

‘The Loop-holes of Retreat’ Exploring Cowper’s Letters

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‘Tis pleasant through the loop-holes of retreat
To peep at such a world ...

(*The Task*, IV. 88-89)¹

By 1787 William Cowper had made his reputation as a poet, not least with *John Gilpin* (1782) and *The Task* (1785), both of which achieved swift popularity. One day in November he was sitting quietly at home in Weston Underwood, a village near the town of Olney in Buckinghamshire, when he received an unexpected visit from a certain Mr Cox, clerk of the parish of All Saints in Northampton. He records the incident in a letter to Lady Hesketh, his cousin:

On Monday Morning last, Sam brought me word into the study that a man was in the kitchen who desired to speak with me. I order’d him in. A plain decent elderly figure made its appearance, and being desired to sit, spoke as follows. Sir, I am Clerk of the Parish of All Saints in Northampton. Brother of Mr. Cox the Upholst’er. It is customary for the person in my office to annex to a Bill of Mortality which he publishes at Christmas, a Copy of Verses. You would do me a great favour, Sir, if you would furnish me with one. To this I replied - Mr. Cox, you have several men of Genius in your town, why have not you applied to some of them? There is a namesake of yours in particular, Cox, the Statuary, who, every body knows, is a first-rate Maker of Verses. He surely is the man of all the world for your purpose. Alas Sir! I have heretofore borrowed help from him, but he is a Gentleman of so much reading, that the people of our town cannot understand him.

(27.11.87: III, 57)²

A Bill of Mortality was a public list of the parishioners who had died during the year, to which might be appended, as in the present case, some moralizing verses on such themes as the brevity of life or the vanity of human wishes. It is hardly surprising that Cowper, who for example knew enough Greek to produce a major translation of Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, should have been amused and even somewhat annoyed at being compared in the extent of his ‘reading’ with Cox the sculptor, but, his ‘mortified vanity a little consoled’ by the respect implicit in the very approach of Cox the official, he happily accepted the unusual commission. In the event he supplied material not only for 1787 but for five further years, all of which is admirable for its purpose.³ He continues his letter with a characteristically witty account of his first exercise in the genre as it trundles its way to its destination:

The waggon has accordingly gone this day to Northampton loaded in part with my effusions in the Mortuary style. A fig for poets who write Epitaphs upon Individuals; I have written *one*, that serves *200* persons.

The point is that, being truly a man ‘of Genius’, Cowper, however learned, could, when required, write so that he could readily be understood by ‘the people of our town’. He was never at a loss for an appropriate voice or approach to a situation. This talent for well-judged communication is of course no less relevant to his mastery of letter-writing, the epistolary art, than to his success in ‘occasional’ poetry such as the respectful Mr Cox extracted from him. Indeed, the distinction between poetry and letters at times becomes blurred in his writing, for,

as we shall soon discover, not only does Cowper put verse in his letters, he composes letters in verse.

Cementing relations

Cowper can move easily between one medium and another within a single missive. Sending a thank-you note to his friend Samuel Rose for the gift of a hamper, he offers in return a present of his own - some well-crafted lines gently parodying the Homeric epic:

The straw-stuff'd hamper with his ruthless steel
He open'd, cutting sheer th'inserted cords,
Which bound the lid and lip secure. Forth came
The rustling package first, bright straw of wheat,
Or oats, or barley; next, a bottle green
Throat-full, clear spirits the contents, distill'd
Drop after drop odorous, by the art
Of the fair mother of his friend, the Rose.

(4.10.89: III, 313-14)

'I should rejoice to be the Hero of such a tale in the hands of Homer', says Cowper, before switching to the subject of Rose's delicate constitution and the salutary effects of 'rural walks and fresh air'. The choice of an exercise in the style of Homer was not arbitrary. An experienced lawyer (with a place in history as the man who successfully defended William Blake against a charge of treason), Rose took a keen interest in the progress of Cowper's translation of Homer during the late 1780s and gave him welcome advice on negotiating income from its publication.⁴ The evocation of Homer at the heart of the letter sustains an important bond between the two men and salutes the constructive give-and-take of their friendship.

Letters fulfil many ends. The example we have just considered, however, achieves one of the commonest: adroit in its reference to shared interests, carefully wrought in its humour, unaffected in its note of intimate concern for the 'debility' Rose had recently reported, it serves perfectly to cement and nourish a relationship. The same function and success are apparent in Cowper's best-known verse epistle, 'To Robert Lloyd, Esq.', though the focus here is at least as much on social as on personal interaction and bonding. Cowper wrote this piece in 1754 when training as a lawyer at the Middle Temple. Its mode reflects the fact that Lloyd was himself an aspiring poet, a member of the circle of young London literati known as the Nonsense Club, which also included, besides Cowper, Bonnell Thornton, George Colman and Joseph Hill. What matters in the verses is not so much the content, which is mostly inconsequential, as the attitudes adopted and the style of execution. Cowper compliments Lloyd on his command of the octosyllabic couplet popularized by the earlier eighteenth-century poet Matthew Prior, deprecates his own efforts in that register, and yet all along proves in practice that he can compete with the very best at imitating Prior's poetic signature tune:

'Tis not that I design to rob
Thee of thy birthright, gentle Bob,
For thou art born sole heir, and single,
Of dear Mat Prior's easy jingle;
Nor that I mean, while thus I knit
My thread-bare sentiments together,
To show my genius or my wit,
When God and you know I have neither ...

(ll. 1-8)

The playful civility makes a model performance in the idiom of a metropolitan intelligentsia.⁵

The journey within: dark passages

‘Epistle to Robert Lloyd, Esq.’, then, positions Cowper as Lloyd’s fellow aspirant and rival in a literary rite of passage and as a member of a particular cultural group. Witty, smart, urbane, it expresses an outgoing and sociable personality. Yet there is at one point a suggestion of altogether different possibilities, as Cowper momentarily lets slip the veil from his inner life, sounding an unsettling note. Writing, he says, can be therapeutic, helping him

to divert a fierce banditti
(Sworn foe to ev’ry thing that’s witty),
That, with a black infernal train,
Make cruel inroads in my brain,
And daily threaten to drive thence
My little garrison of sense: ...
(ll. 13-18)

Here are signs of the melancholia which erupted with force in 1763 when Cowper was faced with the prospect of undergoing examination at the bar of the House of Lords in connection with his having been controversially appointed to the post of Clerk of the Journals on the nomination of his uncle, Ashley Cowper. Subsequent events are well documented in his autobiographical memoir, *Adelphi*, and in the several major biographies.⁶ After three suicide attempts Cowper was taken to Dr Cotton’s asylum at St Albans, where he resided until 1765 and, during his recovery, converted to Evangelical Christianity. Henceforth he lived in retirement, removing soon to Olney, where he shared a home with Mary, widow of the Reverend Morley Unwin, first at Orchard Side and later at nearby Weston Underwood, and began his acquaintance with John Newton, curate of Olney and future incumbent of St Mary Woolnoth, London.. Cowper’s was a varied, creative and in many ways comfortable life, but he remained always subject to bouts of depression and mental breakdown. In particular he was haunted by visions of his own violent destruction that had their recurrent focus in a conviction that God had assigned him to damnation. Cowper was, like Newton, a Calvinist and therefore believed in the doctrines of grace and predestination, which held that God had, before the beginning of the world, divided humankind unalterably into those elected to salvation and those condemned to perdition.⁷

As Cowper put it in one of his many letters to John Newton on spiritual matters,

When I have thought myself falling into the abyss I have been caught up again; when I have thought myself on the threshold of a happy eternity, I have been thrust down to Hell. ... I have no expectation but of sad vicissitude, and ever believe that the last shock of all will be fatal.

(2.9.88: III, 209)

Such ‘vicissitude’ is apparent in psychological form across the body of Cowper’s correspondence, as it is throughout his poetry: on the one hand the ‘abyss’ of sombre introspection, on the other the ‘happy’ realm of heightened responses to the external world, the miracles of the commonplace.⁸ The relation between these polarities will concern us in due course. For the moment the dark side of Cowper’s experience deserves closer attention.

Letters provided a context not only for its expression but for bringing it under control, even transcending it, by putting it into words and drawing from it an identity.

Cowper brought often to his representation of inward affliction a quality of graphic visualization familiar to him from dreams. Addressing Newton on another occasion, he imagines himself approached by a train of gloomy thoughts, a stately re-embodiment of the invasive ‘fierce banditti’ of the ‘Epistle to Lloyd’:

Here lies the difference between you and me. My thoughts are clad in a sober livery, for the most part as grave as that of a Bishop’s Servants. They turn too upon spiritual subjects, but the tallest fellow and the loudest amongst them all, is he who is continually crying with a loud voice, Actum est de te, periisti.

(21.8.81: I, 509-10)

The concluding *sentence*, meaning ‘It is all over for thee – thou hast perished’, is the more disquieting for being in Latin, the language of law and incontrovertible judgement. While Cowper here personifies a dimension of his mental life and turns inner process into psychodrama, at other times he uses emblems to define his state. Again writing to Newton, in the winter of 1784, he insists that

The weather is an exact emblem of my mind in its present state. A thick fog envelops every thing, and at the same time it freezes intensely. You will tell me that this cold gloom will be succeeded by a cheerful spring, and endeavor to encourage me to hope for a spiritual change resembling it. But it will be lost labor: Nature revives again, but a soul once slain, lives no more. The hedge that has been apparently dead, is not so, it will burst into leaf and blossom at the appointed time; but no such time is appointed for the stake that stands in it. It is as dead as it seems, and will prove itself no dissembler.

(13.1.84: II, 200)

What makes this refusal of consolation so emphatic is that it denies not simply orthodox religious hope but also Cowper’s great source of secular salvation - his capacity to be constantly inspired and renewed in the presence of nature. ‘From dearth to plenty, and from death to life, / Is Nature’s progress when she lectures man / In heav’nly truth’, he proclaims in Book VI of *The Task* (ll. 181-83) after a triumphant celebration of the beauties of spring and summer. In the letter to Newton he declares himself, ‘a soul once slain’, excluded from God’s plan for the everlasting life of the elect and cut off, too, from the terrestrial joys of contemplating the Creation. He can identify only with the lifeless stake.

Cowper did of course revive again, though never with any idea of a place being reserved for him in heaven. Such moods of dereliction came and went, at least until his last months. Increasingly in these dark passages, moreover, Cowper gives symbolic value to his life by writing it into a destiny illustrative of the eternal paradox of man’s inexhaustible strength and infinite vulnerability. Even the image of the stake has about it a certain ambiguity, a suggestion of solid endurance jostling that of brittle exposure. In the letters of the 1790s, with the end approaching, the themes of precariousness and persistence move explicitly to the centre of Cowper’s understanding of his story, which itself takes on an aura of myth. From Mundesley in Norfolk, where, following the onset of his fifth bout of acute depression, he had been taken in the care of his kinsman John Johnson, he tells Lady Hesketh of how he has walked with ‘courage’ on the edge of a precipice ‘from which to have fallen would probably have been to be dashed in pieces’, so treating a real and specific event as a metaphor for the whole course of his existence. His thoughts then settle on a feature of the landscape answering to his own sense of monumental solitude and impending disintegration:

At two miles' distance on the coast is a solitary pillar of rock, that the crumbling cliff has left at the high water-mark. I have visited it twice, and have found it an emblem of myself. Torn from my natural connexions, I stand alone and expect the storm that shall displace me.

(27.8.95: IV, 450)

The seascape setting predicts the poem Cowper snatched miraculously from the depths of inexorable decline in 1799, *The Castaway*, where he reviews his history in the 'lasting strife' (l. 17) of a mariner – 'such a destin'd wretch as I' (l. 3) - tossed overboard in a storm. The identity Cowper projects in these verses and in the letters with which they connect has both negative and positive aspects: on one side the pathos of the victim, on the other the resilience of the survivor.⁹ All the same, by casting himself in the role of protagonist battling against overwhelming odds he acquires stature both in his own mind and in the minds of contemporary and future readers – thus finding a kind of immortality after all. In all of this there is a process of therapeutic gain far in excess of the cathartic release of emotion noticed in *The Castaway* by Caroline Helstone in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*.¹⁰

The journey within: It's a small world

The currents that troubled Cowper also had a less direct impact on his writing. They influenced and are reflected in his treatment of the happenstance of his sequestered world. In general, as he explained to Newton, events at Orchard Side and in the town of Olney helped to fend off low spirits:

I wonder that a sportive thought should ever knock at the door of my intellects, and still more that it should gain admittance. It is as if harlequin should intrude himself into the gloomy chamber where a corpse is deposited in state. ... But the mind long wearied with the sameness of a dull, dreary prospect, will gladly fix its eyes on any thing that may make a little variety in its contemplations, though it were but a kitten playing with her tail.

(12.7.80: I, 167)

At times, however, things occurred which, rather than simply diverting Cowper's 'intellects', engaged them in complex ways. His own kittens, of which he had several, were a welcome distraction to him, like his garden, his carpentry, his painting, and those even more intriguing pets, his hares Puss, Tiney and Bess. But one day he found them dangerously compromised:

Passing from the greenhouse to the barn I saw three Kittens, ... looking with a fixt attention at something which lay on the threshold of a door nailed up. I took but little notice of them at first, but a loud hiss engaged me to attend more closely, when behold! a Viper, the largest I remember to have seen, rearing itself, darting its forked tongue, and ejaculating the aforementioned hiss at the nose of a Kitten, almost in contact with his lips. I ran into the Hall for a hoe with a long handle with which I intended to assail him, and returning in a few seconds, missed him. He was gone, and I feared had escaped me. Still however the Kittens sat watching immoveably upon the same spot. I concluded therefore that sliding between the door and the threshold he had found his way out of the garden into the yard. I went round immediately, and there found him in close conversation with the Old Cat, whose curiosity being excited by so novel an appearance, inclined her to pat his head repeatedly with her forefoot, with her claws however sheathed, and not in anger, but in the way of philosophical enquiry and examination. To prevent her falling a victim to so laudable an exercise

of her talents, I interposed in a moment with the hoe, and performed upon him an act of decapitation, which though not immediately mortal, proved so in the end.

(3.8.82: II, 68-69)

Cowper reported this incident not only in this letter to William Unwin but in a mock-heroic poem entitled 'The Colubriad' (or 'snake-saga'). The two modes produce different effects. There is nothing in 'The Colubriad', for example, to match the suspense in the detail of the old cat repeatedly patting the viper's head. The prose anecdote as a whole exemplifies Cowper's skill in weaving a perfectly-paced narrative, vividly pointed and finely nuanced in its tone, which is one of uneasy jocularly and suppressed horror.

The texts do nevertheless share one salient facet. Both allow Cowper to enjoy an illusion of mastery in the face of sudden peril. The moral that prefaces the letter version of the cat-and-snake story - 'We are never more in danger than when we think ourselves most secure' - encapsulates his keen sense of the unexpected, which is one with his anxiety over the precariousness of his place in the divine plan, where an unfathomable God might at any moment call him to final account. (Here we may note that the viewpoint implicit in the famous first lines of Cowper's best-known hymn, 'God moves in a mysterious way / His wonders to perform', opens the way to nasty surprises as well as pleasant ones.) These preoccupations come out regularly in the plots and scenarios of Cowper's poems. A particularly telling example is 'On the Death of Mrs. Throckmorton's Bullfinch' (1788), which begins as a genial show of friendship towards the family from whom Cowper leased the Lodge at Weston Underwood but develops into a tragi-comical drama of fatality in which a captive songster, one of Cowper's several avian doubles,¹¹ is killed by a foraging rat that penetrates the seeming safety of a comfortable drawing-room and high-set (though unfortunately wooden) cage. Such compositions as this and the viper anecdote in both its manifestations are for Cowper a means simultaneously of release and control, enabling him to give humorous and displaced expression to elements of the turbulent underside of his psyche. There is, however, something else. The important difference between the elegy on Maria Throckmorton's bullfinch and 'The Colubriad' and its associated letter is that in the latter disaster is averted, 'The Colubriad' itself concluding with the emphatic announcement that 'With out-stretch'd hoe I slew him at the door, / And taught him NEVER TO COME THERE NO MORE'. The outcome, in which the poet thus sees off the potential assailant, comprises another instance of Cowper's self-fashioning, though the persona he creates is quite unlike that of the victim-survivor we encountered earlier. The status to which Cowper here lays claim is, despite the comic aura, the wholly positive one of authority figure. In a reversal of images of vulnerability, confinement and atrophy that so regularly haunted him he sees himself as defender of his little realm, a guardian stepping forth to drive the serpent out of the garden. The man rejected by the Deity becomes a second and more successful Adam, even perhaps a god, a *genius loci*. Read as fable, an approach encouraged by its introductory adage, the episode is about the unseen dangers around us; understood psychologically, it is about managing the danger within.

Cowper observed of one of his letters that it was the more effective because it gave vent to a substantial 'I' - to '*Ego* and all that *Ego* does' (6.6.89: III, 292). He had taken a similar line earlier when explaining to William Unwin the extent of his self-disclosure in their correspondence:

So far from thinking Egotisms tedious; I think a Letter good for nothing without them. To hear *from* a friend is little, unless I hear *of* him at the same time. His Sentiments may be just, but his feelings & his welfare are most to the purpose.

(1.7.81: I, 494)

These comments point to the several dimensions we have identified in Cowper's letters. In forestalling possible charges of excessive subjectivity he is doubtless thinking of letters as instruments of social interaction, that nourishing of relations that must have been specially important to him in the light, or the shadow, of his experiences of solipsistic isolation. It is very much to the point that he talks elsewhere of 'reciprocal endearments, without which a paradise could afford no comfort' (26.10.81: I, 544). The letter recounting the viper incursion is itself a good example of the reciprocity or give-and-take of affectionate friendship, since Cowper draws an obvious pleasure from sharing with the far-off William Unwin (son of Mary Unwin, long established as rector of Stock in Essex) not only his recent adventure in the garden of Orchard Side but his opinion of Dr Johnson's views on poetry, details of the unseasonable floods around Olney, and his impression of Mr Bull, the new Dissenting Minister of Newport Pagnell. Sociability as well as variety was for Cowper the very spice of life.¹² The same letter accords well with his insistence, in his remarks on 'Ego', that writers should express themselves as fully as possible, for not only is it packed with 'Sentiments', whether ideas or feelings, it also projects a distinctive personality, humorous, observant, engaged with local affairs and wider issues. Also relevant, however, is the Freudian theory of 'Ego' as the agent of balance in mental life, stabilizing the inner self by fending off or blunting threats from the less conscious levels of the mind. The encounter with the snake can then be taken as an allegory or paradigm of a process of psychic adjustment so often at work in Cowper's texts: the writer with his pen (figured in the gardener's hoe) checks the unsettling and potentially deadly force of untoward thoughts or outlandish imagination (the adder), firstly by bringing it into the open, secondly by framing the narrative of its retreat.

Cowper's strategies for maintaining inward stability may be considered further by reference to a generic feature of the epistolary mode that for him takes on special significance. Claude Levi-Strauss speaks, in the most famous of his anthropological discourses, of how the act of miniaturization 'diminishes or eliminates the resistance that reality poses to the ordering instincts of the human mind'.¹³ Scale-reduction pervades Cowper's letters, enabling him to set up Olney and its environs as a sanctuary. We perceive a topography of ever-decreasing areas and rings of protection: the countryside; the town, which is a refuge from and microcosm of the larger world; the house at Orchard Side; Cowper's garden; his greenhouse; his tiny summerhouse. On occasion Cowper even imagines himself dwelling on the inside of an object in the landscape. Thus, Mrs Unwin and he become 'Dormice in a hollow tree' (21.8.88: III, 199), hidden from the great outside but alert to its goings-on: 'Though we Live in a Nook, and the World is quite unconscious that there are any such Beings in it as ourselves, yet we are not unconcern'd about what passes in it' (22-24.12.81: I, 568). So attached does he become to his locale that he grows familiar with its slightest phenomena and comes instinctively to embrace its apparent drawbacks: '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, and am persuaded that were it possible I could leave this incommodious and obscure nook for a twelvemonth, I should return to it with rapture' (27.7.83: II, 151). The greenhouse and the summerhouse are ultimate havens of pleasure and repose - and ultimately of creative freedom:

Our severest Winter, commonly called the Spring, is now over, and I find myself seated in my favorite recess, the Greenhouse. In such a situation, so silent, so shady, where no human foot is heard, and where only my Myrtles presume to peep in at the window, you may suppose I have no interruption to complain of, and that my thoughts are perfectly at my command.

(8.6.83: II, 139)

I write in a nook that I call my Bouderie; It is a Summer house not much bigger than a Sedan chair, the door of which opens into the garden that is now crowded with pinks, roses and honey-suckles, and the window into my neighbour's orchard. ... Having lined it with garden-mats, and furnished it with a table and two chairs, here I write all that I write in summer-time, whether to the Public or to my friends. It is secure from all noise, and a refuge from all intrusion; for intrusions sometimes trouble me even in Olney.

(29.6.85: II, 359-60)

The Task describes 'the happy man ... / Who, doom'd to an obscure but tranquil state, / Is pleas'd with it, and, 'were he free to choose, / Would make his fate his choice' (VI. 906-10). This 'man' is Cowper himself, who, driven into retirement by suicidal depression, made a blessing of necessity. His celebration of rural retreat owes much to the theme's chief exponent in classical literature, Horace, whose praise of a favourite rustic alcove is quoted (in Latin) during the letter referring to an intimate acquaintance with the stones of the garden wall.¹⁴ Like Horace, Cowper values both the passive advantages of the sequestered life, notably safe distance from the turmoil and corruptness of the city, and its active ingredients of congenial company, wholesome routine, and time and space for contemplation. Though the wine that features so regularly in Horace's rituals of home and hearth gives way at Orchard Side to the famous 'cups, / That cheer but not inebriate' (*Task*, IV. 40), Cowper's delight in Samuel Rose's hamper shows that he was by no means always limited to such Spartan fare as he extols in lines on 'a radish and an egg' (*Task*, IV. 173). We have seen already how important friendship, including Rose's, was to Cowper, but we may appropriately note here an aside to Earl Cowper that underlines his reliance on human contact as a means of relieving the drawbacks of seclusion, when, in imagery suggesting a residual sense of deprivation, he declares that when Lady Hesketh visits him, her 'cousin in a corner' (II, 511), she comes 'to brighten the obscurest nook in the world with her presence' (27.6.86: II, 571). The contemplative spirit, however, flourishes in solitude. And here, Cowper follows Horace in reinventing himself as an exemplar of the enlightened poet-retiree, cultured yet free from the distractions of fashionable life, sophisticated yet virtuous, close to nature. He sees his small 'corner' accordingly as a 'hermitage' (I, 567), as a 'nutshell' and 'verse-manufactory' (II, 569), and as a 'nest ... where I brood and hatch, and in due time my progeny takes wings and whistles' (30.4.85: II, 346): terms which together imply an understanding of poetry as in part organic or coming naturally and in part something worked for or made. The floral displays that surround the greenhouse and summerhouse – the myrtles, the pinks and the rest – and the improvements he has made to his 'Bouderie' are clear evidence of Cowper's inventive and nurturing powers, but it is his writing, for 'Public' and for 'friends', the poems and the letters, that constitutes the surpassing offspring of his existence. When he says that in this quiet setting his 'thoughts are perfectly at [his] command' we remember the psychological importance to Cowper of being able to put thoughts under restraint but we are also prompted to salute his capacity for summoning them to triumphant feats of expression.

Arguably the most expressive of Cowper's brief elaborations of his seclusion is as 'the loop-holes of retreat' (*Task*, IV. 88). This image, like several others we have met, suggests not only withdrawal or constriction but also detachment and vantage point. It evokes the idea of a viewfinder or the prospect of a theatre stage, where things are framed at a distance and brought into meaningful focus. Cowper's letters are 'loop-holes'. As we shall see, their window upon the world reaches well beyond Olney and at times even to the other side of the globe. We may usefully note, however, one further example of the therapeutic, self-reassuring visions that so often take shape when Cowper trains his writerly gaze upon the

landscape of his immediate surroundings. We ‘see’ in these episodes both what he observes and what he projects from within himself:

The Country, this country at least, is pleasant at all times, ... I have made in the Orchard the best Winter walk in all the parish, shelter'd from the East and from the North East, and open to the Sun, except at his rising, all the day. Then we have Homer and Don Quixote, and then we will have saunter and Chat, and one Laugh more before we die. Our Orchard is alive with creatures of all kinds, poultry of ev'ry denomination swarms in it, and pigs the drollest in the world.

(27.6.88: III, 187)

The literal and the mythic merge gently together, with shades of John Milton. The passage combines impressions of paradise before the Fall, ‘pleasant at all times’, with ones of a postlapsarian realm where Cowper can exercise his resourcefulness in building a second Eden of sheltered and refined happiness, with pleasing walks, fine books, and civilized conversation. He is, moreover, the God-surrogate of the place, surveying his terrain and its ‘creatures of all kinds’, and finding them good. His declaration to William Unwin that ‘A letter written from such a place as this is a Creation’ (12.5.83: II, 132) points likewise to an appropriation of the attributes of the Deity. Cowper claims implicitly for himself not only influence over his environment but the status of Artificer.

Looking out: society, history, ideology

Wordsworth, who was much influenced by Cowper, reminds his readers in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* that ‘the human mind is capable of being excited without the application of gross and violent stimulants’.¹⁵ Cowper certainly bears out this truth. His responsiveness to ordinary things first appears, naturally enough, in the aftermath of his removal from London and sojourn at Dr Cotton’s Collegium Insanorum. In October 1766 he writes to his cousin, Mrs Cowper, detailing the orderly regime of the Reverend Morley Unwin’s household in Huntingdon, with whom he lodged:

As to Amusements, I mean what the World calls such, we have none; the Place indeed swarms with them, and Cards and Dancing are the professed Business of almost all the *Gentle* Inhabitants of Huntingdon. ... Having told you how we *do not* spend our time, I will next say how we *do*. We Breakfast commonly between 8 and 9, ‘till 11, we read either the Scripture, or the Sermons of some faithfull Preacher of those holy Mysteries: at 11 we attend divine Service which is performed here twice every day, and from 12 to 3 we separate and amuse ourselves as we please. During that Interval I either Read in my own Apartment, or Walk or Ride, or work in the Garden. ... After Tea we sally forth to walk in good earnest. Mrs. Unwin is a good Walker, and we have generally travel’d about 4 Miles before we see Home again. ... At Night we read and Converse as before ‘till Supper.

(20.10.66: I, 152-53)

It is hardly surprising, in view of the solipsistic chaos described in his autobiographical memoir,¹⁶ that Cowper should have taken comfort and spirit from this round of earnest, low-key pursuits and healthy exercise, to which he subsequently adds the rather less sober activities of listening to the harpsichord and singing hymns.

The psychology of Cowper’s recovery aside, the relatively matter-of-fact content of this report draws attention with particular clarity to his interest as a chronicler of eighteenth-century provincial life and inadvertent social historian. More than this, however, the letter expresses a set of consistent values – an ideology. When assessing this we do well to look

beyond the emphasis on religious observance that is a natural consequence of Morley Unwin's office and Cowper's recent conversion.¹⁷ The pointed reference to the 'Gentle inhabitants' of Huntingdon and their frivolous pastimes introduces an element of class-consciousness, even in effect a note of class antagonism. Cowper and Morley Unwin were themselves of 'gentle' background and standing, and on one level the former's remark is an indignant rebuke to those of his own station, in Huntingdon at least being 'almost all', who embrace ungodly pursuits. Nonetheless, in Cowper's account the Unwins and their guest practise what came in his time and after to be increasingly identified as a *middle*-class lifestyle, centred on home and countryside, respectable, earnest yet with its particular understated diversions, underpinned by Christianity. (Wordsworth and Dickens are in different ways other notable advocates of this culture, while Lord Byron is the great exponent of the aristocratic counterpart.) This ethos is in essence the same as that running through the Olney correspondence we have considered, with specific overlap in allusions to sheltered virtue, close community, books, contemplation, and joy in nature. Updating not only the Horatian theme but the Roman philosophy of 'mens sana in corpore sano', the letters both anticipate and reinforce the celebration of 'Domestic life in rural leisure pass'd' (*Task*, III. 202) which dominates the third and fourth books of *The Task* and helped make Cowper an acknowledged spokesman during and beyond the nineteenth century for a whole English way of life.

The piety of Cowper's letters to the devout Mrs Cowper shows why he became, as Carlyle observed of him, the favourite of 'the religious classes' (themselves mostly of the middle rank and estimated by Francis Jeffrey in 1812 to be, at about 200,000, by far the largest section of the reading public).¹⁸ His wider appeal, however, comes into focus with Walter Bagehot's major essay of 1855, which designated Cowper truly 'national' and of 'sure popularity' precisely on the grounds that he was witness to 'our domestic and rural life ... [and so] held up to the English people exact delineation of what they really prefer'.¹⁹ The letters had contributed significantly to the development of this reputation. The process of their collection and publication had been initiated with the 473 items included in the four volumes of William Hayley's *Life and Posthumous Works of Cowper* (1803-06), and given further impetus by the rival editions of the *Life and Works* by T.S. Grimshawe (1835) and Robert Southey (1835-37).²⁰ It is very much to the point that one of the two volumes being reviewed in Bagehot's article contains a large and well-advertised selection from the correspondence.²¹

Cowper's commitment to 'domestic and rural life', though, was never unduly restrictive. It supplied him with a wealth of subjects and concerns, while also providing a standpoint from which to view the world beyond. As we shall now see, variety is indeed one of the attractions of the letters both as an archive of historical documents and as responses to the human scene that outrun their time and place.

Around Cowper's house and garden lay a small but busy town. Olney events and characters elicited some of his liveliest prose, especially in communication with the Newtons whose move to London in 1780 ensured a long-term demand for dispatches of local news. We may read, for example, of the 'Gingerbread Baker and his Gingerbread Wife' who were dismounted by a horse of 'lively Imagination and very weak Nerves' (a disposition rather like Cowper's own, Newton might well have thought) (5.6.80: I, 345), or of the merciful Beadle who, appointed by the court to thrash Molly Boswell's son publicly around the streets 'at the Cart's tail' for stealing some iron work, 'filled his left hand with red Ocre, through which, after every stroke, he drew the lash of his whip, leaving the appearance of a wound upon the skin, but in reality not hurting him at all' (17.11.83: II, 180). Sometimes the world came to Cowper, as we have already witnessed in the visit of a parish clerk from Northampton and indeed of a stray viper. In another nicely sustained action replay he depicts for Newton the

hustle and bustle of a canvassing call at election time, where he clearly enjoys being considered a man of influence, though denying he has any:

We were sitting yesterday after dinner, the two Ladies and myself, very composedly and without the least apprehension of any such intrusion, in the snug parlour, one Lady knitting, the other netting, and the Gentleman winding worsted, when to our unspeakable surprise, a mob appeared before the window, a smart rap was heard at the door, the boys hallowed, and the maid announced Mr. Grenville. ... In a minute, the yard, the Kitchen and the parlour were filled. Mr. Grenville advancing toward me, shook me by the hand with a degree of cordiality that was extremely seducing. As soon as He and as many as could find chairs were seated, he began to open the intent of his visit. I told him I had no vote, for which he readily gave me credit. I assured him I had no influence: which he was not equally inclined to believe, and the less no doubt, because Mr. Ashburner the Drapier addressing himself to me at this moment, informed me that I had a great deal. Supposing that I could not be possessed of such a treasure without knowing it, I ventured to confirm my first assertion by saying that if I had any, I was utterly at a loss to imagine where it could be or wherein it consisted. Thus ended the conference. Mr. Grenville squeezed me by the hand again, kissed the Ladies, and withdrew. He kissed likewise the Maid in the kitchen, and seemed upon the whole a most loving, kissing, kind-hearted gentleman. He is very young, genteel and handsome.

(29.3.84: II, 229-30)

This incident takes a further twist in retrospect from the fact that the inexperienced and rather impetuous candidate is none other than William Wyndham Grenville, later Baron Grenville, who in course of time became Home Secretary, Foreign Secretary and First Lord of the Treasury.

Impromptu sketches, usually light-hearted, stand out in Cowper's treatment of Olney life.. This does not mean, however, that he shuns serious issues or fails to reflect upon them. Thus, writing to Joseph Hill, he comments with indignation on the plight of the lacemakers whose very livelihood was at risk from government plans to remove tariffs on imported Irish goods:

I am an Eye Witness of their poverty, and do know, that Hundreds in this little Town, are upon the Point of Starving, & that the most unremitting Industry is but barely sufficient to keep them from it. ... The Measure is like a Scythe, and the poor Lacemakers are the Sickly Crop that trembles before the edge of it. The Prospect of Peace with America is like the streak of Dawn in their Horizon, but this Bill is like a Black Cloud behind it, that threatens their Hope of a comfortable Day with utter Extinction. I did not perceive 'till this Moment that I had tack'd two Similes together, a Practise, which, though warranted by the Example of Homer and allowable in an Epic Poem, is rather Luxuriant and licentious in a Letter.

(8.8.80: I, 363)

For Bruce Redford this passage illustrates Cowper's use of epistolary style to retreat from or circumvent thoughts of suffering, whether his own or that of others: 'The letter tames the writer's anxiety By switching contexts (epic/tragedy to letter/comedy) and therefore rules of the rhetorical game. Cowper turns passion into detachment.'²² It is certainly true, as we have seen in detail, that Cowper employs the letter as a context for managing a sense of personal dereliction. Yet this hardly seems relevant here. In the present case the motivation at work in Cowper's distancing of himself from pain and vulnerability is social rather than psychological: the gap between the writer and his subject, which is actually no less apparent in the epic/tragic imagery than in the subsequent shift to a conversational mode, signifies the

relation of the high, educated, well-connected to the low, toiling, impoverished. Cowper's concern for the lacemakers is an expression of a top-down liberal and humanist temperament of which there will be much to say in the final section of this essay. All the same, he does show genuine compassion towards them. This comes out especially in the lucid and direct first sentence of those quoted above (one not included by Redford in his excerpt), which movingly registers the extremity of their condition. Moreover, it is not only the lacemakers' painful adversity that Cowper understands but also how their fortunes are inextricably bound up with the course of great events (the wartime cessation of trade with America) and the decisions of the powerful (the revision of policy on import duties). At another point in the letter he even bids to become involved himself in the chain of influence by pressing Hill, who moved in circles appropriate to an attorney of the first rank, to lose no opportunity to whisper in 'the Chancellor's Ear' a word about the distress the excise Bill could cause.

Cowper said of his own poetry that 'My descriptions are all from Nature. Not one of them second-handed. My delineations of the heart are from my own experience. Not one of them borrowed from books, or in the least degree conjectural' (10.10.84: II, 285). The qualities pinpointed in this proud claim of independence are ones that belong the more so to his letters, which, though not without art, come naturally out of first-hand experience and from the heart. They excel as extempore chronicles because they offer not only specificity of detail but also the author's response to what he witnesses and depicts, be this simply his humorous reaction to the excitement of election time or his considered insight into the lacemakers' predicament. Often Cowper's attitudes themselves become the revealing subject of scrutiny in the landscapes of contemporary life that he creates, as when we discover that his view of the lacemaker's existence in the letter to Hill contradicts the almost idyllic picture in 'Truth' (1782) of the 'happy peasant' who, 'Content, though mean',

Shuffl[es] her threads about the live-long day,
Just earns a scanty pittance; and at night
Lies down secure, her heart and pocket light:
She, for her humble sphere by nature fit,
Has little understanding, and no wit, ...
Just knows, and knows no more, her Bible true –
A truth the brilliant Frenchman never knew;
And in that charter reads, with sparkling eyes,
Her title to a treasure in the skies.

(ll. 320-24, 327-30)

Here the correspondence modifies our reading of the poetry, giving the stark reality as opposed to the literary idealization. It would seem that Cowper's descriptions are not everywhere 'from Nature' or entirely free of conjecture after all, for this portrayal of the Olney cottager 'safe in the simplicity' (l. 336) of her being is mediated through pastoral convention, a point underlined by the fact that it provided material for popular illustrations, including one by Richard Westall.²³ The appeal of the vignette, however, was not only to a taste for the picturesque but also to a religious sensibility and social conservatism among his middle-class readers. He acknowledges the lacemaker's 'toilsome and indigent' (l. 326) lot but does so literally in parenthesis, as something that can be taken for granted, and throws all the emphasis on the advantages of a simple existence. It must have been reassuring to those who encountered 'Truth' to think of the labouring class as contentedly 'fit' for their 'humble sphere' and set upon a 'treasure', a 'rich reward' (l. 332), not on earth but in heaven. Then, however, there is on reflection one respect at least in which the letter is continuous with the poem: for all the latter's empathy with the poor, neither fundamentally questions the hierarchical structure of society.

Whatever the relations between the letters and the poetry (another theme to which we shall return), we remain impressed by the clear-sighted intelligence with which the former range across the cultural, social and political life of the nation. Along with frequent references to Cowper's own motivations and aims as a poet there are insights into the work of others, including Milton, Pope and the 'moderns' Gray and Burns. From Cowper's drawn-out difficulties we learn much about the publication process, especially the popular 'subscription' method whereby projects were enabled through pledges from supporters and prospective readers. Authorship famously brought Pope financial independence ('Unplaced, unpensioned, no man's heir, or slave')²⁴ but did not serve Cowper so well. Elsewhere in the correspondence we find Cowper alert to landmark innovation and change. Prompted no doubt by plans for construction of the Grand Union Canal, which passes just seven miles south of Olney, he notes that there have been objections to expansion of the waterway system, the greatest being that it threatens the 'coasting trade' (29.3.93: IV, 317).²⁵ It is hot-air balloons, however, that steal the show. 'Thanks to Montgolfier, we shall fly at last' (10.11.83: II, 179), he proclaims, having witnessed a launch on the Throckmorton estate. Cowper shared with Dr Johnson and others of their generation the view that mankind's desire to outreach his natural and God-given element was a form of hubris, a 'break[ing] of bounds' that would bring 'dangers' and 'reason to repent of his presumption' (15.12.83: II, 190); but this did not prevent him from being intrigued by experiments in aviation or approaching the issues philosophically in a series of letters. (In chapter 7 of *Rasselas*, we may recall, Johnson's allegorical fiction simply treats the attempt to build a flying machine as an obsession ending in absurd failure.) The growth of seaside resorts is a comparatively mundane but no less solid signpost to the future. Cowper tells William Unwin that he has visited Margate, Ramsgate, where he liked in particular the stonework pier, and BRIGHTHELMSTONE (as Brighton then was), which he remembers as a 'scene of Idleness and Luxury, music, dancing, cards, walking, riding, bathing, eating, drinking, coffee, tea, scandal, dressing, yawning, sleeping' (6.10.81: I, 527). Some things, it seems, have changed little.

The letters also underline Cowper's commitment to the two major causes which he championed publicly and very effectively as a poet. Talking to Lady Hesketh about his opposition to slavery and the slave trade, he maintains with good reason that he was 'one of the earliest, if not the first of those who have in the present day, expressed their detestation of the diabolical traffic in question' (16.2.88: III, 103). In 'Charity' in 1782 he had asked how people 'honoured with a Christian name' could 'Trade in the blood of innocence, and plead / Expedience as a warrant for the deed' (ll. 180-83), and then pressed home his attack in 1788 in a succession of shorter pieces including 'The Negro's Complaint', 'The Morning Dream' and 'Pity for Poor Africans', some of which were sold as broadsheets as well as being published over many years in newspapers and periodicals. The Abolition Bill, whose lengthy progress Cowper thus helped to advance, was eventually passed seven years after his death, in 1807. The other controversial movement of which he was a pioneer did not achieve its ban until two centuries later. His open condemnation of hunting comes in Book III of *The Task* – 'Detested sport, / That owes its pleasures to another's pain' (ll. 326-27) – but there could be no more forceful indictment than the straight narration for Lady Hesketh of an actual chase which culminates when the huntsman, 'throwing the fox to the distance of some yards, and screaming like a fiend as he is - Tear him in pieces – at least six times repeatedly, ... consign'd him over absolutely to the pack, who in a few minutes devour'd him completely' (3.3.88: III, 119). The image of the desensitized hunter wonderfully stirs the emotions. Though the letter is addressed to his cousin alone, it is as if Cowper composed it with a much larger audience in mind.²⁶

There can be no doubt that Cowper's retirement from the world strengthened his grasp of its affairs. Here we may draw a useful contrast with his old school friend, the satirist Charles

Churchill, wonder of a day, to whom he pays tribute in verse.²⁷ While Churchill lashes out zealously yet indiscriminately from within the welter of metropolitan vice and folly, Cowper takes the longer view, steady and selective, trained on matters of real consequence, always considered though often forcibly partisan. This takes us naturally to his engagement with the American War of Independence and the French Revolution. The letters are crucial to an understanding of his perspective on these two momentous chapters in history.²⁸

Unlike his contemporary William Blake, Cowper did not back the American colonies in their uprising, which from its inception in 1779 he specifically called a ‘Rebellion’,²⁹ although he did understand and sympathize with their desire for ‘Liberty’. He regarded the Americans’ ‘fears of arbitrary imposition’ as ‘well-founded’, but believed that their method of resistance was both destructive towards Britain because of their alliance with her great enemy, France, and for the same reason dangerous to themselves, being likely to lead to the ‘exchange [of] only an apprehended tyranny for a real one’ (13.10.83: II, 170). Naming their action ‘parricide’, murder of the parent, he interprets it as at once unnatural and maleficent:

the Americans, who if they had contented themselves with a struggle for lawful Liberty would have deserved applause, seem to me to have incurred the guilt of parricide, by renouncing their parent, by making her ruin their favorite object, and by associating themselves with her worst Enemy for the accomplishment of their purpose.

(26.1.83: II, 101)

For Cowper the real villain of the piece was always France, which, together with Spain, he now charges with having ‘stolen America from England’ even though he is uncertain whether they will be ‘able to possess themselves of that jewel or not hereafter’. (We recall the famous turn of phrase in *The Task*: ‘the perfidy of France / That pick’d the jewel out of England’s crown’ [II. 264-65].) The war became global, with England in conflict with several European powers as well as America. Its outcome in the loss of empire, formalized at the Treaty of Versailles in September 1783, Cowper thought ‘humiliating’ (8.2.83: II, 105). The dire course of events bore out entirely his fatalistic theory of history whereby nations ‘have their Season of Infancy, Youth and Age’, with his own country ‘already sunk into a state of decrepitude’ (31.1.82: II, 12-13).

This adverse turn in Britain’s fortunes undoubtedly contributed to an increased introspectiveness in Cowper’s poetry after 1783, a movement from political awareness into patient privacy – England’s defeat, Cowper’s greater retreat. When the patriotic theme surfaces in *The Task* in 1785 it is in the ambiguous and somewhat nostalgic vein of ‘England, with all thy faults I love thee still – / My country’ (II. 206-7). In the letters of the period 1789 to 1793, however, in the face of the tremendous happenings on the other side of the Channel, we find him returning to a searching application of long-standing principles. His relation to the French Revolution foreshadows, though in contracted form, that shift so widely recognized in Wordsworth and Coleridge from eager optimism to shocked reservation. It is, he says, a matter for rejoicing that France should bid to escape ‘tyrannic shackles’, but with the onset of the bloody Terror the revolutionaries have ‘spoil’d’ the good work by ‘excessive folly, and disgraced it indelibly by their unexampled barbarity’ (18.12.92: IV, 262). Reform is one thing, revolution quite another, and for Cowper squarely against God’s will: ‘Princes and peers reduced to plain gentlemanship, and gentles reduced to a level with their own lackeys, are excesses of which they will repent hereafter. Difference[s] of rank and subordination, are, I believe of God’s appointment, and consequently essential to the well being of society’ (7.7.90: III, 396).

It is on the question of Reform – this time of Parliament and the voting system – that Cowper, writing in 1792, makes one of his last, and one of his most obviously balanced, astute, and prescient statements about the condition of England:

All nations have a right to chuse their own mode of government, and the sovereignty of the people is a doctrine that evinces itself; for whenever the people chuse to be masters they always are so, and none can hinder them. God grant that we may have no revolution here, but unless we have a Reform we certainly shall. Depend upon it ... the hour is come when power founded in patronage and corrupt majorities must govern this land no more.

(1.12.92: IV, 248)

Bills for the abolition of rotten boroughs, redistribution of seats, and extension of the franchise were introduced by Pitt in 1785 and Lord Grey in 1793, but were defeated. Cowper's wise sense of the expediency as well as the justice in such measures makes their eventual implementation, beginning with the Act of 1832 and ending in universal suffrage, seem inevitable.

Here Cowper predicts manifest future realities. I shall end with a way in which his work implicitly foretells a less obvious shape of things to come – that is, reflects and helps to formulate a system that came to permeate and determine modern social existence. This takes us back to the values we have seen at work variously in his account of the routine of Morley Unwin's household, his attitudes towards the lacemakers of Olney, and indeed his unshakeable belief in hierarchy in his attack on the excesses of the revolutionaries in France. Cowper was an early exponent of the liberal-humanist order, which, whatever may appear to be the case, is at bottom concerned as much with the situating and supervision of individual lives, their 'placing' and 'policing', as with their rights or freedom. Our next point of focus here is a kind of letter we have not so far encountered – the 'open' letter or letter meant for publication. Its explicit subject is a surprising one.

Emblematic hares

The Gentleman's Magazine for June 1784 printed Cowper's long letter about his experience of keeping three pet hares which he had rescued from a neglectful owner.³⁰ As well as memorializing the most unusual of his occupational therapies against melancholy (a benefit he at one point specifically notes), the document is interesting as evidence of the pleasure in animals and concern for their welfare that complement his responsiveness to non-sentient nature in raising claims for his status as the first English environmentalist poet – 'green' Cowper. He loves and respects his hares. The aspect I wish to bring out here, however, is how he assiduously constructs for his charges a regime, a thoroughgoing structure of regulation. He gives them names - Puss, Tiney and Bess - and nurses them when they are sick. He tries to tame them, though with varying degrees of success, for 'Puss was tamed by gentle usage, Tiney was not to be tamed at all, and Bess had the courage and confidence that made him tame from the beginning'. He builds a house for each of them, with efficient sanitation and waste disposal: 'each had a separate apartment so contrived that their ordure would pass thro' the bottom of it', ensuring that 'they were kept perfectly sweet and clean'. They are permitted to consort during the day, having 'range of the hall', but are at night strictly segregated, 'retired each to his own bed, never intruding into that of another'. Several paragraphs are devoted to an analysis of what hares like to eat and how their guardian worked out a balanced diet for them, supplementing their 'natural favourites' with wholesome 'bread and water'. And so on. It should be clear by now that the report of Cowper's pastime

embodies a mind-set applicable to treating not only animals but human beings – to ways of organizing *people*.

It seems fair to say that the regimen Cowper set up for his hares was influenced by that he had experienced under the enlightened care and salutary discipline of Dr Cotton at the Collegium Insanorum in St Albans, where he had ultimately been converted to Evangelical religion. The gentle refugee from worldly strife became in turn the guardian of other innocent creatures. (Though he could not teach them godliness, as he had been beneficially taught, he did at least seek to inculcate the next best thing, cleanliness.) The discourse of Cowper's leporine arrangements, however, evokes not only the asylum but a range of institutions: home and family, nursery and kindergarten, school, hospital, even laboratory. At the same time it expresses not so much a strictly religious morality as a network of broader humanistic controls, preferences and aspirations. Space is divided up and utilized through attention to the hares' quarters and allocation of indoor and outdoor pursuits. Standards are upheld in everything from daily intercourse to personal hygiene, while conduct is scrutinized and personality placed in categories. There is a duty of support from cradle to grave (the deaths of both Bess and Tiney are put on record). Nature itself is curbed, for Cowper makes sure that his wards cannot, as is their wont in the wild, 'persecute one of their own species'. Throughout there is freedom within bounds, tolerance with due restraint, welfare under rules. Published in a popular up-market periodical, Cowper's essay is as it were a conduit, figuring and reinforcing a set of assumptions about discipline and well-being - an ideology – which, although it is manifestly linked to the Evangelical ethos to which he was habituated, is in essentials an early version of the liberal-humanist dispensation that overarches and informs our own collective lives.

Mr Smith and the Olney poor

We may uncover a little further the model of society implicit in Cowper's writing by considering another project in which he was involved. In a letter to William Unwin in 1782 he refers to their 'beneficent friend Mr. Smith' for whom Mrs Unwin and he acted as agents in bringing 'succour' to 'the distress'd' (18.11.82: II, 90). The philanthropist in question is Robert Smith, MP for Nottingham, who, in strict anonymity (or 'secrecy' in Cowper's more colourful term), provided £40 or £50 for each of several winters to be distributed among the poor of Olney. It sounds as if we have a straightforward case of charitable good works. Yet we learn from this letter that there were in fact stringent conditions attached to the application of Smith's bounty. It could go only to the diligent and God-fearing, or, as Cowper puts it, those 'miserably poor, yet at the same time industrious and honest', whom, he says, it is not difficult to distinguish from the 'dissolute, and in every respect worthless'. In this the concept of moral status reinforces the social hierarchy, with the great and good at the top helping those at the bottom, so long as the latter also are virtuous, productive and well-behaved. In a letter written five years later to Robert Smith himself Cowper insists that he and his fellow 'Almoner' are 'accountable to God for a discreet and judicious discharge of our office' (7.12.87: III, 64).³¹ There is in this the same implicit connection between divine authority and observance of degree as in his objection to the French Revolution for obliterating the distinctions of 'rank and subordination [that] are ... of God's appointment, and consequently essential to the well being of society'. Though progressive in such things as his support of the anti-slavery movement, or indeed the compassion for 'the diseased, the naked, the hungry' also expressed in the letter to Smith, Cowper was in others conservative and for the status quo.

Cowper's ardent defence of hierarchy and contempt for revolutionary levelling, however, do not make his work any less a register of change. The transformation in question is simply

a subtler and less dramatic one. A clue to the nature of the system in which Cowper was implicated as a dispenser of charity emerges from the fact that, as external sources show, Robert Smith was a prosperous banker as well as a successful politician and in due course peer of the realm.³² Smith's philanthropy and Cowper's small but significant role in it may be understood as elements in the operation of maturing capitalism.

This needs explaining. It is common knowledge that the eighteenth century saw the rise of a Protestant ethic that laid stress on hard work and the accumulation of material wealth: the notable literary and indeed mythic condensation being Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), where the hero not only survives on his desert island but turns it into a valuable asset, while at the same time incidentally amassing riches from a faraway plantation in which he had taken a share before his shipwreck. What is less widely recognized is that self-reliance and the acquisitive spirit did not stand alone but were tempered by the cultivation of various kinds of outgoing feeling. Relevant here is 'sentimental' drama such as Richard Steele's *The Tender Husband* (1705) or the equally aptly-named *The Good-natur'd Man* (1768) by Oliver Goldsmith, an author who also promoted benevolence in his novel, *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766). Cowper wrote, for example, a long poem on 'Friendship' for inclusion in his volume of 1782 (though the piece did not reach publication until 1801); and in stanzas 'Addressed to Miss Macartney' (written 1782, published 1815) he celebrates 'gen'rous sympathy' (l. 15) in answer to Frances Macartney's popular 'Prayer for Indifference' (1759).

Feeling matters in these texts not only for itself, as a cardinal virtue, but also as a source of group cohesion within and between families, classes, communities. A paradigm of how this unifying factor can help to create productive cooperation across a society, a nation, even an empire, is again found in *Robinson Crusoe*, for Crusoe's goodness in saving Friday (as he later becomes) from the cannibals and in then educating him is amply reciprocated by the latter's grateful labour in his service. In such an arrangement charity and self-interest are complementary rather than, as we usually think of them, in conflict; in helping Friday Crusoe helps himself, and vice versa. As Crusoe and Friday, so Robert Smith and the Olney poor, except that Smith remains unknown to and keeps his distance from his beneficiaries, which is a point I shall consider shortly. We may recall the historian Thomas Haskell's classic account, in his essay on 'Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility', of how capitalism learned to travel near and far, not just for trade and profit, but with a generosity that served to sustain and in some measure justify its activity.³³

There is a passage in Book IV of *The Task* (ll. 374-428) where the poet describes at some length an impoverished family he has helped from the largesse of a distant benefactor, 'a wealthier than ourselves' who denies 'nothing but his name'. It hardly needs saying that the donor is none other than Robert Smith; but, if confirmation should be needed, Cowper's letter of 10 October 1784 to William Unwin about the poem specifically mentions the inclusion of a 'Compliment ... so justly due' to 'Mr. Smith', though managed with such 'delicacy' that 'nobody but himself can make the application, and you to whom I disclose the secret' (II, 284). The poem characterizes the recipients of Smith's subvention very much in line with the qualifications we have seen Cowper setting out in relevant correspondence: 'Poor, yet industrious, modest, quiet, neat; / Such [as] claim compassion in a night like this, / And have a friend in ev'ry feeling heart'. They are clean and tidy (like Cowper's hares), make do with little, and work hard without making demands, a praiseworthy 'meek and patient pair' practising an admirable 'ingenious parsimony'. We notice that core value of sympathy, a 'feeling heart', but also how the cottagers on their side are distinguished by an upright and uncomplaining temper. When, in the end, Cowper encourages them to hope for a better future, it is not in terms of greater opportunity, or more leisure, or more liberty, but of having an offspring like themselves:

Time shall give increase,

And all your num'rous progeny, well-train'd,
But helpless, in few years shall find their hands,
And labour too.

(IV. 420-23)

The children, like the parents, are born and raised to work, and to be glad of the chance of doing so. This shows just how far Cowper in practice served, if unwittingly, a socio-economic system he theoretically deplored, not least in his attacks, themselves in Book IV of *The Task*, on predatory commercialism and the men who 'Build factories with blood' (l. 681).

We have met several examples of Cowper's correspondence and poetry illuminating one another. The cluster of letters referring to Robert Smith casts clear light on a segment of *The Task*, providing a context in reality, including details of Smith's identity and venture. When we reverse the angle of interpretation, however, Cowper's lines then appear as a generalization or occlusion of these particulars, bringing Smith's generosity, though not his name, into the public domain as part of what is indivisibly both a moral and broadly political statement. No mere slice of Olney life, the vignette pays tribute simultaneously to the beneficial virtues of doing good (charity) and being good (the cottagers' compliant self-discipline) and presents the unequal relations between wealth and poverty, power and servility, capital and labour, seem right, natural, unquestionable. We have witnessed, in one of his remarks to William Unwin, Cowper's nervous concern to satisfy Smith's desire for anonymity, and this anxiety might even account for the odd fact that his letter to Smith of 7 December 1787 specifies no address or addressee. Whatever Smith's motive in acting secretly and at one remove, Cowper's care in serving it has the effect of depersonalizing his humanitarian aims and rendering them very much as part of an objective or 'given' order of existence.

We are led more emphatically than ever to the paradox that the reclusive Cowper, the man so attentive to his private world and correspondence, also, as a genuinely popular poet, played an influential part in shaping and supervising the attitudes and disposition of the nation.

NOTES

1. All references to Cowper's poetry are from *Cowper: Poetical Works*, ed. H.S. Milford, 4th edn rev. Norma Russell (London: Oxford University Press, 1967).

2. There has been a long line of distinguished editions of or including Cowper's correspondence, with early landmarks in William Hayley's pioneering *Life and Posthumous Writings of William Cowper* (4 vols, 1803-6), Robert Southey's *Life and Works of William Cowper* (15 vols, 1835-37) and, produced specifically for an Evangelical readership, T.S. Grimshawe's *Life and Works of William Cowper* (8 vols, 1835). The 479 letters gathered incrementally in editions of Hayley up to 1812 were reprinted as part of John Johnson's collected *Works* (10 vols, 1817) and separately as *The Letters of the Late William Cowper Esq. To His Friends. Revised by his kinsman J. Johnson* (1820). *The Correspondence of William Cowper*, ed. Thomas Wright, 4 vols (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1904) was superseded as the standard edition by the definitive *Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, ed. James King and Charles Ryskamp, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979-86), which has invaluable annotation and apparatus. There are excellent selections from the letters, with informative introductions, in *Cowper: Verse and Prose*, ed. Brian Spiller (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1968) and *William Cowper: The Centenary Letters*, ed. Simon Malpas (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2000). The Everyman Library Selected Letters, ed. W. Hadley (London: J.M. Dent, 1926) deserves a special mention for its useful arrangement of items according to subject or theme.

There are very few studies of Cowper's correspondence. Among them the chapter in Bruce Redford, *The Converse of the Pen: Acts of Intimacy in the Eighteenth-Century Familiar Letter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) is constantly illuminating, and I wish to acknowledge my own indebtedness to several of its insights. References for the letters are to *Letters and Prose Writings*, ed. King and Ryskamp (hereafter *LPW*) but for convenience also specify date.

3. One of these exercises in the 'Mortuary style' appears to have attracted the attention of John Keats. See T.O. Mabbott, 'Keats and Cowper. A Reminiscence?', *Notes and Queries*, 175 (3 September 1938), 170.
4. The business of publishing Homer had been mentioned briefly in Cowper's last letter to Rose (24 September 1789). In due course we find him promising to transmit as soon as possible to his friend Joseph Johnson terms for 'purchas[ing] the Copy': 'You have been so kind as to say that you will manage the bargain for me, ... for I am unable to do it myself' (29.4.91: III, 504). In the event Cowper retained the copyright and was paid £1000 for a run of 700 copies.
5. Cowper's years in London as a young lawyer and aspiring member of the literati, 1750-1763, find accomplished and original treatment in James King, *William Cowper: A Biography* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1986).
6. *Adelphi* is reprinted in *LPW*, pp. 1-61. Cowper has attracted many able and committed biographers from Hayley onwards. James King apart, we may note Thomas Wright, *The Life of William Cowper*, 2nd edn (London: Farncombe, 1921), Hugh I'Anson Fausset, *William Cowper* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1928), Lord David Cecil, *The Stricken Deer* (London: Constable, 1929) and Charles Ryskamp, *William Cowper of the Inner Temple Esq.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959). The full force of *Adelphi* itself was brought home to me by an incisive short appendix on it in Frank D. McConnell, *The Confessional Imagination: A Reading of Wordsworth's Prelude* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), which describes Cowper's madness as 'transform[ing] the world of "experience" into a negative sacrament, a downward viaticum into a universe of absolutely hostile things' (p. 196).
7. There are lines in one of Newton's greatest hymns, 'Glorious things of thee are spoken', that wonderfully express the Calvinist position:

Saviour, if of Zion's city
I thro' grace a member am;
Let the world deride or pity,
I will glory in thy name: ...
(ll. 33-36)

The syntax and rhythm throw the emphasis forcibly onto 'grace' so as also to imply 'not by works' and 'not simply by faith'. Cowper felt himself excluded from the grace of God.

8. See my *Cowper's Poetry: A Critical Study and Reassessment* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press' 1982), pp. 127-64: 'Contemplation as a Means of Grace'.
9. For this reading of *The Castaway*, see Newey, *Cowper's Poetry*, pp. 271-313.
10. Commenting on the poem to the heroine, Shirley Keeldar, to whom she has just recited it, Caroline says, 'Pity him Shirley? What can I do else? ... But he found relief in writing it – I know he did: and that gift of poetry – the most divine bestowed on man – was, I believe, granted to allay emotions when their strength threatens harm' (quoted in Lodwick Hartley, *William Cowper: The Continuing Revaluation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1960)), p. 11. There is an important example in Book VI of *The Task*:

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 wither'd leaves below.
(ll. 77-82)

This songster images the bright side of the poet's psyche and creative life: vital, happy, free, at home with nature, gently tuneful.

12. 'Variety's the very spice of life, / That gives it all its flavour' (*Task*, II.606-7).
13. See Claude Levi-Strauss, *La Pensée Sauvage* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1962), pp. 34-35. I quote the summary of Levi-Strauss's argument in Redford, *Converse of the Pen*, p. 55. My discussion of small-scale settings in Cowper owes much to Redford's account.
14. The quotation is from Horace, *Odes*, II.vi.13-14: 'Iste terrarum mihi praeter omnes / Angulus ridet –' ('That corner of the world holds a smile for me above all others'). Cowper slightly misquotes, giving 'Iste' for 'Ille'.
- Among English writers, no one puts the Horatian prescription for happiness more gracefully than Abraham Cowley in his essay 'Of Obscurity' (1668). Happy the man who

Has a moderate Minde and Fortune, and lives in the conversation of two or three agreeable friends, with little commerce in the world besides, who is esteemed well enough by his few

neighbours that know him, and is truly irreproachable by any body, and so after a healthful quiet life ... goes more silently out of it than he came in, for I would not have him so much as Cry in the *Exit*. (*Essays*, ed. A.B. Gough (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1915), pp. 139-40)

Cowper greatly admired 'ingenious Cowley ... courtly though retir'd' (see *Task*, IV, 718-30) and in an early letter imitated one of his poems (c. June 1750: I, 66-69).

15. Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. Derek Roper (London: Collins, 1968), p.24.

16. See note 6 above.

17. The circles in which Cowper moved during and after his conversion were on the 'low' or Evangelical wing of the Church of England. Though sympathetic to Nonconformism or Dissent, he was never an adherent.

18. *Correspondence between Goethe and Carlyle*, ed. C.E. Norton (London: 1887), p. 161; Jeffrey, Review of Crabbe's *Tales*, *Edinburgh Review*, 20 (July-Nov. 1812), 280. See Norma Russell, *A Bibliography of William Cowper to 1837* (Oxford: Oxford Bibliographical Society, 1963), pp. xvi-xvii.

19. 'William Cowper', *National Review* (July 1855), in *The Collected Works of Walter Bagehot*, ed. Norman St John-Stevan, Volumes I & II, *Literary Essays* (London: The Economist, 1965), I, 292.

20. For the early history of the publication of Cowper's letters, see Russell, *Bibliography*, pp. 201-09.

21. Bagehot was reviewing two volumes: Cowper's *Poetical Works* edited by Robert Bell and *The Life of William Cowper, with Selections from his Correspondence*, being Volume I of the Library of Christian Biography, superintended by the Rev. Robert Bickersteth. See Bagehot, *Collected Works*, I, 263.

22. Redford, *Converse of the Pen*, p. 61.

23. See Russell, *Bibliography*, p. 307 and, for an engraving of Westall's illustration, plate X, facing p. 270.

24. Pope, *Horace Imitated*, Satire I of Book II, l. 116.

25. *LPW*, n. 1, p. 316 follows Wright, *Correspondence*, IV, 391 in identifying this as a reference to the Grand Union, which in the event was not cut until 1805.

26. For discussion of Cowper's interest in animal rights and other 'environmental' issues, see my 'Cowper Prospects: Self, Nature, Society', in *Romanticism and Religion from William Cowper to Wallace Stevens*, ed. Gavin Hopps and Jane Stabler (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 41-56.

27. See 'Table Talk', ll. 670-89.

28. The best study of Cowper's view of the French Revolution, and one that takes the letters seriously, is W.B. Hutchings, 'William Cowper and 1789', *The Yearbook of English Studies, Volume 19: The French Revolution in English Literature and Art*, ed. J.R. Watson (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 1989), pp. 71-93. The Revolution and the American War are among the central topics of my 'William Cowper and the Condition of England', in *Literature and Nationalism*, ed. Vincent Newey and Ann Thompson (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1991), pp. 120-39.

29. See, for example, the letter to William Unwin on 18 June 1880 (I, 353).

30. Reprinted in *LPW*, pp. 40-44.

31. It is from this letter that we learn that the sum available for distribution was around £50. The same concern to help only the godly is expressed in the letter to Unwin of 18 November 1782, where Cowper talks of striving to 'exercise our best discretion in the disposal of the money'.

32. Smith was a partner in the family banking firm of Smith, Payne and Company of Nottingham and London. He entered parliament in 1779, became a close ally and friend of Pitt, and in 1796 was created Baron Carrington. There is a brief biographical sketch in *LPW*, III, xxxi.

33. Thomas Haskell, 'Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility', *American Historical Review*, 90 (1985), 339-61, 547-66.