

**‘William the Conqueror’
The Friendship between William Hayley and William Cowper**

Lisa Gee

‘It was an idle endeavour to make us enemies’, wrote William Hayley in his *Life and Letters of Cowper*, ‘which gave rise to our intimacy.’¹

Hayley was author of the best-selling self-help book in rhyming couplets *The Triumphs of Temper*, and a popular poet who had recently turned down Pitt’s offer of the laureateship because ‘Parnassus is not a rotten Borough’², (also because he didn’t feel his health was up to it). He’d been nagged to write a biography of Milton, not knowing that the great Cowper was working, with Henry Fuseli, on an annotated edition of the poet’s works, until he was ‘surprised and concerned’ to learn that he was ‘represented in a news-paper, as an antagonist of Cowper.’³

So, William Hayley did what William Hayley invariably did. He wrote a letter, complete with accompanying sonnet, to the poet.

7 February 1792, Eartham, near Chichester

Dear Sir,

I have often been tempted by affectionate admiration of your poetry, to trouble you with a letter; but I have repeatedly checked myself, in recollecting that the vanity of believing ourselves distantly related in spirit to a man of genius, is but a sorry apology for intruding on his time.

Though I resisted my desire of professing myself your friend, that I might not disturb you with intrusive familiarity, I cannot resist a desire equally affectionate, of disclaiming an idea which I am told is imputed to me, of considering myself, on a recent occasion, as an antagonist to you. Allow me, therefore, to say, I was solicited to write a *Life of Milton*, for Boydell and Nicholl, before I had the least idea that you and Mr. Fuseli were concerned in a project similar to theirs. When I first heard of your intention, I was apprehensive that we might undesignedly thwart each other; but on seeing your proposals, I am agreeably persuaded, that our respective labours will be far from clashing; as it is your design to illustrate Milton with a series of notes, and I only mean to execute a more candid life of him than his late biographer has given us, upon a plan that will, I flatter myself, be particularly pleasing to those who love the author as we do.

As to the pecuniary interest of those persons who venture large sums in expensive decorations of Milton, I am persuaded his expanding glory will support them all. Every splendid edition, where the merits of the pencil are in any degree worthy of the poet, will, I think, be secure of success. I wish it cordially to all; as I have great affection for the arts, and a sincere regard for those whose talents reflect honour upon them.

To you, my dear Sir, I have a grateful attachment, for the infinite delight which your writings have afforded me; and if, in the course of your work, I have any opportunity to serve or oblige you, I shall seize it with that friendly spirit which has impelled me at present to assure you in both prose and rhyme, that I am,

Your very cordial admirer
W. Hayley

P.P.S.—I wrote the enclosed sonnet on being told that our names had been idly printed together, in a newspaper, as *hostile competitors*. Pray forgive its poetical defects, for its affectionate sincerity.

From my ignorance of your address, I send this to your booksellers, by a person commissioned to place my name in the list of your subscribers; and let me add, if you ever wish to form a new collection of names for any similar purpose, I entreat you to honour me so far as to rank *mine*, of your own accord, among those of your sincerest friends—Adieu!

Sonnet

To William Cowper, Esq.,

On hearing that our names had been idly mentioned in a newspaper, as competitors in a life of Milton

Cowper! delight of all who justly prize
The splendid magic of a strain divine,
That sweetly tempts th’enlightened soul to rise!
As sun-beams lure an eagle to the skies!
Poet! to whom I feel my heart incline
As to a friend endeared by virtue’s ties;
Ne’er shall my name in pride’s contentious line
With hostile emulation cope with thine

No, let us meet with kind fraternal aim,
Where Milton's shrine invites a votive throng.
With thee I share a passion for his fame,
His zeal for truth, his scorn of venal blame:
But thou hast rarer gifts; to thee belong
His harp of highest tone, his sanctity of song.⁴

The letter sat at the bookseller's for six weeks. When he eventually received it, William Cowper wrote to his cousin Lady Hesketh:

By this time I presume you have seen ... Mr. Hayley's friendly letter and complimentary sonnet ... Mr Hayley's letter slept six weeks in Johnson's custody. It was necessary I should answer it without delay, and accordingly I answered it the very evening on which I received it, giving him to understand, among other things, how much vexation the bookseller's folly had cost me, who had detained it so long, especially on account of the distress, that I knew it must have occasioned him also. From his reply, which the return of the post brought me, I learn, that in the long interval of my noncorrespondence he had suffered anxiety and mortification enough; so much that I dare say he made twenty vows never to hazard again either letter or compliment to an unknown author. What, indeed, could he imagine less, than that I meant by such an obstinate silence, to tell him that I valued neither him nor his praises, nor his proffered friendship, in short, that I considered him as a rival, and therefore, like a true author, hated and despised him. He is now, however, convinced, that I love him, as indeed I do, and I account him the chief acquisition, that my own verse has ever procured me. Brute should I be if I did not, for he promises me every assistance in his power.⁵

It was, in fact, love at first letter. By 6 April, Cowper was writing to Hayley,

My Dear Friend,

GOD grant that this friendship of ours may be a comfort to us all the rest of our days, in a world where true friendships are rarities, and especially where suddenly formed they are apt soon to terminate! But as I said before, I feel a disposition of heart toward you, that I never felt for one whom I had never seen; and that shall prove itself, I trust, in the event, a propitious omen.

.....

Come then, my friend, and be as welcome, as the country people say here, as the flowers in May!⁶

Cowper proceeded to explain the presence of his companion, Mrs Unwin, thinking it better not to surprise Hayley on his arrival, gave him leave to bring any Milton-related books with him and expressed concern that corresponding so frequently might be bad for Hayley's poorly eyes.

'I will bring you', wrote Hayley one month later, 'a Heart and Soul so dispos'd to take an affectionate interest in all your Works, that I flatter myself I may be able (as an Ally to the dear Mary) to drive that depressive spirit of Melancholy you once mention'd, to such a distance from you, that it shall have no chance of invading you again. Then I shall be *William the Conqueror*.'⁷

He travelled to Weston Underwood in Buckinghamshire to visit his new best friend. They studied Milton together and went for long country rambles. 'I feel', wrote Hayley to another of his closest friends, artist George Romney, 'I have now found the thing I most wanted—a congenial poetical spirit, willing to join with me in the most social and friendly cultivation of an art dear to us both, and particularly dear to us as the cement of friendship.'⁸

Then, one day when Cowper and Hayley returned from one of their walks, they discovered that Cowper's companion, Mrs Unwin, had suffered a stroke. Cowper was devastated:

Returning from her apartment to me, with a Countenance of absolute distraction, He exclaimed: 'There is a Wall of separation between me & my God'

Hayley tells us that he responded instantly:

I looked fixedly in his Face & answered, with equal celerity & vehemence of expression:— 'So there is, my Friend, but I can inform you, I am the most resolute Mortal on Earth for pulling down old Walls, & by the living God I will not leave a stone standing in the wall, you speak of.'

After a silence, Cowper

... examined my Features intently for a few Moments; & then, taking my Hand most cordially, He said, with a sweet appearance of recovered serenity: 'I believe you.' & ... from that Moment He rested on my

Friendship with such mild, & cheerful confidence, that his affectionate Spirit regarded me as sent providentially to support him in a season of the severest affliction.⁹

The incident stuck in Hayley's mind.

It was not just an act of friendship. Hayley was an amateur doctor with a particular interest in mental illness, a subject he also covered in his creative work. He wrote a long elegy for his mother-in-law, Mrs Ball, who had 'lost her reason' after several of her children had died: she had been treated by a Dr Batty, who suggested that getting her pregnant again might cure her. So her husband did, and the result was Eliza, who married Hayley but, it seems, refused ever to have sex with him. Again, a couple of years before he met Cowper, Hayley had written a musical drama called *The Resolute Fair* or *The Courage of Love*, in which a depressed Javanese Sultan is cured by 'the songs of a fair musician'. It was, he tells us in his *Memoirs*, 'approved for the theatre', but never performed in case some 'injudicious' members of the audience should consider it 'a disrespectful allusion to the mental malady of our Sovereign'.¹⁰

The looking 'fixedly' into Cowper's face and stating something with conviction is reminiscent of the way Dr Willis – who, like Hayley, was not a qualified physician – treated George III.

Hayley himself had many health problems: he almost died four times before starting at Eton, once by accidentally stabbing himself with a penknife while declaiming a speech from *Othello*, and spent most of the rest of his 75 years telling everyone that he was not long for this world. He was an early adopter of the (cold) shower bath treatment and was fascinated by medical technology.

Having used an electric shock machine to treat his own eye complaint, he acquired a similar device from a neighbour of Cowper's, and used it to treat Mrs Unwin, which further endeared him to his friend. (This machine may still be seen at the Cowper and Newton Museum in Olney.)

Within a couple of months the two poets were sufficiently entwined to induce William Cowper to do something he had not felt equal to for at least twenty years:

Through floods and flames to your retreat
I win my desp'rate way,
And when we meet, if e'er we meet,
Will echo your huzza!

Despite his intense anxiety, the 'spiritual hounds' that hunted him 'in the night season' (he heard voices), and his depression, William Cowper – accompanied by Mrs Unwin, John Johnson and, possibly, even an actual dog – made the long journey to William Hayley's house at Eartham, West Sussex.¹¹

During the month Cowper was there, the poets revised and corrected Cowper's translations of Milton's Latin and Italian poetry in the morning and amused themselves after dinner 'in forming together a rapid metrical version of Andreini's Adamo.' In between times, they devoted themselves to caring for Mrs Unwin. Twice a day Hayley's son Tom and a friend hauled her round 'the airy hill of Eartham...in a commodious garden chair'.¹² George Romney joined the party, as did Sussex-based poet Charlotte Smith and others. It was all very jolly, but it had to end. Although the two poets corresponded frequently, the next time they were together was more than a year later. By then – October 1793 – Cowper was already showing signs of the depression that would overwhelm him for the rest of his life.

It was at this point that Hayley's concern for his friend turned to campaigning. Cowper's living expenses were only covered by *ad hoc* contributions from his relatives, Mrs Unwin's meagre fortune being almost spent by now. Hayley believed that this financial insecurity contributed to Cowper's mental health problems and that a poet of his stature should be supported by the state. So he started lobbying for his friend to be given either a sinecure with limited duties that someone else could fulfil for him, or a state pension.

When Hayley visited Cowper at his home in Weston for the first time in April 1792, he

was grieved to the soul in hearing, that the Income of such a Man as Cowper arose partly by pitiful & precarious Contribution from Relations & Friends.– it immediately became the first wish of my Heart to procure for him a becoming Independance [*sic*]

This became 'the darling project' of Hayley's 'sanguine Spirit', even though

An austere Critic might here tell me, that it would have been more Prudent, & more fashionable to have rather regarded as my first object the Improvement of my own shrinking Finances, which were not, I must confess, at the time I speak of, nor are they at present in a very flourishing Condition.¹³

Still, there was no austere critic to hand - or if there was, Hayley ignored him or her, and determined to

lobby the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Lord Thurlow - an old friend of Cowper's from his law student days.

Beforehand, he persuaded another friend, Thomas Carwardine, who had sent a copy of Cowper's poems to Thurlow's daughter Catherine, to get Catherine to forward the book on to him. She did, and he then inserted the following encouraging verses:

*To Miss Catherine Thurlow
with Cowper's Poems.*

Sweet Nymph! accept a Bard, for whom
Rich amaranths with Roses bloom
To deck his moral Lyre;
Dear, doubly dear, must wit & Truth
Be deemed by you, from one whose youth
Was social with your sire.
Apart by different stars impelled
Their course, as Mortals, both have held
To suffer, & to drudge:
But Genius kept them both in view,
and to the Heights of Honor drew
The Poet, & the judge.

Ingenuous Girl! while here you see
How their fraternal Hearts agree
In Energy & Truth
May you restore, & teach to blaze
With double Glory's blended rays
The Friendship of their youth!¹⁴

Despite being both 'overwhelmed with Business' and 'splenetic'¹⁵, the Chancellor found time for Hayley to plead Cowper's case.

And he did so, he tells us, in an extraordinary, unpublished document written in 1794, with 'vehemence & intrepidity':

I appealed to the Chancellor, if it would not singularly become the King to bestow his munificence on Cowper, not only as a proper Compliment to a Man of Genius & virtue ... but as an act of personal thanksgiving & Gratitude towards Heaven, for having restored his Majesty from that mental Malady, by which this wonderful & most interesting poet has been periodically afflicted:—
'You must be aware', Thurlow responded, 'that it would require great delicacy to hint an Idea of this sort to the King'

Hayley was not so easily deflected. 'My Lord', he said, 'I am the most ignorant man alive in all matters that relate to the Court, but this I can say in answer to your objection, that such an application, as I have presumed to suggest, would be no difficult affair, if the King speaks of his own mental infirmity with the Frankness that Cowper does.'

He went on to remind Thurlow of how, back in the days when he had been a fellow student of Cowper's, Thurlow had encountered him 'in a moment of his darkest Despondency', and 'treated him on that calamitous occasion with all the Kindness, that a Friend can exert.'¹⁶

The Chancellor appeared convinced by Hayley's argument. Then, a few days after their meeting, he lost his job.

But Hayley's hopes remained alive. 'I still persuaded myself, that as he had personal Intercourse with the royal Family, he would avail himself of some favorable opportunity to become, what I wished him to be, the architect of Cowper's Fortune.'¹⁷

And, naturally, in order to animate Lord Thurlow to that end, Hayley sent him a poem:

Yes! now your hand, with decent Pride,
Relinquishes that seal unstained,
Which Bacon, Law's less upright Guide!
With many a sordid spot prophaned;

Haply from [illegible word] pomp released,
You now, escaping thorny strife,

Have time to grace a Hermit's Feast,
and honour sweet, sequestered Life:

Here nature reigns [illegible] Souls elate;
Her tranquil smiles their scene endear;
And Fancy, Freedom, Friendship wait
To hail their Favourite Cowper here.

To dignify this dear Retreat
Would I could tempt you to descend,
and in our first of poets meet
Life's richest Gift, an antient Friend!

When Talents & Virtue a Mortal endear,
yet fail to preserve him from Fortune's controul,
Who find her weak Captive in Want's narrow sphere
With adversity, Irons [?], that enter the soul.

Say! is it not, Thurlow, an office divine
With the firm hand of Friendship to cancel such Wrongs?
May the verses of Cowper proclaim it is thine,
While Genius & Gratitude hallow his songs!¹⁸

Sadly the 'animating' verse William Hayley sent to Lord Thurlow failed to have the anticipated effect. 'I was vain enough', Hayley later wrote, 'to expect a very gracious answer to this Epistle – judge then of my surprise & mortification in receiving no answer at all.'

He was, he says, 'half inclined to tell him, in a second Letter, how I felt this rudeness from a Man, who can be, whenever he pleases, most enchantingly polite. On reflection however, I thought it became me most not to write to him again, & I therefore vented my own ill-humour in the few following verses, which I sent to Carwardine, & told him that he might, if he had Courage sufficient, repeat them to his patron.

Why, wrapt in Clouds, no Sun pervades,
Sullen as Ajax in the shades,
Why Thurlow art Thou mute?
When courtesy unstained by art
addresses to thy manly heart
an amicable suit?

The Muse, Thou hear'st with dumb disdain
call'd thee from troubles dark & vain
To scenes of sweet Relief,
That might thy rigid Brow unbend
and shew Thee in thy antient Friend
of living Bards the Chief

Touched by thy silent disrespect,
Two Poets blame thy rude neglect
with dignity serene;
We, tho aloof from public Jars, [?illeg]
We have thy Pride, but (thank our stars)
Thy Pride without thy spleen,'¹⁹

Hayley did not allow Thurlow's silence to discourage him in his efforts to secure a pension for Cowper. He consulted several friends and decided to follow the advice of historian Edward Gibbon, author of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and approach the Prime Minister, William Pitt, asking for a meeting. Pitt responded immediately, inviting the self-styled hermit in for a chat. Hayley was so anxious beforehand that on his friend George Romney's suggestion he knocked back a glass of port (he rarely drank alcohol) which, rather than steadying his nerves, gave him a headache. But Pitt was most welcoming, and responded so positively to Hayley's petition, that he was overcome with emotion, grabbing his hand and kissing it 'in a Transport of that sensibility which has made me too often the dupe of my own Heart.'²⁰ Pitt promised to write to Hayley soon, but Hayley waited in vain. So, as advised by two other friends, he wrote

to Lord Spencer, asking him to prod Pitt's memory. Spencer promised to oblige when he next had the opportunity.

At this point Hayley received news 'of the darkest complexion'. Cowper had sunk into a 'deep & wretched despondency'. 'I now too clearly perceived', he wrote, 'that the horrible impending Mischief, which I had so anxiously laboured to avert from the Mind of my incomparable Friend, had fallen on him with all its weight, & perhaps so fallen, as to overwhelm his enchanting Faculties forever -'

Hayley was crushed by the news of Cowper's illness. He was also furious with the Prime Minister. 'I was persuaded', he wrote, 'that the animation which the patronage of Mr Pitt might have afforded to his declining Spirit, would have preserved the unhappy Sufferer from this miserable depression.'²¹

He decided to write, once more, to Pitt - and with characteristic frankness.

It is not often that a Hermit can be deceived by a Prime Minister; yet I am an Example, that such an extraordinary Incident may happen; for in Truth, my dear Sir, I most credulously confided in yr kind Promise of writing to me soon, concerning your liberal Intentions in favor of my admirable Friend Cowper —alas! instead if hearing from you such Tidings, as I hoped would make him happy, I have just heard from another Quarter that He is recently sunk into that gloomy Wretchedness, a half frantic despondency, from which I was sanguine enough to expect, that yr just Esteem & Beneficence might preserve him.

Now perhaps even yr Kindness may hardly give him a gleam of Satisfaction —your Enemies (a great man can not live without Enemies) affirm, that you have little Feeling: this opinion I have long rejected from my disposition to cherish an enthusiastic regard for you: but the rejected opinion I am now unwillingly putting to the Test —You must have little Feeling indeed, if this Intelligence does not make you lament, as I do most cordially, that an unfortunate delay in providing for a Man of a marvellous Genius, may have conduced to plunge him in the Worst of human Calamity.

How far it is probable that yr Favor might have preserved him from this Evil, or may be likely to restore him from it, perhaps my Lord Spencer may be able from fuller Information to judge better than I can at present: he is a Neighbour & a Friend to the great afflicted Poet, yet if I remember right, not personally acquainted with Him: & his Ldship has kindly promised me (should opportunity arise) to recall to your Remembrance what I said to you in Cowper's Behalf. Ld Spencer enters (as you kindly did when you allowed me the Honor of conversing with you) into the cruel singularity of Cowper's situation, & I am confident that you both sympathize in thinking that our Sovereign's munificence could not be more worthily exerted, than towards this wonderful Man, whether it shall please Heaven to bless him with a restoration of his rare mental Endowments, or still to afflict him with a melancholy alienation of Mind.

I will not utterly relinquish the hope, that you may yet be able to serve him: afflicting as the delay has proved, I am inclined to impute it to such difficulties & Obstructions, as Men, even of excellent Hearts & high Stations too frequently find in their endeavours to befriend the Unfortunate.

I write in the frank & proud Sorrow of a wounded Spirit, but with a cordial & affectionate wish, that Heaven may bless you with unthwarted Power to do Good, & with Virtue sufficient to exert it —

I retain a lasting sense of the very engaging Kindness, with which you allowed me to pour forth my Heart to you on this interesting subject, & I am most sincerely my dr Sir

yr very grateful tho afflicted Servant

W Hayley

Eartham

27 Feb 1794²²

Finally, following an intervention by two mutual friends – the lawyer Samuel Rose (whom Hayley had engaged to defend William Blake at his trial for sedition) and Lord Spencer - Cowper was granted a pension of £300 per annum. But it was too late: by this time Cowper's depression had become incurable. Hayley received two more letters from him (concerning the translation of a passage from Homer), in December 1793 and Jan 1794, and then, silence.

In April 1794, Cowper's friend and neighbor Samuel Greatheed wrote to Hayley. Cowper was refusing to eat or take medicine. Greatheed begged Hayley to come to Weston in the hope that he – who had in the past 'succeeded where his other friends knew they could not, and where they apprehended no one could' – would hurry to Weston 'for the bare possibility of restoring Mr. Cowper to himself, to his friends, to the public, and to God.'²³

How could Hayley resist? He couldn't. But

My unhappy friend was too much overwhelmed by his oppressive malady, to show even the least glimmering of satisfaction at the appearance of a guest, whom he used to receive with the most lively expressions of affectionate delight.

It is the nature of this tremendous melancholy not only to enshroud and stifle the faculties of the

mind, but it suspends, and apparently annihilates for a time, the strongest and best-rooted affections of the heart. I had frequent and painful occasion to observe, in this affecting visit to my suffering friend, that he seemed to shrink, at times, from every human creature, except from the gentle voice of my son.²⁴

‘Although it has been my lot to be acquainted with affliction in a variety of shapes’, wrote Hayley of this visit, ‘I hardly ever felt the anguish of sympathy with an afflicted friend in that severer degree, than during the few weeks that I passed with Cowper at this season of his sufferings ... Yet the anguish of it would have been greatly increased, had I been conscious that he was destined to years of this dark depression, and that I would see him no more.’²⁵

After this visit, Hayley kept in close contact with Cowper’s relatives and carers, the Rev John Johnson and Lady Hesketh, but heard nothing from Cowper himself until 20 June 1797, when he received this letter:

Ignorant of every thing but my own instant & impending Misery, I know neither what I do, when I write, nor can do otherwise than write, because I am bidden to do so. Perfect Despair, the most perfect, that ever possessed any Mind, has had Possession of mine, you know how long, and knowing that, will not need to be Told, who writes.²⁶

Hayley responded with an unconventional - and impulsively-conceived – plan of treatment. He wrote

My keen sensations in perusing these heartpiercing Lines have been a painful Prelude to the following Ecstatic Vision.— I beheld the Throne of God, whose Splendor, tho in Excess, did not strike me blind, but left me power to discern, on the steps of it, two kneeling angelic Forms.

A kind Seraph seemed to whisper to me, that these heavenly Petitioners were your lovely Mother, & my own; both enjoyed fervent Supplications for your Restoration to mental Serenity, & Comfort.— I sprang eagerly forward to enquire your Destiny of your Mother.—Turning towards me, with a look of Seraphic Benignity, she smiled upon me, & said: ‘Warmest of earthly Friends! Moderate the anxiety of thy Zeal, lest it distract thy declining Faculties! & know, as a Reward for thy Kindness, that my Son shall be restored to Himself, & to Friendship.

But the all-Merciful & almighty ordains, that his Restoration shall be gradual; & that his Peace with Heaven shall be preceded by the following extraordinary Circumstances of signal Honour on Earth.— He shall receive Letters from Members of Parliament, from Judges, & from Bishops, to thank Him for the service that He has rendered to the Christian World by his devotional Poetry. These shall be followed by a Letter from the Prime Minister to the same effect; & this by Thanks expressed to Him on the same account, in the Hand of the King Himself.— Tell Him, when these Events take place, he may confide in his celestial Emancipation from despair, granted to the Prayer of his Mother; & He may rest satisfied with this assurance from Her, that his Peace is perfectly made with Heaven.—Hasten to impart these blessed Tidings to your fav’rite Friend! said the Maternal Spirit; & let your Thanksgiving to God be an Increase of reciprocal Kindness to each other! – ‘

Anticipating twentieth-century techniques of persuasion, Hayley added a direct marketing style ‘call-to-action’ PS:

if any of these Incidents speedily take place, which your angelic Mother announced to me in this Vision, as certain signs of your Recovery, I conjure you in her Name, my dear Cowper, to communicate them to me, with all the kind dispatch, that is due to the tender anxiety of sympathetic affection!— Heaven grant that I may hear from you again very soon!— adieu!²⁷

He then tried to set in motion his ‘large & Complicated intellectual Machine’²⁸ by persuading politicians and churchmen to write to Cowper. He was careful, however, to keep his overall plot a secret: one he shared only with Rev John Johnson - Cowper's cousin and carer – and Lady Hesketh. After a lot of nagging and the judicious application of Lady Hesketh's schmoozing skills, Cowper started receiving letters of the type promised in ‘the Vision’. The first, written on 9 August 1797, came from William Wilberforce. When he caught sight of the letter, Cowper said ‘The outside tells me, I shall be taken away by Force, & the inside will tell me the Time when.’²⁹ He did, however, read the letter with what Johnny Johnson described as ‘unusual Attention’.

The second – hustled by Lady Hesketh – came from the Bishop of London late in September: a fan letter, detailing the religious enjoyment with which the Bishop read and re-read Cowper's poems. Cowper's response?

Never was such a Letter written, never was such a Letter read to a Man so overwhelmed with Despair, as I am — It was written in Derision – I know, & I am sure of it.

Johnson challenged this: Cowper shouldn't say such a thing of a man as good as the Bishop of London! 'I should say so', Cowper replied, 'of an archangel, were it possible for an archangel to send me such a Letter, in such Circumstances.'³⁰

Hayley included none of this in the biography of his friend, saying only that

A depression of spirits, which suspended the studies of a writer so eminently endeared to the public, was considered by men of piety and learning as a national misfortune, and several individuals of this description, though personally unknown to Cowper, wrote to him in the benevolent hope, that expressions of friendly praise, from persons who could be influenced only by the most laudable motives in bestowing it, might reanimate the dejected spirit of a poet not sufficiently conscious of the public service, that his writings had rendered to his country, and of that universal esteem, which they had so deservedly secured their author.³¹

Only one more letter was sent to Cowper, from Hayley's friend, the Bishop of Llandaff. Dr Beadon, the Bishop of Gloucester, who was married to one of Hayley's relatives, shocked Hayley by his refusal to write, and Lord Kenyon, of whom Hayley and Lady Hesketh had had high hopes, dithered as he thought – not without reason – that receiving adulatory letters from people he didn't know might drive Cowper further over the edge. Despite the best efforts of both Hayley and Samuel Rose, Kenyon ultimately wrote nothing, and by this time, Hayley's time was mostly occupied in caring for his son, Thomas Alphonso, who was now displaying the first serious symptoms of the illness that would kill him.

Hayley remained hopeful about Cowper's recovery until the last. Following the receipt of letters from William Wilberforce and the Bishops of London and Llandaff, the poet resumed work, completing his translation of Homer. This fuelled Hayley's optimism, and when, on 31 January 1800, he received a newly-translated passage from the *Iliad* in his friend's handwriting, he responded with a sonnet.

Blest be the Characters so Kindly trac'd
In that dear Hand which I have longed to view
Pledge of Affection old and Kindness new
From the reviving Bard supremely graced
With all the Gifts of Fancy and of Taste
That can Endear the Mind! and given to Few
The rarer richer Gift, a Heart as true
As e'er the Arms of Amity embraced.

Ecstatic Tears I on the Paper shed
That speaks, my Cowper! of thy mental Health
And of thy Friendship, soothing as the Dove!
So weeps the Nymph, who, when long Storms are past
Welcomes from the Sea her Bosom's rescued Wealth
To Life to Joy to Glory and to Love³²

The Christian symbolism of the Dove and the blessing that opens the sonnet, the profusion of words connoting love and friendship, the faithful heart and the copious tears, are all typical of the culture of sensibility. But the last three lines are interesting. They seem, like a magic mirror, to reflect a happy ending onto the final stanza of Cowper's last poem 'The Cast-away' (written March 1799 and first published in Hayley's biography). This is uncanny, as it is almost certain that Hayley did not read the poem until January 1801.³¹

No voice divine the storm allay'd,
No light propitious shone;
When, snatch'd from all effectual aid,
We perish'd, each alone:
But I beneath a rougher sea,
And whelm'd in deeper gulphs than he.

In Hayley's sonnet, the storm *is* allayed, the poet rescued from the 'deeper gulphs' and 'restored to Himself, & to Friendship' and much more. In real life there was to be no such happy ending, and Cowper died on 25 April 1800, followed a week later by the other great love of Hayley's life – his son Tom.

References

- ¹ Hayley, *Life and Letters of William Cowper*, p.312.
- ² Hayley, *Two Memorials*, p.43.
- ³ Hayley, *Life and Letters of William Cowper*, p.312.
- ⁴ Hayley, *Memoirs*, pp.425-8.
- ⁵ Hayley, *Life and Letters of William Cowper*, pp.365-6.
- ⁶ *ibid.* pp.368-9.
- ⁷ Hayley writing to William Cowper 6 May 1792, quoted in Bishop, *Blake's Hayley*, p.149.
- ⁸ Hayley, *Memoirs*, p.431.
- ⁹ Hayley, *Two Memorials*, pp.215-16.
- ¹⁰ Hayley, *Memoirs*, pp.408-409.
- ¹¹ Hayley, *Life and Letters of William Cowper*, pp.413-14.
- ¹² *ibid.* pp.417-18.
- ¹³ Hayley, *Two Memorials*, pp.9-10.
- ¹⁴ *ibid.* p.19.
- ¹⁵ *ibid.* pp.20-1.
- ¹⁶ *ibid.* pp.24-6.
- ¹⁷ *ibid.* p.28.
- ¹⁸ *ibid.* pp.29-32.
- ¹⁹ *ibid.* pp.32-5.
- ²⁰ *ibid.* p.75.
- ²¹ *ibid.* pp.89-90.
- ²² *ibid.* pp.91-4.
- ²³ Hayley, *Life and Letters of William Cowper*, pp.134-5.
- ²⁴ *ibid.* p.136.
- ²⁵ *ibid.* pp.139 and 142.
- ²⁶ Hayley, *Two Memorials*, pp.126-7.
- ²⁷ *ibid.* pp.129-32.
- ²⁸ *ibid.* p.151.
- ²⁹ *ibid.* p.162.
- ³⁰ *ibid.* pp.185-6.
- ³¹ Hayley, *Life and Letters of William Cowper*, p.158.
- ³² *ibid.* p.247. The poem is reproduced in volume 2 of Hayley's *Memoirs*, p.102, without the line break between the octave and the sestet, and with appropriate punctuation.
- ³³ Charles Ryskamp, who edited and commented on the manuscript that included 'The Cast-away' for Princeton Library in 1963, suggested that it was 'given by John Johnson to Lady Hesketh, Cowper's cousin, after the poet's death. She, in turn, sent the volume to William Hayley in January 1801.'

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