Cowper's *Task*

Structure and Influence

Martin Priestman

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MARTIN PRIESTMAN

Lecturer in English,
Roehampton Institute of Higher Education

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Introductory

Few people can find *The Task* a fully satisfactory poem to read: even the pious must at times be irritated by its uncertainty of direction, its mixture of evasion and overstatement. Such negative feelings are, however, essential to the experience of the poem. Elsewhere Cowper writes of his kind of 'truth' that, like the pill an invalid swallows, 'Unless you adorn it, a nausea follows.'[1] One trouble with *The Task* is that for much of the time the enunciation of 'truth' and the act of adornment are nakedly separate. One aim of this study will be to take on board the pressure of this unsatisfactoriness as it is felt, but also as it is acknowledged, within the experience of *The Task*.

The poem is also unsatisfactory because it is hard to place. It no longer exerts its own authority and creates its own space, as it did when *The Prelude* appeared in 1850:[2] it now has to pay Wordsworth rent for whatever position it does occupy, and most present-day readers pass through it with other things on their minds. Cowper the pre-Romantic is a slightly more exciting figure than Cowper the Evangelical; nonetheless it hardly needs pointing out, as Northrop Frye has done, that 'the term pre-romantic has the peculiar demerit of committing us to anachronism before we start, and imposing a false teleology on everything we study'.[3] Such false teleology particularly threatens Cowper, since he fails to manifest consistently many of the eighteenth-century strengths that might have pulled him clear of it.[4] Milton, Prior, Thomson and Young, not to mention Virgil and Horace, stand behind *The Task*, but their different dominances are successively evaded by it in ways whose ingenuity makes a comparison with *The Prelude* seem natural. I shall be undertaking such a comparison in my last chapter, but I shall also be attempting to lower *The Task*'s rent somewhat by insisting on the simple legal point that it was there first.

One kind of eighteenth-century strength that might be claimed for *The Task* is a strength of social realism: a simple ability to tell us a lot

about rural life as actually lived in the late eighteenth century. Cowper's letters have long been read for this reason, and edited on this basis; *The Task* too may be offered as an example of a view of country life that is refreshingly 'anti-pastoral' and realistic. Examples of this tendency might include the repudiation of the 'Peasant's Nest' and the descriptions of Crazy Kate and the gypsies in Book I, the satire on landscape gardening in Book III and the descriptions of the waggoner and the cottager's family, but then also of the scroungers, topers, subversives and burglars in Book IV. With considerable wrenching from context such passages may be made to stand alongside comparable excerpts from a work like Crabbe's *Village*; nonetheless any comparison along these lines is so much in Crabbe's favour, so far as both objectivity and passion are concerned, that a study of *The Task* does it no service by pressing the claim. Nor does Goldsmith's *Deserted Village* provide a gentler foil: its concern for the overall patterns of a communal way of life (however sentimentalized) clearly reveals the essentially self-serving nature of Cowper's portrayals. I hope to show that Cowper's portraits of rural working people have little objective integrity beyond the structural exigencies of the particular point in the poem where each appears: that is to say, they have to be read closely in line with the version of the authorial self that is being presented at the time, and most frequently either as projections or anti-projections of that self.

The various unsatisfactorinesses I have outlined rest on a central one: the baffling nature of the poem's structure. This is apparently so open and undetermined that most critics have wished to leave it alone and to concentrate instead on the poem's incidental 'beauties'[5] of detail. These beauties are often defended in terms of accuracy and precision of *observation*, or of what George Eliot called 'a delight in objects for their own sake, without self-reference'.[6] Yet to read *The Task* only for such beauties is to encounter continual frustration: the detail is repeatedly subsumed in argumentation of one kind or another, and most of the argumentation is very self-referring indeed – not in any simple lyric sense either, but in ways that drive deeply and anxiously into the set of symbols and meanings established within the poem as a whole. Cowper the realist is a figure who has been created, as far as *The Task* is concerned, out of excerpts and anthology pieces. Close observation is indeed an important element of his technique, but I hope in this study to demonstrate and explore the extremely volatile relationship between this and other concerns within the poem as a whole.

Critics of *The Task* fall into two groups: those who show any interest in the poem's structure, and those who do not. Of the second

group, which is by far the larger, the vast majority have a primarily biographical interest in Cowper, and it is not entirely uncharitable to say that for this group the whole idea of the poem's *having* a structure is anathema, since it constitutes a claim to the poem's autonomy as literature, away from what has always been the decisive impulse in Cowper criticism, towards understanding the man. Why this need to biographize Cowper has been so strong is hard to say, though the matter would itself make an interesting study. That 'It would be only a very pedantic critic who would attempt to separate the criticism of Cowper's works very widely from a narrative or outline of his life'[7] has attained the status of a myth: it is as if certain paradoxes in the relation between Cowper's life and work have an archetypal resonance that depends for its literary potency on depriving Cowper of his.

Some intense and interesting things have been written from this point of view,[8] and there is no doubt that Cowper himself repeatedly invites direct biographical interest, and nowhere more pointedly than in *The Task*. Its opening words - 'I sing the SOFA. I, who lately sang / Truth, Hope, and Charity' - directly propose the author's presence in his work as a conundrum; far more knowingly and challengingly than, for example, Wordsworth proposes his lyric presence in *The Prelude*. The nature of this apparent presence of author in work is structurally crucial in *The Task*: but in this study I shall attempt to examine it as a literary fact, not as an inadvertency or a transparency leading to biographical disquisition.

Two of the fullest studies of *The Task* as a structure are unpublished American Ph.D. theses. Dorothy Hadley Craven's study of Cowper's use of 'slight connexion' in the poem[9] rightly places emphasis on the moments of transition between topics - transitions that have simply baffled older critics[10] - as structural keys to the whole work. The often hair-raising looseness of these transitions is indeed alternatively a barrier or a key to any sense of what the poem as a whole is up to, and Dr Craven sensibly divides them up into transitions that proceed by 'normal sequence'; those that proceed by an expanded form of Augustan antithesis; and those that proceed according to Cowper's deliberate and declared use of a stream-of-consciousness literary practice that follows on from Locke's theory of the association of ideas. While I believe the idea of expanded antithesis can be taken too far - the poem often seems to oscillate out of control - the importance of associationist theory is indisputable, and any serious consideration of the poem's structure must begin with it. In this connection Dr Craven rightly demonstrates the importance of Cowper's recurrent images of wandering, as if

through the landscape of the poem; and this image is likewise emphasized in Thomas Edgar Blom's excellent study.[11] Dr Blom brilliantly recreates the poem as a deliberate and symbolic account of the progress of the Christian soul from aimlessness to a state of heightened and directed vision, if not salvation. This is precisely the kind of exegesis that the poem itself frequently seems to demand, though bound by its author's pathological self-distrust to a vow of secrecy as to its own purposes: hence its self-referring and portentous allusions to a 'silent task', its posture of unassuming surprise on finally encountering its climactic 'vision', its concluding indirect plea for divine approbation. Blom's is the only account I have read that gives adequate weight to the poem's enigmatic title; and if in reading the poem we miss the sense of a clear progression to a climax that he leads us to expect, some of Dr Craven's thoughts on the structural necessity - within a framework of 'slight connexions' - of eschewing climax provide an instructive complement to his account.

For Morris Golden (whose *In Search of Stability* is one of the few published works to deal seriously with *The Task*'s structure) the language of wandering is again important, but here it is seen - within a minimal but still insistent biographical framework - as something to be escaped from by Cowper in person.[12] At another extreme from Blom's generalized history of '*the* soul' we are presented with Cowper's needs, Cowper's uncertainties, Cowper's 'Search for Stability'. This concern is shown as working itself out within and through the whole structure of *The Task*, and as such Golden's book is a valuable antidote to the aura of Christian-Augustan objectivity with which Craven and Blom surround the poem. A more forceful antidote is provided by David Boyd, who has demonstrated in a highly stimulating article[13] that *The Task*'s structural confusion is radical. Boyd argues that Cowper never sorts out whether he is writing pastoral or satire, and that each mode imposes contradictions on him that cannot be resolved within the role he adopts for it, and thus forces him into a contrary role that merely raises worse contradictions because of its axiomatic opposition to the values adopted in the first. Boyd's charge that the poem's structure depends on 'elaborate role-playing' is strikingly true; and yet it is hard to accept on its own terms as a simple dismissal of the poem.

We still need a description of *The Task* that can take account of these different approaches and mediate between them, while also taking other issues into consideration.[14] It seems clear that the biographical approach is critically moribund; nonetheless its persistence remains a critical question. We certainly need an approach, like Craven's and

Blom's, that can substitute an exemplary, everyman figure for the personalized 'Cowper' of the biographies over long stretches of the poem; nonetheless there are many occasions - and they are often nodal points in the poem - when the poet's own 'situation and turn of mind' seem to be brought forcibly before us, clearly inviting a more direct interest. Indeed one could argue that this slow process of self-revelation is a major key to the poem's structure. But that the worst - Cowper's madness and self-loathing - is never revealed, but is instead, if anything, progressively covered over and escaped from, suggests another account: that rather than being a self-revelation the poem is a self-recreation in the shape of the truly exemplary figure who repeatedly subsumes and becomes subsumed in the local and historical figure of 'Cowper'. At the end of the poem Cowper gives a full-length self-portrait in which the particular and the exemplary are merged and tells us that he 'would make his fate his choice', were he 'free to choose'. It is this interplay between a Cowper fated and unfree and a hypothetical Cowper whose life would be self-chosen that determines much of the poem's inner dynamics and stands behind the 'elaborate role-playing' discerned by Boyd. Cowper's own repeated statements that he writes for purposes of self-therapy (which Boyd unreasonably denies) as well as to be useful underwrite this idea of progressive self-creation.

This account does not and should not reopen the floodgates of biographical speculation: the non-exemplary Cowper, the 'I' to whom we are introduced in the poem, is insistently Cowper-as-writer: 'I, who lately sang / Truth, Hope, and Charity'. It is one of the poem's very greatest achievements that it is able to carry a great weight of intensely personal material while playing largely fair by the social contract between writer and reader established very explicitly and deliberately from the first line. When we glimpse evidence of problems and difficulties that are easily elucidated from the biographies, these are usually revealed in parallel with, and ultimately spring from, problems and difficulties in the writing. When he tells his 'hearers' that,

> Aware of nothing arduous in a task
> They never undertook, they little note
> His dangers and escapes
>
> (II, 307-9)

he is insisting, past the pathos or whatever of 'his situation', on the primacy of the relations established within the 'task' of writing. A reading of the poem should constitute itself as a reciprocal task within these terms.

Background

We are repeatedly called on to witness the processes of the poem's self-generation: nonetheless it is not correct to see *The Task* simply (to borrow a term from a contemporary review of Cowper's earlier *Poems* of 1782),[15] as a poem *sui generis*. It repeatedly regenerates itself from earlier works. Lodwick Hartley has dismissed 'source- and influence-hunting' in Cowper's poetry as 'an unexciting game',[16] and Cowper's own assertions that he 'imitated nobody' and that, in 1781 at any rate, he had 'not read an English poet these thirteen years',[17] have contributed to a general lack of critical interest in where, in literature rather than life, *The Task* comes from. But on one level at least the poem is a mixture of various established genres: Wordsworth valuably recognized this when he classed it with Young's *Night Thoughts* as a 'composite' of idyll, didactic poem and philosophical satire.[18] Following Wordsworth's scheme, it is possible to adduce aspects of Horace and of Thomson as major precursors in the idyllic mode, Virgil's *Georgics* and other aspects of Thomson in the didactic mode, and other aspects of Horace in the satirical mode. There are of course other influences: biblical imagery is obviously all-pervasive;[19] it is often (perhaps over-) stated that Milton's style is equally so: and indeed at the beginnings of *The Task*'s first and third books the Miltonic mannerism becomes itself a (comic) formal fact to be escaped from. The already mixed, theoretically spontaneous mode of Young just referred to takes its place in an 'enthusiastic' associationist tradition that I shall deal with shortly. Between and surrounding these influences and Cowper, there is a mass of religious and meditative writing which deserves study but with which this account is not very much concerned; Cowley and Watts, as Christianizers of Horace, are prominent here; and Roderick Huang has dwelt at perhaps over-partial length on Cowper's debt to the meditations of James Hervey.[20] It is I think fair to summarize that a whole mass of religious and exhortatory material is to Cowper's hand whenever he wants to use it (which he does for a good quarter of the poem - a quarter that I admit in advance I shall fail to exhaust), but that although this material supplies him continually with a potent language and often with blueprints for the forms of paradise, crisis, fall, redemption and apocalypse, it is not formally decisive except as modified by more specifically literary models.

Of these models the most important is probably Horace, in both lyric and satirical modes. Cowper is of course connected to Horace through a whole tradition of meditative retirement poetry, but as often

as not he seems to go to Horace directly: I shall attempt to show in later chapters how important sections of *The Task*'s third and fourth books are closely modelled on *Satires*, II.iii and *Odes*, I.ix respectively. It is to Horace that Cowper turns for the ease, the self-deprecation, the 'cheer without inebriation' necessary for his presentation of retirement as 'the golden mean' between 'the little and the great'. From a structural point of view, however, it is important to notice that Cowper 'the English Horace'[21] primarily inhabits the two books that make up the central third of the poem: it is a role that he moves towards and away from. As I hope to show, the move towards it in the third book is attended by tremendous difficulty in the writing and continual argument with his model; and Book IV, in which he briefly enjoys the true Horatian 'ease', depends on an element of self-mockery that reveals itself, in a telling passage, as a 'mask', concealing vacuity beneath a false appearance of being '*task'd* to his full strength'. Far from being a consistently or comfortably Horatian poem, *The Task* is in part a dialectical argument between the Horatian ideals of ease and the golden mean, and the idea of a task; indeed some time before writing it Cowper explored this dialectic by following up a translation of Horace's ode in praise of 'the golden mean' with a 'Reflection' that begins

> And is this all? Can reason do no more
> Than bid me shun the deep and dread the shore?

and ends with a resolve to 'face a thousand dangers' on 'life's rough sea' at duty's call.[22] Here the dialectic is between pagan/worldly 'reason' and Christian duty, and this debate is realized in the structure of *The Task*, whose last two books are more evangelically affirmative than anything that has gone before. It is not that Horatian ease is entirely repudiated, but rather that it is brought into various new relations with the Christian task (often highly contradictory relations - witness such locutions as 'work without labour') to form a new if somewhat unstable synthesis.

This synthesis owes something to a Christian-Horatian tradition for which Cowley and Watts were probably Cowper's chief models. But what we have towards the end of the poem is more strikingly in a Christian pastoral tradition, in which the pagan Golden Age and Christian Millennium are combined and presented at once as a culmination to the cycle of the seasons and as a final resolution of tensions between country and town, alienated poet and society, and perhaps above all mindless or heartfelt labour and 'idle' or sensitive leisure.

Though this last set of terms is also to be found in unsettled contra-

diction in Horace, and Horace the satirist supplies the essential position from which Cowper conducts his continuing argument with the town, I would wish to argue that Horatian 'ease' constitutes one term in an argument whose other pole is not fundamentally one of Christian commitment, but rather one of work: the work designated in the poem's title itself.

The classical model for the poem about work is the georgic: but here something substantial has intervened between Virgil's *Georgics* and Cowper: Thomson's *Seasons*. There are certainly two lengthy and important passages of *The Task* that derive more directly from the 'instruction manual' manner of *The Georgics* but *The Seasons*, in its profound and serious praise of work, provides the other instinctive pole from the ease of Horatian retirement.

Thomson's influence is evident in many, if not most, of *The Task*'s passages of nature description, but structurally it manifests itself chiefly in two ways. *The Seasons* is a major source for the first book, not only in its set-piece landscape descriptions but also in its central declaration of a universal work principle: 'By ceaseless action all that is subsists'; and following that it provides a model, even down to details of sequence, for that book's increasingly perturbed examination of mercantile expansion and exploration overseas. Secondly, Thomson's poem suggests the seasonal structure which, though only picked up halfway through *The Task* without either explanation or symmetry, becomes crucial to it. The snowscapes of the last three books clearly owe a major debt to 'Winter'; but more importantly, in that poem, composed first but finally placed last, Thomson created a 'safe area' from the demands of work exhibited in the seasonal cycle as a whole. By inhabiting this safe area Cowper becomes able to place his own task or lack of it within the whole work cycle that he has not in fact been able to inhabit meaningfully in the first half of the poem - which now becomes by an adroit trick of perspective the poem's outdistanced 'summer' half. Further, by exploiting the Thomsonian value of winter as a time of significant inactivity (perhaps also as a time when inactivity is clearly *felt* as better than the suffering of snowbound travellers and labourers), Cowper enables himself to take fuller advantage of his concluding vision of Millennium as 'an eternal spring' made of 'the various seasons woven into one'. Thomson likewise concludes with a vision of 'one unbounded Spring encircling all',[23] but the conclusion is almost redundant in Thomson since his seasonal cycle is a self-sufficient system; Cowper, by contrast, by meditatively inhabiting winter so fully, has prepared us for a fundamental equation of winter with life itself, from which only one kind of spring can release us.

So far I have referred only glancingly to events which, it seems to me, very concretely and disturbingly 'happen' in the first half of the poem. Perhaps these will be best exhibited by now attempting to put together the Horatian and Thomsonian strands just discussed, with others. In Wordsworth's terms, the lyric Horace and the descriptive Thomson, together with various Christian-pastoral influences, can be seen to contribute to the elements of 'idyll'; and the labour-praising aspect of Thomson, together with a direct though comically mediated response to Virgil's *Georgics*,[24] to the element of 'didactic poem'. The element of 'philosophical satire', which in its pro-country, anti-town orientation indubitably owes a great debt both to Horace and Juvenal and to a long subsequent tradition, remains to be included, together with the recognition that any or all of these elements are constantly liable to be subsumed in the ostensibly overriding 'task' (didactic again) of Evangelical exhortation and instruction.

In undertaking to be about a sofa, *The Task* (though its intended name was still *The Sofa* through at least four books) begins in a genuine no-man's-land. The poet declares his wish for 'repose' on this theme, but immediately begins to re-construct his subject in a mock georgic praising the successive laborious stages of its invention. Apparently triggered by this account of labour leading to indolence, he goes on to demonstrate how in his own case an activity - that of taking country walks - has led to health and, beginning to assimilate to himself various other rural 'tasks', to assert that action is a universal principle of nature. Combining - somewhat dubiously - this principle of active labour with a roving taste in scenery, he shifts his attention to more alien terrain - the sea-coast, the 'wild' inhabited by gypsies, and thence to primitive nations where, it seems, 'the chase for sustenance' inhibits moral growth. So far, except for the crucial wavering instability of the opening, the poem has moved in accord with a Thomsonian vision that is essentially expansive: the eye, expanding over the cultured landscape, encounters a vision of the universal rightness of such culture, which then wills its expansion, through mercantile enterprise, to foreign climes. But now, closely following, indeed, a sequence from Thomson's 'Summer',[25] the poem stumbles on a realization that 'Doing good, / Disinterested good, is not our trade' (I, 673–4), that a Britain that finds its centre in 'gain-devoted cities' (I, 682), rather than in the country that 'God made' will soon lose its empire, that like Sicily - another nation that 'does not feel for man' (II, 9) and has allowed itself to be dominated by the tyranny that is the essential form of the city - it is ripe for destruction by earthquake, fire and flood. This section of the poem culminates in the first quarter of the second book: the sequence of

images is, as I have said, Thomson's, with the crucial difference that whereas in Thomson the accumulating images of barbarism, alienation, cruelty and volcanic destruction lead steadily away from the poet's own world, in Cowper they lead insistently towards it. It is in this passage that a fundamental structural difference between the two poems becomes apparent, which is that each book of *The Seasons* consists of a number of radial thrusts, radiating from the central topic, so that the central tone can always be 'restored'[26] by switching attention to another aspect; whereas *The Task*, having no central topic, is unavoidably bound to linear progression, where there is no quick or easy retreat from a difficulty once lighted on: this fact lies behind the poem's many switches of tone.

Early in the second book, therefore, *The Task* leaves *The Seasons* behind, tonally as well as topically, and takes on the two different models of bitter anti-town satire, more Juvenalian than Horatian, and apocalyptic sermon. The rest of the book conducts an uneasy argument with itself as to which, if any, of these two it is, the problem being, as Cowper makes clear, that he is disqualified for both, that neither is 'meant his task'. (The nature of this disqualification is partly biographical, but the real evidence is crucially before us, in the actual character of the writing.) In spite of his declared disability, however, he 'plunges' forward in a mixture of both kinds at once, to the point of what he frankly confesses at the beginning of the third book to be exhaustion. It is from this point that he attempts to pick up the Horatian positive of retired ease; this is by no means easy to do in the light of his earlier georgic-Thomsonian espousal of labour and his subsequent struggles with the 'task' of moral chastisement. These struggles in fact continue to dominate the first half of the third book in what is indeed 'a species of monodrama',[27] until he becomes able to redefine the idea of a task enigmatically (as 'no unimportant, though a silent, task' (III, 378)) and then paradoxically (in such formulae as 'laborious ease' (III, 361)); and then to fracture it into a series of fertile possibilities ('Fresh for his task, intend what task he may' (III, 387)). These attempts to break down the idea of the task within the poem have the paradoxical effect of establishing as a central theme what was before only a fugitive and implicit one. There follows the mock georgic about growing cucumbers, in which the mockery is really being used to defend and surround a densely symbolic account of the twin tasks of life and poem as now envisaged. The account also pays off old scores: fulfilling explicitly the expectations set up in the first book, and implicitly, for the discerning, those set up in the second.

One extraordinary achievement of this highly complex third book is its creation of multiple perspectives within the poem, whereby 'the poem so far' becomes half-identified with the poet's early life, both being seen as 'left behind' so that the time of the poem overlaps with the spatial distance of rural home from town. This merging of argument into autobiography, scrupulously enacted within the terms of the writing, now at last permits the frank placing in the fourth book of the poet in a specific setting: the full ease of Horatian retirement, the full absolution from labour of Thomson's winter. Structurally the last three books are far simpler to comprehend, and I have already given some account of them. Briefly, the fourth book begins in the winter ease I have mentioned, and moves out from this position of security into a disquisition on country life that is perhaps best seen as Cowper's brand of anti-pastoral. The fifth book marks a step out from this security, and again seems to follow a sequence of images from Thomson to a point where a self-generating argument takes over; unlike Books I and II, however, the argument here remains positive; indeed it addresses itself successfully to issues – tyranny, warfare, suffering – that were forced as it were underground in the tonal catastrophe of Book II, when a sequence from Thomson's 'Summer' was followed, as here a sequence from 'Winter'. Following all this groundwork it is not hard for the sixth and final book, after another concrete scene that now throws a rosy retrospect over life and poem simultaneously, to suggest an equation between spiritual activity, winter inactivity and life itself, so that the final vision of the Millennium, heralded as it is by Christian pastoral, by Thomson and by Virgil's *Fourth Eclogue*, can appear as a consummation of all the values so far established, but above all of the poem's rival yearnings for society and solitude; for labour and ease. The poem's coda, dissolving all these values back into the texture of an individual life, produces finally that vindicated vision of the poet as exemplary man that it has been the aim of *The Task* to achieve.

It will be worth glancing briefly, before proceeding further, at Cowper's own accounts of the poem's structure. The foregoing outline of this structure should help to place in perspective Cowper's own assertion to Unwin that 'the whole has one tendency. To discountenance the modern enthusiasm of a London Life, and to recommend rural ease and leisure, as friendly to the cause of piety and virtue' (10 October 1784). The word 'tendency' here is circumspectly chosen: 'ease and leisure' hardly seem to be recommended in the strenuous georgic and satirical-sermonizing emphasis of the first two books, although when the Horatian formula has been eventually established in the middle two,