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WILLIAM COWPER'S THE TASK: A STUDY IN TRANSITION

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Department of English

Western Kentucky University

Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Roy Leo Grady, Jr.

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INTRODUCTION

Hidden deep in the shelves of most libraries in England and America is an obscure, dusty volume of poetry containing one of the minor classics in the English language, a poem entitled <u>The Task</u>. Written by the eighteenth-century poet William Cowper, this very long and loosely structured poem won widespread recognition and acclaim in its day, only to gradually fade into a premature oblivion. Today <u>The Task</u> is known primarily to a handful of literary scholars whose arcane and esoteric business it is to go beyond the turnpikes of literary history into the labyrinthine lanes and paths of our literary past. This is an unfortunate situation, for William Cowper and his <u>The Task</u> have much to offer the world in which we live. <u>The Task</u> is a poem which offers a fertile soil for literary scholarship, since in this poem one can see a link between the neo-classic and the romantic. In addition, Cowper's great poem carries a soothing, spiritual message similar in content to that of Thoreau's <u>Walden</u>. It is a message that needs urgently to be spread in an age where insensitivity and spiritual dryness seem to everywhere flourish.

Since *The Task* was first published in 1785, it should be obvious that it would be more romantic than neo-classic. And so it is. Cowper's abandonment of the heroic couplet, his attempts to make more natural the language of poetry, his love and close observations of the natural world, and the spontaneous, associational structure of *The Task* show the poem to be essentially romantic in nature. However, some of the finest portions of this poem were written in the neo-classic tradition; thus Cowper's *The Task* may be viewed as a transitional poem, a poem which provides a link between Romanticism and Neo-Classicism. In short, an Augustan poet could not have written *The Task*; similarly, a poet of the romantic school could hardly have produced a poem so replete with stock diction and didactic advice as is *The Task*.

It is truly unfair and unfortunate that the term "transitional poem" has come to connote a work of art somehow lacking in quality, and perhaps this is the stigma which has relegated *The Task* into a most undeserving obscurity. This connotation is based upon absolutely no, or at best erroneous, logic. Logically, it seems as though a work of art which draws from the best of two worlds should have the potential of being of the highest literary quality. Cowper succeeded in unconsciously blending together the characteristics of two opposite literary schools in *The Task*, and while the poem is not

masterpiece, it is a minor classic worthy of attention and study.

Living most of his life in the seclusion of the little village of Olney, Cowper bequeathed to posterity a poem of spiritual solace. Implicit in Cowper's defense of a life of retirement is an appeal to man's spiritual half, a plea to cultivate a life which engenders the nourishment of one's soul. Like good poetry anywhere, Cowper's purpose in writing The Task was to enrich, ennoble, encourage; and in an age which threatens to abolish man's spiritual side, this poem is laden with wisdom and comfort.

This study of Cowper and The Task is an attempt to discuss the work as a transitional poem with all the competence and accuracy of scholarship which it deserves. Hopefully the study will be rendered with the sensitivity and understanding its spiritual message requires.

CHAPTER I

CLASSICAL INFLUENCES AND THE GEORGIC TRADITION

The tumult of religious and political chaos which occurred in the seventeenth-century prompted the men of the eighteenth-century to seek tranquillity in moderation, common sense, and clarity in all things. This search is made especially evident in the literature of the 1700's as opposed to the nebulous, hazy "metaphysical" poetry of the seventeenth-century, for those who were caught up in the Neo-Classicism of the Restoration and eighteenth-century demanded an observance of literary rules, clarity, reason, and correctness. For exemplars the poets and critics of this new age turned to classical literature, to an age like the Augustan Age of Rome or the golden days of Ithacan splendor where they found ideal precepts embedded in the works of such literary paragons as Homer, Horace, and Virgil. It comes as no surprise to modern students of literary history, then, that education in the eighteenth-century would be centered around classical studies.

That educational practices influence the ethos of a people is a fact which can hardly be denied. The repercussions of educational practices manifest themselves in all manner of human conduct and enterprise. There is no

better illustration of this truism than eighteenth-century England's almost exclusive devotion to the teaching of the classics to generations of English schoolboys, a devotion which helped effect a change as well as propagate that change for several generations in the poetry of England.

English schoolboys in the eighteenth-century grew up with a thorough exposure to classical studies. Their education consisted of learning Latin and Greek grammar rules, in memorizing historical facts of ancient wars and generals, in reciting by rote long passages of Homer, Horace, Virgil, and others, and in composing Latin verse under the circumspect tutelage of a classical scholar. Those schoolboys who underwent such a stringent and rigorous training certainly would have been deeply affected by such studies if the development of their lives inspired them to become men of letters. Such was the case of William Cowper, author of The Task.

Goldwin Smith states in his biography of Cowper that the boy's instruction at Westminster was wholly classical.[1] Furthermore, the evidence of Cowper's predilection for study of the classics indicates that his interest went far beyond that of an average student. Maurice Quinlan, in William Cowper: A Critical Life, reports that Cowper and a young friend spent weeks making a line by line

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[1]Goldwin Smith, William Cowper (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1901), p. 10.

comparison of Pope's translation of Homer with the original,[2] testimony enough of a peculiarly strong affinity for the classics when one considers the limitless horizons of joy and wonder made available to a young man by the new world around the corner or just over the hill.

Cowper's love of the classics can also be seen in his deep love and reverence for Vincent Bourne, a teacher of classical literature who taught Cowper at Westminster. "I love Vinny Bourne," Cowper said in an epistle to the Reverend William Unwin, "I think him a better Latin poet than Tibullus, Propertius, Ausonius, or any of the writers in his way, except Ovid, and not at all inferior to him."[3] Cowper's lifelong remembrance of Vinny Bourne certainly went beyond the fact that the two men shared classical interests, yet this fact obviously contributed to the special niche of fondness afforded Bourne in Cowper's memory.

William Cowper's admiration for classical literature was in harmony with a general neo-classic tendency. Poets of the eighteenth-century associated with Neo-Classicism revealed their classical proclivities in their art as well as their criticism, and though William Cowper was not a critic, he was a fine poet whose letters and best work, The Task, reveal many classical influences.

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[2]Maurice J. Quinlan, William Cowper: A Critical Life (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1970), p.18.

[3]J. G. Frazer, ed., Letters of William Cowper, Vol. 1 (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), p. 116. May 23, 1781 letter to Rev. William Unwin.

Of all the authors of Classicism that Cowper studied, none influenced his literary output more than Homer, Horace, and Virgil; their influence, though probably not consciously wrought, is present in The Task. Homer's simplicity and accuracy of description, Horace's light touch of finesse in satire, and shades of Virgil's Georgics can be detected in Cowper's longest and most famous poem.

If one single element of Horace's Satires were to be chosen as its most identifying characteristic, one would have to choose Horace's penchant for satirizing classes or types of people rather than individuals, this being often done with a light touch of humor. Horatian satire is a gentle, almost kind, means of correcting the weaknesses of man. J.A.K. Thomson points out that Horace "discovered a new kind of satire," one in which "personal invective has passed into a generalized criticism, in which certain types of character are viewed with a detached irony."[4] Any attempt to describe Cowper's use of satire would inevitably lead one to the expression of similar thoughts, an idea which has not gone unnoticed by critics. Herbert Grierson and J. C. Smith have observed that "Cowper's affinity as a satirist is with Horace . . . . a kind of Evangelical Horace."[5]

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[4] J.A.K. Thomson, The Classical Background of English Literature (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1948), p. 86.

[5] Herbert J. C. Grierson and J. C. Smith, A Critical History of English Poetry (New York: Oxford University Press, 1944), p. 258.

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In Book II of The Task, "The Time-Piece," Cowper shows a resemblance to Horace's method of satirizing types when he depicts a minister who does not take his job seriously:

> I venerate the man whose heart is warm,
> Whose hands are pure, whose doctrine and whose life,
> Coincident, exhibit lucid proof
> That he is honest in the sacred cause.
> To such I render more than mere respect,
> Whose actions say that they respect themselves.
> But, loose in morals, and in manners vain,
> In conversation frivolous, in dress
> Extreme, at once rapacious and profuse;
> Frequent in park with lady at his side,
> Ambling and prattling scandal as he goes;
> But rare at home, and never at his books,
> Or with his pen, save when he scrawls a card;
> Constant at routs, familiar with a round
> Of ladyship--a stranger to the poor;
> Ambitious of preferment for its gold,
> And well-prepar'd, by ignorance and sloth,
> By infidelity and love of world,
> To make God's work a sinecure; a slave
> To his own pleasures and his patron's pride:
> From such apostles, oh, ye mitred heads,
> Preserve the church! and lay not careless hands
> On sculls that cannot teach, and will not learn.[6]

And in a similar vein note this typical Cowperian sketch of man's sartorial silliness:

> . . . We have run
> Through ev'ry change that fancy at the loom,
> Exhausted, has had genius to supply;
> And, studious of mutation still, discard
> A real elegance, a little us'd
> For monstrous novelty and strange disguise.
> We sacrifice to dress, till household joys
> And comforts cease. Dress drains our cellar dry,
> And keeps our larder lean; puts out our fires;
> And introduces hunger, frost, and woe,
> Where peace and hospitality might reign.
> What man that lives, and that knows how to live,
> Would fail t' exhibit at the public shows

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[6]William Cowper, The Task, in Cowper: Poetical Works, ed. by H. S. Milford (4th ed.; London: Oxford University Press, 1967), II.372-394.

> A form as splendid as the proudest there,
> Though appetite raise outcries at the cost?
> A man o' th' town dines late, but soon enough,
> With reasonable forecast and dispatch,
> T' ensure a side-box station at half price.
> You think, perhaps, so delicate his dress,
> His daily fare as delicate. Alas!
> He picks clean teeth, and, busy as he seems
> With an old tavern quill, is hungry yet![7]

Cowper's artistic methods resemble those of Horace in yet other ways. In the third Satire Horace described the leading causes of human error as extravagance, indolence, avarice, ambition, and political treachery. Cowper's The Task is filled with expositions of these and similar evils, thus indicating that there exists between Cowper and Horace a similarity in subject matter as well as in satiric technique. Both men apparently saw the world in which they lived in a similar manner, and their art consequently reflects an analogous vision. The poetry of these two men is a direct, personal poetry, a poetry that combines unique blends of contradictory elements. When Grant Showerman said of Horace

> . . . No poet speaks from the page with greater directness, no poet establishes so easily and so completely the personal relation with the reader, no poet is remembered so much as if he were a friend in the flesh,[8]

he could have been speaking of Cowper. And the same is true of the following:

> We discern in his composition the same strange and seemingly contradictory blend of the grave

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[7]Cowper, The Task II.607-628.

[8]Grant Showerman, Horace And His Influence (New York: Cooper Square Pub., 1963), p. 4.

> and gay, the lively and severe, the constant
> and the mercurial, the austere and the
> trivial, and dignified and the careless.[9]

Students of Cowper's <u>The Task</u> have long commented upon the poet's efforts to render accurately his observations; and some feel that this aspect of Cowper's work reveals an attachment to Homer. Homer's precedent for accurate, simple description was of course established in <u>The Iliad</u> and <u>The Odyssey</u>. Lines like the following support this claim:

> Now when all had made prayer and flung down
> the scattering barley,
> Thrasymedes, the high-hearted son of Nestor,
> standing
> close up, struck, and the ax chopped its
> way through the tendons
> of the neck and unstrung the strength of the
> cow, and now the daughters
> and daughters-in-law of Nestor and his grave
> wife Eurydike,
> eldest of the daughters of Klymenos, raised
> the outcry.
> They lifted the cow from earth of the wide
> ways, and held her.
> Now when the black blood had run out, and
> the spirit went from
> the bones, they divided her into parts, and
> cut out the thigh bones
> all according to due order, and wrapped them
> in fat,
> making a double fold, and laid threds of flesh
> upon them.
> The old man burned these on cleft sticks, and
> poured the gleaming
> wine over, while the young men with forks in
> their hands stood about him.
> But when they had burned the thigh pieces and
> tasted the vitals,

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[9] Showerman, <u>Horace And His Influence</u>, p. 9.

> they cut all the remainder into pieces
> and spitted them,
> and roasted all carefully and took off the
> pieces.[10]

One will notice that there is a minimal amount of embellishment involved, an observation that Cowper himself detected in Homer:

> Except the Bible, there never was in the world a book so remarkable for that species of the sublime that owes its very existence to simplicity, as the works of Homer. He is always nervous, plain, natural . . . .[11]

In yet another letter to Lady Hesketh Cowper said

> . . . But Homer's accuracy of description, and his exquisite judgment never, never failed him. He never, I believe, in a single instance, sacrificed beauty to embellishment. He does not deal in hyperbole . . . when he describes nature, whether in man or in animal, or whether nature inanimate, you may always trust him for the most consummate fidelity.[12]

Cowper's attraction to Homer's simplicity and accuracy of description goes beyond the mere acknowledgment of these qualities. In _The Task_ Cowper describes with such an accuracy of design free of embellishment that he can definitely be identified as something of a follower of Homer. The following lines from _The Task_ make this evident:

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[10] _The Odyssey of Homer_, trans. by Richard Lattimore (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1967), II, lines 447-463, p. 62-63. I selected this translation because I feel that it exemplifies the original spirit of Homer. I have made this decision based upon the general comments of critics.

[11] Frazer, _Letters of William Cowper_, p. 404. Dec. 15, 1785, letter to Lady Hesketh.

[12] _Ibid._, p. 412. Jan. 2, 1786, letter to Lady Hesketh.

The night was winter in his roughest mood;
The morning sharp and clear. But now at noon
Upon the southern side of the slant hills,
And where the woods fence off the northern blast,
The season smiles, resigning all its rage,
And has the warmth of May. The vault is blue
Without a cloud, and white without a speck
The dazzling splendour of the scene below.
Again the harmony comes o'er the vale;
And through the trees I view th' embattled tow'r
Whence all the music. I again perceive
The soothing influence of the wafted strains,
And settle in soft musings as I tread
The walk, still verdant, under oaks and elms,
Whose outspread branches overarch the glade.
The roof, though moveable through all its length
As the wind sways it, has yet well suffic'd,
And, intercepting in their silent fall
The frequent flakes, has kept a path for me.
No noise is here, or none that hinders thought.
The redbreast warbles still, but is content
With slender notes, and more than half suppress'd:
Pleas'd with his solitude, and flitting light
From spray to spray, where'er he rests he shakes
From many a twig the pendent drops of ice,
That tinkle in the wither'd leaves below.[13]

Similarity in accurate description, then, is the basis for showing a likeness between Homer and Cowper, and Cowperian critics have been quick to detect it. Lodwick Hartley has observed that Cowper's striving for simplicity of design and language emerged from a classic admiration of the natural and that this striving was ultimately the result of a strong admiration of Homer.[14] Gilbert Thomas points out that Cowper "in his simplicity and fidelity of description . . . reveals his discipleship to Homer."[15] A judicious comparison of Homer and Cowper bears such observations out.

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[13]Cowper, The Task VI.57-82.

[14]Lodwick Hartley, William Cowper: The Continuing Revaluation (Chapel Hill: The Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1960), p. 64-5.

[15]Gilbert Thomas, William Cowper and the Eighteenth Century (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1948) 2nd ed.; p. 260.

At first glance Virgil's Georgics seem to be the predecessor of the early American almanacs, something of a you-can-do-it practical guide to farming, bee keeping, and vine-growing. Marie Loretto Lilly says "the georgic, as Virgil planned it, purports to instruct scientifically by means of technical terms and a use of practical details."[16] The instruction goes beyond the promulgation of agrarian wisdom and streams out into all manner of didactic lessons, from kindness to animals, to patriotic duty, to commenting upon the virtues of rural life in contrast to the evils of the city. In essence, the Georgics are didactic-descriptive poems whose subject matter is rural occupation and whose central theme is praise of the country life over city existence.[17]

The first effort by an English writer to define the principles of the Georgics was performed by Joseph Addison in 1697. Addison stated that the poet who chose to write in the georgic tradition must adopt as his method a natural and easy transition from topic to topic; "he should conceal precept in description; he should make skilled use of moral reflection and pertinent digression," and must select only those precepts which are at once useful and capable of poetic embellishment.[18] Obviously Addison's

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[16]Marie Loretto Lilly, The Georgic (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1919), p. 20

[17]Ibid., p. 25.

[18]Dwight L. Durling, Georgic Tradition in English Poetry (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, Inc., 1964), p. 21.

observations stemmed from his study of Virgil's original work, but had The Task been available in 1697, one can speculate that very similar sentiments would have been expressed concerning the contents of Cowper's poem.

Virgil's Georgics and Cowper's The Task share enough common characteristics to allow one to say that The Task is of the Virgilian didactic-descriptive school. The Task is characterized by the mingling of didactic and descriptive passages, patriotic love of country mixed with condemnation of the evils present, praise of rural life and labor, helpful suggestions concerning actual country concerns, and accurate, interesting sketches of rural people and occupations, all of which are present in the Georgics.

The most salient, pervasive characteristic of The Task and the Georgics is the preference of the country over the town. Cowper's "God made the country, and man made the town"[19] is a miniature echo of sentiments expressed eighteen centuries earlier by Virgil. Similarities abound between the two works in reference to this point. Virgil presents this contrast between what the city and country offer:

> Ah! the two happy swains, did they but know their own bliss! to whom, at a distance from discordant arms, earth, of herself more liberal, pours from her bosom their easy sustenance. If the palace, high raised with proud gates,

---

[19]Cowper, The Task I.749.

> vomits not forth from all its apartments
> a vast tide of morning visitants; and they
> gape not at porticoes variegated with
> beauteous tortoise-shell, and on tapestries
> tricked with gold, and on Corinthian brass;
> and if the white wool is not stained with
> the Assyrian drug, nor the use of the pure
> oil corrupted with Cassia's aromatic bark;
> yet (there is) peace secure, and a life
> ignorant of guile, rich in various opulence;
> yet (theirs are) peaceful retreats in ample
> fields, grottoes, and living lakes; yet
> (to them) cool vales, the lowings of kine,
> and soft slumbers under a tree, are not wanting.[20]

Virgil's position is clear concerning any choice between the extravagance of the city and the wholesome pleasures of rural shades. And thus are Cowper's sentiments similar in The Task:

> Oh, blest seclusion from a jarring world,
> Which he, thus occupied, enjoys! Retreat
> Cannot indeed to guilty man restore
> Lost innocence, or cancel follies past;
> But it has peace, and much secures the mind
> From all assaults of evil;[21]

and in the same vein:

> . . . Cities then
> Attract us, and neglected Nature pines,
> Abandon'd, as unworthy of our love.
> But are not wholesome airs, though unperfum'd
> By roses; and clear suns, though scarcely felt;
> And groves, if unharmonious, yet secure
> From clamour, and whose very silence claims;
> To be preferr'd to smoke, to the eclipse
> That Metropolitan volcanos make,
> Whose Stygian throats breathe darkness all day long,
> And to the stir of commerce, driving slow,
> And thund'ring loud, with his ten thousand wheels?[22]

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[20] Virgil Georgics II.450-471, trans. by Davidson (New York: American Book Company, 1874), p. 64-65.

[21] Cowper, The Task III.675-680.

[22] Ibid., III.729-740.

and finally:

> Hail, therefore, patroness of health, and ease,
> And contemplation, heart-consoling joys,
> And harmless pleasure, in the throng'd abode
> Of multitudes unknown! hail, rural life!
> Address himself who will to the pursuit
> Of honours, or emoluments, or fame;
> I shall not add myself to such a chase,
> Thwart his attempts, or envy his success. (IV.780-787)

Cowper's choice between city and country existence is readily discernible. In fact, Cowper said that the whole poem, with the exception of the fifth book, had one tendency, "to discountenance the modern enthusiasm after a London life, and to recommend rural ease and leisure as friendly to the cause of piety and virtue."[23]

Cowper's accurate, realistic descriptions of rural characters and occupations are natural to the Virgilian didactic-descriptive tradition. William Cowper's The Task is replete with gypsies, woodsmen, herdsmen, and other such people indigenous to woodland scenes. His depiction of these people is delineated well, coming from a "thorough sympathy with nature and country manners and through the intimacy of an untheorizing lover of rural things."[24] A desultory perusal of Cowper's greatest work reveals many vignettes for which he will be long remembered:

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[23]Smith, William Cowper, p. 62.

[24]Durling, Georgic Tradition in English Poetry, p. 153.

> Forth goes the woodman, leaving unconcern'd
> The cheerful haunts of man; to wield the axe
> And drive the wedge, in yonder forest drear,
> From morn to eve his solitary task.
> Shaggy and lean, and shrewd, with pointed ears
> And tail cropp'd short, half lurcher and half cur --
> His dog attends him. Close behind his heal
> Now creeps he slow; and now, with many a frisk
> Wide-scamp'ring, snatches up the drifted snow
> With iv'ry teeth, or ploughs it with his snout;
> Then shakes his powder'd coat, and barks for joy.
> Heedless of all his pranks, the sturdy churl
> Moves right toward the mark; nor stops for aught,
> But now and then with pressure of his thumb
> T' adjust the fragrant charge of a short tube
> That fumes beneath his nose: the trailing cloud
> Streams far behind him scenting all the air.[25]

It must here be said in all fairness to the poet that while The Task is filled with such portraits, portraits accurately enough sketched to be of the georgic school, Cowper was not imitating consciously the work of any other man. His accomplishments were attained by an acute sense of observation intensified by a natural love of simple existence and those who were individual enough to live the potentially virtuous life afforded by just such simplicity. The connection between the Georgics and The Task is academic and real, but Cowper would have carved his way into literary history had he never seen a copy of Virgil.

Another important feature of the didactic-descriptive georgic school is the patriotic encomium, Virgil's most famous tribute to his country occurring in Book II of the Georgics, lines 136-176. In this passage he celebrates the land of Italy, glorifying in the process

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[25]Cowper, The Task V.41-57.

the honest work of the countryside. Cowper's patriotic impulse toward panegyric, in relation to Virgil's, is tempered by a condemnation of what he sees wrong in England, especially in its largest city, London. Historically, one can see that the Rome of Virgil's time (70-19 B.C.) is in some ways similar to eighteenth-century England. Both countries were nations with a large number of men in the army, a trait which somehow serves as a catalyst for creating a race of men bent on the most ephemeral pursuits of a transient world, an endeavor which inevitably and inexorably leads to the city and the pleasure therein. In the minds of men like Virgil and Cowper, the obvious result is extravagance, sloth, and hideous human conduct.

Marie Loretto Lilly recounts Virgil's time in such a way as to make it pertinent to eighteenth-century England:

> . . . Luxury and vice had inevitably followed in the wake of Roman conquest. Long civil wars had torn the country, and men loved the soldier's life of daring and adventure better than steady quiet, the routine of the farmer's toil. The city's lure was probably very much then what it is now. Moreover, during the long wars, there had been times when the regular government was almost suspended. 'Right had become wrong, and wrong right; the fields lay waste, their cultivators being taken away, and the crooked scythes forged into swords.' (Geor. I,505-8). Only a revival of the ancient Roman principles could restore the ancient Roman greatness. A new theme was offered to the poet. "Others that in song might have held frivolous minds were now all grown commonplace.' (Geor. III,2-4). Vergil felt the inspiration, and so composed the poems that were to celebrate the arts

> of peace, the glorification of honest toil,
> the praises of his native land.[26]

Most of Lilly's account is applicable to Cowper's poetic attempts, except, as previously mentioned, his stronger censure of the follies present in his country, made evident in the following:

> England, with all thy faults, I love thee still--
> My country! And, while yet a nook is left
> Where English minds and manners may be found
> Shall be constrain'd to love thee. Though thy clime
> Be fickle, and thy year most part deform'd
> With dripping rains, or wither'd by a frost,
> I would not yet exchange thy sullen skies,
> And fields without a flow'r, for warmer France
> With all her vines; nor for Ausonia's groves
> Of golden fruitage, and her myrtle bow'rs.
> To shake thy senate, and from heights sublime
> Of patriot eloquence to flash down fire
> Upon thy foes, was never meant my task.
> But I can feel thy fortunes, and partake
> Thy joys and sorrows, with as true a heart
> As any thund'rer there.[27]

And in a similar vein:

> Thee I account still happy, and the chief
> Among the nations, seeing thou art free:
> My native nook of earth! Thy clime is rude,
> Replete with vapours, and disposes much
> All hearts to sadness, and none more than mine:
> Thine unadult'rate manners are less soft
> And plausible than social life requires,
> And thou hast need of discipline and art
> To give thee what politer France receives
> From nature's bounty -- that humane address
> And sweetness, without which no pleasure is
> In converse, either starv'd by cold reserve,
> Or flush'd with fierce dispute, a senseless brawl:
> Yet, being free, I love thee: for the sake
> Of that one feature can be well content,
> Disgrac'd as thou hast been, poor as thou art,
> To seek no sublunary rest beside.

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[26]Lilly, The Georgic, p. 12.

[27]Cowper, The Task, II.206-221

> But, once enslav'd farewell! I could endure
> Chains no where patiently; and chains at home,
> Where I am free by birthright, not at all.[28]

Cowper's patriotic utterances are perhaps spiced with a little more didactic blame than anything Virgil wrote, but obviously they are still in the Virgilian tradition.

There is evidence enough in The Task to support the fact that Cowper was a student and admirer of the classical literature of the western world, one to whom "the glory that was Greece/And the grandeur that was Rome" would have been as certain as eternal punishment for the wicked and heavenly recompense for the virtuous. The fact that literary resemblances between Cowper and Homer, Horace, and Virgil exist proves this to be true, as do the favorable comments made by Cowper of these men in his famous body of letters. This in itself is not startling or even mildly surprising, for those men who found themselves in any way connected with Neo-Classicism were practically all admirers of the golden past, looking back to them for direction, for tradition, for inspiration. William Cowper can be counted among their numbers, if not wholly, at least partially.

The Task is many things. As seen in this chapter it reflects influences from Classicism, especially Homer, Horace and Virgil; but this great poem does far more, Cowper having one foot in his own century and another in

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[28]Cowper, The Task, II.206-221.

the next at the time of composition. The Task is unique in showing unusual blends of two distinct literary movements, Neo-Classicism and Romanticism. One aspect of the neo-classic school has already been viewed -- its reverence for Classicism and subsequent influence. Chapter II will deal with yet another typical neo-classic aspect, fondness for stereotyped diction. In the case of Cowper and The Task an interesting paradox occurs in the use of language -- an unusual mixture of the typically neo-classic and the typically romantic.

CHAPTER II

DICTION: COWPER'S LINK BETWEEN NEO-CLASSICISM AND ROMANTICISM

Anyone examining The Task in an effort to select evidence which shows the poem to be transitional in nature must pause and reflect upon its use of language, for the phraseology of The Task is a contrasting, almost antithetical, phenomenon. In some portions of Cowper's long poem he employed many examples of typical eighteenth-century poetic diction, thus placing himself in line with a long list of Augustan writers; however, in other areas of the same poem Cowper used a fresh, natural style in language which provided a link between him and a romantic linguistic theory not yet born. A close scrutiny of Cowper's use of language is helpful in understanding the man and his work as essentially transitional.

The primary emphasis, then, of this segment of study on William Cowper and The Task will be to explore his use of prevailing neo-classical poetic qualities, essentially poetic diction. This will be balanced by a not so comprehensive view of the more natural, colloquial

language he frequently used in The Task, a natural mode of expression very similar to Wordsworth's pronouncements in his famous essay which prefaced the second edition of the Lyrical Ballads. The ultimate goal will be to show that Cowper's use of language placed him between two important literary movements, thus proving that this aspect of Cowper's poetry is transitional. It should, of course, be recorded that diction alone is incapable of marking accurate distinctions between literary movements,[29] though it does reveal certain prevailing ideologies in literary thought.[30] Cowper's use of diction displays remnants of a dying school and clear indications of a young, growing one.

Eighteenth-century poetic diction has come to be associated with an artificial, mechanical use of language, a device employed by the most unpoetic of men in an effort to circumvent their inherent shortcomings. This, at least, seems to be the main attitude of literary students in the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries, a belief which undoubtedly gained its major impetus from William Wordsworth in his essay attached to the second edition of the Lyrical Ballads. This idea has been fostered and perpetuated by the widespread popularity of Wordsworth's famous Preface and by those who primarily deal in general

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[29]Josephine Miles, Eras and Modes in English Poetry (Los Angeles: University of Calif. Press, 1957), p. 2.

[30]Donald Davie, Purity of Diction in English Verse (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), p. 10.

study rather than a concentrated examination of all the facts surrounding eighteenth-century phraseology. Fortunately, there have been a number of scholars who have probed beneath the surface and revealed through their studies the essential truth of poetic diction. Through their efforts the knowledgeable literary observer now realizes that it is a subject far too complex to tag with trite suggestions of artificiality, imitation, or any of the countless other descriptions applied to the subject of poetic diction. It is because of the general misunderstanding which surrounds eighteenth-century poetic diction that any discussion of it should be prefaced by the essential truth delivered by those literary scholars who have investigated the topic so thoroughly. The issue of poetic diction is complex.

Before proceeding it should be said that this discussion of poetic diction is not in any way a rebuttal of the basic beliefs of Wordsworth or any other critic of neo-classic diction. The ideas Wordsworth set forth in the Preface concerning diction are essentially true. However, a complete understanding of why poetic diction was employed certainly mitigates what some consider to be a serious weakness in Augustan poetry. It is true that poetic diction in the eighteenth-century became an artificial device. To understand some of the underlying causes for its extensive use, though, lessens one's distaste for those who employed this diction.

Wordsworth's Preface failed to point out many important aspects of the eighteenth-century's preference for ornamental expressions, the most conspicuous being the relation between poetic diction and decorum. Decorum in this sense has a great deal to do with respect for "the proper maintaining of a convention once established."[31] Eighteenth-century poets in general harbored deep reverence for the classical past. From this respect emanated their sometimes undeviating devotion to tradition, an unwillingness to depart from time-tested standards. Geoffrey Tillotson has brilliantly argued that neo-classic poets only confined themselves to poetic diction when they wrote in certain genres, especially the pastoral, epic, or georgic.[32] The reason for such a pattern is not difficult to infer: the eighteenth-century poet's strong sense of decorum forbade him from deviating too far from the ancient models of such well established genres as the pastoral, epic, or georgic. Any poet who chose, for example, to write a didactic-descriptive poem in the georgic tradition would necessarily acquaint himself with the best models possible: in the minds of eighteenth-century writers such models could be found in only one place, in the classical work of the Latin poet Virgil. His Georgics served as

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[31]Donald Davie, "The Critical Principles of William Cowper," Cambridge Journal, Vol. 7 (1953), p. 185.

[32]Geoffrey Tillotson, Augustan Studies (London: Athlone Press, 1961), p. 24-28.

the apex of the didactic-descriptive school, the model to which their sense of decorum owed its strictest allegiance.

Virgil's influence upon the didactic-descriptive school of poetry was immense. He shaped the technique of construction, the subject matter, and the heavy use of didacticism in that mode of expression. But nowhere is Virgil's influence seen with any more clarity than in the area of poetic diction. "It is fairly well recognized that the origin of many of the conventional phrases used by eighteenth-century poets is to be found in Latin poetry, particularly that of Virgil."[33] John Arthos in his excellent study entitled Language of Natural Description states that the most common uses of poetic diction in the eighteenth-century could be traced almost indubitably to Virgil and those Latin writers similar to him.[34] Virgil's compound epithets, periphrases, and general manner of poetic embellishment were imitated and made to fit the English language by scores of neo-classic poets. This was done not only out of an overly-worked sense of decorum that linked these men to their past masters, but also because of the tremendous respect they felt toward the classical tongues, especially Latin.

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[33]C. V. Deane, Aspects of Eighteenth Century Nature Poetry (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1935), p. 33.

[34]John Arthos, The Language of Natural Description in Eighteenth-Century Poetry (New York: Octagon Books, Inc., 1966), p. 14-15.

This immense appreciation of Virgil's Latin language and strict observance of decorum combined with a rather low view of the poetic possibilities of the English language[35] and caused eighteenth-century poets to enlarge Virgil's use of phraseology into a florid English elaboration. William Cowper's remarks concerning the Latin and English tongues serve well at this juncture:

> What a dignity there is in the Roman language! and what an idea it gives us of the good sense and masculine mind of the people that spoke it. The same thought . . . clothed in English seems childish, and even foolish. . . .[36]

Cowper's appreciation for Latin and dissatisfaction with his native tongue can appropriately be considered the general sentiment of his day. In juxtaposition with Virgil's Latin in particular, the English language, with its Anglo-Saxon Germanic heritage, seemed dull and commonplace. This feeling created a strong impulse among poets to dress up the humble English tongue in an effort to reach the grand plateau Latin had once attained. Translators of Virgil, feeling and responding to this impulse, often rendered Virgil's Latin poems in such a manner as to increase the use of circumlocutions, compound epithets, and other techniques employed by Virgil to embellish his

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[35] Tillotson, Augustan Studies, p. 39.

[36] Frazer, Letters of William Cowper, p. 265. Nov. 24, 1783 letter to Rev. William Unwin.

poetry. A pseudo-classic diction manifested itself in English eighteenth-century works as a result of this tendency.[37]

The use of poetic diction in the eighteenth-century was based primarily upon classical prototypes which were dutifully honored and followed as a result of the strong sense of decorum then in existence. A high esteem for the Latin language combined with the eighteenth-century idea of decorum and more often than not produced florid, gaudy elaborations of stock phraseology in greater numbers than actually existed in Latin poetry. This in itself was a failing for which neo-classic poets cannot be forgiven. But to generally condemn them for being servile and imitative is to fail to appreciate the stringent set of responsibilities under which they wrote, for those men were "responsible to past masters for conserving the genres and decorum which they . . . evolved.[38] The wisest of eighteenth-century poets realized that refinement could be carried to extremes, William Cowper being among that select group. He wrote to his friend William Unwin and commented upon the problem:

> Simplicity is become a very rare quality in a writer. In the decline of great Kingdoms, and where refinement in all the arts is carried to an excess, I suppose it is always rare. The latter Roman writers are remarkable for false ornament, they were yet no

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[37]Deane, Aspects of Eighteenth Century Nature Poetry, p. 35.

[38]Davie, Purity of Diction, p. 16.

> doubt admired by the readers of their own day; and with respect to authors of the present era, the most popular among them appear to me equally censurable on the same account.[39]

Though Cowper himself was guilty of frequent raids on existing stock phraseology, he recognized its real weakness -- an exaggerated, accelerated use of it. There is no inherent weakness in stock diction itself; when judiciously used it has its place in good poetry. But to many eighteenth-century poets poetic diction became a juggernaut which they were unable to control.

The poetic language of William Cowper is somewhat paradoxical, in some instances being highly ornate and in others startlingly fresh and natural. The enigma of his linguistic characteristics is best approached from two perspectives, the one provided by Cowper himself and the other by Geoffrey Tillotson. In a letter devoted largely to imitation Cowper sheds light on the problem:

> . . . Imitation, even of the best models, is my aversion; it is servile and mechanical, a trick that has enabled many to usurp the name of author, who could not have written at all, if they had not written upon the pattern of somebody indeed original. But when the ear and the taste have been much accustomed to the manner of others, it is almost impossible to avoid it; and we imitate in spite of ourselves, just in proportion as we admire.[40]

It has been previously pointed out that Cowper admired classical writers and that Virgil's use of ornamental

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[39] Frazer, Letters of William Cowper, p. 265. Nov. 24, 1783 letter to Rev. William Unwin.

[40] Ibid., Nov. 29, 1781 letter to Rev. William Unwin.

expressions was the fountainhead for imitation. Cowper, by his own observation, would surely also be subject to a Virgilian linguistic influence. This influence was paralleled by a realization that affectation had been carried too far, thus provoking Cowper down the path toward Romanticism in his search for a natural, unaffected language. The result of Virgil's influence and Cowper's own perspicacious findings was a strange mixture of the commonplace and fresh.

Another explanation for this unusual mixture of language in Cowper, especially The Task, is proffered by Geoffrey Tillotson. He points out that in every eighteenth-century georgic something foreseeable, predictable occurs. These predictable happenings were dictated by the decorum of tradition observed when writing in certain traditions, the georgic school being included. Tillotson observes that in these predictable portions of the poem the use of stock diction is found more than in parts of the same poem that, for one reason or another, are inspired by a greater sense of originality. Freshness of expression is to be found in those parts of the didactic-descriptive poem that are not imitative, not following the implicit laws of decorum.[41] If such a theory is applied to William Cowper's The Task, the result shows that Cowper obeys the laws of decorum when writing in the tradition already

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[41]Tillotson, Augustan Studies, p. 30-31.

established and consequently uses poetic diction. When original his language is likewise so; in The Task most of the natural, fresh language is reserved for Cowper's personal observations and response to nature in the romantic sense. According to Tillotson's theory Cowper's mixture of language is just a matter of sorting out the original from the imitative.

If The Task can be considered a transitional poem, one should be able, in the area of language, to see examples of that which can be assigned to Neo-Classicism and that which can be ascribed to Romanticism. This is exactly how it is. Numerous examples of pure eighteenth-century stock diction appear in The Task, although Cowper, at the time of composition, was well aware of a need to bring a fresh language into poetry, an endeavor he succeeded in while writing his long poem. To substantiate such claims requires a closer view of the actual language of The Task.

John Arthos, taking his position primarily from an acknowledged study of Thomas Quayle, lists six characteristics of eighteenth-century diction:

> 1)a vocabulary and a style of phrase formation which he (Thomas Quayle) calls stock diction; 2) compound epithets; 3) Latinisms; 4) personifications of abstract ideas; 5) archaisms; 6) and technical terms.[42]

Numbers one, two, and four apply to The Task: number one is subdivided into several additional divisions, including

[42] Arthos, The Language of Natural Description in Eighteenth-Century Poetry, p. 2.

adjectives formed by adding y to nouns, the use of the present participle as an epithet showing the nature of a thing, and periphrasis.[43]

The present participle used as an epithet was a common poetic device among neo-classic poets. Cowper, too, used this stock formation many times in The Task, the following list proving this statement to be true:

nibbling sheep[44]; blushing crabs (I.110); ruffling wind (I.156); lab'ring team (I.161); smoking villages (I.175); winding shore (I.186); sloping land (I.171); rising moon (I.206); clinking hammers (I.231); grinding wheels (I.231); branching elms (I.223); creaking panniers (I.245); declining day (I.258); blazing sun (I.335); low'ring eye (I.456; foaming waves (I.539).[45]

While Cowper's use of the present participle to show the nature of a thing is probably his most frequent raid on neo-classic diction, he also shows a substantial employment of other facets of this body of diction. Similar to the present participle is another form of stock diction which is formed by adding the suffix "y" to nouns. Examples can be found in The Task:

massy slab (I.21); massy weight (I.59); gouty limb (I.107);

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[43]Arthos, The Language of Natural Description in Eighteenth-Century Poetry, p. 2-3.

[44]Cowper, The Task I.110. All subsequent references indicating Cowper's use of language in The Task will be identified by book and line only.

[45]For a more extensive listing of Cowper's use of this type of stock diction see Appendix I, A.

weedy ditch (I.241); flow'ry thyme (I.270); glossy-leav'd (I.314); dewy eye (I.316); dewy vales (I.429); rosy cloud (I.495); tawny skin (I.568); wat'ry waste (I.665); dusky eve (I.669); stormy winds (II.142); dusty gulphs (II.149); fiery boil (II.183); slipp'ry prey (II.685); massy gates (II.746); muddy beds (II.827).[46]

Arthos subsumes periphrasis, along with present participles and adjectives formed by adding "y" to nouns, under the general title stock diction, the first of his six categories. He defines periphrasis as occurring when a "particular characteristic of a thing is referred to by an adjective, and the adjective modifies a general term to form a phrase whereby a substitute is supplied for the name of a thing."[47] Using this definition, one is able to locate numerous examples of periphrasis in The Task: the Fair (I.7); softer sex (I.71); fleecy tenants (I.291); pencil'd scenes (I.417); sylvan world (I.588); softer satellite (I.766); lawless particle (II.170); golden ear (II.187); golden fruitage (II.215).[48]

Arthos' second category of eighteenth-century diction is compound epithets, those words or phrases added to another word in describing a characteristic attribute.

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[46] For a more extensive listing of Cowper's use of this type of stock diction see Appendix I, B.

[47] Arthos, The Language of Natural Description in Eighteenth-Century Poetry, p. 3.

[48] For a more extensive listing of Cowper's use of periphrasis see Appendix I, C.

There are seven main types of compound epithets: noun plus noun; noun plus adjective; noun plus present participle; noun plus past participle; adjective, or adjective used adverbially, plus another part of speech, usually a participle; true adverb plus a participle; and adjective plus a noun plus "ed."[49] Many of these methods for forming compound epithets can be seen in The Task:
full-blown rose (I.36); well-tann'd hides (I.51); elbow-chairs (I.87); pocket store (I.118); fast rooted (I.166); far-spreading wood (I.184); fast flutt'ring (I.188); weather-house (I.211); low-roof'd lodge (I.227); long protracted bow'rs (I.257); long-surviving oak (I.213); well-water'd land (I.323); well-roll'd walks (I.351); half-wither'd shrubs (I.524); never-ceasing sighs (I.552).[50]

The use of abstract personification, a term which includes the general practice of animating such external tangibles as winter and evening in addition to its normal meaning, offers a very interesting study in that it provides a fertile soil for individual speculation. It is seldom realized that the eighteenth-century critical opinion of personification emphasized particularly the imaginative qualities required in the mind of the poet producing

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[49]Arthos, The Language of Natural Description in Eighteenth-Century Poetry, p. 4.

[50]For a more extensive listing of Cowper's use of compound epithets see Appendix I, D.

this poetic device. In fact, "in the eighteenth-century, creation of the personification abstraction was looked upon as one of the most energetic activities of the imagination and the passions,"[51] "the natural language of an intense passion and of an imagination operating too spontaneously and vehemently to allow much rational control."[52] There is a wide gulf separating this belief and the general assumption that personification, like all other facets of poetic diction, is an insipid, mechanical artifice. Wordsworth, whose comments on personification have given it added notoriety, himself recognized that personifications "are, indeed, a figure of speech occasionally prompted by passion."[53] It is this imaginative, passionate quality of poetic diction which furnishes an interesting field of speculation -- that the use of the personified abstraction in the closing years of the eighteenth-century was yet another sign of a new literary movement, a poetic device simultaneously gaining sustenance from two opposing literary schools, the neo-classic and the romantic.

While the use of personified abstraction is usually regarded as a neo-classic practice, having its origins in

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[51] Earl R. Wasserman, "The Inherent Values of Eighteenth-Century Personification," PMLA, LXV (1950), p. 440.

[52] Ibid., p. 442.

[53] William Wordsworth, "Poetry and Poetic Diction," in English Critical Essays, ed. by Edmund D. Jones (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1947), p. 7.

classicism, it is interesting to note that it is a poetic device used more frequently in the latter part of the century,[54] in those years many consider to be decidedly pre-romantic in inclination. This is an interesting phenomenon, suggesting that the frequency of use is an indication of something of a last stand against the coming of Romanticism. This, however, is not entirely viable when one considers the views toward Neo-Classicism that the writers of this period generally held. William Cowper, for example, was dissatisfied with much of what was essential to neo-classic thought, and as a representative figure of other poets possessing similar views, he can hardly be thought of as one standing defiantly against new forces.[55] The pivot point had been reached and passed; the great majority of those writing after 1760 were disposed toward what was to manifest itself in all its glory in 1798. The best explanation for the increased utilization of personified abstraction during the latter stages of the eighteenth-century lies beyond the shallow, superficial interpretation that avers it is best understood as something of a rear-guard reaction.

The key to understanding why the latter years of the eighteenth-century saw an increased usage of the

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[54]Chester F. Chapin, Personification in Eighteenth-Century English Poetry (New York: Octagon Books, Inc., 1968), p. 5-6.

[55]It was Cowper who once said in a letter that he could thresh Samuel Johnson's old jacket till he made his pension jingle.

personified abstraction centers around the fact that eighteenth-century poets and critics equated personification with imagination, with passion, with strong feeling. As the century progressed toward the dawning of Romanticism, toward the egocentric world of many nineteenth-century poets, the writers of the late eighteenth-century imbued their work with greater personal feeling and a more intense passion of expression. Limited in the sense that romantic symbolism had not yet replaced personification,[56] these poets experienced a greater degree of feeling that had as its finest vehicle of expression the personified abstraction. The result was a romantic impulse housed in a neoclassic edifice. The edifice was soon to give way, but to transitional poets like William Cowper it still served in a very functional capacity.

Cowper's The Task is abundant in prosopopoeia, both abstract and material. His finest examples, though, are to be found in abstract personifications. Used in this sense, the term applies to the personification of seasons and times of the day, but excludes pathetic fallacies. A list of personifications of this nature found in The Task follows:

discipline (II.i.702); ignorance (II.i.736); virtue (II.i.783); domestic happiness (III.i.41); hypocrisy

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[56]Wasserman, "The Inherent Values of Eighteenth-Century Personification," p. 437.

(III.i.100); philosophy (III.i.243); learning (III.i.248); winter (III.i.428); experience (III.i.505); evening (IV.i.243); night (VI.i.57); season (VI.i.61); knowledge (VI.i.92); wisdom (VI.i.97); truth (VI.i.114); nature (VI.i.182); providence (VI.i.528); pleasure and gain (VI.i.892); vice (VI.i.990).

That William Cowper made frequent use of neo-classic diction is obvious. Any refutation of the fact that Cowper was a part of this aspect of Neo-Classicism would border on the absurd, the insane. Yet to say he was akin to William Wordsworth in language theory would be entirely acceptable, for Cowper was something of a pioneer of natural diction -- an innovator toward a natural style in poetry.[57] His situation is similar to that of Dante, who, as W. P. Ker points out, felt free to use the most artificial language along with the most colloquial.[58] Both Cowper's work and his poetic theory as revealed in his letters support such avowals. He once said in a letter that

> . . . every man conversant with verse-writing knows, and knows by painful experience, that the familiar style is of all styles the most difficult to succeed in. To make verse speak the language of prose, without being prosaic,--to marshall the words of it in such an order

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[57]Thomas, <u>William Cowper and the Eighteenth Century</u>, p. 11.

[58]W. P. Ker, <u>Form and Style in Poetry</u>, ed. by R. W. Chambers (New York: Russell & Russell, 1966), p. 169-170.

> as they might naturally take in falling from the lips of an extemporary speaker, yet without meanness, harmoniously, elegantly, and without seeming to displace a syllable for the sake of the rhyme, is one of the most arduous tasks a poet can undertake.[59]

This differs little from Wordsworth's most famous critical motif, to use in poetry a language that is really used by men, an idea often stated in his critical manifesto which was included in the second edition of the Lyrical Ballads.

Although it was necessary to sound scholarship to cite numerous examples of poetic diction in The Task, there is no such need in regard to Cowper's use of unaffected language. A cursory reading of this poem reveals quite plainly that it is composed, for the most part, in a straightforward, natural style, an observation that all Cowperian critics and admirers have been quick to detect. The selections used in Chapter I to show Cowper's kinship with Homer provide evidence enough in support of his naturalness of expression, and at this time there is no need to repeat. One passage, however, will be taken from The Task and compared with a similar passage from Wordsworth's "Lines Composed A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" in an effort to elucidate still further the natural language of Cowper as parallel to and a forerunner of the romantic school, in this case represented by William Wordsworth. First these lines from "The Winter Walk At Noon" followed by the selection from Wordsworth:

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[59]Frazer, Letters of William Cowper, p. 173. Jan. 17, 1782 letter to Rev. William Unwin.

There is in souls a sympathy with sounds;
And, as the mind is pitch'd, the ear is pleas'd
With melting airs, or martial, brisk, or grave:
Some chord in unison with what we hear
Is touch'd within us, and the heart replies.
How soft the music of those village bells,
Falling at intervals upon the ear
In cadence sweet, now dying all away,
Now pealing loud again, and louder still,
Clear and sonorous, as the gale comes on!
With easy force it opens all the cells
Where mem'ry slept. Wherever I have heard
A kindred melody, the scene recurs,
And with it all its pleasures and its pains.
Such comprehensive views the spirit takes,
That in a few short moments I retrace
(As in a map the voyager his course)
The windings of my way through many years;[60]

These[61] beauteous forms,
Through a long absence, have not been to me
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:
But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart.[62]

These two brief excerpts from The Task and "Lines Composed A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" are similar in that both are made up of language capable of being used in prose and manicured conversation and both are written in a corresponding blank verse which is an adequate vehicle of expression for the language and subject content. Not

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[60]Cowper, The Task VI.1-18.

[61]The first twenty-two lines of this poem are mainly descriptive. The speaker has returned to a lovely spot, after having been away for five years, blessed with a stream, lofty cliffs, and a huge sycamore tree under which he can lie and see the smoke of pastoral farms emerging from the woods. It is a beautiful, secluded place.

[62]William Wordsworth, "Lines," English Poetry and Prose of the Romantic Movement, ed. by George Benjamin Woods (Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1929), 23-29.

altogether pertinent, though nonetheless interesting, is the fact that both deal essentially with an intriguing capability of the mind, its power to recall past events either by allowing itself to roam by way of external suggestion or by a conscious desire to recall pleasurable, past moments. The main similarity relevant to this study, however, is the straightforward style of presentation observable in each.

All things in this world are subject to the same cyclic patterns of mutability. And while all learned men are in most ways a product of what has been, some serve as human barometers upon which is recorded events that will be. Such men live in transition periods, days which see the demise of great literary, social, or spiritual beliefs; this allows an emergence of other movements, equally powerful, which replace those that have perished. William Cowper lived in such a period, for the principal tenets of Neo-Classicism were giving way to those of Romanticism in the second half of the eighteenth-century. In Cowper's poetry can be seen characteristics of both schools: he admired the ancients in the neo-classic spirit; he used neo-classic diction, a device which was principally a derivative of the respect the eighteenth-century had for Greek and Roman writers; and finally, he realized the need for a fresh, natural language free of the ornamental quality of stock phraseology.

As a result, Cowper's classic poem, The Task, is a transitional masterpiece animated and inspired by the autumn of Neo-Classicism and the spring of Romanticism.

One of the clearest signs of the beginning of Romanticism was the Evangelical Revival, a topic which will be discussed at considerable length in the following chapter. This religious movement may be correctly considered as a natural product of vernal Romanticism.

CHAPTER III

THE EVANGELICAL REVIVAL

Any study of William Cowper must inevitably consider the Evangelical Revival and the influence this emotional, religious recrudescence exerted on the man and his work, for the revival was the most important factor in shaping his life and work. Cowper has depicted meticulously the average day in the life of a family guided by Evangelical precepts:

> . . . We breakfast commonly between eight and nine; till eleven we read either the Scripture, or the sermons of some faithful preacher of those holy mysteries; at eleven we attend divine service, which is performed here twice every day; and from twelve to three we separate and amuse ourselves as we please. During that interval I either read in my own apartment, or walk, or ride, or work in the garden. We seldom sit an hour after dinner, but if the weather permits adjourn to the garden, where with Mrs. Unwin and her son I have generally the pleasure of religious conversation till tea time. 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 our hearts, I hope, are the best and most musical performers . . . . 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 to prayers. I need not tell you, that such a life as this is consistent

> with the utmost cheerfulness; accordingly
> we are all happy, and dwell together in
> unity as brethren.[63]

This pious testimony is difficult to fully accept by even the most credulous of men, but it is nonetheless a sincere account of an average day in the life of William Cowper. Such a total devotion to a religious existence would obviously affect all aspects of a man's life, and such is the case of Cowper. The Evangelical Revival is of special importance in relation to Cowper as a transitional poet, for though it was basically a romantic phenomenon, this religious movement made the didactic characteristic of Cowper's work all the more noticeable. The tenets of Evangelicalism are everywhere present in the poetry of William Cowper.

In considering Evangelicalism and its role in shaping _The Task_ as a transitional poem, three principal features may be discerned: the didactic, religiously moralistic element so typical of eighteenth-century poetry; the many romantic qualities injected into the poem by the revival, thus establishing _The Task_ and its author as precursors of Romanticism; and the fanatical, unreasonable religious portions of the work, not romantic or neo-classic, though closer to the former by virtue of its rejection of that most neo-classic of characteristics, reason.

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[63]Frazer, _Letters of William Cowper_, p. 23. October 20, 1766 letter to Mrs. Cowper.

Obviously, the revival is of paramount importance in considering Cowper and The Task as essentially transitional in nature.

For a complete understanding of the Evangelical Revival and its many repercussions, one must realize that it was primarily a revolt against the rationalism of eighteenth-century thought, the deistic attitude toward a mechanistic universe,[64] and the philosophy of Shaftesbury, whose theory of benevolence, the moral sense inherent in all men, and the universe undermined the force of biblical guidance and confuted the belief in a God of stern vengeance.[65] The deistic and Shaftesburian philosophies were both based on a desire for a reasonable view of God's relation with man, a desire which developed near the end of the seventeenth-century. As this rational basis for religion developed, emotionalism and private revelation were cast aside for being unreasonable in a most reasonable world.[66] The ultimate result of Deism and Shaftesbury's theory of benevolence was the emergence in the 1740's of Wesley's Methodist or Evangelical Revival, a religious movement void of new ideas, but abundant in emotion and feeling. Norman Nicholson offers an interesting

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[64]Roderick Huang, William Cowper Nature Poet (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1957), p. 47.

[65]C. A. Moore, "Shaftesbury and the Ethical Poets in England," PMLA, XXXI (1916), p. 268.

[66]Hoxie Neale Fairchild, The Romantic Quest (New York: Russell & Russell, 1965), p. 166.

and accurate metaphorical view of the revival:

> . . . The locks, bolts, and bars of the castle of the mind had been burst asunder, and now, from the dungeons of the subconscious, the hidden wishes, thwarted and distorted desires, were creeping up the stairs, gazing wildly from the windows, and throwing themselves madly from the turrets. Here, for some people at any rate, the Age of Reason was ended.[67]

The pendulum had begun to oscillate again, and the great masses of men in need of an emotional, passionate expression of religious feeling swayed to the rhythmic charm of the Evangelical Revival. The powerful cries of a Wesley or Whitefield beckoned the poor and humble to a new and great awakening, to a religion which offered supernatural revelation and fiery threats. One of the strongest bastions of early eighteenth-century thought, reason, was lost in the frenetic roar of the masses. Reason was superseded by emotionalism, the Shaftesburian moral sense was supplanted by a picture of man totally depraved, and the God of benevolence was replaced by the Old Testament God of vengeance and wrath. The people were again happy.[68]

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[67]Norman Nicholson, William Cowper (London: John Lehmann, 1951), p. 34.

[68]Some might argue that Evangelicalism could not have been a happy religion, an argument based primarily on the fact that predestination was a tenet of Calvinism, the most important division of Evangelicalism. Anyone, however, aware of human psychology knows that one professing belief in the movement would not have a very difficult time in placing himself among those predestined for heavenly rewards.

William Cowper's relationship with the Evangelical Revival is an important consideration one must undertake if studying The Task, for Cowper became the literary voice of this religious movement.[69] The Task itself is a direct fruit of Evangelicalism.[70] Actually it is very difficult to comprehend the total influence Cowper's religion exerted upon his poetry. Not only did it provide a pervasive inspiration of theme, but it also created for Cowper a ready-made public who read his work with a strong sense of religious satisfaction.[71] Cowper was aware of his public:

> . . . I can write nothing without aiming at least at usefulness; it were beneath my years to do it, and still more dishonourable to my religion.[72]

As a spokesman for the revival, Cowper obviously imbued his work with evangelistic creeds. Since the revival was basically a revolt against the prevailing philosophies, Deism and Shaftesbury were vehemently denounced.

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[69] Hoxie Neale Fairchild, Religious Trends in English Poetry, Vol. II (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942), p. 131.

[70] George Eayrs, W. J. Townsend, and H. B. Workman, eds., A New History of Methodism, Vol. I (London: Hodder & Staughton, 1909), p. 348.

[71] Lodwick Hartley, "The Stricken Deer and His Contemporary Reputation," Studies in Philology, XXXVI (1939), p. 637.

[72] Frazer, Letters of William Cowper, p. 313. October 10, 1784 letter to Rev. William Unwin.

The universe was essentially a machine to those men adhering to the deistic and Shaftesburian attitudes, a belief which was repugnant to the Evangelicals, who believed that God kept "the universe in order by a never-ceasing act of divine control."[73] William Cowper shared in this evangelistic repudiation of an absentee God and used his poetry as a vehicle for publicly condemning it. In The Task Cowper sees evidence of God's presence in nature:

> . . . When were the winds
> Let slip with such a warrant to destroy?
> When did the waves so haughtily o'erleap
> Their ancient barriers, deluging the dry?
> Fires from beneath, and meteors from above,
> Portentous, unexampled, unexplain'd,
> Have kindled beacons in the skies; and th' old
> And crazy earth has had her shaking fits
> More frequent, and forgone her usual rest.
> Is it a time to wrangle, when the props
> And pillars of our planet seem to fail,
> And Nature with a dim and sickly eye
> To wait the close of all? But grant her end
> More distant, and that prophecy demands
> A longer respite, unaccomplish'd yet;
> Still they are frowning signals, and bespeak
> Displeasure in his breast who smites the earth
> Or heals it, makes it languish or rejoice;[74]

and again in this picture of Sicilian earthquakes:

> Alas for Sicily! rude fragments now
> Lie scatter'd where the shapely column stood.
> Her palaces are dust. In all her streets
> The voice of singing and the sprightly chord
> Are silent. Revelry, and dance, and show,

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[73] Nicholson, William Cowper, p. 92.

[74] Cowper, The Task II.53-70.

> Suffer a syncope and solemn pause;
> While God performs upon the trembling stage
> Of his own works his dreadful part alone.[75]

Cowper and the Evangelicals saw God as taking an active role in the affairs of this universe, often giving warnings to man by way of the elements. The philosophical position that those zealous followers of Evangelicalism took on God and his universe brought back the elemental mystery of the winds, the wondrous splendor of storms and lightning, the portentous wisdom offered by both animate and inanimate nature. To the Evangelicals the world was literally alive with the divinity of a God who called all the shots and pulled all the strings.

Since reason played such an important role in Deism and Shaftesburian thought, both propagated an intellectual interest in science. The idea that the earth was part of a perfect machine fostered a healthy curiosity for scientific knowledge. The earth and the heavens were studied with great fervor and intelligence. Not all men, however, believed in this thirst for knowledge. The Evangelicals are, certainly, to be included in this anti-intellectual camp, and since Cowper "never doubted the fundamentals of the creed he had adopted,"[76] he stood adamantly opposed to scientific investigations.

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[75]Cowper, The Task II.75-80.

[76]A. S. P. Woodhouse, The Poet And His Faith (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 152.

Consequently, Cowper's poetry reflects an anti-intellectualism which sometimes approaches fanaticism.

William Norris Free has wisely pointed out that Cowper's harsh treatment of scientists is part of his basic attitude in opposition to the deistic position concerning the universe.[77] In The Task Cowper has this idea in mind when he says

> God never meant that man should scale the heav'ns
> By strides of human wisdom.[78]

Cowper, a typical Evangelical, distrusted reason in much the same way as a typical middle class American might today distrust a college professor or a wild liberal. Proponents of this deistic, Shaftesburian type of reason were iconoclasts guilty of a most serious heresy. At times Cowper's poetry is too extreme in its insistence that scientific investigation is a violation of God's wishes:

> . . . Some drill and bore
> The solid earth, and from the strata there
> Extract a register, by which we learn
> That he who made it, and reveal'd its date
> To Moses, was mistaken in its age.
> Some, more acute, and more industrious still,
> Contrive creation; travel nature up
> To the sharp peak of her sublimest height,
> And tell us whence the stars; why some are fix'd,
> And planetary some; what gave them first
> Rotation, from what fountain flow'd their light.
> Great contest follows, and much learned dust

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[77]William Norris Free, William Cowper (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1970), p. 124-125.

[78]Cowper, The Task III.221-222.

> Involves the combatants; each claiming truth,
> And truth disclaiming both. And thus they spend
> The little wick of life's poor shallow lamp,
> In playing tricks with nature, giving laws
> To distant worlds, and trifling in their own.[79]

In surprisingly good verse Cowper concludes this passage of evangelistic anti-intellectualism by saying

> Defend me, therefore, common sense, say I,
> From reveries so airy, from the toil
> Of dropping buckets into empty wells,
> And growing old in drawing nothing up![80]

Cowper's assertive dismissal of deistic reason is now generally interpreted as the typical religious sign of the times, a blatantly close-minded rejection of that child of reason, scientific inquiry. The modern reader may view this aspect of Cowper with not a little chagrin and abhorrence, although in actuality it is not so bad as it seems. It is common knowledge among students of Cowper that the poet did take more than a passing interest in the advances being made in balloon launchings, and as is the case with most religious writers, their literary productions are far more severe than is their personal conduct. The really important point, however, to be inferred from Cowper's exclusion of the wisdom to be gained from a study of the natural sciences is that it is a step toward the new spirit which was to topple the mechanistic view of the earth in relation to God and

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[79]Cowper, The Task III.150-166.

[80]Ibid., III.187-190.

the universe. And while Cowper's stand is not a romantic one, it is a step in that direction, a step away from the spirit of Neo-Classicism but failing to reach the intensity of the Romantic concept of the universe -- a step best described as transitional. All transitions involve a certain number of philosophical rejections followed by a period of wrong turns and erroneous beliefs. Cowper's evangelistic denial of scientific investigation and the deistic reason essential to it may be correctly viewed as a ludicrous position. But by being an initial rejection of the mechanical universe of the deists and Shaftesburians, Cowper's feeling toward reason and science contributed to the return of a romantic conception of the universe, one alive with mystery and divinity.

Cowper's moralistic, didactic preaching so prevalent in The Task is also indicative of his rejection of "the powers of reason and empirical philosophy."[81] Part of Shaftesbury's appeal lay in his theory of the moral sense, aptly described by C. A. Moore:

> Man is naturally a virtuous being, and is endowed with a moral sense which distinguishes good from evil as spontaneously as the ear distinguishes between harmony and discord.[82]

Based on his idea of the moral sense, Shaftesbury believed that a man who was good because of a biblical promise

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[81]Huang, William Cowper Nature Poet, p. 74.

[82]Moore, "Shaftesbury and the Ethical Poets in England," p. 269.

of eternal remuneration was not truly virtuous but only shrewd or prudent.[83] This belief obviously inflamed the Evangelicals, since they did not believe that man was naturally good and also because Shaftesbury's theory was a refutation of holy precepts. Cowper rejects this Shaftesburian idea in The Task in favor of the mystery of personal conversion, a personal act of God in the affairs of man.

> Such reas'nings (if that name must need belong
> T' excuses in which reason has no part)
> Serve to compose a spirit well inclin'd
> To live on terms of amity with vice,
> And sin without disturbance. Often urg'd
> (As often as, libidinous discourse
> Exhausted, he resorts to solemn themes
> Of theological and grave import)
> They gain at last his unreserv'd assent;
> Till, harden'd his heart's temper in the forge
> Of lust, and on the anvil of despair,
> He slights the strokes of conscience. Nothing moves,
> Or nothing much, his constancy in ill;
> Vain tamp'ring has but foster'd his disease;
> 'Tis desp'rate, and he sleeps the sleep of death!
> Haste now, philosopher, and set him free.
> Charm the deaf serpent wisely. Make him hear
> Of rectitude and fitness, moral truth
> How lovely, and the moral sense how sure,
> Consulted and obey'd, to guide his steps
> Directly to the FIRST AND ONLY FAIR.
> Spare not in such a cause. Spend all the pow'rs
> Of rant and rhapsody in virtue's praise:
> Be most sublimely good, verbosely grand,
> And with poetic trappings grace thy prose,
> Till it out-mantle all the pride of verse.--
> Ah, tinkling cymbal, and high sounding brass,
> Smitten in vain! such music cannot charm
> Th' eclipse that intercepts truth's heav'nly beam,
> And chills and darkens a wide-wand'ring soul.
> The STILL SMALL VOICE is wanted. He must speak,

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[83] Louis I. Bredvold, The Natural History of Sensibility (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1962), p. 13.

> Whose word leaps forth at once to its effect;
> Who calls for things that are not, and they come.[84]

The result of this small voice could never be the product of reason alone:

> . . . Then liberty, like day,
> Breaks on the soul, and by a flash from heav'n
> Fires all the faculties with glorious joy.
> A voice is heard that mortal ears hear not
> Till thou hast touch'd them.[85]

Shaftesbury's assumption that God is adequately revealed by a mechanical universe, and "that human reason unaided is capable of forming an adequate notion of God"[86] is thoroughly dashed upon the jagged rocks of Evangelicalism. Just as Cowper's repudiation of scientific inquiry lies somewhere between neo-classic and romantic thought, his confutation of Shaftesbury's moral sense likewise does. The belief that God performs such acts as personal conversion and exercises the holy mystery of Grace is one that both Pope and Wordsworth would have rejected. And thus in the process of organic change, Cowper's beliefs are in a transitional position, lying somewhere between the reasonable, mechanistic universe of the neo-classicists and the pantheistic, natural world of Wordsworth.

That the Evangelical Revival was a movement toward emotional freedom is now obvious; consequently, "it has

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[84]Cowper, The Task V.655-687.

[85]*Ibid.*, V.883-887.

[86]Moore, "Shaftesbury and the Ethical Poets in England," p. 267.

been designated romantic in its tendencies."[87] These romantic tendencies manifested themselves mainly in the humanitarian interest generated by the revival, which was the most important single humanitarian force in the century."[88] Since William Cowper has previously been called the voice of Evangelicalism, it is not surprising that his poetry displays much evidence of these humanistic impulses engendered by the Evangelical Revival. Those humanitarian themes appearing most frequently are compassion toward animals, hatred of slavery, a grim, realistic view of war stripped of its glory, and a heightened interest in humble life which was to culminate in Wordsworth.

Cowper was a lover and admirer of animal life, a truth critics have not failed to detect. Gamaliel Bradford says "all his life Cowper loved animals . . . anyone who knows anything of Cowper at all knows . . . the profound interest he took in them"[89] S. A. Brooke points out that Cowper initiated another line of poetry -- "that which draws its impulse from the natural love of . . . animals."[90] Myra Reynolds suggests that "the feeling of

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[87]Huang, William Cowper Nature Poet, p. 45.

[88]Lodwick Hartley, William Cowper Humanitarian (Chapel Hill: The Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1938), p. 13.

[89]Gamaliel Bradford, "Diversions of a Lost Soul," Atlantic Monthly, CXXXIV (July, 1924), p. 365.

[90]Stopford A. Brooke, Naturalism in English Poetry (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1920), p. 100.

close fellowship and almost human love toward animals, so marked in Wordsworth and Coleridge, did not find expression in the transition poetry until . . . Cowper gave it full statement."[91] In addition, Miss Reynolds explicitly states that the emergence of a deep love for animals is "one of the marks of the new spirit,"[92] thus linking the humane treatment of animals, part of every Evangelical's belief, with Romanticism. Cowper's Evangelicalism, then, combined with his natural poetic sensitivity and promoted a deep feeling of love for the animal world. His letters and poetry reflect this love.

In a letter to one Rev. Hurdis, Cowper had this to say of animals:

> I am glad to find that your amusements have been so similar to mine; for in this instance too I seemed to have need of somebody to keep me in countenance, especially in my attention and attachment to animals. All the notice that we lords of the creation vouchsafe to bestow on the creatures, is generally to abuse them; it is well therefore that here and there a man should be found a little womanish, or perhaps a little childish in this matter, who will make some amends by kissing, and coaxing, and laying them in one's bosom.[93]

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[91]Myra Reynolds, The Treatment of Nature in English Poetry (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1909), p. 349.

[92]Ibid., p. 348.

[93]Frazer, Letters of William Cowper, Vol. II, p. 292. June 13, 1791 letter to the Rev. Mr. Hurdis. See Appendix II for an interesting and entertaining letter concerning Cowper's pet hare.

These sentiments are all the more remarkable and fresh when one considers that bearbaiting and cockfighting were still favorite diversions of eighteenth-century England.[94]

It is of some interest to note that Cowper himself provided a home for many animals, the most famous of which are the three hares -- Bess, Puss, and Tiny. He never tired of studying their idiosyncrasies,[95] and as a tribute to their distinct personalities, he wrote an essay which was published in the Gentleman's Magazine. Cowper praised the abundant joy the hares showed for life and suggested that cruelty to such animals was barbarous. It is not surprising that he makes reference to one of his hares in The Task in a passage that deals with the cruelty of hunting:

> . . . Detested sport,
> That owes its pleasures to another's pain;
> That feeds upon the sobs and dying shrieks
> Of harmless nature, dumb, but yet endu'd
> With eloquence, that agonies inspire,
> Of silent tears and heart-distending sighs!
> Vain tears, alas, and sighs, that never find
> A corresponding tone in jovial souls!
> Well--one at least is safe. One shelter'd hare
> Has never heard the sanguinary yell
> Of cruel man, exulting in her woes.
> Innocent partner of my peaceful home,
> Whom ten long years' experience of my care
> Has made at last familiar; she has lost
> Much of her vigilant instictive dread;
> Not needful here, beneath a roof like mine.
> Yes--thou may'st eat thy bread, and lick the hand
> That feeds thee; thou may'st frolic on the floor

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[94]Quinlan, William Cowper: A Critical Life, p. 97.

[95]David Cecil, The Stricken Deer (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1930), p. 172-173.

At evening, and at night retire secure
To thy straw couch, and slumber unalarm'd;
For I have gain'd they confidence, have pledg'd
All that is human in me to protect
Thine unsuspecting gratitude and love.
If I survive thee I will dig thy grave;
And, when I place thee in it, sighing, say,
I knew at least one hare that had a friend.[96]

Although the verse becomes too sentimental at the end, the point is that Cowper was not reluctant to risk the barbs of those less sensitive than he in voicing his concern for animals. It certainly foreshadows Wordsworth, Coleridge, and a host of other romantic writers.

Cowper's best known humanitarian plea for compassion toward animals occurs in Book VI of The Task, "The Winter Walk At Noon":

I would not enter on my list of friends
(Tho' grac'd with polish'd manners and fine sense,
Yet wanting sensibility) the man
Who needlessly sets foot upon a worm.
An inadvertent step may crush the snail
That crawls at ev'ning in the public path;
But he that has humanity, forewarn'd,
Will tread aside, and let the reptile live.
The creeping vermin, loathsome to the sight,
And charg'd perhaps with venom, that intrudes,
A visitor unwelcome, into scenes
Sacred to neatness and repose--th' alcove,
The chamber, or refectory--may die:
A necessary act incurs no blame.
Not so when, held within their proper bounds,
And guiltless of offence, they range the air,
Or take their pastime in the spacious field:
There they are privileg'd; and he that hunts
Or harms them there is guilty of a wrong,
Disturbs th' economy of nature's realm,
Who, when she form'd, design'd them an abode.
The sum is this.--If man's convenience, health,
Or safety, interfere, his rights and claims
Are paramount, and must extinguish their's.

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[96]Cowper, The Task III.326-351.

> Else they are all--the meanest things that are--
> As free to live, and to enjoy that life,
> As God was free to form them at the first,
> Who, in his sov'reign wisdom, made them all.[97]

The sensitive concern Cowper had for animals was a small but important segment of his total humanitarian feelings, foreshadowing the attention the poets of Romanticism would later give to the subject. The many portions of The Task devoted to compassion toward animals were indicative of poems like Coleridge's "To A Young Ass," the opening lines of which provide insight enough into the nature of the poem:

> Poor little foal of an oppressed race!
> I love the languid patience of thy face:
> And oft with gentle hand I give thee bread,
> And clap thy ragged coat, and pat thy head.[98]

This sentimental poetic treatment Cowper and the romantics gave to animals was an expression of the new spirit of man which crept into the hearts of English poets in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-centuries. It was a pouring out of affection for living things whose presence in a universe alive with mystery and divinity effected a new dimension in poetry. This affection did not end with animals.

Since the Evangelical Revival has already been identified as the most humanitarian force in the eighteenth-

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[97]Cowper, The Task VI.560-587.

[98]Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "To A Young Ass," English Poetry and Prose of the Romantic Movement, 1-4.

century, it will not be a matter of great surprise to find that the Evangelicals were quite active in efforts to abolish slavery.[99] From the pulpit, from pamphlets, and from their literature came the evangelistic plea to bring about the abolition of slavery. None wrote with more passion and force than William Cowper on the slave and his condition.[100]

In a letter to Lady Hesketh Cowper expressed his thorough hatred of the institution of slavery:

> . . . I have already borne my testimony in favour of my black brethern; and that I was one of the earliest, if not the first, of those who have in the present day expressed their detestation of the diabolical traffic in question.[101]

A letter written in the same year to Walter Bagot is similar:

> . . . Slavery, and especially Negro slavery, because the cruelest, is an odious and disgusting subject.[102]

These expressions of hatred and disgust toward the slave trade are not only Cowper's personal sentiments, but are the general feelings all eighteenth-century Evangelicals possessed concerning the loss of individual liberty. Just as the romantics adopted the evangelistic concern for animals, they also shared in this typically Evangelical

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[99] Hartley, William Cowper Humanitarian, p. 73.

[100] Ibid., p. 96.

[101] Frazer, Letters of William Cowper, Vol. II, p. 164. Feb. 16, 1788 letter to Lady Hesketh.

[102] Ibid., p. 191. June 17, 1788 letter to the Rev. Walter Bagot.

hatred of slavery and loss of freedom, irregardless of the cause. Poems like Lord Byron's "When A Man Hath No Freedom To Fight For At Home" and "The Prisoner of Chillon" are born from the same spirit as Cowper's lines in The Task dealing with freedom. In Book V he addresses himself to that symbol of vile tyranny the Bastille:

> Then shame to manhood, and opprobrious more
> To France than all her losses and defeats,
> Old or of later date, by sea or land,
> Her house of bondage, worse than that of old
> Which God aveng'd on Pharaoh--the Bastile!
> Ye horrid tow'rs, th' abode of broken hearts;
> Ye dungeons and ye cages of despair,
> That monarchs have supplied from age to age
> With music such as suits their sov'reign ears--
> The sighs and groans of miserable men!
> There's not an English heart that would not leap
> To hear that ye were fall'n at last.[103]

A few lines later Cowper, in moving verse, condemns all forms of human bondage:

> Oh comfortless existence! hemm'd around
> With woes, which who that suffers would not kneel
> And beg for exile, or the pangs of death?
> That man should thus encroach on fellow man,
> Abridge him of his just and native rights,
> Eradicate him, tear him from his hold
> Upon th' endearments of domestic life
> And social, nip his fruitfulness and use,
> And doom him for perhaps an heedless word
> To barrenness, and solitude, and tears,
> Moves indignation.[104]

Cowper's poignant concern for those shackled by all manner of confinement and slavery was a manifestation of Evangelical belief. In a larger sense, though, it was

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[103]Cowper, The Task V. 379-390.

[104]Ibid., V.432-442.

another sign of the quest for freedom, the impulse toward the physical, spiritual, imaginative, and emotional freedom that was so much a part of the spirit of Romanticism which infected not only England but all corners of the world in the late eighteenth-century. The same winds that kindled the Evangelical Revival in England, swept through the American Revolution in America, ravaged the walls of the Bastille in France, ignited the small but powerful torch of freedom so apparent in Cowper's The Task.

The third humanitarian theme so frequently seen in Cowper's poetry is that of pacifism. In Book V of The Task Cowper strips "war of its glory and idealism . . . and presents its causes, motives, and effects with telling realism."[105] In William Cowper Humanitarian, Lodwick Hartley points out the fact that the pacifistic attitude of Evangelicalism, especially as it is revealed in Cowper, antedated the repulsion Southey, Godwin, Coleridge, and Blake all had for war.[106] Like compassion for animals and hatred for slavery, the pacifism of the Evangelicals, Cowper, and the romantics was part of the spirit of Romanticism.

The humanitarianism which the Evangelical Revival activated for the poor and humble in mid-century appeared

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[105] Hartley, William Cowper Humanitarian, p. 160.

[106] Ibid., p. 161.

more and more often in the poetry of the closing years of the eighteenth-century. Poems like "The Cotter's Saturday Night" and "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" are part of a tradition which culminates in the many poems Wordsworth devoted to the treatment of the common man. His "Simon Lee" and "The Old Cumberland Beggar" serve as appropriate examples for a host of other poems peopled with the poor. William Cowper's The Task places him in this tradition, for those passages in his masterpiece which deal with those of humble origins are quite close to Wordsworth. Cowper made a significant contribution toward the elevation of the common man into material appropriate for poetry.[107]

Cowper's best poetic treatment of the common man motif is found in Book I of The Task:

> There often wanders one, whom better days
> Saw better clad, in cloak of satin trimm'd
> With lace, and hat with splendid ribband bound.
> A serving maid was she, and fell in love
> With one who left her, went to sea, and died.
> Her fancy follow'd him through foaming waves
> To distant shores; and she would sit and weep
> At what a sailor suffers; fancy, too,
> Delusive most where warmest wishes are,
> Would oft anticipate his glad return,
> And dream of transports she was not to know.
> She heard the doleful tidings of his death--
> And never smil'd again! And now she roams
> The dreary waste; there spends the livelong day,
> And there, unless when charity forbids,
> The livelong night. A tatter'd apron hides,
> Worn as a cloak, and hardly hides, a gown
> More tatter'd still; and both but ill conceal

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[107]Hartley, William Cowper Humanitarian, p. 45.

A bosom heav'd with never-ceasing sighs.
She begs an idle pin of all she meets,
And hoards them in her sleeve; but needful food,
Though press'd with hunger oft, or comelier clothes,
Though pinch'd with cold, asks never.--Kate is
craz'd![108]

This small portion of The Task is quite unusual for its time, even though the glorification of simple existence had already begun. It is similar to Wordsworth's "She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways," and thus may be viewed as further evidence for showing Cowper to be a romantic precursor.

The spirit generated by the Evangelical Revival was certainly romantic in nature. By opposing the sterile reason of early eighteenth-century thinkers, Evangelicalism promoted the development of an emotional, mystical view of the universe, a view in direct contrast to Deism and Shaftesburian philosophy. This may be interpreted as a step toward Romanticism and the concept of nature romantic poets adopted. In addition, the revival nurtured a healthy humanitarian concern for life, both man and animal. This humanitarianism fostered a new dimension in poetry, and William Cowper's The Task is a significant work in the development of this new poetry. It is obvious that the Evangelical Revival made important contributions toward the development of Romanticism.

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[108]Cowper, The Task I.533-556.

CHAPTER IV

THE INTENSITY OF FEELING AND NATURE: FURTHER INFLUENCES OF THE REVIVAL

In addition to the numerous influences mentioned in Chapter III, the Evangelical Revival heightened and accentuated two characteristics of Cowper which became a part of his poetry. The intensity of feeling which distinguished parts of The Task from the objective, restrained poetry of the eighteenth-century was a direct result of Cowper's religious propensity. Also, the revival affected the interest Cowper had in nature. Cowper's religious interest in nature resulted in a close and accurate depiction of natural scenes. At times Cowper's treatment of nature borders on Wordsworthian pantheism.

It is beyond the scope of this study to consider the biography of Cowper in relation to his religion and poetry. Suffice it to say that Cowper's feeling toward religion was the most significant and dominant influence in this man's life, bringing him both horror and joy. When his religiosity appeared in poetry, it was accompanied by strong, personal feelings. It was subjective verse

in a most objective century. Consider these lines from The Task:

> I was a stricken deer, that left the herd
> Long since; with many an arrow deep infixt
> My panting side was charg'd, when I withdrew
> To seek a tranquil death in distant shades.
> There was I found by one who had himself
> Been hurt by th' archers. In his side he bore,
> And in his hands and feet, the cruel scars.
> With gentle force soliciting the darts,
> He drew them forth, and heal'd, and bade me live.
> Since then, with few associates, in remote
> And silent woods I wander, far from those
> My former partners of the peopled scene;
> With few associates, and not wishing more.
> Here much I ruminate, as much I may,
> With other views of men and manners now
> Than once, and others of a life to come.[109]

This moving passage is straight from Cowper's heart. It is a passage charged with passion, with emotion, with the fervor of salvation, and with the sweeping power of strong conviction. The first person singular pronoun is not used here for realism of effect, but rather as a legitimate outpouring of an intense feeling that which Wordsworth may have called "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings."

Implicit in any poetry of an intensely personal nature is the belief the poet has for his own existence, for the impact his mind and body have on the earth and its people. It is a crying out for the worth of one's own life. Sometimes such poetry is jubilant and stimulating, at times tragic and pathetic. Always it is authentic.

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[109]Cowper, The Task III.108-123.

The interest man has in nature is often reflected by the literature of the day. During the late seventeenth and early eighteenth-centuries, the general feeling toward nature, revealed in the poetry of Neo-Classicism, was one of disinterest and apathetic concern. In the main, nature poetry was composed in conventional expressions[110] by men sitting comfortably in their libraries. Very often nature was but the background upon which the drama of human existence was performed. This rather indifferent view of nature, however, gradually was surpassed by a deep love for the natural world. Men began looking toward nature for wisdom and spiritual comfort.[111] Nature poetry was written by men who walked among the woods, studied the trees and flowers and animals, and who felt a divine spirit at work in nature. Man's "interest in nature became an elaborate cult, a self-conscious worship."[112]

One reason for the changing attitude toward nature was the rise of the Evangelical Revival, for this religious movement preached the need for a return to the simplicity of nature.[113] To the Evangelicals, nature was the antidote for the evil of city life; consequently, they expressed

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[110]Reynolds, <u>The Treatment of Nature in English Poetry</u>, p. 327.

[111]George G. Williams, "The Beginnings of Nature Poetry in the Eighteenth Century," <u>Studies in Philology</u>, XXVII (1930), 583.

[112]<u>Ibid</u>., p. 583.

[113]Huang, <u>William Cowper Nature Poet</u>, p. 53.

a warmer feeling for nature.[114] This new view of nature was to ultimately become a passionate love for all the natural world, the love Wordsworth had for nature. A significant development between the evangelistic and romantic attitudes toward nature is the poetry of William Cowper, a man of whom it has been said his "library was the Bible and the Book of Nature."[115]

William Cowper's nature poetry is similar to the poetry Wordsworth was writing during the Lyrical Ballads period. Not only does Cowper's The Task depict nature with a keen accuracy, but it also reflects a similar spiritual and moral vision in relation to nature. To Wordsworth and Cowper nature was a teacher of wisdom, a life in itself. At times the Evangelical Cowper even approaches the pantheistic view Wordsworth had for nature.

Myra Reynolds has extensively studied Cowper's treatment of nature. Her primary observation is that Cowper, though limited in his description to the scenery around the little village of Olney, wrote with extreme accuracy.[116] The Task is rich in truthful delineation:

> . . . Here the gray smooth trunks
> Of ash, or lime, or beech, distinctly shine,
> Within the twilight of their distant shades;
> There, lost behind a rising ground, the wood

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[114]Thomas, William Cowper and the Eighteenth Century, p. 186.

[115]Warwick James Price, "Cowper's Task: A Literary Milestone," The Sewanee Review, XXIV (1916), 161.

[116]Reynolds, The Treatment of Nature in English Poetry, p. 186-187.

Seems sunk, and shorten'd to its topmost boughs.
No tree in all the grove but has its charms,
Though each its hue peculiar; paler some,
And of a wannish gray; the willow such,
And poplar, that with silver lines his leaf,
And ash far-stretching his umbrageous arm;
Of deeper green the elm; and deeper still,
Lord of the woods, the long-surviving oak.
Some glossy-leav'd, and shining in the sun,
The maple, and the beech of oily nuts
Prolific, and the lime at dewy eve
Diffusing odours: nor unnoted pass
The sycamore, capricious in attire,
Now green, now tawny, and, ere autumn yet
Have chang'd the woods, in scarlet honours
bright;[117]

. . . The grove receives us next;
Between the upright shafts of whose tall elms
We may discern the thresher at his task.
Thump after thump resounds the constant flail,
That seems to swing uncertain, and yet falls
Full on the destin'd ear. Wide flies the chaff.
The rustling straw sends up a frequent mist
Of atoms,sparkling in the noon-day beam;[118]

The verdure of the plain lies buried deep
Beneath the dazzling deluge; and the bents,
And coarser grass, upspearing o'er the rest,
Of late unsightly and unseen, now shine
Conspicuous, and, in bright apparel clad
And fledg'd with icy feathers, nod superb.
The cattle mourn in corners where the fence
Screens them, and seem half petrified to sleep
In unrecumbent sadness;[119]

. . . The tim'rous hare,
Grown so familiar with her frequent guest,
Scarce shuns me; and the stock-dove, unalarm'd,
Sits cooing in the pine-tree, nor suspends
His long love-ditty for my near approach.
Drawn from his refuge in some lonely elm
That age or injury has hollow'd deep,
Where, on his bed of wool and matted leaves,
He has outslept the winter, ventures forth
To frisk awhile, and bask in the warm sun,
The squirrel, flippant, pert, and full of play:

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[117]Cowper, The Task I.303-320.

[118]Ibid., I.354-361.

[119]Ibid., V.21-29.

He sees me, and at once, swift as a bird,
Ascends the neighb'ring beech; there whisks his
brush,
And perks his ears, and stamps and scolds aloud,
With all the prettiness of feign'd alarm,
And anger insignificantly fierce.[120]

These samples of Cowper's amazing descriptive powers are quite unlike anything written by neo-classic poets. In his accurate description of nature, Cowper is definitely much closer to Romanticism than Neo-Classicism. Unlike most neo-classics, Cowper had a strong love for nature, attributing to it a religious significance unknown to his predecessors. Because of this spiritual feeling toward nature, Cowper became intimately familiar with the countryside around the little village of Olney. His poetry reflects this familiarity.

Wordsworth and Cowper believed that nature was a teacher, an entity to whom one could turn in times of doubt and distress. Cowper believed this because he felt nature was a revelation of God,[121] although at times he, like Wordsworth, saw nature as something of a sacrament.[122] The concepts both men had concerning nature and wisdom were in a broad sense religious. In Book VI of The Task Cowper says this of nature's wisdom:[123]

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[120]Cowper, The Task VI.305-320.

[121]Nicholson, William Cowper, p. 92-93.

[122]Ibid., p. 92-93.

[123]Reynolds, The Treatment of Nature in English Poetry, p. 191.

> But trees, and rivulets whose rapid course
> Defies the check of winter, haunts of deer,
> And sheep-walks populous with bleating lambs,
> And lanes in which the primrose ere her time
> Peeps through the moss that clothes the hawthorn
>   root,
> Deceive no student. Wisdom there, and truth,
> Not shy, as in the world, and to be won
> By slow solicitation, seize at once
> The roving thought, and fix it on themselves.[124]

This idea is similar to one expressed by Wordsworth in "The Tables Turned":

> One impulse from a vernal wood
> May teach you more of man,
> Of moral evil and of good,
> Than all the sages can.[125]

God's relation to nature in Cowper's philosophy is quite interesting and paradoxical. Most of the time Cowper's poetic treatment of God and nature shows a careful evangelistic subordination of nature to God. Occasionally, however, Cowper's poetry reveals a religious attitude toward nature which borders pantheism. These two aspects of Cowper's view of nature are clearly shown in the following lines from The Task:

> Acquaint thyself with God, if thou would'st taste
> His works;[126]

> From dearth to plenty, and from death to life,
> Is Nature's progress when she lectures man
> In heav'nly truth; evincing, as she makes
> The grand transition, that there lives and works
> A soul in all things, and that soul is God.[127]

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[124]Cowper, The Task VI.109-117.

[125]William Wordsworth, "The Tables Turned," English Poetry and Prose of the Romantic Movement, 21-24.

[126]Cowper, The Task V.779-780.

[127]*Ibid.*, VI.181-185.

In the first passage Cowper asserts that in order to know nature one must first acquaint himself with God. It is Cowper's way of subordinating nature to God, and this passage clearly shows that he did not identify God with nature. From this brief excerpt one would surmise that Cowper thought of God in the classical sense, remote and distinct from his creation. The second passage, however, is quite different from the first. Cowper definitely approaches the pantheism of the romantics in it, as a comparison with Wordsworth's pantheistic conception of nature indicates. The following excerpt from Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" is one of the clearest expressions of pantheism in English literature:[128]

> . . . a sense sublime
> Of something far more deeply interfused,
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
> And the round ocean and the living air,
> And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
> A motion and a spirit, that impels
> All thinking things, all objects of all
>   thought,
> And rolls through all things. Therefore
>   am I still
> A lover of the meadows and the woods,
> And mountains.[129]

Cowper only occasionally frees himself from the evangelistic insistence that God is distinct from nature and should not be confused with it. When he does, his artistic conception is close to that of Wordsworth. Joseph Warren

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[128] William Flint Thrall, Addison Hibbard, and C. Hugh Holman, A Handbook to Literature (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1960), p. 338.

[129] Wordsworth, "Lines," English Poetry and Prose of the Romantic Movement, 95-104.

Beach has observed that one remarkable trait of "Lines Composed Above Tintern Abbey" is that Wordsworth "does not once name God or make a single unmistakable reference to the supreme being."[130] This fact alone is indicative of the great difference between the vast majority of Cowper's work and the poetry of Wordsworth, but Cowper's occasional identification of God and nature certainly foreshadows the feelings young Wordsworth had for nature.

Since the Evangelical Revival is now seen as part of the romantic revolt, it is clear that the many influences of Evangelicalism seen in Cowper's poetry are primarily romantic. From the humanitarianism to the vague hints of pantheism present in The Task, Cowper's finest work is a product of the religious movement which swept through England in the eighteenth-century. That this product was a precursor of Romanticism should be obvious.

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[130]Joseph Warren Beach, The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth Century English Poetry (New York: Pageant Book Co., 1956), p. 110.

CHAPTER V

COWPER'S WANDERING MUSE

The foregoing examination of William Cowper as one who reflects characteristics of Neo-Classicism and Romanticism has made it clear The Task is a mixture of neo-classic and romantic qualities. Cowper's admiration of classical works, his use of conventional and natural language, and the many influences of the Evangelical Revival on his poetry all combine to form a transitional masterpiece, a poem having not one, but two primary sources, those from a dying Neo-Classicism and a growing Romanticism.

The final portion of this study will examine one additional aspect of The Task which is decidedly romantic in nature. The rambling, wandering, spontaneous structure of this poem is a great distance from the order, symmetry, and proportion of Augustan poetry. In Augustan art the principle of control is always present. Even those poems which seem loosely structured are always the careful product of extensive, logical planning. The Task, however, is not a poem conceived from a mathematical plan. It is too spontaneous for this to be true, since its transition is based upon a free roaming mind guided by its own association

of ideas. The best description for the structure of The Task is to say that it is structured by association.

As Cowper matured as a poet, he placed more and more emphasis on "the felicities of spontaneous genius."[131] To Cowper this idea of spontaneity was an expression of revolt against the mathematical precision of Augustan poetry, for the form of Augustan art is essentially mathematical in construction. The parallelism, antithesis, caesuras, and heroic couplets so natural to that style of poetry best represented by Pope were limits, barriers to freer forms. The mechanical construction of neo-classic poetry emulated the mechanistic concept of Deism; thus when the view of the universe changed later in the century, men began seeking and employing a new theory of composition in poetry.

It should be evident that the changing view of the universe taking place in the eighteenth-century did not directly nor immediately change any poetic theories of composition. The change was slow and gradual and effected a new view of writing poetry by altering the way men thought. The form of The Task, especially in the progression of ideas, offers an excellent example of how the Augustan theory of art was replaced. Indeed, the thought structure of The Task is more indicative of revolt than is the blank verse in which it is written.

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[131]Francis Gallaway, Reason, Rule and Revolt in English Classicism (New York: Octagon Books, Inc., 1965), p. 92.

Cowper made two explicit statements pertinent to his mode of composition of The Task. In a letter to William Unwin, Cowper mentioned his plan in composing this poem:

> . . . If the work cannot boast a regular plan, (in which respect however I do not think it altogether indefensible,) it may yet boast, that the reflections are naturally suggested always by the preceding passage. . . .[132]

Also, in Book III of The Task, "The Garden," Cowper includes among his blessings his "wand'ring muse." And a wandering muse it was. In fact, so wandering was Cowper's muse that it is often very difficult to see how a passage is suggested by that which precedes it. A skeletal view of Book I sufficiently shows how loosely organized the thought progress of The Task is:

> lines 1-88 - a historical development of chairs written in the mock heroic style intimating to the reader the analogous development of society;
>
> lines 89-102 - an amusing view of several sleepers, none of whom have the sweet sleep that a sofa yields;
>
> lines 103-127 - a school boy's walk remembered;
>
> lines 128-180 - a walk in the country and the scene described;
>
> lines 181-209 - the poet's comments on rural sounds;
>
> lines 210-233 - another walk in which a peasant's nest is described;

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[132]Frazer, Letters of William Cowper, p. 314. Oct. 10, 1784 letter to Rev. William Unwin.

lines 234-251 - a realistic view of the peasant's lot in which the mistake concerning the charms of solitude is corrected;

lines 252-265 - a colonnade of trees commended and thanks given to those ancient ones who planted the shady trees;

lines 266-277 - walk continues and comments made concerning the work of the mole;

lines 278-325 - view from a summit and man's urge to immortalize himself; trees described;

lines 326-354 - descent from the summit and a pleasant stroll through the woods;

lines 355-361 - the thresher and his honest toil;

lines 362-409 - the benefits of exercise;

lines 410-454 - works of nature superior to art;

lines 455-490 - a life of pleasure a poor one;

lines 491-533 - the changes of scene nature offers are expedient to good health;

lines 534-566 - Crazy Kate described;

lines 557-591 - the life of the gypsy and his sins described;

lines 592-620 - the blessings of civilized life and the state favorable to virtue;

lines 621-677 - the South Sea islanders and a thought on Omai, a gentle savage;

lines 678-748 - the evils of the city condemned;

lines 749-774 - book concludes with a view of the fatal effects of dissipation and effeminacy.

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It is apparent that Cowper developed The Task in a rambling, wandering, spontaneous manner, quite unlike the normal development of eighteenth-century poetry, with the exception of Thomson's Seasons. To indicate just how far Cowper's The Task strayed from neo-classic theory, compare the thought progress of Book I with the following critical comment of John Dennis, an early eighteenth-century critic:

> The great Design of Arts is to restore the Decays that happen'd to human Nature by the Fall, by restoring Order; if the end of Poetry be to instruct and reform the World, that is, to bring Mankind from Irregularity, Extravagance, and Confusion, to Rule and Order, how this should be done by a thing that is in itself irregular and extravagant, is difficult to be conceiv'd.[133]

It becomes immediately apparent that Dennis could never have reconciled the development of thought in The Task with his own critical theory. The seemingly irregular association of ideas in Cowper's poem would have been repugnant to one such as John Dennis.

In order to find critical commentary favorable to a poem like The Task, one needs to direct his attention to those who are not considered neo-classic critics. Such a man is Dugald Stewart, who, in 1829, wrote the following:

> . . . an arrangement founded on the spontaneous and seemingly casual order of our thoughts pleases more than one suggested

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[133]Walter Jackson Bate, From Classic To Romantic (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1961), p. 14.

by an accurate analysis of the subject.[134]

This observation is antithetical to the critical position taken by Dennis, the neo-classic, and is certainly more compatible with the style of composition Cowper chose to employ in The Task. The loose, spontaneous style of Cowper's long poem is much closer to romantic theory than it is to neo-classic. At least in this respect, Cowper is much closer to Romanticism than he is to the literary trends of the eighteenth-century.

The digressive movement of The Task reflects a changing aesthetic theory which ultimately blossomed in the organicism of men like A. W. Schlegel of Germany and England's S. T. Coleridge. Coleridge wrote in Biographia Literaria:

> The organic form is innate; it shapes, as it develops itself from within, and its fullness of development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form. Such as the life is, such is the form.[135]

Coleridge's famous doctrine goes beyond the prosody of a poem and concerns itself also with the development of thought in a poem. Applied to The Task, Coleridge's notion of organic form provides one with an interesting area of speculation.

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[134] Ralph Cohen, "Association of Ideas and Poetic Unity," Philological Quarterly, XXXVI (1957), p. 470.

[135] Norman Foerster and Robert Falk, eds., American Poetry and Prose (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960), p. 190.

Implicit in Coleridge's statement is the idea of transition in poetry, how the association of ideas affects the movement of a poem. Certainly this idea of movement, of transition in a poem is relevant to any study of The Task which contends the poem is essentially pre-organic in structure. The spontaneous association of ideas is at the very heart of organicism in art, and any poem that can speak of chairs, of walks and moles, of alcoves and gypsies, of Crazy Kates and gentle savages is obviously making extensive use of association. Cowper would have been aware of the idea of association, for in 1728 the first English definition of the association of ideas appeared in Chambers' Cyclopaedia:

> Association of Ideas, is where two or more Ideas, constantly or immediately follow or succeed one another in the Mind, so that one shall almost infallibly produce the other; whether there be any natural Relation between them or not.[136]

While this is basically a very acceptable definition of the association of ideas, Coleridge was later to alter it in a letter to Southey. Coleridge said that association itself

> depends in much greater degree on the recurrence of resembling states of feeling than on trains of ideas . . . a metaphysical solution that does not instantly tell you something in the heart is grievously to be suspected

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[136]Ralph Cohen, "Association of Ideas and Poetic Unity," p. 465.

> as apocryphal. I almost think that ideas never recall ideas, as far as they are ideas, any more than leaves in a forest create each other's motion. The breeze it is that runs through them . . . th state of feeling.[137]

Coleridge's metaphorical interpretation of the association of ideas is quite close to Cowper's The Task, of which Cowper said

> the whole has one tendency; to discountenance the modern enthusiasm after a London life, and to recommend rural ease and leisure, as friendly to the cause of piety and virtue.[138]

This "tendency" is the equivalent to the breeze, the state of feeling mentioned in Coleridge's approach to association, for it was this tendency that warranted and validated Cowper's love of nature. In turn, it was this love, more than any other single factor, that turned poets against the symmetry of Augustan art and fostered a new taste for organicism.

When men began looking to nature for wisdom, spiritual comfort, and aesthetic solace, they saw nature with both an ethereal and corporeal eye, but it was with the corporeal, physical eye that men began to study so closely the lineament and contour of the earth and heavens. And what they saw was in no way suggestive of the proportion and symmetry of neo-classic poetry. The

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[137]Walter Jackson Bate, Coleridge (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1968), p. 162.

[138]Frazer, Letters of William Cowper, p. 314. Oct. 10, 1784 letter to the Rev. William Unwin.

winding, sinuous course of a river, the solitary flight of a lone bird whose freedom implied that it flew with the wind, and the rise and fall of mountains and valleys all stood in defiant opposition to the mathematical precision of the works of poets like Dryden and Pope. The closer scrutiny of nature by late eighteenth-century poets suggested that the neo-classic aesthetic of control and order was but a false artifice desperately in need of replacement. The replacement took the form of spontaneity and the organic growth of thought in poetry. The romantic aesthetic which delivered to the art world the brilliance of Samuel Taylor Coleridge was thus born in the eighteenth-century, and Cowper's _The Task_ is an excellent example of the early evolution of this new aesthetic.

And so it was that Cowper's free roaming, spontaneous mind produced a delightful, wandering masterpiece which clearly foreshadowed the romantic aesthetic that was soon to appear in English Romanticism. Cowper's muse was a hummingbird that flitted around and above the neo-classic muse, perhaps best represented metaphorically by an ostrich, the fleet footed, flightless bird that stays always ever so close to the ground.

CONCLUSION

This study of Cowper's The Task has shown that the classical influence of Homer, Horace, and Virgil, the didactic, moralistic content of the poem, and the many examples of typical neo-classic stock diction mark this minor classic as having derived a substantial portion of its shaping force from the traditions of eighteenth-century Neo-Classicism. In addition, several chapters were devoted to the romantic tendencies of The Task, apparent in Cowper's attempt to use a more natural language, his emotional and passionate outcries, his religious love of nature, and the organic structure of the poem. Therefore, it is quite evident that The Task is a transitional poem that serves as a bridge linking Neo-Classicism with Romanticism.

Although interest in The Task has been slowly dying for years, it needs but the attention of a new generation of men to give the poem the full life it so deserves. Its spiritual and soothing song stands ready to guide an errant race back to the slow, deep wisdom of the rivers, to the soft, sweet song of the forests. Cowper knew while composing The Task that life can become a wild and reckless race and that the precious gift of existence can be lost

in snorts and jerks, in the speed of the long run. He knew, too, that man needs the serenity of hope, the dream of the long journey home. <u>The Task</u> teaches that all these sweet visions do exist. Men like Cowper have been telling us so for ages.

APPENDIX I

STOCK DICTION - PRESENT PARTICIPLES

A. frowning signals (II.68); trembling stage (II.81); conceiving thunders (II.89); blooming health (II.184); dripping rains (II.211); smiling victory (II.243); fleeting images (II.290); moving scene (II.453); craving poverty (II.490); roving appetite (II.525); morning skies (II.648); borrowing light (II.654); sparkling eye (II.727); winking eye (II.773); blushing fruits (III.429); toiling ages (III.450); freezing blast (III.466); dripping clouds (III.515); smoking manure (III.517); breathing air (III.539); swarming flies (III.555); op'ning blossom (III.622); throbbing breast (III.686); wand'ring muse (III.692); enchanting Nature (III.721); shelt'ring grove (III.773); murm'ring soft (III.779); whistling ball (III.802); wand'ring knights (III.815); twanging horn (IV.1); ranting actor (IV.45); peering eyes (IV.115); sliding car (IV.126); rattling wheels (IV.144); trembling chord (IV.160); charming strife (IV.163); pointing wand (IV.183); mould'ring tow'r (IV.235); sweeping train (IV.247); clust'ring gems (IV.252); driving wind (V.3); fleeting shade (V.13); leaning

pile (V.39); trailing cloud (V.56); shelt'ring eaves (V.65); sparkling trees (V.113); stagg'ring types (V.419); tinkling cymbal (V.681); rolling worlds (V.814); shining hosts (V.822); aching wish (V.838); teaching voice (V.858); bustling stage (V.878); melting airs (VI.3); disheart'ning length (VI.22); shelt'ring side (VI.40); dazzling splendour (VI.64); soothing influence (VI.68); flitting light (VI.79); unthinking multitude (VI.100); meand'ring veins (VI.136); streaming gold (VI.150); neighb'ring cypress (VI.154); blushing wreaths (VI.169); blooming wonders (VI.197); bleeding brows (VI.239); smiling sky (VI.258); dissolving snows (VI.260); freezing sky (VI.258); neighb'ring beech (VI.317); bounding fawn (VI.327); bleeding sides (VI.429); brimming beaker (VI.434); living brute (VI.458); avenging arm (VI.464); roaring surge (VI.497); sounding whip (VI.527); crumbling verge (VI.519); budding ills (VI.591); itching ear (VI.643); blooming wreaths (VI.685); enchanting novelty (VI.706); flying joy (VI.795); taunting question (VI.870); falling rocks (VI.868); with'ring wreaths (VI.939); whistling silks (VI.941); blooming spring (VI.946); soothing sorrow (VI.963); quenching strife (VI.963).

APPENDIX I

STOCK DICTION - NOUNS + Y

B. miry ways (III.4); stormy raptures (III.57); dewy sash (III.496); spongy lobes (III.522); wintry suns (III.552); spiry myrtle (III.570); flow'ry island (III.630); wintry flood (IV.3); noisy world (IV.5); steamy column (IV.39); oily eloquence (IV.64); rosy west (IV.133); snowy lawn (IV.152); snowy vale (V.7); icy feathers (V.26); sunny nook (V.71); snowy weight (V.98); smoky mist (V.105); glassy wave (V.134); arrowy sleet (V.140); wat'ry light (V.150); sinewy firmness (V.288); dusty grave (V.609); beamy fires (V.838); icy touch (VI.137); wintry music (VI.143); foamy surf (VI.155); flow'ry season (VI.196); scanty rule (VI.212); mighty process (VI.225); balmy odours (VI.243); fiery men (VI.542); craggy barrier (VI.554); guilty man (VI.597); inky cloak (VI.675); arrowy tongue (VI.782); spicy groves (VI.807).

APPENDIX I

STOCK DICTION - PERIPHRASIS

C. celestial themes (II.438); immortal seed (II.517); noblest function (II.554); brightest truths (II.555); ghostly counsel (II.556); hungry vice (II.680); solemn farce (II.736); peopled scene (III.119); crimson stream (III.202); philosophic tube (III.229); omnipotent magician (III.766); feather'd tribes domestic (V.62); fleecy flood (V.63); pert voracious kind (V.69); lean pensioners (V.93); fairer wreaths (V.712); fleecy load (VI.179); fairer forms (VI.188); controuling ordinance (VI.202); great Artificer (VI.207); holy book (VI.650); fearless flocks (VI.774); crested worm (VI.780); supercilious great (VI.967); golden tube (VI.978).

APPENDIX I

STOCK DICTION - COMPOUND EPITHETS

D. slow rising smoke (I.557); hard faring race (I.564); gain-devoted cities (I.682); theme divine (II.338); credentials clear (II.339); zig-zag manuscript (II.36); conversation frivolous (II.379); doctrine uncorrupt (II.400); language plain (II.400); well-bred whisper (II.413); judgments ill-inform'd (II.435); slow-retiring fair (II.454); sweet seducing charms (II.482); language soft (II.495); wisdom short (II.536); side-box station (II.624); head-strong youth (II.745); manners sweet (II.783); race obscene (II.826); ear-erecting steed (III.9); truth-tried love (III.56); arrow deep (III.109); game-fowl (III.312); self-deluded nymphs (III.316); heart-distending sights (III.331); vigilant instinctive dread (III.340); green coated gourd (III.446); far-beaming eye (III.602); smooth-shaven prop (III.659); close-ramm'd stones (III.646); faction-mad (III.673); grave whisker'd race (III.768); hard-handed poverty (III.827); close-pack'd load (IV.24); loud-hissing urn (IV.38); home-born happiness (IV.140); well-depicted flow'r (IV.151); self-complacent actor

(IV.200); card-devoted time (IV.229); bird-alluring fruit (IV.263); slow-pac'd swain's delay (V.32); well-consider'd steps (V.75); berry-bearing thorns (V.82); blossom-bruising hail (V.141); self-denying zeal (V.329); all-creating energy (V.554); heav'n renouncing exile (V.598); self-reproaching conscience (V.600); self-congratulating pride (V.622); high sounding brass (V.681); wide-wand'ring soul (V.684); still small voice (V.685); new-created earth (V.820); weather-beach'd and batter'd rocks (V.834); never-ending rest (V.841); veil opaque (V.892); cadence sweet (VI.8); scene below (VI.64); tune entranc'd (VI.104); never-cloying odours (VI.164); slow circling ages (VI.227); self-taught rites (VI.232); sea-side sands (VI.245); forehead ridg'd (VI.268); price-deciding hammer (VI.291); flight-performing horse (VI.426); spirits buoyant (VI.329); new-made monarch (VI.353); down-fallen beast (VI.444); bush-exploring boy (VI.445); man-monster (VI.499); transient calm (VI.544); visitor unwelcome (VI.570); grace divine (VI.602); commemoration-mad (VI.634); slow-moving pageant (VI.697); slow-revolving season (VI.824); self-approving haughty world (VI.940).

APPENDIX II

A LETTER CONCERNING PUSS, COWPER'S HARE

The following occurrence ought not to be passed over in silence, in a place where so few notable ones are to be met with. Last Wednesday night, while we were at supper, between the hours of eight and nine, I heard an unusual noise in the back parlour, as if one of the hares was entangled, and endeavouring to disengage herself. I was just going to rise from table, when it ceased. In about five minutes, a voice on the outside of the parlour door inquired if one of my hares had got away. I immediately rushed into the next room, and found that my poor favorite, Puss, had made her escape. She had gnawed in under the strings of a lattice work, with which I thought I had sufficiently secured the window, and which I preferred to any other sort of blind, because it admitted plenty of air. From thence I hastened to the kitchen, where I saw the redoubtable Thomas Freeman, who told me, that having seen her, just after she had dropped into the street, he attempted to cover her with his hat, but she screamed out, and leaped directly over his head. I then desired him to pursue as fast as possible, and added Richard Coleman to the chase, as being nimbler, and carrying less weight

than Thomas; not expecting to see her again, but desirous to learn, if possible, what became of her. In something less than an hour, Richard returned, almost breathless, with the following account that soon after he began to run, he left Tom behind him, and came in sight of a most numerous hunt of men, women, children, and dogs; that he did his best to keep back the dogs, and presently outstripped the crowd, so that the race was at last disputed between himself and Puss;--she ran right through the town, and down the lane that leads to Dropshot; a little before she came to the house, he got the start and turned her; she pushed for the town again, and soon after she entered it, sought shelter in Mr. Wagstaff's tanyard, adjoining to old Mr. Drake's. Sturges's harvest men were at supper and saw her from the opposite side of the way. There she encountered the tanpits full of water; and while she was struggling out of one pit and plunging into another, and almost drowned, one of the men drew her out by the ears, and secured her. She was then well washed in a bucket, to get the lime out of her coat, and brought home in a sack at ten o'clock. This frolic cost us four shillings, but you may believe we did not grudge a farthing of it. The poor creature received only a little hurt in one of her claws, and in one of her ears, and is now almost as well as ever.

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[139] Frazer, Letters of William Cowper, Vol. I, p. 84-85. August 21, 1780 letter to the Rev. John Newton.

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