

# William Cowper's Olney Hymns:

## A Critical Study

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**Arthur F. Pollard**

We recognize all too rarely the individuality of the hymns we sing. Most of us would readily name our favourite hymns, but why are they our favourites? Have we ever tried to analyse their peculiar appeal? Have we, that is, examined their individuality, what it is that makes them what they are and that makes them different from other hymns? Even the hymnologists pay little heed to this problem, being usually concerned with a hymn's history rather than its analysis. Nor are the literary critics usually very interested. Perhaps the plethora of, from their point of view, bad hymns has caused them to ignore the good ones. Perhaps also they have failed to appreciate the singular nature of the hymn as a literary kind. In literature generally, uniqueness is one criterion of excellence. This is not so, or if it is, only in a minor degree with the hymn, because the hymn is very much a public performance. It is the expression not only of the author, but seeks also to become the publicly avowed expression of its audience. They must approve its doctrine and identify themselves with its mood. The doctrine must therefore be fundamental to, and the mood universal in, the experience of the Church. There is yet another requirement. The statement must be simple, concise and direct. How do William Cowper's *Olney Hymns* meet these demands?

Before attempting to answer this question, I must briefly place these hymns in their historical setting. Cowper's life (1731-1800) spanned the golden age of Evangelical hymnody from Watts, through Wesley, to its not inglorious close in the hymns which form the subject of this paper. Cowper was by nature shy, sensitive and wholly lacking in self-confidence. Indeed, when he was faced in 1763 with the prospect of a public examination for a House of Lords clerkship, he became deranged. On his recovery he was converted, and found happiness in the Evangelical society of the Unwin household, first at Huntingdon and later with the then widowed Mrs. Unwin at Olney (Buckinghamshire), whither they moved to enjoy the ministry of the fiery converted slave-trader, John Newton. He it was who suggested the joint effort which resulted in the *Olney Hymns*. This collection is divided into three books, the first "On select texts of Scripture", the second "On occasional subjects", and the last "On the progress and changes of the spiritual life". It was published in February 1779 and contains 348 hymns, 67 of which were Cowper's. Most of these were written between 1771 and 1773 when Cowper suffered another attack of insanity. A few, however, are earlier. About a dozen of the Olney Hymns are still sung. They include Newton's "Glorious things of thee are spoken", "Approach, my soul, the mercy-seat", and "How sweet the name of Jesus sounds", and Cowper's "God moves in a mysterious way", "Hark, my soul! it is the Lord", "Jesus, where'er thy people meet", "Sometimes a light surprises", and "Oh! for a closer walk with God".

One other hymn is often, too often, honoured by careful omission, "There is a fountain fill'd with blood". Much modern taste finds it repulsive. Fausset, for instance, talks of "the barbarous concomitants of sacrificial suffering judiciously inflicted by the God of Evangelicalism for the purpose of redemption" (*William Cowper*, 1928, p. 121). One critic, however, Norman Nicholson, calls it that "splendid sacramental hymn", in which "we are aware, not only of the rituals of the Old Testament, but of sub-strata of significance which

cannot be explained by rational exegesis” (*William Cowper*, 1951, pp. 78, 79). For him the symbols represent not mere barbaric survivals, but living realities in Christian experience. I myself regard this hymn as central to any study of the collection in which it is found.

Considering first the doctrinal basis of the *Olney Hymns*, I must quote as preface Cowper’s comment on that eighteenth-century theological classic, Marshall on Sanctification. In a letter of March 11th, 1767 he wrote:

“The doctrines he maintains are, under the influence of the spirit of Christ, the very life of my soul, and the soul of all my happiness: that Jesus is a present Saviour from the guilt of sin by His precious blood, and from the power of it by His spirit; that corrupt and wretched in ourselves, in Him, and in Him only, we are complete; that being united to Jesus by a lively faith, we have a solid and eternal interest in His obedience and sufferings, to justify us before the face of our heavenly Father; and that all this inestimable treasure, the earnest of which is in grace, and its consummation in glory, is given, freely given to us of God; in short, that He hath opened the Kingdom of heaven to all believers” (*Correspondence*, ed. Wright, I. 88-89).

The link between these views and those of the hymn is immediately obvious. In both the primary stress falls upon redemption through the blood of Christ. The hymn opens boldly and vividly:

“There is a fountain fill’d with blood  
Drawn from Emmanuel’s veins” (I. Ixxix. 1-2).

The hypersensitive may find this crude, but Cowper makes no concessions to exaggerated refinement. He adheres steadfastly to the Biblical account of the manner and means of redemption. Not only is this hymn alleged to be crude; it is also objected that Cowper presents an unworthy idea of God as a deity requiring to be placated by bloody sacrifice. To support their criticism, the objectors invoke also the sentiments of other hymns, such as the lines:

“Jesus, whose blood so freely stream’d  
To satisfy the law’s demand;  
By thee from guilt and wrath redeem’d,  
Before the Father’s face I stand.  
“To reconcile offending man,  
Make Justice drop her angry rod:  
What creature could have form’d the plan,  
Or who fulfil it but a God.” (I.xxii. 1-8)

This, they say, is a God of wrath. Such objections ignore two truths. The first is that justice is essential to the holiness of God. The second may be appropriately illustrated by further quotations from the hymn just cited, “Jehovah-Shalom, The Lord send Peace,” which speaks of

‘Peace, by his injur’d Sovereign wrought,  
His Sov’reign fast’ned to a tree” (ib. 15-16),

and concludes that the forces of hell

“Cannot quench thy love to me,  
Nor rob me of the Lord my peace.” (ib. 23-24)

The angry God ends, as the hymn's title promised, as "the Lord my peace". He does so because Cowper ever retained the vision of the unity in God. It was not a question of a Jehovah-tyrant demanding the blood of a Jesus-victim. "I and my Father are one"—"Jehovah-Jesus", as II. xxxviii is entitled, one in creation and redemption:

"In wisdom thou hast made us,  
And died for us in love" (I. Iii. 23-24),

in justice and in love :

'Unfathomable wonder,  
And mystery divine!  
The Voice that speaks in thunder,  
Says, 'Sinner I am thine!'" (ib. 29-32)

So much for Cowper's doctrine of God. What of his doctrine of man? In the second verse of "There is a fountain":

"The dying thief rejoic'd to see  
That fountain in his day;  
And there have I, as vile as he,  
Wash'd all my sins away" (I. Ixxix. 5-8),

we note his humility, as he regards his own total depravity, and his joy in the accomplished redemption. Together this humility and joy determine the characteristic mood of the hymns, the personal reaction to the doctrines accepted. Some of the critics have claimed that Cowper's self-humiliation was the worst possible exercise for a man of his temperament. This is questionable, but it is more than possible that such humiliation would have characterized Cowper, Evangelicalism or no Evangelicalism. After all, it was a similar condition, lack of self-confidence, which sent him mad at the prospect of a public examination, years before he came into contact with Evangelicalism. In fact, the faith he found gave him rational grounds for his extreme humility, and at the same time, an opportunity for exaltation in the knowledge of election before God, chosen to be saved by the blood of Christ. No wonder he rejoiced in that fountain. Worthless but chosen—in that Calvinistic paradox, Cowper found strength and assurance. One can see this strength and assurance in the structure of the hymns, how, for instance, "Jehovah Shalom" (quoted above) moves compellingly from the curse on man to his peace in God, or again, how "Jehovah our Righteousness" (I. lxxvii), beginning with the bald contrast:

"My God, how perfect are thy ways!  
But mine polluted are"; (1-2)

progresses through a series of confessions showing how

"Self upon the surface floats  
Still bubbling from below" (15-16)

to the final, confident appropriation of the promise,

"The Lord shall be my righteousness;

The Lord for ever mine.” (19-20)

Cowper is beset by self-distrust (I.iii, xiv), the sense of sinful isolation (I. Ixiv), “unbelief, self-will, self-righteousness, and pride” (I. xvii. 25-26), but in the depth of distress he possesses the quiet strength of prayer (III. x, xxviii) and the sublime confidence in the unerring wisdom of God. This last theme has never surely been better stated than in the hymn, “God moves in a mysterious way” (III. xv). Its ending:

“Blind unbelief is sure to err,  
And scan his work in vain;  
God is His own interpreter,  
And He will make it plain.” (21-24)

is no merely “reassuring conclusion” to “a piteous attempt at self-persuasion” (R. Lawrence, “The English Hymn,” *Essays and Studies*, New Series, VII (1954), p. 117), but yet another triumphant inference from what has gone before. From faith such as this there comes serenity, that “Joy and Peace in Believing”, as “Sometimes a light surprises” is entitled. The last verse of this hymn with its unobtrusive but appropriate reminiscence of Habakkuk, so typical of Cowper’s habit of Biblical quotation, aptly sums up this spiritual condition:

“Though vine, nor fig-tree neither,  
Their wonted fruit should bear,  
Tho’ all the fields should wither,  
Nor flocks, nor herds, be there:  
Yet God the same abiding,  
His praise shall tune my voice;  
For while in him confiding,  
I cannot but rejoice.” (III. xIviii. 25-32)

Here is the note of joy in Cowper’s religious experience, which we remarked above in the second verse of “There is a fountain”. In fact, that verse mentions the dying thief’s joy, but the rest of the hymn is a statement of Cowper’s own, of joy expressed in praise. It is enough to quote the fourth and fifth verses:

“E’er since, by faith, I saw the stream  
Thy flowing wounds supply;  
Redeeming love has been my theme,  
And shall be till I die.

“Then in a nobler, sweeter song  
I’ll sing thy power to save;  
When this poor lisping, stammering tongue  
Lies silent in the grave.” (I. Ixxix. 13-20).

From utter self-abasement to constant exultation, that was the progress Cowper desired. That he did not fully attain it was the consequence of his and of all human frailty; that he went as far as he did, and there is plenty of exultation in his *Olney Hymns*, was the result of his finding a faith more suited to his temperament than any other his generation could offer.

But what of those who sang and still sing Cowper’s hymns? Is the mood which these hymns reproduce universal in the experience of the Church? There is the empirical answer; if we do, in fact, still sing some of these hymns, their survival would appear to prove that these at least

satisfy our question. Of course, hymns sometimes survive through the composer's ability—they have good tunes—and sometimes even by congregations' inattention—they have not examined the contents very closely. Putting aside these two accidental circumstances, what of Cowper's hymns? Many are forgotten, and perhaps deserve to be. No doubt the reader will have met some unfamiliar quotations above. But among those that remain, the sense of the incomprehensible but benevolent purposes of God (in "God moves in a mysterious way"), of separation from remembered joys of communion (in "Oh! for a closer walk with God"), of striving worthily to love God (in "Hark, my soul, it is the Lord") and, however fastidious we may have become about the elemental events of our religion and their significance, of sin and the need for grace these evoke a universal response. Hymns such as these remain by the indestructible validity of their message and by the vitality they receive from the reality of that message in Cowper's experience.

The mode of expression—framework, vocabulary, rhythms and imagery—testifies to this vitality. The logic of statement conveys the impression of irresistible progress. The structure of "Jehovah-Shalom" has been used to illustrate this above. It is evident again in "There is a fountain", as it moves from statement (the cleansing blood) (1-4) to personal application (5-8), assertion (the blood will never lose its power) (9-12), and on to praise now (13-16) and hereafter (17-28). Perhaps, for compactness of organization, a better example still is "Oh! for a closer walk with God". From the deeply sincere aspiration of this first line the hymn moves through self-examination and petition to aspiration fulfilled. After lamentful questioning recollection:

"Where is the blessedness I knew  
When first I saw the Lord?" (I. iii. 5-6),

and the confession of present spiritual barrenness (11-12). Cowper pleads for the return of the Spirit and declares his repentance (13-16). With sin driven out, aspiration becomes attainment. The statement of the hymn has reached its logical conclusion, a fact emphasized both by its extensive repetition of, and by its slight though significant differences from, the first verse:

"So shall my walk be close with God,  
Calm and serene my frame;  
So purer light shall mark the road  
That leads me to the Lamb." (ib. 23-24)

The logic derives its compulsion from the integrity of the statement. Cowper, we feel, is honestly recounting actual experience, but (and this is important for a successful hymn) there is nothing eccentric about the experience. Some of us may have had it; it appears possible that we all could have it. The hymn is an acceptable public statement.

Cowper's imagery also contributes to the requirements of the hymn as public statement. It is ordinary, as it must be. An unusual image in a hymn is often disturbing. It is ordinary in the way that Biblical imagery is ordinary; its range is restricted, and it takes the common things of life to which widely accepted significances are attached as its basic material. Water is cleansing, streams refreshing, and storms threatening. It is, however, with none of these, but with the worm image, representative of man's worthlessness, that I wish to begin. Critics have found Cowper's use of this image a further indication of unhealthy self-abasement.

Certainly the sense of sin and weakness is there, but complementary to this there is faith, complete in its dependence and in its confidence:

“Now, Lord, thy feeble worm prepare!  
For strife with earth and hell begins;  
Confirm and gird me for the war.” (I. xxii. 17-19)

I must quote one other image of Cowper’s humility, in which also his joy is expressed. In it, through his suggestion of glad prostration before the Lord, he approaches a sensuousness reminiscent of Renaissance art, and with this he combines a neat, apparent contrast that would not have been unworthy of the Metaphysical school of poetry:

“‘Tis joy enough, my All in All,  
At thy dear feet to lie;  
Thou wilt not let me lower fall,  
And none can higher fly.” (III. Ixix. 21-24)

Ordinary imagery of the kind used in hymns ensures that a meaning is easily and clearly attached to the image. Its drawback, however, is that, in being ordinary, it may lose its appeal. The endeavour must always be to retain, or infuse, freshness. In this connection Cowper’s use of the “fountain/stream” image is interesting. I take two examples. In each there is the usual regularity of reference—cleansing blood and refreshing grace—backed by the wealth of similar Biblical allusions. In the first:

“I want that grace that springs from thee,  
That quickens all things where it flows;  
And makes a wretched thorn, like me,  
Bloom as the myrtle or the rose.

“Dear fountain of delight unknown!  
No longer sink below the brim,  
But overflow, and pour me down  
A living, and life-giving stream!” (III. Ixi. 9-16),

the genuineness of Cowper’s plea is implicit in the images. One can see how “a tree planted by the rivers of water” (Psalm 1. 3) and “the desert shall blossom as the rose” (Isaiah 35. 1) have become part at once both of his spiritual and his literary consciousness. These lines, that is, are a vital statement of his experience. They succeed at their own level of intensity. But for a more profound level let us return to where we began:

“There is a fountain fill’d with blood  
Drawn from Emmanuel’s veins;  
And sinners plung’d beneath that flood  
Lose all their guilty stains.”

The lines in the first example are truthful, elegant, sincere. These are thrilling, almost terrifying, nakedly candid and vehemently fervent. Here in concentrated, passionate symbolism is the fundamental meaning of the Crucifixion. It cannot be paraphrased; it can only be felt. One can understand Nicholson’s writing of this hymn: “For my own part, there are few poems in the English language which evoke such a response in the lower layers of consciousness: it seems to set root-tips moving and searching in my mind, drawing on the

hidden stores of unrememberable memory” (*William Cowper*, 1951, p. 79). Is this image too intense for public avowal? Or is the average twentieth-century congregation too fastidious? As Nicholson says, “If this hymn is in bad taste, then Christianity is in bad taste” (ib.). Its doctrine is impeccable, its mood passionately sincere, its statement simple and direct, and it presents an experience which, though necessarily in varying measure, ought to be shared with Cowper by all his Christian readers. For me, it remains the supreme example of the depth to which, with an image drawn from the restricted range at his lawful disposal, the hymn-writer can reach and can carry his reader successfully with him.

The *Olney Hymns*, with their fidelity to fundamental Christian doctrine, their portrayal of Cowper’s sense of God’s power and love, his humility and joy, expressed in language always adequate and sometimes sublime, may without injustice be described, in the main, in the words which Ralph Lawrence (*op. cit.*, p. 118) used of the first verse of “Oh! for a closer walk with God”. “Here in Cowper is Everyman made vocal.” No higher tribute can be paid to a writer of hymns.

**ARTHUR POLLARD**