CHAPTER XVII

NOTE ON COWPER

IN a very intimate way Cowper is related in literature to Crabbe; and he is, in certain ways, quite as interesting. I want to give you a little lecture about him just because he is so little known and so little studied in Japan. There are several reasons for this, but none of them good reasons. Perhaps the best reason is that Cowper has been latterly neglected in England, and there is a tendency in Japan to estimate him by the standard of foreign thinkers, by contemporary foreign judgment; this is an unfortunate tendency, but it cannot be helped at the present time. Another reason may be found in Cowper's religion, his eccentricities —in the general comprehension of the fact that he was almost fanatically religious, and therefore sometimes tiresome enough to the student who wants poetry in the true state. However, as I said, none of the reasons for our indifference to Cowper are good reasons. His religion no more spoils his poetry at its best than the religion of Wordsworth spoiled "The Excursion." As for power of natural description, he is very valuable to compare either with Wordsworth or with Thomson; and he has a peculiar flavour, different from either. He is almost as much a realist as Crabbe, but in another way. Crabbe did not care about natural scenery and natural beauty in themselves. He saw them only as a part of the great theatre on whose stage human life is being acted in all varieties of tragedy, comedy or melodrama. But Cowper loved nature in herself, loved hills and trees and woods, and all the aspects of the seasons, just as much as Thomson did before him or as Wordsworth did after him. But he describes like Crabbe;

he is a realist of the finest kind. He is not able to do what Crabbe did in regard to painting human nature; but he can paint all other nature as well as any English poet before Tennyson. As I say, it is his realism that relates him to Crabbe; and, like Crabbe, he kept to classic forms. But he is so different as to invite a separate study for his own sake—quite independently of anterior and posterior relationships.

A few extracts from a very great poet may, if well chosen, serve quite as good a purpose as a great many. I am not going to devote very many hours to Cowper; but I am going to offer you examples of his different moods and capacities, in the form of three or four selections. He has considerable variety of power. We like, as a rule, bright skies and plenty of sunshine even in poetry, and Cowper to many people seems grey, like a cloudy afternoon. But really this is a mistake. There is a good deal of colour and sun to be found in Cowper, if you will take the trouble to look for them. Moreover, the colour is not merely objective—it is often emotional. As an emotional poet, as a descriptive poet, and as a didactic poet, Cowper is equally interesting. I shall begin with a very simple quotation, to illustrate the emotional side of his poetry. There is a personal note in the poem; but that personal note is the sort that can be felt by any reader of any country. I am sure that you will be reminded at once of many Japanese poems — old classic poems particularly—by a piece entitled "The Shrubbery."

The title itself requires a word of explanation. The word "shrubbery" has an almost exclusively English meaning, and that meaning has changed a little since Cowper's time. What Cowper meant by "shrubbery" was not a grove, not a great conservatory of small rare branches, but a garden of trees, artificially arranged so as to make a pleasant, shady walking place during the hot season. To-day, the word "shrubbery" refers rather to the establishment of a professional gardener.

Oh, happy shades—to me unblest!
  Friendly to peace, but not to me!
How ill the scene that offers rest,
  And heart that cannot rest, agree!

This glassy stream, that spreading pine,
  Those alders quiv'ring to the breeze,
Might soothe a soul less hurt than mine,
  And please, if any thing could please.

But fix't unalterable care
  Foregoes not what she feels within,
Shows the same sadness ev'ry where,
  And slights the season and the scene.

For all that pleas'd in wood or lawn,
  While peace possess'd these silent bow'rs,
Her animating smile withdrawn,
  Has lost its beauties and its pow'rs.

The saint or moralist should tread
  This moss-grown alley, musing, slow;
They seek, like me, the secret shade,
  But not, like me, to nourish woe!

Me fruitful scenes and prospects waste
  Alike admonish not to roam;
These tell me of enjoyments past,
  And those of sorrows yet to come.

Very plain, this composition; but you will find on reading it that the experience suggested is common to all thinking human lives. Natural scenery cannot make us happy in a time of great moral pain, or of great sorrow caused by the death of some one whom we have loved. On the contrary, at such times the beautiful sky, beautiful flowers, beautiful lights and shadows of familiar distances only make us much more unhappy because they all remind us of past happiness that never can return — happiness shared with others. Perhaps the more beautiful the place, the more we

feel this. Solitary meditation is indeed the greatest possible happiness to those following intellectual pursuits with earnest zest; but even solitary meditation must cease to be pleasure when the mind continues to be haunted by some very great sorrow. Think, for example, of what it means to see again when you are an old man, the garden where you played with your mother and little brothers and sisters as a child — especially if that garden has long passed into the hands of strangers.

In the matter of describing nature realistically, a great poet finds no difficulty in handling the most commonplace details — I mean that he can describe stones and dust and broken fences quite as effectively as you can describe purple shadows of distance, or the flickering of sunlight upon water. Cowper is astonishingly clever in using the most commonplace details so as to make a fine effect with them. You have all known the sensations of walking about in the country just before sunset, when the light changes colour, and comes slantingly across the land, making the tops of shrubs and grasses appear more beautiful than at any other time, and throwing long queer shadows everywhere. Do you not remember, in some such sunset time, to have watched your own shadow as you walked,—lengthening out prodigiously, fantastically, — sometimes running up trees, sometimes running up the side of a house? In such a moment, perhaps, the upper part of the shadow ascends to the roof and disappears there, while the lower part of the shadow only, the legs, continues to walk along the surface of the wall. But I do not know whether any Japanese poet has described such effects. If any one has, I should like to have you compare his description with these lines of Cowper. Speaking of the sun at the horizon, he says—

> His slanting ray
> Slides ineffectual down the snowy vale,
> And, tinging all with his own rosy hue,
> From ev'ry herb and ev'ry spiry blade
> Stretches a length of shadow o'er the field.

Mine, spindling into longitude immense,
In spite of gravity, and sage remark
That I myself am but a fleeting shade,
Provokes me to a smile. With eye askance
I view the muscular proportion'd limb
Transform'd to a lean shank. The shapeless pair,
As they design'd to mock me, at my side
Take step for step; and, as I near approach
The cottage, walk along the plaster'd wall,
Prepost'rous sight! the legs without the man.*

All the details — both objective and subjective—have an extraordinary vividness. You may very easily forget the words of the sketch; but you never can forget the picture —it remains in the mind as distinct as the memory of something actually seen with the eyes. And Cowper is just as vivid in his meditative as he is in his descriptive passages, —he makes you think with him for the moment, and in after years the thought always remains unchanged. Have you ever read his little account of a country postman, coming to the house in the evening with his heavy package of papers and letters? If you have not, you should read it; for there is nothing like it in any other English poetry. It describes conditions that have passed, but in spite of this it describes much that cannot pass, expressing in a few sentences the whole romance of a thousand different emotions that the coming postman brings. To some persons he brings great sorrow — news of death, news of ruin. To others he brings great joy—messages of love. But he himself neither knows nor cares what he brings; his only thought is to perform his duty as quickly and correctly as possible. There is a sort of strange romance in the real function of the humblest postman or telegraph messenger, if you come to think about it. The one, bearing his sack of mail, and plodding through wet or dry in all seasons from house to house; the other, sending or receiving messages ticked over the wires that spread all over the earth and under every sea

* *The Task* [Book V] *The Winter Morning Walk*, ll. 6—20.

—either of these realizes, after a fashion, that ancient fancy of angels or spirit messengers bringing death and life with equal exactness and indifference — themselves feeling no sympathy with either the suffering caused or the joy imparted. So great artists used to paint the faces of the angels in such a way as to show that they were without love or hate or pity—passionless and superhuman. But let us turn to the quaint picture which Cowper wrote of the English country postman of a hundred years ago — not a celestial being, by any means, but in the exercise of his duty quite as impassive as any angel need be. In those times, he used to blow a horn to announce his coming,— and I can still remember that, when I was a very little boy, living at a town called Clontarf in Ireland, the old custom still lingered there; and the postman used to ride along the street sounding his horn.

Hark! 'tis the twanging horn o'er yonder bridge,
. . . . . .
He comes, the herald of a noisy world,
With spatter'd boots, strapp'd waist, and frozen locks;
News from all nations lumb'ring at his back.
True to his charge, the close-pack'd load behind,
Yet careless what he brings, his one concern
Is to conduct it to the destin'd inn:
And, having dropp'd th' expected bag, pass on.
He whistles as he goes, light-hearted wretch,
Cold and yet cheerful: messenger of grief
Perhaps to thousands, and of joy to some;
To him indiff'rent whether grief or joy.
Houses in ashes, and the fall of stocks,
Births, deaths, and marriages, epistles wet
With tears, that trickled down the writer's cheeks
Fast as the periods from his fluent quill,
Or charg'd with am'rous sighs of absent swains,
Or nymphs responsive, equally affect
His horse and him, unconscious of them all.*

* *The Task* [Book IV] *The Winter Evening*, ll. 1—22

There are here also some flashes of character observation,—and Cowper could be almost as clever as Crabbe in drawing character, whether as a satirist of evil or as a praiser of good. One specimen of his power in either direction will do. You may remember Crabbe's strong and cruel picture of English schoolboy life. Cowper was very unhappy at school, and he wrote more terrible things about English schools than did Crabbe. But unlike Crabbe he proposed a remedy for some of the existing evils, and it is a curious fact that he anticipated the views of Herbert Spencer on the subject of domestic education. You know Spencer declares that every father who has the ability and the time to teach his own children ought to teach them all, not to send them at a tender age to strangers in order to learn the simple rudiments of knowledge. English people still, however, send their children far away to boarding schools while they are still only children, and the natural result is that their characters are quickly hardened and spoiled. Of course it is laziness or pride or impatience that accounts for the disinclination of thousands of English parents to teach their little ones; but they claim that it is better for the child to be made rough and hard in character as soon as possible. I believe this way of treating children will at length be abandoned; yet the condition will scarcely be changed even in a hundred years more. That Cowper should have taught the simple truth about the matter a hundred years ago is proof sufficient that in a certain direction he was very much in advance of his age.

> A father blest with an ingenuous son—
> Father, and friend, and tutor, all in one.
> How!—turn again to tales long since forgot,
> Æsop, and Phædrus, and the rest?—Why not?
> He will not blush that has a father's heart,
> To take in childish plays a childish part;
> But bends his sturdy back to any toy
> That youth takes pleasure in, to please his boy:
> Then why resign into a stranger's hand

A task as much within your own command,
That God and nature, and your int'rest too,
Seem with one voice to delegate to you?
Why hire a lodging in a house unknown
For one whose tend'rest thoughts all hover round your own?*

And the poet goes on to describe the parting—how unhappy a little fellow is at being obliged to leave suddenly everybody that he knows and loves, and how much pain the parents also feel at this foolish separation enforced only by a brutal custom. But the consequences of the separation are disastrous. All the time that the boy is away from home, a year or two years, he is thinking of the joy of return—but he does not know how much his own character is being changed for the worse by this absence, and when he does come home,—

Arriv'd, he feels an unexpected change;
He blushes, hangs his head, is shy and strange,
No longer takes, as once, with fearless ease,
His fav'rite stand between his father's knees,
But seeks the corner of some distant seat,
And eyes the door, and watches a retreat,
And, least familiar where he should be most,
Feels all his happiest privileges lost.
Alas, poor boy!—the natural effect
Of love by absence chill'd into respect.†

Of course the child's capacity for frankness and love has been destroyed by the brutality of school life — where the least display of sincere affection, or the least evidence of the longing for home, brings mock and ridicule, and the boy only learns on returning home that he is afraid to be openly loving and frank as before. His parents now seem to be cold, yet it is not they who have been thus changed, but himself. He wants to be away from them again, to go out and play with boys of his age, because he feels himself misunderstood. And what advantages has the boy gained at

* *Tirocinium: or, a Review of Schools.* ll. 543—56. † *Ibid.* ll. 567—76.

school to make up for the loss of love and frankness? Precisely nothing at all, though he may have gained some bad habit—for example, an inclination to lie or to be selfish. If the boy had been kept at home until his character had been somewhat developed and strengthened, and if he had been taught at home, he would have been very much better and wiser. Moreover, the injury done can never, never be repaired. Happily in this country there are no conditions like those described by Cowper. The Japanese child is not entirely separated from home in the first years of school life. But if the time should ever come when he will be, there will be a great change of character for the worse.

The gentle character of the poet did not prevent him from occasionally showing great severity as a satirist. Indeed, we must suppose that gentle natures most strongly feel the wrong of this world—though few of them may care to busy themselves by describing and denouncing it. All wrong is ugliness—want of harmony in some form or other; and beauty is rather the true subject of poetry. But when the gentle poet does happen to be strongly aroused by anger or disgust, he can be much more severe than the average satirist, the merely professional poet of aggression; in our own day we have had strange examples of this—for example, in Tennyson's terrible reply to the elder Bulwer-Lytton, in Browning's ferocious sonnet attacking poor Fitzgerald (who did not really deserve such treatment, especially after his death), and in Rossetti's extraordinary verses about the clergyman who, in his own garden, cut down a tree that had been planted by the hand of Shakespeare. These incidents occurred in a much more kindly age than the eighteenth century, so, after all, we need not be astonished to find Cowper composing these lines about Chesterfield. You will remember how Johnson detested Chesterfield, upon both moral and personal grounds. Cowper's detestation was only moral, but it was even stronger than Johnson's. The poem is simply entitled "The Man of the

World" — by which phrase we always mean the man of society and convention.

> Petronius! all the muses weep for thee;
> But ev'ry tear shall scald thy memory:
> The graces too, while virtue at their shrine
> Lay bleeding under that soft hand of thine,
> Felt each a mortal stab in her own breast,
> Abhorr'd the sacrifice, and curst the priest.
> Thou polish'd and high-finish'd foe to truth,
> Grey-beard corrupter of our list'ning youth,
> To purge and skim away the filth of vice,
> That, so refin'd, it might the more entice,
> Then pour it on the morals of thy son,
> To taint *his* heart, was worthy of *thine own*
> Now, while the poison all high life pervades,
> Write, if thou canst, one letter from the shades;
> One, and one only, charg'd with deep regret
> That thy worst part, thy principles, live yet;
> One sad epistle thence may cure mankind
> Of the plague spread by bundles left behind.*

The very first word of these verses is a whole satire by itself. The name "Petronius" refers to the Roman author Petronius Arbiter, said to have been a kind of master of ceremonies at the court of the Emperor Nero. He wrote the book called "The Satyricon," which has great archæological value because it has told us hundreds of curious things about the private lives of the Romans under the empire, but is nevertheless an extremely immoral book, treating of vices whose very names are not mentioned to-day. But Petronius pretended that he wrote the book in the interest of virtue. Cowper suggests that Chesterfield's letters to his son are just as bad in another way as were the writings of Petronius, and that they were tainted with the hypocritical pretence of aiding virtue. What Chesterfield really tried to do, says Cowper, was to make vice more attractive by representing it without its natural ugliness,—by painting it as

* *The Progress of Error*, ll. 335—52.

beautiful and fashionable. And it was into the heart of his son that he poured this poison! Now all high society has been corrupted by Chesterfield's teaching. "Oh, can you not write just one letter from the world of ghosts, only to tell the living that you are sorry for those bundles of letters which you wrote to your son?" asked Cowper. And observe that the poet is not indifferent to the literary charm of Chesterfield's style. He acknowledges that all the muses weep for him — that is to say, that his death is a loss to literary art. But he thinks that the tears of the muses ought to be a torture to the dead man, because he used his great talent in a wicked way. I may tell you here that there is a distant allusion, indicated by the use of the word "scald," to the old folklore story that the tears of the living burn the dead like drops of fire—so that we must not give way to our grief for those whom we have lost.

The above is sufficient example of what Cowper could do in an unpleasant direction; but there are many more examples in his poems of strong denunciation, mingled with remarkable studies of character. Few poets have been more many-sided, but of the many aspects of Cowper I think we like best his love of love, and his love of nature. We need not trouble ourselves about his religious gloom, nor about his reflections—dark enough—regarding the society and the politics of his time. But when he speaks of a beautiful landscape or of a boy's delight in play, or of the loving duties of parents, or of filial piety — then we find in him something entirely different from any other poet, and strangely sweet. Here, for example, are a few lines about the regret which we feel for our parents, when those parents can no longer know:

> We lov'd, but not enough, the gentle hand
> That rear'd us. At a thoughtless age, allur'd
> By ev'ry gilded folly, we renounc'd
> His shelt'ring side, and wilfully forewent
> That converse which we now in vain regret.
> How gladly would the man recall to life

The boy's neglected sire! a mother too,
That softer friend, perhaps more gladly still,
Might he demand them at the gates of death.
Sorrow has, since they went, subdu'd and tam'd
The playful humour; he could now endure,
(Himself grown sober in the vale of tears)
And feel a parent's presence no restraint.
But not to understand a treasure's worth
Till time has stol'n away the slighted good,
Is cause of half the poverty we feel,
And makes the world the wilderness it is.*

Need I remind you of a Japanese proverb which states exactly the same truth about the relation of child to parents? There is nothing here which is not as much Japanese as English, though it is the work of an Englishman a hundred years ago. For the great poet touches strings of the heart that produce the same kind of music to all times and all places. Of course the real fact cannot be helped by the child—though he may afterwards regret it. He does not like to talk with his father and mother better than to play with little boys of his own age; and when the father comes to look at the playing, the little fellow becomes shy, and feels afraid to be quite himself. So it is only at long intervals that he has a friendly talk with his father, but when he grows up and finds out how cruel the struggle of our life is, and how few good friends can be obtained in this world —then he remembers his father and mother, wishes that he could talk to them, and recollects how in times when they wanted him to talk to them, he preferred to play. Of course this late knowledge, as Cowper says, is one of the tragedies of life. But the fault may often be more the parents' than the child's. If a father cannot make himself a child in feeling for the sake of his little boy, and play with him like a boy, then it is natural that the child should feel strange with him. The mother usually understands the little heart much better, and gets more of the child's love,

* *The Task* [Book VI] *The Winter Walk at Noon*, ll. 37—53.

as the poet suggests. The father's thoughts are apt to be too much occupied with business.

There is yet one more thing to remember about Cowper; he was not only a humourist, but one who delighted to play with all the bright trifles of life. The man who in his moments of religious fanaticism was almost maddened with melancholy, could in other moments make the whole world laugh; and the world still laughs at "The Diverting History of John Gilpin," which I suppose you have all read. Moreover, he delighted to play with pet dogs, pet animals of any kind, but especially hares. The hares of Cowper have become famous in literature, for he wrote poems about them, and he composed a very pretty epitaph for the tomb of one that died. You know that these creatures are very shy in their wild state, and Cowper's pets were wild hares, not caged creatures like rabbits. Indeed he seems to have had something of the same understanding about creatures as the wonderful American Thoreau, although Thoreau was altogether a more extraordinary man. Thoreau lived in the woods with wild creatures; he could make the wild birds come to his hand, and the fish of the rivers knew him and would follow his shadow. But Thoreau had no religious notions about him; and Cowper's dark ideas of the universe probably prevented him from enjoying to the utmost those pleasures of companionship with animals and birds that his natural faculties fitted him for. If you want to make animals understand you, as well as love you, you must not refuse to believe that they have souls — by souls I mean a thinking life. However, Cowper could make his hares and his dogs love him, and he wrote some pretty poems about both. I think you will remember the story of his spaniel, who seeing his master vainly trying to reach a flower growing in the river by which they had been walking together, jumped into the stream, took the stalk of the flower between his teeth, bit it off and brought it to his master. At least this little poem, "The Dog and the Water-Lily," is now in almost every anthology. It is written in the eighteenth

century style — much like Gray's astonishing poem on the cat that drowned herself while trying to catch some gold fish in a glass vessel. But the verse is otherwise more simple than Gray's, and being written in quatrains only, is much better known.

In conclusion—now that we have considered the variety of Cowper — let me say that the student should remember Cowper's place in poetry as being just as curious as the position of Crabbe. Both Crabbe and Cowper were classic by training, and wrote mostly in classic form,—Cowper, indeed less than Crabbe. Still the position of both was this, that while their education forced them to adhere to classic form, the spirit of their poetry is not classical at all, and this keeps it warmly alive, while their classical contemporaries are slowly but surely fading out of memory.