

COWPER'S WRITING SLOPE



A MATERIAL WORLD

WRITING SLOPE

Introduction

A box, but a very special box for this study. It is Cowper's portable writing box which opens up to become a miniature desk. The box, or 'writing slope', dates from around 1790. It was bought by the museum, in 2006, from a sale of Cowper's artefacts, some of which had passed by descent to the Cowper Johnson family.

The Portrait of Cowper with his Box

There is a portrait of Cowper hanging in the hall of the museum which depicts him seated by this special desk. The painting is worth comment for the glimpse it gives us of Cowper the writer and of some of the tools of his trade, including, importantly, our writing slope.

The portrait is a copy of one painted by Abbott in 1792. (The original was bought by the National Portrait Gallery.) Lemuel Frances Abbott was a largely self-taught painter, famous for his ability to capture a good likeness of his sitters - particularly their facial expressions. He had been asked to paint Cowper by John Johnson - a second cousin of Cowper from his mother's side of the family. Johnny, as he was usually known, was by all accounts a vivacious, bubbly relation, but Cowper had lost touch with his Norfolk based, maternal family and the two only met in 1790. Johnny was nineteen at the time, but the two got on famously:

Johnny, with whom I have been always delighted, is also so much in love with me, that no place in the world will suit him to live at present, except Weston. (Underwood.)

Johnny became a devoted friend, admirer and frequent visitor.

We don't know for sure what Cowper thought of the painting project at first, but he seems to have warmed to it, and to Abbott, as work progressed:

I have sat twice, and the few who have seen his copy of me are much struck with the resemblance. He (Abbott) is a sober quiet man, which considering I must have him at least a week longer for an inmate, is a great comfort to me.

And a little later, he wrote to Lady Hesketh, with rather more enthusiasm but with his typical dryness:

My portrait is nearly finished. An excellent one in my mind and in the opinion of all who see it, both for drawing and likeness. Should it be your wish to view it...I think it will afford you as much pleasure, nay perhaps even more, than a sight of the original myself; for...while this picture subsists, my charming lineaments and proportions can never be forgotten.

To his friend the Reverend William Bull of Newport Pagnell, he also joked about his ten days of

...sitting. Not on cockatrice eggs, nor because I was too sick to move ...but because my Cousin Johnson has an Aunt who has a longing desire for my picture...

He goes on to make it clear how impressed he is with the result:

The likeness is so strong that when my friends enter the room where the picture is they start, astonished to see me where they know I am not...

...this prodigy of art goes to London next Monday to be suspended a while at Abbott's, and then proceeds onto Norfolk where it will be suspended for ever.

With such acclaim ringing in our ears, we should perhaps look more closely at the portrait to see what this 'likeness' and other elements in the composition might tell us about the man, his work and even his writing slope.

In the painting Cowper is shown seated on a smart, red upholstered chair. He has a strong posture - a good, upright back - and is placed centrally on the canvas, his body almost filling it. He is sitting slightly above us and from this raised position stares us straight in the eye. Posed in this way, Cowper has a quietly authoritative air, suggestive of a serious man of some considerable importance; and it's an effect added to by the objects selected to be painted along with him.



Following long-standing portraiture tradition, Cowper is depicted with his attributes - objects that identify a sitter and, usually, celebrate his or her achievements. In this painting Cowper is shown pointing with a finger of his left hand at a vast tome, while in his right hand he holds a quill pen.



The book is open at a page headed *Homer's Iliad*, so we understand that Cowper is pointing to an important example of his work as a renowned translator of Classical Greek and Latin texts. The pen he holds obviously represents an essential tool of his writer's trade.

The book is shown lying open on the writing slope we are discussing. We can deduce that the box was an important personal artefact both from its inclusion in the painting and because Abbott has shown the box performing a crucial role: it supports his book and, metaphorically, Cowper's literary career - his reading and his writing.

Some twelve years earlier (probably in 1779 though the letter is undated) Cowper had evoked a similar image in words; these referred to another special box in which he stored his private papers. This was in a letter to his friend William, (the son of Mrs. Unwin, his constant companion at Orchard Side). In it he uses imagery to capture the value and significance of a box in which he could secrete some of his poetry. William, he says, IS his mahogany box:

You are my mahogany box with a slit in the lid of it, to which I commit my productions of the lyric kind, in perfect confidence that there they are safe, and will go no further. All who are attached to this Jingling Art have this peculiarity, that they would find no pleasure in the exercise, had they not one friend at least to whom they might publish what they have composed. If you approve my Latin, and your wife and sister my English, this, together with the approbation of your mother, is fame enough for me.

However valuable it was to him in his work, this mahogany box is very unlikely to be our writing slope; it was more probably a fairly ordinary rectangular box with a fitting in the lid that dropped open to hold papers. Indeed, as we shall shortly see, Cowper says he did not own a portable desk in 1785 (just six years on) but relied instead on makeshift piles of books and maps to lean his papers on.

But back to the portrait for a moment, for the composition seems to seek to present Cowper as a modest man (or someone careful about being too proud) rather as do the sentences just quoted from his letter to William Unwin.



We can tell this because although the painting shows Cowper as a man of fashion (he sports yellow silk breeches and a matching waistcoat both neatly finished with yellow silk buttons; he wears shimmering silk stockings and a very elaborate cravat) and in a quietly commanding pose, the portrait is not in other respects particularly imposing or grand. For instance Cowper is seated and is apparently ‘at home’. We may deduce from this that he chose to present himself as a private man comfortable in his own surroundings and ‘doing his own thing’, however important that was, rather than trumpeting his public, celebrity status. For example, if he were standing and placed in an ostentatious setting, we might be more inclined to read the portrait as a public statement about Cowper’s social and literary pre-eminence.

From such a view, the picture sums up Cowper and his box in this way: we can see that the writing slope is a treasured and important possession supporting the work of an important and serious reader and writer; a gentleman who is of some social and literary position and, as such, well worthy of our respect, but who is at the same time accessible and modest.

The Writing Desk - a Close-Up

The writing desk is made of attractively figured mahogany, banded in fruitwood and edged in box. The lid has a centrally placed, inlaid boxwood motif edged in fruitwood and rimmed with a further thin line of boxwood. The motif is an oval patera, a popular decorative design on eighteenth century furniture and interior décor more generally. (A patera is an abstraction, usually leaf-like in form, from a shallow dish used in the classical world for offerings.) The dark and light, three dimensional effects on the patera - for example the shading on

the scrolled edges of this leaf form - may have been achieved by scorching the inlaid wood; this was usually done by dipping the wood into hot sand or lead.



The lid of the box is hinged so that when fully open it lies flat, aligned with the base. When lying open like this, the interior of the box forms a continuous, and reasonably smooth, writing slope. The surface of this incline is covered with some rather moth-eaten green baize. This may well be the original covering material (though the slopes of many such desks were covered in leather) as the slope in the portrait is coloured green too.



To make this continuous writing slope, the wood has been cut very shallow at the locking end of the lid and then cut at a slant; this slanting cut rises through the central hinge and to the far edge of the base of the box. At this highest point there is a shelved recess, divided into compartments, designed to hold various writing necessities such as ink, pens, sealing wax and pounce. The glass pounce pot is still with us; its pewter lid is pierced, pepper-pot fashion, to allow the pounce (sand or powder of some sort) to be sprinkled over wet ink to dry it. (This is before blotting paper.)

The lid of the slope can be held open, supported at various heights, by a narrow brass rod. This small brass mechanism will normally lie flat, embedded in the edge of the base, but can be lifted and slotted into one of several small holes in the lid. In this mode, the desk becomes more like a lectern and a good support for reading books at a comfortable angle.

The desk has a side drawer for papers or other stationery fitted with a brass swan-neck handle. This drawer is somewhat hidden, or disguised, in the side of the box - a feature that would seem to suit Cowper's desire to hide away some of his '*jingling art*' until perhaps he felt more sure of its quality. On the other side of the base there is a matching handle; the two together make the closed box easy to carry.

Other Such Desks

Portable writing desks had been known for many centuries and in many countries before they became fashionable in England. But they became popular here in the third decade of the eighteenth century not just as a fashionable item but also for their usefulness. This was in the context of a newly

demanding intellectual, social and business world. Boxes like this were efficient and versatile; they supported the work of the creative writer and researcher as well as that of the business man or the inquisitive traveller.

Indeed in late eighteenth century such writing boxes might be found in drawing rooms or libraries, with military men on their expeditions and amongst travellers' luggage. They might be laid on table top or lap and used to support the composing or reading of many kinds of document – private diaries and correspondence, semi-public business contracts, and manuscripts intended for publication. They also made elegant statements, for they were well made pieces of miniature furniture.

It's important to note though, that unlike a desk or table, a writing box was definitely a personal, not a household, or shared possession. In our case, this was definitely **Cowper's** private box. He had a key for it, so could keep it locked, and could secrete special papers away in it; this was not a piece of furniture made for general use.



Myths and Mysteries: A Second Writing Slope

Until recently the museum believed that the mahogany slope we are discussing was one given Cowper by his cousin Harriot, Lady Hesketh, in December 1785. There is a hand-written note, thought to have been written by one of the Cowper-Johnson relatives, in the drawer of the little desk which claims this. The writer of the note also says that this is the box depicted in the Abbott portrait, and adds that Cowper is believed to have written his famous poem, *The Task*, on it.

Sadly most of this turns out to be a myth - the only true part being that the desk is depicted in Abbott's portrait. But such is the magical power of a handwritten note from a Cowper relative that the claim remained unchallenged until 2011.

As it happens it is also true that Cowper was given a writing slope by his cousin Harriot, Lady Hesketh in the winter of 1785. (In fact Harriot, it turns out, was acting for her sister Theadora, from whom the gift really came. But for simplicity's sake we will call it Harriot's box.) And we know from Cowper's 'thank you' letter to Lady Hesketh that it was an object he particularly loved:

My desk, the most elegant, the compactest, the most commodious desk in the world, and of all the desks that ever were or ever shall be, the desk that I love the most, is safe arrived.

(This extract is quoted in the note written by Cowper's relative as if to prove we are talking about the same desk.) But we can also read, in a letter from Cowper to William Unwin written only a couple of weeks later, a nice description of the 'Harriot Desk'. It sounds splendid and Cowper is clearly thrilled with it:

Let me sing the praises of the desk my dear cousin has sent me. In general it is as elegant as possible. In particular it is of cedar, beautifully laquered. When put together it forms a handsome small chest, contains all sorts of accommodations, is furnished with cut glass for ink and sand, and is hinged, handled and mounted with silver. It is inlaid with ivory, and also serves the purpose of a reading desk. It came with stationery ware of all sorts, and this splendid sheet is part of it.

These details reveal that Cowper must have describing another desk, for there is no silver or ivory, lacquer or cedar wood to be seen on our mahogany version. Cowper had bad eyesight but it seems unlikely that he was this mistaken. What is also interesting is that Cowper cannot have owned our mahogany desk when he received Harriot's precious gift, because while anxiously waiting for it to be delivered - he knew of its impending arrival - Cowper wrote this to her:

... Where can it possibly be? I am not absolutely in despair about it, ... but to tell the truth I stand tottering upon the verge of it. I write, and have written these many years, upon a book of maps, which I now begin to find run too low and too flat, though till I expected a better desk, I found no fault with them. See and observe how true it is, that by increasing the number of our conveniences, we multiply our wants exactly in the same proportion!

As noted earlier, Cowper had invented his own way of supporting his work and it didn't apparently involve a wooden desk of any sort. So the whole sequence of Cowper's portable desk ownership is puzzling: until late in 1785 Cowper was apparently accustomed to writing on a slippery pile of maps and owned no desk at all; in December of that year he was

given a fancy desk by Harriot, but by 1792, when the portrait is painted, he seems to have abandoned this splendid gift in preference for the mahogany one the museum now owns. Moreover we have no further knowledge of the Harriot desk - it isn't mentioned again in his correspondence, and there appears to be no reference to the mahogany slope, of Abbott portrait fame, there either.

Did Cowper own two writing slopes - for the description of the Harriot box does not tally with ours, the one painted so clearly by Abbott? If so, when did he acquire the second mahogany one and why did he choose to have it appear in the Abbott portrait rather than the more exotic sounding slope? Indeed, what happened to this much loved ivory, silver and cedarwood concoction? Was the mahogany box '*with a slit in the lid*' that Cowper invoked in his letter to William Unwin, perhaps an early reference to our writing slope after all?

One thing we can say with some confidence: Cowper cannot have composed *The Task* on a desk he does not seem to have owned when that poem was completed, in 1784.

Such is the lure of a good story about provenance - and there are many such uncurling themselves in the museum world - that myths soon ossify into fact. But in their coming to pass, a fascinating new set of questions will often emerge. And in our case we now must ask - what IS the true story behind our mahogany box?



Cowper and Publications

We started by looking at Cowper's writing slope from the perspective of its inclusion in the Abbott portrait and by considering what the composition suggested about the man and his work. We thought it depicted a rather **private** public man; one who seemed reluctant to shout about his considerable literary standing - this we considered was a relatively homely portrait - but someone who nevertheless chose to be publicly displayed as a man of letters. So we saw presented a man whose identity seemed bound up with reading and writing, as if these were the most important things about him. But, and at the same time, we saw someone who did not seem to want to exaggerate his greatness as a writer or as a public figure. The portrait might have left us wondering how much Cowper would ever really want to be in the public eye and by extension how much he would want his work published.

And so we end by returning to this idea, to take a brief look at what Cowper said about his own writing; what he claimed for it, how he judged it, and what he wanted for it. It is interesting to notice how his ideas develop over time.

Here he is first of all on the pleasure he takes from writing and, by implication, what he values about it. He is writing to William Unwin in 1779:

No manufacturer of waking dreams ever succeeded better in his employment than I do, I can weave such a piece of tapestry in a few minutes, as not only has all the charms of a reality, but is embellished also with a variety of beauties, which tho' they never existed, are more captivating than any that ever did.

He went on, in another letter to William of that year, to

comment on his poetry, and does so again in very humble vein:

You I think was never a dabbler in Rhime; I have been one ever since I was 14 years of age, when I began with translating an elegy of Tibullus. I have no more right to the name of poet than a maker of mousetraps has to that of an engineer, but my little exploits this way have at times amused me so much, that I have often wished myself a good one. Such a talent as mine, is like a child's rattle, very entertaining to the trifler that uses it, and very disagreeable to all beside.

Note the reference to amusement; it's a value Cowper often mentions when talking about his writing; at first it is all that he claims for this 'hobby'; but, as he grows in fame and confidence he tends to shift his ground.

We begin to see the shift in 1781, in a letter to John Newton when he said he wanted his work to be 'useful' to others, and (dare he even say it?) 'approved' by them, as well as a private amusement:

No man ever wrote such quantities of verse as I have written this last year, with so much indifference about the event, or rather with so little ambition of public praise. My pieces are such as may possibly be made useful. The more they are approved, the more likely they are to spread, and consequently the more likely to attain the end of usefulness, which as I once said before, except my present amusement is the only end I propose.

At this time too (it is still 1781) he started to comment on how careful a writer he was and so to point up, with some mild pride, that he was not just having casual fun, but was a disciplined craftsman with a proper concern for the technicalities of his trade. (In another study featuring Cowper's letter cabinet, we look again

at Cowper's letter writing, and note that he was even concerned to see that a hand-written page **looked** well-crafted, tidy and all of a piece.) This is what he said on the discipline point, and again to John Newton:

Whatever faults I may be chargeable with as a poet, I cannot accuse myself of negligence – I never suffer a line to pass till I have made it as good as I can;

And again

The moment a man takes it into his foolish head, that he has what the world calls genius, he gives himself a discharge from the servile drudgery of all friendly offices, and becomes good for nothing except in the pursuit of his favourite employment. But I am not yet vain enough to think myself entitled to such self-conferred honors,...

And so Cowper comes finally to address directly a growing dilemma he has about his writing - was it still just a private, albeit disciplined, amusement and diversion or was it something the world at large should see? On the whys and wherefores of 'going public', he wrote to John Newton:

If a Board of Enquiry were to be established at which poets were to undergo an examination respecting the motives that induced them to publish, and I were summoned that I might give an account of mine, I think I could truly say, what perhaps few poets could – that though I have no objection to lucrative consequences if any such should follow, they are not my aim; much less is it my ambition to exhibit myself to the world as a genius. What then says Mr. President, can possibly be your motive? I answer with a bow – amusement; there is nothing but this, no occupation within

the compass of my small sphere, poetry excepted, that can do much towards diverting that train of melancholy thoughts, which when I am not thus employed, are for ever pouring themselves in upon me. And if I did not publish what I write, I could not interest myself sufficiently in my own success to make an amusement of it.

From this letter, it seems that for Cowper, publishing added a necessary element of risk; it gave an edge to an otherwise trivial amusement; one that he could only value as a diversion and a temporary (albeit valuable) cure for his bouts of depression. And the risk came from minding what others thought of his work.

He is clear about the life-giving energy, the essential ‘push’ to authenticity, that going public and facing criticism could give a creative writer:

You are sensible that it is not an age in which poetry of a religious or moral tendency is likely to find many readers. But I know well that publication is necessary to give an edge to the poetical turn, and that what we produce in the closet, is never a vigorous birth, if we intend that it should die there. For my own part, I could no more amuse myself with writing verse, if I did not print it when written, than with the study of tacticks for which I can never have any real occasion.

So finally, here he is writing to his cousin Harriot in 1786 talking again about whether, or why, he should publish his work. It’s the ‘shall I shan’t I?’ Cowper we saw in the portrait, admitting to a little ambition after all, but not wanting to make too much noise:

I am not ashamed to confess that having commenced as an author I am most ardently desirous to succeed as such. I have what you perhaps little suspect me of, in my nature an infinite share of ambition. But with it as you well know an equal share of diffidence. To this combination of opposite qualities it has been owing that till lately I stole through life without undertaking anything, yet always wishing to distinguish myself.

It's the ultimate confession of the man we saw in the painting - a shyly distinguished Cowper with his writing slope; quietly going public, and probably quietly rather pleased to have finally dared.

As he wrote to Johnny Johnson when this portrait was to be more widely seen:

After having been exhibited in his (Abbott's) room so long, I care not where I am exhibited next. The public at large are welcome to a sight of me, if he and you and they are agreed upon it.

More on Writing

In another study called Cowper's Letter Cabinet we'll pursue the topic of Cowper's letter writing a little further. We'll also be looking at some of the other accessories he needed and at the complex workings of the postal system he bought into.



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Photographs by Deborah Hopson-Wolpe