



William Cowper: Religion, Satire, Society (The Bucknell Studies in Eighteenth-Century Literature and Culture)

Conrad Brunstrom

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This book re-examines the literary significance of poet and translator William Cowper (1731-1800). Cowper is too often read as an 'escapist' poet, whose retirement constitutes an attitude of political retreat and disengagement. This book recovers the highly politicised context of 'retirement' as a mode of political opposition in the eighteenth century and shows the extent to which one poet drew from, and contributed to, this radical tradition. Far from retreating from civic engagement into private meditation, Cowper characteristically chose to escape from the self-enclosed misery of private meditation into his own carefully plotted version of social responsibility. The fascination of Cowper lies in his inability to centre his life and work around any one paradigm, his refusal to synthesize his experience and his characteristic mode of oscillation between alternatives, a mode which has its roots in popular eighteenth century understandings of 'digression' as a positive literary attitude. An ideal of a balanced rural life is constantly considered, re-evaluated and yet postponed as Cowper's poetry evidences a strong fear of the more intransigent and unappeasable aspects of nature. Claustrophobic and agoraphobic, the space for sane, useful existence proves elusive in the extreme. The emblem of the castaway, forever representative in a world where faith has become detached from forms and dogma and become a matter of 'emotional correctness' a condition of feeling rather than either creed or ritual. The contradictions inherent in this 'mainstream' ideological tendency claim Cowper as one of their most prominent victims.

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