yet it is primarily a metaphorical reference to Christ, 'the living vine', whose shed blood makes the sacramental 'feast' possible. Cowper might have chosen any other representation of the atonement, yet he specifically selects imagery that blurs the line between the first couplet and the second. Importantly, that same line is left visible enough to prevent theological error by his use of language drawn from the text of scripture: the 'living vine' is a direct reference to John 15:5, 'I am the vine', and 'Jesus is the bread!' is taken from John 6:35, 'I am the bread of life'. By constructing the verses in this way, Cowper subtly draws his speaker through the physical receipt of the sacrament to a scriptural reflection on what is signified in the act, retaining the mystery of the former while ensuring that the latter does not stray into becoming a meditation solely upon either the elements or the act of eating them in and of themselves: 'Jesus is the bread!', is the conclusion of these verses, rather than, 'The bread is Jesus!'. In balancing these elements—spiritually-charged language with scriptural

³⁵¹ *ibid*, p.16.

references, an imaginative approach to the sacrament with subtle doctrinal clarity, and quiet, shaping didacticism framed in such a manner that meditation is not excluded—Cowper effectively balances the needs and tastes of his readership in the composition of a hymn fit for this unique reading context.

From the year of Newton's arrival in Olney the popularity of both his church services and informal gatherings increased steadily, to the extent that, in addition to the relocation of the Tuesday night meeting, as early as 1765 he had cause to order the installation of a new balcony (the very balcony in which Cowper would sit) in the north aisle of the church building to make room for his swelling congregation.³⁵² Newton's weekly meetings followed a loose but consistent format. Typically, they commenced with extemporaneous prayer, before moving on to conversation over matters spiritual, 'the singing of a hymn', and a sermon.³⁵³ Since he was able to deliver Evangelical sermons on scriptural texts from the pulpit of his church, Newton seems to have felt that this freed him to select more diverse sources to preach from at the Great House. In addition to sermons on the Bible, his diary records what Hindmarsh refers to as 'informal discourses' on alternative texts, including his own conversion story, *Pilgrim's Progress*, and hymns.³⁵⁴

As with the New Year's services, this spoken address to the faithful was always the central feature of the meeting. Newton himself, who unfailingly recorded the passage or topic on which he preached in his diary often to the exclusion of all other comment, clearly felt this element to be of singular import, so much so that he personally composed a series of 'Short

³⁵² Hindmarsh (1996), p.186.

³⁵³ *ibid*, p.199.

³⁵⁴ *ibid*.

Hymns' explicitly for the purpose of preparing the congregation, seven under the subcategory of 'Before Sermon'³⁵⁵ and eight under 'After Sermon'.³⁵⁶ Insofar as Newton's weekly meetings had a liturgy—an informal yet consistent order of regular practices—these hymns are best understood as performing a quasi-liturgical function. Though it is not sorted into either of the formal sections in *Olney Hymns*, Cowper's hymn, 'Ye sons of earth prepare the plough',³⁵⁷ appears to have been written for the same purpose. Almost identical to 'Bestow, dear Lord, upon our youth', a hymn written to prepare the young people of Olney to hear a sermon, this hymn applies the Parable of the Sower to the gathered members of the Olney cell. Unlike his contributions to the New Year's service, there is no single group within the congregation at whom the message is specifically directed; it is a hymn for all present, and the uncomplicated directionality of its verses reflects this. At the outset, Cowper has his speakers urge one another, 'Ye sons of earth', to 'prepare the plough' and 'break up your fallow ground!' in preparation for the 'blessings' of 'The Sower'. Having passed through each of the warning images of the parable—the 'stony soil', the 'thorny ground', and the 'beaten path and highway side'—the hymn concludes by transitioning directionally into a collective 'we', as the speakers turn from addressing one another to beseech God that the coming sermon would yield a 'golden store':

Father of mercies we have need
Of thy preparing grace;
Let the same hand that gives the seed,
Provide a fruitful place.

³⁵⁵ *Olney Hymns*, p.415-18.

³⁵⁶ *ibid*, p.419-22.

³⁵⁷ *Poems*, i., p.155.

Though the term ‘quasi-liturgical’ is an accurate category for the hymns in this section, the use of it brings to the surface questions that it is difficult to answer. While the practice of utilising hymns in conjunction with sermons as a means of preparation and consolidation is attested to by the named subsections assigned to those roles (both for the weekly meeting and the annual youth service), we have no indication as to how regularly such hymns were deployed, or if they were reused. Although its tone and content would suggest that ‘Ye sons of earth prepare the plough’ belongs in the same category—indeed, this is the best explanation for the text—it remains unclear as to whether it ought to be understood as a hymn that saw regular quasi-liturgical use in that preparatory role, or whether it was used only once, either because it was composed for one particular occasion or because it fell by the wayside.

The uncertainty arises from the dearth of supporting material, detailed provenance, or commentary concerning *Olney Hymns* either in the hymnbook itself or in the correspondence and diaries of either contributor. Where Newton’s clarifying subheadings are absent, however, we must rely on the texts themselves. The next section examines the handful of Cowper’s hymns written in the confessional and devotional mode, and argues that they were written ‘for the use’ of the weekly meeting.

Confessional and devotional hymns

The use of confessional hymns in corporate ecclesial settings finds its origins in the utilisation of the penitential Psalms³⁵⁸ for a similar purpose; the collective incantation of the fifty-first

³⁵⁸ Ps.6, Ps.32, Ps.38, Ps.51, Ps.102, Ps.130, and Ps.143.

Psalm, for example, is the designated means of confessing personal sin congregationally in the Communion Service in the *Book of Common Prayer*.³⁵⁹

[3] For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me. [4] Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest. Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.³⁶⁰

The seven penitential Psalms, variously used for the corporate confession or lamentation of sin alongside Anglican liturgy, are framed in the first person. This is profoundly relevant to our inquiry because it establishes the collective confession of sin out loud and via verses written in the first person as normative practice. In *Olney Hymns* several pieces by Newton might be mistaken for personal confessions of sin, but appear to have been composed in this mode, for the purposes of providing a speaker, or a group, with a vehicle for acknowledging transgression and seeking forgiveness and restoration from God.³⁶¹ In 'Physician of my sin-sick soul',³⁶² for example, we read:

I would disclose my whole complaint,
But where shall I begin?
No words of mine can fully-paint
That worst distemper, sin.

³⁵⁹ See: Charles Whitworth, 'The Penitential Psalms and Ash Wednesday Services in the *Book of Common Prayer*', *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique* [Online], v.22, no.1 (2017): pp.1-9.

³⁶⁰ Ps.51:3-5.

³⁶¹ See *Olney Hymns*: i.xxx, i.cvi, i.cxxix, iii.vi, iii.vii.

³⁶² *ibid*, p.103-4.

It lies not in a single part,
But thro' my frame is spread;
A burning fever in my heart,
A palsy in my head.

It makes me deaf, and dumb, and blind,
And impotent and lame;
And overclouds, and fills my mind,
With folly, fear, and shame.

A thousand evil thoughts intrude
Tumultuous in my breast;
Which indispose me for my food,
And rob me of my rest.

Like the psalms, these verses are written in the first person singular, with God addressed in the second person. Like the psalmist, Newton eschews the naming of any explicit sin, choosing instead to frame this confession as a broad lamentation of the sinful state. Sin 'lies not in a single' place or action, but is 'spread' throughout, and, as in the psalm, is chiefly located in the thought life, the 'inward parts', of the speaker. Even Newton's pathologization of sin—a 'distemper', a 'burning fever', and 'palsy' that removes the appetite, causes insomnia, and renders the speaker 'deaf', 'dumb', 'blind', 'impotent', and 'lame'—finds its origin in the psalmic tradition. These verses in particular echo the words of Psalm 102:3-4: 'my bones are

burned as an hearth. My heart is smitten, and withered like grass; so that I forget to eat my bread’.

With its focus upon self-contemplation, ‘Dear Lord accept a sinful heart’³⁶³ is an example of a Cowper hymn written in the confessional mode:

Dear LORD accept a sinful heart,
Which of itself complains
And mourns, with much and frequent smart,
The evil it contains.

By beginning the hymn with the phrase, ‘Dear LORD’, Cowper places it firmly within the penitential psalmic tradition. Four of the psalms within this subcategory begin with the phrase, ‘O LORD’, the capitalisation of which signifies that the Hebrew term being translated here is the tetragrammaton, YHWH—the name used to convey the ineffability of God.³⁶⁴ In prefacing this lofty title with the word, ‘Dear’, Cowper softens the speaker’s approach to God, while retaining the repentant reverence of the psalmic mode. This intimate tone is maintained throughout as, once again, God is addressed as ‘thou’, and the speaker refers to him or herself in the first person singular, ‘I’, ‘my’, or ‘me’.

Having beseeched God to ‘accept’ the approach of a ‘sinful heart’, and acknowledged the ‘evil it contains’, the hymn goes on to list and lament an array of sins. Verse two confesses the ‘fiery

³⁶³ *Poems*, i., p.182-3.

³⁶⁴ Ps.6, Ps.38, Ps.102, and Ps.143.

seeds of anger' that 'lurk' within, and verse three confesses a temptation toward "works righteousness"—a tendency that, as we have seen in our re-appraisal of his character and role at Olney, Cowper often preached against in his epistolary sermons—with references to 'Legality' and the desire to 'purchase life' rather than rest in faith. In the same verse the poet has the speaker confess 'discontent', and sinful attempts to 'prescribe' how God would provide for and 'deal with' the faithful, while verses four and five confess 'unbelief' and 'Presumption', and prayer made difficult by 'thoughts' that are 'eager' to 'roam'. The final verse reads:

Oh, cleanse me in a Saviour's blood,
Transform me by thy pow'r,
And make me thy belov'd abode,
And let me roam no more.

Both the tone and arc of this hymn, beginning with its comprehensive and sorrowful enumeration of sins and ending with a restorative supplication, follows the structure of the fifty-first Psalm, which opens with a lengthy confession, 'Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity and cleanse me from my sin',³⁶⁵ and concludes in a prayer of restoration: 'Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. [...] Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit'.³⁶⁶ Where the hymn departs from this psalm, and also Newton's confessional hymns, is in its references to specific sins. This tabulatory structure, however, appears to be aimed at comprehensiveness and generality, at times featuring several unrelated sins piled into a single verse in what is a clear attempt to cover as many bases as

³⁶⁵ Ps. 51:2.

³⁶⁶ Ps. 51:10-12.

possible. The usefulness of this hymn is found, therefore, both in this broadness—its verses could be used by any Evangelical to describe their own personal struggles and experiences—and in its clear self-identification with the penitential psalms, a confessional mode with which the Olney congregation would have been familiar.

Where a confessional posture necessitates that the speaker address God directly, devotion is inclusive of more diverse directionalities. The aim of the devotional hymn—to facilitate the exaltation of the attributes and works of God and to provide space for reflection on the manifestation of these theological principles in one's life—allows for God to be addressed either directly in the second person or indirectly in the third. In 'My song shall bless the Lord of all',³⁶⁷ for example, the poet constructs a catena of doxological proclamations on the Divine Attributes in the latter mode. Verse one praises the omnipotence of God, naming him as both 'Saviour' and the 'great Supreme', while verse two expounds the aseity of God, declaring him to be 'Without beginning, or decline'. Cowper extends this meditation via chiasm, a poetic device common throughout the psalms. In the concluding couplet God is given the central place in the verse, and takes the role of both object and subject consecutively:³⁶⁸

[a] Eternal ages saw

[b] Him shine,/

³⁶⁷ *Poems*, i., p.165.

³⁶⁸ Cowper makes use of this same technique in several other places. In 'This is the feast of heav'nly wine' (*Poems*, i., p.167), for example, we see an identical **[abba]** chiastic structure at the conclusion of the hymn, with the speaker and Christ alternating in their occupation of the subject and object:

Surely [a] the Lord will welcome [b] me,
And [b] I shall see [a] his face.

[b] He shines

[a] eternal ages hence.

In verses four and five the poet continues his enumeration of the Divine Attributes, juxtaposing the immanence of God with his transcendence: ‘Emmanuel’ —“God with us” —and the babe ‘in the manger’, is simultaneously acknowledged to be the ‘Almighty ruler of the sky’, and addressed by the title, ‘Jehovah’, the latinised rendering of the tetragrammaton.

The directionality of this hymn, which places the speaker in the first person singular and God in the third person, gives it a declarative tone once more reminiscent of the Psalmist. Psalm 34:1-4, for example, reads,

[1] I will bless the LORD at all times: his praise shall continually be in my mouth.

[2] My soul shall make her boast in the LORD: the humble shall hear thereof, and be glad.

[3] O magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together.

[4] I sought the LORD, and he heard me, and delivered me from all my fears.

And Psalm 103:1-4:

[1] Bless the LORD, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name.

[2] Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits:

[3] Who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases;

[4] Who redeemeth thy life from destruction; who crowneth thee with loving-kindness
and tender mercies [...].

Matthew Henry writes of this devotional mode that it is directed towards 'stirring up' both 'others' and oneself 'to praise God'. 'The psalmist', he explains, 'Stirs up himself, and his own soul', communicating 'with his own heart', and exciting 'his own soul to that which is good'.³⁶⁹ Cowper frames his own laudatory statements within this psalmic mode; although his speakers are primarily addressing reverent proclamations about God to one another, there is a clear sense in which these statements are also addressed to themselves. Indeed, this is particularly visible in Cowper's insertion of specific responses to each exaltative statement in the form of a series of declaratives in the first person singular: 'My song shall bless the Lord of all', 'My praise shall climb to his abode', 'My well-plac'd hopes with joy I see', and

My bosom glows with heav'nly zeal

To worship him who dy'd for me.³⁷⁰

Cowper's more reflective devotionals are similarly designed to 'stir up' an inner 'heav'nly zeal', though by the alternative means of provoking consideration of the work of God within the life of the speaker. With the same chief end of, as Newton wrote in his preface to *Olney Hymns*, 'promoting the faith' of the meeting's members, in 'Lord my soul with pleasure springs'³⁷¹ Cowper once more forms the verses around a series of devotional declarations, expressions of love for God and for the life of faith. The first two verses read:

³⁶⁹ Henry (1737), ii., Ps.103.

³⁷⁰ *Poems*, i., p.165.

³⁷¹ *ibid*, p.189-90.

Lord my soul with pleasure springs,
When Jesus' name I hear;
And when God the Spirit brings
The word of promise near:
Beauties too, in holiness,
Still delighted I perceive;
Nor have words that can express
The joys thy precepts give.

Cloth'd in sanctity and grace,
How sweet it is to see
Those who love thee as they pass,
Or when they wait on thee:
Pleasant too, to sit and tell
What we owe to love divine;
Till our bosoms grateful swell,
And eyes begin to shine.

Where 'My song shall bless the Lord of all' is intended to serve as a vehicle for the exaltation of God, in these verses Cowper provides his speaker with a means by which they might reflect upon and express gratitude for the sanctificative work of God in their own lives. In the first verse, the poet meditates upon the sense of spiritual enervation experienced in the hearing of profound theological truths, the speaking of the 'name' of 'Jesus', and of a 'word of promise'

brought 'near' by 'God the Spirit'. Cowper's recourse to this latter phrase gives some small indication of the influence of certain Puritan divines on the theological content of his hymns. Lengthy study of this will be made in chapters four and five, particularly concerning the significance of John Owen for Cowper's composition, and so here it will suffice to note that the phrase, 'word of promise', is likely drawn from Owen. In his 1669 work, *A Practical Exposition on the CXXX Psalm*, the theologian defines a 'word of promise' as a scriptural reminder of the promises of God to the believer: 'the souls great supportment in waiting for God'.³⁷² Such a 'Word', he continues, is an encouragement to the believer because it is usually constitutive of a personal revelation of the attributes, nature, and character of God: it is 'declarative of God, his Mind and his Will', he writes, 'a declaration of the Nature of God, especially his Goodness, Grace and Love'.³⁷³ Owen reasons that the natural consequence of such a declaration is the 'communicati[on] of grace and strength to the soul'.³⁷⁴ While Cowper's reference here to the 'pleasure' of the 'word of promise' is inclusive of a private encounter with God, perhaps in prayer or reading the Bible, the communal elements that dominate the rest of the verses suggest that he is writing chiefly with reference to the weekly meeting, with its prayer, conversation, and sermon. Indeed, this reading is made even more likely by his choice of Owen's term, which focuses on the declarative and scriptural nature of the 'word of promise'; this particular encouragement, according to Owen's definition of it, is usually received aurally, and via the act of preaching.

There is an observational quality to this hymn, which presages something of the type of poet that Cowper was to become. That he is, at least in part, seeking to evoke the weekly gathering

³⁷² John Owen, *A Practical Exposition on the CXXX Psalm* (England, 1669), p.397.

³⁷³ *ibid*, p.398.

³⁷⁴ *ibid*.

here is strongly suggested by the final four lines of the second verse; Cowper's description of "sitting" and "telling" what 'we owe to love divine' is powerfully reminiscent of his portrayal of the 'spiritual converse' and communal intimacy of the meeting in his letters—'quickening discourse', undergirded by a sense of 'unity', 'as becomes brethren'. Rather than simply describing past meetings, however, Cowper's hymn, used in the context of Newton's gathering, represents an attempt to define, or set the tone, of future meetings. By inhabiting its verses, the speaker engages in a creative re-imagining of what the meeting has been in the past in order to shape what it might be in the future, and re-devotes themselves to this vision of spiritually-energised *koinonia*: one where those present might expect to speak of 'what we owe to love divine', receive the 'word of promise', and 'perceive' the 'beauties' of 'holiness' until 'our bosoms grateful swell, /And eyes begin to shine'.

The hymns studied in this chapter offer glimpses of the qualities described by Cowper's biographers and present in his letters. Fused with his burgeoning poetic skill, there are elements indicative of a sophisticated theological mind: his creative merging of scriptural texts, command of various psalmic modes, allusions to the *Book of Common Prayer*, and precise use of directionality. These hymns were not written from 'down there in the pew', and nor are they mere 'reports'; rather, they quietly emanate the pastoral instinct, theological clarity, and desire for usefulness to which his correspondence and early biographies attest.

This chapter has demonstrated the ancillary role that hymns played within the Olney meeting. The hymns examined were composed expressly to augment, prepare for, respond to, or facilitate engagement with another component, most commonly the informal sermon or lecture delivered by Newton. Such engagement might be effected by any number and

combination of elements within a single hymn: summative elements, which outline the text, topic, or story upon which Newton was to preach; applicatory elements, which seek to apply the text, topic, or story to the life of the speaker(s); exhortative elements, in which the speaker(s) exhort one another and themselves to prepare heart and mind to hear and respond rightly to the sermon; supplicatory elements, in which the speaker(s) beseech God for growth in sanctification or greater understanding; exaltative elements, in which the speaker(s) offer laud to God for his works, promises, or attributes; autobiographical elements, in which the speaker(s) reflect on the impact of these theological concepts in their own lives, in their experience of both conversion and sanctification; and confessional elements, in which the speaker(s) confess sin to God and one another.

Each of the hymns written for the weekly meeting by Cowper and Newton is constituted of a selection of these elements. As we might expect from authors with a ministerial disposition who wrote for the benefit of their readership, the changing emphases and elemental make-up of the hymns appears to coincide with what, in the days and hours leading up to the meeting, the two men felt would be most useful for their readers. Indeed, just as we would anticipate this from a set of sermons, so we should expect it from Cowper's Olney hymns, especially because, as the next chapter argues, a significant number of them were composed to serve as the basis for Newton's sermons.

It is precisely the occasional, bespoke quality of each individual text that makes the collection seem chaotic as a whole. Such heterogeneity, alongside the scarcity of supporting or explanatory material written by either author, means that it is challenging to provide a systematic account of Cowper's hymns. This aspect of *Olney Hymns*—we might even call it a

defining feature—runs counter to the idea that both Newton and Cowper wrote with eventual publication and a broader readership at the forefront of their minds. Though this certainly became the case for the former, who carried on with the task late into the 1770s, careful reading of Cowper's Olney hymns leaves the strong impression that if he ever did write with a non-local readership in mind then he did so rarely, and when he did it remained peripheral and secondary to his primary readership. From the texts themselves, it appears that the immediate needs and tastes of the people of Olney and the reading context of the upcoming meeting—its planned emphasis, and Newton's idea of the topic or text on which he planned to speak—were his first concern when composing the majority of his hymns.

This chapter has isolated and examined the relatively small handful of hymns that are specifically occasional or can be identified as having being written for sacramental, preparatory, confessional, or devotional purposes by either Newton's peritext or by their devotion to one particular element, tone, or mode. The next will examine the majority of Cowper's contributions to the collection: homiletical, or 'expoundable', hymns, which, in line with Newton's own practice, were composed as preaching texts for the weekly meeting.

Chapter III
Hymns for the Weekly Prayer Meeting: Cowper's homiletical hymnody

Newton's few references to hymn-writing in his diary reveal that, in addition to the standard practices of collective devotion, confession, and praise, while at Olney he devised a further novel use for verses composed for the weekly meeting. From the beginning of his extra-liturgical ministry in 1765, the new curate began to utilise hymns—presumably those of Isaac Watts or Phillip Doddridge—as 'the basis' of his informal sermons.³⁷⁵ During the next seven years, Newton gradually transitioned to writing his own hymns tailored specifically to this purpose, and thus, in an entry written after the Sunday evening prayer meeting on 6 December 1772, we find the following: 'Expounded my new hymn at the Great house on the subject of a burdened sinner'.³⁷⁶ Along the same lines, his note for Tuesday 30 November 1773 reads: 'Finished a hymn on the barren fig-tree. I usually make one hymn a week to expound at the Great House'.³⁷⁷

Having used them as preaching texts for some time, by 1772-1773 Newton was engaged in the practice of regularly 'making' hymns specifically to serve as the basis for sermons delivered at his weekly meetings. A topical hymn, written 'on the subject of a burdened sinner', would have provided the basis for a topical sermon, preached to those struggling with the burden of sin,

³⁷⁵ He distributed hymnbooks by the former and books by the latter to his parishioners; Hindmarsh (1996), p.199.

³⁷⁶ Bull (1868), p.183.

³⁷⁷ *ibid*, p.199.

while a text-based hymn ‘on the barren fig-tree’ would have aided an exegetical sermon on a Biblical text. This is strongly implied by the peritext with which each hymn is framed; ‘The blasted fig-tree’³⁷⁸ is found in Book I of *Olney Hymns*, ‘On Select Passages of Scripture’, with a reference to Mark 11:20, while ‘The burdened sinner’³⁷⁹ is included without scriptural references in Book III, ‘On the Rise, Progress, Changes, and Comforts of the Spiritual Life’. To these two types of hymn and the sermon inferred from them we must add a third. Newton also preached with reference to his own experience of the life of faith and, corresponding with this concern, many of his hymns are experiential in nature.³⁸⁰

Newton’s diary entries, though brief, are extremely significant to our inquiry. The information they contain opens up a fascinating new context within which to consider Cowper’s *Olney Hymns*, many of which are otherwise difficult to place. Contemporary readers of *Olney Hymns*—especially those that have read the scholarship concerning his contributions to the collection—must surely wonder why Cowper wrote twelve expository hymns on scripture passages, two expository hymns on *Pilgrim’s Progress* (more on this in chapter four), two didactic hymns on the spiritual practices of prayer and Bible reading, eight didactic hymns on specific theological and applied theological issues, and seven hymns on various aspects of the Christian life. Crucially, readers must also wonder why several of these hymns appear to form part of a series on the same topic or Biblical book, why they often seem to be referring to local issues, why it is that in each hymn Cowper tends to focus on one subject or text, and why his concern is usually towards carefully explaining or exegeting some meaning from that subject: why, in short, his approach and tone are less private, meditative, and introspective than

³⁷⁸ *Olney Hymns*, p.120-1.

³⁷⁹ *ibid*, p.315-7.

³⁸⁰ Hindmarsh (1996), p.198.

homiletical, didactic, and local. In Newton's diary we find a potential answer to these questions. This hypothesis is made even more likely by what we have uncovered regarding Cowper's hymns for the New Year's services, his sacramental hymns, and his hymn for the relocation of the prayer meeting, all of which were clearly written at Newton's behest for the use of the weekly meeting. The news, therefore, that Newton regularly 'made' hymns on subjects scriptural, topical, and experiential to serve as preaching texts for the same meeting naturally leads us to ask: did he engage Cowper to do likewise?

The 'expoundable' hymn

What exactly is an 'expoundable' hymn, and what sort of text is necessary for the fulfilment of such a role? To expound, in Samuel Johnson's estimation, is 'to explain', 'to interpret', and 'to shew the meaning of'.³⁸¹ In his influential manual on homiletics, *The Art of Prophesying* (first published in English in 1606), Puritan theologian William Perkins defines the 'order and sum of the sacred and only method of preaching' as constitutive of four elements: first, the reading out-loud of 'the text' of 'canonical scriptures'; secondly, the explanation of its 'sense and understanding'; thirdly, the proffering of 'profitable points of doctrine'; and fourthly, the application of these doctrines 'rightly to the life and manners of men'.³⁸² This definition maps onto the three types of Newton sermon identified above. In each case, a primary text—whether scripture, a received set of doctrines or topics, or a description of an element of the Christian experience—is subject to the scrutiny of explanation, interpretation, and application.

³⁸¹ "expound, v.", Johnson, *Dictionary* (1755), i.

³⁸² For information concerning the influence of Perkins on Puritan and Evangelical preaching, see: W. B. Patterson, *William Perkins and the Making of Protestant England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Ian Breward (ed.), *The Work of William Perkins*, trans. by Thomas Tuke (Abingdon: The Sutton Courtenay Press, 1970), p.328.

In the composition of a sermon, the result of this scrutiny is a secondary text, either pre-written, pre-planned, or delivered extemporaneously in reaction to the primary text.

What relation does an expoundable hymn have to these two different types of text? Where on an axis between primary and secondary does such a hymn sit? Should the hymnwriter expound upon the primary text himself, or should his efforts be geared towards offering a summary of it? In the first case, the resulting hymn is a kind of quasi-secondary text, a versified exposition that the preacher then expands upon, rather like preaching a sermon upon a sermon. If the hymnwriter and the preacher are different people (as was the case with the hymns that we will examine here), then this is a profoundly complex interaction: a secondary text (sermon), produced via an engagement with an quasi-secondary text (hymn) by a different author, which was in turn produced via an engagement with a primary text (scripture, topic, experience). Concerning the second case, if the goal of the hymnwriter is merely to summarise then the hymn becomes a kind of quasi-primary text. Here, the task of exposition remains with the preacher (though, as we will see shortly, this claim is somewhat reductive), whose secondary text expounds upon both the primary text and quasi-primary text. Whether the result of the hymnwriter's labours is a quasi-primary or quasi-secondary text, in either case, an expoundable hymn is evidently more complicated than it might first appear.

Marshall and Todd begin to tackle these questions in Newton's case by observing that, as a hymnwriter, he appears to oscillate between two types of hymn. Regarding the former, which they term his 'sermon-hymns', they provide the following overview: 'Newton's sermon-hymns fall into three parts: the text (which may be a Bible story or a general truth or observation), an

explanation of the relevance of the text to the lives of the singers, and then a prayer.³⁸³ To the latter they attach the label, 'mere versifications', or 'versified quantities of biblical material'.³⁸⁴ Though the distinction that Marshall and Todd draw between these two polarities is pertinent, further clarification is necessary. The category, 'sermon-hymn', does not fully account for either the content or purview of the texts that the two critics place within it. Newton's hymn, 'The blasted fig-tree',³⁸⁵ for example, is set beneath a reference to Mark 11:20, in which Christ, having found a fig tree to be barren, curses it, such that it is rendered dead 'from the roots'. In the first verse, the preacher quickly summarises this narrative,

One awful word which Jesus spoke,
Against the tree which bore no fruit;
More peircing [sic] than the light'nings stroke,
Blasted and dry'd it to the root.

This done, in verses two to six he moves through Perkins's schema, explaining the 'sense and understanding' of the text, making 'profitable' doctrinal inferences, and applying them to 'the life and manners' of his readership, before concluding with a prayer in the seventh verse:

O Lord, unite our hearts in pray'r!
On each of us thy Spirit send;
That we the fruits of grace may bear,
And find acceptance in the end.

³⁸³ Marshall and Todd (1982), p.92-3.

³⁸⁴ *ibid*, p.96, p.102.

³⁸⁵ *Olney Hymns*, p.120-1.

Although verses one to six of this hymn likely served as a set of prompts for Newton's sermon, the category of 'sermon-hymn' is problematic. Had Newton been aiming to versify merely his sermon then the resulting hymn would have omitted the prayer of the seventh verse. Though surely a vital ancillary to the preaching process, this supplicatory element in particular should be properly understood as additional, perhaps peritextual, to the sermon itself. Indeed, Perkins's careful anatomical description of the sermon form leaves out any mention of a concluding prayer, and Newton's own sermons, as recorded in his collected works and preaching journals, do not include any supplicative element as part of the sermon text. Yet, as Marshall and Todd themselves acknowledge, Newton's 'sermon-hymns' regularly contain 'a prayer', which, it should be added, is often augmented by other elements foreign to the sermon, such as devotion and confession. Since sermons, properly understood, do not contain these elements, and since Newton's more sermonic hymns often do contain them, the 'sermon-hymn' category is ultimately unsuitable as a descriptor for these texts.

The second category offered by Marshall and Todd, 'mere versification', is also unhelpful because it implies both homogeneity and objectivity.³⁸⁶ Concerning the first of these, homogeneity, Newton's 'mere versifications' are always augmented by some form of exhortation, supplication, exaltation, reflection, or confession, and thus they are never exclusively summative. Concerning the second, objectivity, in those hymns largely dedicated to versifying scripture Newton always frames the text as he would have it understood, at times theologising his re-telling of it, at times offering direct commentary upon it within the verses

³⁸⁶ It should be noted that this definitional problem is partly of Newton's own making, since it is he who describes himself as a 'versifier' in the preface to *Olney Hymns*.

themselves. In ‘Lot in Sodom’,³⁸⁷ for example, despite his clear concentration on summarising the narrative of chapters thirteen, fourteen, and nineteen of Genesis, the theological categories of Evangelicalism are clearly visible in the re-telling. At the close of verse six he suggests that the fate of Lot’s wife is a warning to ‘pilgrims’—a word, popular among Puritans and Evangelicals, which does not appear anywhere in the Old Testament—and in the final verse he concludes with an application and a supplicatory prayer:

The doom of Sodom will be ours
If to the earth we cleave;
Lord quicken all our drowsy pow’rs,
To flee to thee and live.

Though broad reference to this hymn as a ‘mere versification’ of the Lot narrative in Genesis is understandable, in reality Newton’s re-telling both concludes with a prayer, and is inclusive of elements that, according to Perkins’s definition, are actually homiletical in nature: didactic interventions and application. In the final analysis, the categorical distinctions provided by Marshall and Todd are useful insofar as they draw attention to the two polarities within Newton’s expoundable hymns. As descriptors, however, they are not useful, because, as we have demonstrated, they do not adequately describe the individual hymns one might seek to place within them.

³⁸⁷ *Olney Hymns*, p.6-7.

The need for a more precise set of terms is even more pressing for our discussion of Cowper's hymns, which, though they contain many of the same elements as Newton's, are even more difficult to define. This is because they often tread the lines between summation, sermonising, devotion, supplication, and confession in more subtle ways. The source of these nomenclative difficulties is, as we have already observed, the inconsistent profile of the hymns themselves: they cannot be described by their directionality, since this is subject to change, nor can they be described by their constitutive elements, since each hymn is likely to contain a unique mixture of them. With this in view, we will proceed with the terms 'quasi-primary' and 'quasi-secondary'. These are judged to be useful descriptors because they are inclusive of what Marshall and Todd rightly attempt to communicate—the intentional proximity of the hymn in question to either a primary or secondary text—without excluding other elements not proper to such a text, such as versified prayers, and without necessarily elevating the hymn in question beyond its ancillary function.

We have arrived, then, at the conclusion of a long answer to a short question. An 'expoundable' hymn is a text designed to play a supportive role to another text, and to be either largely summative (primary) or largely expository (secondary) in nature, with the freedom to contain additional elements, supplicatory, exaltative, confessional, or otherwise. Furthermore, armed with the information that Newton used hymns as the basis for sermons, we are provided with a ready means of categorising them, which is according to the primary text with which they are chiefly concerned: a scriptural passage, a topic, or an element of the Christian experience. Even here there is some crossover, for the poet's experiences will often creep into his examination of scripture or a topic, or he will reach for a Biblical verse or doctrinal formula in his narration of his experiences. Despite occasional references to potentially competing

primary texts, the original primary text usually remains the fixed subject of Cowper's focus throughout the hymn, and thus it is a sound and viable means of separating Cowper's homiletical hymns, whether quasi-primary or quasi-secondary, into groups for the purpose of examining them.

What follows in this chapter is a survey of a broad selection of Cowper's *Olney Hymns* via Newton's homiletical categories: scripture-focused hymns, topic-focused hymns, and experience-focused hymns. Rather than seeking to argue that each individual set of verses was written to serve as an expoundable hymn on a text-by-text basis, this discussion endeavours to draw out the various homiletical features that populate Cowper's hymns: their declarative modes, their didactic elements, their various approaches to the primary text, and their reoccurring theological and pastoral themes. It also shines a light upon the places where his skill as a poet is visible, and his effective use of the 'imagery and colouring of poetry' in the composition of homiletical hymns. Having posited the hypothesis that Cowper, along with Newton, was engaged in the practice of writing 'expoundable hymns', the aim is to demonstrate concretely that the hymns selected are homiletical in nature, and thereby to provide a solid basis from which to make this new reading. Our first port of call—before embarking upon a study of Cowper's scriptural, topical, and experiential pieces—is the declarative mode as exhibited across these three categories.

Cowper's homiletical modes

Given his aversion to public speaking and the absence of any record of his having delivered a sermon, we can conclude that William Cowper never took on the physical role of preacher in the weekly meetings. Newton's unfinished biography records that he volunteered to pray

several times at the gathering, and that even this proved 'difficult' such that 'for a time his natural constitutional unwillingness to be noticed in Public, kept him in silence':

But it was not very long before the ardency of his love to the Saviour, and his desire of being useful to others, broke thro' every restraint. He frequently felt a difficulty and trepidation in the attempt, but when he had once began, all difficulty vanished, and he seemd to speak, tho' with self-abasement, and humiliation of spirit, yet with that freedom and fervency, as if he saw the Lord whom he addressed face to face.³⁸⁸

By the time that he came to compose hymns for Newton's gathering, Cowper had been preaching boldly, fervently, and regularly via his epistolary sermons for several years: a 'Private' homiletical ministry, carried out with the aspiration of 'turning many to the Truth'. That same ministerial confidence, directness, and conviction carried easily into the verses he wrote for, or we might we better say "to", the Evangelicals of Olney, in the form of a homiletical mode of address.

'God moves in a mysterious way',³⁸⁹ perhaps Cowper's most well-known hymn, is exemplary of this mode. From its opening line onwards, the verses are formed of a series of strong declaratives, beginning with 'God moves in a mysterious way' and ending: 'God is his own Interpreter,/ And he will make it plain'. Further discussion of this hymn is reserved for a later chapter, but it is worth noting two verses in particular where the same homiletical tone is particularly evident:

³⁸⁸ Newton, Unfinished memoir, Ms.RC0707.

³⁸⁹ *Poems*, i., p.174-5.

Ye fearfull Saints fresh courage take,
The clouds ye so much dread,
Are big with Mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust him for his Grace,
Behind a frowning Providence
He hides a Smiling face.

The sheer number of hymns Cowper wrote in this same declarative register is worthy of comment. We have seen it in operation already in his two communion hymns, two of the three hymns written for the New Year's service, and both his preparational hymn and his hymn for the new meeting place. Additional to these, there are a further fourteen hymns written in the same mode.³⁹⁰ In several of these, Cowper moves beyond the sermonic to a more castigatory tone, reminiscent of a preacher remonstrating with a congregation. Detailed discussion of these hymns will also be deferred till later in this chapter, but it is helpful to pause briefly here and mark their exhortative qualities. In 'What thousands never knew the road!',³⁹¹ Cowper censures those who attempt to 'find,/ Delight or happiness' in the things of the world:

³⁹⁰ These include: 'The saints should never be dismay'd', 'By whom was David taught', 'Ere God had built the mountains', 'God gives his mercies to be spent', 'What various hind'rances we meet', 'The Spirit breathes upon the word', 'Sometimes a light surprises', 'Honor and happiness unite', 'The new-born child of gospel-grace', 'The Lord receives his highest praise', 'What thousands never knew the road!', 'To keep the lamp alive', and 'Grace, triumphant in the throne'.

³⁹¹ *Poems*, i., p.201.

Cleave to the world ye sordid worms,
Contented lick your native dust;
But God shall fight, with all his storms,
Against the idol of your trust.

The long-established Antinomian leanings³⁹² of the residents of Olney and its environs drew forth similarly stern words on that subject, directed specifically at those who subscribed to its tenets:

Was it for This, ye Lawless Tribe,
The dear Redeemer Bled?
Is This the grace the Saints imbibe
From Christ the Living Head?³⁹³

Returning to a theme common to several of his epistolary sermons, in 'Grace, triumphant in the throne',³⁹⁴ once more the poet frames the content of the hymn as a series of declaratives, a versified rebuttal of the temptation towards salvation by works:

Grace, triumphant in the throne,
Scorns a rival, reigns alone!
Come and bow beneath her sway,

³⁹² This will receive lengthy treatment later in this chapter.

³⁹³ *Poems*, i., p.200.

³⁹⁴ *ibid*, p.203.

Cast your idol works away [...].

Contrary to Davie's suggestion that Cowper the hymnwriter wrote from 'down there in the pew', these hymns demonstrate that, when writing for Newton's weekly meetings, he was more than capable of adopting a variety of homiletical tones: castigatory, exhortative, declarative, and persuasive. Indeed, the spontaneous nature of the hymn-writing project appears to have provided opportunities for Cowper to dilate on specific issues faced by the community, and to direct his hymns toward specific constituencies within the meeting itself. In 'God gives his mercies to be spent',³⁹⁵ his ongoing interest in caring for the poor and destitute of the town manifests itself in a barely-concealed appeal to the wealthier attendees of the meeting to increase their donations to the parish fund (a fund for which, as we have seen, Cowper campaigned vigorously). In *Olney Hymns*, Newton presents this hymn as a meditation on Ecclesiastes, but, where the author of the scriptural text seeks to expound upon the vanity of all things, the poet focuses in solely on the vanity of wealth:

God gives his mercies to be spent;

Your hoard will do your soul no good [...].

Cowper sustains this direct tone throughout the hymn, declaring that the 'blessing' of excess provision is intended for 'giving others food', warning of the 'endless woe' that awaits those who seek only after 'pleasure', and concluding with cautions that Christians should be 'timely

³⁹⁵ *ibid*, p.146-7.

wise' in the use of their surplus. This last admonition is illustrated via a brief metaphor, drawn straight from the agrarian environs of Olney, which likens the 'joy' of 'vain amusements' to

The honey of a crowded hive,
Defended by a thousand stings.

A similarly direct tone characterises Cowper's hymn, 'When Hagar found the bottle spent',³⁹⁶ another piece that—as Newton's title, 'For the Poor', suggests—appears to have been written for a particular constituency within the meeting. Formed of a catena of short references to Biblical stories, this hymn reminds its intended readership of the provision and grace of God. Beginning in verse one, Cowper offers a brief retelling of the twenty-first chapter of Genesis, as the 'Angel of the Lord' is 'sent' to 'guide' Hagar and Ishmael 'to a Well', before moving on to verse two, and the miraculous provision of Elijah with 'Cake and Cruse' in 1 Kings 19. Verse three evokes the command of Christ in the sixth chapter of Matthew, that his followers should not 'worry' since God will provide for those who 'seek first his kingdom':

His Saints and Servants shall be fed,
The Promise is secure,
Bread shall be giv'n them, he has said,
Their Water shall be sure.

³⁹⁶ *ibid*, p.192.

As with both his hymns for the children and his epistolary sermons, in addition to a homiletical tone this hymn takes on a homiletical structure, similar to that often adopted by Newton—explaining the ‘sense and understanding’ of various Biblical texts, and then applying them ‘to the life and manners’ of his readership. Having assured the gathering that ‘A gracious God will not refuse/ Provision by the Way’, in the final verse the poet concludes with several direct exhortations:

To Jesus then your Troubles bring,
Nor murmur at your Lot,
Supply is sure while He is King,
You shall not be forgot.

Each of the hymns examined thus far contain passages that map easily onto Perkins’s schema. Rhyme and metre removed, much of the material we have quoted here would not appear out of place either in the text of an eighteenth-century Evangelical sermon, or indeed in the epistolary sermons that we examined in our discussion of Cowper’s ministerial role. In these passages, Cowper can be observed preaching directly to the Evangelicals of Olney, drawing ‘profitable points of doctrine’ from a variety of subjects, and applying them to ‘the lives and manners’ of his readership. That Cowper’s selection of these subjects was directly influenced by local issues tallies with what is known of Newton’s homiletical tendencies. Indeed, Thomas Scott, Newton’s successor at SS Peter and Paul, implied with some frustration that his predecessor has a penchant for preaching regularly on the affairs of the town, and this had unhelpful consequences: ‘Mr. Newton [...] could not preach a plain and practical sermon’, he

writes, 'without exciting inquiries throughout [Olney], 'What has been the matter? Who has been telling Sir something that led to this subject?'.³⁹⁷ This description fits neatly with what we find in Newton's hymns, many of which are nakedly directed towards local matters. In 'Preaching to the dry bones',³⁹⁸ for example, we find the following two verses:

Like [Ezekiel], around I cast my eye,
And oh! what heaps of bones appear!
Like him, by Jesus sent, I'll try,
For he can cause the dead to hear.

Hear, ye dry bones, the Saviour's word!
He, who when dying, gasp'd, "Forgive,"
That gracious, sinner-loving Lord,
Says, "Look to me, dry bones, and live."

The success of Cowper's foray into this responsive sub-genre of homiletical hymn is, once again, found in his careful use of directionality. Unlike Newton, the poet does not allow his homiletical impulse to eclipse the broader form and functional requirements of the hymn. In these hymns, as with his hymns for the New Year's meeting, he never assumes the 'I' of the preacher, nor asserts his own voice to the extent that the ordinary member of the gathering would not be able to inhabit his words. Even those hymns that appear to be directed at particular constituencies within the meeting are written with a calculated vagueness such that,

³⁹⁷ John Scott, *The Life, Letters, and Papers of the late Rev. Thomas Scott, D.D.* (New Haven: Nathan Whiting, 1827), p.456.

³⁹⁸ *Olney Hymns*, p.198-9.

like his confessionals, there is little in them that could not be self-applied by any individual reader. In the hymns discussed in this section, Cowper's preaching is easily subsumed into the collective voice, and thus his 'sermons' can be taken up by his speakers, who in turn preach to themselves and to one another in the act of singing.

The various homiletical modes exhibited throughout Cowper's *Olney Hymns* are indicative not only of the project that likely birthed them—the task of providing Newton with hymns from which to preach— but also of the manner in which Cowper engaged in the Olney hymn-writing project more broadly. Newton's recollections of the hymn-writing period, his persistent references to the 'clearness' of his friend's theological knowledge and the soundness of his 'advice', suggest both that Cowper was inclined to assert his opinion and that Newton was willing to receive it. In his unfinished biography of the poet, he writes that they were 'very much together', and that they took 'frequent walks and visits at home'; in his preface to *Poems* (1793), he describes its author as 'a friend and a counsellor, in whose company for almost seven years, though we were seldom successive waking hours separated, I always found new pleasure'.

This relational context, taken alongside the various homiletical tones exhibited in the hymns we have examined in this section, suggests that Cowper did not merely write to briefs set by Newton, but rather, like his letters, that he was free to write out of personal conviction. If these hymns were written to serve as preaching texts for Newton, then this opens up the extraordinary possibility that, at times, Cowper helped to set the direction for what Newton would preach on that week. Ultimately, whether this was the case or not we cannot say, being without the necessary supporting material to do so. Yet, both the tone and content of these

hymns, which often touch upon the same topics and concerns as his letters, strongly indicate that Cowper was no stranger to preaching sermons in the form of quasi-secondary texts, and that he had authorial agency and oversight in doing so. With his active part in the hymn-writing project thus framed, in what remains of this chapter we will examine three of the different forms of homiletical hymn that Cowper wrote to the Evangelicals of Olney: scriptural, topical, and experiential.

Cowper's scripture hymns

Twenty-one of Cowper's hymns appear in Book I of *Olney Hymns*, 'On Select Passages of Scripture'. At the head of each of these pieces is affixed a title and a subtitled scriptural reference. Though the source of these references was almost certainly Newton this does not necessarily negate the legitimacy of their shaping influence upon Cowper's texts. In this section we will see that the majority do indeed appear to have been originally written as expositions upon the 'select passages of scripture' proffered at a later date by Newton's editorial hand.³⁹⁹ These hymns range from quasi-primary to quasi-secondary texts, and several occupy an interesting space in between. Exemplary of the former category is 'Write to Sardis, saith the Lord',⁴⁰⁰ a versification of the proclamations of Christ to the church in Revelation 3:1-5:

³⁹⁹ There are a small number of hymns by Cowper that do not match the peritextual information proffered by Newton. Baird and Ryskamp note that 'Oh for a closer Walk with God' 'was not conceived as a hymn on a select passage of Scripture' (*Poems*, i., p.480), though it is presented in that section as a meditation on 'Genesis v.24': 'And Enoch walked with God: and he was not, for God took him'. As this chapter demonstrates, however, careful examination of each individual text alongside the Scripture reference inserted by Newton reveals that the majority were indeed initially written as hymns 'On Select Passages of Scripture'.

⁴⁰⁰ *Poems*, i., p.161.

[1] I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead. [2] Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God. [3] Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee. [4] Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy. [5] He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels.

Cowper translates the complex admonitions at the outset of this passage into four simple lines at the close of the first verse:

All thy works and ways I search,
Find thy zeal and love decay'd;
Thou art call'd a living church,
But thou art cold and dead.

There is a curious rhythmic fluency here, an inner consistency engendered by Cowper's use, albeit subtly, of a range of literary techniques. The repetition of 'thy' in the first two lines and 'Thou art' in the third and fourth ties the lines together aurally, as does the use of alliteration ('works and ways', 'zeal and love', 'and/decay'd'), internal rhyme and assonance ('work/search', 'Find/thy', 'call'd/cold', 'way/decay'd'), and sibilance (works and ways I

search').⁴⁰¹ The deployment of these rhythmic patterns enables Cowper to progress easily through a difficult and lengthy section of the passage, such that, on entering into the second verse, he is able to direct our focus towards versifying Christ's injunctions to the church:

Watch, remember, seek and strive,
Exert thy former pains;
Let thy timely care revive,
And strengthen what remains:
Cleanse thine heart, thy works amend,
Former times to mind recall;
Lest my sudden stroke descend,
And smite thee once for all.

The third verse concludes with the passage's warning of final judgement, centring it around a direct quotation from the text, Christ's promise that the 'upright' shall 'walk with me in white'.

There being no other obvious purpose or cause for its composition, it seems probable that Cowper wrote this hymn to serve as a quasi-primary text: a smooth and lyrical summary of Revelation 3:1-5 to serve as the basis for a sermon. Its placement alongside four similar pieces in a subsection on Christ's 'letters to the seven churches', indicates that Newton preached a five-sermon series on chapters two and three of Revelation, and that this was Cowper's

⁴⁰¹This quality in Cowper's poetry was noted by Gregory Leadbetter in a paper, titled 'Cowper's "Chit chat": blank verse, the exploded couplet, and the role of the poet', delivered at the *William Cowper: art and afterlife* conference at Olney on Saturday 4 September, 2021.

contribution. The inclusion of 'Hear what God the Lord hath spoken',⁴⁰² a versification of Isaiah 60:15-20, alongside seven other meditations on Isaiah in Book I⁴⁰³ suggests that it too was written for a sermon series. The passage reads:

[15] Whereas thou hast been forsaken and hated, so that no man went through thee, I will make thee an eternal excellency, a joy of many generations. [16] Thou shalt also suck the milk of the Gentiles, and shalt suck the breast of kings: and thou shalt know that I the Lord am thy Saviour and thy Redeemer, the mighty One of Jacob. [17] For brass I will bring gold, and for iron I will bring silver, and for wood brass, and for stones iron: I will also make thy officers peace, and thine exactors righteousness. [18] Violence shall no more be heard in thy land, wasting nor destruction within thy borders; but thou shalt call thy walls Salvation, and thy gates Praise. [19] The sun shall be no more thy light by day; neither for brightness shall the moon give light unto thee: but the LORD shall be unto thee an everlasting light, and thy God thy glory. [20] Thy sun shall no more go down; neither shall thy moon withdraw itself: for the LORD shall be thine everlasting light, and the days of thy mourning shall be ended.

Where 'Write to Sardis, saith the Lord' is easily categorised as a quasi-primary text, since it is largely concerned with summarising a Biblical passage, this hymn, with its focus on both summarising and applying the text to its readership, is closer to a quasi-secondary text. To these ends, it begins with a poetic rendering of verse fifteen, addressed to a 'people, weak and

⁴⁰² *Poems*, i., p.149-50.

⁴⁰³ Three of which, written by Newton, are similar in their tone and approach to the text: 'Pensive, doubting, fearful heart', 'As the serpent rais'd by Moses', and 'Glorious things of thee are spoken'—though it should be noted that the latter focuses in on several additional Old Testament texts, including Psalm 87.

few;/ Comfortless, afflicted', and 'broken'. The identity of that people—in Isaiah it is the people of Israel—is altered, and the message of the passage is redirected towards the Evangelicals of Olney:

Thorns of heart-felt tribulation
Shall no more perplex your ways

Eliding the motif of the nation, Cowper reframes the salvific message of the passage via the Puritan-Evangelical motif of individual pilgrimage. Deliverance is construed, not as the restoration of the nation, but as protection from the dangers of the journey: the 'ways' down which the Christian is led will no longer be obstructed by the 'thorns' of personal, 'heart-felt' suffering and 'tribulation'. This translative rendering of the text in verse one gives way to a more summative approach in the following verses, which quotes from the passage almost verbatim. 'Thou shalt call thy walls salvation, and thy gates Praise', becomes,

You shall name your walls, Salvation,
And your gates shall all be praise.

'Violence shall no more be heard in thy land, nor destruction within thy borders' is also rephrased as,

Never shall you feel oppression,
Hear the voice of war again.

The final verse is given over to a summary of verses nineteen and twenty:

You no more your suns descending,
Waning moons no more shall see;
But your griefs, for ever ending,
Find eternal noon in me;
God shall rise, and shining o'er you,
Change to day the gloom of night;
He, the Lord, shall be your glory,
God your everlasting light.

Cowper's summary of the passage is forensic, to the extent that it even traces its directional shifts. At the outset of verse nineteen, the voice of the text moves from God, who is the first person "I" of verses fifteen to eighteen, to that of the prophet, who proceeds to discuss God and his promises in the third person. The poet matches this transition through the insertion of a volta at the end of the fourth line in this final verse, and thus, as the speaker passes through the semi-colon and emerges into the final four lines of the hymn, the voice of the verse becomes the voice of the prophet, and God is once more referenced in the third person as 'he' and 'the Lord'.

In these two scripture-focused hymns, Cowper's efforts appear to have centred on carefully summarising the chosen Biblical passage into verse, with the quiet flair that would become characteristic of his poetry. Each hymn serves as a gateway into the primary text, a sound basis from which a preacher might enter into a detailed exegesis of the passage. As with Newton's

hymns, however, these summative endeavours are shaped by other elements that we might call—since they are less obviously sermonic in their tone and delivery—Cowper’s hermeneutical interventions. In each case, his summary of the text is founded upon careful recontextualisation, redirecting the second person ‘you’ of both passages toward his readership, whether subtly and by implication in the case of the first hymn or more substantially in the case of the second. Utilising the tools, ‘imagery’, and ‘colouring of poetry’, Cowper’s text, whether quasi-primary or quasi-secondary, shapes the manner in which his readership approaches and apprehends the primary text, encouraging them to read themselves into its narrative and thereby apply its message to themselves. Where the former is concerned, these tools are employed in order to reduce a complicated passage down into a brief, rhythmically cohesive, easily-comprehended, and therefore easily self-applied set of verses, while in the latter, the poet uses them more directly in order to apply the text to his readership via the familiar metaphor of Christian pilgrimage.

Elsewhere, Cowper’s hermeneutical interventions are more obvious. In several places he can be observed freely mixing terms from the New Testament or Christian theology into his summation of Old Testament texts. For example, in, ‘As birds their infant brood protect’,⁴⁰⁴ he uses two single verses—Isaiah 31:5, ‘As birds flying, so will the Lord of hosts defend Jerusalem’, and Ezekiel 48:35, ‘the name of the city from that day shall be, The Lord is there’—as the basis for a re-narration of the entire Christian salvation narrative. The opening verse reads:

As birds their infant brood protect,

⁴⁰⁴ *ibid*, p.153.

And spread their wings to shelter them;
Thus saith the Lord to his elect,
'So will I guard Jerusalem.'

Here is another instance of the poet resituating the text of scripture within the Olney landscape, translating the somewhat opaque simile of 'birds flying' into the familiar rural image of birds 'protect[ing]' their 'infant brood'. The recontextualisation of this metaphor presages the interpretative recontextualisation that will take place in the rest of the hymn, beginning in the subsequent couplet, as, under Cowper's explicatory hand, God's promise to the inhabitants of 'Jerusalem' in Isaiah is also established in Olney, and interpreted as a word to 'his elect'. The questions raised by this reading are anticipated in the second verse:

And what then is Jerusalem,
This darling object of his care?
Where is its worth in God's esteem?
Who built it? who inhabits there?

The use of rhetorical questions, a form of catechesis, is a technique particularly favoured by Cowper in the composition of his homiletical hymns. A further eight of the pieces that he wrote for the Olney Evangelicals prominently feature either a question or a series of questions that the hymn proceeds to answer.⁴⁰⁵ In this hymn, the remaining three verses are framed as responses to the questions posed by the second verse. Verse three reads:

⁴⁰⁵ See: 'By whom was David taught', 'Jesus, whose blood so freely stream'd', 'My God! till I receiv'd thy stroke', 'Fierce passions discompose the mind', 'His Master taken from his Head', 'God of my life to thee I call', and 'O Lord my best desire fulfill'.

Jehovah founded it in blood,
The blood of his incarnate Son;
There dwell the saints, once foes to God,
The sinners, whom he calls his own.

In the final verse, Cowper draws the hymn to a close with his second reference, versified in the concluding lines:

Let earth repent, and hell despair,
This city has a sure defence;
Her name is call'd, the Lord is there,
And who has pow'r to drive him thence.

Though there are no explicit references to it either in the hymn itself or in Newton's footnotes, there is a third text operating here in Cowper's rendering of these two Old Testament texts, Revelation 21:2-3:

[2] And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. [3] And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.

Cowper implicitly contextualises the city described in the two Old Testament passages within this New Testament text, transposing the ‘new Jerusalem’ of Revelation onto the old. With this ‘new Jerusalem’ in mind, Cowper’s readership can extend God’s promises to Isaiah and Ezekiel to themselves, reading each via the Revelation passage as a declaration regarding their own eternal destination. By overlaying Christian theological categories onto the primary texts in his summary of them, Cowper performs a definite hermeneutical act, deliberately shaping the manner in which each will be understood by his readership. In using these Old Testament texts as a means of entering into a meditation on Christian eschatology and the person and work of Christ, Cowper places his own hymn within a long-standing teleological and typological reading tradition, present within Christian theology from the New Testament authors onward. John Owen, whose influence on Cowper’s own eighteenth-century theological context cannot be overstated, writes concerning this hermeneutical method in *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ* (1684):

Moses and the Prophets, and all the Scriptures, do give Testimony unto him, and his Glory. This is the line of Life and Light, which runs through the whole Old Testament; without the conduct whereof we can understand nothing aright therein: And the neglect hereof, is that which makes many as blind in reading the books of it [...].⁴⁰⁶

There are, then, several homiletical features at work in this hymn. Aside from its didactic elements, the driving force here is an evident desire to apply this content to the reader. From the quiet localising of its imagery to the direct interpretation and application of its meaning,

⁴⁰⁶ John Owen, *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ* (London, 1764), p.119.

Cowper sets to work explaining his own reading of the ‘sense and understanding’ of these passages and the ‘profitable points of doctrine’ that he has extracted from them to the ‘life and manners’ of his readership. What this hymn witnesses to, therefore, is Cowper, in the manner of a preacher, employing a particular hermeneutic in order to communicate and apply a Christologically-, teleologically-, and soteriologically-focused interpretation of an Old Testament text to the Evangelicals of Olney.

Though the means of this communication here is the homiletical mode, at times Cowper’s interactions with scripture eschew straightforward declarative exposition. In a number of the hymns examined in this chapter we have seen the development of an alternative approach to the text: an approach that, rather than merely relaying its sense and content from an external perspective like a preacher or commentator, seeks to enter into the primary text and expound it from within. Indeed, Cowper makes a practice of commandeering the voice of the passage and speaking through it to his own readership, even, in the case of such hymns as ‘Ye sons of earth prepare the plough’ and ‘Hear what God the Lord hath spoken’, where that voice is the voice of God. In some hymns, for example, ‘Write to Sardis saith the Lord’, this is relatively uncontroversial because Cowper’s aim seems to have been more toward summation than application. Where the poet is seeking to apply the passage and produce a quasi-secondary text, however, this approach yields fascinating results. An excellent example of this is found in ‘The Lord proclaims his grace abroad!’,⁴⁰⁷ a hymn in which Cowper takes on the voice of God:

My grace, a flowing stream, proceeds

⁴⁰⁷ *Poems*, i., p.152.

To wash your filthiness away;
Ye shall abhor your former deeds,
And learn my statutes to obey.

My truth the great design insures,
I give myself away to you;
You shall be mine, I will be yours,
Your God unalterably true.

Yet not unsought, or unimplor'd,
The plenteous grace shall I confer;
No—your whole hearts shall seek the Lord,
I'll put a praying spirit there.

Newton presents this hymn as an exposition of Ezekiel 36:25-28, certainly an accurate editorial claim, since Cowper's verses both quote from it directly in several places, and generally follow its trajectory:

[25] Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. [26] A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. [27] And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them. [28]

And ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; and ye shall be my people,
and I will be your God.

What might initially seem an attempted versification, a basic quasi-primary text, is in reality something far more interesting. Rather than summarising the passage, here Cowper is actually summarising his own typological interpretation of it; 'Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean', for example, is not simply versified, but translated: 'My grace a flowing stream, proceeds/ To wash your filthiness away'. The important thing here is not the theological translations themselves, but the mode adopted by Cowper in his communication of them. Instead of presenting his readership with his interpretations in the external, declarative, expository mode, Cowper enters into the text and, in a breath-taking act of ventriloquism, has God speak forth both the original content of the passage and his interpretation of it. It must be noted that this ventriloquism is theologically and textually informed, and thus, rather than being dreamt up by Cowper, the pronouncements placed in God's mouth here are drawn from elsewhere in the Bible. The phrase, 'My grace a flowing stream, proceeds/ To wash your filthiness away', for example, finds its source in Acts 22:16: 'wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord'. Nevertheless, in merging other texts into this single utterance, the poet makes an extraordinary interpretative claim about what God is saying in *this* text.

The result of this approach is the generation of a powerful applicatory tool. The declarative voice, which stands removed from the primary text and offers interpretations to the readership, is excised, yet its functions are not. Instead, these functions are integrated into the voice of the text itself. Despite presenting as a quasi-primary text, this hymn is actually closer

to a quasi-secondary text: a versification of an Old Testament passage that is inlaid with 'profitable points of doctrine', and applied to the 'life and manners' of its readership via a voice that speaks directly to them in such a manner that the visible work of application is made redundant.

This same fascinating approach to hymn-writing is found throughout Cowper's *Olney Hymns*, in pieces such as 'My God! till I receiv'd thy stroke'.⁴⁰⁸ At first glance, this hymn appears to be autobiographically-focused, with its initial fixation on the 'wickedness' and 'shame' of the previous life of the "I". The content of these first three verses appears to have been informed by Cowper's own experiences, and his references to a 'sharp rebuke' and the 'stroke' of divine correction are conversant with his descriptions elsewhere of his pre-salvation-experience episodes of depression. By the third verse, however, the primary focus of the hymn is clear:

Is Ephraim banish'd from my thoughts,
Or vile in my esteem?
No, saith the Lord, with all his faults,
I still remember him.

The voice of God that comes crashing into the speaker's moment of self-reflection is that of Jeremiah 31:20: 'Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he a pleasant child? For since I spake against him, I do earnestly remember him still: therefore my bowels are troubled for him; I will surely have mercy upon him, saith the Lord'. Matthew Henry writes of this text that, though it is written

⁴⁰⁸ *ibid*, p.151.

concerning an entire tribe, 'Ephraim the people is here spoken of as a single person, to denote their unanimity; they shall be as one man in their repentance, and shall glorify God in it with one mind and one mouth, one and all.'⁴⁰⁹ Despite its concern with a collective, Henry notes that this text is still 'applicable to individual persons', and therefore that the words of God might be received as such: 'Those that have been undutiful backsliding children', he explains, 'if they return and repent, however they have been under the chastisement of the rod, shall be accepted of God as dear and pleasant children'.⁴¹⁰ This, in essence, is the interpretation that Cowper presents to his readership. Again, however, it is the manner of communication rather than the interpretation itself that is notable. Rather than adopt the declarative mode used by Henry, Cowper invites his readers into an imaginative engagement with the text, encouraging them to inhabit the "I" of Ephraim's confession, and to read their own experiences and transgressions into the primary text. Having placed his speakers in the role of Ephraim, Cowper then redirects the voice of the text towards them, such that each receives the forgiving benediction of God, and each, in the act of singing, applies the content of that benediction to themselves and to one another.

This same applicatory mechanism is also adopted in 'Hark, my soul! it is the Lord'.⁴¹¹ Addressing the voice of the text to 'thee', the reader, Cowper redirects Christ's question to Peter in John 21:16, 'lovest thou me?', towards the members of the Olney gathering. Continuing in the same voice, the following verses read:

I deliver'd thee when bound,

⁴⁰⁹ Henry (1737), iii., Jer. 31.

⁴¹⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹¹ *Poems*, i., p.157-8.

And, when wounded, heal'd thy wound;
Sought thee wand'ring, set thee right,
Turn'd thy darkness into light.

Can a woman's tender care
Cease, towards the child she bare?
Yes, she may forgetful be,
Yet will I remember thee.

Mine is an unchanging love,
Higher than the heights above;
Deeper than the depths beneath,
Free and faithful, strong as death.

Thou shalt see my glory soon,
When the work of grace is done;
Partner of my throne shalt be,
Say, poor sinner, lov'st thou me?

Once more, Cowper's ventriloquism is carefully tuned to remain within broadly recognisable scriptural boundaries; his own additions here are drawn from other passages, and merged into the single utterance from John 21:16. Indeed, the first of the four verses quoted above is effectively an abridgement of Luke 4:18—'he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them

that are bruised’ — and the second is a versification of Isaiah 49:15: ‘Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee.’ Likewise, the content of lines two and three of the third verse is drawn from Ephesians 3:18-19, which refers to the ‘breadth, and length, and depth, and height’ of ‘the love of Christ’, and the first line of the final verse evokes Revelation 22:12: ‘behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be’.

Perhaps the most interesting example of this approach to the primary text is Cowper’s hymn, ‘Ere God had built the mountains’,⁴¹² a meditation upon Proverbs 8:22-31:

[22] The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old. [23] I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was. [24] When there were no depths, I was brought forth; when there were no fountains abounding with water. [25] Before the mountains were settled, before the hills was I brought forth: [26] While as yet he had not made the earth, nor the fields, nor the highest part of the dust of the world. [27] When he prepared the heavens, I was there: when he set a compass upon the face of the depth: [28] When he established the clouds above: when he strengthened the fountains of the deep: [29] When he gave to the sea his decree, that the waters should not pass his commandment: when he appointed the foundations of the earth: [30] Then I was by him, as one brought up with

⁴¹² *ibid*, p.145-6.

him: and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him; [31] Rejoicing in the habitable part of his earth; and my delights were with the sons of men.

In the first two verses of the hymn Cowper offers a summary of this passage:

Ere God had built the mountains,
Or rais'd the fruitful hills;
Before he fill'd the fountains
That feed the running rills;
In me, from everlasting,
The wonderful I AM
Found pleasures never wasting,
And Wisdom is my name.

When, like a tent to dwell in,
He spread the skies abroad;
And swath'd about the swelling
Of ocean's mighty flood;
He wrought by weight and measure,
And I was with him then;
Myself the Father's pleasure,
And mine, the sons of men.

These verses exemplify Cowper's burgeoning skill as a composer of accentual-syllabic poetry. His deftness and mastery of metre are evident in the careful construction of the lines, which

faithfully fall into an easy 7/6/7/6 iambic rhythm, each seven-syllable line ending on an amphibrach⁴¹³ and each six-syllable line concluding with a masculine ending. Alongside this alternating rhyme scheme, Cowper once again smooths the inner walk-ways of his verses, filling them with alliterative pairings: ‘running rills’, ‘tent to dwell’, and ‘was with’. Even more noticeable is his repeated use of alliteration in the formation of verb-object pairings, such as ‘spread the skies’, ‘swath’d about the swelling’, and ‘fill’d the fountains / That feed’.

Having taken on the voice and ‘I’ of ‘Wisdom’ in the opening verses of the hymn, Cowper then switches to an external perspective in verses three and four, exiting the text in order to offer a form of commentary upon it. This decision is a fascinating one, and perhaps informed by the theological context in which he and his Evangelical contemporaries found themselves. In response to the resurgence of an inter-denominational Arian movement across the British Isles in the seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries, the Evangelical hymnwriters and theologians of the mid-eighteenth century made a practice of both challenging Arian theology and elevating classical trinitarianism and Christology in their work.⁴¹⁴ It is perhaps with this context in mind that Cowper frames his approach to the personified figure of ‘Wisdom’ so carefully. In his first-person description of ‘Wisdom’—a created figure, ‘brought forth’,⁴¹⁵ who, historically, had been cast by Arians as a type of Christ, and thereby referenced as evidence of the accuracy of Arian Christology—Cowper is careful to eschew any Christological language that might be misunderstood as drawing a typological reading of the text. Moreover, as the

⁴¹³ His recourse to this particular metrical form was perhaps influenced by his intimate and long-standing acquaintance with classical prosody.

⁴¹⁴ See: Maurice Wiles, *Archetypal Heresy: Arianism through the Centuries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁴¹⁵ *Poems*, i., p.145-6.

poet transitions into the commentative and declarative mode in the third and fourth verses, he lays down several clear Christological markers, designed to differentiate and elevate Christ:

Thus wisdom's words discover
Thy glory and thy grace,
Thou everlasting lover
Of our unworthy race!
Thy gracious eye survey'd us
Ere stars were seen above;
In wisdom thou hast made us,
And dy'd for us in love.⁴¹⁶

'Wisdom', capitalised in the first two verses, is now rendered in the lower case, 'wisdom', and the 'Thou' of verses one to three, the 'everlasting' and all-creating 'I AM', is revealed to be Christ: the one who 'dy'd', and, in verse four, was 'nail'd' to 'a tree'. It is interesting that, rather than offering his commentary upon this text in the declarative, Cowper opts instead for a devotional mode, applying the theological message subtly by having his speaker address these statements about God to God in the first person as a form of prayer. Indeed, by carefully setting the terms by which the divine is approached and addressed, Cowper acts decisively here to frame the speaker's understanding of God, rooting it firmly in classical Christology.

⁴¹⁶ *ibid*, p.145-6.

John Newton's homiletical scripture hymns are, as Marshall and Todd suggest, easy to spot, if not easy to define. His quasi-primary hymns are recognisable for their large quantities of summative material, albeit steered and flavoured by Newton's didactic interventions, his personal pastoral and theological predilections, and his inclusion of elements other than mere summation. His quasi-secondary hymns are distinguished by their gradual progression through the stages of Perkins's schema, summarising the passage, extracting points of doctrine, and applying them to the reader, before moving beyond into prayer, devotion, or confession.

Cowper's homiletical scripture hymns, by contrast, are fascinating for the alternative means by which they go about achieving the same ends. In this section we have seen him, like Newton, both summarise and comment upon scripture: in the former reducing complex theological content into verse, and in the latter standing at a remove from the primary text, offering didactic commentary in declarative modes and various hortative tones. We have also observed, however, that Cowper's alternative approach to the passage—his practice of entering into the text and utilising its voice—yields something much more interesting: a different type of homiletical hymn, which presents itself as a quasi-primary text, but in reality contains all of the sermonic elements of a quasi-secondary text. Woven into his summation of the primary text are his own interpretations, ministerial concerns, and hermeneutical interventions, 'profitable points of doctrine' that are 'applied to the life and manners' of the reader, not from a remove, but via delivery in the voice of the text itself. In short, Cowper's scripture hymns are notable for their homiletical qualities. Merging the stages of Perkins's schema, they re-tell the narrative of their chosen passage, using the language of Christian doctrine, and in the voice of the text—explanation, interpretation, and application, all rendered in one fluid movement. A version of this same approach to homiletical hymnody,

which seeks to move the reader beyond mere comprehension into an imaginative engagement with the primary text, is evident in Cowper's topical hymns, and it is to these that we shall now turn.

Cowper's topical hymns

As its title suggests, in this section we will examine those hymns by Cowper that take for their primary focus a variety of topics. This word, topic, serves as a broad umbrella term for a number of subjects, including individual doctrines, practices, and common experiences in the life of faith. Cowper's topical hymns are concerned with describing, explaining, promoting, or justifying these subjects to his readership. Since the phrase 'primary text' is not adequate as a category here—it might perhaps, for example, be comfortably used to describe a received doctrine, but not a common experience—in this section we will use the phrase 'primary subject' in its place to signify the topic upon which the hymn in question is focused. In the previous section, we explored Cowper's imaginative engagement with primary texts. Rather than merely rehearsing its content, these hymns often became a means of entry into the primary text itself, a space in which the reader could take on the "I" and thus imagine themselves within its story, interacting with its characters, and even taking part in conversations with God. From our examinations of this technique emerged the conclusion that, for Cowper, this type of engagement served as a homiletical mechanism for communicating and applying an interpretation of a primary text to a readership. Cowper attempted something similar in the composition of his topical hymns: a kind of didacticism, exercised through the facilitation of an imaginative engagement with the primary subject on the part of the reader, and applied through the act of singing. Whether a spiritual practice, an

applied theological principal, a doctrine, or an element of the Christian life, again in this section we will see that his examination of these subjects is either explicitly or implicitly homiletical rather than personally meditative—that, like his scripture hymns, Cowper’s topical hymns are written either directly to or likely for the use of his local readership.

Cowper’s hymn, ‘The Spirit breathes upon the word’,⁴¹⁷ is a prime example of imaginative engagement with a primary subject, in this case, the act of reading the Bible. Its first three verses read:

The Spirit breathes upon the word,
And brings the truth to sight;
Precepts and promises afford
A sanctifying light.

A glory gilds the sacred page,
Majestic like the sun;
It gives a light to ev’ry age,
It gives, but borrows none.

The hand that gave it, still supplies
The gracious light and heat;
His truths upon the nations rise,

⁴¹⁷ *ibid*, p.170.

They rise, but never set.

The imagery and narrative of these verses is informed by a broadly Evangelical understanding of what it means for the Christian to properly encounter and be transformed by Scripture. Newton elucidates the various aspects of this understanding at length in several letters and sermons. In an address on the topic of ‘Searching the Scriptures’, he describes the Bible as ‘a glass by which we can discover the presence of the Creator in every part of his creation, and a clue to lead us through the mysterious mazes of divine providence’.⁴¹⁸ This principle is particularly evident and at work in the last set of verses by Cowper in *Olney Hymns*, ‘Winter has a joy for me’:⁴¹⁹

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

[...]

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

⁴¹⁸ *Works of Newton*, (London, 1808), ii., p.345.

⁴¹⁹ *Poems*, i., p.206.

These verses are difficult to place. Likely the product of one of Cowper's many walks in the countryside surrounding his home—perhaps joined by Newton—they have a meditational quality, present in phrases such as 'a joy for me', and 'the Saviour's charms I read'. Then again, as we have already observed in Cowper's confessionals and devotionals, the use of the first-person singular is not necessarily indicative of a hymn's being written for private purposes. Closer inspection of these verses reveals clues that point towards their having been written for the Olney readership. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin asserts that the creation exists 'so to manifest [God's] perfections in the whole structure of the universe, and daily place himself in our view, that we cannot open our eyes without being compelled to behold him':

Hence, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews elegantly describes the visible worlds as images of the invisible [...]. For the same reason, the psalmist attributes language to celestial objects [...].⁴²⁰

Critic Charles Ryskamp cites the formative influence that the French theologian had on Cowper, writing that Calvin was 'part of him from the beginning'.⁴²¹ At the time of the poet's death, Calvin's *Sermons upon Deuteronomie* were among the works catalogued in his library, and Calvin's theology greatly informed the wing of the revival of which Cowper and Newton were part.⁴²² It is unsurprising, therefore, to see the reformer's influence here, in Cowper's

⁴²⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. by Henry Beveridge (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishing, 2014), p.17.

⁴²¹ Ryskamp (1959), p.56.

⁴²² Keynes (1959), p.54.

modelling of this hermeneutic, as he repetitively, catechetically frames the separate elements of nature in explicitly signficatory terms: the 'turtle's plaintive song' of 'spring' echoes Christ's 'dying grones'; the 'thousand charms' of summer and the 'beams of milder' autumn 'Tell' of 'his smiling face'; his 'bleeding beauties' are 'drawn' on the 'skies' of the 'early dawn'; the 'Ev'ning, [...] shews an emblem of his grace', and 'Points to an eternal rest'. Cowper's use of referential phrases such as 'shews', 'emblem', and 'Points' places the natural object of each sentence in the category of signifier—something that gestures towards a meaning beyond itself. More significant, however, is the presence of terms relating directly to communication, such as 'drawn', 'song', and 'tell', each an overt reference to the linguistic capabilities which Calvin sees inherent within creation. In his homiletical attempt to model a 'practical' hermeneutic for the Olney Evangelical, Cowper moves beyond the psalmist's suggestion that 'the heavens declare the glory of God',⁴²³ by drawing the individual out of passivity. We are not called merely to witness the 'perfections' of God in 'the whole structure of the universe'; more than this, Cowper would have us go outside with his hymn on our lips, inhabit the 'I', and 'read' the 'Saviour's charms' in the created order. Moreover, Cowper's obvious overextension in the search for examples with which to populate the hymn—the turtledove's song recalling Christ's 'dying grones', for example, and the presentation of the 'blushes of the skies' as the unlikely emblem of his 'bleeding beauties'—are more likely the fruit of a roving didactic eye than organic observation. Rather than being private verses derived from quiet contemplation, these less convincing illustrations are more likely the product of a desire to communicate and model something to a readership: that they, too, ought to 'read' and discover the 'Saviour's

⁴²³ Psalm 19:1.

charms' in the objects and images that populate their local landscape—in 'every part of his creation'.

Newton is keen to explain that such discoveries, especially with regards to the reading of Scripture, cannot not be achieved alone by the reader, but are only possible with the action of the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. '[W]ho can enumerate', he goes on to ask, 'the various, the important, the interesting lessons we receive from this Heavenly Teacher, when, by the influence of his Holy Spirit, he powerfully applies his written word to the hearts of his real disciples'.⁴²⁴ Later in the same sermon, he returns to this idea again, insisting that reading the Bible involves 'a serious, impartial, humble, persevering inquiry, accompanied with earnest prayer for the light and assistance of God's Holy Spirit'.⁴²⁵ Newton reiterates this last notion in his correspondence, commenting to one acquaintance that God 'has given us the written word to be a lamp to our feet, and encouraged us to pray for the teaching of his Holy Spirit, that we may rightly understand and apply it'.⁴²⁶ In another letter, written in 1768, he offers further explanation:

how comfortable and encouraging it is to reflect, that God has given us his infallible word, and promised us his infallible Spirit, to guide us into all necessary truth; and that in the study of the one, and in dependence upon the other, none can miss the way of peace and salvation, who are sincerely desirous to find it. But we are cautioned to keep

⁴²⁴ *Works of Newton* (London, 1808), ii., p.345-6.

⁴²⁵ *ibid*, ii., p.353.

⁴²⁶ *ibid*, i., p.295.

our eye upon both; and the caution is necessary, for we are too prone to separate what God has joined together.⁴²⁷

The final statement in the extract above is central to 'The Spirit breathes upon the word',⁴²⁸ which is dedicated to expressing the synergy between the reader reading the 'infallible word' and the 'infallible Spirit' enabling it to be read. Cowper's description of the former is dramatic: 'glory gild[ed]', a 'Majestic' source of 'light and heat', and, in verse four, a 'bright display'. His references to the latter, though less numerous, are no less powerful; the entire hymn proceeds from a choice metaphor, declaring that the 'Spirit breathes upon the word', and that it is this divine act that 'brings the truth to sight'. He illustrates both this act and its effects skilfully, rendering each tangible by externalisation, and portraying each as a mysterious and physical occurrence: a "breath" that causes the text itself to visibly exude 'sanctifying light'. By externalising this process of internal illumination, Cowper presents the act of reading scripture as a supernatural interaction, and invites his readership to see it likewise. Their own habits of quiet, private study are transformed by his pen into a visual and tactile encounter with a 'sacred page', which emanates 'glory', 'light', and 'heat' from its 'bright display'.

Written in the same declarative register, Cowper's treatment of another spiritual discipline, prayer, adopts a similar approach to a similar type of primary subject. The second and third verses of his hymn, 'What various hind'rances we meet',⁴²⁹ read:

Pray'r makes the dark'ned cloud withdraw,

⁴²⁷ *ibid*, vi., p.202.

⁴²⁸ *Poems*, i., p.170.

⁴²⁹ *ibid*, p.169.

Pray'r climbs the ladder Jacob saw;
Gives exercise to faith and love,
Brings ev'ry blessing from above.

Restraining pray'r, we cease to fight;
Pray'r makes the christian's armor bright;
And Satan trembles, when he sees
The weakest saint upon his knees.

Once again, Cowper's words are in step with those of Newton:

Prayer is indeed the best half of our business while upon earth, and that which gives spirit and efficacy to all the rest. Prayer is not only our immediate duty, but the highest dignity, the richest privilege we are capable of receiving on this sign of eternity [...]. A stranger to prayer, is equally a stranger to God and to happiness.⁴³⁰

In the above verses Cowper depicts 'Pray'r' from several perspectives, and ultimately, with Newton, he presents it as a powerful act on the part of even the very 'weakest' Christian. It is a means of both dismissing the 'dark'ned cloud—a vague image, broad enough to encompass temptation, doubt, or difficult circumstance—and of ascending to heaven itself: 'Pray'r', the poet insists, 'climbs the ladder Jacob saw', and returns with 'ev'ry blessing from above'. In the following verse, Cowper rearranges the scene entirely, situating the Christian in the midst of a

⁴³⁰ *Works of Newton* (London, 1808), ii., p.328.

form of warfare, and employing corresponding imagery. To pray, the first line implies, is to 'fight', and additionally to make 'the christian's armor bright', such that the spiritual adversary, 'Satan', is reduced to 'trembl[ing]' at the sight of 'The weakest saint upon his knees'.

Taken alone, each of these hymns might be mistaken for a personal poetic reflection upon private spiritual matters. With their readership in view, however, and with the context of Newton's practice of preaching on hymns foregrounded, they take on a new meaning as didactic texts, written upon specific topics, and designed to shape the lives and energise the spiritual practices of those for whom they were written. In addition to modelling a particular Biblical hermeneutic in his scripture hymns, here the poet does something similar with these topical hymns, directing his readership to read their lives and surrounding landscapes via an Evangelical lens. Prayer, like reading the Bible, is dramatised by Cowper, and recast as an active, transcendent, combative, and vibrant encounter with spiritual forces.

That these hymns are homiletical in nature is further indicated by Cowper's strong and consistent use of the declarative mode, framing each hymn as a series of statements on the primary subject. It is also indicated by their location within *Olney Hymns*: the former in a subsection titled, 'On the Scripture' alongside one other Newton hymn on the same subject, 'The word more precious than gold';⁴³¹ the latter in a subsection titled 'On Prayer', alongside a Newton hymn titled, 'Power of prayer'.⁴³² Here, as with 'Write to Sardis saith the Lord' and 'Hear what God the Lord hath spoken', again we find Cowper hymns that appear to have been written as part of a series on a single subject. The first of Newton's hymns, 'On Scripture',

⁴³¹ *Olney Hymns*, p.256-7.

⁴³² *ibid*, p.254.

shares some of Cowper's conflict-derived imagery, with its depiction of the Christian almost 'overcome', reaching for 'the Spirits' sword' and driving the satanic adversary from the scene—a brief narrative clearly influenced by Christian's battle with Apollyon in *Pilgrim's Progress* (to which we will return in great detail in the next chapter). The second of the two Newton hymns follows the same trajectory as Cowper's verses, beginning with a lamentation on the weakness of Christians without prayer, 'When temptations, foes, and storms, / Press them close', before focusing in on the strength imparted to the 'poor believer' by regular supplication:

Pray'r can force a passage thro'
Iron bars and brazen gates.

The similarity of these two sets of hymns in both their declarative tone and theological content suggests more than mere agreement over the primary subjects. Was each set written for a meeting in which Newton's sermon focused on the significance of spiritual practices? Being without the necessary material we can only offer informed speculation, however, paired with what we know of Newton's propensity to preach topical sermons at his weekly meetings, the fact that each of Cowper's hymns is presented in conjunction with one by Newton on the same subject renders it not unlikely that each set was pre-planned and composed by the two friends for specific sermons encouraging the Evangelicals of Olney to cultivate the habits of prayer and Bible reading.

Newton's hymn, 'Power of Prayer',⁴³³ is also notable for the method of argumentation that its verses employ in support of the central message of the hymn. In order to underscore this message—that prayer is vital to the Christian life—Newton appeals to relevant examples drawn from various places in the Bible. In verse five he cites the story of Hezekiah, who, 'from his knees', overcame both his own 'disease' and the existential threat posed by 'proud Assyria's host'. In verse six he relates both Peter's escape from prison in Acts 12:6-10 and Elijah's prayer for rain in the first book of Kings. Having listed these three narratives, in verse eight Newton offers the following conclusion:

For the wonders he has wrought,
Let us now our praises give;
And, by sweet experience taught,
Call upon him while we live.

This method is relevant to our inquiry because, in similar fashion, Cowper's topical hymns often refer to multiple Biblical passages relevant to the primary subject as a means of enforcing a central thesis. We have seen this already: in his hymn written for the encouragement of the impoverished people of Olney, the poet makes reference to the Hagar and Ishmael narrative and to the miraculous procurement of 'Cake and Cruse' for Elijah, before returning to the primary subject of the hymn, the certainty of God's provision:

His Saints and Servants shall be fed,

⁴³³ *ibid*, p.254-5.

The Promise is secure,
Bread shall be giv'n them, he has said,
Their Water shall be sure.⁴³⁴

Cowper often opts for this type of didactic reasoning in his verses, an approach that we might call 'systematic', insofar as, like systematic theological reasoning, it seeks to provide an answer to a theological question by drawing together examples of that question being addressed in the Bible, presenting those examples together as a coherent whole, and then establishing a definitive, authoritative, cumulative statement on the issue at hand. In 'The saints should never be dismay'd',⁴³⁵ another hymn on the topic of God's provision, the poet fashions a catena of Biblical references before concluding with an applied theological sequitur: Abraham's miraculous receipt of a 'ram' in verse one, David's rescue despite being the 'certain prey' of Saul in verse two, and Jonah's deliverance via the mouth of 'a fish' in verse three are all brought together in the one text and presented as evidences for the assurance of provision, 'Blest proofs of pow'r and grace divine'. Christians, Cowper declares, can therefore:

Wait for his seasonable aid,
And tho' it tarry wait:
The promise may be long delay'd,
But cannot come too late.

⁴³⁴ *Poems*, i., p.192-3.

⁴³⁵ *ibid*, p.140-1.

The same systematic approach is the chosen framework for ‘By whom was David taught’,⁴³⁶ a hymn on the kindred topic of ‘trust[ing] in the Lord’. Also exemplary of Cowper’s use of catechesis in his verses, this hymn asks a series of questions that it then provides the answers to: ‘By whom was David taught,/ To aim the dreadful blow,/ When he Goliath fought,/ And laid the Gittite low?’ in verse one; and ‘Who ordered Gideon forth,/ To storm th’invaders’ camp,/ With arms of little worth,/ A pitcher and a lamp?’ in verse two. From these questions Cowper draws forth the answer that ‘Israel’s God and king’ sent each man ‘to the fight’, and that it is God who gives ‘strength the sling,/ And skill to aim aright’. In the final analysis, therefore, Christians can trust in God, because:

[...] David’s Lord, and Gideon’s friend,
Will help his servant to the end.

Each of the systematic topical hymns we have thus far covered is a homiletical response to issues surrounding Applied Theology: will God provide sustenance, can God be trusted, will God send ‘aid’ in the midst of trials? Cowper’s use of this type of logic to answer this type of question in these hymns offers us another glimpse of his legal training being applied to theological argumentation. Faith, he reasons, can be placed in God in the present because the past witnesses to his having been faithful. The precedents for this are largely sourced in scripture—‘Blest proofs of pow’r and grace divine,/That meet us in his word!’—but Cowper also appeals to more subjective evidentiary pools, including the more recent past experiences of the speaker:

⁴³⁶ *ibid*, p.142-3.

Oh! I have seen the day,
When with a single word,
God helping me to say,
My trust is in the Lord;
My soul has quell'd a thousand foes,
Fearless of all that could oppose.⁴³⁷

Beyond issues relating to Applied Theology, Cowper uses this systematic structure to direct his readership on matters of doctrine. In 'Israel in ancient days',⁴³⁸ he examines the Atonement in detail, expounding its various aspects via figures and images drawn from the Old Testament. Journeying through the Pentateuch, Cowper selects several passages and uses them to dilate upon the doctrine comprehensively and with legal precision: in verse two, the 'paschal sacrifice' of Exodus 12:13 is proffered as an emblem of the 'need for other blood' to 'reconcile' man with God; in verse three, 'the Lamb' and 'Dove' of Leviticus 12:6 are deemed representative of Christ's 'perfect innocence', since 'he who must for sin atone,/ Must have no failings of his own'; and the 'scape-goat' and 'living bird' of verses four and five, drawn from Leviticus 16:20-26 and Leviticus 14:4-7 respectively, are presented as symbolic of the total removal of sin and the 'guilty soul enlarg'd,/ And by a Saviour's death discharg'd'. Book-ending these four stanzas are Cowper's opening and closing verses, which reveal a further didactic emphasis within this hymn beyond the doctrine itself:

⁴³⁷ *ibid*, p.143.

⁴³⁸ *ibid*, p.159-60.

Israel in ancient days,
Not only had a view
Of Sinai in a blaze,
But learn'd the gospel too:
The types and figures were a glass
In which they saw the Saviour's face.

[...]

Jesus I love to trace
Throughout the sacred page;
The footsteps of thy grace,
The same in ev'ry age!
O grant that I may faithful be
To clearer light, vouchsaf'd to me.

Cowper's claim that the Israelites 'saw the Saviour's face' in their own religious experiences is an invitation to the believer to approach the narratives and images of the Old Testament typologically. Once more, here we see him utilising a hymn as a means of imparting a way of reading to his readership. Rather than present them with a product of the espoused hermeneutic—for example, a rewriting of the Passover narrative inlaid with Christian theological categories—Cowper performs the process of reading an Old Testament passage through a New Testament lens within the text of the hymn itself: the 'paschal sacrifice' and 'blood besprinkled door' are presented on their own terms at the opening of the verse, before

then being interpreted as symbolic of the 'need of other blood' in its final lines. Indeed, this meta-hermeneutical act is reflected in the very structure of the verses:

The paschal sacrifice,
The blood-besprinkled door,
Seen with enlightned [sic] eyes,
And once apply'd with pow'r;
Would teach the need of other blood,
To reconcile an angry God.

The summary of Exodus 12:13, which here is the object of interpretation, is rendered in a quatrain of iambic trimeter at the beginning of the verse. This outline is then followed by a concluding couplet, framed in a lengthier iambic tetrameter, in which the poet proceeds to expound upon the preceding quatrain by way of a doctrinal exposition. Each of Cowper's interpretative verses follow this same structural pattern, mimicking the progress of the hermeneutical process that the hymn itself is explicitly teaching its readership to employ.

Unsurprisingly, given the central place it occupied within eighteenth-century Evangelical theology and preaching, the Atonement is a recurrent theme throughout Cowper's topical hymns, and one whose theory he is keen to teach his readership. In 'Jesus, whose blood so freely stream'd',⁴³⁹ the poet takes this complex theological concept as his primary subject, explaining it deftly in the opening verse:

⁴³⁹ *ibid*, p.144.

Jesus, whose blood so freely stream'd
To satisfy the law's demand;
By thee from guilt and wrath redeem'd,
Before the Father's face I stand.

Summarising the logic and process of the Atonement, John Calvin writes that 'in our flesh', Christ has carried out the necessary steps to reconciliation: to 'yield a perfect obedience', 'satisfy the justice of God, and pay the penalty of sin'.⁴⁴⁰ In the crucifixion, therefore, Christ is understood to have paid 'the penalty of sin' by presenting himself 'as the price of satisfaction to the just judgement of God'.⁴⁴¹ Cowper's ability to appreciate the nuances of this concept are, again, perhaps rooted in his training at the Inns of Court. He easily employs transactional and legal language similar to that used by Calvin: the 'peace' of reconciliation' is 'bought', and terms such as 'satisfy' and 'law's demand' echo the phrases used by the theologian. Cowper's utilisation of such terminology is in the service of a broader aim—the versification of a complex theological formula. He achieves this by crafting a four-stage narrative sequence that renders it more easily comprehended. Beginning with the 'blood' of 'Jesus', the poet moves on to explain the necessity of the cross in the satisfaction of 'the law's demand', expounds upon its redemptive power from the effects of 'guilt and wrath', and then arrives at the reconciled believer, 'Before the Father's face'. For Cowper, the rehearsal of this doctrine in narrative form ultimately has a pastoral purpose. His sophisticated use of tense within these verses serves to both communicate and apply the nuances of penal substitutionary atonement, the crux of

⁴⁴⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, p.299.

⁴⁴¹ *ibid.*

which is firmly located in the past. The blood of Christ is not 'streaming', rather, it has 'stream'd', and by enjambment Cowper further links this to the satisfaction of 'the law's demand' in the second line of the verse, also framed in the past tense. By contrast, the effects of this salvific work are rendered in the present tense, and thus, the speaker arrives at the point of reconciliation, having travelled through the atonement process, to finally inhabit the 'I' in the 'redeem'd' present, to 'stand' before God, their sins having been absolved in the past.

Cowper's topical hymns expound upon a range of other doctrinal and theological subjects. Notable among these hymns is Cowper's denunciation of Antinomianism in 'Too many Lord, abuse thy grace':⁴⁴²

Too many Lord, abuse thy grace
In this Licentious Day,
And while they boast they see thy Face,
They turn their Own away.

[...]

The Pardon such presume upon,
They do not Beg but Steal,
And when they plead it at thy Throne,
Oh, where's the Gospel Seal?

⁴⁴² *Poems*, i., p.200.

[...]

The Liberty our Hearts implore,
Is, not to Live in Sin,
But still to wait at Wisdom's Door,
'Till Mercy calls us in.

These same concerns are the primary subject in both 'O God, whose favorable eye'⁴⁴³—which warns against a 'graceless heart' that presumes upon grace of God—and 'The Lord receives his highest praise',⁴⁴⁴ in which Cowper criticises the 'loud professor' who merely 'talks of free and sov'reign grace', contrasting this against the fruit of authentic faith, 'humble minds and hearts sincere'. Set in a subsection titled, 'Cautions', these two hymns are mirrored by similar contributions from Newton, 'True and false zeal'⁴⁴⁵ and 'The sluggard',⁴⁴⁶ which are similarly anxious to differentiate between 'living and dead faith'.

The consistent focus on this topic by both hymnwriters, a shared disquietude marked by the curious specificity of these verses, is perhaps the product of more than a mere generally Evangelical concern with the subject of grace and genuine conversion. The ongoing and rapid growth of Newton's weekly meeting in the late 1760s, which led to the relocations we have already discussed, eventually resulted in his having to admit people by invitation only—

⁴⁴³ *ibid*, p.198.

⁴⁴⁴ *ibid*, p.199.

⁴⁴⁵ *Olney Hymns*, p.392-3.

⁴⁴⁶ *ibid*, p.401.

presumably those whom he judged to be in possession of a 'living' faith.⁴⁴⁷ It is not difficult to imagine Newton rising to preach on this perceived problem at an overcrowded and carnivalesque meeting, and sternly referring to these hymns in his remarks. The focus on Antinomianism, however, explicit in the first hymn and present throughout many of his contributions to the collection, is specifically reflective of the Olney context. Thirty years before Newton's arrival in Olney, William Hunt, John Drake, and Philip Doddridge wrote with some concern to Isaac Watts regarding the 'dissenting interest' at Olney: 'most of the dissenters in this town have for some time been extremely fond of lay preachers in the Antinomian strain, and have entertained very strong prejudices against all the regular ministers in these parts'.⁴⁴⁸ Thomas Scott reports that, even after Newton's ministry, Olney 'swarmed with antinomians'.⁴⁴⁹ He further suggests that the presence of this 'strain' within the town troubled his predecessor, writing that 'the antinomians and dissenters had quite undermined his influence', and it seems therefore that these hymns were specifically directed towards this issue.⁴⁵⁰

Cowper's doctrinally-focused topical hymns touch upon many of the same theological issues as his letters. In 'Grace, triumphant in the throne',⁴⁵¹ he takes the familiar topic of salvation by grace as his primary subject. Condemning 'Self-advancement' and 'idol works', Cowper exhorts his readership to,

⁴⁴⁷ Hindmarsh (1996), p.199.

⁴⁴⁸ Thomas Milner (ed.), *The Life, Times, and Correspondence of the Rev. Isaac Watts* (London: Thomas Richardson and Son, 1845), p.496.

⁴⁴⁹ Scott (1827), p.457.

⁴⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁴⁵¹ *Poems*, i., p.203.

Banish ev'ry vain pretence
Built on human excellence;
Perish ev'ry thing in man,
But the grace that never can.

In 'Almighty King! whose wond'rous hand',⁴⁵² too, the poet expounds upon the various manifestations of 'Providence' in the lives of Christians, declaring it to be the source of 'food', 'heal[ing]', protection from 'pain', 'nourish[ment]' of the 'soul', and of 'streams of outward comfort'. This hymn is marked by a curious directional switch. Beginning in the exaltative mode, its verses are initially a sort of prayer, with God addressed in the second person as 'Almighty King' and 'Thy' by the speaker, who speaks in the first person singular, 'My' and 'I'. Again here, Cowper's prayer does not seem to be purely an expression of personal ecstasy or devotion; as with his epistolary prayers, the supplicative elements of his hymns are in themselves a kind of sermon, filled with theological content, and delivered with a sideways glance at the reader: 'Thy Providence supplies my food,' he writes in verse two, 'And 'tis thy blessing makes it good'. Both the presence of the reader and Cowper's intentions are explicitly confirmed at the outset of the third verse, as the poet turns away to address us:

My streams of outward comfort came
From him, who built this earthly frame;
Whate'er I want his bounty gives,
By whom my soul for ever lives.

⁴⁵² *ibid*, p.205.

Either his hand preserves from pain,
Or, if I feel it, heals again;
From Satan's malice shields my breast,
Or overrules it for the best.

Here, God is the subject of discussion rather than the partner, as the speaker pivots to another hearer, and the hymn becomes a kind of theologically-informed testimony, delivered in the declarative mode. This testimony posits God as creator, reasons that all needs must be met by his bounty, and presupposes the ultimate goodness of his intentions towards the believer in all events and circumstances—a reference, similar to those we saw in Cowper's correspondence, to Romans 8:28: 'And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God'. It is upon this basis that Cowper, faced with trials and difficulties, proclaims here as he did in his letters to Ann Bodham and Maria Cowper that God will either 'preserve' the speaker 'from pain' or allow straitening circumstances with the ultimate aim of 'heal[ing] again'.

These didactic undercurrents are more openly on display elsewhere in Cowper's doctrine-focused topical hymns. In 'Of all the gifts thine hand bestows',⁴⁵³ his reflections on the primary subject, the nature of faith, are more directly homiletical. Framed once more as a form of prayer, with God addressed in the second person as 'Thou Giver of all good!', in this hymn

⁴⁵³ *ibid*, p.204.

Cowper opts for the first person plural: 'Faith [...] From the same hand we gain', in verse two; 'Till thou thy teaching pow'r apply,/ Our hearts refuse to see', in verse three; and in verse four:

Blind to the merits of thy Son,
What mis'ry we endure!
Yet fly that hand, from which alone,
We could expect a cure.

Again, this hymn is powerfully reminiscent of Cowper's letters, which were often punctuated with sermonic prayers delivered in the first-person plural. Already quoted in our second introductory chapter, this section from a letter to Mrs Madan is particularly pertinent: 'May we always be enabled to receive Him with our whole Heart! May we charge our souls continually to lift up their everlasting gates and admit this King of Glory, the Christ of God, in all the fulness of His free salvation.' Though they are primarily meditations upon doctrine, in each of these hymns Cowper is keen to situate theological concepts within the experience of the individual or collective. Among his contributions to *Olney Hymns*, however, are a number of hymns that take as their primary subject various topics relating specifically to Christian experience. Though the majority are centred on the subject of trials, both spiritual and temporal, and though they appear to have been written out of personal experience, Cowper's approach to this topic is multifaceted: at times speaking didactically and authoritatively upon the subject, at others speaking passionately from within the experience itself. The final section of this chapter is devoted to a survey of these hymns within the context of usefulness.

Cowper's experiential hymns

A significant number of Cowper's contributions to *Olney Hymns* come under the category of hymns on the Christian experience. Several of these are unexpected. 'Sometimes a light surprises',⁴⁵⁴ for example, is a cheerful hymn, apparently written in the wake of a divine encounter during the act of singing. The 'light' that 'surprises/ The Christian while he sings' is confidently identified by Cowper as 'the Lord', rising 'With healing in his wings' to inaugurate a 'season of clear shining' and bring 'cheer' after the 'rain' of tribulation. It seems likely that this description is based upon Cowper's own experience. Something of the sort happened to him on at least one occasion, shortly after he had arrived in Olney, as he reported in a letter to his aunt, Mrs Madan, on Saturday 26 September 1767:

On the last Sabbath Morning at a Prayer Meeting before Service, while the poor Folks were singing a Hymn and my Vile Thoughts were rambling to the Ends of the Earth, a single Sentence (And is there no Pity in Jesus's Breast?) seized my Attention at once, and my Heart within me seemed to return Answer, Yes, or I had never been here. The Sweetness of this Visit lasted almost thro' the Day, and I was once more enabled to weep under a Sense of the Mercies of God in Jesus.⁴⁵⁵

It is unclear if 'Sometimes a light surprises' was written in direct response to this particular event. Cowper habitually attached his experiential verses, whether hymns or poetry, to the letters in which he had described the events that inspired them: for example, in a letter to Mrs Madan sent several months later, he sorrowfully relays the news of Mrs Unwin's illness in

⁴⁵⁴ *Poems*, i., p.188-9.

⁴⁵⁵ *Letters*, i., p.180.

prose, and encloses with it a hymn-reflection, 'Oh for a closer Walk with God'.⁴⁵⁶ Given that, in his report of the prayer meeting experience, Cowper neither includes nor mentions the hymn, and given that the letter itself was written six days after the event had taken place, we can reasonably assume that he had not yet written these verses, and, therefore, penned them later, presumably either on remembering the event or having experienced something similar. Indeed, the very first word of the hymn suggests that this was not a one-off occurrence—that the 'light' that came with singing hymns came, if not often, 'sometimes'. Having described the experience in the first verse, Cowper pivots to a didactic reflection upon it in the second and third:

In holy contemplation,
We sweetly then pursue
The theme of God's salvation,
And find it ever new:
Set free from present sorrow,
We cheerfully can say,
E'en let th'unknown to-morrow,
Bring with it what it may.

It can bring with it nothing
But he will bear us thro';
Who gives the lilies clothing

⁴⁵⁶ *ibid*, [Thursday, 10 December 1767] p.187-8.

Will clothe his people too:
Beneath the spreading heavens,
No creature but is fed;
And he who feeds the ravens,
Will give his children bread.

This hymn is significant to this thesis because it represents an attempt by its author to draw a series of lessons from an experience and apply them to a readership. Written in the first-person plural and with reference to 'The Christian', Cowper generalises his experience from the outset, broadening his description of it in order to make it inclusive of the experience of Christians everywhere. He then pivots to his readership, drawing from his description a set of instructive reflections, couched in Biblical references: the 'unknown to-morrow' faced in verse two is taken from Matthew 6:34; the 'lilies' and promise of clothing in verse three are from Matthew 6:28-29; the 'ravens' at the close of the same verse are from Luke 12:24; and the barren 'vine', 'fig-tree', 'fields', 'flocks', and 'herds' of verse four are from Habakkuk 3:17-18. The logic of this hymn is one that occurs elsewhere: the contemporaneous experience of Christians, married with the past promises and actions of God as documented in the Bible, should inspire faith in his goodness, provision, and providence: that, 'he will bear us thro''. At the hymn's close, Cowper makes his application of these lessons explicit with his transition into the first person singular, and thus he has his speaker sing:

Yet God the same abiding,
His praise shall tune my voice;
For while in him confiding,

I cannot but rejoice.

This chapter has directed a light towards those hymns that, until now, have largely escaped critical attention. Here at its close, we will turn to that group of hymns which, perhaps more than any other, has received the attention of Cowper's critics and influenced the consensus concerning his contributions to Newton's collection. This consensus, as outlined in the introduction, finds that they are best understood as effusions of mental instability and discomfort. Cowper's hymns on the Christian experience seem to support this reading, since, unlike 'Sometimes a light surprises', the majority are explicitly concerned with various spiritual trials, and several, including the one above, have the appearance of in-the-moment testimonies, written by the author about—and either during or in the immediate aftermath of—his own experiences. These hymns also appear to buttress popular critical conceptions about the purpose for which Cowper wrote hymns: as confessional 'private poems', in which he unwittingly documented his slow descent into madness. It should be noted that without the provision of any other context it is indeed difficult to see how these hymns could have been written to serve another purpose, or how they might be read in any other way. Further complications to any discussion of this topic are brought by the incorrect inclusion of two of Cowper's hymns in this subgroup: 'My soul is sad and much dismay'd' and 'My former hopes are fled'. The substantial task of restoring these two hymns to their proper context is the work of the next chapter. Continuing the line of inquiry followed in Part One, this final section will seek to challenge the traditional consensus regarding Cowper's experiential hymns by asking what other designs he might have had in writing them, and where (if at all) they fit into Newton's claim that the contents of his hymnbook were 'originally composed' for the 'use' of the Evangelical members of the 'parish and neighbourhood of Olney'.

The texts that constitute this subsection can themselves be further separated into two helpful subgroups: hymns that offer general commentary upon the concept, experience, and role of spiritual trials in the life of the Christian, and hymns that engage with the subject imaginatively. Beginning with the first of these subgroups, in “’Tis my happiness below”,⁴⁵⁷ Cowper presents the ‘happiness’ of the Christian as one lived with ‘the cross’ of sanctification via difficulty:

God, in Israel, sows the seeds
Of affliction, pain, and toil;
These spring up, and choke the weeds
Which would else o’erspread the soil:
Trials make the promise sweet,
Trials give new life to pray’r;
Trials bring me to his feet,
Lay me low, and keep me there.

A curious mixture of the homiletical and the meditative, this octet is difficult to place. Though they might be easily misunderstood as the reasoning of an unstable mind, these confident assertions are actually the product of Cowper’s engagement with the Puritan tradition (the subject of Part Two). In *Of Temptation* (1658), John Owen writes that the intended ‘end’ of ‘great sufferings’ is to ‘show unto man what is in him’ and to show God ‘himself unto man’.⁴⁵⁸ ‘We know not the power and strength that God puts forth in our behalf, nor what is the

⁴⁵⁷ *Poems*, i., p.175-6.

⁴⁵⁸ John Owen, *Of Temptation* (Oxford, 1658), p.7, p.9.

sufficiency of his grace, until, comparing the temptation with our own weakness, it appears to us', he continues, concluding: 'We must be tried, that we may be made sensible of being preserved'.⁴⁵⁹ This last notion is at the root of Cowper's declaration in the hymn that 'Did I meet no trials here [...] Might I not, with reason, fear/ I should prove a cast-away'? Cowper's assertion that trials 'make the promise sweet', 'give new life to pray'r', and that they are ultimately 'Sanctifying'—that, in short, trials should be understood by the Christian as a source of potential utility—is echoed by Newton:

Afflictions quicken us to prayer. It is a pity it should be so; but experience testifies, that a long course of ease and prosperity, without painful changes, has an unhappy tendency to make us cold and formal in our secret worship; but troubles rouse our spirits, and constrain us to call upon the Lord in good earnest, when we feel a need of that help which we can only have from him. They are useful, and in a degree necessary, to keep alive in us a conviction of the vanity and unsatisfying nature of the present world, and all its enjoyments; to remind us that this is not our rest, and to call our thoughts upwards, where our true treasure is, and where our conversation ought to be. [...] Afflictions evidence to ourselves, and manifest to others, the reality of grace. And when we suffer as Christians, exercise some measure of that patience and submission, and receive some measure of that patience and submission, and receive some measure of these supports and supplies, which the Gospel requires and promises to believers, we are more confirmed that we have not taken up with mere notions; and others may be convinced, that we do not follow cunningly devised fables.⁴⁶⁰

⁴⁵⁹ *ibid*, p.9-10.

⁴⁶⁰ *Works of Newton* (London, 1808), ii., p.22-4.

Despite now being in possession of greater clarity as to its meaning and context, we are still left with the question of what this text is and what its aims are. Until the final two lines, Cowper frames the above verse as a series of theological statements that seek to define the occasion, usefulness, and source of 'trials' in the life of the Christian. Though strong at the outset, this homiletical tone softens considerably at the conclusion, receding from the general and declarative into the personal and reflective, as the poet situates the content of the first six lines within his own experience and the first person singular: 'Trials bring me to his feet,/ Lay me low, and keep me there'. The same softening is true of the first verse, which ends:

Trials must and will befall;
But with humble faith to see
Love inscrib'd upon them all,
This is happiness to me.

Is this a homiletical hymn like those we have examined in this chapter, or is it a 'personal poem'? Or, does this hymn occupy a space between a homiletical hymn and a confessional/devotional hymn, the public and the private, seeking to shape the approach of the speaker to God? Certainly, the consistent introduction of the personal tone brings with it a hybridity that makes the text difficult to define; certainly, it is difficult to imagine that Cowper is not here writing, albeit perhaps didactically, in relation to his own personal experience.

Elsewhere, Cowper is more clearly homiletical in his discussion of suffering as a concept. As we have already noted in this chapter, ‘God moves in a mysterious way’⁴⁶¹ is a hymn on the nature of trials that is formed of a series of strong declaratives:

His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour,
The Bud may have a bitter taste,
But *wait*, to *Smell the flower*.

Cowper’s hymns, as presented by Baird and Ryskamp, do not often italicise words, and the source of these italics is unclear. The editors note that the copy text is from the Maitland-Madan Commonplace Book, the content of which was copied from a letter initially sent to Mrs Madan by Newton (interestingly, Newton’s publication of this hymn in *Twenty Six Letters on Religious Subjects* (1774) does not feature italics).⁴⁶² Whether it was Cowper, Newton, or Madan herself who italicised these words, this typographical feature is relevant regardless, since it serves to highlight either the homiletical intentions of the author or the manner in which the reader-transcriber received the declaratives that they give shape to—as directives to be heeded. Another hymn that seeks to speak generally to the concept of trials and the Christian experience is ‘O how I love thy holy word’.⁴⁶³ In this hymn, which is framed in the devotional ‘I/thou’, Cowper begins by expressing love and gratitude for the ‘holy word’ and ‘gracious covenant’: a guide along the ‘peaceful way’ that imparts ‘joys’ greater than both

⁴⁶¹ *Poems*, i., p.174-5.

⁴⁶² *ibid*, p.xxix; John Newton, *Twenty six letters on religious subjects.: To which are added, hymns, &c* (England: 1774), p.220-1.

⁴⁶³ *Poems*, i., p.176-7.

‘mines of shining wealth’ and ‘the strength of youth, the bloom of health!’. Having made these general declarations, the poet then turns to reflect upon his own experiences:

Long unafflicted, undismay’d,
In pleasure’s path secure I stray’d;
Thou mad’st me feel thy chastning rod,
And strait I turn’d unto my God.

At the hymn’s conclusion, these spiritual trials, though they ‘pierc’d’ the poet’s ‘fainting heart’, are ultimately judged to be a cause for gratitude: without them, he reasons, ‘Thy precept I had still despis’d’; trials, he concludes, ‘sav’d me from eternal woe’.

Once again, here Cowper straddles two approaches to the nature of trial. His verses are aimed at generality and they have a didactic quality, yet his expression is influenced by his own experience and delivered via a kind of imaginative engagement that recalls his scripture hymns. Sinful dalliances are framed as diversions from the road of pilgrimage, down ‘pleasure’s path’, and the consequent suffering is construed via the metaphor of God’s ‘chastning rod’. Though this use of imagery ensures that the verse is not restricted by specificity—its words can be read and used devotionally by readers as vessels for their own experiences—nevertheless Cowper is clearly speaking autobiographically here, albeit with the details veiled in metaphor. This same composite approach is evident in several of his other hymns on the same primary subject. In ‘The billows swell, the winds are high’,⁴⁶⁴ he writes in the simple present tense from within

⁴⁶⁴ *ibid*, p.177-8.

the experience, giving expression to the believer struggling through the moment of trial. Spiritual difficulty is framed as a storm, 'billows swell' and 'winds are high', and the voice of the speaker rises 'Out of the depths', beset by 'fears' and denuded of 'strength':

Amidst the roaring of the sea,
My soul still hangs her hope on thee,
Thy constant love, thy faithful care,
Is all that saves me from despair.

The same scenario resurfaces in 'God of my life, to thee I call',⁴⁶⁵ as Cowper describes with 'trembling heart' the encroachment of 'great water-floods'. In the face of these difficulties, he offers a supplicative response:

Friend of the friendless, and the faint!
Where should I lodge my deep complaint?
Where but with thee, whose open door
Invites the helpless and the poor!

Did ever mourner plead with thee,
And thou refuse that mourner's plea?
Does not the word still fix'd remain,
That none shall seek thy face in vain?

⁴⁶⁵ *ibid*, p.178-9.

[...]

Fair is the lot that's cast for me!

I have an advocate with thee;

They whom the world caresses most,

Have no such privilege to boast.

Poor tho' I am, despis'd, forgot,

Yet God, my God, forgets me not;

And he is safe and must succeed,

For whom the Lord vouchsafes to plead.

With its singular focus upon self-contemplation, 'Thy mansion is the christian's heart'⁴⁶⁶ is another example of a hymn apparently written from within a moment of trial. Typical of Cowper's ability to weave together scriptural references in the formation of a unique theological reflection, its verses are built upon the fusion of two Biblical texts: the cleansing of the temple,⁴⁶⁷ and the Apostle's words in 1 Corinthians 6:19, 'know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost [...]?''. In Cowper's reframing of the former via the latter, the speaker's heart becomes the temple, the 'dwelling-place' of God, a 'mansion' temporarily transformed into a 'den of thieves' (a phrase directly quoted from the Synoptics), which Christ must enter into and restore to a 'calm delightful house of pray'r'. The poet's personification of

⁴⁶⁶ *ibid*, p.156-7.

⁴⁶⁷ Featured in all four of the gospels: Matt 21:12-17, Mark 11:15-19, Luke 19:45-48, and John 2:13-16.

sin as a ‘bustling crowd’, a ‘thievish swarm’, an ‘unruly throng’, and a noisome ‘din’ of ‘voice[s]’ powerfully utilises every atmospheric detail of the gospel accounts, and their overarching transactional theme is transmuted into a metaphor for the ‘sharp designing trade’ pursued by sin, which seeks to tempt the speaker to ‘part with ease’ and ‘purchase’ the ‘pain’ of shame, regret, and distance from God. As with the other two hymns, it is written using the first-person singular, ‘I’.

What are we to make of these hymns? Should they be understood as mere effusions of spiritual difficulty, as personal poetry, expressive of Cowper’s mental difficulties? It is difficult for the literary critic to read hymns such as ‘God of my life, to thee I call’ without looking forward to ‘The Castaway’. That said, there is much within them that is absent from that desolate poem. There are moments of didacticism throughout, and moments where Cowper cites theological assurances with confidence: that Christ has an ‘open door’, that he is an ‘advocate’ for the believer, that this is a ‘privilege’ that the ‘world’ cannot match, that ‘my God, forgets me not’ and therefore the Christian is ‘safe and must succeed’.⁴⁶⁸ Are these tremulous and private attempts to stir the embers of a dying faith, or are they an attempt to model to a readership how they might prayerfully navigate the storm of trial? Moreover, whereas the suffering of ‘The Castaway’ is uniquely Cowper’s—albeit given shape by Anson’s account of a calamity at sea in *A Voyage Round the World* (1748)—each of the hymns above eschews the specificity of confessional poetry, generalising descriptions of sin and difficulty, and opting for expressions that could reasonably be sung by most revivalists, either with reference to current or past experiences of sin and trial.⁴⁶⁹

⁴⁶⁸ *Poems*, i., p.178-9.

⁴⁶⁹ *ibid*, iii., p.357-8.

It is the argument of this section, in line with our central contention in this chapter, that, while these hymns are certainly at least in part rooted in the personal experiences of their author, they were nevertheless written with the aim of being useful to a particular readership. Michael Mascuch, in his survey of the *Origins of the Individualist Self: autobiography and self-identity in England, 1591-1791*, documents the development of an outward-facing, self-reflective mode of writing in English literature and culture throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. Noting the increasing popularity in the late 1500s of the preservation of 'the private expressions of ordinary persons' and their publication 'for the edification of posterity [...] both to demonstrate the biographical subject's Christian conduct and to bind together the godly community', Mascuch argues that this growing print culture gave rise to the common practice among English Protestants of keeping 'a personal notebook of miscellaneous experiences'.⁴⁷⁰ By the seventeenth century, spiritual diarists had become more conscious of a potential readership beyond themselves, so much so that they began to write explicitly with that readership in mind. Many of these authors, Mascuch writes, 'came to treat [their] private notebooks as if they were an extension of [their] public person'.⁴⁷¹ He continues:

Despite their largely personal and spiritual focus, public pressures informed the memorials as much as, and perhaps even more than, private desire did. At the very least, we must say that the texts were products of interaction between private and public relations. [...] The works do not constitute a retreat into the interior recesses of

⁴⁷⁰ Michael Mascuch, *Origins of the Individualist Self: autobiography and self-identity in England, 1591-1791* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), p.67, p.84.

⁴⁷¹ *ibid*, p.89.

the mind, but instead an advance from those recesses into the realm of publicity, and (modest) self-promotion.⁴⁷²

The last sentence is especially significant for Cowper, his broader context, and the hymns we have examined thus far in this section. Hindmarsh notes that Puritan ‘spiritual diaries’—or as he terms them, written forms of ‘self-examination’—were ‘the first and most important precedent’ for the same practice and the general drive towards written forms of introspection among revivalists in the eighteenth century.⁴⁷³ Both John Newton and the Wesley brothers were among those revivalists who, after the fashion of their Puritan forebears, took up the practice of keeping regular confessional diaries. For the Wesleys, these texts are constituted of reports concerning general life and movements, but also of their inner spiritual lives—their struggles with and victories over sin and adversity.⁴⁷⁴ Charles Wesley, for example, records many instances of his own daily battle with personal sin; in his entry for 21 March 1736, a Sunday, he writes: ‘Faint and weary with the day’s fatigue, I found my want of true holiness, and begged God to give me comfort from his word’.⁴⁷⁵ The following Tuesday, 23 March, he returns to the same subject: ‘I felt my faith revive; and I was confident God would either turn aside the trial or strengthen me to bear it.’⁴⁷⁶

⁴⁷² *ibid*, p.92.

⁴⁷³ Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: spiritual autobiography in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.92.

⁴⁷⁴ Ted A. Campbell, ‘John Wesley as a diarist and correspondent’, *The Cambridge Companion to John Wesley*, ed. by Randy L. Maddox and Jason E. Vickers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p.136.

⁴⁷⁵ Charles Wesley, *The Journal of the Rev. Charles Wesley, M.A.*, ed. by Thomas Jackson, 2 vols (London: John Mason, 1849), i., p.6.

⁴⁷⁶ *ibid*, p.5.

Wesley occasionally offers details about the nature of his experience, even naming the sin with which he is struggling. On Monday 22 May 1738, for example, he records that: 'It was morning before I could get to sleep. Many motions of pride arose, and were continually beaten down by Christ my King. The devil also tempted me to impatience through pain; but God turned it into an occasion of resignation.'⁴⁷⁷ Usually, however, his references to sin are left unspecified, and communicated vaguely via terms such as 'temptation'. On Tuesday 6 June 1738, he wrote, 'My inward temptations are, in a manner, uninterrupted [...] I never knew the energy of sin, till now that I experience the superior strength of Christ',⁴⁷⁸ and on Saturday 30 June 1739: 'This whole week has the messenger of Satan been buffering me with uninterrupted temptation'.⁴⁷⁹ Twenty-two days later, he expounds upon the experience of temptation at some length, in an entry written on Sunday 22 July:

I never knew till now the strength of temptation, and energy of sin. Who, that conferred with flesh and blood, would covet great success? I live in a continual storm. My soul is always in my hand. The enemy thrusts sore at me, that I may fall; and a worse enemy than the devil is my own heart.⁴⁸⁰

That Charles Wesley wrote these entries with an eye on potential future publication—that, in Mascuch's words, they represent an advancement out from rather than a retreat into the recesses of the mind—is perhaps indicated by the use of general terms such as 'temptation' as a means of referring to sin. By avoiding specificity, the diarist both safeguards his own public

⁴⁷⁷ *ibid*, p.94.

⁴⁷⁸ *ibid*, p.100.

⁴⁷⁹ *ibid*, p.156.

⁴⁸⁰ *ibid*, p.157.

perception and renders his experience helpful to a broader readership, who are in turn able to use his words as vessels for their own struggles and experiences. Charles was fully aware of the public-facing nature of such texts, since both his older brother, John, and the co-founder of the Evangelical revival, George Whitefield, made a habit of publishing their own journals and letters in regular instalments from 1738 onward.⁴⁸¹ Hindmarsh notes that, though they were concerned with stimulating, directing, and defending the revival and are therefore to be differentiated from the separate confessional diaries that their authors also kept, even these explicitly public-facing journals were infused with personal 'spiritual concerns'.⁴⁸² Of John Wesley, he writes that 'the Wesley of the diary, seeking both self-knowledge and holiness, was present in the printed *Journal*.'⁴⁸³

Whether Charles Wesley intended his confessional diary to be published or not, there are two things of particular relevance here. The first is that, within the theological stream in which Cowper swam, the careful and regular documentation of spiritual trial and its disclosure to a reading public was a well-established practice. The second is found in Wesley's extension of this practice beyond prose and into verse, specifically hymns. First published in 1740, for example, his hymn, 'In Temptation',⁴⁸⁴ is in essence a verse-based expression and exposition of what we have read in his diaries:

Jesu, Lover of my Soul,

Let me to Thy bosom fly,

⁴⁸¹ Hindmarsh (2005), p.97.

⁴⁸² *ibid*.

⁴⁸³ *ibid*, p.117.

⁴⁸⁴ John Wesley and Charles Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, 3rd edn. (London, 1740), p.67.

While the nearer Waters roll,
While the Tempest still is high:
Hide me, O my Saviour, hide,
Till the Storm of Life is past:
Safe into the Haven guide;
O receive my Soul at last.

Hindmarsh draws a similar link between Newton's confessional diary and his hymns, writing that his 'private devotional exercises aimed to recreate the emotional landscape of conversion as a way of keeping gratitude to God at a high pitch, since gratitude was, from the human point of view, the inward motor of growth in Christian virtue'. 'Many of Newton's hymns', he adds, 'function in the same way'.⁴⁸⁵ Newton's hymns are filled with apparently diaristic accounts and expressions of personal spiritual difficulty. In 'Behold I am vile!',⁴⁸⁶ for example, we find:

Thy gospel oft I hear,
But hear it still in vain;
Without desire, or love, or fear,
I like a stone remain.

The same preoccupations and concerns are present in 'The waiting soul',⁴⁸⁷ a hymn initially incorrectly attributed to Cowper:

⁴⁸⁵ Hindmarsh (1996), p.271.

⁴⁸⁶ *Olney Hymns*, p.318.

⁴⁸⁷ *ibid*, p.322-3.

Cold as I feel this heart of mine,
Yet since I feel it so;
It yields some hope of life divine
Within, however low.

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

In 'The effort—in another measure',⁴⁸⁸ we find:

Bow'd down beneath a load of sin,
By Satan sorely prest;
By war without, and fears within,
I come to thee for rest.

These hymns are designed to meet several needs. Facing their author, they are the report of real and immanent spiritual experience. Facing their readership, they are instructive, a source of direction, and a means of explaining and giving expression to common Christian experience. For each, they also represent an opportunity for an encounter with the 'emotional landscape' of conversion, and for the generation of spiritual feeling. Newton's hymns share many of the

⁴⁸⁸ *ibid*, p.324-5.

same qualities as Wesley's verses and diary entries: confessional, informed or inspired by personal experience, yet at the same time written for a readership, and rendered in broad and general terms such that readers might easily identify with the experience that the hymns give voice to and see their own immediate struggles in its verses.

Cowper's experiential hymns belong within, and are best explained by, this context. Though they contain effusive elements, these texts should not be understood as mere effusions. Whether more commentative or imaginative, they should also be understood as fundamentally public-facing: advancing outward from the recesses of the mind with the purpose of being useful, rather than retreating into private introspection and meditation. They were written within a culture where the minutiae of day-to-day spiritual life was seen as a source of communal edification, and where, to that end, it was documented for the purposes of distribution in prose, verse, and hymns.

Perhaps the most striking and obvious example of Cowper's presentation of his own spiritual experiences for the use and edification of his readership is 'God moves in a mysterious way'. Of all the pieces that Cowper wrote on elements of the Christian experience, this text is the one for which we have the most contextual information. In his memorial sermon delivered on the occasion of the poet's death, Samuel Greatheed asserts that this hymn was written just prior to Cowper's breakdown in January 1773.⁴⁸⁹ Moreover, it is not unlikely that Newton, who delivered a sermon from 1 Corinthians 10:13 on the topic of 'God's sufficiency in times of temptation' around the same time, made reference to its verses in his address to the people

⁴⁸⁹ Greatheed (1800), p.18.

of Olney.⁴⁹⁰ Despite undergoing great discomfort—though it should be noted that he could not have known the extent of what was to descend upon him in short order—Cowper naturally saw this experience as an opportunity to reflect publicly on matters of providence and the place of trials in the life of the Christian. That he did so is strongly indicative of the two arguments made in this chapter: first, that this was the culture that Newton sought to cultivate in Olney; and secondly, that, with Newton, Cowper was well-used to producing verses inspired by his own experiences, not for his own private purposes, but for the ‘use’ of the Evangelicals within the ‘parish and neighbourhood of Olney’.

In closing, it should also be noted that these hymns were written within a local context where such texts—specifically including, according to his diary, hymns on the varieties of Christian experience such as ‘The burdened sinner’—were used by Newton as either quasi-primary or quasi-secondary texts in his sermons. This fact becomes even more relevant when one considers the Olney readership. Concerning his ministry within the town, in December 1776 Newton affirms that he was ‘often’ moved to preach upon the topic of trial, suffering, and ‘the benefit of affliction’. The cause of this was the situation of his congregants, regarding which he writes: ‘the many exercises of my poor afflicted people, and the sympathy the Lord has given me with them in their troubles, has made this a frequent and favourite topic of my ministry among them’.⁴⁹¹ This is reflected in his funeral sermon for Cowper, in which he recalls that he ‘had the Honour to be over a set of [poor?] plain people chiefly Lace Makers’ whose ‘great confinement caused in them great depression of Spirits’. He continues: ‘They used to say O Sir

⁴⁹⁰ Hindmarsh (1996), p.196.

⁴⁹¹ *Works of Newton* (London, 1808), ii., p.22.

if I was right sure I should not feel so, but they well knew Mr Cowper [,] they knew he was right & from him they could take comfort'.⁴⁹²

This small and apparently unimportant detail introduces a significant and wholly overlooked factor into our consideration of Cowper's experiential hymns, whose melancholic elements have always been understood as being solely autobiographical or diaristic. The discovery that much of the pastoral task at Olney was dedicated to providing spiritual (in addition to material) aid to lace makers struggling with 'depression of Spirits' opens up the possibility that Cowper was not solely writing about himself, or indeed merely in the belief that self-disclosure might be generally useful to his readership, but that he was also writing towards the experiences of his readers themselves: that he was specifically responding to their current circumstances and concerned with providing them with words with which to describe, understand, and redeem their own ongoing experiences. Read within this context, Cowper's verses, whether didactic or apparently autobiographical, seem like an attempt to meet the issues arising from the exclamative, 'O Sir if I was right sure I should not feel so'. To the question, "if I was saved surely I would not undergo this 'depression of Spirits'", Cowper's hymns respond by reasoning that within the experience of 'trial' the reader should see evidence of their status as a 'true-born child of God'. Here at the close of this chapter, therefore, we return to the central argument of Part One: that, when considered within their local context, Cowper's hymns reveal themselves to be complex interactions with a readership, and written with the ultimate intent of being useful.

⁴⁹² Newton, Unfinished memoir, Ms.RC0707.

PART TWO
COWPER AND THE PURITANS

Chapter IV
Pilgrimage, Spiritual Autobiography, *Pilgrim's Progress*, and the Influence of John Bunyan on
Cowper's *Olney Hymns*

Following four weeks of concentrated composition, in November 1776 Cowper sent a lengthy piece of poetry to William Unwin. He titled it *Tirocinium*, a term that, as Baird and Ryskamp explain in their notes to the poem, filtered into the English lexicon during the seventeenth century, and was used to denote the entrance of the individual into the education system, or 'pupilage'.⁴⁹³ Cowper was stirred to pen the piece by his own harrowing experience at Westminster. In it he rails against the custom of sending children away to school, arguing passionately that they are best educated at home. 'Parents', he contends, are naturally endowed with a concern for the moral welfare of their children; they 'exert a prudent care', 'feed' their 'minds with proper fare', and 'wisely store the nurs'ry' with 'moral narrative' and 'sacred text'.⁴⁹⁴ Concerning his own childhood reading, he writes:

I pleased remember, and while mem'ry yet
Holds fast her office here, can ne'er forget,

⁴⁹³ *Poems*, ii., p.426-7.

⁴⁹⁴ *ibid*, p.274.

Ingenious dreamer, in whose well-told tale,
 Sweet fiction and sweet truth alike prevail,
 Whose hum'rous vein, strong sense, and simple stile,
 May teach the gayest, make the gravest smile,
 Witty, and well-employ'd, and like thy Lord,
 Speaking in parables his slighted word,
 I name thee not, lest so despised a name
 Should move a sneer at thy deserved fame,
 Yet ev'n in transitory life's late day
 That mingles all my brown with sober gray,
 Revere the man, whose *Pilgrim* marks the road
 And guides the *Progress* of the soul to God.⁴⁹⁵

Of all the texts that William Cowper could have named as formative *Pilgrim's Progress* is perhaps the least unexpected, both from what we know of his temperament and theological convictions, but also from what we know of his time. Indeed, the ubiquity of *Pilgrim's Progress* throughout the households of eighteenth-century England is well documented.⁴⁹⁶ As Isabel Rivers writes, though Bunyan himself was notorious for his non-conformity, by the turn of the century his masterpiece was in fact overwhelmingly being purchased, commented upon, and reissued by Anglicans.⁴⁹⁷ That the Revd John Cowper allowed his son to read it, therefore, is unsurprising, even more so because—to Cowper's point in *Tirocinium*—by the beginning of the

⁴⁹⁵ *ibid.*

⁴⁹⁶ Anne Dunan-Page, 'Introduction', *The Cambridge Companion to Bunyan*, ed. by Anne Dunan-Page (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p.2.

⁴⁹⁷ Isabel Rivers, 'The *Pilgrim's Progress* and the Evangelical Revival', *The Oxford Handbook of John Bunyan*, ed. by Michael Davies, W.R. Owens (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p.537.

eighteenth century the book was being widely utilised as ‘a genteel reading primer for post-infancy’.⁴⁹⁸

Given the formative role that Bunyan’s ‘well-told tale’ played in the early life of the poet, and his claim to ‘revere’ it still in ‘life’s late day’, we might expect to find evidence of its influence both visible and veiled throughout his *Olney Hymns*. Part Two of this thesis is dedicated to examining the influence of several Puritan authors and theologians upon Cowper’s contributions to the collection. This chapter is devoted to Bunyan. In it, we will trace Cowper’s use of Bunyanesque themes, his verse-based forays into the genre of spiritual autobiography, and finally his interactions with *Pilgrim’s Progress*. In our examination of the third of these aspects of his engagement with Bunyan, we will carry out an extended study of two hymns in particular, ‘My former hopes are fled’⁴⁹⁹ and ‘My soul is sad and much dismay’d’.⁵⁰⁰ Continuing the argument and method of Part One, this chapter will uncover the context and purpose for which these hymns were written, thereby opening the way for a completely new reading of them. In doing so, it will offer fresh insight into Cowper’s singular poetic interactions with John Bunyan, while also adding further ballast to the argument made by this thesis—that Cowper’s hymns are more sophisticated than has been previously supposed, and that they were written for both specific purposes (often didactic) and occasions, and for a specific readership.

⁴⁹⁸ Michael Mullett, *John Bunyan in Context* (Keele: Keele University Press, 1996), p.192.

⁴⁹⁹ *Poems*, i, p.172.

⁵⁰⁰ *ibid*, p.179.

Bunyan's themes

Charles Hambrick-Stowe writes that the 'principal metaphor running through Puritan spirituality and devotional practice was the pilgrimage'.⁵⁰¹ Concerning the manner in which the Puritan community utilised the concept in their daily lives, he continues: 'Puritans in the seventeenth century used the metaphor to structure their understanding and experience of the life of the spirit.'⁵⁰² Differentiating this new understanding of pilgrimage from that held by the rest of the Christian tradition, Hambrick-Stowe suggests that, via the Puritans, the concept was removed from hagiology and the cloister, and applied *en masse* to the lives of ordinary individuals—that 'devotional pilgrimage was to take place within the context of the saint's secular calling'.⁵⁰³ Despite its democratisation within the Puritan community, however, the concept of pilgrimage remained esoteric insofar as it remained Puritan. It is a sign of the far-reaching influence of Bunyan, therefore, that, via his prose, pilgrimage found its way from the seventeenth-century devotional manuals of dissenters into the eighteenth-century verses of William Cowper, Esq.: an Old Westminster, the son of an Anglican clergyman, and great nephew of the Lord Chancellor.

As we have already seen in Part One, Cowper's hymns often make references to the theme of pilgrimage. Indeed, it is telling that, in addition to its appearance in his homiletical hymns, Cowper's more personally meditative pieces reveal his tendency to frame his own life via the same concept. This is reflected in what is perhaps his most famous hymn, 'Oh for a closer Walk with God'.⁵⁰⁴ Written at a time of personal trial—the aforementioned illness suffered by Mary

⁵⁰¹ Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety: Puritan devotional disciplines in seventeenth-century New England* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982), p.54.

⁵⁰² *ibid*, p.54.

⁵⁰³ *ibid*, p.55.

⁵⁰⁴ *Poems*, i, p.138.

Unwin—its verses are less concerned with the journey's end than the '*Progress* of the soul to God', as denoted by its opening line. This 'walk' is quickly clarified as a lifelong expedition along a 'road' that 'leads' to 'the Lamb'. At the heart of the hymn is the expression of a Bunyanesque desire to be transformed by the pilgrimage itself, a petition for a 'serene Frame', and for a 'purer Light' to 'mark' the pathway of the pilgrim speaker. As is so often the case with Cowper's hymns, this inner conviction finds its way into outward, public-facing, didactic expressions. In 'What thousands never knew the road',⁵⁰⁵ he addresses a broader readership on the same theme—the passage of the Christian along 'the road', a 'journey to the sky' that

None but the chosen tribe of God,
Will seek or choose [...] for their own.

Recalling the many fearful opponents and fatal diversions encountered by Bunyan's pilgrim along his journey, Cowper includes within his hymn both the 'thousands' who 'hate' the way 'when 'tis known!', and the 'thousand ways' that 'in ruin end'. In its opening verses this hymn takes a homiletical tone, and is formed of a series of declaratives regarding the difficulty of the road to salvation and the state of humanity:

A thousand ways in ruin end,
One, only, leads to joys on high.

⁵⁰⁵ *ibid*, p.201.

In common with many of Cowper's *Olney Hymns*, however, this piece contains several elements. Moving from this initial homiletical mode, the poet transitions from declaration to supplication at the close of the second verse, inserting a petition to be used by the speaker as a means of entreating God to keep them safely upon 'the narrow way': 'By that my willing steps ascend', he bids his speaker sing in verse two. Into this adverbial phrase and the last line that frames it, the poet either subtly or subconsciously interweaves the twin concerns of *Pilgrim's Progress*, the ultimate destination of the Christian, but also the gradual transformation, or sanctification, of the soul *en route*. In addition to seeking ascent to some heavenly terminus, Cowper has the speaker request to do so 'willing[ly]', and to be 'Pleas'd' with the 'journey'.

In and around these allusions to the concept of pilgrimage, several of Bunyan's antagonists make appearances in Cowper's hymns. Following his escape from the 'Valley of the Shadow of Death', Christian is joined in his journey by 'Faithful'. This new companion shares his experience of a dangerous encounter with 'Wanton', who, with a 'flattering tongue [...] lay at me hard to turn aside with her, promising me all manner of content'.⁵⁰⁶ Though a similar figure is also a central foil in the Biblical book of Proverbs, Bunyan's depiction of 'Wanton' as one who would lure a pilgrim away from the path of pilgrimage is certainly echoed by Cowper's depiction of the 'World' in his hymn, 'God gives his mercies to be spent':⁵⁰⁷

'Tis thus the world rewards the fools
That live upon her treach'rous smiles;
She leads them, blindfold, by her rules,

⁵⁰⁶ *ibid*, p.194-5.

⁵⁰⁷ See Proverbs 7, or Proverbs 23:27-35; *Poems*, i, p.146.

And ruins all whom she beguiles.

Elsewhere, in 'The Lord receives his highest praise',⁵⁰⁸ the 'loud professor' whose 'swelling words' and 'fluent speech' offend the 'righteous Judge's ear' is strongly reminiscent of Bunyan's character, 'Talkative', who mistakenly believes that 'hearing and saying will make a good Christian'.⁵⁰⁹ Bunyan's declaration, via his protagonists, that 'talking is not sufficient',⁵¹⁰ that 'fruit is indeed in the heart and life', and that 'men shall be judged according to their fruits',⁵¹¹ is echoed by Cowper's concluding verse:

But none shall gain the blissful place,
Or God's unclouded glory see;
Who talks of free and sov'reign grace,
Unless that grace has made *him* free.

In 'O God, whose favorable eye',⁵¹² Cowper's warnings to those who, 'Lull'd in a soft and fatal sleep', are 'plunging into night' recalls Christian's encounter with 'Sloth', 'Simple', and 'Presumption'. These versified admonitions echo Bunyan's ominous description of 'those who see no danger' and 'lay down to sleep': who 'are like them that sleep on the top of a mast' over 'a gulf that hath no bottom'.⁵¹³

⁵⁰⁸ *ibid*, p.199.

⁵⁰⁹ Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*, ed. Sharrock (1966), p.203.

⁵¹⁰ *ibid*.

⁵¹¹ *ibid*, p.204.

⁵¹² *Poems*, i, p.198.

⁵¹³ Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*, ed. Sharrock (1966), p.170.

It is difficult to tell exactly what relation these moments in Cowper's hymns bear to Bunyan's prose. Certainly, elements of Bunyan's allegory are used within these verses as a means of expressing different stages and occurrences common to the Christian life—time and again the poet repairs to *Pilgrim's Progress* for images, symbols, characters, and topics with which to furnish his hymns, and with which to describe the 'experience of the life of the spirit'. How conscious Cowper's utilisation of these elements actually was, however, remains uncertain. Did he turn to Bunyan's allegory for its familiarity to his eighteenth-century Buckinghamshire-based readership, or was he, as an eighteenth-century reader, merely influenced by what he had read? That Bunyan shaped the worldviews and works of writers that came after him is widely recognised, and, as such, it is a matter of little surprise that we might find traces of *Pilgrim's Progress*, left consciously or subconsciously, throughout Cowper's *Olney Hymns*.

More interesting than this, however, is the notion that the poet might have penned verses with a view to exegeting, clarifying, and commenting upon Bunyan's prose for the benefit of a particular local readership. Such a project would constitute a real meeting of the minds, as the latter, rather than merely being shaped by the former, strives to master the message of his words, tame it into verse, and then impart it to his own readership. Such a project would also yield a fascinating type of text. In Part One we constructed a framework by which we might conceptualise the hymns that Newton required for his meeting, and their necessary interactions with the other texts involved: a primary text (Scripture), leading to either a quasi-primary text (a largely summative hymn) or a quasi-secondary text (a largely homiletical hymn), to be used by a preacher in the composition and delivery of a secondary text (sermon). Here, in chapter four, we will have need of this framework again, in order to map the complex interactions between Cowper's hymns and Bunyan's text, the latter of which became, as we

shall see, the primary text in a sermonic lecture series delivered by Newton at the weekly meeting. Before examining the hymns that Cowper wrote for this series, we must first lay out the context for their composition.

John Newton and Pilgrim's Progress

Though they offer no comment on the provenance of 'My former hopes are fled', in their notes on 'My soul is sad and much dismay'd' Baird and Ryskamp shed a fraction of light upon the context out of which it was composed:

Wright says that this hymn was inspired by lectures of Newton's on *Pilgrim's Progress* [...]. Newton was lecturing on *Pilgrim's Progress* at a meeting on 1 December 1772, little more than a month before Cowper lapsed into insanity [...]. The reference to Apollyon does seem to point to Bunyan rather than to the Book of Revelation, but the connection of the hymn with Newton's lecture remains uncertain. The anguished tone of the hymn, although consistent with what is known of Cowper's mind late in 1772, is not a reliable guide to the date of composition.⁵¹⁴

The work they reference, Thomas Wright's *Life of Cowper* (1892), offers the following remark: 'Newton having about this time given a course of lectures at the Great House on the "Pilgrim's Progress" it is not surprising to find that one of Cowper's hymns (No. 39) can be traced to that allegory'.⁵¹⁵ The vagueness of the phrase 'about this time', and the apparent lack of further

⁵¹⁴ *Poems*, i, p.485.

⁵¹⁵ Wright (1892), p.199.

information, lead Baird and Ryskamp to exercise caution in proposing even a rough time period in which the hymn might have been composed. Their unwillingness to do so is probably found in the problems that such a timeline might raise. The 1772 journal entry to which they appeal reads as follows: 'Tuesday, December 1st. At the Great House began *The Pilgrim's Progress* again.'⁵¹⁶ The hymn in question, 'My soul is sad and much dismay'd', appears to reference Christian's encounter with Apollyon and his subsequent journey through 'The Valley of Humiliation', a sequence that takes place a fair distance into the narrative. Had the hymn been inspired by or written for lectures delivered in the month of December—Cowper was taken ill in January—then that would require Newton to have moved rather quickly through the book, or to have begun his series in the middle of it, or to have merely chosen salient parts of the story upon which to comment. From what we know of the systematic nature of Newton's preaching, these hypothetical scenarios seem improbable, and so Baird and Ryskamp reserve judgement upon the provenance of the hymn. With the benefit of sustained investigation into Newton's Tuesday night prayer meetings, however, in this chapter we are able to proffer a host of further information that moves us much closer to an understanding of the timeline to which, and purpose for which, both 'My former hopes are fled' and 'My soul is sad and much dismay'd' were written.

In his landmark study of the life of Newton, Hindmarsh reveals that the preacher's 1772 series on *Pilgrim's Progress* was in fact a repeat of an earlier series: 'Beginning in June 1767', he writes, 'Newton began a popular series of expositions at these meetings based on *Pilgrim's Progress*, which he continued for two and a half years; he repeated the series again in 1772.'⁵¹⁷

⁵¹⁶ Bull (1868), p.183.

⁵¹⁷ Hindmarsh (1996), p.199.

Extended consultation of Newton's works, and works concerning him, reveals some confusion regarding the year in which this first series of lectures was inaugurated. The source of this confusion is a single letter, published in *The Christian Correspondent, or a series of religious letters, written by the Rev. John Newton,...to Captain Alexr. Clunie,...Never before published* (1790). Several scholarly works, most recently Isabel Rivers's excellent investigation into '*The Pilgrim's Progress* in the Evangelical Revival',⁵¹⁸ quote the letter, which *The Christian Correspondent* dates 26 July, 1766:

We reached the wicket-gate last Tuesday, and shall perhaps stay there a fortnight. There is such a fulness and depth in the *Pilgrim's Progress*, that a small portion of it affords a sufficient text for an evening; and I see more in it, now I come to examine it closely, than I have ever observed before, though I have read it so often that I have it in a manner by heart.⁵¹⁹

The content of this letter is revealing. It displays the methodical and steady progress of Newton's exposition, and the interesting manner in which he interacted with *Pilgrim's Progress*—not considering it at arm's length, but drawing his audience in and journeying with the pilgrim. Before entering into a fuller examination of these interactions, however, it is important to ascertain which of these dates is correct. If it is the 1766 date given in *The Christian Correspondent* then it is unlikely that 'My soul is sad and much dismay'd' was inspired by Newton's first series of lectures, since Cowper himself did not move his household to Olney until September 1767, sixteen months later. If the 1767 date is correct then Cowper would

⁵¹⁸ Rivers (2018), p.548-9.

⁵¹⁹ John Newton, *The Christian Correspondent, or a series of religious letters, written by the Rev. John Newton,...to Captain Alexr. Clunie,...Never before published* (Hull, 1790), p.129.

only have missed the first three months of the lectures, and would therefore have joined the prayer meeting in time to hear Newton's thoughts on the Pilgrim's descent into the Valley of Humiliation.

Newton's 1767 Commonplace Book proves that the letter in *The Christian Correspondent* is incorrectly dated. Moreover, further examination of the journal also yields several fascinating insights into the lecture series itself, and, most importantly, the timeline of Cowper's arrival at Olney and possible engagement with it. Concerning the first of these matters, Newton's entry for Sunday 26 July, 1767, records a letter written to Clunie, and also the texts upon which he had preached that day, Joshua 4:10-11 and 1 Kings 17:7.⁵²⁰ The preacher's reference to this last detail in his journal matches the content of his letter to Clunie: 'I have been preaching to-day from Joshua iv. v.10,11. and 1 Kings xvii. v.7.'⁵²¹ This is conclusive evidence that Newton's letter was sent on 26 July 1767, not 26 July 1766. That his series on *Pilgrim's Progress* began in the June of 1767 is further attested by his entry recorded on Tuesday 2 June, 1767, which reads: 'At the prayer meeting this evening began to expound the Pilgrim's Progress. It has been some time upon my mind. May the Lord make it useful.'⁵²² Newton's admission in his letter to Clunie regarding the deliberate pace at which he was determined to move through the book is also affirmed by his journal entries. Despite having only reached 'page 24, 25' by the end of July, his forensic analysis appears to have been popular among his parishioners—on Tuesday 28 July, two days after his correspondence with Clunie, he delivered his lecture to a 'full house'.⁵²³

⁵²⁰ Newton's Commonplace Book, 1967 | London, Lambeth Palace Library, Ms.2941.

⁵²¹ Newton, *Christian Correspondent*, p.129.

⁵²² Commonplace Book, Ms.2941.

⁵²³ *ibid* [I have been unable to ascertain which edition of *Pilgrim's Progress* was used by Newton in these lectures].

Concerning the timeline of Cowper's arrival at Olney and his engagement with the series, the *Commonplace Book* proves exceedingly useful. On Monday 6 July Newton travelled to Huntingdon, where he stopped by a certain house on High Street: 'Had pleasure in converse with Mrs Unwin and Mr Cooper', he writes, 'I trust the visit was seasonable.'⁵²⁴ Back in Olney at the prayer meeting the following day Newton spoke from 'p.17-22' of *Pilgrim's Progress*, an unusually lengthy passage, and also penned a letter to 'Mr Cooper'.⁵²⁵ The visit appears to have been 'seasonable' indeed—from Newton's entry for Monday 3 August we learn that, just four weeks later, the Huntingdon party made the return trip: 'In the evening Mr Cooper, Mrs and Miss Unwin came'.⁵²⁶ The following evening Newton preached on 'page 27, 28'; on Wednesday, he writes, 'Mrs U and Mr Cooper left us'.⁵²⁷ Cowper's attendance at the lecture on pages twenty-seven and twenty-eight of *Pilgrim's Progress* on Tuesday 4 August 1767 is confirmed by his letter to Mrs Madan, sent on Monday 10 August. In it he recounts their visit to 'Friend Newton at Olney', where he and Mrs Unwin took 'a View of the Place where we trust the Lord has fix'd the Bounds of our Habitation.'⁵²⁸ He continues:

I want to be with the Lord's People, having great Need of quickening Intercourse and the Communion of his Saints. [...] [T]he Lord seems to have filled the Hearts of Mr. & Mrs. Newton with Christian Tenderness & Affection towards us, the Number of the

⁵²⁴ *ibid.*

⁵²⁵ *ibid.*

⁵²⁶ *ibid.*

⁵²⁷ *ibid.*

⁵²⁸ *Letters*, i., p.175.

Flock there is considerable, and they all dwell together as becomes Brethren, in Unity.⁵²⁹

Since the party visited Olney from Monday through to Wednesday, the sizeable 'Flock' Cowper describes can only have been the Tuesday night prayer meeting. Indeed, he appears to have found this experience profoundly moving, even decisive. In the ensuing weeks the popularity of the lectures did not wane—on the 11 August the meeting was 'crowded', and on the 25 August it was 'full'—and on Monday 14 September Newton records the permanent arrival of his new friends at Olney: 'Mr Cooper and Miss Unwin came to reside here from Huntingdon'. The entry for the following day reads: 'This day chiefly taken up with my guests. At prayer meeting Pilgrim p.37, 38.'⁵³⁰

With Cowper now fully in situ, Newton continued his march through *Pilgrim's Progress* unabated. By Tuesday 15 December they had arrived at 'page 55', and the meeting was described by the preacher as 'golden hours'.⁵³¹ Newton's Commonplace Book for 1768 being lost, we are unable to follow his weekly preaching schedule into the following year. Thankfully, however, much of his correspondence survives, and within the various volumes of "never before printed" missals there are several references to his lecture series. Newton's letter to Miss Medhurst, sent on 20 July, reveals what progress he had made in the first seven months of 1768:

⁵²⁹ *ibid*, p.176.

⁵³⁰ Commonplace Book, Ms.2941.

⁵³¹ *ibid*.

Soon after I returned from Yorkshire, I began to expound the Pilgrim's Progress in our meetings on Tuesday evenings; and though we have been almost seven months travelling with the pilgrim, we have not yet left the house Beautiful; but I believe we shall set off for the Valley of Humiliation in about three weeks. I find this book so full of matter, that I can seldom go through more than a page, or half a page, at a time. I hope the attempt has been greatly blessed among us; and for myself it has perhaps given me a deeper insight into John Bunyan's knowledge, judgement, and experience in the Christian life, than I should ever have had without it.⁵³²

In a later letter to Clunie, which, if the date is to be believed, was sent on 9 December 1769, the preacher informs his friend of the approaching conclusion of the lecture series: 'I believe', he writes, 'we shall finish the Pilgrim's Progress, if we are spared to the last Tuesday in the year.' Concerning the current subject of the lectures, he continues: 'We are to attend them over the river next week.'⁵³³

With all of this information brought to light, we might now propose a fairly confident estimation of when the two hymns in question, 'My soul is sad and much dismay'd' and 'My former hopes are fled', were written. Concerning the former, if Newton kept the course outlined in his July 1768 letter to Miss Medhurst then his exposition of the pilgrim's protracted struggle through the 'Valley of Humiliation' would have begun in mid-August. Assuming Cowper wrote his hymn for those meetings, and we will deal with this assumption presently, then we can reasonably conclude that August 1768 was roughly the time of composition. Since

⁵³² *Works of Newton* (New York, 1810), vi., p.37-8.

⁵³³ Newton, *Christian Correspondent*, p.191-2.

the poet was not yet in Olney when Newton preached on the pilgrim's escape from the 'City of Destruction', we can surmise that the most probable date of composition was in early December 1772, when the preacher began the series again.⁵³⁴ In keeping with the argument of Part One, it is the argument of this chapter that, like his scripture and topical hymns, these two pieces were written *for* the meetings rather than being inspired by them: that they too served as ancillary texts to Newton's preaching. As we have already seen, Cowper composed hymns for the meetings as early as April 1769, merely nine months before our proposed date.⁵³⁵ This opens up the strong possibility that 'My soul is sad and much dismay'd' was composed for homiletical purposes in the meeting in August 1768.

This argument is strengthened by Newton's creation of an annotated edition of Part I of *Pilgrim's Progress*, published in 1776. Isabel Rivers notes that such annotated editions were not uncommon in the eighteenth century: to some of its 'editors, commentators, and adaptors' *Pilgrim's Progress* served as a polemical work', while to others it became 'a guide for members of religious societies how to live Christian lives'.⁵³⁶ For Newton it was certainly the latter. In his introduction to the work, he praises Bunyan's 'considerable natural abilities', including 'a lively invention', 'a penetrating spirit', and 'a strong judgement', describing him as one 'well

⁵³⁴ Though, it must be said, the notion that he *began* his series again at this time is not certain: indeed, it might have been begun prior to the given date, since the phrase 'began *The Pilgrim's Progress*' appears in his letter to Miss Medhurst – 'I began to expound the Pilgrim's Progress in our meetings on Tuesday evenings' – and yet we know that here he did not 'begin' to expound the text, having begun the task in the previous year. This, perhaps, is why Baird and Ryskamp merely allow that 'Newton was lecturing on *Pilgrim's Progress* at a meeting on 1 December 1772'. This opens the possibility, therefore, that Newton began his lectures at an earlier point, and therefore that Cowper wrote 'My former hopes are fled' earlier in the same year.

⁵³⁵ Baird and Ryskamp note that 'Jesus, where'er thy people meet' was '[w]ritten for the opening, early in April 1769, of the Great Room for prayer meetings'. *Poems*, i., p.482.

⁵³⁶ Rivers (2018), p.553.

instructed in the mysteries of the kingdom', and a 'man of real genius'.⁵³⁷ Concerning the nature of this genius, he writes:

By the exercises through which the Lord led him, and a close study of the Word of God, he acquired a singular knowledge of the human heart, and its various workings, both in a state of nature and grace, and of the various snares and dangers to which a Believer is exposed from the men and the things of the world [...]. These fruits of his experience and observation he has exhibited in a very pleasing and instructive manner in his Pilgrim, which may be considered as a map of the Christian profession in its present mixed state [...]. A map, so exactly drawn, that we can hardly meet with a case or character, amidst the vast variety of persons and incidents, that daily occur to our observation, to which we cannot easily point out a counterpart in the Pilgrim.⁵³⁸

The worth of *Pilgrim's Progress*, in Newton's estimation, is found in two places. First, in its 'comprehensive' and precise rendering of the landscape of 'Christian life': its schematic accuracy, and omission of irrelevant 'ornaments'; its careful inclusion of topographical features—'snares and dangers' and 'things of the world'—that are common to the diverse terrain of human experience; its meticulous symbolisation of human features, the 'heart' of man, manifested in a 'vast variety' of 'persons', 'incidents', 'cases', and 'characters'; and, finally, its scale, which charts the course of an entire 'Christian life', while also detailing those things which 'daily occur to our observation'.

⁵³⁷ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, ed. by John Newton (London, 1776), p.A4, p.A3.

⁵³⁸ *ibid*, p.A4.

If the first part of the value of Bunyan's 'map' is primarily located in its being 'exactly drawn', then the second part of its value is located in its resulting functionality. The works of Bunyan, Newton writes, have been generally 'useful to the Churches', and of great 'encouragement' to those 'seeking salvation'.⁵³⁹ Concerning *Pilgrim's Progress* specifically, however, he returns often to one superlative in particular: 'instructive'. Indeed, 'instruction', he writes, is to be found 'upon every perusal'.⁵⁴⁰ For Newton, then, to the chagrin of literary critics everywhere, the worth of Bunyan's work is principally found in its usefulness—a quality that is made possible by its unerringly accurate description of the world, the human condition, and the Christian life.

Beyond its literary merits accidental or otherwise, therefore, Newton finds that *Pilgrim's Progress* is indispensable precisely because it successfully meets the hallowed purpose for which its author intended it:

This Book will make a Travailer of thee,
If by its Counsel thou wilt ruled be;
It will direct thee to the Holy Land,
If thou wilt its Directions understand [...].⁵⁴¹

If this conclusion seems reductive or unsophisticated, it is important at this point to recall the categories—aesthetic, cosmological, ontological—that are fundamental to the preacher's

⁵³⁹ *ibid.*, p.A2, p.A3.

⁵⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p.A4.

⁵⁴¹ Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*, ed. Sharrock (1966), p.144.

evaluation, and that we addressed in Part One. For Newton, who like Bunyan held that the tenets of Christianity are true, God is the ultimate source of truth, being, and beauty:

To take a glimpse within the veil,
To know that God is mine;
Are springs of joy that never fail,
Unspeakably divine!

These are the joys which satisfy,
And sanctify the mind;
Which make the spirit mount on high,
And leave the world behind.⁵⁴²

To know God, to ‘take a glimpse within the veil’, is the highest experience to which any individual might attain. Therefore, within Newton’s categories, there is no higher art form than that which facilitates such an experience—none higher than that which peels aside the ‘veil’ and brings ‘joy’, satisfaction, sanctification, and closer communion with God, as the ‘spirit’ mounts ‘on high’, and leaves ‘the world behind.’ By these categories, Newton’s judgement that *Pilgrim’s Progress* is useful, or ‘instructive’, is neither pejorative nor reductive; rather, it is the highest possible praise. Significantly, this judgement is shared by Cowper, whose comments upon Bunyan’s ‘hum’rous vein, strong sense, and simple style’ in *Tirocinium* culminate in his

⁵⁴² *Olney Hymns*, p.55.

own conclusion, that the worth of the ‘well-told tale’ is its power to guide ‘the *Progress* of the soul to God’.

Lastly, it must be noted that, for Newton, functionality does not equate to simplicity. Indeed, he writes, though ‘many’ readers have drawn ‘benefit from the whole’, they have also remained ‘at a loss to determine the Author’s meaning in some particular parts of his representation’.⁵⁴³ Given the singular importance of the text in Newton’s estimation, ‘an Edition containing some brief Notes to illustrate the more difficult passages’, in addition to being ‘long desired’, was also quite necessary.⁵⁴⁴ Having already delivered two popular lecture series on *Pilgrim’s Progress*, he need only have turned to his notes to provide him with the basis for his annotations. Such is the textual complexity of the resulting book that it ought really to have a full study of its own. As may be expected—since they were most probably based upon his original lecture notes—Newton’s annotations are often homiletical in tone, yet they also include information about Bunyan’s writing process and situation, implicit and explicit hermeneutical directions, and an alternating authorial perspective: sometimes speaking authoritatively to the reader about the text, sometimes including itself within the readership, sometimes placing the readership within the narrative itself. Bunyan’s own peritextual notes, such as the Biblical references he included in his margins, are also commented upon by Newton, whose annotations become a solid bridge between hypertext and hypotext, defining exactly how elements of *Pilgrim’s Progress* have arisen from or relate to the text of Scripture.

⁵⁴³ Bunyan, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, ed. Newton (1776), p.A4-5.

⁵⁴⁴ *ibid*, p.A5.

All of this, needless to say, is beyond the reach and concern of this chapter. What does concern us, however, are the four hymns inserted by Newton into his footnotes. Two of those hymns, ‘A Welcome to the House Beautiful’⁵⁴⁵ and ‘The Lord of the Hill’,⁵⁴⁶ are by him. The remaining two, ‘My former hopes are fled’⁵⁴⁷ and ‘My soul is sad and much dismay’d’⁵⁴⁸ are by Cowper, though Newton includes them here and in *Olney Hymns* under the alternative titles of ‘The Shining Light’ and ‘The Valley of the Shadow of Death’. Newton does not offer an explanation for the inclusion of these hymns in his edition, yet, from his decision to incorporate them into footnotes explicitly designed to ‘illustrate difficult passages’, it is evident that their role is to perform a similar function: to aid the reader’s apprehension of the text. This established, we might also reasonably deduce that, like the hymns we examined in Part One, these four devotionals were originally composed for use in the Tuesday night prayer meeting, for the purpose of elucidating the primary text under discussion.

This contextual insight must drastically reshape our understanding of these two hymns, and add to the perception of their author that this thesis has thus far attempted to establish. Concerning the former, we must now read them as texts composed for particular occasions and with a particular purpose—complex poetic interactions with a prose primary text. Concerning the latter, we might imagine Cowper repairing to his copy of *Pilgrim’s Progress*, earnestly poring over the passage for the upcoming week, and pondering how best to distil into verse its theological content, atmosphere, imagery, and narrative. Even more interesting, we must consider him deliberating over how to transform these elements of *Pilgrim’s Progress*

⁵⁴⁵ *ibid*, p.72.

⁵⁴⁶ *ibid*, p.81.

⁵⁴⁷ *ibid*, p.6.

⁵⁴⁸ *ibid*, p.99.

into stirring sung petitions, with the intention that the Evangelicals of Olney might each gain a greater grasp of, and even enter into, Bunyan's allegory, accept its 'Directions', and be transformed by its 'counsel'.

'My former hopes are fled; or, 'The Shining Light'

For literary critics arguing that Cowper's hymns are mere versified symptoms of his anxieties, 'My former hopes are fled'⁵⁴⁹ is commonly presented as *res ipsa loquitur*. The case is convincingly made from the opening lines,

My former hopes are fled,

My terror now begins.

The bleak and confessional language in these lines harmonises with the distressed, violent pace of the metre that frames it, to form an apparently alarming admission, conscious or otherwise, of the poet's deteriorating mental state. R. D. Stock writes that the hymn is 'repulsive'; its verses exemplify the 'hectic intensity' that, he goes on to claim, is the common feature of all Cowper's hymns.⁵⁵⁰ Arriving at a similar judgement, Lodwick Hartley argues that 'My former hopes are fled' destroys the illusion of stability created by the preceding devotionals in *Olney Hymns*: 'with its headlong, frantic rhythm', he continues, it 'bursts suddenly upon tranquil musings about apparently well-established faith.'⁵⁵¹ Hartley concludes that its 'effect' is

⁵⁴⁹ *Poems*, i, p.172.

⁵⁵⁰ R. D. Stock, *The Holy and the Daemoniac from Sir Thomas Browne to William Blake* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), p.335, p.315.

⁵⁵¹ Lodwick Hartley, 'The Worm and the Thorn: a study of Cowper's *Olney Hymns*', *The Journal of Religion*, v.29, no.3 (July 1949), p.226.

‘shattering’.⁵⁵² Richard Arnold agrees with these assessments, adding that ‘the ‘first ten lines’ of the hymn embody ‘fear and desperation at the thought of impending doom’, that ‘on any level it is negative and forboding [sic]’, and that beneath the surface the ostensibly hopeful final stanzas ‘are just the same’.⁵⁵³ Removed from its original context and viewed in isolation therefore, this hymn, for these critics at least, can only be emblematic of its author’s existential issues. The thing, so it would seem, speaks for itself.

In Newton’s edition of *Pilgrim’s Progress*, ‘My former hopes are fled’ is found on the sixth page. Our eyes are directed to it by a manicule, inserted into the text at the outset of the protagonist’s flight from the ‘City of Destruction’. Bunyan’s narrator observes his subject, held spellbound by the ‘book in his hand’, and he describes the dawning of conviction as its pronouncements upon sin and damnation cause him to become ‘greatly distressed in his mind’.⁵⁵⁴ Finding no comfort from either family or friends, ‘Graceless’ finally encounters one named ‘Evangelist’, who gives him a parchment, and points him towards the ‘Light’ above the wicket gate.⁵⁵⁵ At his direction, the pilgrim begins his pilgrimage, and flees towards the ‘Shining Light’ pursued by his friends, ‘Obstinate’ and ‘Pliable’, and the pleas and mocking cries of his neighbours. In his notes on the passage, Newton writes:

A convinced sinner must sink into despair, but for the reports of the Gospel. He hears there is a Saviour, but his thoughts of him are very confused. He cannot yet be said to see the Son, but he embraces the word of God as true; he renounces all hope in himself,

⁵⁵² *ibid.*

⁵⁵³ Arnold (2012), p.114-5.

⁵⁵⁴ Bunyan, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, ed. Newton (1776), p.2, p.4.

⁵⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p.5-6.

and follows the shining light; waiting in the use of means, not to qualify himself for mercy, but that Christ may be revealed unto his soul.⁵⁵⁶

In asserting that the experience of salvation is a gradual process, Newton places himself within the Puritan soteriological tradition. William Perkins (1558-1602), in his work *The Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience* (1606), comprehensively defines the stages of this process, terming it 'the giving of the first grace'.⁵⁵⁷ He presents his schema, which would greatly inform the Puritan understanding of the conversion process, in ten stages:

I. God gives man the outward meanes of salvation, specially the Ministerie of the word: and with it, he sends some outward or inward crosse, to breake and subdue the stubbornnesse of our nature, that it may be made plyable to the will of God. [...]. II. This done, God brings the minde of man to a consideration of the Law, and therein generally to see what is good, and what is evill, what is sinne, and what is not sinne. III. Upon a serious consideration of the Law, he makes a man particularly to see and know, his owne peculiar and proper sinnes, whereby he offends God. IV. Upon the sight of sin, he smites the heart with a Legall feare, whereby when man seeth his sinnes, he makes him to feare punishment and hell, and to despaire of salvation, in regard of any thing in himselfe. [...] V. The fifth action of grace therefore is, to stirre up the minde to a serious consideration, of the promise of salvation propounded and published in the Gospel. VI. After this, the sixt is, to kindle in the heart, some seedes or sparks of faith, that is, a will and desire to beleieve [...]. VII. Then, so soone as faith is put into the heart,

⁵⁵⁶ *ibid*, p.6.

⁵⁵⁷ William Perkins, *The Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience* (Cambridge, 1606), p.50.

there is presently a combat: for it fighteth with doubting, dispaire, and distrust. [...] VIII. Furthermore, God in mercie quiets and settles the Conscience, as touching the salvation of the soule, and the promise of life, whereupon it resteth and staieth it selfe. IX. Next after this settled assurance, & perswasion of mercy, followes a stirring up of the heart to Evangelicall sorrow, according to God, that is, a grieve for sinne, because it is sinne, and because God is offended: and then the Lord works repentance [...]. X. Lastly, God gives a man grace to endeavor, to obey his commandments by a new obedience.

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Bunyan's understanding of his own conversion experience, laid out in detail in *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, is itself discernibly influenced by Perkins's morphology. The presence of Perkins is also felt in the early pages of *Pilgrim's Progress*, which contain Bunyan's attempt to allegorise the passage of the individual along the first stages of 'the line of grace'.⁵⁵⁹ The would-be pilgrim's flight from the City of Destruction to the 'Wicket-Gate' mirrors the first six stages of the schema, prior to the moment at which, in Newton's words, 'Christ may be revealed unto his soul'. In these initial movements of the narrative, therefore, we witness 'Ministerie of the word' leading to 'consideration of the Law', protagonist's sight of 'his owne peculiar and proper sinnes' leading to 'a Legall feare' and 'despaire of salvation', and, finally, 'serious consideration of the salvation' of the 'Gospel' leading to 'a desire to beleieve'.

⁵⁵⁸ Hindmarsh (2005), p.35; Perkins (1606), p.50-52.

⁵⁵⁹ John Bunyan's, 'Mapp Shewing the Order and Causes of Salvation and Damnation', featured in: Gordon Campbell, 'The Source of Bunyan's Mapp of Salvation, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, v.44 (1981), p.242.

Given that Cowper's own impulse toward spiritual autobiography, along with his Evangelical contemporaries, must be judged to have been inherited from the Puritans via Bunyan, before entering into our examination of 'My former hopes are fled', it is worth pausing to consider the extent to which he was influenced by this soteriological formula in both his hymns and prose.⁵⁶⁰ His 1765-1772 correspondence is filled with references to his conversion experience, and in it we can observe him gradually separating that experience into constitutive elements similar to those delineated by Perkins, and then forming those elements into a gradational narrative. In a long letter to Lady Hesketh, for example, he remembers having often 'wished' that he could either believe in the 'Word of God' enough to 'make it the animating principle of all [his] conduct', or that he might 'clearly and roundly get rid of it all'. From this recollection, he launches into the succeeding events.

Three and thirty years of my life did I spend in this manner, balancing between faith and infidelity, and leaving the upshot of all, and the final destination of a being built for eternity, to be cleared up at the universal judgment, which yet I hoped would never happen. What a terrible reference of my everlasting interests to a period decisive and without appeal! and at which every stain of unpardoned guilt must be pronounced a stain for ever. In this dreadful condition, while I was growing every day more insensible to my duty, though at the same time not less convinced of the truth of the Gospel, it pleased my All-Merciful Maker to visit me with a chastisement for which I will be ever thankful, and when the hour of discipline was past, and the scourge had done its work, He was likewise pleased to visit me with such clear apprehensions of the truth of His

⁵⁶⁰ Kathleen Lynch writes that, among conversion narratives, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* became 'the paradigmatic autobiographical narrative in the Anglophonic world.' Kathleen Lynch, *Protestant Autobiography in the Seventeenth-Century Anglophone World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p.231.

Divine Revelation, and such delightful assurances that ail should be forgiven, and forgot, if I would but return to Him [...].⁵⁶¹

Though not perhaps in the same order, various elements of Perkins's formula are visible here as, tacking between consideration of the 'law' and his 'owne peculiar and proper sinnes', the poet is finally led to an 'inward crosse', the 'hour of discipline' that leads to 'despaire of salvation', and beyond to 'delightful assurances'.

From his references to it in letters such as this one—indeed, it is not unlikely that the lost letters he wrote to his 'former friends'⁵⁶² contained similar material—Cowper progressed to formally documenting his own "narrative" circa 1767. Alongside these various prose iterations, however, the poet had also begun to reflect on his conversion experience in verse. In *Adelphi*, for example, included with a note explaining that it is a 'specimen of [his] first Christian thoughts, being written very shortly after [his] conversion', we find the following set of verses:

How blest Thy creature is, O God!

When with a single eye,

He views the lustre of Thy Word,

The day spring from on high.

Thro' all the storms that veil the skies

And frown on earthly things;

⁵⁶¹ *Letters*, i., p.105.

⁵⁶² *Poems*, i., p.188.

The Sun of Righteousness he eyes
With healing on His wings.

Struck by that light, the human heart,
A barren soil no more,
Sends the sweet smell of Grace abroad,
Where serpents lurk'd before.

The soul a dreary province once,
Of Satan's dark domain;
Feels a new empire form'd within,
And owns a heav'nly reign.⁵⁶³

Though it is less concerned with the process of salvation—being more a document of ‘first impressions’ such as ‘healing’, ‘sweet smell[s]’, and ‘light’, than a meditation on the mechanics of the experience—here again we see something of the influence of Puritan soteriology in both Cowper’s impulse to document the event and his attempt to frame and understand it. The resulting hymn constitutes a loose narrative, centred around the disruptive and galvanising power of the Bible, the attendant ‘storms’ of sin and spiritual angst, and the eventual transformation of the ‘soul’ from a ‘dark domain’ to a ‘new empire’ ruled by a ‘heav’nly reign’. Indeed, this ordering of events, beginning the narrative with the ‘Word’ rather than with the ‘storms’ (which, in his case, certainly preceded any inquisitive encounter with the Bible), is

⁵⁶³ *Letters*, i., p.47.

perhaps evidence of *Pilgrim's Progress* filtering into Cowper's framing of his own experience. Though, for him, the text does not bring conviction but relief, his desire to open his own narrative with a depiction of himself, like Bunyan's protagonist, with the Bible in hand is indicative of the shaping power of *Pilgrim's Progress* on his expression of his own conversion experience.

Cowper's later autobiographical verses increasingly reflect this influence. In 'Sin enslav'd me many years',⁵⁶⁴ for example, the poet offers a more carefully structured account of his conversion. Beginning with an allusion to his descent into depression, in the first verse he describes the development of a sense of 'deep distress' caused by 'a thousand fears' that, after 'many years' of 'Sin', 'Came swarming o'er my mind'. Likewise, his reference to the 'Friends and ministers' who 'said much/ The gospel to enforce' recalls the visitations of his cousin, Revd Martin Madan, and Revd Thomas Haweis during his illness.⁵⁶⁵ His description of having 'Fear'd, almost, to speak or move', also matches the report given in *Adelphi*:

My ears rang with the sound of the torments that seemed to await me and inevitable damnation was denounced upon me in such strains of malice impatient to be gratified that the united world could not have assured me of being reprieved from Hell one hour longer. Thus did the pains of Hell get hold upon me and before daybreak the very sorrows of death itself encompassed me. A numbness seized upon the extremities of my body, and life seemed to retreat before it. My hands and feet became cold and stiff;

⁵⁶⁴ *Poems*, i., p.195-6.

⁵⁶⁵ *Letters*, i., p.31.

a cold sweat stood upon my forehead; my heart seemed at every pulse to beat its last
and my soul to cling to my lips as if upon the very point of departure.⁵⁶⁶

The hymns ends with the moment of salvation:

Thus afraid to trust his grace,
Long time did I rebel;
Till, despairing of my case,
Down at his feet I fell:
Then my stubborn heart he broke,
And subdu'd me to his sway;
By a simple word he spoke,
‘Thy sins are done away.’

Among the details that tie these verses to his own narrative, Cowper sows several phrases that appear to be sourced from somewhere other than his own story. His reference in verse one, for example, to struggling with ‘sinful pleasures’ *after* the advent of ‘a thousand fears’ does not match the flow of the *Adelphi* narrative (indeed, from the beginning of his descent into depression, Cowper appears to have experienced very little in the way of pleasure). Likewise, in the second verse, his allusions to having both ‘chose[n] a legal course’ and ‘fasted, watch’d and strove’ *after* having heard the warnings of ‘friends and ministers’ is foreign to the sequence of events he documents in *Adelphi*. Rather than being accounts of his own experience, it seems

⁵⁶⁶ *ibid.*

more likely that these tropes were drawn from a common reservoir, inherited from Perkins and Bunyan. Cowper's description of attempts to 'strive' towards salvation are, for example, strongly reminiscent of Christian's diversion from salvation's path towards the house of 'Mr Legality', and his subsequent discovery of the inability of this "legal course" to 'set [one] free from' the 'burden' of sin, that 'No man was as yet ever rid of his burden by [it]', and that '[one] cannot be justified by the Works of the Law'.⁵⁶⁷ Furthermore, Cowper's references to his own experience via terms such as 'despairing of my case' and 'my stubborn heart he broke' strongly recall Perkins's affirmation that the Christian must 'despaire of salvation, in regard of any thing in himselfe', and that the trials that lead to such moment are intended to 'breake and subdue the stubbornesse of our nature'.

While Cowper's early verse account of his spiritual autobiography was, by his own admission, written as a personal meditation, this later hymn—and others that, like it, include references to his conversion experience—appear to be emerging, like his hymns on Christian experience, out into the public arena rather than retreating back into the recesses of his mind. Indeed, the insertion of common tropes that are not germane to his own personal experience is evidence of an attempt to make the narrative applicable to, or useful for, a readership beyond himself. For John Newton, whose early interactions with revivalist Christianity were dominated by experiences of 'a spoken culture of personal testimony' in congregational contexts, spiritual autobiography became a powerful tool in both public and local ministry, leading to the composition and publication of his own *Authentic Narrative* (1764) and his use of his own story as an illustration in various sermons and informal talks while at Olney.⁵⁶⁸ Particularly useful to

⁵⁶⁷ Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*, ed. Sharrock (1966), p.157.

⁵⁶⁸ Hindmarsh writes: 'He had heard many times the public testimonies of would-be members of Independent Meetings, oral conversion narratives that anticipated his own. His introduction to the life of the London and

our inquiry are Newton's musings in his *Narrative* on the utility of conversion narratives for the faithful. Though Christians are 'as one body, animated by the one Spirit' and their 'experience' of salvation and sanctification is 'formed upon these common principles', he points out that this experience is 'far from uniform'.⁵⁶⁹ 'We must not therefore,' he continues, 'make the experience of others, in all respects, a rule to ourselves, nor our own a rule to others; yet these are common mistakes, and productive of many more.'⁵⁷⁰ Hindmarsh remarks that, this said, these comments (and indeed the fact that Newton saw fit to publish his narrative) indicate that he thought that the 'experience of others' should be understood as 'normative in some respects'.⁵⁷¹ Reports of individual experience, therefore, were in Newton's estimation to be received as valuable illustrations of general truths, and therefore studied and learned from where possible, but not to the extent that they became a 'rule' to the individual. Newton allowed that his own experiences, despite being 'extraordinary', might lead to 'some good effect' in the lives of his readers, writing at the outset of his narrative that: 'If God may be glorified on my behalf, and his children in any measure comforted or instructed, by what I have to declare of his goodness, I shall be satisfied.'⁵⁷²

Cowper seems to have come to a similar mind. Like Newton, he initially felt that his own narrative was 'so much out of the common Course of [God's] Proceeding' that it should be shared with caution. Despite claiming in his letter to Mrs Madan that, for this reason, he did not intend 'that any such ['unenlighten'd Person']' other than his cousin, Lady Hesketh, 'shall

Liverpool religious societies in the 1750s also exposed him to a spoken culture of personal testimony'. Hindmarsh (2005), p.268-9.

⁵⁶⁹ John Newton, *An authentic narrative of some remarkable and interesting particulars in the life of ******, ed. by Thomas Haweis (London, 1764), p.117.

⁵⁷⁰ *ibid*, p.118.

⁵⁷¹ Hindmarsh (1996), p.39.

⁵⁷² Newton, *Authentic Narrative*, p.118, p.16.

thereafter read it', the same letter contains the first tremors of his beginning to waver on this point. Crucially, he reveals that it was Newton who persuaded him that the narrative might be shared 'safely' with his cousin, and it is clearly Newton's views on the utility of his own 'extraordinary' story that influence Cowper's concluding thought on the matter: 'I do not perceive that she has been Stumbled by it, and it may possibly at some future time be made usefull to her.'⁵⁷³ Here, then, we seem him beginning to allow that his own conversion narrative could be of utility to a broader readership than he had first intended, and that it might even have mimetic potential: 'Temporal Trouble is often the Forerunner of Spiritual', he writes in the same letter, 'and I pray the Lord to sanctify her Sufferings to her, that it may be so with her.'⁵⁷⁴

Here then, we see stirrings of Cowper's willingness to offer his own conversion experience to others: a change of heart that would eventually develop into a willingness to infuse his own hymns with the story. Given that Newton used his own conversion experience in both his sermons and hymns, it is not unlikely that Cowper wrote this hymn—in similarity with his hymns scriptural, topical, and concerning the Christian experience—for the use of the weekly prayer meeting, perhaps even as a quasi-primary text for Newton's informal preaching. Returning to the main subject of this section, despite being a versification of 'the giving of the first grace' in *Pilgrim's Progress*, there are shades of Cowper's conversion account in 'My former hopes are fled'.⁵⁷⁵ Concerning his own beleaguered first steps along the 'line of grace', he writes in *Adelphi* that, 'Conviction of sin and expectation of instant judgement never left me from the seventh December 1763 till the middle of July following. [...] All that passed in this

⁵⁷³ *Letters*, i., p.197.

⁵⁷⁴ *ibid.*

⁵⁷⁵ *Poems*, i., p.172.

long interval of eight months may be classed under two general heads—conviction of sin and despair of mercy.⁵⁷⁶ This experience, which Cowper would have come to understand as a divinely orchestrated ‘despaire of salvation, in regard of anything in himselfe’, is recalled by the opening verse of the hymn:

My former hopes are fled,
My terror now begins;
I feel, alas! that I am dead
In trespasses and sins.

Despite the undercurrent of personal experience that informs it, however, this quatrain is primarily a carefully rendered re-enactment of Bunyan’s depiction of personal conviction and the renunciation of worldly hope. Since Cowper’s aim, with Newton, is to ‘illustrate’ and apply this text to his readership, this re-enactment is necessarily more complex than a mere shortened reiteration of the content of the passage. Indeed, the poet has his speaker assume the experience as their own, entering into Bunyan’s text in the first person via the anaphoric repetition of the possessive, ‘My/My’, thereby adopting both the anguish of Graceless, and his renunciation of ‘former hopes’ in the world.

Rather than being confronted with a ‘shattering’ confession of personal disquiet, therefore, the first verse of ‘My former hopes are fled’ actually represents a careful condensation of the first five pages of *Pilgrim’s Progress* into one quatrain (strongly reminiscent of Cowper’s

⁵⁷⁶ *Letters*, i., p.34.

summary of Revelation 3:1-5 in 'Write to Sardis, saith the Lord'). In the opening two lines alone, with the flight of 'former hopes', Cowper captures several moments from Bunyan's prose: the helplessness of the convicted sinner's 'lamentable cry, saying, what shall I do?', and, as Perkins would have it, his 'despaire of salvation, in regard of any thing in himselfe', expressed most fully in his grief-stricken declaration to his family:

"this our city will be burned with fire from heaven: in which fearful overthrow, both myself, with thee my wife, and you my sweet babes, shall miserably come to ruin, except (the which yet I see not) some way of escape may be found, whereby we may be delivered."⁵⁷⁷

The source of this dread certainty is the Bible, specifically its pronouncements concerning error and judgement. Questioned by Evangelist, Graceless confesses: 'Sir, I perceive, by the book in my hand, that I am condemned to die, and after that to come to judgement.'⁵⁷⁸ Cowper reaches for Pauline phraseology as a means of concisely communicating this protracted personal revelation: 'I feel, alas that I am dead/ In trespasses and sins', he writes, capturing the force and meaning of Bunyan's prose via language drawn from Ephesians 2:5-9 and Colossians 2:13-17. More than mere summary, however, here again is another example of a hermeneutical intervention by Cowper in his engagement with the primary text. Bunyan himself does not explicitly reference either of these New Testament texts, yet with his inclusion of them Cowper makes a link between the passage and the Bible, simultaneously suggesting

⁵⁷⁷ Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*, ed. Newton (1776), p.2, p.3.

⁵⁷⁸ *ibid*, p.5.

that these are the texts upon which the allegory is drawing, but also that these are the texts through which it should be read.

The poet returns to these legal categories several times throughout the hymn, particularly in the following verse:

Ah, whither shall I fly?
I hear the thunder roar;
The law proclaims destruction nigh,
And vengeance at the door.

For Perkins, the convicting voice of the Mosaic Law is central to the preliminary phases of the 'first grace'. In the second stage of his schema 'God brings the minde of man to a consideration of the Law'. Subsequently, in the third stage, by a 'serious consideration of the Law', Perkins writes, God causes the individual 'to see and know' their own 'sinnes'. As a result of this gradual revelation, in the fourth stage the 'heart' of the individual is smitten 'with a Legall feare'. Again, though Bunyan does not explicitly name the Mosaic Law, his protagonist's perusal of 'the Book' is certainly a representation of these three stages, and the encroachment of 'Legall feare' upon the soul. Faced with certain 'destruction' and 'vengeance', he is overcome by what Newton describes in his footnote as 'earnestness, anxiety, and perplexity'. This internal tension is given 'lively representation', suggests Newton, by Bunyan's description of the would-be pilgrim's overwhelming instinct, and yet inability, to run: 'I saw also that he looked this way, and that way, as if he would run', Bunyan writes, 'yet he stood still, because (as I perceived) he could

not tell which way to go.’⁵⁷⁹ Cowper expertly captures this ‘lively representation’ in the second verse: his rhetorical question, ‘whither shall I fly?’, bespeaks both the desire to run and the helplessness brought about by the absence of means and ignorance of direction. Via this moment in the second verse, the poet has his speaker inquire of themselves as to whether the necessary insight can be mustered from within, and, finding nothing, experience the convicted sinner’s ‘despaire of salvation, in regard of any thing in himselfe’.

Cowper uses every means at his disposal to recreate the experience of ‘Legall feare’ undergone by Graceless. His first and second verses are punctuated with anxiety-inducing words such as ‘terror’, ‘dead’, ‘vengeance’, and ‘doom’. As noted by our literary critics, however, the overpowering sense of disquiet within this hymn is undoubtedly caused by its metrical structure. The poet’s carefully crafted trimeter renders each line short and breathless, an effect compounded both by his preference for words with either one or two syllables, and his sparse use of medial caesurae. This frenzied rhythm is hemmed in by the threat of ‘vengeance at the door’, and the ‘roar’ of ‘thunder’ in verse three. With less space within which to draw out the complex and unfolding emotional state of Bunyan’s convicted sinner, Cowper is forced to seek economical means of expressing the force of his experience. To this end, the poet sets aside one line, ‘I hear the thunder roar’, to conjure a setting around the speaker that reflects the mental turmoil of the pilgrim. Though it represents a departure from the text—Bunyan offers no description of setting in the first pages of *Pilgrim’s Progress*—Cowper makes excellent use of this pathetic fallacy. Restricted to a short and apparently simple line, he opts for an aural description of the sky rather than visual. The effect, however, is startling, because the ‘roar’ of

⁵⁷⁹ *ibid*, p.4.

the 'thunder' is necessarily imagerial. With the injection of this sound into the third verse Cowper wordlessly surrounds his speaker with clouds and darkness—a textured and evocative scene that outwardly reflects the inner turbulence of 'Legall feare', and provides a nocturnal atmosphere ready to be broken by the fulgence of salvation in verses four and five.

With their systematic depiction of the 'Ministerie of the word', the 'consideration of the Law', 'despaire of salvation', and 'Legall feare', the first three verses alone provide strong evidence for our proposed reading of 'My former hopes are fled'. The argument is bolstered still further by verses five and six, with their illustration of the moment at which the 'convinced sinner' finally turns from 'despair' and 'follows the flaming light':

But sure, a friendly whisper says,

'Flee from the wrath to come.'

I see, or think I see,

A glimm'ring from afar.

Though he offers no speculations on the nature of the relationship between this hymn and Bunyan's text, J. R. Watson does note that the line, 'I see, or think I see', is drawn from our passage in *Pilgrim's Progress*. As is traditional with critics of Cowper, Watson attributes this reference to the poet's emotional sensitivity: 'It is characteristic of his temperament', he writes, 'that he should have read *The Pilgrim's Progress* and privileged a very human and

tentative moment in Bunyan's text'.⁵⁸⁰ Though this is not untrue—it certainly *is* characteristic of Cowper's temperament that he would do so—the resurfacing of these two paraphrases in the hymn is more complex than mere allusion. Having expounded upon the sinner's descent into despair in the first three verses, the poet must now convey the advent of hope in the final two. For this purpose, Cowper appropriates two extracts from Bunyan's text, and intentionally fuses them together to form a volta—a pivot point suspended between the end of the third verse and the beginning of the fourth. The exhortation at the close of verse three, 'Flee from the wrath to come', is lifted from the words written upon the Evangelist's 'parchment scroll', 'Fly from the wrath to come', while the utterance at the beginning of verse four, 'I see, or think I see', references the would-be pilgrim's first tentative apprehension of the 'Shining Light':⁵⁸¹

Then said Evangelist, pointing with his finger over a very wide field, Do you see
yonder Wicket-Gate? The man said, No: then, said the other, Do you see yonder
Shining Light? He said, I think I do.⁵⁸²

In rendering these moments into verse, again we see Cowper departing from Bunyan's prose. Doubtless driven by the need to abbreviate the passage, the poet elides both the Evangelist and the scroll upon which the warning is written, choosing instead to deliver it by way of a 'friendly whisper'. Once more, however, the effect of this small alteration is both startling and ambiguous. The chosen adjective, 'friendly', perhaps recalls Cowper's own conversion experience, and the kindly ministrations of his cousin, Martin Madan. Beyond this, and

⁵⁸⁰ Watson (1999), p.289.

⁵⁸¹ Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*, ed. Newton (1776), p.6.

⁵⁸² *ibid.*

certainly more accessible to the Evangelicals of Olney, the relocation of the source of the warning, from a scroll to a disembodied ‘whisper’, invokes the ‘still small voice’ in 1 Kings 19:12.

Whether unaccompanied or via the mouth of a “friend”, it is a voice similar to that of God which interrupts the ‘roar’ of ‘Legall feare’ at the outset of verse four. Immediately, the hope of the fourth verse dawns into the gloom:

I see, or think I see,
A glimm’ring from afar;
A beam of day that shines for me,
To save me from despair.

Although this hymn might be taken as exemplary of a common feature that critics note in Cowper’s hymns—the absence of resolution—the poet’s offer of any resolution at all here actually constitutes a hopeful divergence from Bunyan’s narrative.⁵⁸³ Indeed, in *Pilgrim’s Progress*, the protagonist’s full emergence from his state of ‘perplexity’ and ‘anxiety’ is delayed by a further twenty-six pages. Having fled the city pursued by the haunting cries of his family and the jeers of his neighbours, Graceless is subsequently accosted by Obstinate and Pliable.⁵⁸⁴ There follows a lengthy and trying discourse, which culminates in his being waylaid by the ‘Slough of Despond’.⁵⁸⁵ Following his rescue by ‘Help’, and a near fateful encounter with ‘Mr Wordly Wiseman’ and ‘Mr Legality’, the pilgrim eventually arrives at the ‘shining light’, and

⁵⁸³ King (1986), p.84.

⁵⁸⁴ Bunyan, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, ed. Newton (1776), p.8.

⁵⁸⁵ *ibid*, p.14.

enters the gate with joy and trembling.⁵⁸⁶ When examined alongside this series of trials, therefore, by comparison Cowper appears hasty in his immediate offer of resolution. Furthermore, where Bunyan's prose contains no description of the 'light', the poet unfurls it to our eyes as the verses progress: at first a 'glimm'ring from afar', in Cowper's hands Bunyan's light above the 'wicket gate' gradually swells into a 'beam of day', becoming a 'Fore-runner of the sun' that 'marks the Pilgrim's way', and 'save[s]' him 'from despair'.

For those who thronged to hear John Newton expound *Pilgrim's Progress*, these verses surely provided a means by which they might further enter into its pages, and assume the perspective of the pilgrim. It would have enabled them to relive their own conversion experiences, or perhaps provoked conversion among those yet to experience it. While this Evangelical practice of reading oneself into a text was certainly inherited from the Puritans—Bunyan insists that 'This Book will make a Travailer of *thee*'—there remains something distinctly Evangelical about 'My former hopes are fled'. First, while it is true that the tendency to read oneself into texts was not in itself originally an Evangelical exercise, the act of singing oneself into a text, Biblical or otherwise, certainly is. Secondly, returning to the point made above, the optimism of the hymn's conclusion—despite its divergence from the text it is meant to be expounding—is emblematic of the advancements that Evangelical soteriology made upon that of its Puritan ancestors. Mark Noll notes that, while 'much of this nascent evangelicalism reprised themes of the Puritans', the 'time required for conversion was foreshortened'.⁵⁸⁷ Which is to say that, though Evangelicals did not discard Perkins's ten stage conversion progress, they allowed for, even encouraged, the notion that the relief and transformation experienced following

⁵⁸⁶ *ibid*, p.15, p.18, p.23, p.33.

⁵⁸⁷ Noll (2004), p.93.

conversion might be instantaneous. This explains Cowper's unwillingness to adhere strictly to Bunyan's withholding of relief in his narrative, with its insistence upon a lengthy journey through the 'giving of the first grace'. Instead, the poet elects to encourage his speaker with the concluding image of the 'rising sun', a symbol that, though representative of an as yet unfulfilled hope, is also imbued with the promise of inevitable future fulfilment. If the hymn must begin with the departure of 'former hopes', then Cowper-the-Evangelical cannot allow it end without the dawn of a final, future, and certain 'hope'.

The first of our two hymns, then, is the product of a sophisticated engagement with this early passage from *Pilgrim's Progress*. In it, we witness Cowper's use of metre and imagery in order to convey and enhance the force and atmosphere of Bunyan's narrative, and the subtle manner in which he enfolds theological clarification and textual exposition into his verses. In a manner identical to his scripture hymns, we have also witnessed him ventriloquise the primary text, taking on its voice as a means of allowing his speaker to enter into and experience the full force of Bunyan's allegory. Cowper's use of this applicatory mechanism once more situates his hymn somewhere between a quasi-primary and quasi-secondary text; certainly it is a summary of the passage, yet this dramatic summation is couched within scriptural references and subtle didactic and hermeneutical interventions designed to shape the manner in which the speaker approaches and understands the primary text. Viewed in the full light of its immediate local context, this hymn is neither 'repulsive' nor 'shattering'; rather, it is a monument to Cowper's skill as both a poet and an exponent of matters theological. More than this, however, 'My former hopes are fled' also speaks to a broader historical context, namely the extent to which the Evangelicals assumed, but also adapted, the theological positions of their Puritan forbears, particular with reference to their understanding of the process of salvation.

'My soul is sad and much dismay'd'; or, 'The Valley of the Shadow of Death'

Before moving our discussion onto the content of 'My soul is sad and much dismay'd',⁵⁸⁸ it is worth pausing at the threshold of the hymn in order to notice titular variations between different publications of it. When Cowper's verses first appeared in print in the footnotes of Newton's 1776 edition of *Pilgrim's Progress*, they did so under the appellation, 'Christian in the Valley of the Shadow of Death'.⁵⁸⁹ By removing the name 'Christian' from its title when he subsequently published 'The Valley of the Shadow of Death' in *Olney Hymns*, Newton also removed the hymn's explicit association with *Pilgrim's Progress*. This simple action not only obfuscated the hymn's primary purpose as an exposition of Bunyan's allegory, but it also gave the piece a new purpose entirely. In *Olney Hymns*, Cowper's verses are presented as a general devotional, and there they function simply as a meditation upon a particular facet of the Christian life, albeit a meditation littered with Bunyanesque imagery and themes. Cowper's artistry in the accomplishment of his original charge—the reduction of a passage spanning six pages into five quatrains, without losing either its force and atmosphere or theological content—makes the hymn seem strange in this second (indeed, perhaps we might say third) context. Viewed in isolation from this charge, its poignant rendering of the pilgrim's desperate and prolonged struggle through the Valley of the Shadow of Death might easily be seen as a thinly veiled cry for help. Indeed, Erik Routley read it along these lines, concluding that 'it is clearly—more than most of Cowper's work—the work of a man of unstable mind'.⁵⁹⁰ By

⁵⁸⁸ *Poems*, i., p.179.

⁵⁸⁹ Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*, ed. Newton (1776), p.99.

⁵⁹⁰ Erik Routley, *I'll Praise My Maker: a study of the hymns of certain authors who stand in or near the tradition of English Calvinism, 1700-1850* (London: Independent Press, 1951), p.78.

examining it among the footnotes of Newton's *Pilgrim's Progress*, however, we see Cowper's verses as they were meant to be seen: as an expository text that, like 'My former hopes are fled', is a careful amalgamation of dramatic summative content and didactic intervention.

In 'My soul is sad and much dismay'd', Cowper reimagines Christian's harrowing passage through the dark night of the soul: 'a wilderness, a land of deserts, and of pits; a land of drought, and of the shadow of death; a land that no man (but a christian) passeth through, and where no man dwelt.'⁵⁹¹ Having departed from the 'House Beautiful' and endured a gruelling encounter with Apollyon, Bunyan's pilgrim trudges toward his next ordeal. As he draws near, he is met by two men fleeing back along the path, who fearfully caution him that the valley is filled with 'a continual howling and yelling', and stalked by 'Hobgoblins, Satyrs, and Dragons of the pit'.⁵⁹² Discarding their shrill warnings, he warily enters the shadow, and his path is immediately beset by 'a very deep ditch' at his 'right hand', and 'a very dangerous quag' at his 'left'.⁵⁹³ Teetering perilously between these twin dangers, Christian finally approaches the midpoint of the valley, where he is confronted with the 'mouth of hell', a ghastly fissure, continually issuing forth 'flame', 'smoke', 'sparks', and 'hideous noises'.⁵⁹⁴ As he makes to pass by, he is met by 'a company of Fiends', whose 'grievous blasphemies' he mistakes for his own thoughts:

now poor Christian was so confounded, that, he did not know his own voice: and thus

I perceived it: just when he was come over against the mouth of the burning pit, one

⁵⁹¹ Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*, ed. Newton (1776), p.100.

⁵⁹² *ibid*, p.101.

⁵⁹³ *ibid*, p.102.

⁵⁹⁴ *ibid*, p.103.

of the wicked ones got behind him, and stept up softly to him, and whispering suggested many grievous blasphemies to him, which he verily thought had proceeded from his own mind. This put Christian more to it than any thing that he met with before, even to think that he should now blaspheme him that he loved so much before; yet, if he could have helped it, he would not have done it: but he had not the discretion either to stop his ears, or to know from whence those blasphemies came.⁵⁹⁵

For Newton, this conflict represents the central moment of the passage. In his introductory footnote, positioned immediately after Cowper's hymn, he offers the following prefatory comment: 'The valley of the shadow of death', he writes, 'is descriptive of a state of trials and afflictions, inward and outward, though chiefly the former.'⁵⁹⁶ Concerning the necessity of such trials, he goes on to state firmly that 'Through this valley all believers must pass'.⁵⁹⁷ At the end of the passage, as the pilgrim exits the valley, Newton adds the following observation—presumably a summary of his original sermon:

This is a very common case with many of God's dear children; the fiery darts of Satan come flying thick and fast about them. Evil and blasphemous thoughts, which cannot be named, are suggested to them, which often greatly perplex and terrify them, as they are not able at that time to distinguish these blasphemous suggestions of the enemy, from their own thoughts.⁵⁹⁸

⁵⁹⁵ *ibid*, p.104-5.

⁵⁹⁶ *ibid*, p.100.

⁵⁹⁷ *ibid*.

⁵⁹⁸ *ibid*, p.105.

In accordance with Newton's reading, Cowper makes this last trial the focus of his hymn. Faced with the terror of the 'burning pit', Christian sees no method of defence other than prayer, and thus he cries, 'O Lord, I beseech thee, deliver my soul.'⁵⁹⁹ Cowper's verses are, in essence, an extension of this invocation; the majority of the hymn is dedicated to petitioning the help of God when faced with spiritual difficulty. In the first line we join Christian at the nadir of his dark night of the soul, beginning in *medias res* with the exclamation: 'My soul is sad and much dismay'd!'. The remainder of verses one and two, to which we will later return in more detail, plaintively offer a description of the valley and its menacing inhabitants, before the hymn arrives at its prescriptive culmination in the final three verses:

Their fiery arrows reach the mark,
My throbbing heart with anguish tear;
Each lights upon a kindred spark,
And finds abundant fuel there.

I hate the thought that wrongs the Lord;
Oh, I would drive it from my breast,
With thy own sharp two-edged sword,
Far as the east is from the west.

Come then, and chase the cruel host,
Heal the deep wounds I have receiv'd!

⁵⁹⁹ *ibid*, p.104.

Nor let the pow'rs of darkness boast

That I am foil'd, and thou art griev'd!

At the core of Christian's experience in the valley is loneliness, a spiritual isolation that Bunyan introduces via his narrator, who offers a foreboding exordium at the threshold of the passage: 'now this valley is a very solitary place'.⁶⁰⁰ Cowper captures this sense of remoteness in his verses by isolating the 'I'. His own introduction to the valley, 'My soul is sad and much dismay'd', instantly places the speaker in the introspective posture of the pilgrim, and the tone is immediately confessional, evocative of embattled solitude. The only other presence in the hymn is Christ, yet even he is present solely as the one addressed. Where Cowper will have Christ enter into dialogue with his speaker elsewhere in his hymns, here the petition, like that of Christian, goes unanswered. The simple and familiar forms of address adopted by Cowper further bespeak the helplessness of Bunyan's pilgrim: 'See, Lord', sings the speaker, gesturing forlornly to the forces that threaten to overwhelm; 'See, from the ever-burning lake', he sings again, as the alarmed and isolated eye turns its gaze upon the onrushing 'storms' of 'blasphemies' and 'lies'. Christ, though addressed, remains silent, and thus Cowper has his speaker enter fully into the isolation of the pilgrim.

Bunyan's own annotations to his text serve to remind the reader of its prescriptive purpose: that buried within its immersive narrative there are 'directions' to be understood and 'Counsel' to be followed. The provision of Biblical references, 'Ephes. 6. 18.' and 'Psal. 116. 4.', is intended to direct Christians enduring the Valley of the Shadow of Death to particular places

⁶⁰⁰ *ibid*, p.100.

in scripture, either for comfort or instruction.⁶⁰¹ Despite this didactic function, Bunyan does not let his prose become staid or formulaic. Rather than calmly turning to 'All prayer' when confronted with danger, Christian 'crie[s]' out in alarm and instinctively reaches for this alternative 'weapon'.⁶⁰² Likewise, the danger does not quietly abate upon his use of it, rather it is his persistence amidst uncertainty that gradually yields relief:

When Christian had travelled in this disconsolate condition some considerable time, he thought he heard the voice of a man, as going before him, saying, Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no ill, for thou art with me. [...] So he went on, and called to him that was before; but he knew not what to answer: for that he also thought himself to be alone. And by-and-by the day broke [...].⁶⁰³

Though Christian's journey through the valley is ostensibly haphazard—surely a testament to Bunyan's skill as a writer—beneath the chaos this passage fundamentally offers a clear description of a particular spiritual trial, and simple instructions to its reader as to how it must be endured. It teaches that the Christian will experience dark nights of the soul, and that these will involve psychological torment, isolation, and an instinctive sense of guilt in the face of unwanted temptations. Bunyan's directive is that, in the face of such trials, the Christian must pray and persevere, and these two actions will ultimately yield deliverance. Turning to Cowper's hymn, we find that it contains a carefully reconstructed versification of this sequence, in which the 'I' is compelled to fully dwell in each phase, before being transported to the next. At first the speaker is assaulted with the 'horrid blasts' of the foe, and in fear turns

⁶⁰¹ *ibid*, p.104.

⁶⁰² *ibid*.

⁶⁰³ *ibid*, p.105-6.

inward, finding there a 'throbbing heart' surrounded by 'abundant fuel', and 'kindred sparks' alike to those flung by the assailant. During this introspective moment, Cowper allows the speaker to wonder with Bunyan's pilgrim whether his own heart is the source of the unwelcome blasphemy, and to feel, as Christian did, 'so confounded, that, he did not know his own voice'. Having thus recreated the pilgrim's sense of disorientation and doubt, the poet then provides the speaker with the opportunity to renounce it: 'I hate the thought that wrongs the Lord', is the vehement opening cry of the following verse, and, with growing determination, 'Oh, I would drive it from my breast'. The final verse constitutes the consummation of this movement, as the speaker finally resorts to 'All prayer', turning with renewed strength to Christ and boldly petitioning that the invading 'cruel host' be expelled, and that the 'deep wounds' incurred be 'Heal[ed]'.

On reading 'My soul is sad and much dismay'd'⁶⁰⁴ alongside *Pilgrim's Progress*, it becomes evident that, as with 'My former hopes are fled', Cowper composed this hymn primarily in service of Bunyan's didactic intentions. If, as I have argued, the purpose for which the hymn was written was to communicate the 'counsel' of the text to the Evangelicals of Olney, it must surely be judged to be successful. Not limited by the form, Cowper's verses relay the author's 'directions' in full; indeed, they do so vibrantly, without becoming insipid or mechanical. Prescriptive qualities aside, it is this last achievement that provides the hymn with its most interesting aspect: an understated literariness, by which the poet causes his reader to feel the force of the pilgrim's experience. Cowper's powers are most visible in his economic distillation of the threatening atmosphere of the valley and its torments into the first two quatrains:

⁶⁰⁴ *Poems*, i., p.179-80.

My soul is sad and much dismay'd;
See, Lord, what legions of my foes,
With fierce Apollyon at their head,
My heav'nly pilgrimage oppose!

See, from the ever-burning lake
How like a smoky cloud they rise!
With horrid blasts my soul they shake,
With storms of blasphemies and lies.

Perhaps governed by a desire to maintain focus upon the principal concern of the passage, Cowper omits the 'two men' fleeing in the opposite direction and such topographical digressions as the 'very deep ditch' and the 'very dangerous quag'. Despite these elisions, he still manages to successfully recreate the sense of rising dread induced by Christian's slow entrance into the valley, as the intensity of the first verse increases, from 'sadness' and 'dismay' in the opening line to panic in the second and third, with the arrival of 'legions of foes' and 'fierce Apollyon'. Readers are forgiven for pausing here and wondering at the poet's inclusion of Apollyon, who must surely seem a strange and unnecessary addition to the text, given the clear boundary that Bunyan draws between that bloody encounter and the pilgrim's subsequent entrance into the valley: 'here', he insists, 'Christian was worse put to it than in his fight with Apollyon'.⁶⁰⁵ This embellishment is likely a product of the hymn's original audience

⁶⁰⁵ Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*, ed. Newton (1776), p.100.

and function. For attendees of the prayer meeting the memory of Christian's struggle with Apollyon must have remained present, having presumably been the subject of the preceding lecture. In resurrecting the 'monster', therefore, Cowper likewise summons the excitement of the previous Tuesday, drawing upon and enhancing the thrill of that 'dreadfullest fight' by presenting his speaker with 'destroying Apollyon' redivivus accompanied by 'legions' of 'foes'—an old enemy, yet several orders of magnitude more threatening than before.⁶⁰⁶

Cowper's selection of the word 'legion', here, is also of particular interest. Into it he collapses the 'Hobgoblins', 'Satyrs', 'wicked ones', 'Dragons of the pit', and 'company of Fiends' that haunt Bunyan's valley: these are the 'foes' that 'oppose' the speaker's 'heavenly pilgrimage', gathered up into one collective noun. The singular impact of this word choice, however, is largely located in the broadness of its purview, which reaches beyond *Pilgrim's Progress* to a wider pool of connotations both scriptural and classical. Beginning with the former, Cowper's 'legion' invokes the disturbing stories of the 'demon-possessed man' in Mark 5:1-20 and Luke 8:26-39. The Marcan account reads:

But when he saw Jesus afar off, he ran and worshipped him, and cried with a loud voice, and said, What have I to do with thee, Jesus, thou Son of the most high God? I adjure thee by God, that thou torment me not. For he said unto him, Come out of the man, thou unclean spirit. And he asked him, What is thy name? And he answered, saying, My name is Legion: for we are many. And he besought him much that he would not send them away out of the country. Now there was there nigh unto the mountains

⁶⁰⁶ *ibid*, p.91, p.98, p.93.

a great herd of swine feeding. And all the devils besought him, saying, Send us into the swine, that we may enter into them. And forthwith Jesus gave them leave. And the unclean spirits went out, and entered into the swine: and the herd ran violently down a steep place into the sea, (they were about two thousand;) and were choked in the sea.

By conjuring this passage into our field of vision, the poet forefronts the metaphysical nature of Christian's struggle within the Valley of the Shadow of Death, relocating the site of the battle to the 'soul' and emphasising the infernal and ethereal power of the adversary. At the beginning of the second verse, the poet further draws out this ethereality with his description of the pilgrim's slow approach to 'the mouth of hell', with its 'flame and smoke' and 'sparks and hideous noises':

See, from the ever-burning lake
How like a smoky cloud they rise!

Here Cowper accentuates the ghastly incorporeality of the 'Legion' by powerfully mingling landscape and antagonist. Under the influence of his pen the two become indistinguishable, the former 'rising' from the latter as a 'smoky cloud', to 'shake' the 'soul' with 'horrid blasts' and 'storms'. Indeed, the poet's allusion to the New Testament narrative adds a greater sense of peril to Bunyan's own depiction of the Valley of the Shadow of Death, as the speaker is now not haunted merely by a 'company of Fiends', but by an infernal 'legion'. With the spectre of the Gerasene Demoniac in view, Cowper's 'I' falls at the feet of Christ and begs to be relieved lest he too be subject to similar internal torment.

Bunyan's portrayal of Christian's plight is chiefly psychological. The valley is overshadowed by 'discouraging clouds of Confusion', and it is this disorientation that proves to be the pilgrim's greatest source of discomfort: Bunyan writes that he 'thought he should be torn to pieces'; that he 'thought he heard a company of Fiends'; that 'sometimes he had half a thought to go back'; that at other times he 'thought he might be half-way through the valley'; until finally 'poor Christian' is 'so confounded' that 'he did not know his own voice'.⁶⁰⁷ Despite the psychological nature of the struggle, Bunyan is careful to maintain the corporeality of the adversary throughout the passage. Indeed, the true horror of the 'Fiends', 'Hobgoblins', and 'Satyrs' is found in their felt physical proximity, and again and again the author has them 'come nearer and nearer' or 'come forward to meet him'. At the nadir of Christian's dark night of the soul, we read that 'one of the wicked ones got behind him, and stept up softly to him'.⁶⁰⁸ There is, therefore, a persistent physicality within Bunyan's depiction of the spiritual adversary faced by Christian—though psychological, the pilgrim's tormentors are repeatedly presented as being external to the body, and yet able to draw near and penetrate the mind with their own 'grievous blasphemies'.

Cowper deliberately retains these palpable qualities within his own reimagining of Christian's encounter with the inhabitants of valley. Armed with 'burning arrows' and lead by 'fierce Apollyon', the 'cruel host' that stalks his verses is endowed with a physicality that prevents the speaker from perceiving the threat as being solely abstract in nature. This duality is present within the word 'legion', a term surely chosen by the poet for its protean connotations. Not

⁶⁰⁷ *ibid*, p.104.

⁶⁰⁸ *ibid*, p.105.

limited to the ghastly ethereality of the ‘unclean spirits’ of Gerasa, for Cowper, this particular noun also summons the brutish melee of Homeric warfare; indeed, when describing the military might of the Trojans and Greeks in his own translation of the *Iliad*, the poet utilises the term six times. Beyond even these classical allusions, however, Cowper’s portrayal of the assailant as a ‘cruel’, legionary ‘host’ most powerfully invokes *Paradise Lost*, with its visceral depiction of the ‘puissant legions’ of ‘Satan’, elsewhere described as a ‘Host of Rebel Angels’:

[...] this mighty Host

In horrible destruction laid thus low,

As far as Gods and Heav’nly Essences

Can perish.⁶⁰⁹

Populated with ‘foes’ that are endowed with both the incarnative potency of Milton and Homer and the preternatural malice of the tormentors of the Demoniac, the occupants of Cowper’s vale of tears are a careful mingling of the physical with the unearthly: an enemy who is led by ‘Apollyon’ yet ‘smoke-like’, and whose assaults are ‘storms’ of ‘blasphemies’ manifested as ‘fiery arrows’. These Miltonic undertones are also present in Cowper’s depiction of the setting, which is reminiscent of ‘Pandaemonium’ and its environs.⁶¹⁰ For the lace makers of Olney, Cowper’s reference to the ‘ever-burning lake’ would immediately have summoned the apocalyptic dread of the Book of Revelation, which mentions the ‘lake of fire’ no less than four times.⁶¹¹ Less familiar to them perhaps—though, as we have demonstrated, certainly

⁶⁰⁹ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. by Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.24, p.5, p.8.

⁶¹⁰ *ibid*, p.28

⁶¹¹ 19:20, 20:10, 20:14, 20:15

present in the mind of Cowper—is Milton, toward whom, in a letter to William Hayley, the poet confessed himself as being ‘fill’d’ with ‘feelings that an affectionate child has for a beloved father.’⁶¹² Cowper’s ‘ever-burning lake’, though drawn from a common pool of Christian symbolism, is syntactically reminiscent of Milton’s ‘Land that ever burn’d’, replete with its own ‘lake with liquid fire’.⁶¹³

By reading ‘My former hopes are fled’ and ‘My soul is sad and much dismay’d’ alongside *Pilgrim’s Progress*, we recover and restore both the original intention and skill of their author. As hymns, these texts carefully reiterate and expand upon the ‘counsel’ and ‘directions’ of Bunyan’s allegory. As poetry, they powerfully evoke Bunyan’s prose, achieving a similar force, despite the brevity imposed by form, by using imagery and language redolent with Biblical, classical, and Miltonic themes: an intertextuality that combines to recreate both the heady conviction of the ‘giving of the first grace’ and the oppressive and atmospheric dark night of the soul. Throughout *Olney Hymns*, Cowper engages with Bunyan in various ways. In addition to providing him with a primary text to summarise and expound, Bunyan and his work are highly influential for Cowper’s homiletic. At times, Cowper appears to be intentionally utilising Bunyan’s themes, language, and imagery; at times, Bunyan appears to be influencing Cowper, shaping his understanding and communication of theological concepts, scripture, and the Christian experience. This dynamic—which sees Cowper interact both consciously and subconsciously with his own private reading—is also visible in his engagements with other Puritan theologians. Whether constructing devotionals, quasi-primary, or quasi-secondary texts, whether composing didactic hymns or hymns that advance out from personal

⁶¹² *Letters*, iv., p.297 [Sunday, 24 February 1793].

⁶¹³ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, p.10.

experience, Cowper's reading of Puritan texts greatly shapes many of his contributions to *Olney Hymns*, and it is to an examination of this that we will turn in our next and final chapter.

Chapter V
Walter Marshall, John Owen, and the Influence of Puritan Theology on Cowper's *Olney*
Hymns

'Pisgah's top' and Pearsall's Meditations: a case study in Cowper's theological reading

A variation on the broadly Evangelical theme of spiritual rebirth, 'I was a groveling creature once'⁶¹⁴ is another example of a hymn influenced by Cowper's conversion experience. Rendered in the first person 'I', it begins with a retelling of a salvation narrative, before moving into a reflection on the assurance of eternal life, and concluding with a caution against hubris: 'Tho' much exalted in the Lord', the closing verse warns, 'My strength is not my own.' Cowper opens the hymn with a textured and gritty meditation upon the state of the soul prior to its reawakening:

I was a groveling creature once,
And basely cleav'd to earth;
I wanted spirit to renounce
The clod that gave me birth.

If the bleak implications of the phrase 'groveling creature' were not enough to engender contemplation, its syllabic weightiness is cause for hesitation. Through the insertion of this phrase, Cowper constrains his reader to dwell upon the depravity of the unregenerate self for

⁶¹⁴ *Poems*, i., p.191-2.

exactly half of the syllables in this single line of iambic tetrameter. The following line is similarly unrelenting in its depiction of the unhappy ‘creature’, ‘basely cleav’d to earth’. Encoded within this second phrase is a theological reflection on the nature of the soul pre-salvation. The ‘I’ performs the verb ‘to cleave’, confessing itself to have been willingly bonded to the ‘earth’—a common image within Christian literature, that here serves the dual purpose of connoting both physical and hamartiological impurity. This picture of a bedraggled ‘creature’ wedded to earth and earthly ways is intensified by the prefatory adverb, ‘basely’, a term thoroughly defined by Dr Johnson fifteen years prior to the time of writing as: ‘vile; worthless’, ‘of mean spirit, disingenuous; ungenerous; low; without dignity of sentiment’, and ‘of low station; of mean account’.⁶¹⁵

Though intended to be sobering, Cowper ensures that this first verse will not induce self-flagellation. The repetitive use of the past tense—‘I was’, ‘once’, ‘cleav’d’, ‘I wanted’—frames the hymn’s introduction as an admission of a former state rather than as a confession of current guilt. Furthermore, he does not allow his reader to dwell in this dark nostalgia, plunging immediately into a description of salvation in the second verse:

But God has breath’d upon a worm,
And sent me, from above,
Wings, such as clothe an angel’s form,
The wings of joy and love.

⁶¹⁵ “cleave, v.”, Johnson, *Dictionary* (1755), i.

He continues into the third:

With these to Pisgah's top I fly,
And there delighted stand;
To view, beneath a shining sky,
The spacious promis'd land.

Richly intertextual, these verses contain several Biblical touchstones. The depiction of the unregenerate sinner in verse one is reminiscent of the pride-induced and animalistic madness of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4:33, while the tone, like Cowper's more confessional hymns, is again reminiscent of Psalm 51.⁶¹⁶ Likewise, Cowper's use of the phrase 'But God' as a means of introducing the topic of salvation in verse two finds clear precedent in the Bible. Appearing over forty times in the King James Version, this phrase commonly serves as a preface to statements regarding the benevolent mercy of God, with examples such as: 'but God meant it unto good' in Genesis 50:20; 'But God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave' in Psalm 49:15; 'But God commendeth his love towards us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us', in Romans 5:8; and, perhaps most notably, in Ephesians 2:4-6, 'But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, Even when we were dead in our sins, hath quickened us together with Christ'. These last words from Ephesians in particular appear to have been at the forefront of Cowper's mind in the composition of this hymn, since the word 'breath'd' in his own description of the salvation process performs the same function

⁶¹⁶Daniel 4:33 narrates the story of Nebuchadnezzar, who 'was driven from men, and did eat grass as oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till his hairs were grown like eagles' feathers, and his nails like birds' claws'. Cowper's confessional tone is particularly reminiscent of Psalm 51:5: 'Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.'

as ‘quickened’ does for the author of Ephesians. The final, and for our purposes most significant, Biblical reference occurs in the last verse, with Cowper’s description of his flight to ‘Pisgah’s top’ on ‘wings of joy and love’, there to ‘view’ the ‘spacious promis’d land’, the ‘length and breadth’ of which has been ‘promis’d’ to the believer by the ‘Lord of all the vast domain’. In utilising the imagery of wings and flight, Cowper draws upon the fortieth chapter of Isaiah, where those that ‘wait upon the Lord’ are renewed in their faith with the promise that ‘they shall mount up with wings as eagles’. This avian reference is combined with another Biblical text, drawn from Deuteronomy 34:1-4,⁶¹⁷ where Moses is taken on foot to the summit of Mount Pisgah, and from there views the promised ‘land of milk and honey’. For Cowper, this terrain serves as a metaphor for eternal life and the rewards received therewith, and thus the hymn ends with a final reflection on the eschatological future that awaits the Christian.

This hymn is emblematic of Cowper’s gifts as a hymn writer. Enfolded into its verses are a variety of reflective and didactic moments—opportunities for the reader to meditate upon salvation, sin, assurance, and states past, present, and future—expressed via a range of carefully chosen images, sourced from the Bible, and intricately woven together. This said, there is one detail within the hymn that prevents complete poetic satisfaction. Strange and conspicuous at its centre is the phrase ‘Pisgah’s top’, an unwieldy and unnecessarily specific choice for the opening line of the third verse. Ostensibly formed out of his reading of Deuteronomy, Cowper’s decision to use this phrase might perhaps have arisen from a desire to make the reference unmistakable, though it would have surely been so anyway given the

⁶¹⁷ Deuteronomy 34:1-4: ‘And the Lord shewed him all the land of Gilead, unto Dan, and all Naphtali, and the land of Ephraim, and Manasseh, and all the land of Judah, unto the utmost sea, and the South, and the plain of the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees, unto Zoar. And the Lord saith unto him, This is the land which I swear unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, saying, I will give it unto thy seed [...]’.

description of a 'spacious promis'd land' at the close of the same verse ('mountain's top', for example, would have been a more natural fit, while also meeting the metrical and syntactic needs of the line).

Combined with the didactic content of the hymn, the phrase 'Pisgah's top' identifies the specific source for these verses as being in Cowper's reading. In a letter to Maria Cowper, dated Tuesday 11 March 1766, the poet thanks his 'dear cousin' for the gift of a book: 'I am much oblig'd to you', he writes, 'for Pearsall's Meditations'.⁶¹⁸ Authored by the Congregationalist minister Richard Pearsall, the work in question, *Reliquiae Sacrae; or, Meditations on Select Passages of Scripture* (1765), does not receive further mention in this letter. Sent over a month later, Cowper's much lengthier missive of Thursday 17 April offers an explanation for this lack of comment: 'The Reason why I did not send you my Opinion of Pearshall [sic] was because I had not then read him. I have read him since and like him very much, especially the latter part of him.'⁶¹⁹

In this 'latter part', the tenth discourse of his *Meditations*, Pearsall urges his readers to engage in regular and extensive contemplation of the eschaton: to 'Retire from the Noise of the World', 'Listen in serious Meditation', 'Paint' the blissful future 'to thy Imagination from the Divine Word', and 'Say, "And I too must be shaken out of my long Sleep, by the long and loud-sounding Trumpet! O what Objects will then meet my first-opening Eyes!'.⁶²⁰ In offering this devotional advice, Pearsall returns to an instruction offered in the previous chapter, where he argues that such contemplation is best reached via the regular practice of 'Converse' with

⁶¹⁸ *Letters*, i., p.133.

⁶¹⁹ *ibid*, p.140-1.

⁶²⁰ Richard Pearsall, *Reliquiae Sacrae; or, Meditations on Select Passages of Scripture* (London, 1765), p.181.

‘Heaven’: ‘If thou [...] wouldst see the Land of Promise’, he reasons, ‘wither shouldst thou repair but to Pisgah’s Top?’.⁶²¹ Here, then, is the likely origin of this cumbrous phrase. More than that, however, here we also find the source for the didactic content of the hymn itself. Pearsall’s suggestion that the Christian ought to prayerfully engage in the practice of meditating upon the ‘promised land’ of everlasting life is the essence of ‘I was a groveling creature once’. Indeed, to sing the hymn is to enact Pearsall’s instruction and engage in the practice he recommends: to withdraw from the world and transport one’s soul to ‘Pisgah’s Top’, there to ‘see the Land of Promise’, and ‘Paint it to’ the ‘Imagination’. Situated in that Cowperian space between the quasi-primary and quasi-secondary, these verses take Pearsall’s *Meditations* as their primary subject, dramatise his pastoral recommendation, and engender an imaginative engagement with it by entering into the concept rather than commenting upon it.

This hymn, therefore, is also emblematic of the influence of Cowper’s reading upon his writing. Its verses reveal something of the manner in which the poet internalised theological works and, either consciously or subconsciously, reproduced their ideas in his hymns. In this final chapter, we will demonstrate the influence that the works of several Puritan divines had upon Cowper-the-hymnwriter. Throughout this thesis, proper contextualisation has played a vital part in uncovering the true root, purpose, and associations of Cowper’s hymns. Here, in our final chapter, we will preface our examination of the texts themselves by briefly establishing the context for that examination and its basis: Cowper’s correspondence and the record of his library.

⁶²¹ *ibid*, p.140.

Cowper's reading: summary and sources

It is a matter of considerable surprise that Geoffrey Keynes's catalogue of Cowper's library, published in the *Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society* in 1959, appears to have been of little interest to scholars of Cowper until this point.⁶²² Casual perusal of the article reveals a number of fascinating details, which, if properly considered, might change several preconceived notions about the poet's life. It is generally accepted, for example, that, following his great breakdown in 1773, Cowper gradually ceased relations with Christianity, and withdrew from any active involvement in Evangelical spirituality—David Cecil, as we have already noted, refers to Cowper's Evangelicalism as a 'phase'. His anonymous composition and publication of *Antithelyphthora* in 1781, his involvement in the Evangelical wing of the abolition movement, and the clear theological underpinnings of his much later poetry notwithstanding, Keynes's catalogue reveals that there were a number of theological works, both Evangelical and Puritan, in the poet's library. Significantly, many of these works were published or reissued after the fateful year of the breakdown, and thus they cannot be discounted as merely the leftovers from an earlier period of heightened interest. These include: an anonymous *Discourse on the Genuineness and Authenticity of the New-Testament* (New York, 1794); Joseph Berington's *An Inquiry into the Moral and Political Tendency of the Religion called Roman Catholic* (London, 1790); the third edition of John Brown's *Dictionary of the Bible* (Edinburgh, 1789); Jonathan Edwards's *Salvation of all Men strictly examined* (New-Haven, 1790); the twenty-second edition of James Hervey's *Meditations and Contemplations* (London, 1776); the

⁶²² Apparently alone among Cowper scholars, George Ella takes some notice of Cowper's library and reading habits, though, in a work of 688 pages, it is understandably brief: George M. Ella, *William Cowper: poet of paradise* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 1993).

four volumes of Erasmus Middleton's *Biographia Evangelica* (London, 1776-86); the second edition of Serle Ambrose's *Horae Solitariae; Or, Essays upon some remarkable Names and Titles of Jesus Christ* (London, 1787); John Smalley's *Sermon delivered in the College-Chapel in Newhaven* (New-Haven, 1787); Joseph Swain's *Redemption, a Poem in five books* (London, 1789); the fifth edition of Richard Watson's *An Apology for the Bible* (London, 1796); the second edition of John Witherspoon's *Practical Discourses on the Leading Truths of the Gospel* (London, 1792); the August 1780 edition of *The Gospel Magazine*; and several works by John Newton, the latest of which is his *Letters to a Wife*, published in 1793.⁶²³

It is of course possible that Cowper was gifted all of these volumes, and that he did not read any of them. This, however, would be difficult to prove, and since he does not appear to have been in the habit of regularly annotating his books—at least, from what we can tell of what remains of his library—the lack of commentary in the margins of these works is not indicative of his having left them unread. The notion that he might have requested, read, and enjoyed these books, however, would damage the conventional narrative arc that is a feature of all biographies of the poet: that Cowper dispensed with his theological interests during the 1770s, and that he never returned to them, other than in forced letters to Newton. Keynes's catalogue, therefore, brings with it the potential for a much-needed nuancing of conventional understandings of Cowper's life and outlook. While such a sweeping reconsideration is beyond the scope of this chapter and thesis, the challenge that the catalogue brings to our notions regarding Cowper's post-1772 life and work is equally relevant to our study of his pre-1772 hymn composition. This is because there are a great number of theological works noted in the

⁶²³ Keynes (1959), pp.47-69.

catalogue that were published before the year 1772, and upon investigating these in conjunction with the hymns one thing becomes clear—Cowper’s reading, especially in the Puritans, had a hand in his writing. Alongside Keynes’s scholarly work, Cowper’s letters also reveal that the poet read, understood, and was greatly influenced by a number of theological works that are not included in the catalogue. Given the endless nature of an investigation into how each and every theological work in Cowper’s library might or might not have directed the poet’s pen—not to mention the potential of such a study to overreach and become overly speculative—this chapter will focus on two Puritan authors, both of whose works are referenced either in the poet’s letters or in Keynes’s catalogue: Walter Marshall and John Owen. The purpose of this line of inquiry is to both locate Cowper and his hymns more broadly in the context of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Puritan thought, and to strengthen the argument of the thesis as a whole, since Cowper’s versification of Puritan thought is often didactic in nature, intended for the edification of his readership.

Walter Marshall: Union with Christ and assurance of salvation

In the third volume of *Theron and Aspasio* (1755), its author, the noted eighteenth-century Evangelical James Hervey, returns to a favourite topic, the Calvinist doctrine of Union with Christ. For Hervey, perhaps the most vital consequence of a right understanding of this doctrine is the personal assurance of salvation for the elect. Concerning this, he writes:

A sweet Assurance of Pardon, a comfortable Persuasion of our Reconciliation with God, an established Hope of eternal Glory through Jesus Christ; these will be operative in the Soul [of a Christian], as a “Torch in the Sheaf”. These will inkindle Love, increase

Watchfulness; these will beget the true Humility of Mind, and work an unfeigned Abhorrence of Sin; these will enlarge the Heart with Charity, and exalt the Affections above the World. These are the proper, and the only effectual Means of making the Man of God perfect, that is, thoroughly furnished to every good Work.⁶²⁴

Here Hervey outlines one of the fundamental convictions of Calvinist theology: that the Christian life is a response to, rather than the means of, salvation. Since Christian individuals are unbreakably and intimately united to Christ, he argues, they are guaranteed salvation. As a consequence of this guarantee, the Christian is liberated to live a life of gratitude, founded upon and resting in the ‘sweet Assurance’ of ‘Reconciliation with God’. Noting the ‘debt of evangelicalism [...] to the old Puritan divinity’, Hindmarsh argues that ‘enormous’ reliance upon the work of the seventeenth-century divines was especially common in England, where, ‘evangelicals appropriated [the] Puritan writers in the face of wide-spread prejudice against Calvinism, associated as it was with the turmoil of the Interregnum and the regicide’.⁶²⁵ Indeed, just as the Reformers claimed Augustine as their theological forebear, so the Evangelicals, in the face of political ill-feeling on one side and increasing accusations of enthusiasm on the other, sought to trumpet their close proximity to the Puritans, whom they viewed as their spiritual and doctrinal progenitors.⁶²⁶ We should be unsurprised, therefore, by Hervey’s insertion of a footnote at the end of the above paragraph, recommending an exemplary Puritan work in sympathy with his own views:

⁶²⁴ James Hervey, *Theron and Aspasio; Or, a Series of Dialogues and Letters, Upon the Most Important and Interesting Subjects*, 3 vols, 4th edn. (London, 1761), iii., p.336.

⁶²⁵ Hindmarsh (2018), p.77.

⁶²⁶ Arnoud S. Q Visser, *Reading Augustine in the Reformation: the flexibility of intellectual authority in Europe, 1500-1620* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p.4.

For the Display and Confirmation of these Points, I do, with great Pleasure, and without any Diffidence, refer to Mr Marshall's [sic] *Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*. Which I shall not recommend in the Style of a Critic, or like a Reader of Taste, but with all the Simplicity of the weakest Christian; I mean, from my own Experience. It has been one of the most useful Books to my own Soul. I scarce ever fail to receive spiritual Consolation and Strength from the Perusal of it. And was I to be banished into some desolate Island, possessed only of two Books beside my Bible, this should be one of the two, and perhaps the first that I would choose.⁶²⁷

Spilling onto the following page, the footnote concludes its effusive recommendation with the declaration that Marshall's work is a 'fair, compendious, and ample Avenue—to the Palace of Truth—to the Temple of Holiness—and to the Bowers of Happiness.'⁶²⁸

Cowper—who both owned a fourth edition copy of *Theron and Aspasio*, and proclaimed its author to be 'one of the most Spiritual & truly Scriptural Writers in the World'—appears to have followed this recommendation.⁶²⁹ A popular re-printing of *The Gospel-Mystery of Sanctification* (1692) appeared in 1761 with a preface authored by Hervey himself, and it seems likely that this, or perhaps a subsequent edition of it, was the one he owned. In a letter to his cousin Maria, dated Wednesday 11 March, 1767, Cowper expresses admiration for Marshall and his work, and attests to its personal usefulness:

⁶²⁷ Hervey, p.336.

⁶²⁸ *ibid*, p.337.

⁶²⁹ Keynes (1959), p.57; *Letters*, i. p.141 [Thursday, 17 April 1766].

The Book you mention lies now upon my Table. Marshal [sic] is an Old Acquaintance of mine; I have both read him and heard him read with Pleasure and Edification. The Doctrines he maintains are under the Influence of the Spirit of Christ, the very Life of my Soul, and the Soul of all my Happiness. That Jesus is a present Saviour, from the Guilt of Sin by his most precious Blood, and from the Power of it by his Spirit, that corrupt and wretched in ourselves, in Him, and in Him only we are complete, that being united to Jesus by a lively Faith, we have a solid and Eternal Interest in his Obedience & Sufferings, to Justify us before the Face of our Heavenly Father, and that All this inestimable Treasure, the Earnest of which is in Grace, and its Consummation in Glory, is Given, freely Given to us of God, without Regard to our Sins on the one hand, to hold it back, or to our imperfect Services on the other to bring it forward, in short that he hath opened the Kingdom of Heaven to All Beleivers, these are the Truths which by the Grace of God, shall ever be dearer to me than Life itself, shall ever be placed next my Heart as the Throne whereon the Saviour himself shall sit, to sway all its Motions, and reduce that World of Iniquity and Rebellion to a State of Filial and Affectionate Obedience to the Will of the most Holy.⁶³⁰

Clearly, *Gospel-Mystery* inspired Cowper to homilize. More than a mere expression of approval, however, this outpouring demonstrates Cowper's comprehensive understanding of its argument and his appreciation for its valuable contribution to Evangelical theology. Indeed, here he names Marshall as the source for much of his theology, and the list of doctrines he suggests came via 'The Book you mention' is extensive, to the point of its almost being

⁶³⁰ *ibid*, p.159-60.

comprehensive. Included are the felt proximity of Christ to the believer in the midst of strife, Union with Christ, Penal Substitutionary Atonement, and, most significantly for our inquiry, the Perseverance of the Saints, or Assurance: that the Christian, once united with Christ, cannot be separated from him, has 'a solid and Eternal Interest in his Obedience and Sufferings, to Justify us before the Face of our Heavenly Father', and must therefore be saved.

Before turning to Cowper's Marshallesque meditations on the doctrine of Assurance, it is helpful to examine his interactions with the doctrine of Union with Christ, if only to demonstrate the complexity of the doctrine and, concurrently, Cowper's grasp of and references to complex theology in his hymns. Indeed, this is especially relevant to Cowper because, in a subsequent letter to his cousin, dated Saturday 14 March, 1767, the poet is at pains to reinforce his admiration for Marshall's pronouncements on this particular doctrine:

I think Marshal [sic] one of the best Writers and the most Spiritual Expositor of Scripture I ever read. I admire the Strength of his Argument and the clearness of his Reasonings upon those parts of our most Holy Religion, which are generally least understood even by real Christians, as Masterpieces of the kind. His Section upon the Union of the Soul with Christ is an Instance of what I mean, in which he has spoken of a most Mysterious Truth with admirable Perspicuity, and with great Good Sense, making it all the while subservient to his main purpose of proving Holiness to be the Fruit and Effect of Faith. [...] I never met with a Man who understood the Plan of Salvation better, or was more happy in explaining it.⁶³¹

⁶³¹ *ibid*, p.161.

It is necessary at this stage to elucidate the contours of this complicated area of theology—complicated not only to the modern secular mind, but to an eighteenth-century reader also. Indeed, at the outset of his discussion of Union with Christ, Marshall attempts to engender within his reader a profound sense of respect for the loftiness of the doctrine, going so far as to name it a ‘mystery’ that is ‘eminently great, above many other mysteries’: ‘one of the three mystical unions that are the chief mysteries in religion’.⁶³² He begins, therefore, by placing the concept that believers are united with Christ in the same company as the Hypostatic Union, ‘the union of the divine and human natures in one person, Jesus Christ, God and Man’, and also the triune nature of God: ‘the union of the Trinity of persons in one Godhead’.⁶³³

Marshall suggests that the mystical union of the believer with Christ is perhaps best understood as a ‘glorious [...] fellowship’, which is achieved by ‘our being in Christ, and having Christ himself in us’.⁶³⁴ This mutual indwelling, however, is not ‘merely’ a ‘universal presence’, by which God might be said to be in some sense present within all things, but ‘by such a close union, as that we are one spirit and one flesh with him’.⁶³⁵ At the centre of the doctrine of Union, therefore, is the notion that the believer enjoys an intimate relationship with God the Son, as one individual to another. More complex than mere interpersonal relationality, however, this intimacy is inclusive of a kind of extreme proximity, or oneness. This proximity is enabled and permanently maintained by the third person of the Trinity, God the Holy Spirit:

⁶³² Walter Marshall, *The Gospel-Mystery of Sanctification*, 7th edn. (London, 1761), p.42.

⁶³³ *ibid.*

⁶³⁴ *ibid.*

⁶³⁵ *ibid.*

Tho' Christ be in heaven and we on earth; yet he can join our souls and bodies to his at such a distance, without any substantial change of either, by the same infinite spirit dwelling in him and us [...]; and he will be in us himself by his spirit, who is one with him, and who can unite more closely to Christ than any material substance can do, or who can make a more close and intimate union between Christ and us.⁶³⁶

Having taken great pains to emphasise the unique proximity of each believer to Christ—a proximity that sees the Christian transformed into an intersection between earth and heaven—Marshall is quick to remind his believing readers of their earthliness, and to maintain the distinctions between God and man. 'And it will not follow from hence', he insists, 'that a believer is one person with Christ, any more than that Christ is one person with the Father by that greater mystical union.'⁶³⁷ Just as the believer and Christ are distinct in person, so, Marshall explains, are they distinct in the separate category of being: 'Neither will a believer be hereby made God, but only the temple of God.'⁶³⁸ To this, he adds the further clarification that, 'Neither will a believer be necessarily perfect in holiness hereby; or Christ made a sinner'.⁶³⁹ Marshall is also quick to note that, though united with Christ, believers have no cause for hubris, since it is 'the preciousness of the blood of God' that has secured them this lofty state of being.⁶⁴⁰

Marshall outlines several logical outworkings of this union, beginning with the doctrine of Imputation. Believers, he argues, are not 'justified', that is, made righteous in the sight of God,

⁶³⁶ *ibid*, p.44.

⁶³⁷ *ibid*.

⁶³⁸ *ibid*.

⁶³⁹ *ibid*.

⁶⁴⁰ *Ibid*.

by their own works of righteousness; rather, 'all spiritual life and holiness is treasured up in the fulness of Christ, and communicated to us by union with him'.⁶⁴¹ Or, more simply, the sins of the Christian are imputed to Christ on the cross, while the righteousness of Christ is imputed to the believer through faith. Thus, by faith, and faith alone, an individual is made righteous. This, Marshall suggests, is also a 'mystery'; Christians, he writes, must not attempt to contribute their own righteousness towards their salvation or sanctification, but, 'the holy frame and disposition whereby our souls are furnished and enabled for immediate practice of the law, must be obtained by receiving it out of Christ's fulness'.⁶⁴² This 'fulness' is received via the personal relationship, or union, between Christ and the believer. Marshall is anxious to ensure that believers understand that both saving justification and the slow, sanctifying transformation of the individual into the image of Christ over a lifetime of faith are enacted in this way, and that neither justification nor sanctification are a result of the work of the individual, but both are given by Christ through union.

In previous chapters we have already identified several of these themes running throughout Cowper's letters and hymns: for example, his repeated castigation of those who strive towards salvation by works, and his condemnation of Antinomianism, both of which are excluded by Marshall's theology.⁶⁴³ Beyond this, a number of Cowper's devotional hymns contain more complex manifestations of Marshall's understanding of the doctrine of Union. One such meditation can be found at the opening of his hymn, 'Jesus, where'er thy people meet':⁶⁴⁴

⁶⁴¹ *ibid*, p.68.

⁶⁴² *ibid*, p.40.

⁶⁴³ *ibid*, p.87.

⁶⁴⁴ *Poems*, i., p.166.

Jesus, where'er thy people meet,
There they behold thy mercy-seat;
Where'er they seek thee thou art found,
And ev'ry place is hallow'd ground.

For thou, within no walls confin'd,
Inhabitest the humble mind;
Such ever bring thee, where they come,
And going, take thee to their home.

To begin to grasp the sophistication of these lines first requires comprehension of both the meaning and weight of the term 'mercy-seat'. For our own understanding, but also for the purposes of seeing how the term was understood in eighteenth-century Protestant England, we will turn once more to Matthew Henry, whose explanation of its significance in his notes on the twenty-fifth chapter of Exodus reads thus:

The mercy-seat was the covering of the ark or chest, made of solid gold, exactly to fit the dimensions of the ark [...]. This propitiatory covering, as it might well be translated, was a type of Christ, the great propitiation, whose satisfaction fully answers the demands of the law, covers our transgressions, and comes between us and the curse we deserve. [...] God is said to dwell or sit between the cherubims, on the mercy-seat

[...] and from thence he here promiseth, for the future, to meet with Moses, and to commune with him [...].⁶⁴⁵

In the sixteenth chapter of Leviticus, this 'mercy-seat' is permanently installed atop the ark, in the 'most holy place', covered by a 'vail' at the centre of the 'tabernacle' (later the temple in Jerusalem).⁶⁴⁶ Here, in this singular location where heaven intersects with earth, the 'High Priest' is permitted to enter, having ceremonially washed and donned raiments specific to the task,⁶⁴⁷ in order to make 'an atonement for himself, and for his household, and for all the congregation of Israel'.⁶⁴⁸ The sacred nature of the space, and of the 'seat' at its centre, is communicated in the second verse, where the High Priest is warned not to enter either unbidden, while ceremonially unclean, or in a wrong frame of mind: 'he come not at all times into the holy place within the vail before the mercy-seat, which is upon the ark; that he die not: for I will appear in the cloud upon the mercy seat'.⁶⁴⁹ Here, in this last verse, as in Exodus 25, the 'mercy-seat' is revealed as the exact location of the divine intervention into time and space, as God subjects himself to prepositional definition, and is said to appear 'upon' the seat itself, in order to make himself communicable to mankind.

Cowper's use of this image in 'Jesus, where'er thy people meet' is filled with meaning. Drawing upon Marshall's insistence that the 'believer' is become 'the temple of God', 'having Christ himself in us', Cowper enfleshes these assertions, and draws out their radical implications. In the first verse, the uniquely sacred object described in hushed tones throughout the

⁶⁴⁵ Henry (1737), i., Ex. 25:10-22.

⁶⁴⁶ Leviticus 16:2.

⁶⁴⁷ *ibid*, 16:4.

⁶⁴⁸ *ibid*, 16:17.

⁶⁴⁹ *ibid*, 16:2.

Pentateuch is to be found ‘where’er’ Christians ‘meet’: and, therefore by extension, in Olney. As such, the presence of the Olney Evangelicals, who are become vessels of the divine, transforms the place of meeting into ‘hallow’d ground’, such that every space they occupy becomes a ‘mercy-seat’: a place where the divine is manifested and might therefore be encountered. These verses carefully follow Marshall’s logic. His argument that Christ is made present in the life of the Christian ‘not merely by his universal presence’, or divine omnipresence, but by a personal relationship, a ‘close union’ between individuals, ‘having Christ himself in us’, is enfleshed by Cowper in these verses. The second stanza explains that this extraordinary multiplication of mercy seats and the transformation of ‘ev’ry place’ into ‘hallow’d ground’ is similarly not ‘merely’ due to the ‘universal presence’ of Christ; rather, it is because he now ‘inhabitest the humble mind’, such that Christians ‘ever’, or always, ‘bring’ him where ‘they come’, and ‘going, take [him] to their home’. Here, then, at the outset of this hymn, Cowper vividly reiterates Marshall’s explication of Union with Christ. Indeed, more than simply repeating its main emphases, the hymn actually applies them to the experienced reality of the singer, such that the lacemakers of Olney, should they have felt moved to sing this hymn while they toiled, would have understood themselves to be individually the location of an intersection between heaven and earth, and the cottages in which they worked and rooms in which they prayed to be ‘hallow’d ground’.

Beyond Cowper’s focus upon the doctrine of Union with Christ, the influence of *Gospel-Mystery* is also seen in his repeated references to the Calvinist doctrine of Assurance: the belief that the elect cannot lose their salvation. In his fourteenth ‘Direction’, a summative ‘epilogue’ to the work, Marshall points out that personal Assurance is the logical conclusion of Union with Christ—that the arc of his argumentation ‘confirms in us the doctrine of certain final

perseverance of the saints'.⁶⁵⁰ For Marshall, one of the great strengths of this suite of doctrines is the grateful holiness they engender; rather than being motivated by 'slavish fear' of damnation, Christians are to be motivated by gratitude, brought about by a 'comfortable' assurance that leads them to 'work out of love'.⁶⁵¹ It is Marshall's defence of this doctrine, above all else, that Hervey celebrates most loudly in *Theron and Aspasio*; indeed, his recommendation of *Gospel-Mystery* as 'one of the two' books beside his Bible that he would wish for if 'banished into some desert island' is largely driven by its guidance on the 'sweet assurance of pardon', and the 'comfortable persuasion of our reconciliation with God'.

Brought about by his appalling depression, Cowper's later tragic insistence that he was 'Buried above ground', 'more abhorred' than Judas, and doomed to everlasting 'Hatred and vengeance',⁶⁵² has naturally prevented critics from noticing the presence of the doctrine of Assurance within his work. Throughout his devotionals, however, we find multiple hymns where Marshall's words are either simply re-stated, or subjected to imaginative reiteration by the poet. In the final couplet of 'My song shall bless the Lord of all'⁶⁵³ Cowper has the speaker boldly affirm the doctrine, with the declaration that,

He will not fail, he cannot faint,
Salvation's sure, and must be mine.

In 'The Saviour! what a noble flame',⁶⁵⁴ also at the close of the hymn, we read:

⁶⁵⁰ Marshall (1761), p.338.

⁶⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁶⁵² *Poems*, i., p.209-10.

⁶⁵³ *Poems*, i., p.165.

⁶⁵⁴ *ibid.*, p.168.

And while thy bleeding glories here
Engage our wond'ring eyes;
We learn our lighter cross to bear,
And hasten to the skies.

In this verse, the Christian gazes upon the 'bleeding glories' of the cross, and in doing so is transformed, 'learn[s]' to 'bear' the 'cross' of life and is thus sanctified, before finally departing 'to the skies'. There is no petition or uncertainty regarding this final destination; rather, Cowper presupposes it, as he did in 'My song will bless the Lord of all'. In 'Hark, my soul! it is the Lord',⁶⁵⁵ Cowper has Christ himself declare words of assurance over the speaker:

'Thou shalt see my glory soon,
When the work of grace is done;
Partner of my throne shalt be,
Say, poor sinner, lov'st thou me?'

'There is a fountain fill'd with blood'⁶⁵⁶ finds its apogee in an affirmation of Assurance. Not only does Cowper proclaim that 'redeeming love [...] shall be' the 'theme' of the speaker 'till I die', but, in the final two verses, he writes:

Lord, I believe thou hast prepar'd

⁶⁵⁵ *ibid*, p.157-8.

⁶⁵⁶ *ibid*, p.154.

(Unworthy tho' I be)
For me a blood-bought free reward,
A golden harp for me!

'Tis strung, and tun'd, for endless years,
And form'd by pow'r divine;
To sound, in God the Father's ears,
No other name but thine.

Cowper's use of the present perfect here communicates the certainty of the future salvation, symbolised by the gift of a 'golden harp', 'prepar'd' for the believer. Indeed, so certain is this outcome that the 'harp'—which is not a general prize but is destined 'for me!'—has been 'prepar'd' in the past tense. Furthermore, it is planned for eternal usage: 'strung, and tun'd, for endless years', and 'form'd' for a single purpose, to 'sound' the 'name' of Christ in 'God the Father's ears'. For Cowper, life itself becomes a song, not motivated by 'slavish fear', but by 'comfortable' assurance. As the verses slowly move out from their initial focus on the Atonement, they reveal a broader plan of salvation, in which the believer is saved by Christ for the sole purpose of joyfully and eternally singing to 'God the Father' about God the Son's 'power to save'. In their depiction of this salvific process Cowper's words recall those of Marshall: that, 'God's design in all his works' is the 'hallowing, sanctifying, and glorifying' of 'God's name in all things'.⁶⁵⁷ This, he writes, 'is the end of all our actings', since God has 'made

⁶⁵⁷ Marshall (1761), p.330.

all things for Christ, and would have him have the pre-eminence in all; that the Father may be glorified in the Son.’⁶⁵⁸

John Owen: Indwelling Sin

The influence of *Pilgrim’s Progress* and *Gospel-Mystery* upon Cowper-the-hymnwriter is perhaps only equalled by the work of John Owen. Indeed, for our inquiry, Owen’s *The Nature, Power, Deceit, and Prevalency of Indwelling Sin in Believers* (1668) is perhaps the most illuminating book listed in Keynes’s catalogue.⁶⁵⁹ So highly regarded and widely read was Owen within English Protestant circles during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and on into the nineteenth, that, in their preface to the 1830 edition of *Indwelling Sin*, Samuel Stennet, D.D., John Stafford, Abraham Booth, Benjamin Wallin, John Conder, D.D., and James Webb, were moved to write the following:

The religious world has long been acquainted with the character and writings of the reverend and learned Dr. John Owen, the author of the following treatise on Indwelling Sin, and therefore any recommendation from us of the works of that great man, may be altogether unnecessary.⁶⁶⁰

Having given due obeisance to the ‘great man’, the authors then turn to the treatise itself: ‘we take the liberty,’ they write, ‘of giving this public attestation of our value for the above-

⁶⁵⁸ *ibid.*

⁶⁵⁹ Keynes (1959), p.63.

⁶⁶⁰ John Owen, *The Nature, Power, Deceit, and Prevalency of Indwelling Sin in Believers* (London, 1830), p.iii.

mentioned treatise and that we esteem it worth of the perusal of all Christians.’⁶⁶¹ At the bottom of this brief but fulsome endorsement is attached James Hervey’s commendation of the same work, sourced from *Theron and Aspasio*:

The Author’s Pen is indeed a dissecting Knife, goes deep into his Subject, and lays open this Plague of the Heart. Like a Work-man that need not be ashamed, He demonstrates his Point from the unerring Word of God, and the acknowledged Experience of Christians. Like a compassionate as well as able Physician, He all along prescribes the proper Antidote; nay, He shews how the Poison may be so over-ruled by divine Grace, and so managed by the watchful Patient, as to become medicinal, salutary, and conducive to the most beneficial Purposes.⁶⁶²

Whether Cowper bought Owen’s work based on Hervey’s recommendation is unknown. It seems unlikely, however, that Cowper’s ownership of two books highly praised by him in *Theron and Aspasio* was mere coincidence. To these endorsements we might add that of John Newton. Hindmarsh notes that Owen’s work was formative for Newton, that the theologian remained one of his ‘favourite authors’, and that he appealed to him ‘frequently’ in his own writing.⁶⁶³ In addition to reading Owen’s work, Newton also recommended it in his correspondence: in a letter dated 21 January 1766, for example, he assigns to Owen ‘one of the first places (as a teacher).’⁶⁶⁴ With this in view, it is not unlikely that, on their rambling

⁶⁶¹ *ibid.*

⁶⁶² Hervey (1761), ii., p.269.

⁶⁶³ Hindmarsh (1996), p.80, 155, 158.

⁶⁶⁴ *Works of Newton* (London, 1808), ii., p.102.

walks around the Buckinghamshire countryside, the two friends discussed his various works and emphases during the course of their theological conversations.

Cowper's most fascinating engagement with *Indwelling Sin* arises out of his open endorsement of its central thesis: his clear reiteration throughout his hymns of Owen's teaching on the remnants of sin in the lives of believers. Before turning to an examination of this recurrent theme, it is helpful to note the attention that Cowper pays to those elements and discussions that hover on the periphery of Owen's argument. One such element that makes its way into *Olney Hymns* is Owen's reflection on the propensity of neophytes, having experienced the joy of conversion, to slip into lethargy and inactivity. New converts, he observes, 'have usually many fresh Springs breaking forth in their Souls, and refreshing Showers coming upon them, which bear them up to an high Rate of Faith, Love, Holiness, Fruitfulness and Obedience'.⁶⁶⁵ This he likens to 'a Land-flood', when 'many lesser Streams run into a River', and it 'swells over its bounds, and roulds on with a more than ordinary fulness'.⁶⁶⁶ Such an individual, he suggests, will derive 'so much Pleasure and Contentment' from the 'Beauties of the old Creation' that he will assume that 'he can never be weary of it, nor shall ever be contented on any account to be under Darkness again'.⁶⁶⁷ New converts 'see a new Glory' in Christ, which reduces the 'desirableness of all earthly Diversions', and they are endowed with both a 'vigorous' and 'active Holiness' and an ability to 'see a new guilt and filth in Sin, that gives them an utter abhorrency of its old delights and pleasures'.⁶⁶⁸

⁶⁶⁵ John Owen, *The Nature, Power, Deceit, and Prevalency of Indwelling Sin in Believers* (London, 1732), p.194 [In all my quotations of Owen I have used the edition owned by Cowper].

⁶⁶⁶ *ibid.*, p.194.

⁶⁶⁷ *ibid.*, p.196.

⁶⁶⁸ *ibid.*

Faced with such irrepressible fledgeling zeal, 'Indwelling-Sin'—which Owen, just short of personifying it, presents throughout as a mysterious, active, and intelligent force—must bring about 'Decays and Declensions in Grace and Obedience' by seeking to 'stop or taint these Springs'.⁶⁶⁹ There are, writes Owen, 'several Ways whereby it bringeth this to pass':

First, It works by Sloth and Negligence. [...] Secondly, By unframing the Soul, so that it shall have formal, weary, powerless Thoughts of those things, which should prevail with it unto Diligence in thankful Obedience. [...] Thirdly, Indwelling-Sin oftentimes prevails to the stopping of these Springs of Gospel-Obedience, by false and foolish Opinions, corrupting the Simplicity of the Gospel.⁶⁷⁰

To these, Owen also adds several others, including 'negligence of private communion with God in prayer and meditation', 'growing notions of truth without answerable practice', and the development of 'carnal wisdom', which 'teach[es] a Man to trust to and in himself.'⁶⁷¹ Warning against these inevitable assaults on the soul and the subsequent lessening of zeal, Owen urges the new convert to strive to maintain the 'fulness' of their new-found faith: 'if these Springs be not kept open', he warns, and 'if they prevail not for the continuance of these Showers, they must needs decay and go backwards.'⁶⁷²

That Cowper was influenced by Owen's discussion of the resurgence of sin in the lives of new converts is seen most clearly in two of his hymns, in which he explicitly addresses the same

⁶⁶⁹ *ibid*, p.196.

⁶⁷⁰ *ibid*, p.196-199.

⁶⁷¹ *ibid*, p.201-11.

⁶⁷² *ibid*, p.194.

issue: 'The new-born child of gospel-grace',⁶⁷³ and 'Jesus, whose blood so freely stream'd'.⁶⁷⁴

The former, which Newton titles 'The New Convert', is a straightforward reiteration of Owen's pleas to the neophyte. Eschewing his metaphor of a river bursting its banks—which, given their proximity to the Great Ouse, would have held negative connotations for the residents of Olney—Cowper likens the new convert to 'some fair tree when summer's nigh', an altogether more placid image, especially convenient for its evocation of the tree described in the parable of the mustard seed:

The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field: Which indeed is the least of all seeds: but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof.⁶⁷⁵

Cowper's 'blooming branch', raised 'on high' towards 'Emmanuel's shining face', is emblematic of both the 'pleasure and contentment' and the 'high rate' of 'fruitfulness' that, for Owen, constitutes the rich spiritual growth of the young Christian. In the third verse, this initial optimism gives way to the inevitable onset of 'decays and declensions in grace and obedience'. Sin, the poet writes, 'soon darts its cruel sting' into the life of the new convert, and causes their newfound 'comforts' to decrease 'day by day'. Switching metaphors, Cowper returns to Owen's image of the bursting river to give expression to this decline, describing the 'self-fed spring' of sinless peace as a 'brook that glides away'. For Cowper, as for Owen, the cause of this backsliding is the tendency of man 'to trust to and in himself', a fact that he illustrates via

⁶⁷³ *Poems*, i., p.197.

⁶⁷⁴ *ibid*, p.144.

⁶⁷⁵ Matthew 13:31-32.

a reference to Judges 7:2, and God's reduction of Gideon's army to 300 men before his battle with the Midianites:

When Gideon arm'd his num'rous host,
The Lord soon made his numbers less;
And said, lest Israel vainly boast,
'My arm procur'd me this success.'

From this illustration, Cowper—retaining the confident declarative mode—asserts that God will allow indwelling sin to make its presence felt in order to 'bring' the 'spirits' of believers 'down' and 'draw [their] ebbing comforts low', so that each will remember that they are 'sav'd by grace', and that therefore they 'may not claim the praise [they] owe'. This fascinating concept—that, in Hervey's words, the 'Poison' of indwelling sin 'may be so over-ruled by divine grace' as to be utilised by God for the ultimate good of the Christian, becoming 'medicinal, salutary, and conducive to the most beneficial Purposes'—is commensurate with Owen's understanding of the place and utility of trial and temptation, as discussed in chapter three. The same idea, that the experience of one's own frailty can ultimately be edifying for the Christian, is found in Marshall, who writes that such experience, 'maketh us sick of sin, and sensible of our need of the great Physician, and willing to be ordered according to any of his prescriptions, whatsoever we suffer, rather than to follow our own wisdom.'⁶⁷⁶

⁶⁷⁶ Marshall (1761), p.215.

Owen's concern for the experience of new converts surfaces elsewhere in Cowper's hymns, most notably in 'Jesus, whose blood so freely stream'd'.⁶⁷⁷ His assertion that the new believer is gifted with a 'fresh' sight of a 'new glory' in Christ informs verses one to four of this hymn, which marvel at the 'plan' of salvation and the reconciliation of 'offending man' to his creator, proclaiming that only God could have 'form'd' and 'fulfil[led]' such a 'plan', and revelling in the all-encompassing victory of the atonement; 'No drop remains of all the curse' writes Cowper:

No arrows dipt in wrath to pierce
The guilty, but returning soul.

In these first four verses the speaker is plunged into what Owen describes as the 'land-flood' of the new convert's zeal. This is Cowper's reimagining of the 'fresh Springs' and 'refreshing Showers' described in *Indwelling Sin*, and his verses simulate the excitement of one who sees both 'a new glory in Christ' and a 'new guilt and filth in Sin', and is subsequently endowed with 'an utter abhorrency of its old delights and pleasures'. Likewise, the final two verses emerge directly from Owen, specifically his warning against becoming 'hood-winked and asleep', and his castigation of those who behave as though there were 'no enemy to deal withal':

Now, Lord, thy feeble worm prepare!
For strife with earth and hell begins;
Confirm and gird me for the war,
They hate the soul that hates his sins.

⁶⁷⁷ *Poems*, i., p.144.

Let them in horrid league agree!
They may assault, they may distress;
But cannot quench thy love to me,
Nor rob me of the Lord my peace.

The explosive volta laid by Cowper at the outset of the penultimate verse is indicative of what is to come. Jolted out of a salvation-induced reverie, the 'Now' plants the speaker firmly in the present, abruptly confronting them with the oncoming 'strife' and 'war'. As in 'The new-born child of gospel-grace', his depiction of sins and trials that await the believer is varied, imaginative, and also physical: it is a 'storm', a 'dart', a 'snake's bite', or a 'swarm' of 'flies'. For Cowper, as for Owen, sin is conceptualised as a militant enemy force, an ominous collective, 'they', a 'horrid league', that will 'assault' the Christian. In addition to evoking Bunyan here, Cowper also draws upon Ephesians 6:11-17, with his insertion of a petition to be confirmed and girded for 'the war':

Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. [...] Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all

the fiery darts of the wicked; And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God [...].⁶⁷⁸

Like the author of Ephesians, Cowper has his speaker beseech God to 'prepare' and 'gird' him for the oncoming conflict 'with earth and hell'. Elsewhere, in hymns such as 'The Saviour hides his face',⁶⁷⁹ the poet returns to natural imagery in order to illustrate the effect and presence of sin:

What trifles tease [sic] me now!
They swarm like summer flies,
They cleave to ev'ry thing I do,
And swim before my eyes.

Reaching back into the previous stanza, which invokes the forty-second psalm with its reference to the 'roe' that 'Pants for the living stream', here Cowper cleverly extends the image. The suffering of temptation is presented via the quiet misery and agitation of a 'roe' under aphidian assault at a water's edge. As we have observed elsewhere, once again Cowper marries aural effects with imagery, communicating this agitation through a combination of plosive 't' sounds and sibilance in phrases such as 'what trifles tease', 'swarm', 'summer', and 'flies'. Additionally, Cowper's return to the verb 'cleave', here used in the line, 'They cleave to ev'ry thing I do', speaks of an unwelcome and polluting presence, that actively clings to its unwilling host, and that must somehow be stripped or washed away. The poet's choice of the

⁶⁷⁸ Ephesians 6:11-17.

⁶⁷⁹ *ibid*, p.181.

‘fly’ as a metaphor for sin here and elsewhere is powerful, bringing with it connotations of earthiness, decay, and uncleanness; the insertion of the verb ‘swarm’, further contributes to the noxious quality woven into this familiar pastoral image. Indeed, the ‘fly’ is the embodiment of Owen’s concept of sin in the life of the believer: a seasonal creature that will not fail to return and cause discomfort, yet is endowed with little power, such that it must largely be reduced to ‘teaz[ing]’. Cowper’s skilful representation of the distressed experience of one who can see, yet is caught in a violent storm of unclean insects, is powerfully evocative of Owen’s thesis: that the believer should expect to experience sinful desires, which, though ultimately powerless, remain a source of deep discomfort.

That Cowper was influenced by Owen’s relatively short discussion of the new convert is indicative of the extent to which he absorbed the content of *Indwelling Sin*. This is made even more apparent by the everywhere visible, and at times glaring, effect that its overarching thesis appears to have had upon his hymns. Before examining that effect, it is necessary to provide an outline of the thesis itself. Stated briefly, Owen argues that sinless perfection cannot be achieved in this lifetime—that sin will remain an unwanted presence in the lives of Christians until death. ‘Though its Rule be broken, its Strength weakened and impaired, its Root mortified,’ he writes, ‘yet it is a Law still of great Force and Efficacy.’⁶⁸⁰ Here, in this use of the word ‘Law’, we meet our first potential source of confusion. For Owen, as for the author of the letter to the Romans, this word has two uses: to refer to ‘the Law’, encoded in and issuing from the Pentateuch; and to refer to the strong, innate, and inherent predisposition of the human heart towards sin—a corrupted “law of nature”, that cannot be fully excised.⁶⁸¹ When referring

⁶⁸⁰ Owen (1732), p.4.

⁶⁸¹ Matthew Henry’s note on Romans 7:23-5: ‘The corrupt and sinful inclination is here compared to a law, because it controlled and checked him in his good motions. It is said to be seated in his members; because Christ

to the 'law of sin', Owen should be understood to be using this term according to the latter sense. Owen's definition of this law, his description of the predisposition of humans towards it and his presentation of its reach within the life of the individual, is comprehensive. 'This Law of Sin dwelleth in us', he writes, and 'it adheres as a depraved Principle': first, 'unto our Minds in Darkness and Vanity'; secondly, 'unto our Affections in Sensuality'; thirdly, 'unto our Wills in a loathing of and aversion from that which is good'.⁶⁸² Concerning its persistence, Owen writes that 'by some, more, or all of these' avenues, sin 'is continually putting itself upon us, in Inclinations, Motions, or Suggestions to evil, when we would be most gladly quit of it'.⁶⁸³ Significantly, and central to the entire work, Owen argues that this 'Indwelling-Sin' remains within the individual, even when they have become a Christian, and that the task of the Christian in life is to strive with it in these three areas: the mind, affections, and will.

Owen's thesis in *Indwelling Sin* is not, therefore, a mere restatement of the doctrine of Original Sin, but an exposition of the continuing presence of sin specifically in the lives of Christians, and a guide as to how it might be dealt with. His directions regarding this latter point are substantial. First, he insists that the mere comprehension of indwelling sin is not sufficient for its confrontation and management. Appealing to the seventh chapter of Romans, he reasons that the 'Apostle' himself had 'been told' of it, and that it had even 'been preach'd unto him'.⁶⁸⁴

having set up his throne in his heart, it was only the rebellious members of the body that were the instruments of sin. In the sensitive appetite, or we may take it more generally, for all that corrupt nature, which is the seat not only of sensual but of more refined lusts. This wars against the law of the mind, i.e. the new nature; it draws the contrary way, drives on a contrary interest; which corrupt disposition and inclination is as great a burden and grief to the soul, as the worst drudgery and captivity could be. It brings me into captivity. To the same purpose, *ver.* 25. *With the flesh I serve the law of sin*, i. e. the corrupt nature, the unregenerate part is continually working towards sin.' See: Henry (1737), v., Rom. 7:23-5.

⁶⁸² Owen (1732), p.16.

⁶⁸³ *ibid.*

⁶⁸⁴ *ibid.*, p.4.

This, he suggests, merely ‘convinced him, that there was a Law of Sin’.⁶⁸⁵ As such, it is vital that humans are not simply informed of their condition, but that they ‘find’, or recognise, it within themselves: ‘it is one thing for a Man to know in general that there is a Law of Sin; another thing for a Man to have an Experience of the Power of this Law of Sin in himself’.⁶⁸⁶ The majority of human beings, Owen claims, are conversant with the former, but not with the latter:

Many Men live in the dark to themselves all their Days; whatever else they know, they know not themselves. They know their outward Estates, how rich they are, and the Condition of their Bodies as to Health and Sickness, they are careful to examine; but as to their inward Man, and their Principles as to God and Eternity, they know little or nothing of themselves.⁶⁸⁷

By contrast, those who have become Christians must be always aware, though perhaps not fully, of the state of their ‘inward man’, having ‘found’ within themselves this law of sin:

Believers have Experience of the Power and Efficacy of Indwelling-Sin. They find it in themselves, they find it as a Law. It hath Self-evidencing Efficacy to them that are alive to discern it. [...] Whoever contend against it, shall know and find, that it is present with them, that it is powerful in them. He shall find the Stream to be strong, who swims against it, though he who roulds along with it be insensible to it.⁶⁸⁸

⁶⁸⁵ *ibid.*

⁶⁸⁶ *ibid.*

⁶⁸⁷ *ibid.*, p.8.

⁶⁸⁸ *ibid.*, p.5.

Having 'found' the law of sin dwelling within, Owen insists that the believer is to resist, or 'swim against', it. '[B]e always doing it whilst you live in this World', he writes: 'great Ground is obtained, when the Work is vigorously and constantly carried on; Sin is much weakened, so that the Soul presseth forwards towards Perfection'.⁶⁸⁹ Such 'Perfection', Owen goes on to explain, will never be attained in this life: 'the Work must be endless; I mean, whilst we are in this World.'⁶⁹⁰ Indeed, he is careful to affirm the necessity of ongoing struggle in several places: 'Let us, then, reckon on it', he writes, 'that there is no Way to have our Work done but by always doing of it; and he who dies fighting in this Warfare, dies assuredly a Conqueror.'⁶⁹¹

In summary, Owen argues that to become a Christian is to begin a lifelong battle with indwelling sin that will only reach its conclusion in the eschaton, and that the Christian must therefore consistently confront and work against this predisposition within themselves. Profoundly influential for Cowper, this idea is a central theme for both his hymns and letters: at times, as we shall see, he takes it as his primary subject, but more often it manifests itself in the presuppositions that form the basis for his hymns. The third verse of 'There is a fountain fill'd with blood',⁶⁹² contains the following statement:

Dear dying Lamb, thy precious blood
Shall never lose its pow'r;
Till all the ransom'd church of God
Be sav'd, to sin no more.

⁶⁸⁹ *ibid*, p.27.

⁶⁹⁰ *ibid*.

⁶⁹¹ *ibid*.

⁶⁹² *Poems*, i., p.154.

The second of these couplets quietly assumes Owen's insistence that the Christian must 'be always' combatting sin 'while in this world': the 'church', Cowper posits, will only 'sin no more' once finally 'sav'd' at the eschaton. In both 'Hark, my soul! it is the Lord'⁶⁹³ and 'Fierce passions discompose the mind',⁶⁹⁴ this concept is placed in the mouth of Christ himself, who gently addresses the speaker—who is identified as a believing Christian—by the epithet, 'Sinner': "Say, poor sinner, lov'st thou me?" is the refrain of the first; "Art thou a sinner, soul?", asks the second. By having Christ ask this question, Cowper subtly confers scriptural authority upon Owen's thesis, and imposes it upon the speaker. Each hymn also echoes Owen's anticipation of the sinless state that awaits in eternity: in the former Christ promises that, 'Thou shalt see my glory soon,/ When the work of grace is done' and 'Partner of my throne shalt be'; and in the latter, 'Thou soon shalt leave this wretched spot,/ And rise with me to dwell'.

Over and against the perfectionist teaching that became common throughout the eighteenth-century revival (of this, more later), Cowper firmly situates the hope of sinless perfection in the eschatological future. Over and against the Antinomian teaching common to Olney and its environs, he firmly insists upon the necessity of recognising and fighting sin. In the present, the believer must expect to struggle with sin and temptation, and learn to ask simply for 'grace to love thee more'.⁶⁹⁵ Concerning the nature of the struggle, the poet concludes another hymn, 'By whom was David taught',⁶⁹⁶ with the following verse:

⁶⁹³ *ibid*, p.157.

⁶⁹⁴ *ibid*, p.158.

⁶⁹⁵ *ibid*.

⁶⁹⁶ *ibid*, p.142-3

But unbelief, self-will,
Self-righteousness and pride,
How often do they steal,
My weapon from my side?
Yet David's Lord, and Gideon's friend,
Will help his servant to the end.

Here again, Cowper has the 'saints' of Olney sing of their own 'unbelief', 'self-will', 'Self-righteousness and pride'. Indeed, not content with merely drawing these confessions from his speakers, he also then has them acknowledge, via a self-searching interrogative inserted into the line, 'How often' these sins return to detain them in their journey. Though chiefly concerned with enheartening the faithful in the main body of this hymn, Cowper is at pains to take a brief detour here at its close in order to bring the speaker into an encounter with what Owen describes as the 'Inward Man', before concluding with the reassurance that God, benevolently cast as both 'Lord' and 'friend', will 'help his servant to the end'.

In similar fashion, elsewhere in Cowper's hymns the influence of Owen's thesis manifests itself in the designation of the speaker as simultaneously "enlighten'd" and yet still subject to sinful temptation. These hymns are often framed as devotional texts in which the speaker, having either briefly referenced or reflected at length upon their own indwelling sin, pivots to God, and petitions to be strengthened in the struggle. The first verse of, 'My God! how perfect are thy ways!',⁶⁹⁷ for example, reads:

⁶⁹⁷ *ibid*, p.150.

My God! how perfect are thy ways!

But mine polluted are;

Sin twines itself about my praise,

And slides into my pray'r.

This meditation upon the sin of the speaker and sinlessness of God is framed in the language of the psalmist. Drawing upon the eighteenth psalm, Cowper opens the hymn with the phrase 'My God' (repeated five times throughout Psalm 18), and reshapes the proclamation of the eighteenth verse, 'As for God, his way his perfect', into an exaltative utterance: 'how perfect are thy ways!'.⁶⁹⁸ Against this divine perfection, Cowper contrasts the 'ways' of the speaker, whose actions are 'polluted', and whose attempts to 'praise' and engage in 'pray'r' are beset by 'sin'. Conveyed via sibilant verbs with serpentine connotations, like Owen, Cowper depicts sin as a sinister, invasive, and active force, and his use of the present indicative tense signifies a general and ongoing condition: sin 'slides' and 'twines', and later it 'returns' and 'creeps' in the form of 'impatience' and 'self-applause'.⁶⁹⁹ Again, Cowper's presupposition here is drawn from Owen—that the speaker is, and will continue to be, burdened with indwelling sin, while God, being perfect, is not. In beginning the hymn with a frank admission and meditation upon imperfection, Cowper's aim here is to lay the foundation for the introduction of a favourite theme—the necessity of faith for salvation, and the foolishness of reliance upon works. This is confirmed by the final verse of the hymn, where, having fully confessed the deficiency of

⁶⁹⁸ Psalm 18:30.

⁶⁹⁹ *Poems*, i., p.150.

‘fancied merit’, the poet has his speaker proclaim: ‘The Lord shall be my righteousness,/ The Lord for ever mine’.

In addition to those hymns where Owen’s doctrine is either presupposed or present as a minor theme within certain verses, a number of pieces are given over to the explicit communication of the argument of *Indwelling Sin*. In ‘Holy Lord God! I love thy truth’,⁷⁰⁰ Cowper expounds upon Owen’s insistence that ‘while in this world’ sinless perfection is unreachable:

Holy Lord God! I love thy truth,
Nor dare thy least commandment slight;
Yet pierc’d by sin, the serpent’s tooth,
I mourn the anguish of the bite.

But tho’ the poison lurks within,
Hope bids me still with patience wait;
Till death shall set me free from sin,
Free from the only thing I hate.

Newton’s title for this hymn, ‘Hatred of Sin’, infuses it with a gloominess that, upon closer inspection, is not quite suitable. Indeed, the opening declaration of the first verse is surprisingly spirited, a powerful doxology that includes a declaration of love for the ‘truth’ of the Bible and its ‘commandment[s]’. Having begun here, Cowper then pivots to consider the problem of

⁷⁰⁰ *ibid*, p.196.

indwelling sin within the life of the Christian—what Owen describes as the ‘great force and efficacy’ of the remaining ‘Law’ of sin. Despite being saved into a ‘love’ for God and his precepts, the speaker, ‘pierc’d by sin’, confesses ‘anguish’ at the remaining effects of the ‘bite’. By depicting the source of sin via the metaphor of the ‘serpent’s tooth’, Cowper roots the experience of indwelling sin in the present in the Fall account in the third chapter of Genesis, and in doing so conveys something of the ontological and inherent nature of the problem: though redeemed, he points out that the believer has still been “bitten”, and is therefore still subject to the ramifications of that event. Extending the logic of this serpentine imagery into the next verse, Cowper goes on to describe the ‘sin’ itself as a ‘poison’ that cannot be fully excised: a ‘lurk[ing]’, sinister substance, endowed with the same mysterious agency as Owen’s depiction of indwelling sin. The concluding point of the second verse, that only ‘death shall set me free from sin’, is reiterated triumphantly at close of the hymn, as Cowper constrains the speaker to affirm, with Owen, that the struggle with sin will end only at the eschaton:

One view of Jesus as he is,
Will strike all sin for ever dead.

In this final couplet, the directionality of the hymn transitions from the devotional and confessional tone of the previous verses into the declarative mode, and the speaker turns from speaking privately with God to speaking about him and his promises to another audience. A reassuring climax, it resounds with the defiant certainty of Owen, that ‘he who dies fighting in this Warfare dies assuredly a Conqueror’. Though it might well have served a confessional purpose—and though, from what we know of Cowper, it seems likely that its verses were informed by personal experience—this hymn should not be misread as a melancholic or self-

flagellatory personal confession. Rather, it is best understood as a nuanced attempt to both explain and give voice to a complicated aspect of what Cowper understood to be a foundational part of the Christian experience: a careful restatement and application of Owen's thesis, couched in creative metaphors and Biblical imagery, and moving almost imperceptibly between didactic and devotional modes.

This same approach to the subject of indwelling sin is evident in several other hymns, including, 'I thirst, but not as once I did'.⁷⁰¹ Verse one reads:

I thirst, but not as once I did,
The vain delights of earth to share;
Thy wounds, Emmanuel, all forbid,
That I should seek my pleasures there.

Drawing once more on the spiritual autobiography trope, in the second verse Cowper sketches a general narrative for the speaker to inhabit with their own personal redemptive experience:

It was the sight of thy dear cross,
First wean'd my soul from earthly things;
And taught me to esteem as dross,
The mirth of fools and pomp of kings.

⁷⁰¹ *ibid*, p.193.

Here again Bunyan is visible beneath the surface of Cowper's verses in this description of the moment of redemption: the galvanising 'sight of' the 'cross' recalls Christian's burden being 'loosed from his shoulders' on approaching the cross of Christ in *Pilgrim's Progress*.⁷⁰² Before encountering Bunyan, however, we are first greeted by Owen, and his reassurance that, despite its permanence this side of eternity, 'great Ground' might be 'obtained' in the Christian's struggle for sanctification, and that sin might be 'greatly weakened in its Power'. This optimistic sense of progression emerges in Cowper's opening verse: his speaker still 'thirst[s]', and presumably will go on thirsting, 'but not as once I did'. A nuanced reiteration of Owen's thesis, this admission simultaneously confesses a remaining temptation to sin, and the cheerful realisation that this temptation for 'vain pleasures', 'vain delights', the 'mirth of fools', and 'pomp of kings', has been, in Owen's words, 'greatly weakened'. Having confronted the speaker with the realities of a life lived in combat with indwelling sin, Cowper then echoes the remedy prescribed by Owen in the event of its resurgence. In pivoting to an emotional reflection on both the 'wounds' and the 'dear cross' of Christ, the hymn follows Owen's directive that, when faced with temptation, the Christian should turn to a meditation upon the atoning grace of God, and 'fill' their 'Affections with the Cross of Christ'.⁷⁰³

In seeking to explain Cowper's apparent enthusiasm for Owen's *Indwelling Sin* and the recurrence of its themes throughout his hymns, it is tempting to look to his temperament. Hindmarsh writes of Newton that in his early years as a Christian he had a 'relentless concern with the weight of indwelling sin' and a 'preoccupation with his own spiritual biography'.⁷⁰⁴ Assuming that he shared something of this practice with Cowper, and that the hymns were in

⁷⁰² Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*, ed. Sharrock (1966), p.38.

⁷⁰³ Owen (1732), p.138.

⁷⁰⁴ Hindmarsh (1996), p.235.

some sense both a ‘monument’ to their ‘intimate and endearing friendship’ and an expression of their shared Evangelical spirituality, it seems probable that these hymns are, to a certain extent, representative of Cowper’s state of mind.⁷⁰⁵ That said, given what we established in Part One concerning the nature and uses of ‘private’ hymns—that they were written for and proffered to the community for didactic purposes, and likely used as auxiliary-primary texts in sermons—we should not rush to relegate these hymns to the status of ‘private poems’. Nor, for that matter, should we reduce Cowper’s consistent references to the concept of indwelling sin to a personal fixation. As ever, to broaden one’s gaze out from Cowper’s mental health is to find substantive cause for his focus on this particular topic in the broader context of the revivalist movement, specifically in the perfectionist controversies of the mid-eighteenth century.

Though the gradual separation of the Wesleyan and Whitefieldian factions of the revivalist movement from the 1740s onward was largely influenced by disagreements over soteriology, the greatest strain on the fragile union undoubtedly came via John Wesley’s propagation of the doctrine of Christian Perfection. With its tendency to provoke raucous and widespread enthusiastic outbursts, the events surrounding this doctrine eventually led to its becoming a topic of national conversation, such that, in 1766, Wesley was forced to write a lengthy apologia, titled *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*. Attempting to demonstrate the consistency of his teaching on the issue from the 1730s to the time of writing, Wesley cites numerous works he had already penned on the subject. One particular quote, drawn from a

⁷⁰⁵ *Olney Hymns*, p.vi.

1739 pamphlet, *The Character of a Methodist*, describes the state of one who has attained to Christian Perfection, and, in doing so, briefly summarises the doctrine:

All the commandments of God he accordingly keeps, and that with all his might. [...] And therefore, loving God with all his heart, he serves him with all his strength. [...] By consequence, whatsoever he doth, it is all to the glory of God. In all his employments of every kind, he not only aims at this (which is implied in having a single eye) but actually attains it.⁷⁰⁶

Such Christians, Wesley affirms, do not think evil or sinful thoughts, or feel evil tempers; they have attained 'deliverance from all sin', a state that 'is given instantaneously'.⁷⁰⁷ Moreover, against the argument of John Owen in *Indwelling Sin*, and the subsequent teachings of Whitefieldian revivalists, Wesley claims that such a state should not solely be expected 'at death', but 'every moment': 'now is the accepted time', he cries, 'now is the day of this salvation.'⁷⁰⁸

The outcome of Wesley's teaching on Christian Perfection was the declaration by numerous Methodists across Britain that they had 'attained' to the state he describes (incidentally, neither John nor Charles ever claimed this for themselves). This trend became a crisis with the advent of the 'London Affair', or 'London Disturbances', which began in 1760 and reached its climax in 1763. George Bell, ex-corporal in the regiment of Life Guards and a member of the Methodist society, proclaimed himself to have reached perfection. So public was his

⁷⁰⁶ John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (Bristol, 1766), p.16.

⁷⁰⁷ *ibid*, p.55.

⁷⁰⁸ *ibid*.

declaration and so powerful his preaching that, as Gareth Lloyd writes, by April 1761 'the majority of London Methodists were seeking this attainment with renewed fervour and impressive results.'⁷⁰⁹ Accompanying the attendant reports of dreams and prophetic visions were those of people in increasingly significant numbers claiming to have experienced instantaneous perfection. Lloyd cites Bell's 'personal magnetism and the attractiveness of his message' as the impetus behind his adoption of a 'leadership role', and his organisation of regular perfectionist meetings 'close to Grosvenor Square', at least one of which was attended by Wesley himself.⁷¹⁰ The culmination of the Affair was finally reached when 'the desire of many London Methodists to be perfect' reached 'epidemic, and in some sense, unhealthy proportions', and, amidst a tumult of confusion, Bell was arrested following his announcement that the apocalypse would commence on 23 February, 1763.⁷¹¹

Inevitably, the reproach for this series of events fell upon Wesley. As Hindmarsh writes: 'Although Wesley disassociated himself from the excesses of Maxfield and Bell, it was thought by many to show exactly where Wesley's teaching about perfection would end'.⁷¹² Within the revival movement the Affair brought about further schism between Whitefieldians and Wesleyans: 'it was the behaviour of Wesley's followers that set the Calvinists' teeth on edge', Hindmarsh continues; their 'claims to perfection,' he explains 'however hedged about by talk of grace, appeared in many cases to be simply 'enthusiastic' self-righteousness.'⁷¹³ Indeed, this sentiment was amply, if curtly, expressed by Whitefield himself, who made quiet reference in

⁷⁰⁹ Gareth Lloyd, 'A Cloud of Perfect Witnesses: John Wesley and the London Disturbances, 1760-63', *The Asbury Theological Journal*, v.57, no 1. (2002), p.120-21.

⁷¹⁰ *ibid.*

⁷¹¹ *ibid.*, p.122, p.128.

⁷¹² Hindmarsh (1996), p.132.

⁷¹³ *ibid.*, p.138.

a letter sent on 2 June 1766 to ‘That monstrous doctrine of sinless perfection’, which ‘for a while turns some of its deluded votaries into temporary monsters’.⁷¹⁴

Even beyond revivalist circles, both the Affair and the doctrine associated with it caused broader controversy. Albert M. Lyles writes that Methodism was ‘seized upon as the subject of satire’, and here were articles covering the controversy in several newspapers, including the *Westminster Journal* and *London Chronicle*.⁷¹⁵ It also drew forth a clarifying censure, as Gareth Lloyd records, from Bishop Warburton; his pamphlet, titled *The Doctrines of Grace; or, The Office and Operations of the Holy Spirit vindicated from the infidelity and abuses of fanaticism*, was published at the height of the disturbances in 1763, and it went through three editions in the first year.⁷¹⁶ Additionally, a great number of works criticising, satirising, and desecrating Wesley’s doctrine are documented by Clive B. Field in his revised bibliography of ‘Anti-Methodist publications in the eighteenth century’. Among these are William Combe’s, *Perfection, A Poetical epistle, calmly addressed to the greatest hypocrite in England* (1778), *Original Letters between the Reverend Mr. John Wesley and Mr. Richard Tompson [...] with some strictures on Christian Perfection* (1760), *A Word in Season, being a caution against the awful delusions of the perfectionists* (1763), and *A Scriptural Account of the doctrine of perfection* (1763).⁷¹⁷ Authored by none other than Martin Madan, this final tract is careful to reaffirm Owen’s argument that, ‘this degree of sanctification will not take place until the moment a believer is dismissed from the body: for we that are in this tabernacle do groan,

⁷¹⁴ *The Works of the Reverend George Whitefield, M.A.*, 7 vols (London, 1771), iii., p.337.

⁷¹⁵ Albert M. Lyles, *Methodism Mocked: the satiric reaction to Methodism in the Eighteenth Century* (London: The Epworth Press, 1960), p.45; Lloyd (2002), p.130.

⁷¹⁶ *ibid.*

⁷¹⁷ Clive D. Field, ‘Anti-Methodist Publications in the Eighteenth-Century: a revised bibliography’, *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, v.73, no.2 (1991): pp.159-280.

being burdened: burdened with indwelling sin and the breakings forth of corruption.’⁷¹⁸ He concludes:

Upon the whole then, we see that the Doctrine of Sinless Perfection as taught and received by some in our Day, is not to be found in the Word of God. That Sin is not eradicated by the Implantation of Grace; but remains a distinct Principle from it: and that there is no Deliverance from the Body of this Death, until this earthly House of our Tabernacle is dissolved.⁷¹⁹

His point made with lawyerly precision, Madan ends the tract with a strongly-worded prayer that its contents might save some from the ‘Snare of the Devil’, and the ‘Error of the wicked.’⁷²⁰

In his final analysis, Gareth Lloyd writes that ‘the activities of George Bell, encouraged by John Wesley, came very close to destroying Methodism within the capital, and certainly drove a nail into the coffin of Anglo-Methodist relations’.⁷²¹ Though helpful in grasping the significance of these events for the capital, this conclusion does not allow for the substantial ripple effects that were felt across the entire country. In a journal entry dated Wednesday 4 August 1762, Wesley, having just reported similar outbreaks in Congleton and Cheshire, records a Perfectionist revival on the banks of the Mersey: ‘I rode to Liverpool, where also was such a work of God as had never been known before [...]. Nine were justified in one hour. The next moment I spoke severally with those who believed they were sanctified. There were fifty-one

⁷¹⁸ Martin Madan, *A Scriptural Account of the Doctrine of Perfection* (London, 1763), p.8.

⁷¹⁹ *ibid.*

⁷²⁰ *ibid.*

⁷²¹ Lloyd (2002), p.130.

in all.’⁷²² This outbreak is particularly significant for our study of Cowper because it was witnessed by John Newton. Hindmarsh expertly demonstrates that it was this encounter with Perfectionism that most probably led to Newton’s break with Wesley: that the ‘perfectionist revival at Liverpool and Bolton in 1762 had emphatically demonstrated that the theological differences between [Wesley] and Newton could not be treated any longer as opinions of little consequence.’⁷²³ Though they had differed over soteriology for some time, the latter had been happy to let matters lie, and had drawn criticism for doing so. The outbreaks of perfectionist enthusiasm, however, proved too much:

He had long objected to Wesley’s doctrine of instantaneous and entire sanctification but had subordinated his concerns in the interests of unity. Here, however, was the phenomenon itself occurring with dramatic effect among the poor and despised people about whom he had already entertained some doubts. Would he be able to continue to associate with them? This must surely have been the breaking point for Newton.⁷²⁴

And what of Cowper? Given that it drew a publication from his cousin, Martin Madan, and that Bell’s meetings took place over several years a mere two miles from his home at Inner Temple, it is unlikely that the London Affair escaped his attention. Moreover, that Cowper discussed Wesley’s doctrine with Newton while at Olney is suggested by the letter that he wrote to him on Friday 21 December, 1781:

⁷²² Quoted in: Hindmarsh (1996), p.131.

⁷²³ *ibid*, p.139.

⁷²⁴ *ibid*, p.131-2.

next comes News from the North of a different complexion, which it is possible may be News to you. Mr. Fletcher on his recovery from his late dangerous illness, has started up a Perfectionist. He preached Perfection not long since at Dewsbury where Mr. Powley and his Curate heard him. He told the people that He that Sinned was no Christian, that he himself did not Sin, Ergo had a right to the Appellation.⁷²⁵

Cowper displays a surprising level of knowledge regarding the affairs of this particular preacher, whose location 130 miles north of Olney does not appear to have proved a barrier to his being intimately acquainted with his past movements:

having spent much of his Life and exerted all his talents in the defence of Arminian errors, he is at last left to fall into an error more pernicious than Arminius is to be charged with, or the most ignorant of his disciples [...]. Mr. Wesley has also been very troublesome in the same place, and asserted in perfect harmony of sentiment with his brother Fletcher, that Mr. Whitfield disseminated more false doctrine in the nation, than he should ever be able to eradicate. Methinks they do not see through a glass darkly but for want of a glass, they see not at all.⁷²⁶

This letter ratifies what might have been inferred from Cowper's clear endorsement of the Calvinistic doctrines associated with the Whitefieldian faction of the revival: his general disapproval for Wesleyan doctrine, including Arminianism. More specifically, it confirms Cowper's knowledge of and opposition to perfectionism. Indeed, the knowing familiarity with

⁷²⁵ *Letters*, i., p.566.

⁷²⁶ *ibid.*

which he refers to it here in his note to Newton is indicative of its having long been a common topic of conversation between the two men. In a later letter, sent to Powley himself, he offers a further damning assessment of the doctrine, writing: 'I am utterly at a loss to conceive what colour of plausibility they can give to their argument or how they can defend it for a moment.'⁷²⁷

Much as Cowper appears to have written homiletical hymns in response to Antinomian currents in and around Olney, it seems highly probable that, as the revival rumbled on into the late 1760s and early 1770s, both he and Newton felt it necessary to either address or guard against what, in Cowper's words, they would have judged to be 'pernicious' Wesleyan 'error'. Thus, the prominence of Calvinistic doctrines such as Assurance and Indwelling Sin in Cowper's homiletic, and the presence of these concepts either as presupposition, minor theme, or as the primary subject in his hymns, is not solely reflective of his own state of mind, his convictions, and his personal spirituality; indeed, it is also reflective of a desire to produce useful texts that would guard, shape, and edify his Olney readership in the midst of theologically-uncertain times. Cowper's engagement with these Puritan thinkers in his hymns should be seen within this context. In addition to there being clear instances of him re-stating particular aspects of their work, more generally it seems that Cowper's theology was greatly influenced by his reading and that, therefore, when confronted with either a theological controversy or an opportunity to write didactically (brought about by either local or personal circumstance), it was their works that he engaged with and reached for, and it was upon their doctrines that he built his verses.

⁷²⁷ *Letters*, ii., p.69.

CONCLUSION

Towards a Redressal of Cowper and His Work

I read Cowper: The Task. Now there's a man with a dash of white fire in him. It comes so strangely, among such flummery: one line, one phrase [...] a line about a hare perhaps; something said still with the formal lilt, but completely in his own voice.⁷²⁸

—Virginia Woolf (1927)

I am no preacher

—William Cowper (1782)

There is a sense in which William Cowper was a preacher. To write this is not to denigrate him or his work, since—as recent scholarship has endeavoured to demonstrate to a post-Christendom age, and as we have acknowledged in this thesis—homiletics is an art. Despite its accurate elements, however, the designation does not quite fit. Can a man who never preached a sermon and only ever took to the pulpit in letters, conversation, and verse be given the title of ‘preacher’? Insofar as he thought, wrote, and composed theologically, there is also a sense in which William Cowper was a theologian. Again, however, this statement cannot be definitive, since Cowper made no advancements for Theology proper and wrote no formal theological works. Here, at the close of this thesis, we cannot help but return to the quotation

⁷²⁸ Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (eds), *The Letters of Virginia Woolf: volume III, 1923-1928*, 6 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1975-80), iii., p.333 [To Vita Sackville-West, Monday 21 February, 1927].

with which it began: the observation made by Cowper's cousin, John Johnson, that 'the character of Cowper is undetermined; mystery hangs over it'.

Though it might be difficult to summarise in a single term or phrase, it is accurate to say of Cowper that he was a poet for whom theology—its truth, its beauty, its communication, and its application to the extraordinary and quotidian—was a central concern. To the extent that he was a theologian, Cowper was concerned with thinking about these matters carefully and with a degree of complexity. To the extent that he was a preacher, he was concerned with imparting his thoughts to his various readerships: meeting their perceived needs, accounting for their tastes, and shaping his verses to their reading contexts.

Critics of Cowper have, to varying degrees, often focused on what Virginia Woolf terms his 'dash of white fire': a quality in his poetry that is seen in momentary flashes, 'wave[s] rising solitary' out of the mass of verses, 'the triumph of style'.⁷²⁹ While her identification of these elements in his work is apt, Woolf's designation of the rest of the poetry as 'flummery' is not. Johnson defines 'flummery' as 'A kind of food made by coagulation of wheatflour or oatmeal' to which the *Oxford English Dictionary* adds: 'n. Trifles, useless trappings or ornaments'.⁷³⁰ To dismiss so much of Cowper's poetry in this way is to miss so much of his skill as a poet and his subtlety as a thinker. Running through his smaller pieces and out into the broad and open waterways of his moral satires, occasional pieces, and *The Task*, Cowper's theological discourse is often sophisticated, reflective of his substantial reading, and redolent with Biblical

⁷²⁹ *ibid.*

⁷³⁰ "flummery, n.", Johnson (1755), i.; "flummery, n.", *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, 2021), accessed 12 January 2022 [I am grateful to Alexandra Harris for her discussion of this letter in her paper: "A dash of white fire": Virginia Woolf reads Cowper', *William Cowper: art and afterlife conference* (4 September, 2021), Olney].

references, as the poet applies the elevated principles of Divinity to everything from the domestic to the cosmic: ‘rested in & viewed without a reference to their Author’, he wrote in a letter to John Newton on Wednesday 3 May, 1780, ‘what is the Earth, what are the planets, what is the sun itself but a bauble?’.⁷³¹

The irony of Woolf’s comment—and of the general consensus that lines up behind it—is that it represents a complete inversion of how Cowper understood himself and his work. For him, though it is to be delighted in, the ‘hare’ that he is describing is a mere ‘bauble’, especially if viewed outside of a Christian cosmology: ‘without a reference’ to its ‘Author’. Furthermore, where the poetry is concerned, the ‘dash of white fire’ itself is flummery, a ‘useless ornament’, unless viewed within the broader context of the overarching moral message of his poem. Cowper hoped that his poetry would be ‘a vehicle of true knowledge’ to the ‘ignorant’.⁷³² He wrote to Joseph Hill:

my volume, whatever pains I may have taken to adorn it with character or to enliven it with an air of cheerfulness, is at the bottom a religious business, a transcript of my own experience, and a summary of such Truths as I know to be the most valuable in themselves, because the most important in their consequences.⁷³³

In short, for Cowper, the theological, didactic, and homiletical content of his verses—the ‘flummery’—is actually their principal component.

⁷³¹ *Letters*, i., p.335.

⁷³² *ibid*, ii., p.41 [To: William Bull, 24 March 1782].

⁷³³ *ibid*, p.42 [1 April 1782].

With this in view, there is need of a wholesale reconsideration of this aspect of Cowper's work: one that goes beyond vague gestures towards his belief in 'the fierce doctrines of election, predestination, etc.', and is willing to investigate his theological reading, his engagement with the Reformed theological tradition and the Bible, and his intricate use of verse in order to convey his sense of these 'most valuable' matters to his readership. Though his reference to 'Experience' might be discounted here—since the experience of a thing is not vital to its being taken seriously—Cowper's comment to Newton regarding Dr. Johnson is apposite and instructive to this task. 'I think him a little mistaken in his notion that divine Subjects have never been poetically treated with Success', he begins, before concluding: 'A little more Christian knowledge and Experience would perhaps enable him to discover excellent poetry upon spiritual themes'.⁷³⁴

The hymns belong at the forefront of such a redressal, since they represent Cowper's first attempts at public-facing engagement with 'spiritual themes'—his first attempts at writing 'usefull' texts. They are, in this sense, of great formative significance to his oeuvre. By re-situating the hymns in Olney, this thesis has begun the work of reconsidering Cowper along these lines. It has also demonstrated that his 'Olney' hymns were written to be used for specific purposes by a specific readership and on specific occasions, and therefore that they should primarily be read as such. Moreover, in examining them as texts written for a particular readership, this thesis has recovered within the hymns something of Cowper's skill as a poet and hymnwriter: his deft use of directionality; his adoption and seamless transition between various hymnic modes; his ability to summarise, weave together, and enter into Biblical texts;

⁷³⁴ *ibid.*, i., p.526 [To: John Newton, 4 October 1781].

his synthesis of the quasi-primary and the quasi-secondary; his careful selection of local imagery, and his extension of images into narratives that run through his hymns, aided by lines smoothed with assonance, sibilance, internal rhyme, and alliteration. Such fire, white or otherwise, does not occur in a vacuum, and, where *Olney Hymns* are concerned, Cowper's use of the 'imagery and coloring of poetry' is quietly located in moments where he is carefully considering his readership: their needs, their tastes, and their reading context.

Lastly, Cowper's theological engagement within his hymns is construed as emerging from a series of ongoing, organic, and thoughtful interactions between him, his Bible, and his reading in various Reformation, Puritan, and Evangelical theologians. Whether a result of the influence that certain theologians and theological streams of thought had upon him, or whether fully conscious and intentional, Cowper's theological interactions are often conceived as responses to contemporaneous and local theological issues, or as he engages with particular texts and seeks to give shape to his thoughts on doctrine, Scripture, and the Christian experience.

In the final analysis, when situated within a renewed view of their author and his context, Cowper's *Olney Hymns* are found to be much more than mere effusions of feeling. In the main they are sophisticated texts, governed by authorial intent, and carefully crafted for a local readership: 'the parish and neighbourhood of Olney, for whose use the hymns were originally composed'.

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