

**William Cowper, *The Task*, Book VI:
'The Winter Walk at Noon', lines 57-82**

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The night was winter in its 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 the embattled tower
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 sufficed,
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 suppressed
Pleased 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 withered leaves below.

What are the qualities that make Cowper's poetry so attractive and so deeply satisfying? Near the top of my list would come his ability to enclose description of the natural world within a sympathetic, but not sentimental, human embrace. His descriptions are precise and economical, so that nature retains its separate individuality. But, at the same time, the rhythms and movement of his poetry blend nature with the warm response of the observer. Nature and human being are brought together into a relationship in which each enhances and sustains the other. It is an alliance of equals, profoundly expressing truths that have come to seem more and more urgent: that we are a part of everything that is around us, and that everything around us is a part of us.

We are in the last of the six books of *The Task*. We have come through 'The Winter Evening', Book IV, when we have closed the shutters fast, let fall the curtains and wheeled the sofa round. We have taken 'The Winter Morning Walk', Book V, when the sun's rays have slid ineffectual down the snowy vale, casting sharp but thin shadows. Now, our opening lines rapidly recapitulate what we have come through in order to launch us on a recuperative walk. The past is summarized in two concise clauses without an intervening conjunction (the technical term for this is 'asyndeton', from the Greek meaning 'not connected'):

The night was winter in its roughest mood,
The morning sharp and clear.

A shortening effect is further created by the ellipsis (that is, omission of a word or words) in the second line: 'The morning [was] sharp and clear'. Cowper wants to hurry on, to more welcoming weather. Here, by contrast, he wants to dwell, to relax, and so the syntax broadens out, unfolds with the warming sun of noon:

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.

In Book V, it was the sun's weak light that was 'slanting' (line 6). Now, at the middle of the day, the hills tilt welcomingly to receive stronger rays that feel more like the approach of the middle of the year. 'The season' is placed at the beginning of a line, following up 'The night' and 'The morning' to form a pattern of anaphora, the repetition of a word or phrase in successive lines or clauses. Thus, as we read down the page, 'The night' is replaced by 'The morning', and then, in time, by 'The season'. Part of a day (noon) expands to become a part of the year, an entire 'season'. The 'rage' of 'roughest' winter gives way to a happier alliteration of a smiling season; and the vowel in 'rage' yields to its assonantal echo in 'May'. We have moved into the world of the happiest of James Thomson's *Seasons*, the great English poem of natural description from the first half of the eighteenth century. In spring the sun's power nourishes re-born nature, appearing to our eyes in the colour green, 'smiling Nature's universal robe' (James Thomson, 'Spring', line 84). 'Smiling' is Thomson's recurrent word for the benevolence of nature and of its creator. Here, at a moment prefiguring May, Cowper acknowledges his poetic predecessor and the power to which he has attested.

It is a time when one regains equilibrium, and all one's senses are awakened. First, sight is alert with fresh clarity:

The vault is blue
Without a cloud, and white without a speck
The dazzling splendour of the scene below.

Cowper is already in a state of harmony, declared and embodied by his balanced phrasing. The phrases 'Without a cloud' and 'without a speck' act like poised scales at either end of the line, the former pointing back to the clear blue sky, the latter forward to the shining snow-filled valley, whose whiteness is the fulcrum of the balance. 'Vault' as signifying the apparent concave of the sky is a poeticism that adds a touch of elevation to the scene, consistent with the dignity of the measured syntax and line-structure. The metaphor was coined in the Elizabethan period: think of King Lear's tonally very different cry 'that heaven's vault should crack'.

Secondly, there is hearing, bringing the actual harmony of music:

Again the harmony comes o'er the vale,
And through the trees I view the embattled tower
Whence all the music. I again perceive
The soothing influence of the wafted strains

These lines are syntactically dominated by the repetition of 'again'. For Cowper has been here before. He took this same walk back in Book I, passing over the rustic bridge to the alcove near Weston Hall. On that walk, too, he heard 'the sound of cheerful bells' (I, 173), though on that occasion they came from the square tower and tall spire of Clifton Reynes rather than, as now, the battlemented Emberton church.¹ The poem has wheeled round to its beginning. Martin Priestman has written fittingly of how walking acts as an 'organizing metaphor' for *The Task*, creating now 'a feeling of circularity by returning us in part to the positives of the first half of "The Sofa"'.² Or perhaps we should say not so much a circle as a fresh start over familiar territory. The sounds are coming from a different church this time, and the poem now, like the poet, has experienced so much that the mood is quietly different. In Book I, Cowper's walk took in the extensive Ouse valley, and, after crossing the rustic bridge, expanded into an immense prospect as viewed from the alcove. Now, in Book VI, the walk is intimate, enclosed, and the 'joy' and 'raptures' of Book I (lines 149, 151) give way to a more inward and meditative feeling.

For we cut the last sentence off in its midst:

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.

This is one of those marvellous transitions that Cowper is so good at. Think of the moment that initiated the walk at the beginning of *The Task*, where Cowper rises from the static verse in which he has laboriously and self-consciously written on the sofa, and effortlessly breaks into the fluid poetry of

free movement:

The sofa suits
The gouty limb, 'tis true; but gouty limb,
Though on a sofa, may I never feel:
For I have loved the rural walk through lanes
Of grassy swarth close cropped by nibbling sheep
(I, 106-10)

Now, in Book VI, the poetry moves from description of sights and sounds to actual movement ('as I tread'), the change heralded by the simplest of all conjunctions, 'and'. And the verbs which follow straight away ('And settle in soft musings as I tread') are not those of one leaping off the sofa, but of a mature man thinking and taking his time. The whole passage has been undemonstratively held together by a series of sibilants, voiced and unvoiced ('southern side', 'season smiles', 'resigning', 'speck', 'splendour', 'scene', 'trees', 'soothing', 'strains'), which now cumulate in 'settle in soft musings'. The poetry echoes the idea of sounds resolving themselves into meditation as Cowper slowly treads his way not to a bursting prospect, but to an intimate and covered world:

The walk still verdant, under oaks and elms,
Whose outspread branches overarch the glade.

The way remains green as it was in spring, the Latin 'ver' that is the etymological and semantic root of 'verdant'. But it does so because of the oaks and elms that protect it from the winter snow. The weather may resemble May in its warmth and softness, but we should remember that it is still 'midwinter spring', which is 'its own season', as T. S. Eliot writes in the opening line of 'Little Gidding', the fourth of his *Four Quartets*.

This wondrous season, which seems to draw together the two ends of life, spring and winter, youth and age, Cowper here accepts as a personal gift:

The roof though moveable through all its length
As the wind sways it, has yet well sufficed,
And intercepting in their silent fall
The frequent flakes, has kept a path for me.

The syntax here, like the poet settling himself beneath the trees' natural shelter, works its way through qualifying phrase ('through all its length'), subordinate clause ('As the wind sways it'), first main clause ('has yet well sufficed') and participial phrase ('And intercepting in their silent fall'), until it reaches its second main clause, which falls effortlessly to its rest on 'for me'. Nature has picked Cowper out as recipient of a special benison, a movingly generous acknowledgement for a man who has owned himself to have been excluded as a 'stricken deer' in *The Task*'s most confessional passage (III, 108). Nature does not banish him, but welcomes him in. Cowper's language maintains its level of dignity, both in syntax – the measured tread of the sentence matching the lightly-worn formality of the blank verse lines – and in slightly formal, Latinate language – 'frequent', for example, meaning 'abundant', 'numerous'. But that final 'for me' is simple, unadorned and accepting of nature's beneficent embrace; and its place in the rhythm of the sentence renders it satisfying, inevitable even, and, well, 'natural'.

However, the poet is not quite alone in this secluded natural world:

No noise is here, or none that hinders thought.
The redbreast warbles still, but is content
With slender notes and more than half suppressed
Pleased 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 withered leaves below.

The bells of the church tower give way to what at first appears to be silence: the effect of entering a covered enclave after being on open land. But Cowper quickly corrects himself to acknowledge other sounds, the notes – subdued, as though in sympathy with the poet's reclusive quietness – of a warbling robin. The poet's description embodies such sympathy between man and bird. Just as he responded to the scene through eyes, ears and feeling, so the robin combines colour ('redbreast'), sounds (his song) and movement (his flitting from spray to spray). Cowper's comfortable attribution to him of human feelings ('content', 'Pleased') also draws them together. Both are living creatures and it is natural enough for the writer to see in the bird a reflection of his state. They are fellow inhabitants of an intimate small world, which is seen from the poet's point of view.

But the robin retains his separate identity. He is, in an important sense, in 'solitude': like the poet, he

is apart from other members of his species, absorbed in his own private activities. We human beings and robins share the environment, but we are also alone in a world whose seasonal round is both a source of comfort (because it brings back scenes with which we are familiar) and a mark of time's remorseless movement (because we and the scene have changed). As the robin settles on a twig, pendent drops (his actions, too, are accorded the dignity of a Latinate adjective) of ice fall, and the final sound is not 'the music of those village bells' (Book VI, line 6), but tinkling as they fall on leaves unsparingly described as 'withered'. Seasons may come around, but the separate parts of nature die; and we are never quite the same person, or robin, we were last year. Cowper's consummate artistry reveals that we share these fundamental truths, but also the beauty, fragility and embrace of the world through which we tread or flit.

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Notes

- 1 I owe the topographical details to *The Poems of William Cowper*, eds. John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, II (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 410-11, and *William Cowper: The Task and Selected Other Poems*, ed. James Sambrook (London: Longman, 1994), p. 198.
- 2 Martin Priestman, *Cowper's Task: Structure and Influence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 145.