MRS. UNWIN'S SPECTACLES

AND WILLIAM COWPER'S SIGHTS AND INSIGHTS

A MATERIAL WORLD

A PAIR OF SPECTACLES:
SIGHTS AND INSIGHTS

Introduction

This study concentrates on a pair of spectacles that belonged to Mrs. Unwin. Mrs. Unwin was Cowper's long standing companion with whom he once lodged and later shared homes. They lived together at both Olney and Weston Underwood.

Cowper and Mrs. Unwin both needed spectacles to improve their eyesight. Cowper often refers to his weak eyes and rather poor vision in his letters, along with references to how he managed such problems. So he mentions his glasses and their maintenance as well as some other, more rarefied-sounding, remedies for eye troubles. We'll be drawing on these references in what follows; and we'll look occasionally too at Cowper himself, through his own glasses as it were, to see how he chose to present himself to friends and relatives in his written 'conversations' with them. We shall also note a few 'spectaculars' - remarkable Olney events that he described.

We don't own any spectacles that belonged to Cowper, so we can't be as precise about the kind he wore, nor their strength, as we can about Mrs. Unwin's. But her glasses make a good starting point for investigating the state of spectacle art in the mid to late eighteenth century. And we do so, for the most part, by looking, through Cowper's own, spectacled eyes at the text of some of his letters.

Mrs. Unwin’s Spectacles

The Frames

Let’s begin by looking at the frames of Mrs. Unwin’s glasses. These are made of horn and have silver hinges at the joints.

Horn was a common framing material up to the end of the eighteenth century, and it is still in use today. The most common other materials used in the first days of spectacle making - so from the thirteenth century on - were wood, bone and leather.
Over time almost every conceivable material has been tried: whalebone (baleen), ivory, tortoiseshell, rubber and many kinds of metal. Very few examples of the earliest glasses survive, though they are illustrated in portraits providing us with good visual evidence of their use and their appearance.

Horn is a difficult material to work as it tends to fragment - to de-laminate. Also it is not easily shaped into curves - clearly a disadvantage if you are seeking, as here, to frame a circular lens. Horn was popular though, and happened to be rather fashionable at the end of the eighteenth century when our pair was made. The appeal of horn as a framing material is not surprising as it often has a very attractive ‘look’. Mrs. Unwin’s pair, for example, is a rich honey colour and gently patterned. Horn also has a good ‘feel’: it is smooth and comfortably light-weight.

There is another fashionable element to Mrs. Unwin's glasses: they are oval. Until the end of the eighteenth century lenses, and thus frames, were almost always round. This shape persisted perhaps because a round is so geometrically satisfying and it is readily understood in many cultures as a 'right' shape. It persisted too perhaps because it is a practical shape for eye-glasses - a circle is relatively easy to frame and it matches the shape of an eyeball. So form meets function here and as such, circular lenses conform to a basic principle of good design.

Mrs. Unwin's frames have a further distinctive eighteenth century feature: they don't just surround the lenses, they have short side arms, designed to grip the wearer's temples (these are called 'temple spectacles') and so stay in position. Until this invention - usually said to be around 1730 and by an Englishman called Edward Scarlett - spectacles were mostly of 'rivet design'. The latter were shaped to perch on the bridge of a wearer's nose by linking the two lenses with an inverted 'V' which could sit astride a nose. This linkage was made of the lens-framing material and was riveted at the top of the 'V'. But spectacles of this sort still usually had to have a little hand support if they were not to slip forward.

Apart from rivet spectacles there had been a number of design ideas for keeping spectacles in place – none of them very successful. For example, in the 17th century glasses were built with a rigid, arch-shaped nose bridge linking the two lenses but these also needed to be hand held or they fell off. Another solution for keeping spectacles in position was to attach string or ribbons to the lenses and loop these over the ears. (It's a design that features in many early portraits of eminent Chinese philosophers and courtiers.) So eighteenth century 'temple spectacles', with their short arms that did not interfere with wigs yet were long and firm enough not to need ear loops, were quite a break through in spectacle design.

Lenses – historical background

Let's consider now the all-important lenses of these spectacles. These are made of glass. The frame round one lens has cracked and the glass it held is missing.

The early history of eyeglass technology is rather vague, however it is generally agreed that the earliest lenses were not made of glass but of natural stone. These became the 'reading stones' used by long-sighted monks to help them in their all important work of reading and writing in the scriptorium. The first stones were probably spherical lumps of natural crystal - transparent quartz and beryl; and it was perhaps just by chance that it was discovered that if you looked through a convex-shaped piece of rock crystal objects appeared magnified. Self-evidently this helped people to see these objects more easily and in more detail, and was particularly useful if you suffered from long-sight. It was a small step from this to discover that the smaller the spherical radius of a stone, the stronger the magnification; and, from thereon, that by grinding convex crystal to different angles those with long-sight could be helped to see even more efficiently.

Lens Makers

In the western world, the expertise of thirteenth century Venetian glass makers ruled the day when it came to the first glass lens-making. These craftsmen were able to produce the finely ground and polished convex glass discs - small magnifying lenses - that could be framed and held in position in front of eyes or lodged on a nose with a hinge. There are many Italian paintings from 1352 on depicting monks and saints wearing spectacles - perhaps as a symbol of their wisdom and out of respect.

The Venetians, and their Florentine near neighbours, both of whom had long experience with glass, went on to corner the European eye-glass market and continued to do so well into the seventeenth century. Their control over this field included a fifteenth century development - the making of concave lenses as well as convex ones - to help the near sighted see further a-field.

The Germans on the other hand dominated the frame making part of the spectacle trade. Nuremberg craftsmen for instance (famous

makers of tin-toys and ‘cheap goods’) produced a ubiquitous, all-wire frame that allowed wearable eye-glasses to be bought for pennies. So between them Italy and Germany controlled the early manufacture and sale of spectacles in the West. But we’re talking quantity not quality perhaps, for basic glasses of the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries were really cheap and bought by trial and error: they were mass-produced, touted around by peddlers by the sack load and sold for a few small coins. For instance a pair of leather spectacles - they looked rather heavy, like goggles - might be bought for one penny and ‘gilt horn’ glasses for nine pence.

But this cheapness is interesting, as it means straightforward spectacles were not just goods for the rich and powerful, nor were they designed to make an expensive fashion statement; instead they were affordable by ‘ordinary’ artisans and other working folk.
We know for example (from shop records and art-work) that masons, clockmakers, tailors, shoemakers, hermits, schoolmasters amongst many other such, bought and wore spectacles. And - just to give us a better sense of what ‘affordable’ might have meant in the fifteenth century - records reveal that Italian masons of that century could earn about 17 ‘soldi’ a day while a cheap pair of spectacles cost around 2 soldi. So - they were hardly a luxury item that ate deeply into a daily wage. (A pricier pair might range in price from 6-18 soldi.)

Even in the eighteenth century, a cheap pair of imported German metal spectacles cost a mere 1d over in England. Meanwhile London-made spectacles of this period were relatively expensive as these belonged to the growing trade (sixteenth century and on) in technically more sophisticated lenses and frames. (English spectacles might cost as much as much as three shillings in 1800.) So it’s clear that in many respects a pair of spectacles was a ‘better buy’ then than they are today. But what were they like? Were they any good?

Rules, Regulations and Specifications

There were controls over spectacle-making from the earliest days. For example, by 1300 the Guild of Crystal Workers in Venice had regulations governing the making of ‘discs for eyes’.

England joined the business much later on. But in London too, the Worshipful Company of Spectacle Makers (with the comforting motto on their coat of arms ‘A blessing to the Aged’) established in

1629, introduced further regulations governing spectacle making. (Details sadly lost in the Great Fire.) English spectacle makers were often of a scientific bent: makers of scientific instruments and other precision tools with some element of glass along with spectacles. For example, an eighteenth century London maker, called Ayscough, (a significant figure in the development history of spectacle design - he invented double-hinged sides on spectacle frames) advertised his reading and other eye-glasses along with those for his barometers, telescopes and mathematical instruments.

And a quasi-scientific approach to lens manufacture is evident from early days too. This is in the way lenses were ground to age-graded specifications and marketed by such graduations. So, by the mid fifteenth century, Florentine records show that spectacle makers produced glasses at varying strengths, these designed to match the age of their purchaser and wearer. The strength of spectacle lenses was graded in five year leaps to meet the way eyesight was agreed to decline with age. And so, and beginning with those aged thirty, lenses in spectacles were ground with progressively stronger magnification to help with increasing long-sightedness. Glasses were thus bought by age: a pair for a 35 year old, a 40 year old and so on.

As we shall see later, it is possible that Cowper was referring to this system when he ordered a pair of new spectacles in the 1780's.

Mrs. Unwin's Lenses

But back to Mrs. Unwin's glasses again. Out of curiosity, we investigated the strength of the remaining lens in her spectacles and it turns out that she was slightly longsighted; as must be clear by now, this is a common occurrence with aging. The surviving

lens has a magnification of 2.5, which means her vision was not so greatly impaired and might not have been much of a problem to her except when she was doing close work, or was in poor light and tired. These glasses would have helped her with reading obviously - those religious texts so important to her perhaps - and with the finer handicrafts she liked to pursue.

We know from Cowper's descriptions of evenings spent together in the parlour at Orchard Side, that she was a much practised needle-woman, knitter and knotter. The handling of finely spun cotton and silk and the other threads involved in this work would have required keen eyesight, and would have been particularly demanding on an eighteenth century winter evening in a room only dimly lit by candles.

There is a nice description of a bespectacled Mrs. Unwin, knitting away "on the FINEST needles" with Cowper seated nearby, written by Harriot (Lady Hesketh, Cowper's cousin) in a letter to her sister Theadora. It gives us a vivid picture of the scene. This is what she wrote:

Our friends delight in a large table and a large chair. There are two of the latter comforts in my parlour. I am sorry to say, that he and I always spread ourselves out on them, leaving poor Mrs. Unwin to find all the comfort she can in a small one, half as high again as ours, and considerably harder than marble…Her constant employment is knitting stockings, which she does with the finest needles I ever saw; and very nice they are – the stockings I mean. Our cousin has not for many years worn any other than those of her manufacture. She knits silk, cotton and worsted. She knits sitting on one side of the table in her spectacles, and he on the other reading to her (when he is not employed in writing) in HIS.

There's perhaps a rather 'othering' tone to Harriot's depiction of this scene: the details of Mrs Unwin relegated to a hard, low chair and forever knitting, while Cowper and Lady Hesketh sit apart and, one senses, in more distinguished pursuits as well as in greater comfort. But it's a comment that comes perhaps with the benefit of hindsight; for Harriot, in letters written when Mrs. Unwin is frail and ill-tempered and close to dying, reveals quite a dislike and some disdain for Cowper's companion. She claimed to admire her earlier on, but came it seems, to lose patience with the old lady in her illness and old age, and became inclined to mock her.

We see this in letters to cousin Johnny Johnson in the 1790's for example, when she was looking after both Cowper and Mrs. Unwin and probably rather worn down by the task. Harriot could not resist sniping away at Mrs. Unwin's behaviour and regularly called her 'the enchantress'. She let off further steam by implying that Mrs. Unwin had become malevolent and manipulative - rather than perhaps just ill, old and a bit selfish. When it came to 'our dearest Cousin' (William), it seems Harriot felt a little proprietorial, and rather jealous of his dependency on others - apart from family. (Cowper's friend Haley was another she came to resent.)

Nevertheless she gave us a good account of them both wearing their spectacles of an evening and of the fine knitting. And Cowper too had occasion to mention Mrs. Unwin's knitting in poor winter light, and so we might infer, wearing her spectacles. In 1788, for example, he detailed how they spent early mornings in winter:

I have told you before, I believe, that the half hour before breakfast is my only letter-writing opportunity. In summer I rise rather early, and consequently at that season can find more time for scribbling than at present. If I enter my study now before nine, I find it all at sixes and sevens; for servants will take, in part at least, the liberty

claimed by their masters. That you may not suppose us all sluggards alike…Mrs. Unwin, who, because the days are too short for the important concerns of knitting stockings and mending them, rises generally by candle-light…

Shortly we'll be turning to consider Cowper's eyesight problems and away from Mrs. Unwin's bespectacled occupations. But before doing so, we should look at the case in which she kept her glasses.

Spectacle Case

Mrs. Unwin kept her spectacles in a black, papier-mâché case. It is a narrow oblong with rounded ends. The case is a tight fit for the frames and it seems quite likely that the squeezing and pushing required to get the spectacles properly homed caused the damage we've already noted.

But the case is in good condition: papier-mâché is quite a tough, durable material provided it is kept dry, despite it's squishy, fibrous origins. The 'mash' is made from paper pulp mixed with paste and worked to a putty-like consistency, then moulded into shape.

Alternatively, pasted layers of paper may be moulded or freely formed. Papier-mâché is a cheap, versatile substance that has been used over time to make many personal or house-hold objects. Though plain in origin, it is easy to embellish with moulded or applied decoration.

Since it is easy to work, papier-mâché is often applied as an ornament. For example as a three-dimensional decoration that is merely glued to an otherwise plain picture frame. Or it might be formed into light-weight household items – trays, small portable writing slopes, tiny shelves or pen and ink stands for instance.
It's a cheap material but it can be finely finished to suggest a costly product. Many a treasured personal accessory, such as a snuff-box, scent bottle or needle-case has been made from decorated mashed paper.

The kind of surface embellishment found on papier-mâché ranges widely. For example, the material may be painted, gilded, varnished, lacquered or carved. Alternatively it may simply have raised, moulded decoration - as with Mrs. Unwin's spectacle case. Her case is embellished with a pattern of little sprigs - stylised roses and leaves - set within the suggestion of scrolling plant stems. It has been painted black, but the plain, brown, fibrous material, the mash, from which the case has been made is visible where the lid slides onto the base.

This is about as much information as we can glean about Mrs. Unwin's spectacles and their usage from reading Cowper's and Lady Hesketh's letters. However we do know rather more about Cowper's vision and his treatment of it from these same sources; and it is to these and his eyesight that we now turn.

Cowper’s Eyesight

When Cowper was eight years old he was sent to live with a Mrs. Disney for help with his eyes. She was an renowned oculist and, according to Cowper’s Memoir written in about 1767, he spent considerable time in her care:

Having very weak eyes and being in danger of losing one of them I continued a year with this family.

Cowper lived at Mrs. Disney’s for about two years, presumably to be treated by her on an on-going basis. Apparently Cowper had ‘specks’ on his eyes and these impaired his eye-sight considerably. He was particularly troubled it seems by his left eye, ‘My larboard eye’ as Cowper called it, many years later, in a letter to John Newton.

We do not know much about these ‘specks’ from a medical perspective - what they were, or how caused. But according to some eighteenth century eye-specialists they might have had something to do with having inflamed eyelids. These, they suggested, could bring about films or specks on the eyes. The problem, it was thought, might impair vision, but not necessarily cause blindness.

Whatever the cause, Cowper seems to have been dogged by eye-troubles all his life. And he was inclined to have inflamed eye-lids. This is confirmed by a note written by cousin Johnny Johnson in the 1790’s when Cowper was in his sixties:

Cowper was getting on well with his revision of Homer – 60 or 70 lines a day. His eyes were blood-shot, but he had always suffered from inflammation both of the eyeballs and the lids.

Cowper’s remedies for eye-trouble.

Quite apart from wearing spectacles Cowper had other resources he liked to draw upon for help with his eyes. In particular he was a great believer in ‘Elliot’s ointment’. John Elliot was a physician, practising mid century, who patented a medicine and course of treatment for eye-troubles. The ointment is thought to have mercuric oxide as its main ingredient. In any event, Cowper swore by it; and here he is, in 1782, in his fifties, asking his friend Joseph Hill for a supply:

When it suits you to send me some more of Elliot’s medicines, I shall be obliged to you. My eyes are in general better than I remember them to have been since I first opened them upon this sublunary stage, which is now a little more than half a century ago. Yet I do not think myself safe without those remedies, or when through long keeping they have in part lost their virtue.

A few years later, in 1786, he reminded Lady Hesketh about his on-going eye troubles and mentioned again his reliance on Elliot's medicines:

My eyes, you know were never strong, and it was in the character of a carpenter that I almost put them out. The strains and exertions of hard labour distended and relaxed the blood vessels to such a degree that an inflammation ensued so painful that for a year I was in continual torment, and had so far lost the sight of one of them that I could distinguish with it nothing but the light, and very faintly that. But a medicine of Elliot's, which I had never tried before, though two of his medicines I had used for many years, through God's mercy cured me almost in an instant, and my eyes are for the most part stronger now than they were when you used to see me daily. I shall write … soon for a supply of this medicine, for though I do not often want it, I would never be without it.

So later that same year Cowper we find asking Joseph Hill for more:

Elliot's ointment and the dark coloured eye-water.

The eye water is thought to have been a 'camphorated vitriolic water' as recommended by Elliot in his 'Medical Pocket Book' published in 1781.

Cowper recommended the ointment to others too, as we can see from this letter written in 1780 to Mrs. Newton. He is concerned about an outbreak of smallpox in Olney:

The small pox still rages here and many children die of it…Hannah has yet escaped, though two of Mrs. Clarke's children have had them, and Nanny has been extremely ill. As soon as she began to recover, it was feared she would lose her sight. Her eyes were terribly inflamed, and the sight of one of them almost covered by a thick film. But a few applications of Elliot's Ointment and eye water have cured her.

But Cowper was a very practical man and manifestly interested in self-help remedies - often of a herbal sort - for various maladies. He had one related to eyes. It was a cure for a squint, and we hear of it in a letter to Mrs Unwin's son William.

To dispatch your questions first…Wallnut shells skilfully perforated, and bound over the eyes are esteemed a good remedy for squinting. The pupil naturally seeking its light at the aperture, becomes at length habituated to a just position. But to alleviate your anxiety on this subject, I have heard good judges of beauty declare that they thought a slight distortion of the eye in a pretty face, rather advantageous.

Kind re-assurance here to those lucky enough to be pretty in the first place; but just how slight is a '*slight distortion*'; would it be better to get the walnuts out just in case?

Cowper went on to 'dispatch' another health question in his letter to William, and although this advice has nothing to do with eyesight it is nevertheless quite interesting and very 'hands-on'. Cowper continued:

The figure however cannot be good if the legs do not stand perpendicular to the person. Knock-knees therefore must be corrected if they can. It is I suppose, a case of weakness. I should therefore recommend the cold bath as a strengthener, and riding on horse-back as soon as the boy is capable of it as a means of forcing the knees into their proper line. Their pressure against the saddle will naturally push them outward, and accordingly you may frequently observe the legs of persons habituated from their infancy to this sort of exercise, curved into almost an arch. Witness half the jockeys and postillions in the Kingdom.

But back now to Cowper's spectacles and their maintenance.

Cowper's spectacles

We glean perhaps something about the strength of Cowper's lenses, and thus the weakness of his eyes, from a few helpful sentences written by Cowper to Lady Hesketh in December 1786. Cowper needed new glasses and it appears that he tried to buy some of an appropriate strength by choosing a particular, age-graded lens. He must, it seems, have named an age he thought matched his needs and asked Lady Hesketh to purchase and send him a new pair of this strength. His own, we learn, had a broken frame. In the following letter we learn that the ordered spectacles had arrived, along with some other treasures:

I am desirous to send you a line by this post……that I may acknowledge the receipt of the caravan and its contents. I have examined them one by one. I have opened the snuff-box, looked through the spectacles, studied the lamp, and tasted the gingerbread. The gingerbread I find incomparable, the lamp I do not yet perfectly comprehend, yet am not without hopes that I shall make myself master of it in time, and in the snuff-box I missed your picture. As to the spectacles, they are exactly such as I called for, and yet I cannot read through them at all. The fact is I suppose that mine are not so young as I imagined them. When I bought them I asked for the youngest, and these which are now upon my nose were presented to me as such. They suited me exactly then, and they do so still, whereas the new ones rather puzzle my sight rather than assist it, whence I conclude that I was older at the time and still continue to be so, than I have been willing to suppose.

In short my dear, unless I could send you my eyes as I sincerely wish I could, I know not how this matter can be managed with any certainty of success. The diameter of the glasses being just the same, I once thought of applying myself to the watchmaker at Olney, thinking it possible he might be able to shift the old ones into the new frame, but it presently occurred to me that he might possibly break both the old ones and the new in the experiment, in which case I should become stone-blind as to all the occupations for which I have occasion for glasses. It seems to me therefore on the whole the wisest course to return them, which I will do by the first safe opportunity.

But what, in the end, does he decide to do? Two days later Cowper wrote again to Harriot with his solution:

..the vulgar adage which says, Second thoughts are best, observes that the third thought generally resolves itself into the first. Thus it has happened to me. My first thought was to effect a transposition of the old glasses into the new frame; my second, that perhaps both the old glasses and the new frame might be broken in the experiment; and my third, nevertheless, to make the trial. Accordingly I walked down to Olney this day, referred the matter to the watchmaker's consideration, and he has succeeded in the attempt to a wonder. I am at this moment peering through the same medium as usual, but with the advantage of a more ornamental mounting.

He went on, incidentally, to mention again the gingerbread that came with the new spectacles, and some shoe buckles Harriot had previously sent him. He reports good progress all round:

The clerk of the parish has made me a new pair of straps for my buckles; and the gingerbread, by its genial warmth, has delivered me since dinner of a distension of stomach that was immoderately troublesome, so that I am the better for you my dear, from head to foot.

As to the technological mystery that was the new lamp:

*For a long time I in vain endeavoured to make myself master of the lamp, and was obliged at last to call in William (*William Kitchener, or 'Kitch' Cowper's gardener*) to my assistance. Now there are certain things which great geniuses miss, and which men born without any understanding at all hit immediately. In justification of the truth of this remark, William, who is a lump of dough, who can never be more dead than he is till he has been buried a month, explained it to me in a moment; accordingly we have used it twice, to my great satisfaction.*

What Cowper Saw: Sights and Insights

A Trio of Spectacles

Cowper enjoyed telling a good yarn and was good at evoking the sounds and smells as well as the sights of an event that amused or intrigued him. There is not the space here to explore his story-telling, but we might squeeze in a few described 'spectaculars': things he saw and which struck him as special while he was at Olney.

The first occurred in the summer of 1780 after the June Fair at Hanslope (the 'Hanslip' in what follows). Cowper called it Tom Freeman's Misadventure and it occurred during one of 'two indifferent nights' that plagued Cowper. And, being awake, this is what he (partly) witnessed from his bedroom window overlooking the Market Place:

He and his wife returning from Hanslip Fair, were coming down Weston Lane, to wit, themselves, their horse and their great wooden panniers at ten o'clock at night. The horse having a lively imagination and very weak nerves, fancied he saw or heard Something, but has never been able to say what. … Accordingly he started, and sprung from the middle of the road to the side of it, with such surprising alacrity, that he dismounted the Gingerbread Baker and his Gingerbread Wife in a moment. Not contented with this effort, nor thinking himself yet out of danger, he proceeded as fast as he could to a full gallop: rushed against the gate at the bottom of the lane and opened it for himself without perceiving that there was any gate there, still he galloped, and with a velocity and momentum continually encreasing till he arrived in Olney. I had been in bed about 10 minutes when I heard the most uncommon and unaccountable noise that can be imagined.

It was in fact occasioned by the clattering of tin pattypans and a Dutch Oven against the sides of the panniers – much gingerbread was picked up in the street and Mr Lucy's windows were broke all to pieces. Had this been all, it would have been a comedy, but we learned the next morning that the poor woman's collar bone was broken and she has hardly been able to resume her occupation since.

There is something John Gilpin-like about this account. (John Gilpin was a bouncy, humorous ballad Cowper had yet to relate and publish.) And perhaps this is a bit more of a tale than a visual spectacular. Nevertheless there are 'all at one glance', scenic elements to the telling which compare quite well with looking at a Breughel painting: both engage with a jovial depiction of an earthy, busy village life but include harsher detail. Cowper's Tom Freeman visual is a homely rather than a heroic spectacle.

The second spectacular took place in March 1781. And it is interesting partly for the difference in tone. Here, and by his own account, Cowper witnessed something extraordinary, but he treats it relatively matter-of-factly, embroidered only with a little lace trim:

Olney has seen this day what it never saw before, and what will serve it to talk of I suppose in years to come. At eleven o'clock this morning a party of soldiers entered the town, driving before them another party, who after obstinately defending the bridge for some time were obliged to quit it and run. They ran in very good order, frequently faced about and fired, but were at last obliged to surrender prisoners of war. There has been much drumming and shouting, much scampering about in the dirt, but not an inch of lace made in the town, at least the Silver End of it.

Silver End is just round the corner from the Market Place and Orchard Side and it was very much the poor end of town in Cowper's day. Many of the poverty-wracked lace makers lived there; and

Silver End was the source of many of those putrid smells that Cowper fought against with his scented garden plantings.

And the third spectacular? Nothing less than a lion. In 1778 Cowper regaled William Unwin with this:

...when any thing arises at Olney that is not in the threadbare stile of daily occurrences, you shall hear of it...Nothing of this sort has happened lately, except that a lion was imported here at the (Cherry) Fair, seventy years of age, and as tame as a goose. Your mother and I saw him embrace his keeper with his paws, and lick his face. Others saw him receive his head in his mouth, and restore it to him again unhurt. A sight we chose not to be favoured with, but rather advised the honest man to discontinue the practise. A practise hardly reconcileable to prudence, unless he had a head to spare. The beast however was a very magnificent one, and much more royal in his appearance, than those I have seen in the tower.

Three spectacles and now a few insights: some glimpses he gives us of the interior Cowper.

Sightings - Cowper the Manager

Managing Words

What does Cowper allow us to see of himself in his letters? Well, this is a tricky question as Cowper is the arch manipulator of language and, not surprisingly perhaps, he varies his approach depending to whom he is writing. His letters were tailor-made to entertain, to please, to inform, to entice and his eye was nearly always firmly fixed on the receiver: we can sense how he watched and played with their reactions.

Cowper admitted as much at the end of one letter to William Unwin, where he obviously felt he'd forgotten what he was up to:

You must understand this to be a soliloquy, I wrote my thoughts without recollecting that I was writing a letter, and to you.

And perhaps the result was unusually sluggish; as if Cowper was chewing the cud rather than imagining, and accommodating, his friend William's probable reactions to what he was saying.

And here, in a letter to John Newton, Cowper shows his awareness of his manipulative skill with words:

I am merry that I may decoy people into my company, and grave that they may be the better for it. Now and then I put on the garb of a philosopher, and take the opportunity that disguise procures me, to drop a word in favour of religion. In short there is some froth and here and there a bit of sweetmeat...

But, complex character that he is, Cowper doesn't direct his creative energies merely towards pleasing the person to whom he is writing. Ultimately, he claimed, the pleasure was his; and this because he saw letter-writing as a rewarding social act; a slice of meaningful interaction. At least, this is how Cowper put the point to William Unwin:

You do me the justice to suppose that if I could be very entertaining, I would be so, because by giving me the credit for such a willingness to please, you only allow me a share of that universal vanity, which inclines every man upon all occasions to exhibit himself to best advantage. To say the truth however, when I write to you, not about business nor on any subject that approaches to that description, I mean much less my correspondent's amusement, which my modesty

will not always permit me to hope for, than my own. 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 perhaps, fits us for it.

But this extract would seem to reveal also, unwittingly perhaps, that the pleasure Cowper claimed, derived partly too from an inner assurance that he had successfully engaged his 'listener' - he knew he'd charmed, enticed, amused, informed or whatever it was that was appropriate to his cause. There is a managerial twist to the satisfaction he feels.

Cowper often referred to letters as a kind of conversation - as medium for direct exchanges. He sometimes gave quite lengthy expositions on this (as above) and sometimes used very simple words which embodied the idea:

I could talk a good while longer but I have no room...

So he wrote to his friends naturally or, at least, without forethought:

Now upon the word of a poor creature, I have said all that I have said, without the least intention to say one word of it when I began. But thus it is with my thoughts. When you shake a crab-tree the fruit falls, good for nothing indeed when you have got it, but still the best that can be expected from a crab-tree.

Cowper wrote this to William Unwin in 1781 and he made many comments in similar vein. But of course a conversation may feel natural but still be well monitored from inside and fashioned to be 'appropriate'.

So even when he spoke of himself we have to be aware that this was done carefully and with shades of a masquerade. Cowper remained in control and in his letters was guardedly open, his frankness often veiled with wit and metaphor. Nevertheless there are consistencies to draw upon, and comments that ring true because they are so human and so recognisable. And these tell us more.

The Busy Man

Bearing all this in mind we are going to look briefly at one aspect of Cowper's life at Olney - at some of his creative activities, and how these served him. So we'll be looking not at the demented and violently tormented Cowper, but at the well man. Or at least, the man well for the most part, but acutely shy and anxious and haunted by melancholic moods. A man well enough to make things. He described some of his activities to Harriot:

As soon as I became capable of action, I commenced carpenter, made cupboards, boxes stools. I grew weary of this in about a twelve month, and addressed myself to the making of birdcages. To this employment succeeded that of gardening, which I intermingled with that of drawing, but finding the latter occupation injured my eyes, I renounced it, and commenced poet.

One way of interpreting what Cowper reveals about his various crafty occupations at Olney is to claim they show he was a master of defence strategies. Strategies which consisted largely of staying in command and of following familiar, patterned activities (daily walks; regular meals) that both kept him safe from threatening unknowns and kept his mind constructively engaged. He liked familiar detail:

The very stones in the garden walls are my intimate acquaintance;

I should miss almost the minutest object and be disagreeably affected by its removal...

So he wrote to John Newton in 1783. And later the same year he amplified what he meant by 'an object' to William Unwin. He was upbraiding William for taking too little exercise:

I beseech you to ride and to ride often. I think I have heard you say you cannot even do that without an object. Is not health an object? Is not a new prospect an object?…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.

So for Cowper, 'an object' was more of 'an objective' than a mere 'thing'; his concept embraced the notions of a goal and a task as well. And this fits with his need for activities which fed his enquiring mind: Cowper was someone who liked to investigate, to understand, and in this sense it might be argued, to manage his environment. Crafting objects and thereby understanding objects, was just one part of this managerial defence programme, but it played an important part in keeping Cowper well:

I find constant employment necessary, and therefore take care to be constantly employed. Manual occupations do not engage the mind sufficiently, as I know by experience, having tried many. But composition, especially of verse absorbs it wholly.

To John Newton he put the same point more poignantly, aware as he was that relief was just temporary:

While I am in pursuit of pretty images, or a pretty way of expressing them, I forget everything that is irksome, and, like a boy that plays truant, determine to avail myself of the present opportunity to be amused, and to put by the disagreeable recollection that I must after all, go home and be whipt again.

His Moods

But first of all how does Cowper see his 'everyday' kind of depressions? Well he is consistent on one point: they do not last. He wrote to John Newton this way:

My mind has always been of 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 their surface.

While to Lady Throckmorton in 1788, the intemperate black took on a more delicate sable tone:

The truth is however that though I sent no letter I did in fact begin one; but having risen that morning in very indifferent spirits I found it so tinged with my own sable mood, that having filled one page, I burned it..

But note – he is recovered enough to write, so the mood passed.

A couple of years earlier Cowper wrote re-assuringly to Harriot about his moods. He had not seen her for some 20 years:

Am I not your cousin …who used to read to you, to laugh with you, till our sides have ached, at any thing, or nothing? And am I in those respects at all altered? You will not find me so, but just as ready to laugh and to wander as you ever knew me. A cloud perhaps may come over me now and then, but for a few hours, but from clouds I was never exempted.

And he insisted to William Unwin that:

I am not in the least an enemy of cheerfulness and good humor..

Meanwhile to Harriot he was adamant about not being 'bi-polar': he had the 'downs' but not the 'ups'.

Assure yourself… I will be as philosophically careful as possible that these fine nerves of mine shall not be beyond measure agitated when you arrive. In truth there is much greater probability that they will be benefited and greatly too, than otherwise. Joy of heart, from whatever occasion it may arise, is the best of all nervous medicines… you must not imagine neither that I am on the whole in any great degree subject to nervous affections. Occasionally indeed I am and have been these many years much liable to dejection. But at intervals, and sometimes for an interval of weeks, no creature would suspect it…because I have not that which is commonly a symptom of such a case …I am never at any time exalted in proportion as I am at some times depressed.

And how right he is about 'joy of heart'. But how to find 'the occasion' for it? That's the problem. For Cowper it was often achieved through being with amusing people whom he trusted, recognised as kindred spirits whom he could amuse in his turn. People such as cousins Harriot and Johnny Johnson and the sparkling Lady Austen. But he had difficulty with strangers.

Managing People

As Cowper explained to cousin Johnny, he suffered from

An insuperable shyness

This made it hard for him to meet new people. And, as he put it to Walter Bagot whom Cowper knew from Westminster School days:

I am a shy animal and want much kindness to make me easy

And to William Unwin, referring to a proposed visit to a house in nearby Gayhurst:

*He (*a Mr. Wright*) understood that I did not much affect strange faces…and sent over his servant on purpose to inform me that he was going into Leicestershire, and that if I chose to see the gardens I might gratify myself without danger of seeing the proprietor*

Another way of putting this is to say Cowper did not readily trust others; he preferred mostly to play safe, to avoid meeting strangers and to keep himself to himself.

Managing Objects

'Making things' also served Cowper well, involving, as it does, a concentrated understanding of materials and processes – another kind of being 'in control' that could work to keep lurking, as yet unfathomed, unknowns at bay. 'Keeping busy' is of course also a way of blotting out, or of diverting 'sable' thoughts, as well as a means of generating more positive feelings. Here is Cowper making this somewhat negative point to William Unwin in 1780:

I am glad when I find a subject to work upon; a lapidary I suppose accounts it a laborious part of his business to rub away the roughness of the stone, but it is my amusement, and if after all the polishing I can give it, it discovers some lustre, I think myself well rewarded for my pains.

But describing the positive side, he told William:

My scribbling humour has of late been entirely absorbed in the passion of landscape drawing. It is a most amusing art, and like every other art, requires much practise and attention...

So long as I am pleased with an employment , I am capable of un-wearied application, because my feelings are all of the intense kind.

I never received a little pleasure from any thing in my life; if I am delighted, it is in the extreme – the unhappy consequence of this temperature is, that my attachment to any occupation seldom outlives the novelty of it. That never of my imagination that feels the touch of any particular amusement, twangs under the energy of the pressure with so much vehemence, that it soon becomes sensible of weariness and fatigue. Hence I draw an unfavourable prognostic, and expect that I shall be shortly constrained to look for something else. Then perhaps I may string the lyre again, …

So 'making' is fun until one knows too well how to do it. And, having 'controlled the beast' as it were, the beast that was the untamed process, Cowper liked to move on and find another problem to wrestle and master. A more satisfying diversion was one that engaged his mind and pleased his controlling spirit; and he did not like it too easy.

Managing Judgments

Spirits may be high while an activity is on-going but what about the end product? At this point, if not before, judgments come into play, and these, even one's own can be painfully unsettling. Cowper, writing again to William Unwin in 1779 describes a rather common 'makers' problem':

I have this peculiarity belonging to me as a rhimist, that though I am charmed to a great degree with my own work while it is on the anvil, I can seldom bear to look at it when it is once finished. The more I contemplate it, the more it loses of its value, 'till I am at last quite disgusted with it. I then throw it by, take it up again perhaps ten years after, and am as much delighted with it as at first.

Cowper wrote a long letter to William Unwin in 1780 exploring his thoughts on judgments and genius. He explained that he agreed with Joshua Reynolds (President of the Royal Academy) that

…men of ordinary talents may be highly satisfied with their own productions, men of genius never are. Whatever be their subject, they always seem to themselves to fall short of it, even when they seem to others most to excel, and for this reason – because they have a certain sublime sense of perfection, which other men are strangers to, and which they in their performances are not able to exemplify.

This theoretical explanation may be true, but it does not quite account for the ways in which judgments threaten, and threaten especially those, like Cowper, with feelings of insecurity. Nor does it deal with a poignant query Cowper went on to raise about the stability of judgments; he noted how, in one day, a mind, an opinion, might change several times. And he concluded:

Alas! What can I do with my wit? I have not enough to do great things with, and these little things are so fugitive, that while a man catches at the subject, he is only filling his hand with smoke. I must do with it as I do with my linnet, I keep him for the most part in a cage, but now and then set open the door that he may whisk about the room a little, and then shut them up again.

A Parting Shot

In the following extract from a letter to John Newton, written in 1783, Cowper shows us a man entrapped by his genius and his shyness as well as perhaps by his managerial priorities. He depicts himself as safely imprisoned but his own jailer:

My passion for retirement is not at all abated after so many years spent in the most sequestered state, but rather encreased. A circumstance I should esteem wonderful to a degree not to be accounted for, considering the condition of my mind, which if not always melancholy is yet never peacefull, did I not know that we think as we are made to think…thus I am both free and a prisoner at the same time. The world is before me; I am not shut up in the Bastille though often as miserable as if I were, there are no moats about my castle, nor locks upon my gates but of which I have the key - but an invisible uncontroulable agency, a local attachment, an inclination more forcible than I ever felt even to the place of my birth, serves me for prison walls and for bounds which I cannot pass. … … Here I have spent almost 11 (years) in a state of despair, nevertheless…It is the place of all the world I love the most, not for any happiness it affords me, but because here I can be miserable with most convenience to myself, and with the least disturbance to others.

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