

## William Cowper

Isn't it characteristic of me, though (...) that of all our poets I find Donne the *least* appealing. I can't bear Donne—I heartily dislike him! His very name is like a shower of dry bits of mud thrown at me. . . . I revolt against Donne—and I still hold strongly by William Cowper, of whom I like all I read—and all I hear about him too—more & more & more!. . .<sup>1</sup>

MOST READERS OF John Cowper Powys who are familiar with his detestation of John Donne and veneration for William Cowper, his other kinsman,<sup>2</sup> will probably, at one stage or another, have read from his pen passionate declarations in quite a few of his letters. The one quoted above was written to Louis Wilkinson on 7 February 1953, therefore towards the end of his life, but he never varied in his judgment on the two poets.

I have an idea that Donne's cult of the eccentric, his play of wit, and later his marked attraction to metaphysical themes, were distasteful to Powys (and William Cowper might have agreed with him). But JCP's championship of Cowper made me realise that I knew next to nothing of the life and works of the poet who is considered today to be among the precursors of Romanticism. Confident in Powys' views on literature, I wished to better understand the reasons for the regard in which he held his distant parent. Hence this paper.

So let us turn to William Cowper, to the tragedy that was his life. He was born on 26 November 1731 at Berkhamsted Rectory, Hertfordshire, son of John Cowper, a vicar, and of Ann Donne, a descendant of the Dean of St Paul's. The child was fragile, of great sensitivity and had a tendency to melancholy. He had the great misfortune to lose his mother whom he worshipped when he was six. This loss probably had profound consequences on the development of his mind for it may have been responsible for his morbidity and his early conviction that life had a bias against him. He would write one day: "I can truly say that not a week passes, perhaps I might with equal veracity say a day, in which I do not think of her." Within a year he was sent to an ill-managed school where for two years he suffered persecution and severe bullying. His chief oppressor's cruelty finally discovered was punished with expulsion, while William Cowper was removed and sent home. Powys had some experience of similar appalling treatment to sensitive young boys.

The worst bullies were excrescences, ugly ogre-like figures that took advantage of the subtle unwritten laws by which we lived – such for instance as never, *under any conceivable condition*, to appeal to a master – to pursue their ingrained brutality. Yes, serious bullying was an excrescence on the system ...<sup>3</sup>

At an early age he felt he was different from other boys. He later went to Westminster School, in London, and to his surprise, in this second school he spent pleasant years, for he was a born scholar.

Obedying his father's wish, he was apprenticed to the law at the age of 18 and called to the Bar in 1752 where for ten years he was a lawyer. But the law meant

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<sup>1</sup> *Letters of John Cowper Powys to Louis Wilkinson*, 1935-1956, Macdonald, London, 1958, p.300.

<sup>2</sup> John Donne (1572-1631) and William Cowper (1731-1800) were ancestors to Mary Cowper Johnson.

<sup>3</sup> J.C. Powys, *Autobiography*, Colgate University Press, 1968, p.112.

nothing to him. (John Cowper at Corpus Christi was clear-sighted enough about himself and what interested him to realise that, contrary to his parents' wish, he had not the slightest inclination to enter Orders.) William Cowper at times was beset by obsessions and distrust of life. He thus turned to religion for some comfort. It was nevertheless at that time that he discovered the two sources of pleasure which were to remain with him all his life, his love for nature and his inclination for poetry. "O! I could spend whole days and moonlight nights in feeding upon a lovely prospect! My eyes drink the rivers as they flow."

While he was learning law at a solicitor's in London William Cowper had made the acquaintance of two charming young cousins, Harriet and Theodora Cowper. He fell in love with Theodora and the attraction was mutual. The courtship lasted a few years, but her father, Ashley Cowper, perhaps fearing the too close relationship or because of the young man's financial straits, finally refused to consent to their marriage. The one element which might later have saved him, his love for Theodora, was severed, for even though Cowper's refined nature was hardly subject to passion or strong feelings, he had been deeply attached to Theodora, and felt a profound tenderness for her. One can only wonder whether she might not have saved him from morbidity and depression, had she become his wife. He wrote poems to her, which are close to those of later Romantic poets.

Bid adieu, my sad heart, bid adieu to thy peace!  
Thy pleasure is past, and thy sorrows increase;  
See the shadows of evening how far they extend,  
And a long night is coming, that may never end.

Theodora would remain faithful to the poet and later anonymously follow his career and send him money. The forced end of this tender attachment caused him to fall into a severe depression which lasted a year, during which he sought the relief of religion

My hard heart was at length softened, and my stubborn knees brought to bow. I composed a set of prayers, and made frequent use of them.

But his yearning for relief through religion did not last, his mind was too critical. He tried very hard to find God through prayers and submission to His will, but it was a passive attitude with no real meaning. At the time he abandoned all hopes of marrying Theodora, he also had the misfortune to lose his father. Then a year later, Russell, a close friend from Westminster days, also died from drowning. From then on, he tried to live as well as he could, but was totally discouraged. As David Cecil writes in his remarkable biography<sup>4</sup> *The Stricken Deer*, all William's fears had remained:

Occupy himself as he might, he could not rid himself of the unspoken conviction that he was diverting his mind from a dark tangle of horrible shadows, which he must not think of lest it should make him mad.

He accompanied Harriet and Thomas Hesketh who was engaged to her, to Southampton where they remained a few months. The change of air did him good. And it was during a walk, overlooking "the end of that arm of the sea, which runs between Southampton and the New Forest", that William Cowper experienced something very close to an ecstasy:

Here it was, that on a sudden, as if another sun had been kindled that instant in the heavens, on purpose to dispel sorrow and vexation of spirit;

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<sup>4</sup> David Cecil, *The Stricken Deer* (1929), Faber and Faber, 2009, p.43.

I felt the weight of all my misery taken off; my heart became light and joyful in a moment; I could have wept with transport had I been alone. I must needs believe that nothing less than the Almighty fiat could have filled me with such inexpressible delight; not by a gradual dawning of peace, but, as it were, with a flash of his life-giving countenance.

This revelation, this 'epiphany', calls to mind the many occasions where JCP had these same spiritual experiences which, he explained,

are apt to come when, as you contemplate some particular scene or object, you suddenly recall *some* other deep cause of satisfaction in your life, but a cause totally independent of the one you are now regarding *and not in the same plane of feeling*.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, William Cowper was haunted by religious preoccupations. His character was a strange mixture of rationality and of a deep sense of sin, accompanied by self-distrust. His reason made it impossible for him to be a true believer, but these different components were in conflict with his sensitivity and his religious delusion, his fear of God's vengeance. Fear. Something which was familiar to JCP:

... that sickening tormentor of the human soul, Fear, Fear the Arch-Demon, was always waiting to make me long to bury myself at the bottom of the sea. I am speaking now of the sort of Fear a person never, or *hardly* ever, reveals; and indeed I am against attempts to reveal it. Better, far better, carry about with you your own torment and sprinkle it with your own sluice-pipe of Lethe water!

We are all mad; and the best thing is to learn to forget our madness.<sup>6</sup>

For nine long years he kept his fears at bay, led an active life and started to take an interest in the great epic poet Homer. He entertained the wish to try his hand on the translation of his works, noting with respect to the 1725 translation that "there is hardly a thing in the world of which Pope was so entirely destitute as a taste for Homer." But other ordeals were awaiting him.

At the age of 31, he realised that being poor and having failed as a lawyer, it was urgent for him to find a position. In 1763, an influential cousin, Major Cowper, was able to offer him a Clerkship at the House of Lords. He at first accepted, but then was thrown into a state of utter panic when he learned he had to pass a public examination. At that point he lost faith in his powers. He started taking drugs, began to wish for madness to save him. He also thought of suicide, but his horror of death was such that in spite of several serious attempts, he failed to succeed. He turned to prayer, fearing the wrath of God for thinking of self-murder, whereas at the same time his rational judgment tried to refute his fear of damnation.

Damned below Judas; more abhorred than he was,  
Who for a few pence sold his holy Master!  
Twice betrayed, Jesus me, the last delinquent,  
Deems the profanest.

Man disavows, and Deity disowns me,  
Hell might afford my miseries a shelter;  
Therefore Hell keeps her ever-hungry mouths all  
Bolted against me.

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<sup>5</sup> *Autobiography*, opus cit., p.41.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.104.



Illustration by Henry Fuseli for Cowper's poem 'Crazy Kate'.  
*from Wikimedia Commons*

When his brother John came to see him, he noticed alarming symptoms of religious delusion and persecution mania. Unable to reason with William, he asked their cousin Madan to discuss the tenets of the Evangelical religion with him. Cowper was too dazed to understand exactly, but as David Cecil writes “a seed had fallen which was to bear fruit later”. John then decided in December 1763 to remove him to an asylum. Although quite indifferent to his own fate, William had enough humanity in him to remember his cat at the last minute and entrust it to a friend. He remained at St. Albans for almost two years. His doctor was competent and understanding, and brought Cowper a sense of comfort by appealing to the human in his patient. Cowper recovered from the awful visions which had tortured him, and was apparently deemed cured.

In June 1765, he came to Huntingdon, in the fens, some fifteen miles from Cambridge, to be near John, who was a Fellow of Benet College (now Corpus Christi). Feeling suddenly free from obsessions, he decided that Divine Grace had saved him. The seed now flowered: there followed in his life a period of intense Evangelical rapture which made him devoutly attend church services, and

turned him into a fanatic, to the dismay both of his brother and of his cousin, Lady Hesketh. Evangelism, reacting against the lethargy of the Anglican Church, demanded that man, although convinced of his wickedness, should “lay hold of his salvation” and be “converted”, since Christ by His sacrifice had borne the punishment. Cowper suddenly discovered the power of imagination, for Evangelism was a religion based on emotion. But in fact he would never reconcile his mind with his emotions. That unity would only exist in his poetry.

However the wheel was turning, something fortunate happened. In Huntingdon he made the acquaintance of William Unwin, a pleasant and friendly young man who was reading for holy orders. He then met his parents, an elderly parson, and his wife Mary. He soon became so intimate with the Unwins that he was invited to join the household, which proved a benediction for the lonely Cowper. The Unwins led a calm and harmonious life, almost monacal in its regularity, held sessions of prayers four times a day and daily attended church service. A great friendship grew up between William Cowper and Mary Unwin, a few years his elder, who was devout but also cheerful and humorous. He later wrote of her: “That woman is a blessing to me, and I never see her without being better for her company.” This situation had the advantage of solving his financial problems but above all it provided him with a family life. He was no longer “Unmoved with all the world beside / A solitary thing”.

In 1767 Mr Unwin fell from his horse and died. Mary, and William Cowper who lived under her roof, were forced to move in order to escape gossip and malevolence. They finally decided to settle in a small market town, Olney in Buckinghamshire, helped in their search for a house by Reverend John Newton<sup>7</sup> the curate in charge. After assisting John Newton to considerable effect in a great many of his religious activities, Cowper fell into a kind of hysteria, where he thought it his duty to preach to those around him, including to his brother John, in order to save their souls, becoming to some extent a diseased devout, obsessed with a “ghostly haunting horror” and the Wrath of God.

Newton feeling worried for the poet asked him to help with *Olney Hymns*<sup>8</sup> in 1771 when Cowper was again threatened by depression and felt a sudden loss of interest in religion, as a result of which he became miserable and anguished. Cowper’s contributions to the hymns are mostly devoid of any imaginative or poetical value, and also show a conflict between faith and self-distrust. This activity possibly harmed him, encouraging introspection at a time when his previous religiosity turned back upon itself. He became the victim of terrible dreams which dealt with the idea of damnation, in particular one in which he heard the words, ‘*Actum est de te, periisti*’ (It is all over with thee, thou art lost). About that dreadful experience, he wrote:

I did not indeed lose my senses, but I lost the power to exercise them. I could return a rational answer even to a difficult question, but a question was necessary, or I never spoke at all.

So for a time, he was again deeply depressed and even tried to take his life. That he did not succeed was for him a proof that God had meant him to commit

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<sup>7</sup> John Newton (1725-1807), clergyman and writer of ‘Amazing Grace’.

<sup>8</sup> J. Newton, *Olney Hymns*, London: J. Johnson, 1806. Out of the 348 hymns in the original edition, the majority are reckoned to be by Newton, with 65 by William Cowper, including “God moves in a mysterious way, / His wonders to perform; / He plants his footsteps in the sea, / And rides upon the storm”. The *Olney Hymns* met with tremendous success.

suicide, had given him power to accomplish this act of obedience, and that this failure to succeed was his unforgivable sin against his Maker. After remaining utterly depressed for a year and a half at the Vicarage under the patronage of the Reverend Newton, mostly working in the garden, he finally came back to life in May 1774. As John Newton wrote: “Yesterday, as he was feeding the chickens, some incident made him smile”. William then abandoned religion for good, and returned to ‘Orchard Side’, Mrs. Unwin’s house, writing:

My mind has always a melancholy cast, and is like some pools I have seen, which, though filled with a black and putrid water, will nevertheless, in a bright day, reflect the sunbeams from the surface.

Examining in his biography a well-known portrait of the poet in adulthood, David Cecil shrewdly remarked :

The face is a plain, everyday sort of face, with ruddy, weather-beaten cheeks, and a wise, gentle mouth. The set of the lips, precise yet kindly, shows refinement, but it is an old-maidish kind of refinement; (...) But out of this face glance a pair of eyes which change its whole expression; startled, speaking eyes, fixed on something outside the picture which we cannot see, in fear, in horror, in frenzy; luminous, dilated orbs; the eyes of an artist, of a seer, can it be of a madman?<sup>9</sup>

When Cecil wrote these lines, notions of ‘madness’ and ‘depression’ were very different. All we can probably say now is that Cowper suffered from terrible repetitive depressions, alternating with more or less stable or agitated phases, in a way not far removed at times from manic depression.

After abandoning religion, he evolved into a true poet. At the end of the seventies, he started to work in earnest on what was his true calling. At first, he wrote conventional poetry, using satire as his means, and showed himself as a mild moralist, for he was too scrupulous and gentle to be malicious. He slowly matured, meditating on the art of poetry, and in *Table Talk* was to write that the poet

Seizes events as yet unknown to man,  
And darts his soul into the dawning plan.  
Hence in a Roman mouth, the graceful name  
Of prophet and of poet was the same;  
Hence British poets too the priesthood shar’d,  
And ev’ry hallow’d Druid was a bard.

Slowly Nature came to be more and more present in his verse. And one should remember that at the time nature as such was not yet a subject for poetry.

For I have loved the rural walks through lanes  
Of grassy swarth, close cropped by nibbling sheep  
And skirted thick with intertexture firm  
Of thorny boughs; have loved the rural walk  
O’er hills, through valleys, and by river’s brink. . .

In July 1781 he had the good fortune to make the acquaintance of Lady Austen, a beautiful, wealthy, refined and vivacious lady, who had seen the world, but had retained natural manners. She proved to be a true antidote to John Newton’s nefarious influence. After meeting Cowper and Mrs. Unwin, she decided to settle in Olney. They thus saw each other every day. That summer was for Cowper one of the happiest. The relationship soon evolved into something that was more than friendship, but William Cowper finally desisted, out of

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<sup>9</sup> David Cecil, *op. cit.* (first published 1929), p.15.

shyness and self-distrust, and he had also to take into account the happiness of his faithful Mary Unwin whom he deeply valued.

It was a tale Lady Austen had told him which was at the origin of *The Journey of John Gilpin*, a humorous ballad which became very popular. She was also responsible for *The Task*, his following oeuvre published in 1785. When she was asked by Cowper on what subject he should write, she had replied “you can write upon any — write upon this sofa!” The work in fact described “rural ease and leisure” in the lovely country around Olney.

Cowper’s love of nature increased and as he wrote, “Everything I see in the fields is to me an object, and I can look at the same rivulet or at a handsome tree, every day of my life, with new pleasure.” He also continued his walks in the countryside which brought him peace of mind.

I saw the woods and fields at close of day  
A variegated show; the meadows green  
Though faded; and the lands, where lately waved  
The golden harvest of a mellow brown,  
Upturned so lately by the forceful share;  
I saw far off the weedy fallows smile  
With verdure not unprofitable, grazed  
By flocks, fast feeding, and selecting each  
His favourite herb; while all the leafless groves  
That skirt the horizon, wore a sable hue,  
Scarce noticed in the kindred dusk of eve.

His style is a compound of elegance, exactness and humour. He paid the greatest attention to the words he used, as well as to their appropriate meaning for, as he wrote back in protest to his publisher, after having noticed that his text had been tampered with:

There is a roughness on a plum which nobody that understands fruit would rub off, though the plum would be much more polished without it. But, lest I tire you, I will only add that I wish you to guard me from all such meddling; assuring you that I always write as smoothly as I can; but that I never did, never will, sacrifice the spirit or sense of a passage to the sound of it.

The nature he favoured was typical of his epoch, seen as a well-kept and ornamental garden cultivated by man. His poetry, while heralding Romanticism, is still of a classical and reflective mould, but shows at times how attentive he was to small details, and how fortunate in his choice of striking imagery:

I fed on scarlet hips and stony haws  
Or blushing crabs, or berries that emboss  
The bramble, black as jet, or sloes austere

This is the description of a woodman’s dog:

Shaggy, and lean, and shrewd, with pointed ears  
And tail cropped short, half lurcher and half cur,  
His dog attends him. Close behind his heel  
Now creeps he slow; and now with many a frisk  
Wide scampering, snatches up the drifted snow  
With ivory teeth, or ploughs it with his snout;  
Then shakes his powdered coat, and barks for joy.

Cowper loved all animals and had many pets. Three leverets had been given to him which he tamed and studied with care and tenderness. Others are

mentioned in his letters: kittens, dogs, guinea-pigs, domesticated pigeons, goldfinches, and all the birds which grace a garden. See for instance his description of a robin in winter:

The redbreast warbles still, but is content  
With slender notes, and more than half suppress'd:  
Pleas'd 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.

He would write in defence of animals, either in prose or in verse. When we read under his pen: "I would not number in my list of friends (...) the man who needlessly sets foot upon a worm" we are of course reminded of JCP's own attitude towards not hurting even flower or grass.

All the notice that we lords of Creation vouchsafe to bestow on the creatures, is generally to abuse them; it is well therefore that here and there a man should be found a little womanish, or perhaps a little childish in this matter, who will make some amends, by kissing and coaxing, and laying them in one's bosom.

In his poems and prose, one finds sentiments and thoughts which will later find their way to Wordsworth. He evoked for instance the hard life of the poor and in a letter of July 1784 to William Unwin, he used harsh words (at least if we take into account his usual meekness) to express his indignation towards the local tax-maker for his tax upon candles:

Some families, he says, will suffer little by it. Why? Because they are so poor that they cannot afford themselves more than ten pounds in the year. (...) Rejoice, therefore, O ye penniless! (...) I wish he would visit the miserable huts of our lace-makers at Olney, and see them working in the winter months, by the light of a farthing candle, from four in the afternoon till midnight.

He also shows his detestation of sport, especially fox-hunting:

... Detested sport,  
That owes its pleasures to another's pain,  
That feeds upon the sobs and dying shrieks  
Of harmless nature, dumb, but yet endued  
With eloquence that agonies inspire,  
Of silent tears and heart-distending sighs!

No doubt Cowper would have fully agreed with JCP and shared his uncompromising rejection of vivisection, had he known of such a thing. He was also conscious of the threats brought about by the beginning of industrialism. We detect the very same disgust for those subjects that would move JCP to repeated and exalted denunciations. But William Cowper was wary of excess and of exaggeration, he would not adopt extravagance or denounce evils publicly .

*The Task* was published in 1786. During that year he renewed his acquaintance with one of his cousins, Harriet Cowper, who had become Lady Hesketh. She had stopped writing to him at the time when he was so immersed in Evangelism that he held feverish discourses on religion to all his acquaintances. When the relationship was renewed, he was filled with happiness. Lady Hesketh had quickness of taste and kindness, and was a godsend to the poet. She also reminded him of her sister Theodora, his youthful love, whom he had not forgotten. When she promised to visit him at Olney, he wrote rapturously: "I shall

see you again, I shall hear your voice. We shall take walks together. I will show you my prospects, the hovel, the alcove, the Ouse, and its banks, everything that I have described.” She duly visited in June. In November 1786 she arranged for the poet and Mary Unwin to leave their house for another, healthier, bigger, more comfortable and cheerful in Weston, a delightful village two miles from Olney. Elated, he wrote to his benefactress: “...you must always understand, my dear, that when poets talk of cottages, hermitages, and such like things, they mean a house with six sashes in front, two comfortable parlours, a smart staircase, and three bed-chambers of convenient dimensions; in short, exactly such a house as this.”



William Cowper's 'cottage' in Weston  
*courtesy* Mark Covington

The change was a success. Cowper was a resident guest of the domain of the Throckmortons, who were respected gentry, quiet and well-bred. They had created wonderful gardens and park areas in Weston Underwood, many of which are mentioned in several of Cowper's works. They befriended him, and he lived in Weston until a few years before his death. The house now known as 'Cowper's Lodge' is situated in High Street.

But after Lady Hesketh's departure, his mind floundered. William Unwin was taken ill and died shortly afterwards, leaving the poet dejected. For the first six months in 1787 he was again very depressed. He recovered some strength, founded on Mary's constant presence by his side and slowly came back to life, able to enjoy the pleasures of the moment. "The present is a dream, but one wishes to make it as pleasant as one can." This 'Powysian' reaction to life came late, but Cowper only understood dimly this essential principle which would be the basis for JCP's sensual philosophy. Cowper's nature was far too delicate and frail, it lacked a certain primitive brutality, a crucial element underlined by JCP in *Autobiography*<sup>10</sup>:

This I do at least know of myself: I combine an extremely quick and mercurial intelligence with a lean, primordial, bony, gaunt neanderthal simplicity. My nimble wit is in fact the Ariel-like slave of my Caliban

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<sup>10</sup> p.604.

primitiveness and its deadly and thaumaturgic champion against the world.

In 1785, feeling better, William Cowper had taken up an old project of his, the translation of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* into blank verse. His versions were the most significant English renderings of these epic poems since those of Pope earlier in the century. The project procured an ideal and regular occupation for his creative energy, so he set to work in earnest, writing to Lady Hesketh:

Homer, in point of purity, is a most blameless writer; and though he was not an enlightened man, has interpreted many great and valuable truths throughout both his poems. In short he is in all respects a most venerable old gentleman, by an acquaintance with whom no man can disgrace himself. The literati are all agreed to a man, that although Pope has given us two pretty poems under Homer's titles, there is not to be found in them the least portion of Homer's spirit, nor the least resemblance of his manner. I will try, therefore, whether I cannot copy him somewhat more happily myself.

But Cowper was too much the civilised eighteenth-century 'gentleman' himself, seeking grace and elegance, so he completely missed the earthliness, the primitiveness of Homer's poetry. His translations proved a failure. But at least they provided an occupation for a few years when he was again despondent and when his old demons were threatening to devour him. Having completed the *Iliad* in 1786, he then proceeded to work on *Odyssey* which was finished by the end of 1789, revised and published in 1791.

Cowper drew near to Nature through gardening in the humblest way, and he soon became an expert. In October 1788 he wrote to a friend:

I then judged it high time to exchange this occupation for another (...) gardening was, of all employments, that in which I succeeded best, though even in this I didn't suddenly attain perfection. I began with lettuces and cauliflowers; from then I proceeded to cucumbers; next to melons. I then purchased an orange-tree, to which, in due time, I added two or three myrtles. These served me day and night with employment during a whole severe winter.

For JCP of course, it was also part of the 'ideal' life ...

From the bottom of my soul the sort of life that would best suit my life-illusion, (...) would be some primitive labour, requiring no skill, but that had an ancient and poetical tradition behind it. (...) My ideal life would be to do *some* manual work every day and some reading of Homer (...) and to spend the rest of the time either walking or writing or making love.<sup>11</sup>

In January 1790, a young undergraduate from Cambridge, came to see him, bringing with him simplicity of character and a most agreeable kind of humour. 'Johnny of Norfolk'<sup>12</sup> as he came to be known, was a young kinsman, whom the poet soon considered as his son. He would prove one of the staunchest, most devoted and indispensable of friends. In January 1791, Cowper wrote to him:

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<sup>11</sup> *Autobiography*, p.184.

<sup>12</sup> John Johnson (1769-1833), second cousin on his mother's side to William Cowper who later became Rector of Yaxham. He is the paternal grandfather of John Cowper Powys's mother Mary Cowper Johnson and therefore 'JCP's great-grandfather from Norfolk'. See Stephen Powys Marks 'What's in a Name?' in *The Powys Society Newsletter* 28, July 1996, pp.18-23 and 37, July 1999, pp.14-17..

Yours, my dear Johnny, are vagaries that I shall never see practised by any other; and whether you slap your ankle, or reel as if you were fuddled, or dance in the path before me, all is characteristic of yourself, and therefore to me delightful. (...) Continue to take your walks, if walks they may be called, exactly in their present fashion, till you have taken orders. Then, indeed, for as much as a skipping, curvetting, bounding divine might be a spectacle not altogether seemly, I shall consent to your adoption of a more grave demeanour.

Cowper was about fifty at the time. His life with Mary was harmonious, peaceful. His favourite hour was tea-time, especially on a winter's evening, when they exchanged their impressions of the day's happenings, and he read to her while she was busy embroidering. Besides the care of his garden, his long walks about the countryside, he had adopted the routine of devoting some hours every day to poetry. There was another occupation which was dear to him, that of letter-writing. His letters<sup>13</sup> are spontaneous, charming, witty, reminding us of the novels of Jane Austen — who by the way felt the greatest admiration for the poet. As he said, "I do not write without thinking, but always without premeditation." They are the simple statements of what he has in mind and are sincere, at times overflowing with deep religious feelings, often gently humorous. He was aware of the charm which emanated from his letters, and derived much pleasure in writing them.

There is a pleasure annexed to the communication of one's ideas, whether by word of mouth or by letter, which nothing earthly can supply the place of, and it is the delight we find in this mutual intercourse that not only proves us to be creatures intended for social life, but more than anything else fits us for it. (...) The happiness we cannot call our own, we yet seem to possess, while we sympathize with our friend who can.

Cowper had always had the greatest admiration for the author of *Paradise Lost*. In October 1791 his publisher asked him to edit a new grandiose edition of Milton which was to be illustrated by different artists, including the Swiss painter Fuseli<sup>14</sup> (1741-1825). He was to translate the Latin and Italian poems, settle the text, select notes from others and write notes of his own. Cowper had just finished his translations of Homer and needed to have something else to occupy his mind, so with some reluctance he accepted the offer. This new work turned out to be a source of anguish, a weight, a 'Miltonian trap', for he had no energy left. In fact the last years of William Cowper were darkening.

At the end of the year, Mary Unwin had a series of strokes which made her more and more an invalid and dependent on him. Gloom, anxiety, again invaded his spirit. One of his last pleasures was meeting the poet William Hayley (who would become his first biographer). After an exchange of letters Hayley came to visit him. A friendship was struck between the two men. Cowper and Mary then spent six weeks at Hayley's residence in Eartham, Sussex. But the novelty soon wore off, for he realised that away from home, he could not write. The countryside of Sussex seemed wild and was not congenial to his spirit. He wrote:

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<sup>13</sup> William Cowper's letters were published in 1800, after his death. See the two letters to 'Johnny' below.

<sup>14</sup> In 1799 Fuseli organised an exhibition of 47 paintings, some of them very large, from subjects furnished by the works of Milton, completed in a space of nine years.

... here I see from every window woods like forests, and hills like mountains, – a wilderness, in short, that rather increases my natural melancholy, and which, were it not for the agreeables I find within, would soon convince me that mere change of place can avail me little.

Cowper and Mary thus came back to Weston, but not for long and in a grievous condition. Lady Hesketh, on a visit, realised how reduced in spirit William Cowper had become, while poor Mary Unwin was heading towards madness. In July 1795 the devoted ‘Johnny’ with immense generosity undertook to remove William Cowper and Mary to west Norfolk, hoping that the bracing air and constant change of scene might improve the situation.<sup>15</sup> He arranged for trips to North Tuddenham, Mundesley, Dunham Lodge and East Dereham. Towards the very end of Cowper’s life, and with Johnny’s encouragements, he began to revise his translation of Homer for a second edition, realising however “the unforeseen impossibility of doing justice to a poet of such great antiquity in a modern language.” But moving to Norfolk did not have the desired effect. When Mary died at the end of 1796, Cowper fell into lethargy during the day, and at night was assailed with apocalyptic visions and anguish. He was almost no longer of this world.

Obscurest night involv’d the sky,  
Th’ Atlantic billows roar’d,  
When such a destin’d wretch as I,  
Wash’d headlong from on board,  
Of friends, of hope, of all bereft,  
His floating home for ever left.

William Cowper died on 25 April 1800. His last words were “What does it signify?”

Jacqueline Peltier

William Cowper’s letters are a delight to read, for they are lively, often humorous, entertaining and written in the elegant style favoured in the second half of the 18th century. Here are two letters he wrote to his dear ‘Johnny of Norfolk’:

Weston, March 23, 1790<sup>16</sup>

You are a man to be envied, who have never read the *Odyssey*, which is one of the most amusing story-books in the world<sup>17</sup>. There is also much of the finest poetry in the world to be found in it, notwithstanding all that Longinus<sup>18</sup> has insinuated to the contrary. His comparison of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* to the meridian and to the declining sun is pretty, but I am persuaded not just. The prettiness of it seduced him; he was otherwise too judicious a reader of Homer to have made it. I can find in the latter no symptoms of impaired ability, none of the effects of age; on the contrary, it seems to me a certainty that Homer, had he written the *Odyssey* in his youth, could not have written it better; and if the *Iliad*

<sup>15</sup> Cowper’s dark-blue washing-basin, and jug and chamber pot were piously kept at the Rectory in Norwich. JCP mentioned “the precious memorials” in *Autobiography*, p.103.

<sup>16</sup> *Letters of William Cowper*, Macmillan and Co, London, 1899, p.215.

<sup>17</sup> William Cowper’s versions (1791) were the most significant English renderings of these epic poems since those of Pope earlier in the century.

<sup>18</sup> Longinus, name given to an unknown Greek author, who lived in the 1st or 3rd century AD, and wrote *On the Sublime*, which is both a treatise on aesthetics and a work of literary criticism.

in his old age, that he would have written it just as well. A critic would tell me that instead of *written* I should have said *composed*. Very likely; but I am not writing to one of that snarling generation.

My boy, I long to see thee again. It has happened some way or other that Mrs. Unwin and I have conceived a great affection for thee. That I should is the less to be wondered at, because thou art a shred of my own mother; neither is the wonder great that she should fall into the same predicament, for she loves everything that I love. You will observe that your own personal right to be beloved makes no part of the consideration. There is nothing that I touch with so much tenderness as the vanity of a young man; because I know how extremely susceptible he is of impressions that might hurt him in that particular part of his composition. If you should ever prove a coxcomb, from which character you stand just now at a greater distance than any young man I know, it shall never be said that I have made you one; no, you will gain nothing by me but the honour of being much valued by a poor poet, who can do you no good while he lives, and has nothing to leave you when he dies. If you can be contented to be dear to me on these conditions, so you shall; but other terms more advantageous than these, or more inviting, none have I to propose.

Farewell. Puzzle not yourself about a subject when you write to either of us; everything is subject enough from those we love.

W.C.

Weston, November 20, 1792<sup>19</sup>

MY DEAREST JOHNNY — I give you many thanks for your rhymes, and your verses without rhyme; for your poetical dialogue between wood and stone; between Homer's head and the head of Samuel; kindly intended, I know well, for my amusement, and that amused me much.

The successor of the clerk defunct, for whom I used to write mortuary verses, arrived here this morning with a recommendatory letter from Joe Rye and a humble petition of his own, entreating me to assist him as I had assisted his predecessor. I have undertaken the service, although with no little reluctance, being involved in many arrears on other subjects, and having very little dependence at present on my ability to write at all. I proceed exactly as when you were here, — a letter now and then before breakfast, and the rest of my time all holiday; if holiday it may be called, that is spent chiefly in moping and musing and "*forecasting the fashion of uncertain evils*."

The fever on my spirits has harassed me much, and I have never had so good a night nor so quiet a rising since you went as on this very morning, a relief that I account particularly seasonable and propitious, because I had, in my intentions, devoted this morning to you, and could not have fulfilled those intentions had I been as spiritless as I generally am.

I am glad that Johnson<sup>20</sup> is in no haste for Milton, for I seem myself not likely to address myself presently to that concern with any prospect of success; yet something, now and then, like a secret whisper, assures and encourages me that it will yet be done.

W.C.

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<sup>19</sup> *Letters of William Cowper*, op. cit., pp.284-5.

<sup>20</sup> William Cowper's publisher since 1782.