William Cowper’s The Task

With Cowper (pronounced, Cooper), we begin our study of sensibility and early Romanticism. Here are some suggestions and questions to help you think about Cowper and prepare for class.

Please begin with the following passage from The Monthly Review, a popular “review” (like a magazine) that began in 1749. When The Task appeared in 1785, it was, as The Monthly said of Cowper’s earlier Poems (1782), unlike anything anyone had ever seen:

Most poets have no character at all; being, for the chief part, only echoes of those who have sung before them. For while not only their sentiments and diction are borrowed, but their very modes of thinking, as well as versification, are copied from the said models, discrimination of character must of course be scarcely perceptible. Confining themselves, like pack-horses, to the same beaten track and uniformity of pace, and, like them too, having their bells from the same shop, they go jingling along in uninterrupted unison with each other. This, however, is not the case with Mr. Cowper; he is a poet sui generis [“of his own kind”], for as his notes are peculiar to himself, he classes not with any known species of bards that have preceded him: his style of composition, as well as his modes of thinking, are entirely his own. The ideas, with which his mind seems to have been either endowed by nature, or to have been enriched by learning and reflection, as they lie in no regular order, so are they promiscuously brought forth as they accidentally present themselves ... His versification is almost as singular as the materials upon which it is employed. Anxious only to give each image its due prominence and relief, he has wasted no unnecessary attention on grace or embellishment: his language, therefore, though neither strikingly harmonious nor elegant, is plain, forcible, and expressive. (Monthly Review 57 [Oct. 1782]: 262-63)

1. First, make sure you get the joke! The Task starts out as a “mock-epic,” a poem that treats a “low” or trivial subject in the epic language usually reserved for “high” or important themes. The Task moves from a mock-epic theme – “I sing the sofa, I who lately sang ...” (compare the beginning of the Task with the opening lines of Homer’s The Iliad, Virgil’s The Aeneid, Spenser’s The Faerie Queen, and Milton’s Paradise Lost!) – to “another subject,” as Cowper remarks in the Advertisement: having begun with the subject of “the SOFA,” the author “connected another subject with it; and ... brought forth at length, instead of the trifle which he at first intended, a serious affair.” I sometimes think that when Cowper dropped the joke, in line 109, perhaps, Romanticism was born! What is this high or “serious affair” which replaces the mock-heroic, trifling theme of the opening?

2. What is the relationship between the mind and nature in Cowper’s poem? Look at Cowper’s stunning image of threshing in Book I, the “frequent mist / Of atoms” (I.360-61). What kind of poetic mind is being represented here? How does this passage relate to the discussions we have had about Locke?

3. Consider what we could call the politics of sensibility in Cowper’s poetry. To what extent does sensibility become or necessitate political criticism for Cowper? You will want to think about cruelty to animals, sympathy for the insane, and abolitionism. The opening of Book II was one of the most influential pieces of abolitionist literature. (In 1783 the first substantial anti-slavery bill was proposed in Parliament; Britain tried unsuccessfully to abolish the slave trade in 1789, ’91, and ’92; the slave trade was finally abolished on March 25, 1807, and slavery itself throughout the Empire in 1833.)