

The Cowper and Newton

Journal



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THE COWPER AND NEWTON JOURNAL

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The *Journal* invites submissions on any topic related to William Cowper, John Newton and their circle but embraces the wider milieu – literary, artistic, religious, historical, horticultural – of their contemporaries (in effect the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries). In keeping with its museum origins, the *Journal's* scope also covers material culture: the study of relevant objects from the period and their wider significance.

Each issue of the *Journal* may include articles of varying lengths, notes on shorter topics, and reviews (of books, but also of exhibitions, plays, films and other relevant productions or events). The focus is mainly on scholarly research and criticism in the fields listed above, but also takes in subjects of more general interest such as local topography, family connections, and reminiscences of people and places.

Submissions should be sent as email attachments (preferably as Word documents) to one of the Joint Editors. It would be helpful if contributors could follow the Style Notes as set out on the *Journal* page of the museum website: www.cowperandnewtonmuseum.org.uk/journal-2/. The editors reserve the right to make minor changes to work submitted.

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Editorial

Homes, literal and metaphorical, figure prominently in our 2017 issue. Following up his discovery that Sam Roberts, Cowper's 'faithful attendant', was an ancestor of his, James Brannan significantly corrects some of the standard assumptions made about Cowper's servants, and provides fascinating insights into Cowper's domestic arrangements. Karen E. Smith's study of John Newton's letters to John Ryland Jr, a Baptist pastor, in which he offers practical and spiritual advice about the choice of a marriage partner, intriguingly reveals a man not only thoughtfully mentoring a younger colleague but also reflecting on some pertinent and troubling personal and theological questions for a married minister. Jane Darcy contributes a sensitive and sympathetic meditation on the emotional value of home for Cowper and for his admirer, Jane Austen. Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park* is shown to be a heroine whose devotion to, and disruption from, domestic security are significantly influenced both by her creator's responses to Cowper's poetry and by Jane Austen's own experiences. Kimberley Braxton's astute reading of four religious poems by Anne Brontë argues that her interaction with Cowper's works provided her with a means of working out her own spiritual home.

In addition, Vincent Newey notes a reference to Cowper's famous hymn, 'God moves in a mysterious way', in Vera Brittain's autobiography of the First World War period, *Testament of Youth*. Brittain's experience of the painful ironies of love and death sounds echoes in Cowper's poetry. Kate Bostock provides a detailed and insightful review of John Bugg's edition of a business letterbook belonging to Cowper's publisher, Joseph Johnson, containing five previously unpublished letters from Johnson to Cowper.

Our 2018 special issue will be guest-edited by Katherine Turner (kturner@marybaldwin.edu), whose scholarly and wide-ranging study of the influence of Cowper's anti-slavery poems on American abolitionists was a highlight of the 2016 volume. Her theme for 2018, 'home and away', builds on and extends topics investigated in the following essays. Please refer to Katherine's call for papers on the Cowper and Newton Museum website for full details of her proposed areas of enquiry.

William Hutchings, Vincent Newey and Tony Seward

‘With what intense desire she wants her home’: Cowper’s Influence on Jane Austen

Jane Darcy

Fanny Price, the timid heroine of *Mansfield Park*, never feels at home. Taken at nine from the chaos of her family house in Portsmouth, she grows up in the grandeur of Mansfield Park, under the care of her uncle and aunt, Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram. But although Sir Thomas at the outset declared, ‘Let her home be in this house’, he fails to see the divisiveness of Mrs Norris’s insistence that Fanny be brought up to know her place, never to consider herself on an equal footing with the Bertram children. It is Mrs Norris who plans this relegation in concrete terms, suggesting Fanny be given ‘the little white Attic, near the Old Nurseries ... close by the housemaids’.¹

Such security as Fanny has is threatened when she is fifteen. Widowhood means Mrs Norris must leave the parsonage and move to a smaller cottage. The Bertrams assume, wrongly, that she will do her duty by Fanny and take her to live with her. When the news is casually broken by Lady Bertram, Fanny is aghast:

‘And am I never to live here again?’

‘Never, my dear; but you are sure of a comfortable home. It can make very little difference to you, whether you are in one house or the other.’²

Fortunately for Fanny, this does not come to pass. But this failure to understand the difference between a house and a home remains a quietly powerful revelation of the Bertrams’ lack of sensibility in a novel which takes home, homelessness and exile as its central theme. It is one of great personal significance to Jane Austen herself. Her loss of her own family home in her mid-twenties affected her severely. In this essay I want to explore the profound influence of Cowper on Austen’s thoughts and feelings about the necessity of finding a true home. Her love of Cowper’s poetry is, of course, well known. Many of us remember Fanny Price’s passionate reaction to the proposed felling of an avenue of trees on a neighbouring estate:

‘Cut down an avenue! What a pity! Does not it make you think of Cowper?
“Ye fallen avenues, once more I mourn your fate unmerited”.’³

But I what I hope to demonstrate in this essay is the more profound and pervasive influence of Cowper on Jane Austen.

‘This nest of comforts’

Only when Fanny is eighteen does Austen reveal how she has responded to her banishment to the ‘little white Attic’. Over time she has developed a consolatory response to her situation, creating her own tiny domain. On the floor below her attic bedroom is the old schoolroom where she and the Bertram girls had been tutored. No longer in use, it has now been grandly retitled ‘the East room’. But it is a space that no one wants. So when Fanny begins to colonise it with her books and plants, spending more and more time there, it becomes generally accepted that the East room belongs to her. Even Mrs Norris’s spiteful stipulation for ‘there never being a fire in it on Fanny’s account’, cannot spoil the deep pleasure Fanny takes in it.⁴ Austen rarely gives details of rooms or costumes, but at this moment we are invited to gaze at the space which Fanny has transformed into a home:

The aspect was so favourable, that even without a fire it was habitable in many an early spring, and late autumn morning, to such a willing mind as Fanny’s, and while there was a gleam of sunshine, she hoped not to be driven from it entirely, even when winter came. The comfort of it in her hours of leisure was extreme. She could go there after any thing unpleasant below, and find immediate consolation in some pursuit, or some train of thought at hand. – Her plants, her books – of which she had been a collector, from the first hour of her commanding a shilling – her writing desk, and her works of charity and ingenuity, were all within her reach.⁵

Those of us who know Cowper will recognise here a poignantly Cowperian sensibility. Cowper’s evocations of himself, comfortably insulated from the world, dreaming beside a wintry fire, had appealed to his readers, Jane Austen among them, from the publication of *The Task* (1785). His posthumously published letters added to this new literary celebration of intimate domestic space. We think of him in his greenhouse (‘a cabinet of perfumes’) or playing with a new kitten (‘she is dressed in a tortoise-shell suit’).⁶ But as he revealed in ‘On the Receipt of My

Mother's Picture out of Norfolk', his childhood was overshadowed by his mother's death just before his sixth birthday. Writing in 1790, he continues to cherish the memory of maternal love:

Thy nightly visits to my chamber made,
That thou mightst know me safe and warmly laid;
Thy morning bounties ere I left my home,
The biscuit, or confectionary plum;
The fragrant waters on my cheeks bestow'd
By thy own hand, till fresh they shone and glow'd;
All this, and more endearing still than all,
Thy constant flow of love, that knew no fall ... (58-65)

Fanny too is a wounded spirit, the only one of Jane Austen's heroines we have followed since her troubled childhood; we know her still to suffer acutely from fears and anxieties. Like Cowper, Fanny finds consolation in retreat to a space whose psychological significance we are now attuned to – a room of her own. Here she can read and write and think: in other words, attend to her inner life. Her possessions are few but imbued with great personal meaning:

She could scarcely see an object in that room which had not an interesting remembrance connected with it. – Every thing was a friend, or bore her thoughts to a friend...⁷

Her writing desk reminds us of Jane Austen's own treasured mahogany box, a present from her father. Fanny, far from feeling deprived or resentful at the luxuries allowed her cousins, draws enormous contentment from this modest room. Indeed Austen reinforces the theme of true domestic happiness in this novel by using the words 'comfort' and 'comfortable' some two hundred times.

But let us return to where we left off:

Every thing was a friend, or bore her thoughts to a friend; and though there had been sometimes much of suffering to her – though her motives had been often misunderstood, her feelings disregarded, and her comprehension undervalued; though she had known the pains of tyranny, of ridicule, and neglect, yet almost every recurrence of either had led to something consolatory; her Aunt Bertram had spoken for her, or Miss Lee had been encouraging, or what was yet more frequent or more dear – Edmund had been her champion and her friend; – he had supported her cause, or explained her meaning, he had

told her not to cry, or had given her some proof of affection which made her tears delightful – and the whole was now so blended together, so harmonized by distance, that every former affliction had its charm.⁸

It is a quite extraordinary sentence. Its length, with its gently oscillating thoughts, reflects Fanny's lengthy meditations on the meaning of suffering. Jane Austen well understood a child's vulnerability to pain. '... & yet one's heart aches for a dejected Mind of eight years old', she exclaimed in a letter of 1808 as she thought of a niece who had just lost her mother.⁹ But Austen also understood how seemingly minor knocks to a sensitive child can be experienced as deep wounds, as 'the pains of tyranny, of ridicule, and neglect'. Equally significant, however, is the very evident strength afforded to Fanny by her developing inner world. Her acute sensibility has allowed her to transform her suffering: 'almost every recurrence of either had led to something consolatory', 'and the whole was now so blended together, so harmonized by distance, that every former affliction had its charm.' She is able to recall the pleasure of feeling championed and comforted by one of the few guardian figures in the novel. For Fanny, who frequently feels invisible, these moments of being seen, of being cherished, are very dear indeed.

Fanny's finely tuned sensibility has enabled her to find a way to heal former wounds, although it cannot entirely protect from future ones, as Austen goes on to illustrate. By the time she began writing *Mansfield Park* in 1811, Austen's understanding of the true nature of sensibility had deepened from her earlier writing. In her boisterous juvenile fiction, fashionable sensibility was one of the main targets of her satire. In 'Amelia Webster', for example, George is suitably overwhelmed by the beauties of the eponymous heroine: 'I saw you thro' a telescope, and was so struck by your Charms that from that time to this I have not tasted human food.'¹⁰ Even *Sense and Sensibility* begins, at least, by inviting us to laugh at Marianne Dashwood's self-conscious displays of sensibility in the early scenes. It is she who uses her love of Cowper's poetry to condemn Edward Ferrars as an unworthy suitor for her sister.

'I could not be happy with a man whose taste did not in every point coincide with my own. He must enter into all my feelings; the same books, the same music must charm us both. Oh! mama, how spiritless, how tame was Edward's manner in reading to us last night ... I could hardly keep my seat.

To hear those beautiful lines which have frequently almost driven me wild, pronounced with such impenetrable calmness, such dreadful indifference!’ –

‘He would certainly have done more justice to simple and elegant prose. I thought so at the time; but you *would* give him Cowper.’

‘Nay, mama, if he is not to be animated by Cowper!’ –¹¹

But as the novel progresses it becomes a far more subtle reflection on different modes of sensibility. Elinor Dashwood’s dignified silence on her own sufferings shows them to be just as intense as Marianne’s. The popular novels of sensibility, however, placed strong emphasis on the *immediate* nature of feelings. No sooner had the man or woman of sensibility witnessed the suffering of some unfortunate than tears would course freely down their cheeks in sympathy. Marianne Dashwood can hardly keep her seat or her temper. A whole influential branch of social and political philosophy developed from the medical understanding of the responsiveness of the body’s nerves.

But what Jane Austen shows in Fanny Price’s mature reflections on her beloved possessions, is something more profound – the workings of a responsive sensibility over time. Even the modest furnishings of her room are invested by Fanny with value:

The room was most dear to her, and she would not have changed its furniture for the handsomest in the house, though what had been originally plain, had suffered all the ill-usage of children.¹²

Its ‘greatest elegancies and ornaments’ consist of ‘a faded footstool of Julia’s work, too ill done for the drawing room’ and ‘three transparencies, made in a rage for transparencies’, of Tintern Abbey, a moonlit lake in Cumberland and a cave in Italy. There is also a collection of family profiles ‘thought unworthy of being anywhere else’. Pride of place, however, goes to ‘a small sketch of a ship sent four years ago from the Mediterranean’ by her brother William, a midshipman, ‘with HMS Antwerp at the bottom, in letters as tall as the main-mast’.

But the particular moment when Jane Austen shows us Fanny’s room in such detail is one when Fanny is perplexed and troubled: ‘To this nest of comforts Fanny now walked down to try its influence on an agitated, doubting spirit’.¹³ It is here, with the image of a ‘nest of comforts’,

that we sense Austen consciously or unconsciously recalling a letter of Cowper's written to William Unwin on 30 April 1785:

Your mother and I walked yesterday in the Wilderness. As we entered the gate, a glimpse of something white, contained in a little hole in the gate-post, caught my eye. I looked again, and discovered a bird's nest, with two tiny eggs in it. By and by they will be fledged, and tailed, and get wing-feathers, and fly. My case is somewhat similar to that of the parent bird. My nest is in a little nook. Here I brood and hatch, and in due time my progeny takes wing and whistles.¹⁴

He will famously describe his 'nook' to Joseph Hill, 25 June 1785:

I write in a nook that I call my *Boudoir*. It is a summerhouse 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. It formerly served an apothecary, now dead, as a smoking-room; and under my feet is a trap-door, which once covered a hole in the ground, where he kept his bottles. At present, however, it is dedicated to sublimer uses. 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.... It is secure from all noise, and a refuge from all intrusion; for intruders sometimes trouble me in the winter evenings at Olney. But (thanks to my *Boudoir*!) I can now hide myself from them. A poet's retreat is sacred.¹⁵

We will not find it difficult to account for Jane Austen's liking for the miniature, familiar as we are with her remark about her 'little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory on which I work with so fine a Brush', although we should be aware of the ironic context of her comment – a jovial letter to a nephew on his aspirations to be a novelist.¹⁶

But why might she have been so attuned to Cowper's evocation of his little nook, where he can both take refuge and peep out at the world?

Jane Austen and melancholy

I think the answer lies in a full ten years of Jane Austen's life about which we know very little – the years between her father's announcement of his retirement as rector of Steventon, and the diminished family of Mrs Austen, Jane and Cassandra finding a permanent home at Chawton Cottage. Only a scattering of Austen's letters was preserved from this period, enough for us to be able to trace most of her movements. We know the family took a succession of lodgings in Bath from 1801

onwards; that some summers were spent at the seaside, others with relatives; that following the Rev George Austen's death in 1805, the family moved first to Clifton and then to Southampton to be nearer the two naval sons. Two years after this first move, she recalls the 'happy feelings of Escape!'.¹⁷ The house in Castle Square in Southampton feels more like a home; there is a garden which she energetically starts to plan. She insists on lilacs, and: 'I could not do without a Syringa, for the sake of Cowper's Line' adding 'We talk also of a Laburnum',¹⁸ referring to the lines in 'A Winter Walk at Noon', Book VI of *The Task*:

... Laburnum rich
In streaming gold; syringa iv'ry pure (149-150)

But the really telling thing about this extended period is that Jane Austen simply stops writing. She has been a writer since childhood, producing a series of brashly comic fragments, novels, plays and poetry, throughout her teenage years. In the early 1790s she completes 'Elinor and Marianne', and 'First Impressions' – which will not be published until 1811 and 1813 respectively under their new titles of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*. Later in the 1790s she wrote 'Susan' which would eventually become *Northanger Abbey*. But then she falls silent. She tries revising 'Susan' for publication in 1802 and starts, but abandons *The Watsons* in 1804.

The fact that she does not start writing again until the move to Chawton in 1809, and the speed with which she produces all her novels, revised and new, between then and her death in 1817, would suggest that this long period of effective homelessness had a crushing effect on her. It seems particularly striking that the first new novel she embarks on after this extended silence is *Mansfield Park*, a book which draws its emotional intensity from ideas of home and homelessness, of feeling an outsider, an exile. I believe Jane Austen experienced these silent years as, at least in part, a time of personal melancholy. She was probably never ill, prostrated with the sort of nerves that perpetually trouble Mrs Bennet. Rather, I think that internal evidence provided by her later novels, in particular *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*, strongly suggests she had no option but to choke back her own unhappiness. And in the background of her novels there is always the sense of insecurity, that a

death in the family may bring instant eviction from a family home. She may make fun of Mrs Bennet's perpetual fretting in *Pride and Prejudice* about the entailed estate – the death of Mr Bennet and their eviction by the usurping Mr Collins simply an unwittingly comic fantasy. But *Sense and Sensibility* opens with the devastating loss of the Dashwoods' family home; in *Emma*, ever since the loss of the rectory (now the home of the Eltons) following her husband's death, Mrs Bates and her daughter have lived in severely reduced circumstances; and Anne Elliot in *Persuasion* loses her family home for a different reason – the extravagances of her father that necessitate their having to rent out Kellynch.

'He that attends to his interior self'

It is telling, therefore, that 'home' for Fanny Price is a matter of very modest possessions. Austen mentions her pot of geraniums and shows us she is well supplied with books – she is currently reading a life of Lord Macartney and Crabbe's newly published *Tales* (1812).¹⁹ The presence of a copy of Samuel Johnson's *Idler* essays is a nod to Austen's favourite prose writer. This little collection gains in poignancy when we learn that the consequence of the Austens leaving Steventon Rectory was that everyone's books had to be sold. Not only did her father's considerable library have to go – his 500 volumes representing quite a collection for a financially encumbered rector and father of eight – but Jane Austen's own collection of books went too. Clothes can be transported from one place of lodging to another, but the Austens evidently were not to be burdened in their new itinerant life with their books. Jane Austen's piano, too, had to be left behind. Her writing desk assumes even greater importance when we see how very little she then possessed.

It is significant therefore that Austen emphasises the central place of books in Fanny's life, going as far as to name those currently on her desk. This is unusual for Austen. Some of her heroines are great readers – Mr Darcy's veiled compliment to Elizabeth Bennet implies that she improves her mind by extensive reading; some are not – Mr Knightley knows Emma has been making lists of edifying books since she was twelve but never had the staying power required to read them. Austen rarely *names* books or authors, however. So Fanny's choice of serious historical biography, contemporary (if uncontroversial) poetry,

and edifying, entertaining prose, with no mention of novels, signals both Fanny's intelligence and her intellectual curiosity. But it is more than this. Here, as never before in Austen, books are emblems of Fanny's rich inner life.

Again we can see the influence of Cowper. Today we have no difficulty imagining a writer retiring to some secluded cottage in order to write. But in Cowper's day literary life happened predominantly in London, the centre for booksellers and publishers, for reviewers and critics. There was a flourishing of literary circles – Dr Johnson founded the Literary Club and even the shy Cowper enjoyed the Nonsense Club. For Cowper to make a deliberate decision to leave the metropolis for a life of permanent rural retirement was certainly unusual. All the more surprising was it, therefore, that it was only at the age of sixty that he found literary success with *Poems* in 1782 and *The Task* in 1785. The poet whom Jane Austen heard read aloud since childhood (she turned ten in 1785) was a new, fresh voice. Cowper fully understood his originality, writing to William Unwin in 1784,

My descriptions are all from nature: not one of them second-hand. My delineations of the heart are from my own experience: not one of them borrowed from books....²⁰

It is revealing, I think, that both Jane Austen's favourite writers, Johnson and Cowper, were melancholics. Although biographical details of the extent of their personal sufferings would not emerge until after their deaths in 1784 and 1800 respectively, the melancholic sensibility of each was clear in their published writings. For both, their principal concern was human suffering. It is the focus of some of Johnson's most profound *Rambler* essays. 'The sharpest and most melting sorrow,' he writes in *Rambler* 17, 'arises from the loss of those whom we have loved with tenderness', adding 'friendship between mortals can be contracted on no other terms, than that one must sometime mourn for the other's death'. *Rambler* 47 again addresses the theme:

But for sorrow there is no remedy provided by nature ... it requires what it cannot hope, that the laws of the universe should be repealed; that the dead should return, or the past should be recalled.

We know she read Cowper's 1782 *Poems* from her breezy declaration that she is 'Mistress of all I survey' in 1813 as she enjoys the splendours of her brother's Godmersham library, an allusion, of course, to 'Verses, supposed to be written by Alexander Selkirk'.²¹ But she would also have known his reference in 'Retirement' to melancholy being the malady that 'claims most compassion, and receives the least'(302) and his telling lines:

But, with a soul that ever felt the sting
Of sorrow, sorrow is a sacred thing. (315-6)

She would, of course, have been familiar with the most poignant autobiographical passages in *The Task*. But there are other quiet moments in that poem which seem also to have shaped her thinking. Let us take Cowper's important articulation of the importance of the inner life from Book III:

He that attends to his interior self,
That has a heart, and keeps it; has a mind
That hungers, and supplies it; and who seeks
A social, not a dissipated life,
Has business; feels himself engag'd t'achieve
No unimportant, though a silent task. (373-8)

The heroines of both *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*, Jane Austen's later novels, are unusual in being introverted young women. The attention each pays to her inner life, her 'interior self', gives each an exceptional depth. With this depth, of course, comes the capacity for suffering, but also for intense if quiet joy. We note that Austen writes of Fanny late in the novel:

but her happiness was of a quiet, deep, heart-swelling sort; and though never a great talker, she was always more inclined to silence when feeling most strongly.²²

Cowper's poetry would have demonstrated to Jane Austen that it was possible to have a vivid inner life while living in seclusion. She would have seen too that this inner life could be outward-looking, fully engaged from within 'the loop-holes of retreat' with the exterior world.²³ The range of topics Cowper addressed was wide – contemporary British

politics, war with the Americans and their European allies, the slave trade, the Gordon Riots, hunting, education, enclosure, earthquakes.

She would have been drawn, as Coleridge was, by Cowper's celebration of the simple delights of home on a wintry night, the 'fireside enjoyments, home-born happiness', the hours 'Of long uninterrupted ev'ning' while outside the frost rages abroad.²⁴ It is an evocation of hearth and home that has yet to be subsumed into an ideology of family life by the Victorians. What Cowper is rejoicing in is a sort of delicious solitude.

Jane Austen's letters reveal her own love of solitude – either of quiet companionship, or the rare treat of having a room all to herself. 'To sit in idleness over a good fire in a well-proportioned room is a luxurious sensation', she wrote to her sister Cassandra in 1800, adding 'Sometimes we talked & sometimes we were quite silent'. Some years later, staying at her brother's at Godmersham, we see her snatching half an hour to write to Cassandra, sketching herself as 'Very snug, in my own room, lovely morn'g., excellent fire, fancy me'. On a wet day in the summer of 1809 she reported: 'I am moved down into the Library for the sake of a fire which agreeably surprised us ... & here in warm and happy solitude proceed to acknowledge this day's Letter'.²⁵

Happy solitude beside a fire! It is all the more evocative, therefore, later in *Mansfield Park* when Sir Thomas Bertram discovers that Fanny has never been allowed a fire in her room. As so often in this most subtle of novels, the interior drama for Fanny is painfully complex, but cannot be explained to anyone else. Sir Thomas for the very first time has sought out Fanny in her domain. He has come to put well-meaning pressure on her to accept Henry Crawford's offer of marriage. Fanny has had abundant evidence of the impulsive immorality underlying Henry's exterior charm. But even her champion Edmund is blinded by his infatuation for Mary Crawford, Henry's sister. And to no one – not even to herself – can she fully confess her feelings for Edmund. Sir Thomas briefly considers and immediately rejects the idea that this might underlie Fanny's inexplicable reluctance to encourage Henry Crawford: 'It is hardly possible that your affections –' he begins, before dismissing the notion: 'No, No, I know *that* is quite out of the question'. As readers we feel the blow of this callous dismissal. And worse is to follow when

Sir Thomas becomes angry with Fanny: ‘You do not owe me the duty of a child. But Fanny, if your heart can acquit you of *ingratitude* –’. The scene ends with Fanny in tears with ‘no one to take her part’.²⁶

What are her feelings, then, when despite his evident displeasure, Sir Thomas has ordered a fire to be lit in Fanny’s room, its symbolic warmth now compromised by Fanny’s painful feelings of being misunderstood?

Where Cowper’s influence might be behind Jane Austen’s symbolic use of the lit fire – Fanny is being newly cherished by the family – it can also be seen in the novel’s sharply satirical commentary on the new eighteenth-century craze amongst the gentry for ‘improving’ their houses and estates. As Maria Bertram approaches twenty-one, she eyes up her prospects. Marriage to the stolid Mr Rushworth ‘would give her the enjoyment of a larger income than her father’s’, a house in town, and the fine country estate of Sotherton.²⁷ At the same time Mansfield welcomes the eligible siblings, Henry and Mary Crawford. The ensuing discussion about Sotherton, its house and grounds, is full of subtle clues.

Rushworth only has to see how a friend, the owner of Compton, has ‘had his grounds laid out by an improver’ to feel Sotherton looks like a prison, despite its seven hundred acres. His impulsive decision to have a particular avenue of oaks cut down to improve the ‘prospect’ famously emboldens Fanny’s response already quoted.²⁸

Mary Crawford, meanwhile, assesses the eligibility of Tom Bertram purely in terms of his property:

... he and his situation might do. She looked about her with due consideration, and found almost every thing in his favour, a park, a real park five miles round, a spacious modern-built house, so well placed and well screened as to deserve to be in any collection of engravings of gentlemen’s seats in the kingdom, and only wanting to be completely new furnished It might do very well; she believed she should accept him. ²⁹

Henry Crawford, we are told, has a ‘great dislike’ to ‘anything like a permanence of abode, or limitation of society.’³⁰ But later in the novel, with his new project of making Fanny fall in love with him, he tells the assembled company of accidentally coming across Thornton Lacey, Edmund’s future living. The parsonage, he decides ‘is by no means bad’, but it must be improved: ‘the house must be turned to front the east

instead of the north' and 'some very pretty meadows' must be bought so that they can form a new garden. Even when Edmund politely states that the house and grounds can be 'made comfortable' without any major changes, Henry persists.³¹ Edmund must transform the parsonage. It is unstylish, merely

a solid walled, roomy, mansion-like looking house, such as one might suppose a respectable old country family had lived in from generation to generation, through two centuries at least –

We are alert to Henry's dismissive tone: with very little effort it might become 'a gentleman's residence'. But Edmund should set his sights higher, Henry insists: 'you may raise it into a *place*'. We note the fashionable 'place', a term which robs the house of any home-like qualities.

Ever chameleon-like, Henry suddenly decides he wants to rent Thornton Lacey himself, so he can come up from London and hunt. He has, he announces, 'set his heart upon ... a little homestall –'.³² The resonance of the unusual word 'homestall' becomes evident when we realise Austen found it in *The Task*. The context redoubles her comic irony, for Cowper is writing about Omai, the Tahitian brought to England by Captain Cook in 1774. Cowper imagines Omai's return to Tahiti in 1776:

...thou hast found again,
Thy cocoas and bananas, palms and yams,
And homestall thatch'd with leaves. (I. 639-41)

'But hast thou found/ Their former charms ...?' Cowper asks. In the ensuing passage he meditates on home and homesickness. He imagines Omai, after his period of celebrity in London, no longer at home in Tahiti:

Methinks I see thee straying on the beach,
And asking of the surge that bathes thy foot
If ever it has wash'd our distant shore. (654-56)

Jane Austen, in other words, not only uses Cowper's 'homestall' to reinforce Henry Crawford's shallowness, but as another subtle reflection on home and homelessness. So too would she have known Cowper's powerful satire on the period's relentless drive for 'improvement' – 'the

idol of the age’ – and the glib readiness to swap one house for another, the embodiment of which was Capability Brown:

He speaks. The lake in front becomes a lawn,
Woods vanish, hills subside, and vallies rise,
And streams as if created for his use,
Pursue the track of his directing wand
Sinuous or straight, now rapid and now slow,
Now murm’ring soft, now roaring in cascades
Ev’n as he bids. (*The Task*, III. 774-780)

I will not develop here *Mansfield Park*’s masterfully comic scene set in the Sotherton’s ‘wilderness’, with its symbolically locked gate, as this has been the focus of many insightful readings. I want instead to pursue Austen’s profound understanding of the significance of home and the ways in which she draws on Cowper’s reflections on the importance of the familiar landscape, and of a home imbued with memories.

‘As if to be home again’

In less psychologically acute novels, a heroine’s separation from her family at a young age might be no more than a convenient plot device. But in the final third of *Mansfield Park* Jane Austen develops the theme of home and homelessness with extraordinary insight, clearly influenced by her reading of Cowper. For the eighteen-year-old Fanny time has not dulled her feelings. Instead she has cherished an image of home that has become increasingly idealised. When Sir Thomas Bertram suggests she spend two months with her family, she is delighted. But she is unaware that his underlying motive is to make her reconsider Henry Crawford’s unwelcome proposal of marriage. For Fanny, the offer seems wholly benevolent, and her joy in it releases long suppressed feelings:

The remembrance of all her earliest pleasures, and of what she had suffered in being torn from them, came over her with renewed strength, and it seemed as if to be home again would heal every pain that had since grown out of separation.³³

With that phrase – ‘as if to be home again’ – Austen quietly reveals the pathos of Fanny’s feelings. After nearly ten years, we realise, Fanny still feels she is not at home in Mansfield and remains unvalued. Her

reflection immediately afterwards evokes the dream of home that she has cherished:

To be in the centre of such a circle, loved by so many, and more loved by all than she had ever been before, to feel affection without fear or restraint, to feel herself the equal of those who surrounded her ... This was a prospect to be dwelt on with a fondness that could be but half acknowledged.³⁴

Austen shows the damage done to Fanny's sense of worth. She has evidently rationalised the silence from her birth family as being her own fault:

She had probably alienated Love by the helplessness and fretfulness of a fearful temper, or been unreasonable in wanting a larger share than any one among so many could deserve.³⁵

The bitter irony for Fanny is that her childhood home – her parents and siblings in Portsmouth – is nothing like the idealised circle of which she had dreamt. The squalid house, the loud, drunken father, negligent mother and squabbling siblings, the youngest forever 'chasing each other up and down stairs, and tumbling about and hallooing', come as a rude shock. Left alone in the company of her father, absorbed in a newspaper and ignoring her, Fanny's distress is evident in her broken thoughts: 'She was at home. But alas! It was not such a home, she had not such a welcome, as -- she checked herself; she was unreasonable. What right had she to be of importance to her family?' Once again, Fanny finds herself virtually invisible.³⁶

Fanny's unhappiness intensifies over the weeks as no news comes from Mansfield. She begins to fear that she has been forgotten. A further dread is her expectation of hearing that Edmund has married Mary Crawford. Then Edmund writes of his painful discovery of a certain shallow worldliness in Mary, but that he continues to hope that away from the influence of her London friends she may still agree to marry him. His misery allows him to articulate his feelings towards Fanny – not yet feelings of romantic passion – but a deep fraternal love which Fanny has long craved. And more than this, he expresses the need he and his parents have for Fanny to return:

You are very much wanted. I miss you more than I can express. My mother desires her best love, and hopes to hear from you soon. She talks of you

almost every hour, and I am sorry to find how many weeks more she is likely to be without you. My Father means to fetch you himself, but it will not be till after Easter, when he has business in town. You are happy at Portsmouth, I hope, but this must not be a yearly visit. I want you at home, that I may have your opinion about Thornton Lacey.³⁷

Half hidden in this request for advice on his future home is what is possibly *Mansfield Park*'s most touching line: '*I want you at home*'.

Shortly afterwards Tom Bertram's serious illness moves the normally indolent Lady Bertram to write directly to Fanny 'how glad I should be, if you were here to comfort me.'³⁸ But Easter comes and goes and still Fanny is not sent for. Her private suffering is intense:

... it was a cruel, a terrible delay to her. The end of April was coming on; it would soon be almost three months instead of two that she had been absent from them all, and that her days had been passing in a state of penance...³⁹

Her eagerness, her impatience, her longings to be with them, were such as to bring a line or two of Cowper's 'Tirocinium' for ever before her. 'With what intense desire she wants her home', was continually on her tongue, as the truest description of a yearning which she could not suppose any schoolboy's bosom to feel more keenly.⁴⁰

The fact that, at the painful crisis of the novel, Fanny turns to Cowper and to this particular poem is highly significant. Events have caused all the central characters to focus on what home really means to them. Maria, unknown to her family, is about to abandon her stifling marital home, while illness has made Tom Bertram newly appreciate Mansfield. Edmund continues to agonise over Mary Crawford, knowing that a country parsonage has little appeal to her. Meanwhile Mary, disturbingly, calculates that Tom Bertram's death would mean Edmund's becoming heir to Mansfield, making him a vastly improved prospective suitor. Meanwhile both Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram discover Mansfield is not home without the comforting presence of Fanny.

We have already considered the powerful psychological influence on Jane Austen of finally acquiring a permanent home in 1809. Those of us who, like her, love William Cowper's poetry will be fully aware of the deep emotional attachment he had throughout his life to the idea of home. Austen would have read Cowper's moving poem about receiving his mother's portrait, the gift of which unleashes an intense flood of

memories of his boyhood and in particular the death of his mother. We will also have read *Adelphi*, Cowper's spiritual autobiography, as Austen probably had not, with its painful evocation of the bullying he experienced as a young boy at Westminster School.

His feelings give particular intensity to 'Tirocinium'. Addressed to his friend William Unwin, the poem is a stern indictment of boarding schools. Separating father and child will, Cowper writes, 'lac'rate both your heart and his!' (558). He strongly recommends that Unwin tutor his two young sons at home, painting a picture of a homesick boy at boarding school, sadly marking off the days till the holidays:

Th' indented stick, that loses day by day,
Notch after notch, till all are smooth'd away,
Bears witness, long ere his dismissal come,
With what intense desire he wants his home. (559-62)

Jane Austen suggests that Fanny has taken the line deeply to heart. And the poem's influence continues to be felt in what follows. For there is further pain awaiting Fanny on returning home, as there is for Cowper's schoolboy. 'A disappointment waits him even there', Cowper writes:

Arrived, he feels an unexpected change;
He blushes, hangs his head, is shy and strange,
No longer takes, as once, with fearless ease,
His fav'rite stand between his father's knees,
But seeks the corner of some distant seat,
And eyes the door, and watches a retreat,
And, least familiar where he should be most,
Feels all his happiest privileges lost.
Alas, poor boy!—the natural effect
Of love by absence chill'd into respect. (566-76)

And here is Fanny experiencing the same disappointment:

When she had been coming to Portsmouth, she had loved to call it her home, had been fond of saying that she was going home; the word had been very dear to her; and so it still was, but it must be applied to Mansfield. *That* was now the home. Portsmouth was Portsmouth; Mansfield was home.⁴¹

Fanny, of course, will be rewarded with a true home – first at Mansfield Park itself and then at Mansfield's parsonage as Edmund's wife. But Jane Austen herself has found a new happiness, not in a sudden *coup*

de foudre of romantic love, but in a Cowperian vision of quiet domestic happiness. Comfortable and content at Chawton for what would be the remainder of her short life, she could echo Cowper's line 'Domestic happiness, thou only bliss', and share his vision of the secret of that happiness:

Friends, books, a garden, and perhaps his pen,
Delightful industry enjoy'd at home...⁴²

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Notes

¹ *Mansfield Park*, p.10, ch.1

² Ibid. p.23, ch.3

³ Ibid. p.48, ch.6; Fanny quotes from *The Task*, l.338-9

⁴ Ibid. p.126, ch.16

⁵ Ibid. p.126, ch.16

⁶ Cowper, Letter to William Bull, 3 August 1784; Letter to Lady Hesketh, 10 Nov. 1787

⁷ *Mansfield Park*, p.126, ch.16

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Jane Austen, Letter to Cassandra Austen, 15-16 Oct 1808.

- ¹⁰ *Juvenilia*, pp.59-60.
- ¹¹ *Sense and Sensibility*, p.19, ch.3
- ¹² *Mansfield Park*, pp.126-7, ch.16
- ¹³ *Ibid.* p.127, ch.16
- ¹⁴ Cowper, Letter to William Unwin, 30 April 1785
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Letter to Joseph Hill, 25 June 1785
- ¹⁶ Jane Austen, Letter to James Edward Austen, 16-17 Dec. 1816
- ¹⁷ Jane Austen, Letter to Cassandra Austen, 30 June-1 July 1808
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.* Letter to Cassandra, 8-9 Feb. 1807
- ¹⁹ *Mansfield Park*, p.130, ch.16
- ²⁰ Cowper, Letter to William Unwin, 10 Oct. 1784
- ²¹ Jane Austen, Letter to Cassandra Austen, 23-24 Oct. 1813
- ²² *Mansfield Park*, p.306, ch.37
- ²³ *The Task*, IV.88
- ²⁴ *The Task*, IV.140, 142, 309.
- ²⁵ Jane Austen, Letters to Cassandra, 8-9 Nov. 1800, 6-7 Nov.1813, 30 June – 1 July 1809
- ²⁶ *Mansfield Park*, pp.261, 263, 265, ch.32
- ²⁷ *Ibid.* p.34, ch.4
- ²⁸ *Ibid.* p.45, ch.6
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- ³⁶ *Ibid.* p.317, ch.38
- ³⁷ *Ibid.* p.347, ch.44
- ³⁸ *Ibid.* p.349, ch.44
- ³⁹ *Ibid.* p.352, ch.45
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p.353. ch.45
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.* p.353, ch.45.
- ⁴² *The Task*, III.41, 355-6

Sam Roberts of Weston, Cowper's 'faithful attendant'

James Brannan

While researching family history in the 1980s, I made the interesting discovery that Samuel Roberts, often referred to merely as 'Sam', Cowper's lackey or factotum, was a direct ancestor of mine. His son John James Roberts, a carpenter, married Elizabeth Robinson, from a local Baptist family; their son William Robinson Roberts, who moved from Olney to Ampthill, was my great-great-grandfather. I traced Sam's will and saw that his date of death corresponded to that given in Thomas Wright's biography of Cowper; Wright also notes that Sam was buried near the tower and porch of Weston Underwood church¹. The stone, which once bore an inscription reading 'for many years a faithfull attendant of the poet Cowper'², has either been removed or has become illegible. Based on Sam's age at his death I found a suitable baptism in the Weston register for 1754: son of Edward Roberts, a parish clerk. Sam's mother was Susan(na), née Scrigginton, probably his father's second wife (married in Olney 1749). I also found Sam's marriage in 1781³ to Ann Wheeler, referred to by Cowper as 'Nanny'. The Wheelers were a Roman Catholic family of Weston Underwood and Ann was christened at the Throckmortons' chapel in 1758⁴.

In view of the fact that Sam appeared to have originated from Weston, I found it surprising that, according to many of Cowper's biographers, he had supposedly been brought by the poet from Dr Cotton's asylum in St Alban's, where he had already been working as a servant. Thomas Wright seems to have been the first biographer (1892) to develop this story in detail, namely that Sam Roberts had attended to Cowper at the asylum and was taken from there to Huntingdon together with the boy Dick Coleman⁵. While in Huntingdon, Cowper certainly kept a servant as well as maintaining Coleman⁶, but there is no proof from his own words that the servant in question was Sam. Wright assumes that Cowper is referring to Sam in a number of early letters and in the autobiographical memoir about his early life, but Sam is not named by the poet himself as his lackey until much later; and when he is mentioned by name, Cowper never says that Sam was the servant from St Alban's. Wright was writing

almost a century after Cowper's death and his assumption about Sam's origin has since been reiterated in a significant number of works. Curry's recent biography is no exception; he writes that when Cowper left the asylum '[h]e took with him as his personal valet one of Dr Cotton's servants, Sam Roberts, who had been attending to him'⁷.

However, nearly all nineteenth-century biographies of Cowper do not make the same assumption about Sam, who is not mentioned as having been brought from St Alban's by Corry in his 1803 *Life*, by Taylor in his 1833 biography, or by Southey in his seminal work of 1835-7. More importantly, no such indication is given by those writers who would have known Sam personally: John Johnson, neither in his 'Sketch' of Cowper's life (in *Poems*, volume 3, 1815) nor in his volumes of *Letters* (1817 etc.); William Hayley, neither in his *Life and Posthumous Writings* of Cowper (1803 etc.), nor in his own writings⁸; or Rev. S. Greatheed in *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Cowper* (1814). It is true, however, that a later edition of Hayley's *Works of William Cowper*, edited by Rev. Grimshawe and published in 1835 (after Sam's death) does give such an indication. Under the passage from Cowper's memoir of his early life (written shortly after moving in with the Unwins in Huntingdon in November 1765) reading 'the man, whom I have ever since retained in my service, expressed great joy on the occasion', referring to a servant who had witnessed his recovery at the asylum, Grimshawe inserted the footnote 'Samuel Roberts'⁹. He may have been misinformed about the servant's identity or, being known for his incompetence, perhaps merely jumped to a conclusion¹⁰. Southey does not include such a footnote in connection with the same passage¹¹. Later in that autobiographical memoir, writing about his move to Cambridge, Cowper mentions the servant again, saying that '[h]e had maintained such an affectionate watchfulness over me ... that I could not bear to leave him behind, though it was with some difficulty that the doctor was prevailed on to part with him'¹². The man had only recently entered into Dr Cotton's service 'just time enough to be appointed to attend me', and Cowper adds 'I have strong grounds to hope that God will make me of use as an instrument in His hands of bringing him to the knowledge of Jesus' (a conversion to which he later refers). The same man is mentioned once more in a letter from Huntingdon to Joseph Hill (24 June 1765): 'I am

not quite alone, having brought a Servant with me from St Albans, who is the very Mirrour of Fidelity and Affection for his Master. ... Men do not usually bestow these Encomiums upon their Lacqueys, nor do they usually deserve them, but I have had Experience of mine both in Sickness and Health and never saw his Fellow'. In a subsequent letter to Hill from Huntingdon (12 November 1766), Cowper writes about the boy Dick Coleman as follows: 'He will be about Nine Years of Age when my Man leaves me, at which time I think of taking him into my Service ... This though not so cheap a way as keeping no Servant, will yet be a considerable Saving to me, for I shall have but one to maintain instead of two'. One further reference by Cowper to the servant in question, again without naming him, can be found in a letter written shortly after his arrival in Olney: 'The Man Servant you may remember is the same that attended me at St Albans'¹³.

It can be presumed that the servant from the asylum subsequently left Cowper's service – as foreseen in the letter to Hill – and that Dick Coleman, who lived at Orchard Side, was one of those who served the poet in Olney. In his 1803 biography Corry wrote that at Olney Cowper and Mrs Unwin 'kept only one maid servant, a gardener, and a footman'¹⁴, perhaps in addition to Coleman. Cowper mentioned a number of successive servants in his letters, not all by name: for example, in 1782, he referred to a former servant who was then living at Northampton¹⁵. Whilst he clearly appreciated some of those who worked for him, he could be rather demanding. He dismissed a maid shortly after arriving in Olney and had difficulty finding a suitable one locally; her replacement sent by Mrs Madan was not satisfactory either¹⁶. In 1771 he complained to Hill about a 'blundering Servant' who had packaged the wrong piece of venison¹⁷. Cowper also dismissed, 'for manifold good Causes', a gardener called Darlin, who was replaced by William Kitchener ('Kitch'), described as an Olney pauper who would cost one fourth of Darlin's wage¹⁸. Writing to Newton in that connection, Cowper laments '... for Man Servant in future we are resolved to have none, having found those Gentry in Every Instance Expensive, and for the most part, worse than Useless'. Kitchener, although berated by Cowper for his lack of intelligence¹⁹, worked for the poet until at least 1792, performing various tasks such as carrying messages to Weston from Olney, where he

apparently continued to live²⁰. While at Weston, Cowper was unhappy with an unnamed incompetent labourer – presumably not ‘Kitch’ – who had been employed to transplant some laurels²¹.

It is thus submitted that Sam Roberts did not enter Cowper’s service until after the move to The Lodge at Weston Underwood in November 1786. This would mean that Grimshawe – in his footnote – then Wright, and many subsequent twentieth-century biographers, have been wrong about Sam’s background. It is not until a letter of 4 September 1787 to Lady Hesketh, from Weston, that we find the first mention of Sam by Cowper himself. It reads: ‘Sam our lacquey, and Molly [Peers] our Cook are never heard but when they answer a question. Sam’s Wife, by the way, has long been engaged to officiate in the Scullery while you shall be with us, and she is the very counterpart of her husband for quietness and sobriety’. A subsequent letter of 7 February 1788 records that ‘our lacquey’ is the ‘clerk of the parish’ (of Weston Underwood), while an earlier letter of 11 December 1786, also to Lady Hesketh, had stated ‘the clerk of the parish has made a new pair of straps to my buckles’. Wright, and later King and Ryskamp, in their corresponding footnotes, assume that this earlier ‘clerk’ already refers to Sam; by describing him merely as ‘clerk’, shortly after his arrival at Weston, Cowper implies that he had only recently begun to employ the man who was to become his new servant. If Sam had been in Cowper’s service since St Alban’s it would also be rather strange for him to be described in this manner to Lady Hesketh.

There is little doubt that Sam Roberts was a local man and St Alban’s was far enough away from Weston to make his service there, at a very early age, rather implausible. In 1764/5 Sam would have been aged only about 10 or 11, so hardly a ‘man’ at that time. Moreover, it would have been a coincidence for Cowper to have taken him back to his place of origin (without even a mention in the letters). In fact Sam had already married in Weston and his first three children had been christened there while Cowper was still in Olney. Sam had witnessed a number of marriages in the Weston register, presumably as parish clerk, going back to 1776. It is possible that Cowper came into contact with Sam through the Throckmortons, his wife’s family being Roman Catholic. Samuel Teedon indicates that Sam’s mother also served the Cowper-

Unwin household in Weston; in his diary for 8 April 1792 he writes: 'Mrs Roberts came with an invitation for me to dine with Madam tomorrow. She drank tea with us. Sam's mother not his wife'²². Lady Hesketh also refers in 1799 to some money she owes to Sam's 'mother and aunt'²³, who would have been elderly by that time. While still in Olney Cowper refers to a Susan Roberts, who could be Sam's mother, as being very ill but recovering²⁴.

There are various references to Sam Roberts in Cowper's letters during the Weston years, portraying him as a man of some intelligence and a true factotum, rendering diverse services to his master. The Roberts family apparently continued to live in their own house rather than moving into The Lodge. Cowper writes on 4 September 1787: 'Our Servant sleeps always at his own house'. Teedon mentions that his cousins visited Sam's house in Weston and informed him who was preaching that evening in Olney²⁵. The maid Molly Peers and her daughter also lived in Sam's house at one point²⁶. Cowper's letters tell us much about his day-to-day life and a number of anecdotal accounts concern Sam, sometimes just incidentally, such as when he ushered in visitors, for example, a parish clerk from Northampton²⁷. On one occasion Sam tried to prevent a Quaker preacher from seeing Cowper, having instructions not to admit anybody²⁸. Teedon seems to have appreciated Sam, who would visit him in Olney and take his letters to Cowper; however, on one occasion the schoolmaster was upset to find that his letter had not been delivered²⁹. Sam also delivered some of the poet's letters to Teedon.

An insight into Sam's role is provided by the writings of John Johnson, whose first meeting with Cowper in 1790 was described in a poem written 40 years later entitled 'Recollections of Cowper'³⁰. The day after Johnson arrived in Olney, Cowper sent Sam to conduct him to the Lodge³¹. Sam is portrayed in the account as the poet's valet, engaged in menial tasks such as bringing his master's walking shoes and closing the shutters as dinner was served, Cowper being 'careful not to tantalise the eye of his necessitous neighbours'. Johnson also describes the Sunday evening service at Weston church, where Sam, as parish clerk, 'pitched the psalm'.

In some of Cowper's anecdotes Sam plays a prominent and sometimes amusing role: in 1789 he was sent to Gayhurst to bring back Cowper's

spaniel Beau³², and in 1791 to Woburn to enquire about the shortcomings of one of Lady Hesketh's servants³³. When the innkeeper there found out that he was Cowper's servant, Sam was given a free breakfast! In several letters of 1792-3 Cowper mentions that Sam has been helping to carry or support Mrs Unwin after her second stroke³⁴. In a letter to Hayley of 20 January 1793 Cowper relates how 'Samuel with his cheerful countenance appear'd at the study-door, and with a voice as cheerful as his looks, exclaim'd – Mr. Hayley is come, Madam!'. It was a disappointment, to Mrs Unwin in particular, to discover that he was announcing the delivery of Hayley's portrait, not the arrival of the man himself. In 1793³⁵ Sam and a carpenter, putting their 'foolish noddle[s]' together, built Cowper a 'shed' (or arbour) in the 'shrubbery' at Weston and it turned out to be more elaborate than the basic structure Cowper had foreseen, 'a thing fit for Stow-gardens', thus prompting Cowper's proposed inscription (in the place of another verse he had 'designed for a hermitage'³⁶):

Beware of building. I intended
Rough logs and thatch, and thus it ended.

Mrs Unwin persuaded Cowper not to 'break Sam's heart' by his reproach, however poetical. Shortly afterwards, during an after-dinner walk with Mrs Unwin³⁷, Cowper discovered a sundial 'mounted on a smart stone pedestal'. Cowper had suspected Sam 'this Fac Totum of mine' of being responsible for placing it there, having often heard his master deplore the absence of one, but Sam was then forced to tell him that it was a surprise gift from John Johnson.

Nanny (Ann) Roberts is described in 1792³⁸ as 'Cook and House-keeper', replacing Molly Peers due to ill-health³⁹. 'Sam's wife shall be paid' writes Cowper on 21 July 1792. Cowper refers to a visit by Sam and his wife to an 'uncle from whom they have expectations' in Stowe⁴⁰. Nanny is complimented by the poet for bringing Mrs Unwin her shoes but reproached for breaking a bottle of 'good liquor'⁴¹! The Roberts children are also mentioned a couple of times in Cowper's letters: he reports that Sam's 'eldest boy' died of the smallpox in 1787⁴², with two other children suffering from the disease; and some time later that one of Sam's sons 'bow'd' in front of Abbott's portrait of the poet⁴³.

Sam's sister-in-law, Susan(na) Wheeler (b. 1776), also known as 'Sukey', was another servant of Cowper. A piece of lace made by her is on display in the Cowper and Newton Museum, and the handwritten inscription states that she ('Cowper's servant who lived with him at Weston') was 'Susan' the 'chambermaid' who inadvertently shut up Cowper's cat in a drawer, as related in the poem 'The Retired Cat'⁴⁴.

In 1792 Cowper and Mrs Unwin, accompanied by John Johnson, visited Hayley in Eartham, Sussex, and decided to take Sam and Nanny with them. When planning the trip, Cowper reassured Hayley that only one bed would be necessary for the couple, 'being one flesh', and justified Sam's presence by his usefulness⁴⁵. Nanny was supposed to 'jog thither in the stage' with Johnson, rather than travelling with Cowper, Mrs Unwin and Sam, who would be 'more useful by the way'⁴⁶ than Johnny. However, a subsequent letter from Johnson⁴⁷ reported that all five of them (plus Beau, the dog) had, in the end, ridden to Eartham in the same coach, with Sam on the 'Box'. According to Johnson, Cowper was later to regret taking the servants to Eartham. In a letter to his sister⁴⁸ describing the journey home, Johnson complained that they had doubled the cost of the trip for Cowper, adding: 'He is however resolved to take them no more, as he found them only an incumbrance – and I am glad his eyes are open on that subject'. Johnson also remarked that the couple had felt 'starved' in Eartham in comparison with Weston where they were 'used to stuff their guts with every thing that they could wish'⁴⁹! Johnson was beginning to express a concern that Sam and Nanny were too expensive for Cowper and were perhaps taking advantage of his generosity; the poet, however, never complained in his letters that they had not served him well.

A few years later neither Cowper nor Johnson appeared to question the idea of taking Sam and Nanny on the next trip, this time to Norfolk, and Nanny's sister Sukey joined them. According to his 'Memoir of Cowper'⁵⁰, Johnson himself had the sudden idea of taking Cowper and Mrs Unwin to a 'Summer's residence by the sea-side' and when he mentioned it to Lady Hesketh she was of the same opinion⁵¹. There is little doubt, however, that Lady Hesketh was the driving force behind the move and saw it as a more permanent solution for Cowper⁵², although it was not presented as such to the poet⁵³. John Johnson speaks as follows

about the arrangements foreseen for the servants in Norfolk, in a letter to his sister of 10 July 1795⁵⁴:

In your room will sleep the old Lady [Mrs Unwin], because of the fire place – and upon a bed in one corner of it, our Sally and Sukey Wheeler must sleep ... In the ligh Closet will be Nanny Roberts. Our dear Cousin will be in my room, and upon a small bed in the same room will be Samuel Roberts, who is quite a treasure for his excellent behaviour to our dear Cousin.

Ultimately they all left Weston (Sukey travelled separately⁵⁵) on 28 July 1795, stopping the first night at Eaton and the second at Barton Mills. In Norfolk they stayed first at the Vicarage at North Tuddenham.

Sam Roberts thus continued to serve Cowper in Norfolk⁵⁶ and his presence was clearly appreciated by John Johnson, at least initially. Johnson records in his diary that he spent part of the journey from Weston talking ‘incessantly’ to Sam, who was in the same Post Chaise with Cowper and himself, in order to ‘divert [Cowper’s] thoughts as much as possible’⁵⁷. It must also have been comforting for the poet to maintain the connection with Weston through the presence of Sam, Nanny and Sukey, who remained with him during his stay in Mundesley from 19 August until early October 1795. Sam reassured Cowper that he would visit his ‘beloved’ Weston again⁵⁸, but of course he never did. Sam notably accompanied his master and Johnson on a visit to Happisburgh (31 August), going up the lighthouse with Johnson and reporting back to Cowper what he had seen. In September, when Johnson had found a house for Cowper and Mrs Unwin, Dunham Lodge, he discussed the subject of the servants with Lady Hesketh, who felt it was best to send ‘all the Wheeler crew away’⁵⁹, for financial reasons (she had been concerned for some time about the expense of ‘ye swarms who lived in [Cowper’s] kitchen’⁶⁰) but also because in her view they had too much influence in the household. Lady Hesketh’s harshest criticism can be found in a letter of 13 September 1795 to John Johnson⁶¹; she describes the Weston servants, and ‘the female ones particularly’, as ‘non-descripts’, but with the ‘Reins of Government’ in their hands. She did not categorically reject Sam, however, remarking:

He is certainly capable of being an excellent Servant and this one cannot say of every body – he is also doubtless a very usefull one on many ocasions

– and daily gains ground in the favour and opinion of his poor Master, but whether he will be brought to be just the servant he ought to be after all the Indulgence he has receiv'd is impossible for me to say at this distance.

Lady Hesketh told Johnson that he was right not to suffer the ‘young Suckers to be transplanted to Dunham Lodge’, as they were ‘idle weeds’ who would ‘certainly take Root’ there! She agreed to let Sam have five guineas, in addition to his wages, so that one of his sons could be apprenticed, and also granted him some furniture from Weston Lodge. This was clearly intended to appease Sam. While Sam had ‘behaved so well in many respects and in some Instances with such attention to his dear Master that one would wish to reward him and to give him no real ground of Complaint’, she foresaw that Sam and his family, having had ‘such lucrative places’ would be ‘extremely shock’d to lose such Loaves and such Fishes as they have for many years rejoic’d in’. Lady Hesketh concluded by instructing Johnson: ‘Pray take great care of this letter, which if found wou’d let the cat out of the bag at once!’ She did not want to give the servants the chance to ‘counter-act’ and Johnson seems to have followed her advice by taking prompt action, even though he undoubtedly had a certain respect for Sam himself⁶², in spite of the difference in their social background.

On 15 September 1795 Sam travelled with Cowper and Johnson to see Dunham Lodge and all three men spent the night at Dereham. Miss Barham Johnson speculates that Sam and his wife might have been reluctant to move to such a big house as Dunham Lodge anyway, thus saving Johnny the task of ‘dismissing’ them, but it is unlikely that they would have left Cowper spontaneously for such a reason. After receiving Lady Hesketh’s letter of 13 September, Johnson clearly put the dismissal plan into action. In Miss Johnson’s words: ‘One wonders whether Cowper and Mrs Unwin realised that they would never see Sam and Nanny Roberts again, and whether there was a sad leave-taking’⁶³. Certainly none of them would have been aware of the extent of Lady Hesketh’s hostile attitude towards the servants, without which they might perhaps have remained in Norfolk. Nanny returned to Weston first, because Cowper writes to Lady Hesketh from Mundesley on 26 September 1795: ‘Samuel desires me to present his duty to you. His wife is gone to Weston ...’. In the same letter the poet laments ‘I shall

never see Weston more', having probably realised by that time that the move had become permanent. Johnson had also gone to Weston without telling Cowper, who writes: 'Whither he is gone I know not; at least I know not by information from himself. Samuel tells me that he thinks his destination is to Weston. But why to Weston is unimaginable to me'⁶⁴. Cowper could not understand why Johnson would have returned there, but it was clearly a necessary visit to deal with the 'break up' (Lady Hesketh's words) at the Lodge and sort out the furniture, some of which was intended for Sam's family. Johnson did not record his visit to Weston in his diary. His whereabouts were perhaps to be kept a secret from Cowper and Mrs Unwin, so as not to upset them, but Sam felt obliged to disclose it; the words 'Samuel tells me that he thinks ...' reveal a reluctance on Sam's part to say what he knew. Sam was perhaps still considering his own position, but Lady Hesketh was no doubt correct in her letter of 13 September when she suggested that he would not have wanted to remain in Norfolk without his wife.

According to John Johnson's diary, it was on 7 October 1795 (when Cowper and his party left Mundesley) that 'the Weston Servants, by Lady Hesketh's Recommendation, [were] left behind, to return to Weston Underwood'⁶⁵. The word 'Recommendation' is certainly a euphemism! Without their servants, Cowper and Mrs Unwin then went to Dereham, where they stayed temporarily before settling at Dunham Lodge, as planned, later that month. Wright erroneously implies that Sam remained with Cowper until around October 1796. A couple (coincidentally) by the name of Johnson were then engaged as servants⁶⁶, joining the Johnsons' maid Sally and a young man, Sam Dent. On 17 August 1798 Lady Hesketh enquired of John Johnson as to how Dent was getting on⁶⁷. He was from Weston⁶⁸ and had previously attended to Mrs Unwin before being taken to Norfolk by Johnson as his own servant⁶⁹. In the last years of his life, Cowper was nursed by Margaret Perowne, a friend of John Johnson's sister, and she received a significant sum of money (£200) from the poet's estate⁷⁰. In April 1798 Lady Hesketh expressed veiled criticism of the fact that Johnson had sent Sam the poet's 'old wardrobe' when the clothes could have been given to someone in need locally⁷¹. She appears nevertheless to have continued to pay an annuity to Sam and his family even after Cowper's death⁷².

Sam Roberts was a resident of Weston in March 1798 as he is listed on the Buckinghamshire *Posse Comitatus* roll for the village, under the occupation ‘laceman’⁷³. Later that year a daughter of Sam and Nanny was christened at Weston. Sam was to live for 32 years after Cowper’s death and is known to have been a source of information and artefacts. For example, he helped to retrieve a silhouette of Cowper from a shade⁷⁴ and verse fragments from a shutter⁷⁵ at The Lodge. The Cowper and Newton Museum has some hairs from Cowper’s wig received from Sam Roberts on 1 April 1831⁷⁶, the year before his death.

The most interesting item relating to Sam Roberts from that later period is a letter written by Sam himself to John Johnson dated 5 December 1806⁷⁷. He was replying to a letter from Johnson enquiring about the ‘Yardley Oak’ tree, subject of Cowper’s poem first published by Hayley in 1804, and begins by conveying the relevant information that Sam had waited for George Courtenay to confirm. Sam had been given Johnson’s letter by a Mr Wolseley, whom he had taken to visit Weston Lodge. Even though Sam was the parish clerk, his letter contains numerous spelling and grammatical mistakes. Reflecting the fact that Johnson had remained a personal friend, Sam additionally provides information about his two sons, emphasising how it has caused him financial hardship to help his eldest son set up in business in London. Johnson was to keep Hayley informed about his correspondence with Sam, which apparently continued for a while thereafter. William Hayley, who had described Sam in his work on Cowper as a ‘very affectionate, worthy domestic, who attended his master into Sussex’⁷⁸, wrote in April 1810 to John Johnson: ‘Now let me rejoice with you on the discovery of the manuscripts found by the good Samuel Roberts!’ adding ‘I have always intended to send to the said good Samuel a copy of his master’s life, which he perfectly deserves’; and ‘I hope you may visit Weston, and exhort the good Samuel Roberts to make yet more discoveries. Remember me kindly to him.’⁷⁹ One of the papers found by Sam – inside an account-book which had belonged to Cowper – was the fragment of a hymn ‘To Jesus the Crown of my Hope’, apparently given by Sam to Rev. John Sutcliff and first published in the *Baptist Magazine and Literary Review* a few months later (April 1810)⁸⁰.

After Nanny’s death in 1809, the *Northampton Mercury* announced Sam’s second marriage to Elizabeth Filby of Croydon in 1812,

describing him as a ‘lace dealer’. In 1815 a Moravian minister (Rev. Samuel Connor) visited Weston and met Sam’s new wife: ‘... I made enquiry for Sam Roberts, who had been [Cowper’s] Gardener [*sic*] & soon found his place of residence, but only his Wife was at Home, who was well acquainted with the [Moravian] Brethren, & with the greatest pleasure showed me her Garden, into which had been transplanted from Cowper’s garden at Weston a favourite Woodbine’⁸¹. Then in 1824 Charles Knight visited Weston and met a few individuals who had been ‘intimately acquainted’ with the poet, one of whom was ‘a favourite and faithful domestic [who] lived [*sic*] with Cowper during the whole of his residence at Weston’. The unnamed servant, most probably Sam, was then living ‘in a beautiful cottage’ and had built in his garden a summer-house, ‘in honour of his lamented master’, on which was inscribed the verse *Inscription for a Moss-House in the Shrubbery at Weston*⁸². Sam’s second wife pre-deceased him. By the end of his life he was a man of property and in his will left a ‘freehold messuage and outbuildings with the garden etc. together with the two cottages adjoining’ in Weston, and also a ‘freehold cottage etc.’ in the parish of Emberton. The *Mercury* reported his death in 1832 as follows: ‘At his son’s house, in London, ... in the 78th year of his age, much esteemed and regretted by a numerous circle of friends, Mr. Samuel Roberts, of Weston Underwood, Bucks, for many years faithful attendant on the Poet Cowper.’ Whether or not he or his wife deserved Lady Hesketh’s ire, Sam certainly fulfilled his role as an efficient valet or factotum and appears to have remained indispensable to Cowper during the Weston years.

Notes

- ¹ T. Wright, *The Correspondence of William Cowper*, 1904, vol. 4: Sam was buried (p. 259 footnote) ‘near the porch of Weston church’ or (p. 495 footnote) ‘close to the church tower’. A 1919 churchyard map in Weston church shows a number of graves on the north side of the tower that no longer exist.
- ² Manuscript in the Cowper and Newton Museum collection (I am grateful to Elizabeth Knight for this information). Sam’s wives were buried in the same grave.
- ³ Married by Thomas Scott, curate, at Weston.

- ⁴ I wish to thank my cousin Noreen Walker of Ontario, Canada, for tracing this record (kept in Latin).
- ⁵ T. Wright, *The Life of William Cowper*, 1892, pp. 116, 122 ('Roberts, a rather prominent figure in this history'), 130 and 140.
- ⁶ Letters to Hill, 10 March 1766, and to Lady Hesketh, 2 January 1786. In this article all references to Cowper's letters can be found in James King and Charles Ryskamp (eds.), *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper* (5 volumes), Clarendon Press, 1979-1986.
- ⁷ N. Curry, *William Cowper*, 2015, p. 55. See also, for example, C. Ryskamp, *William Cowper of the Inner Temple, Esq.: A Study of His Life and Works to the year 1768*, 1959; S. Malpas, *Centenary Letters*, 2000; and biographies by H. l'Anson Fausset 1928, D. Cecil 1929, G. Thomas 1935, L. Hartley 1938, M. Quinlan 1953, J. King 1986, and G. Ella 1993.
- ⁸ J. Johnson (ed.), *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of William Hayley*, 1823.
- ⁹ Rev. T. Grimshawe (ed.), *The Life and Works of William Cowper*, 1835, vol. 5, p. 293 (*Memoir*); and later editions, e.g. the single volume published by Nimmo in 1876, p. 457. A similar footnote for this quotation in the 'restored' *Adelphi* is given by King and Ryskamp (*op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 38).
- ¹⁰ Grimshawe has been described as 'a hopelessly incompetent editor' (N. Russell, *A Bibliography of Cowper to 1837*, 1963, p. 232); cf. 'Grimshawe's fault was general incompetence' (L. Hartley, *William Cowper, the Continuing Reevaluation*, 1960, p. 48). R. Spiller is also critical: 'Grimshawe ... so mangled his sources as to make his revision of Hayley's work almost worthless' ('A New Biographical Source for William Cowper', *PMLA*, XLII (1927), pp. 946-62).
- ¹¹ R. Southey, *Life of William Cowper*, 1836, vol. 1, p. 154, and 1843, vol. 1, p. 107.
- ¹² King and Ryskamp (*op. cit.*, vol. 1, p.42 (*Adelphi*)).
- ¹³ Letter to Mrs Madan, 1 March 1768.
- ¹⁴ J. Corry, *The Life of William Cowper, Esquire*, 1803, p. 20. M. Quinlan (*William Cowper: A Critical Life*, 1953, p. 66) refers to two servants at Olney, identifying one as Sam Roberts, but without referring to any evidence for this assumption.
- ¹⁵ Letter to Unwin, 3 July 1782. Cowper also had a servant living with him in Olney called William Peace (or Pearce), who left when he got married, i.e. before December 1784 (criticised in a letter to Newton, 18 March 1792; see also the letter to Newton of 24 December 1784). Around that time, Cowper describes a servant called Tom in *Truth* (1782); and 'footman Tom' is mentioned in *Tirocinium* (1782-84).
- ¹⁶ Letters to Mrs Madan, 11 June 1768, 18 June 1768 and 9 July 1768.
- ¹⁷ Letter to Hill, 1 January 1771.

- ¹⁸ Letters to Newton, 24 September and 11 November 1780.
- ¹⁹ Described as a ‘lump of dough’ etc. in a letter to Lady Hesketh, 11 December 1786.
- ²⁰ Letter to Teedon, 20 October 1792: ‘William Kitchener is here and will attend you home’; Kitch is mentioned several times by Teedon as his messenger, see T. Wright (ed.), *Diary of Samuel Teedon*, 1902. Kitchener appears on the 1798 Buckinghamshire *Posse Comitatus* for Olney (listed as ‘gardener’).
- ²¹ Letter to Lady Hesketh, 26 September 1793 (with more general reflections on servants).
- ²² Teedon’s *Diary*, *op. cit.*, pp. 19-20.
- ²³ C. Bodham Johnson (ed.), *Letters of Lady Hesketh to the Rev. John Johnson, Concerning Their Kinsman William Cowper the Poet*, 1901, p. 82; letter to Johnson of 28 March 1799: ‘... I could not find any thing in your Accounts my good Johnny, relative to the Cash which I owe to Saml. Roberts Mother and Aunt – perhaps indeed they may be both in Heaven by this time ...’.
- ²⁴ Letter to Newton, 25 August 1781: ‘Susan Roberts has been supposed dying for some time, was speechless for a Week, then grew better, was seized with violent Convulsions, and is again grown better’.
- ²⁵ Teedon’s *Diary*, *op. cit.*, 18 March 1792.
- ²⁶ Letter to Lady Hesketh, 11 August 1793 (also *Letters of Lady Hesketh*, *op. cit.* p. 25, 27 September 1793).
- ²⁷ Letters to Lady Hesketh, 27 November 1787, and (about a later clerk) to Hayley, 25 November 1792.
- ²⁸ Anecdote dated 1795, cited by J. King, *William Cowper*, 1986, p. 264.
- ²⁹ Teedon’s *Diary*, *op. cit.*, 2 February 1794.
- ³⁰ The poem, interspersed with prose notes, is cited by King (*op. cit.*, p. 185) and by Rev. Grimshawe (*op. cit.*, vol. 4, p. 147); extensive quotations from it can be found in an unpublished typescript by Miss Catherine Mary Barham Johnson (John Johnson’s great-granddaughter, 1895-1996) entitled ‘Cowper’s Norfolk Connections’ (Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies, Aylesbury, file 37, copy in Cowper and Newton Museum).
- ³¹ Johnson’s message had been carried from Olney by ‘Kitch’.
- ³² Letter to Rose, 5 November 1789 (Cowper was unhappy with Sam for letting the dog escape).
- ³³ Letter to Lady Hesketh, 13 February 1791.
- ³⁴ Lady Hesketh writes later, in May 1794, that ‘even Samuel can scarce support’ Mrs Unwin, after a further attack (Southey, *op. cit.*, vol. 3, p. 175).
- ³⁵ Letters to Hayley, 24 July and 15 August 1793. See also T. Wright, *The Town of Cowper*, 1893, pp. 183-4.

- ³⁶ *Inscription for the Hermitage*, May 1793 (see John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp (eds.), *The Poems of William Cowper*, vol. 3, pp. 193, 342).
- ³⁷ Letter to John Johnson, 6 September 1793.
- ³⁸ Letter to Lady Hesketh, 5 April 1792.
- ³⁹ Teedon's *Diary*, *op. cit.*, 17 March 1792: 'Mrs U. told me that this day she had hired Nanny Roberts instead of Mrs Peers'; the fact that Nanny ultimately 'succeeded' Molly was not confirmed by Cowper to Lady Hesketh until 11 August 1793.
- ⁴⁰ Letter to Lady Hesketh, 6 June 1792. It is not known whether it was Sam's own uncle or his wife's.
- ⁴¹ Letters to Hayley, 14 June 1792, and to John Johnson, 29 September 1793.
- ⁴² Letters to Lady Hesketh of 10 December 1787 and 1 January 1788; the burial of Sam's son George Michael is recorded in the Weston register for 1 December 1787.
- ⁴³ Letter to Hayley, 29 July 1792.
- ⁴⁴ Poem dated 1788 according to Baird and Ryskamp, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 309; see also Wright's *Life of Cowper*, *op. cit.*, p. 545.
- ⁴⁵ Letter to Hayley, 22 July 1792.
- ⁴⁶ Letter to Lady Hesketh, 21 July 1792.
- ⁴⁷ *Letters of Lady Hesketh*, *op. cit.*, p. 20.
- ⁴⁸ Letter of John Johnson to his sister Kate, 23 September 1792, Barham Johnson Collection (OLNCN:2649/30/3).
- ⁴⁹ Quoted in 'Cowper's Norfolk Connections', *op. cit.*, p. 84.
- ⁵⁰ J. Johnson, *Poems by William Cowper*, 1815, vol. 3, p. 51.
- ⁵¹ See also Southey, *op. cit.*, vol. 3, p. 176.
- ⁵² See King's biography of Cowper, pp. 264-65.
- ⁵³ Johnson suggests that it would have proved fatal to Cowper 'had the measure been suggested under the idea of a final separation from that endeared residence', insisting that this was not the intention (*Poems*, *op. cit.*, vol. 3, p. 52).
- ⁵⁴ *Letters of Lady Hesketh*, *op. cit.*, p. 43 (Johnson's plan was then to reside at Dereham, but Cowper begged him to stay in a village instead).
- ⁵⁵ Lady Hesketh in a letter to John Johnson of 1 August 1795 (Southey, *op. cit.*, vol. 3, p. 182) says that 'Susie' would bring to Norfolk the key to the box of Cowper's papers from Weston.
- ⁵⁶ Letters to Lady Hesketh, 27 August, 5 September and 26 September 1795.
- ⁵⁷ For John Johnson's diary from the relevant period, see R. Spiller, *op. cit.* Johnson writes that Mrs Unwin travelled with Nanny and Hannah Wilson in the other chaise; see also 'Cowper's Norfolk Connections', *op. cit.*, p. 123.

- ⁵⁸ Letter to Lady Hesketh, 27 August 1795.
- ⁵⁹ Letter from John Johnson to his sister, 6 September 1795 (*Letters of Lady Hesketh*, *op. cit.*, p. 46). The ‘Wheeler crew’ presumably just consisted of Sam, Nanny and Sukey (there is no evidence that another Wheeler sister was present).
- ⁶⁰ *Letters of Lady Hesketh*, *op. cit.*, p. 26 (27 September 1793). She particularly disliked Hannah Wilson, who did not actually return to Weston but was apprenticed in Norwich.
- ⁶¹ Quoted in ‘Cowper’s Norfolk Connections’, *op. cit.*, p. 133. Original letter in Barham Johnson Collection (OLNCN:2649/32/11).
- ⁶² Johnson once wrote for Cowper a ‘poetical Dialogue ... between Homer’s head and the head of Samuel’, the latter presumably being Roberts (see Cowper’s letter to John Johnson, 20 November 1792), implying that he was making fun of Sam for his lack of education. Cowper felt obliged to say that the poetry was ‘kindly intended, I know well, for my amusement’.
- ⁶³ ‘Cowper’s Norfolk Connections’, *op. cit.*, p.135.
- ⁶⁴ Southey, *op. cit.* (vol. 3, p. 191) writes: ‘Mr Johnson was probably absent in preparing for their removal to Dunham Lodge, when Cowper ... supposed him to be gone, whither he himself would fain have returned, to Weston’.
- ⁶⁵ See R. Spiller, *op. cit.* Nanny Roberts had in fact already left some 10 days earlier.
- ⁶⁶ See J. King, *op. cit.*, p. 271, and ‘Cowper’s Norfolk Connections’, *op. cit.*, p. 135.
- ⁶⁷ *Letters of Lady Hesketh*, *op. cit.*, p. 61 (‘I ... doubt not that he is now an excellent Servant’), and p. 62 footnote (‘Sam Roberts was succeeded by Sam Dent’).
- ⁶⁸ Christened in 1781 at Weston, Sam Dent is referred to by Johnson as a ‘boy’ and as ‘little Sam’.
- ⁶⁹ See ‘Cowper’s Norfolk Connections’, *op. cit.* p. 116; Dent had been replaced at Weston by Sam’s eldest son (Samuel junior) and Johnson commented in a letter to his sister that ‘the old Lady is quite guided by [Sam]’, who had efficiently arranged for his son to take over.
- ⁷⁰ T. Wright, *Unpublished and Uncollected Letters of William Cowper*, 1925, p. 85; Sam Roberts is not mentioned here as a beneficiary.
- ⁷¹ *Letters of Lady Hesketh*, *op. cit.*, p. 61.
- ⁷² Note by C. Bodham Johnson in *Letters of Lady Hesketh*, *op. cit.*, p. 62; see also p. 84 (reiterating the error that Sam had served Cowper since 1765).
- ⁷³ See I. Beckett, ‘The Buckinghamshire Posse Comitatus 1798’, Buckinghamshire Record Society, 1985.
- ⁷⁴ Described by Lady Hesketh, in a letter to Johnson of 28 May 1800, as a ‘horrid likeness’ (*Letters of Lady Hesketh*, *op. cit.*, p. 106), this was the profile

drawing by John Higgins first mentioned by Cowper on 18 May 1791 (see N. Russell, *op. cit.*, p. 286).

- ⁷⁵ *Lines Written on a Window-Shutter at Weston* (on the poet's departure from The Lodge). See Baird and Ryskamp, *op. cit.*, vol. 3, pp. 208, 352-53 (Sam found and copied both fragments and gave them to William Wilson, Cowper's barber). The original shutter can be seen in the Museum with only the first fragment.
- ⁷⁶ Item 78B, presented by Mr J. Taylor of Northampton. The Museum also has Cowper's coffeepot, which was passed on to Sam and ultimately purchased by Helen Higgins. (I am grateful to Kate Bostock for this and other information about the Museum's collection.)
- ⁷⁷ Barham Johnson Collection (OLNCN:2649/21 (e)).
- ⁷⁸ Hayley's *Life of Cowper*, 1803 edition, vol. 2, p. 113 (footnote to above-cited letter of 24 July 1793); the same footnote is reproduced in Southey, *op. cit.*, vol. 3, p. 218.
- ⁷⁹ See *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of William Hayley*, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, pp. 168 and 170.
- ⁸⁰ See Baird and Ryskamp, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, pp. 137-38 and 479; also N. Russell, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-28.
- ⁸¹ *Cowper and Newton Bulletin*, vol. 7, no. 3, Winter 2008, p. 15.
- ⁸² *Knight's Quarterly Magazine*, vol. 3, Aug-Nov 1824 ('Visit to Cowper's favourite village'), p. 47.

Anne Brontë, William Cowper and the Pursuit of Universal Salvation

Kimberley Braxton

The range of literary works and figures that influenced the Brontës is known to be considerable. While Charlotte, Branwell and Emily found their greatest source of inspiration in the works of Byron and Sir Walter Scott, Anne turned more frequently to the work of William Cowper. Elizabeth Langland comments that Anne was ‘more influenced by the eighteenth century than by the Romantic poets and novelists who shaped her sisters.’¹ Charlotte and Branwell make passing references to Cowper’s poetry within their writing, but Anne’s relationship with the poet is much more sustained and complex. Owing to Anne’s dedication poem ‘To Cowper’ her creative relationship with the poet has long been accepted and remarked upon by critics such as Inga-Stina Ewbank, P.J.M. Scott, Marianne Thormählen and Sara J. Lodge.² Yet while they acknowledge the impact Cowper had on Anne’s poetic composition, specific exploration of the verse is usually brief. In this essay I will build on their findings to produce a thorough analysis and exploration of this creative relationship, citing evidence of where it is present in Anne’s work.

Anne’s respect for Cowper was one that registered with her siblings. When Charlotte set out to capture the memory of Anne in her novel *Shirley*, through the character of Caroline Helstone, she made Cowper’s poetry central to it. Caroline recites ‘The Castaway’ before discussing with Shirley Keeldar, often considered to be a version of Emily, her feelings regarding the poet:

‘I hope William Cowper is safe and calm in heaven now,’ said Caroline.

‘Do you pity what he suffered on earth?’ asked Miss Keeldar.

‘Pity him, Shirley? What can I do else? He was nearly broken-hearted when he wrote that poem, and it almost breaks one’s heart to read it. 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. It seems to me, Shirley, that nobody should write poetry to exhibit intellect or attainment. Who cares for that sort of

poetry? Who cares for learning – who cares for fine words in poetry? And who does not care for feeling – real feeling – however simply, even rudely expressed?’³

Charlotte read and edited her sister’s work, and she was aware of Cowper’s creative impact as demonstrated here. Anne’s practice of writing her concerns and fears into her poetry, in order to process her spiritual anxieties, would have been well known to Charlotte. In *The Task* Cowper writes, ‘There is a pleasure in poetic pains / Which only poets know’ (II, 285-6).⁴ Both Cowper and Anne were familiar with the pleasure which creativity could offer; it would act as a source of relief from their spiritual pains. Cowper may have been the first to suggest to the young Anne Brontë that poetry was such a refuge in times of distress.

In this extract from the novel Charlotte also clearly shows Anne’s feelings regarding Cowper. She highlights the intensity of emotion Anne felt and her preoccupation with his salvation. Charlotte demonstrates the family connection with Cowper: it is her novel in which this scene appears, and her fictional representation of Emily is also aware of the poet. However, she chooses to foreground Anne’s connection to Cowper. His poetry was firmly situated within the family’s communal reading, but Anne formed an intimate relationship with the poet. She interacted with his work more than with any other apart from the Bible. Anne repeatedly returned to it as a form of inspiration and also as an avenue through which to voice alternating doubts and convictions about salvation.

This essay will explore how Anne, through her poetry, interacted with Cowper as a method of processing her own spiritual beliefs. I examine four of Anne’s foremost religious poems written during the period 1841-4: ‘Despondency’ (1841), ‘To Cowper’ (1842), ‘A Word to the Calvinists’ (1843), and ‘A Prayer’ (1844). Through an analysis of these poems I demonstrate how Anne used the suffering of others, and frequently Cowper’s, to express her own struggles with her faith. In an attempt to save Cowper, through her poetry, she ultimately attempted to save herself.

During this period Anne’s poems express feelings of doubt and spiritual backsliding, and Cowper is the central source of inspiration. However, as Langland explains, Anne and Cowper’s religious beliefs

differed considerably: ‘Cowper was an especial favourite, in whose work Brontë found echoed her own religious preoccupations and questions. Yet in her insistence on Universal Salvation, Brontë diverged sharply from Cowper, a strict Calvinist given to fits of melancholy over his possible damnation.’⁵ Anne’s divergence from Cowper is a product of what Susan Wolfson deemed interaction rather than influence, in which the writer’s work does not demonstrate a loyal interpretation but rather exhibits strong feelings about certain aspects of the prior work, and shows a tendency to dwell upon them.⁶ Anne’s emotional interaction with Cowper is profound but cautious when it comes to matters of faith. Sara J. Lodge argues that ‘Anne’s often deliberately plain religious lyrics and the concern her novels display with depression, particularly religious melancholy, as well as the promise of universal salvation, reflect her continued interest in the questions posed by Cowper’s life and art.’⁷ Through her interaction with these questions, in relation to Cowper, Anne is able to explore her own spiritual progress and suffering.

There are numerous branches of influence from various Christian groups which can be located within the Brontës’ lives and works, ranging from Evangelicalism and Wesleyan Methodism to Calvinism. Marianne Thormählen is clear in her belief that ‘The Brontës resembled some of the leading religious thinkers of their time, notably Thomas Erskine and F.D. Maurice, in regarding religion as the concern of the individual soul guided by God.’⁸ The Brontë children were not strictly bound to one branch of Christianity. Each had their own particular beliefs, fuelled by Patrick Brontë’s liberality with regard to his children’s education. Anne’s personal belief in the doctrine of Universal Salvation derives from the vision of Origen who, as Diarmaid MacCulloch explains, ‘asserted that humankind will be saved through its own efforts with the help of Christ, through purging which goes on past human death. He could not accept that humankind or creation was totally fallen, as that would destroy all moral responsibility’.⁹ Anne’s notions of Universal Salvation were present from her youth, likely encouraged by the deaths of her mother and sisters during her infancy. Universal Salvation, though not widely accepted, reached a level of prominence in the nineteenth century owing to the work of theologian Henry Bristow Wilson and philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher.

A persistent theme in Anne's poetry and fiction is the notion that Hell is not a permanent situation; all can eventually earn their way to Heaven. Origen offered the confirmation Anne desired when he suggested that 'all, including Satan himself, have the chance to work back towards God's original purpose. All will be saved, since all come from God.'¹⁰ Origen's vision differs significantly from the Calvinist belief in predestination that developed later. The Calvinist notion, as explained by MacCulloch, suggests that 'If salvation was entirely in God's hands, as Luther said, and human works were of no avail, then logically God took decisions of individual salvation without reference to an individual's life-story. God decided to save some and logically also to consign others to damnation.'¹¹ Whilst it was suggested that predestination would bring comfort, as you could not lose your salvation, it filled Cowper and subsequently Anne with immense dread. Anne vehemently opposed this notion, as shall be seen in her poetry, and she used Cowper's experience as a warning.

In December 1848 Anne replied to a letter she received from Rev. D. Thom who had published *The Assurance of Faith: or Calvinism Identified with Universalism* in 1828. Thom wrote to Anne's pseudonym, Acton Bell, after reading *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Thom's letter is not extant but, from Anne's reply, it is clear that Universalism was the central focus. In response Anne wrote 'I have seen so little controversial Theology that I was not aware the doctrine of Universal Salvation had so able and ardent an advocate as yourself; but I have cherished it from my very childhood – with a trembling hope at first, and afterwards with a firm and glad conviction of its truth. I drew it secretly from my own heart and from the word of God before I knew that any other held it.'¹² This revelation from Anne reveals not only the personal nature of her faith but also the length of time she had held these beliefs. The indication of progression is most significant: as a child it was a 'trembling hope' and by 1848 it is 'firm'. It is in terms of this progression that Anne's poetic relationship with Cowper becomes significant.

In 1841 Anne wrote 'Despondency' which heavily interacts with Cowper's poem, 'The Castaway'. Whereas Cowper's castaway, 'drank / The stifling wave, and then he sank'¹³ Anne pleads, 'How can I rouse my sinking soul / From such a lethargy?' (5-6).¹⁴ The symbolism of drowning remained present in her mind, inherited from

‘The Castaway’, but unlike Cowper’s victim she had not yet given up. Throughout her poetry Cowper acts as a warning. Feeling the despair of Cowper’s castaway Anne’s poetic voice calls for assistance where Cowper’s does not. She wrote, ‘Lord Jesus, save me lest I die, / And hear a wretch’s prayer’ (35-36).¹⁵ Whilst she is pleading in desperation there is still hope. There is still faith that Christ will offer assistance in this time of need. Cowper, in contrast, wrote:

No voice divine the storm allay’d,
No light propitious shone,
When, snatch’d from all effectual aid,
We perish’d, each, alone... (61-64)¹⁶

In contrast to Anne’s poem there is no hope of assistance from God and a striking lack of entreaty to Him. Vincent Newey comments on how ‘Cowper’s outright acceptance in “The Castaway” of the fact that he has perished inwardly and spiritually is accompanied by a concomitant acceptance of a life and world without God. There is nothing in the text, in fact, to hold it to the belief that the universe is God-directed; He is simply not present’.¹⁷ Cowper’s complete loss of faith stood as a warning to Anne of the depths to which religious despair could drive a person.

Anne’s vision of hope shows that she did not simply locate herself within Cowper’s work; she used Cowper as an example to encourage her own spiritual progression. However, Anne’s progression frequently encountered challenges. Whilst there is still hope enough to ask for Christ’s assistance, a theme of doubt runs throughout, and it is in this mood that the poem concludes: ‘O how shall I arise!’ (32).¹⁸ Anne’s adoption of an exclamation point rather than a question mark is significant. Whilst this could have been an error in transcription, as Chitham mentions in the editorial notes,¹⁹ the meaning is in keeping with the tone of the piece. The line reads as a question – a question implying that there is faith in the possibility of help, that someone is listening. But by using an exclamation point the line reads as a cry of utter despair, suggesting that Anne’s voice is located closer to Cowper’s castaway than initially perceived.

Echoing Cowper, the scale of the despair expressed is extensive. Anne demonstrates this by the repetitive use of the conjunctive ‘And’

as the starting point of ten lines of the poem, portraying the sheer extent of her grief and building a mountain of despair that cannot be overcome without the aid of Christ. This is what Thormählen describes as ‘spiritual backsliding, a particularly painful condition’.²⁰ Brontë proclaimed, ‘I have gone backward in the work, / The labour has not sped’ (1-2).²¹ The noticeable discourse of fatigue – ‘Drowsy’, ‘dull’, ‘heavy’, ‘lethargy’ – indicates that Anne was not necessarily commenting on a backsliding into sin but rather a progression in faith which she deemed insufficient. The use of the word ‘work’ indicates how Anne viewed her faith; it is something that must continually be focused on and progression must be made through Christian works. Nevertheless, while this initial poem from Anne sobs with anguish it also retains hope as it closes with the speaker caught in the act of prayer. Anne heeded Cowper’s warning in ‘Hope’: ‘Life without hope can close but in despair’ (274).²²

Anne’s frequent questioning and interaction with varying notions of religious faith are recurring features throughout her poetry. As Edward Chitham remarks, ‘She is very rarely adamant, always leaves room for a counter-argument or a counter-character. Her religion is a quest, a patient sifting and internal discussion.’²³ In ‘To Cowper’, whilst she initially appears adamant in her assertion of Cowper’s salvation, the poem still exhibits her characteristic questioning and uncertainty – even when regarding a point about which she felt passionately. For the opening of the poem Anne does not discuss Cowper on his own merits but in terms of what he meant to her, her relationship, her emotions:

Sweet are thy strains, Celestial Bard,
 And oft in childhood’s years
 I’ve read them o’er and o’er again
 With floods of silent tears.
 The language of my inmost heart
 I traced in every line –
My sins, my sorrows, hopes and fears
 Were there, and only mine.
 All for myself the sigh would swell,
 The tear of anguish start;
 I little knew what wilder woe
 Had filled the poet’s heart. (1-12)²⁴

The use of the phrase ‘inmost heart’ indicates that Anne found in Cowper’s poetry emotions that she could not herself express. The stress placed upon ‘My’ is the most prominent indicator of Anne’s attempt to demonstrate the extent of her interaction with Cowper. It is a clear representation of the powerful personal feelings of identification Anne felt with Cowper and his work.

Anne’s focus on herself and her own feelings results in chastisement of her own emotional selfishness in relation to Cowper. Whilst the poem implies that she was not aware of Cowper’s suffering during her childhood it did not alleviate the guilt she felt. When interacting with Cowper she thought only of locating herself within his work at this time. For Anne to be so enamoured of Cowper’s poetry with no knowledge of his life was quite unusual. Newey comments, ‘One notices how often the reviewers stress the presence of Cowper’s “self” within and behind the poetry ... or focus directly upon its autobiographical content’²⁵, yet Anne remained unaware.

The discovery of Cowper’s personal suffering appears to have been the stimulus for this poem, and remains her focus for the subsequent eight stanzas. Of Cowper’s suffering Anne writes:

I did not know the nights of gloom,
The days of misery,
The long long years of dark despair
That crushed and tortured thee. (13-16)²⁶

Anne’s ‘nights of gloom’ refers to the troubled sleep Cowper recalls in *Adelphi* at the time of his suicide attempts. ‘Before I rose from bed it was suggested to me that there wanted nothing but murder to fill up the measure of my iniquity, and that though I had failed in my design, yet I had all the guilt of that crime to answer for. A sense of God’s wrath and a deep despair of escaping it instantly succeeded.’²⁷ It would undoubtedly have been shocking for Anne to read of her hero’s suicide attempts, but there is no judgement in her poem, only pity.

Despite the extensive suffering in Cowper’s life, Anne only dedicated this one stanza to his misery. A pitiful wallowing was not the intention of her poem. Instead the stanza is followed by Anne informing the reader and, it appears, Cowper himself of his fate:

But they are gone, and now from earth
Thy gentle soul is passed.
And in the bosom of its God
Has found its Home at last. (17-20)²⁸

Having read Cowper's works Anne refused to accept the fate he foresaw for himself. She used the strength of her own faith, at that moment, to inform him of his salvation. Her poetry would grant him the salvation he could not write for himself. By convincing herself of Cowper's salvation she could believe in her own.

Anne tried to support and enforce her point by asserting, 'It must be so if God is love', 'Then surely thou shalt dwell on high' (21, 23).²⁹ The use of 'must' and 'surely' suggests her certainty, yet the inclusion of 'if' reveals her doubt, and suddenly the stanza becomes one through which Anne tries to convince herself as well as Cowper. In an attempt to re-imbue the poem with the initial tone of certainty Anne responds to Cowper's claim in 'The Castaway' that in his darkest moments he was alone with: 'in thine hours of deepest woe / Thy God was still with thee' (27-28).³⁰ However, the poem subsequently begins to unravel as Anne's certainty dissolves into her usual questioning; the final three stanzas of the poem each close with a question. Anne's one stanza of certainty is quickly overshadowed by six subsequent stanzas of doubt.

Anne's initial pursuit of Cowper's salvation is unsuccessful as she is able to envisage but fails to provide it. The poem concludes:

Yet should thy darkest fears be true,
If heaven be so severe
That such a soul as thine is lost,
O! how shall I appear? (41-44)³¹

Not only does she contemplate the fears of Cowper's religious melancholy; she concludes by allowing these fears to influence her and induce religious doubt. As Thormählen explains, 'Anne's poems speak of recurrent attempts to shore up faltering faith, and even when she celebrates happy moments of religious conviction, calm assurance of permanence is absent.'³² Anne was left in fear for her own salvation.

Anne's search for salvation was not over, and within six months she would compose another poem filled with a ferocity and certainty lacking in her two previous poems. 'A Word to the Calvinists' is unusually

structured and could easily be read as two separate poems. The poem still adopts Anne's commonly used 4 line stanzas with an ABAB rhyme scheme, but the metre of stanzas 1-7 differs noticeably from that of stanzas 8-12; this arises from the distinctive tone of each section. The tone adopted in the initial section differs considerably from Anne's previous work. Thormählen has suggested that: 'It is a very powerful, one might almost and paradoxically say condemnatory, attack....All members of the Brontë family are on record as disapproving of the Calvinist doctrine of election....Charlotte and Anne rejected it with an intensity that bespeaks some sort of personal involvement.'³³ One case of Calvinism we can be certain encouraged Anne's animosity was that of Cowper.

In 'To Cowper' Anne had succumbed to doubt and failed to find the salvation she sought for Cowper and herself. She returned to her cause with a confidence she had previously lacked. Impassioned, she appears to interrogate Calvinists by demanding:

And when you looking on your fellow men
Behold them doomed to endless misery,
How can you talk of joy and rapture?
May God withhold such cruel joy from me! (21-24)³⁴

Cowper could clearly be seen as a victim of this endless misery. In a profound final declaration Anne condemns herself for the sake of others. The closing stanza shows her refusing salvation if all cannot be saved. Anne repeats 'And' throughout the poem to demonstrate the sheer urgency of her argument, as she did in her previous poem 'Despondency'. Previously she used the repetition to emphasise her grief, but in this case it drives home the cruelty and wrongdoing of the Calvinists, punctuating the long list of accusations she has for them. There is also Anne's characteristic questioning, but where previously she was asking Christ for guidance, in this case the questions proceed from disbelief and disgust. Previously it was her faith on trial; in this poem she is the one in control as she puts their faith under scrutiny.

The latter half of the poem differs not only in metre and tone, but also greatly in approach. Whereas the first half was dominated by questions, in the second Anne states in the text itself that she does not want to ask questions: 'I ask not how remote the day / Nor what the sinner's woe /

Before their dross is purged away' (41-43).³⁵ In this poem Anne's faith is stable and unquestioning, rather than doubtful. She also clearly specifies that even those who have turned their back on Christ will be saved, 'That even the wicked shall at last / Be fitted for the skies' (37-38), 'They'll cling to what they once disdained / And live by him that died' (47-48)³⁶ – a staple of her faith in Universal Salvation. At this moment the doubt previously described in 'Despondency' and 'To Cowper' is silenced. No matter what Cowper did and suffered, and no matter her own moments of spiritual backsliding, she is adamant that eventually they will be saved.

Thormählen claims that 'It is impossible to overstate the boldness of Anne's position as regards salvation... It was one thing to argue, as her father and Adam Clarke did, that all *may* be saved. It is quite another to assert that all *will ultimately* be saved, through God's mercy and Christ's Atonement.'³⁷ Anne retained her universalist position, that all would be saved, throughout her subsequent writing career. At this point, although her notions regarding her spiritual progress appeared stable, belief in her faith and salvation continued to be shaken. In 'A Prayer', composed a year after 'A Word to the Calvinists', she explores the ongoing trials she continued to experience with her faith.

Unlike the previous three poems, 'A Prayer' is composed as a hymn, perhaps inspired by the hymns of Cowper. Following her 'Celestial Bard', Anne did not shy away from the struggles of faith in her hymns. In *Adelphi*, Cowper made the struggles he faced when it came to prayer clear. He confessed that he 'then for the first time attempted prayer in secret, but being little accustomed to that exercise of the heart and having very childish notions of religion, I found it a difficult and painful task and was even then frightened at my own insensibility.'³⁸ This struggle with prayer foreshadows Cowper's madness and suicide attempts; it acts as a forewarning of the danger that can arise if prayer is abandoned. In 'A Word to the Calvinists' Anne may have fought for and found the salvation she desired for Cowper, but her own salvation was something she could not be sure of. The battle for her faith continued in her verse.

In 'A Prayer' she reverted to her feelings of spiritual backsliding, explored three years earlier in 'Despondency'. Through the personal tone of the poem Anne also brought herself rather than others, such as

Cowper, to the fore. Whether using her own poetic voice, or that of a Gondal character,³⁹ there is a consistent focus on the individual rather than an overarching, representative message in the majority of Anne's poetry. This highlights the significance of 'To Cowper' and 'A Word to the Calvinists' in which Anne chose, instead, to speak for others and it is what makes these poems some of her most passionate. They foreshadow the creative fire and the fearless step into controversy she would later take in her second novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*; Anne's voice is strongest when protesting for others. By adopting the hymn form Anne used her own suffering to assist fellow sufferers, the way Cowper did for her.

The problem of spiritual backsliding was one experienced by many. As Thormählen observes, 'Holding on to one's childhood faith is a feat which very few religious thinkers at any point in time have accomplished'.⁴⁰ Cowper's poetry, as Anne herself experienced, proved a balm to the spiritual distress of many and this is what Anne attempted to replicate. In accordance with the musical nature of the hymn she adopts lyrical techniques such as alliteration – 'feeble faith'(4), 'future fills'(7)⁴¹ – and a refrain, repeating the final line of each stanza. These techniques dramatise Anne's portrayal of suffering and lend a desperation to the poetic voice; her faith is feeble and the future she foresees fills her with dismay.

The emotional desolation of this poem is the most extreme of the four explored in this essay; the second stanza even suggests thoughts of suicide:

Not only for the past I grieve,
The future fills me with dismay;
Unless Thou hasten to relieve,
I know my heart will fall away. (6-9)⁴²

Previously Anne expressed religious doubt, but now her grief has progressed. In 'A Prayer' she no longer feels capable of saving herself. It is unclear whether she is referring to the loss of her faith, the loss of her sanity, or the loss of her life, but of loss she is certain. In her desperation Anne asks God to take strong action: she writes, 'O, take this heart I cannot give. / Do Thou my Strength my Saviour be; / And make me to Thy glory live!' (15-17).⁴³ The use of 'take' and 'make' demonstrate the

extent of her spiritual turmoil. The poetic voice is helpless, unwilling, and in what remains of her faith she asks for divine intervention.

An intriguing element within this tone of helplessness is the word ‘cannot’. While it could suggest spiritual and physical exhaustion, meaning Anne is unable to fulfil her duty to God, it could also suggest an unexplained resistance – the aspect of character from which she wanted to be rescued. In her 1845 diary paper, Anne revealed the personal turmoil she underwent during that period. Of her time at Thorp Green she wrote, ‘I have had some very unpleasant and undreamt of experience of human nature.’⁴⁴ Whilst the experience can only be conjectured, witnessing her brother become involved in an extra-marital affair with their employer is undoubtedly an aspect. Watching her brother descend into sin required Anne’s faith in Universal Salvation to be firm, to not believe her brother condemned, and yet her faith appeared shaken beyond repair. Anne wrote the diary paper nine months after she composed ‘A Prayer’ and yet her feelings had not recovered. She wrote of her own personal despair, ‘I for my part cannot well be flatter or older in mind than I am now.’⁴⁵

The four poems demonstrate that Anne did have moments of certainty, but that ultimately her spiritual progress was still not complete. Through her writing, Anne may have been able to convince herself of Cowper’s salvation but not her own. P.J.M. Scott suggested that to find the spiritual answers she desired and come to terms with these in order to gain peace for herself and others was ‘a major – perhaps the major – task in Anne Brontë’s life...the difficulty of the gulf she had laboriously to traverse in pain of mind, body and spirit before she arrived at peace.’⁴⁶ In regard to Cowper, Newey has suggested that ‘only in death did he find lasting release from the insistent claims of cheerless and self-conscious vision.’⁴⁷ For the majority of her adult life Anne replicated similar spiritual and psychological traumas to those that Cowper experienced. She continued to draw inspiration from Cowper;⁴⁸ he may only have found peace in death but Anne persevered in her spiritual progression.

It was not in her poetry but in her final novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, that Anne achieved the spiritual stability she had sought throughout her writing. After her husband’s death Helen Huntingdon, the novel’s heroine, laments:

How could I endure to think that that poor trembling soul was hurried away to everlasting torment? it would drive me mad! But thank God I have hope – not only from a vague dependence on the possibility that penitence and pardon might have reached him at the last, but from the blessed confidence that, through whatever purging fires the erring spirit may be doomed to pass – whatever fate awaits it, still, it is not lost, and God, who hateth nothing that he hath made, *will* bless it in the end!⁴⁹

This echoes the pity and hope that were characteristic of Anne's poetry. Gone is the questioning and doubt; she could finally express her spiritual beliefs with certainty. She underlined the strength of belief with the italicisation of '*will*' and the concluding exclamation mark. She no longer relies on 'vague dependence' but has 'blessed confidence' in her spiritual convictions.

This essay has traced Anne Brontë's spiritual progression, inspired by her interaction with William Cowper's works, and expressed in her poetry. Anne's adoption of Cowper as her focus allowed her to explore her own spiritual concerns. This source of personal inspiration allowed her to develop individually as a writer and to find that her key strength lay in writing on behalf of others. In the preface to the second edition of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* she declared: 'Such humble talents as God has given me I will endeavour to put to their greatest use...when I feel it my duty to speak an unpalatable truth, with the help of God, I *will* speak it.'⁵⁰ Through her interaction with Cowper's works, which encouraged her own brutally honest compositions, Anne achieved the confidence and determination to tackle the harsh realities of her final novel.

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Notes

- ¹ Elizabeth Langland, *Women Writers: Anne Brontë – The Other One* (London: Macmillan Education, 1989), p. 30.
- ² See the following works: Inga-Stina Ewbank, *Their Proper Sphere* (London: Edward Arnold., 1966), P.J.M. Scott, *Anne Brontë: A New Critical Assessment* (London & New Jersey: Vision Press and Barnes and Noble Books, 1983), Marianne Thormählen, *The Brontës and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), Sara J. Lodge, 'Literary influences on the Brontës' in

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- ³ Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley* [1849] (London: Penguin, 2006), pp. 213-14.
 - ⁴ William Cowper, *The Task*, in *The Poetical Works of William Cowper*, ed. H.S. Milford, 4th edn. (Oxford University Press: London, 1950), pp. 127-241, (p.152).
 - ⁵ Langland, p. 32.
 - ⁶ Susan J. Wolfson, *Romantic Interactions: Social Being and the Turns of Literary Action* (Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), pp. 9-10.
 - ⁷ Sara J. Lodge, 'Literary influences on the Brontës' in *The Brontës in Context*, ed. Marianne Thormählen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 143-50, (p. 145).
 - ⁸ Marianne Thormählen, *The Brontës and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 47.
 - ⁹ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity – The First Three Thousand Years* (London: Allen Lane, 2009), p. 153.
 - ¹⁰ Ibid.
 - ¹¹ Ibid., p. 634.
 - ¹² Anne Brontë to Revd D. Thom, 30 December 1848 in *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë with a selection of letters by family and friends*, vol. 2, ed. Margaret Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), pp. 160-1, (p.160).
 - ¹³ William Cowper, 'The Castaway', *The Poetical Works of William Cowper*, ed. H.S. Milford, 4th edn (Oxford University Press: London, 1950), pp. 431-2 (p.432).
 - ¹⁴ Anne Brontë, 'Despondency' in *The Poems of Anne Brontë: A New Text and Commentary*, ed. Edward Chitham (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1979), pp. 80-81 (p. 80).
 - ¹⁵ Ibid, p. 81.
 - ¹⁶ Cowper, 'The Castaway', p. 432.
 - ¹⁷ Vincent Newey, *Cowper's Poetry – A Critical Study and Reassessment* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1982), p. 274.
 - ¹⁸ Anne Brontë, 'Despondency', p. 81.
 - ¹⁹ *The Poems of Anne Brontë: A New Text and Commentary*, ed. Edward Chitham (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1979), p. 81.
 - ²⁰ Thormählen, *The Brontës and Religion*, p. 343.
 - ²¹ Anne Brontë, 'Despondency', p. 80.
 - ²² William Cowper, 'Hope', *The Poetical Works of William Cowper*, ed. H.S. Milford, 4th edn. (Oxford University Press: London, 1950), pp. 59-76 (p.65).
 - ²³ Edward Chitham, 'Religion, Nature and Art in the work of Anne Bronte', *Brontë Society Transactions*, 24, 2 (1999), 129-45 (p. 133).

- ²⁴ Anne Brontë, 'To Cowper', p. 84.
- ²⁵ Newey, p. 4.
- ²⁶ Anne Brontë, 'To Cowper', p. 84.
- ²⁷ William Cowper, *Adelphi*, in *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, ed. James King and Charles Ryskamp, 5 vols (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1979-86) VI (1979), p. 25.
- ²⁸ Anne Brontë, 'To Cowper', p. 84.
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² Thormählen, *The Brontës and Religion*, p. 94.
- ³³ Ibid., p. 86.
- ³⁴ Anne Brontë, 'A Word to the Calvinists' in *The Poems of Anne Brontë: A New Text and Commentary*, ed. Edward Chitham (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1979), pp. 89-90, (p. 89).
- ³⁵ Ibid., p. 90.
- ³⁶ Ibid.
- ³⁷ Thormählen, *The Brontës and Religion*, p. 343.
- ³⁸ Cowper, *Adelphi*, VI (1979), p. 7.
- ³⁹ Gondal was the setting of Emily and Anne's juvenilia, and they continued to write for it for the rest of their lives. No prose remains, but large quantities of their poetry derive from Gondal.
- ⁴⁰ Thormählen, p. 72.
- ⁴¹ Anne Brontë, 'A Prayer' in *The Poems of Anne Brontë: A New Text and Commentary*, ed. Edward Chitham (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1979), p. 105.
- ⁴² Ibid.
- ⁴³ Ibid.
- ⁴⁴ Anne Brontë, '31st July 1845, Diary Paper' in Juliet Barker, *The Brontës – A Life in Letters* (London: Penguin, 1997), pp. 132-3, (p. 132).
- ⁴⁵ Ibid.
- ⁴⁶ P.J.M. Scott, *Anne Brontë: A New Critical Assessment* (London & New Jersey: Vision Press and Barnes and Noble Books, 1983), pp. 59-60.
- ⁴⁷ Newey, p. 32.
- ⁴⁸ Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* [1848] (London: Penguin, 1996) p. 447.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid.
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John Newton's Advice on Marriage to John Ryland Jr

Karen E. Smith

Introduction

John Newton (1725-1807) had a wide circle of friends with whom he corresponded regularly and to whom he offered counsel. Those receiving advice included the well-known hymn-writer William Cowper (1731-1800), the evangelical philanthropist, Hannah More (1745-1833), and the anti-slave campaigner, William Wilberforce (1759-1833), as well as a number of Dissenting ministers and friends.

Among the Dissenting ministers with whom he corresponded was the Baptist John Ryland Jr (1753-1825), who served as pastor of College Lane Church in Northampton and then, later, as the pastor of the Broadmead Baptist Church in Bristol and as the Principal of the Baptist College in Bristol. Newton's correspondence with Ryland has been collected together and published by Grant Gordon in *Wise Counsel, John Newton's Letters to John Ryland, Jr.*¹ Using letters to Ryland from that collection, the diary of Ryland's second wife, Frances Barrett Ryland², as well as some of Newton's other letters, this article will explore Newton's advice to Ryland on marriage.³

The friendship of John Newton and John Ryland Jr.

John Newton was an Anglican priest with a warm Evangelical spirit that led to an openness to people of all Christian denominations and none. Described as “a singularly genial man”, a devoted and exemplary Christian minister, a theological moderate and a skilled spiritual director,⁴ he used both the pulpit and his pen to reach out to an extraordinary number of people. D. Bruce Hindmarsh has noted that Newton's links with Particular (Calvinistic) Baptists may be traced back to the days of his curacy at Olney (1764-80).⁵ In spite of the disapproval of some within his congregation he went to hear Benjamin Beddome (1717-1795)⁶ preach and, when he had settled at Olney, he worshipped and dined with the local Baptist minister, William Walker.⁷ In May 1776, he attended the Northamptonshire Baptist Association meetings which were held at Olney and heard a sermon by John Ryland Sr and Robert

Hall, as well as others. He provided accommodation for several people attending the meeting who were from away and invited others into his home for breakfast. He then wrote in his diary, 'We all seemed mutually pleased'.⁸ He attended the ordination service of John Sutcliff at Olney in 1776 and regularly corresponded with others. As Hindmarsh declares, Newton's 'links with Calvinistic Baptists were thus many and close'.⁹

One long-standing relationship was with John Ryland Sr who was a schoolmaster for boys, as well as minister at College Lane Church in Northampton. After meeting Ryland in 1765, Newton travelled often to Northampton to speak to the boys in Ryland's school. He also went to a school whose headmistress, Martha Trinder (1736-1790)¹⁰, was a member of the congregation at College Lane. Newton was apparently impressed by the work in the school and by 1776, he had enrolled his niece, Betsy Catlett (1769-1834), in Mrs Trinder's school for girls.¹¹

Newton became acquainted with the younger Ryland when he visited Northampton and when John Ryland Jr (1753-1825) was fifteen, he was first invited to visit Newton at Olney. This was the beginning of a long friendship as Newton became for Ryland a spiritual mentor and a friend.¹² Looking to him as a 'spiritual father' Ryland seems to have sought advice from Newton about everything, from preaching to pastoral work to more personal matters of finance and moving house. Hence, it is not surprising that when Ryland needed guidance on marriage, he turned to John Newton. Newton's counsel seems to have focused primarily on three issues: finance, domesticity and spiritual devotion.

Newton's advice on finding a marriage partner

Ryland first wrote to Newton concerning marriage when he was twenty-two. While it does not appear that Ryland had a person, as Newton put it, 'fixedly in view', he seems to have had someone 'transiently in view'.¹³ However, seeing that Ryland had no money, Newton's advice was firm: 'since you have no settlement, if she has no money, I cannot but wish she may pass on till she is out of sight and out of mind'.¹⁴ Speaking of what he described as a 'grave business' Newton claims:

I take it for granted that my friend is free from the love of filthy lucre and that money will never be the turning point with you in the choice of a wife. Methinks I hear you think, 'If I wanted money, I would either dig or beg for

it; but to preach or marry for money, that be far from me.’ I commend you. However, though the love of money be a great evil, money itself, obtained in a fair and honourable way, is desirable, upon many accounts, though not for its own sake. Meat, clothes, fire, and books, cannot easily be had without it.¹⁵

Newton, it seems, placed a great emphasis on finance. However, realizing that Ryland might think he was putting too much stress on money, Newton went on to explain at some length that while ‘the love of money was the root of all evil’, pecuniary considerations were important. Bluntly, Newton urged Ryland to consider the future and the possibility of children to feed. He advised:

But while you are without income or settlement, if you have thoughts of marriage, I hope they will be regulated by due regard to consequences. They who set the least value upon money have in some respects the most need of it... You could perhaps endure hardships alone, yet it might pinch you to the very bone to see the person you love exposed to them. Besides, you might have a John, a Thomas, and a William, and half a dozen more to feed (for they all must eat).¹⁶

Newton ends this letter by urging Ryland to think carefully about financial considerations. Describing arrangements for a marriage that would be to Ryland’s advantage, Newton suggests that Ryland should look for a wife who would come from a family of some financial means. In this way he would not have to worry about finance because she would bring ‘a tolerable fortune to boot’. He wrote:

Many serious young women have a predilection in favour of a minister of the gospel; and I believe among such, one or more may be found as spiritual, as amiable, as suitable to make you a good wife, with a tolerable fortune to boot, as another who has not a penny. If you are not willing to trust your own judgment in the search, entreat the Lord to find her for you.¹⁷

Taken alone, these comments may seem to reflect a rather mercenary approach to marriage. Yet Newton would have been well aware of the financial difficulty, especially for many dissenting ministers. As with John Ryland Sr, many ministers started schools, kept a smallholding, or found some other source of income in order to try to make ends meet.¹⁸ While not all ministers were living in penury, Newton was aware that Ryland could easily find himself in great difficulty. Moreover, while

there were funds to help the widows and children of deceased ministers, those who had no financial security could leave their family in very dire straits.¹⁹ Newton was aware of the financial problems for John Ryland Sr. Moreover, Newton himself had known financial hardship. When he and Mary first married, they ‘had only their clothes and seventy pounds in debt to their names.’²⁰

The next time Ryland wrote to Newton about marriage, the focus does not seem to have been on finance, but on the suitability of the candidate in question. In January 1776, Ryland had approached a young woman’s father for permission to pursue the match and had been rejected.²¹ By December 1776, Newton wrote to him again, addressing him in the letter as ‘Poor dear Lad’ and stressing that he had burned Ryland’s letter to him ‘believing you would like to have it out of danger of falling into improper hands’.²² Ryland had obviously expressed great disappointment over the lack of success in finding a marriage partner. The circumstances are not clear from the correspondence, but whatever happened, Newton claimed that after reading his letter, he believed that Ryland should think of the incident more as ‘an escape than a disappointment’.²³ Always concerned to show Ryland how life experiences might shape him not only as a person, but also as a minister, Newton goes on to reflect on how such a disappointment might help him face disappointment in ministry. He wrote:

Your pride, it seems, has received a fall by meeting a repulse. I know Mr Self does not like to be mortified in these affairs; but if you are made successful in wooing souls for Christ, I hope that will console you for meeting a rebuff when only wooing for yourself. Besides I would have you pluck up your spirits.²⁴

Newton then offers some practical advice by quoting to Ryland two proverbs as assurance that he would ultimately find the right person:

‘There is as good fish in the sea as any that are brought out of it’ and ‘If one won’t another will, or wherefore serves the market?’ Perhaps all your difficulties have arisen from this, that you have not yet seen the right person: if so, you have reason to be thankful that the Lord would not let you take the wrong, though you unwittingly would have done it if you could. Where the right one lies hid I know not;... The Lord in his providence will disclose her, put her in your way, and give you to understand, ‘This is she’.²⁵

Newton's advice is quite practical and down to earth. He seems to believe that Ryland will be directed to the right person and he is insistent that Ryland should apply the disappointment he feels to his own personal spiritual growth: 'Wait, pray, and believe, and all shall be well'.²⁶

Newton urged Ryland 'to take notice of the very severe afflictions which many of the Lord's own people are groaning under, and your trials will appear comparatively light'.²⁷ Ryland must have struggled to come to terms with his rejection, though later, as he reflected on the event, he wrote: 'Providence shewed at length that she was not designed for me; and I found it my duty to submit to the divine Will, which I was enabled to do.'²⁸

The reasons for Ryland's rejection are not clear, though Newton's idea of the right kind of person for Ryland would probably have accorded with the accepted patterns of eighteenth-century domesticity. The household in the eighteenth century was a 'key institution'.²⁹ While historians argue that the gender separation between public and private spheres may not have been quite as simple as is sometimes supposed, for Evangelicals household roles were reinforced by Scripture. Like their Puritan forebears, they believed that family life had been ordained by God, and the home was the place where the structure and moral fibre of society was taught and monitored.³⁰ The 'godly order' within the home was evident first in the fact that every person had a proper place and role; men, women, children, servants, masters, indeed all who were part of society, were to behave in accordance with their status or rank. It was accepted that this 'ordering' had been decreed by God, and conformity to patterns of behaviour deemed appropriate to a particular station in life was a sign of spiritual maturity and growth in godliness. It seems likely that Newton, and indeed Ryland, were both thinking of a suitable marriage partner who conformed to the expected female roles of domesticity as well as being a suitable candidate for a minister's wife.

By 1777 it appears that Ryland had found a new potential candidate for marriage. However, there were complications in that she was under the care of guardians, and Ryland wrote to ask Newton's advice. Newton's reply was again, at first, practical. He reminded him of the legalities of marrying someone who was under guardianship and suggested that Ryland should speak to the guardians to gain their consent. Newton

probably would have known the young woman since she had been a pupil of Mrs Trinder's school in Northampton, where he had visited often and where his own niece had attended. In his letter to Ryland he spoke favourably: 'I think this prospect preferable to the former'.³¹ Ryland was keen to begin a courtship, but had run into difficulty because the young woman concerned had been involved with someone else. Newton offered this advice:

Your first step I should think (earnest prayer to the Lord for his blessing and direction excepted) should be to inform yourself whether her dislike to the young man formerly proposed continues, so that she is resolved against the connection....³²

Then Newton says that Ryland should approach the young woman and see how she felt about it, but that he should take care that it did not appear that he had 'courted her money rather than herself'.³³ By 15 February it seems that Ryland was making progress and Newton was writing again, claiming that he had put on his 'considering cap' before replying, but it had not taken long. He advised Ryland to speak to the guardians and then speak to the young lady concerned.³⁴ After two years of courtship, Ryland seems to have been discouraged again over the prospect of marriage. On 23 February 1779 Newton again began his letter 'Poor dear Lad.' He told Ryland that his troubles were something that would 'humble your spirit' and give a 'mellowness to your preaching'.³⁵

Finally, on 12 January 1780, John Ryland married Elizabeth Tyler of Banbury. She had been a student at Mrs Trinder's school and had been baptized by John Ryland Sr with others from the school on 10 April 1774.³⁶ In his diary Ryland claimed he had been seeking the Lord's guidance. Years later he wrote concerning the other two women he had considered for marriage, and claimed that he believed 'God provided still better for me in the end'.³⁷ Apparently Newton agreed. In January 1780 he wrote to them both:

I cordially rejoice that my two friends are at length happily brought together And I doubt not, before this you have been ashamed twenty times over of the unbelieving fears and complaints you have formerly indulged. Now you can say from your heart that the Lord's choice for you was better than your own would have been, and that, notwithstanding all your impatience, his time is likewise the best.³⁸

In this letter, he made mention of his own marriage to Mary Catlett some thirty years before.³⁹ He then urged Ryland to beware of falling into the temptation of idolatry.

Beware of idolatry. You cannot love B[etsy] too much, if you love her in a proper subordination. Look at her while you are reading this, and it will help you to [see] an illustration of my meaning. You have not all her love. She will continue to love her relatives, and if she had a thousand friends, she has room enough in her heart for them all. But there is a peculiar regard due to you, which she cannot, will dare not, to transfer to another. Just so, the Lord leaves us scope enough for the exercise of affections towards creatures. But there is a sense in which we must love him wholly and only. To him our love must remain supreme and unrivalled.⁴⁰

The worry over idolatry was something that Newton had wrestled with in his own relationship with his wife, Mary. It seems that he worried that if he idolized her, God might take her from him.⁴¹ This worry over an idolatrous love for Mary continued even after her death, when he wrote to Hannah More:

You perhaps know, madam, from what you have read of mine, and possibly from what you have seen in me, that my attachment to my dearest was great, yea excessive, yea idolatrous. It was so when it began. I think no writer of romances ever imagined more than I realized. She was to me precisely (how can I write it?) in the place of God. By degrees He who has the only right place in my heart, and who alone can fill it, was pleased to make me sensible of his just claim, and my idol was brought some steps lower down. Yet still I fear there was somewhat of the golden calf in my love, from the moment that we joined our hands to the moment of separation.⁴²

While Newton's emphasis on idolatry may have been a reflection of his Calvinistic theology, the fear of separation by death was also born out of an awareness of the fragility of life. Life in the eighteenth century was harsh. Poor hygiene and lack of sanitation, as well as inadequate medical knowledge and treatment, meant that life was overshadowed by the constant threat of death. If a person did not die of influenza or a pulmonary infection, life might be ended by cholera, typhoid, typhus, dysentery or smallpox. While life expectancy varied according to social class, gender and region, it is estimated that the average life expectancy from birth in the mid-eighteenth century was between 35 and 40 years.⁴³

Women of child-bearing years were particularly vulnerable. Life in a pre-contraceptive era meant that women often had multiple pregnancies, and with every pregnancy there was a higher risk of death. Many women experienced numerous miscarriages before giving birth to a child who was stillborn, or died within a few days, or was maimed for life by the rough treatment received if delivery was difficult. Women who survived the trials of pregnancy were still at risk of dying in childbirth. There were few hygienic measures taken when giving birth to a child, and the risks of haemorrhaging or an obstructed delivery were great.⁴⁴ Newton was only too aware of how quickly death could strike. This may explain why, as he cautioned against idolatry, he reminded Ryland that all the pleasures of this life are transient and relationships are transient. What mattered most was relationship to God.

By all accounts, Betsy and John Ryland had a happy marriage. Newton wrote to him on 7 September 1780:

I am glad to find that you and your dear B[etsy] (to whom we join in love) can see and own the hand and goodness of the Lord, in bringing you together and now in blessing you together; that you are not disappointed in each other, and above all, that he has given you your desire, without sending leanness into your soul. Remember you are to be helpmeets, not hindrances.⁴⁵

By 13 March 1782 Newton was writing to Ryland, perhaps with an awareness that, as in his own marriage, there had been no children,

I hope that you and Mrs Ryland joy on like Zechariah and Elizabeth of old [who were] in all ordinances and commandments blameless; [and] that you are of one heart and mind—full of love, peace, gentleness, and usefulness to edification of all around you.⁴⁶

On 17 January 1785 Newton congratulated the Rylands on their fifth wedding anniversary and then reflected on the beginnings of his own marriage many years earlier:

Our setting out in wedded life was something like that of an adventurous mariner, who should put to sea without either pilot or compass. We knew and thought but little of the Lord, but he thought of us, his plan was exceedingly different from that we had formed for ourselves, but it gradually opened upon us, and hitherto he has helped us. What is before us we know not, but he knows it all, and I am enabled in some measure to cast the care upon him.

May he be your guide and guard likewise. I trust he will. He has given you a heart to care for his concerns, and he will care for yours.⁴⁷

His words were another attempt to offer spiritual guidance to Ryland and a reminder of the need to trust in God's providence. Words that proved timely. For after seven years of marriage Elizabeth gave birth to their first child, John Tyler Ryland, on 9 December 1786. However she soon developed a 'consumptive disorder' and was gravely ill.⁴⁸ Hearing the news, Newton wrote to Ryland of the difficulties of losing someone we love, but urged him nevertheless to simply submit to God's will and to say 'Thy will be done'.⁴⁹

Ryland's wife Elizabeth (Betsy) died on 23 January 1787. A few days later, when Newton received confirmation of the death, he wrote to Ryland. While again he urged him to trust in God, he also called him to put his ministry first.

Your wound must be painful for a time, but the Lord will not leave you; he will condescend to visit you; he will, if I may so speak, dress your wound, till it be effectually healed. In the meanwhile, beware of grief; it is insinuating, deceitful, [and] hurtful. Attend to your health and your calling. Ride, walk, talk, change air and objects now and then. Time, prayer, and especially praise, will relieve you. You are a soldier, you are a leader in the Lord's army, and private concern must give way to the public cause. The enemy presses at the gates, and must be repelled. The Lord's flock must be fed and guarded from the wolves. Time is short and eternity approaching. You must drop a tear, but I hope you will be enabled to weep as if you wept not. These are truths, though as I hinted before, I ought to offer them with just a sense of my own inability to apply them to myself, were your case my own.⁵⁰

Newton's rather firm emphasis on ministerial duty in the face of grief could be interpreted as lacking pastoral sensitivity. Yet, again, it would seem that this was an expression of belief in the providence of God. Elizabeth's death it seems was to be accepted as God's will. Newton's pastoral concern for his friend, however, may be noted in his comment that while he stated what should be believed and practised, he would have had difficulty applying it to himself if he had been in Ryland's place. Indeed, when his own wife died in 1790, he wrote 'that the world seemed to die with her' and for several years composed hymns marking the anniversary of her death.⁵¹

Ryland was grief-stricken over the death of Elizabeth, and financially insecure,⁵² so he did not immediately rush into a second marriage. However, in 1788, fifteen months after the death of his beloved Betsy, Newton wrote to Ryland suggesting that it was time he married again:

Seriously, everybody knows you loved your Betsy while she lived, and were a true mourner for her after she was gone. But the moment she went, you were freed from the law of your wife. You are still a young man; there are circumstances about you that make you uneasy, and to pair yourself to another gracious suitable partner, seems the easiest and most effectual way of deliverance from your thralldom.⁵³

Ryland eventually made plans to marry Frances Barrett, a woman who had known Elizabeth at Mrs Trinder's school and had remained friends with her. However, even as plans for the wedding were being made, Ryland wrote to Newton and expressed his doubts over the rightness of the match. In his reply Newton confirmed that, at Ryland's request, he had burned the letters Ryland had written to him about the matter. Nevertheless, Newton advised Ryland that if he did not have the same passion he had felt for his first wife, he should not worry, stating that those feelings were perhaps idolatrous and certainly 'overrated'.

As matters seem to have gone too far for receding with honour and propriety, and as you mean to marry in the Lord, I think you should trust him to give you such feelings as may suffice to make your relation comfortable. Where there is grace and good sense, and a mutual desire of walking according to the rule of his word, it may, I think, be humbly expected that his blessing on the interchange of kind offices, which are continually recurring in so near a connection, may conciliate, preserve, and increase friendship and esteem, which if not accompanied by all the transports of passion, may very well answer every valuable purpose of life. And, indeed, those feelings which you and I have had towards the objects of our heart's love are perhaps overrated. If they have been sources of pleasure, they have likewise been the sources of our sharpest and most painful trials. And I believe that they are generally so much defiled by an idolatrous attachment, that we have little reason to boast of them....And perhaps this might be one of the reasons why the Lord, in his wisdom and mercy, saw it most for your good to take your Betsy home, that you might not be hindered in your first and greatest desire of cleaving to Him, and him alone, with full purpose of heart....⁵⁴

Humorously, Newton assured Ryland that

Your last letter to me is going into the fire, as you ordered; though, poor thing! I see nothing in it to deserve such a sentence.⁵⁵

The suggestion that Elizabeth might have died in order to ensure Ryland's proper devotion to God seems rather harsh. However, such a claim was in keeping with Newton's own concerns over idolatrous love and again reflected the Calvinistic understanding that everything that happens is within the sovereign purposes of God. While Ryland obviously did not have the same feeling for Frances that he had known for Elizabeth, he seems to have accepted Newton's view that true piety and devotion to God were the most important qualities for a wife. Later he wrote:

If ever I sought the glory of God in any action of my life, I am sure it was in this. I regarded sincere piety in the choice of a companion, more than any other consideration whatever. It was my chief concern to be united with one whose heart was united to Christ, and who would help me to devote myself wholly to him.⁵⁶

On Thursday 18 June 1789, Frances Barrett married John Ryland Jr. She was twenty-eight and had never previously been married, while he was thirty-six years of age with a young son. There is no hint in Frances's diary that she was aware of Ryland's misgivings over their impending marriage. On the Sunday after they married she wrote:

Last Thursday day ever to be remembered. I entered the marriage state and became united, to one of the kindest, and best of men! I feel the importance of my situation, because I am sure of all others, it will require great delicacy, and propriety of conduct...O that I may be assisted in the discharge of every duty, possess a lowliness of spirit becoming my station, and excited to a greater gratitude of the divine goodness⁵⁷

The friendship between John Ryland and John Newton continued until Newton's death at the age of eighty-two. While the relationship changed over the years, it is evident that Ryland looked to the older Newton as a trusted spiritual guide. Newton's practical guidance on finance and domesticity in marriage was shaped by the eighteenth-century social and cultural ideal of the Christian household, as well as his Evangelical religious views. However, Newton's views on marriage were formed

also by his own happy union with his wife, Mary: the one for whom his love, he feared, was ‘excessive, yea idolatrous’. Throughout his correspondence with Ryland, Newton always stressed that love for God must come before anything, even before his love for his wife. When Mary died on 15 December 1790, they had been married for forty years. In a letter to Ryland on 26 March 1791 he expressed thanks to God that while he had loved her, he had also been able to let her go.

I thank you for your condolences and prayers, especially the latter. I am a debtor to the prayers of my friends. The Lord has heard them on my behalf. I have been, and am wonderfully supported. My attachment to my dear was very strong, indeed idolatrous; yet I have been far from sinking under the stroke. Neither her sickness nor her death prevented me from preaching a single sermon. I was enabled to preach her funeral, almost with the same composure as if it had been that of another person....I thought I could bear the removal of any but one. And now the Lord has reconciled me (in a manner beyond my hopes) to give up that one also; though she was dear to my heart, as the light to my eyes. He has indeed done a marvelous thing.⁵⁸

Newton lived for seventeen more years, preaching and offering counsel to his friends until he died on 21 December 1807. Ryland died on 25 May 1825, always grateful for the spiritual guidance and practical advice of his friend.

Notes

- ¹ Grant Gordon, ed., *Wise Counsel, John Newton's Letters to John Ryland, Jr.* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2009). Gordon has drawn these letters from a collection of Newton's letters to Ryland located in the Bristol Baptist College archive and from Newton's *Cardiphonia: Or, The Utterances of the Heart, [1780]* (London: Morgan and Scott, 1911).
- ² The original diary is in the archives at Bristol Baptist College, Bristol. The diary has been transcribed in full by Timothy Whelan, ed. *Nonconformist Women Writers, 1720-1840*, Vol. 8 (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2011), pp. 307-97.
- ³ His ‘Thoughts on Marriage’, published in 1761 in *The Christian's Magazine* under the pseudonym ‘Minor’, and later in 1803 in *The Orthodox Churchman's Magazine*, were originally advice he had offered to his friend Joseph Woolmer (1716-1782).
- ⁴ D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the English Evangelical Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 4-5.

- ⁵ Hindmarsh, *John Newton*, p. 142.
- ⁶ Benjamin Beddome served as pastor of the church at Bourton-on-the-Water in Gloucestershire for fifty-five years from 1740 to 1795. He wrote over eight hundred hymns, many of which were written to provide the congregation with a summary of his sermon to be sung at the end of a service. J.R. Watson, *The English Hymn: A Critical and Historical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), pp. 198–204. See also K.E. Smith, ‘Benjamin Beddome’, in *Dictionary of Evangelical Biography, 1730–1860*, ed. Donald M. Lewis, 2 vols (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 1, 74. See also W.B. Lowther, ‘Beddome, Benjamin (1717–1795)’, rev. by Karen E. Smith, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004) <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/1921>> [accessed 13 Nov 2016].
- ⁷ Hindmarsh, *John Newton*, p. 142. See also, Geoffrey F. Nuttall, ‘Baptists and Independents in Olney to the time of John Newton’, *Baptist Quarterly*, 30.1 (January, 1983), pp. 26-37.
- ⁸ Diary (1773-1805), 1 June, 1776, as cited in Hindmarsh, *John Newton*, p. 142.
- ⁹ Hindmarsh, *John Newton*, p. 143.
- ¹⁰ ‘Some Account of Mrs Martha Trinder, of Northampton’, in John Rippon, *The Baptist Annual Register for 1790, 1791, 1792 and part of 1793* (London: Dilly, Button, and Thomas, 1793), pp.135-142.
- ¹¹ Betsy was the daughter of Mary Newton’s brother, George Catlett. See, Hindmarsh, *John Newton*. p.143.
- ¹² Hindmarsh, *John Newton*, p. 144 ff.
- ¹³ Grant Gordon *Wise Counsel*, letter fourteen, 3 February, 1775, p. 73. Also the fourth of the ‘Nine Letters to the Rev. Mr R---’ in *Cardiphonia*, p. 322.
- ¹⁴ Grant Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, letter fourteen, 3 February, 1775, p. 73.
- ¹⁵ Grant Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, letter fourteen, 3 February, 1775, p. 73.
- ¹⁶ Grant Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, letter fourteen, 3 February, 1775, p. 74.
- ¹⁷ Grant Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, letter fourteen, 3 February, 1775, pp. 74 -5.
- ¹⁸ Kenneth Brown’s study of ministers in the nineteenth century showed that there was a discrepancy in the amount the ministers were paid by churches. See, Kenneth D. Brown, *A Social History of the Nonconformist Ministry in England and Wales 1800-1930* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p.156ff.
- ¹⁹ For a discussion of the financial hardship of the families of deceased Baptist ministers see, Karen E. Smith, ‘What about the Widows? An Appeal to Nineteenth Century Baptist Women’ in *Baptists and the World: Renewing the Vision*, ed. John H.Y. Briggs, (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2010), pp. 70-82.
- ²⁰ Hindmarsh, *John Newton*, p. 62.
- ²¹ According to Grant, a note was made in Ryland’s diary on 26 January, 1776. See *Wise Counsel*, p.89.

- ²² *Wise Counsel*, letter nineteen, 20 December 1776, p. 99. Grant notes that the letter is also printed as letter eight of ‘Nine letters to Rev R...’ in *Cardiphonia*. However the salutation is ‘dear Sir’.
- ²³ Grant Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, letter nineteen, 20 December 1776, p. 99.
- ²⁴ Grant Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, letter nineteen, 20 December 1776, p. 99.
- ²⁵ Grant Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, letter nineteen, 20 December 1776, p. 100.
- ²⁶ Grant Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, letter nineteen, 20 December 1776, p. 100.
- ²⁷ Grant Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, letter nineteen, 20 December, 1776, p. 101.
- ²⁸ John Ryland, *Autograph Reminiscences*, unpublished manuscript in Bristol Baptist College, Bristol, p. 53 as cited in Grant Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, p. 102.
- ²⁹ Roy Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Allen Lane, 1982), p. 160.
- ³⁰ See Karen E. Smith, ‘Baptists at Home’ Chapter 5 in *Challenge and Change: English Baptists’ Life in the Eighteenth Century*, eds. Stephen Copson and Peter J Morden, (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 2017), pp. 100-122.
- ³¹ G. Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, letter twenty, 7 February, 1777, p.103.
- ³² G. Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, letter twenty, 7 February, 1777, p.104.
- ³³ G. Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, letter twenty, 7 February, 1777, p. 104.
- ³⁴ G. Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, letter twenty-one, 15 February 1777, p. 107-8.
- ³⁵ G. Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, letter twenty-five, 23 February 1779, p. 123-4.
- ³⁶ G. Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, p. 136.
- ³⁷ John Ryland, *Reminiscences*, p. 54 as cited in G. Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, p. 136.
- ³⁸ G. Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, letter twenty-eight, January 1780, p. 137.
- ³⁹ They had married on 12 February 1750.
- ⁴⁰ G. Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, letter twenty-eight, January 1780, p. 138-9.
- ⁴¹ Hindmarsh claims that this fear was mentioned in writings by other Evangelical ministers. He noted that Henry Venn wrote to his wife in 1759 claiming that they must love one another as though they were unmarried so that ‘by this means we shall more likely to continue together, and not provoke the stroke of separation by an idolatrous love to one another’. John Venn, *Life and a Selection from the letters of the Late Rev. Henry Venn*, ed. Henry Venn, 2nd edn., 1841, p. 73 as cited in Hindmarsh, p. 62.
- ⁴² ‘Letter to Mrs Hannah More’ in *Letters of John Newton*, with biographical sketches and notes by Josiah Bull, [1869] (reprinted Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2007), p. 352.
- ⁴³ E. A. Wrigley and R.S. Schofield, *The Population History of England 1546-1871: A Reconstruction*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press),

- p. 236 as cited in Susannah R. Ottoway, *The Decline of Life: Old Age in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 21.
- ⁴⁴ Adrian Wilson, *The Making of Man-Midwifery: Childbirth in England, 1660–1770* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 15. Similar stories are told of births in France. See John McManners, *Death and the Enlightenment* (Oxford University Press, 1981), 8–9.
- ⁴⁵ G. Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, letter twenty-nine, 7 September 1780, p. 143.
- ⁴⁶ G. Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, letter thirty-one, 13 March 1782, p. 156.
- ⁴⁷ G. Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, letter thirty-three, 17 January 1785, p. 164-5.
- ⁴⁸ John Ryland, *Pastoral Memorials*, as cited in G. Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, p. 179.
- ⁴⁹ G. Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, letter thirty-seven, 23 January 1787, p. 186. This letter was also published in the *Baptist Magazine* 13 (1821), pp. 152-3.
- ⁵⁰ G. Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, letter thirty-eight, 2 February 1787, p. 189-90.
- ⁵¹ J. Newton, *Letters to a Wife, by the author of Cardiphonia*, (London: J. Johnson, 1793), Vol II [1755-1785], pp. 244 and 253ff.
- ⁵² His financial difficulties were related to an agreement with his father when he moved to London.
- ⁵³ Grant Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, letter forty-two, 30 April, 1788, p. 205.
- ⁵⁴ G. Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, letter forty-four, 20 January 1789, p. 214. This letter was also published in the *Baptist Magazine* (1860), pp. 496-8.
- ⁵⁵ G. Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, letter forty-four, 20 January 1789, p. 214.
- ⁵⁶ J E Ryland, *Pastoral Memorials: Selected from the Manuscripts of the late Revd John Ryland D.D. of Bristol: With a Memoir of the Author*, 2 vols (London: BJ Holdsworth, 1826-8) vol. 2, pp. 42-3 as cited in *Nonconformist Women Writers, 1720–1840*, 8 vols, ed. Timothy Whelan (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2011), viii, p. 308.
- ⁵⁷ ‘Diary of Frances Barrett Ryland’ (21 June 1789) in *Nonconformist Women Writers, 1720–1840*, VIII, p. 315.
- ⁵⁸ G. Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, letter fifty, 26 March 1791, pp. 241-50.

An Echo of Cowper in Time of War

Vincent Newey

Recent issues of the journal have included not only full-scale articles on relations between Cowper and other authors but also shorter ones noting brief yet suggestive references to the poet or his work. Another of these citations comes in Vera Brittain's celebrated autobiography of the First World War period, *Testament of Youth*, published in 1933. Brittain recalls how on the eve of 1915 she parted in London from the man she loved, Roland Leighton, lately enlisted and awaiting deployment to the front. Shortly afterwards, back home in Derbyshire, she had received an affectionate letter from Roland and then attended a service in the local church:

The next day, in church, Cowper's hymn, 'God moves in a mysterious way', so often sung during the War by a nation growing ever more desperately anxious to be reassured and consoled, almost started me weeping; as I listened with swimming eyes to its gentle, melodious verses, I wondered whether I should ever have sufficient understanding of the world's ironic patterns to be able to accept the comfort that they offered:

*Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
With blessings on your head.*

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.*

*Blind unbelief is sure to err;
And scan His work in vain;
God is His own interpreter,
And He will make it plain.*

For the first time, too, I began to realise that love, in addition to its heights and depths, had also its inconveniences. Thoughts of Roland were certainly not conducive to solid work for Pass Mods. . . .¹

The passage presents us with two orders of response. The first we may call the public and collective. Brittain records that Cowper's hymn provided a focus for people's urgent need of comfort and support amidst the strains and uncertainties of war. It is worth reflecting how readily the address to wavering believers, the 'fearful saints', transfers to the situation of men and women for whom threatening clouds were gathering across the Channel and in their immediate lives. The message is a simple one powerfully expressed: trust in God, all will ultimately be well and made clear. The verses must at the same time have spoken to and reinforced a general assumption that God was 'on our side' — as He was more specifically for the 'saints' themselves, the recipients of saving grace. It is surely to the point, moreover, that Cowper's standing as a national poet was at its height in the early part of the twentieth century. The popular Oxford selection of his poetry and prose, for example, found a place for the patriotic stanzas on 'Boadicea' and 'The Loss of the Royal George' and for a reprint of Walter Bagehot's landmark essay of 1855 which explores at length the 'essential English' character of Cowper's writings.² We may wonder if any in the congregations Brittain brings to mind knew Cowper not only as a writer of hymns but also as one who in verse and letters celebrated at length his country's imperial victories in the Seven Years War, lamented with a mixture of despondency and defiance her loss of the American colonies, and vented his savage indignation at the Continental power that 'pick'd the jewel out of England's crown'.³ Cowper had in fact worked through many thoughts and emotions of the kind Brittain's contemporaries were destined to experience in the years after 1914.

The other level of response is of course the personal. 'Gentle' and 'melodious' seem odd words to describe Cowper's evidently hard-driving and sonorous lines and are best seen perhaps as a reflection of the young Brittain's own sensitive state in the aftermath of her all-too-brief meeting with Roland. It is hardly surprising that, confronted by present difficulties and anxious about the future, she should doubt if she could ever come sufficiently to terms with 'the world's ironic patterns', the twists and turns, the shocks and strange progressions, to be able to embrace in practice the consoling wisdom she could grasp in theory. Are all things that happen, however dark or painful, part of an overarching

and benign scheme of Providence? Will God's plan and purposes be in the end revealed to humankind? Brittain reached no positive answer to these questions. Indeed, subsequent events led her in quite another direction. Not long after the time she almost wept while listening to 'God moves in a mysterious way' she got a letter from Roland in which he described 'the heap of hideous putrescence' and other horrors of the trenches. Her reply offers thoughts, including a conception of God, which leave little or no room for comfort:

'When I think of these things,' I told him in reply, 'I feel that that awful Abstraction, the unknown God, must be some dread and wrathful deity before whom I can only kneel and plead for mercy, perhaps in the words of a quaint hymn of George Herbert's that we used to sing at Oxford:

*Throw away thy wrath!
Throw away thy rod!
O my God
Take the gentle path!*⁴

Cowper tells us in his autobiographical memoir that a sudden encounter with Herbert's poems during his severe depression of the early 1750s turned his mind to religious matters and somewhat 'alleviated' his condition, but he was 'advised by a very near and dear relation to lay him aside, for he thought such an author was more likely to nourish my melancholy than to remove it'.⁵ Judging by Brittain's quotation and image of a 'dread and wrathful deity' before whom the sole hope is a desperate plea for mercy, Cowper's 'relation' (his brother, John?) had a point. Further effects of the war can only have intensified the young woman's bleak impressions. Roland was killed in action within a twelvemonth of the London trip, followed soon after by two of his and Vera's close friends, and finally by her brother. What, we may ask, did Brittain think then of the reassuring assertions of 'God moves in a mysterious way'?

Interestingly, Cowper too was carried by a tide of happenstance to a place where the trusting and optimistic spirit of his hymn could not hold sway or conviction. His, however, was a more explicit and extreme case than Brittain's. In his memorial sermon on the poet Samuel Greatheed says: 'Our dear departed friend conceived some presentiment of his sad reverse [the breakdown of January 1773] as it drew near; and during a

solitary walk in the fields, he composed a hymn, which is so appropriate to our subject, and so expressive of the faith and hope which he retained so long as he possessed himself.⁶ It is strange that commentators should have taken at face value this account of the genesis of ‘Light Shining Out of Darkness’ (to use the title rather than first line), as the editors of the Oxford *Poems* do for purposes of dating.⁷ An Evangelical clergyman addressing a like-minded audience, Greatheed would naturally wish to proclaim the strength of ‘faith and hope’ and to cast the scene of Cowper’s inspired act of worship in line with the familiar ‘open field’ convention of religious narratives and testimonies.⁸ It is equally possible that Cowper composed these well-wrought verses, not extempore or from the heart, but in studied formulation of an aspect of the religion he professed. Be all of this as it may, it was not long before he gave expression to very different feelings about God and His ways. The collapse of which Greatheed speaks produced, probably in 1774, the remarkable lines beginning ‘Hatred and vengeance, my eternal portion’ and ending with a visualization of existential torment and the penalty of a living death that includes the same imagery of ‘rod’ and wrathful deity that we met in Brittain’s recollection of Herbert:

Hard lot! Encompass’d with a thousand dangers,
 Weary, faint, trembling with a thousand terrors,
 Fall’n, and if vanquish’d, to receive a sentence
 Worse than Abiram’s:
 Him, the vindictive rod of angry justice
 Sent, quick and howling, to the centre headlong;
 I, fed with judgments, in a fleshly tomb, am
 Buried above ground.⁹

No sight of clouds ‘big with mercy’ here.

Roland Leighton fell in a hail of bullets while leading his men, not ‘over the top’, but through a gap in a hedge on the flank that was thought to be unknown to the enemy and thus safe passage. Vera received news of his death when expecting a call to confirm his arrival home — on the very day of and just before their wedding ceremony. She certainly knew about ‘the world’s ironic patterns’ — or what in passing we may call ‘acts of God’. So did Cowper, who made poetry out of them. Among the several examples two spring readily to mind.

include a thudding sense of release — ‘and then he sank’. To go down is to be freed from the effort and difficulties — one might say the tyranny — of staying up. This and other parts of the poem return us, in a sometimes subtle but always definite arc, to ‘God moves in a mysterious way’. Both pieces employ the so-called ‘common metre’ of English hymnody, the four lines of alternating ‘eights’ and ‘sixes’, though in ‘The Castaway’ Cowper adds a distinctive closing couplet which allows him to summarize, extend, or emphasize points and insights. There are in the above-quoted verse negative religious connotations, the drinking of the ‘stifling wave’ being a communion with death, a downwards viaticum, while the act of drowning is an inverse of the life-giving ritual of baptism. Sea and storm, which in the opening lines of ‘Light Shining Out of Darkness’ are the habitation of the all-powerful God, provide of course the setting for the whole narrative of ‘The Castaway’. In the end, seeing a ‘semblance’ of his own fate in that of the mariner, Cowper says specifically

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.

(ll. 61-6)

‘No voice divine. ...’ This can be viewed in three ways: there is a God who has purposefully elected to condemn the castaway; there is a God, but He has retreated from the world and left it to function without intervention; there is no God at all, only a spectacular universe operating by the laws of nature. Whether we favour one of these, none, or consider the issue undecidable, it remains that the moment refutes in one way or another the credo of Cowper’s famous hymn. Here especially Cowper appears as one no more able than Vera Brittain to ‘accept the comfort [his verses] offered’. This does not mean, however, that he grew incapable of positive affirmation. Where he had once rejoiced in glorifying God and in the ‘light’ that cometh out of ‘darkness’, at the last he embraced the darkness itself and thereby transcended it, becoming his own creator and interpreter, writing for all time his life into a singular destiny.

It should also be said in postscript that, as Vera Brittain's comment leads us to view them, these two works, 'God moves in a mysterious way' and 'The Castaway', show in distinct outline the polarities of Cowper's diverse poetic identity. He could write so as to bind the community together and as the driven outsider — on the one hand poet of social relationship, on the other poet of the self.

Notes

- ¹ Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1933), intro. Mark Bostridge (London: Virago, 2014), pp. 98-9. All references are to this edition. Whether deliberately or inadvertently Brittain omits the stanza beginning 'His purposes will ripen fast', which comes immediately before her and the hymn's last. This in no way affects the argument.
- ² The selection in question is *Cowper: Poetry and Prose*, ed. Humphrey Milford (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921). Bagehot is quoted from this source, p. 41.
- ³ For these examples and Cowper's deeply patriotic interest in the affairs of the nation, see my 'William Cowper and the Condition of England', in Vincent Newey and Ann Thompson (eds), *Literature and Nationalism* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1991), pp. 120-39. The famous words about 'the perfidy of France / That pick'd the jewel . . .' are from *The Task*, II. 264-65.
- ⁴ *Testament of Youth*, p. 174. Probably quoting from memory, Brittain transposes the first and second lines of Herbert's poem 'Discipline'.
- ⁵ *Adelphi*, in *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, ed. James King and Charles Ryskamp, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979-86), I, 9.
- ⁶ Samuel Greatheed, *A Practical Improvement of the Divine Counsel* (Newport Pagnell, 1800), p.18.
- ⁷ *The Poems of William Cowper*, ed. John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980-95), I, 484.
- ⁸ For this *topos*, see, for example, *The Lives of the Early Methodist Preachers*, ed. Thomas Jackson (London, 1837).
- ⁹ Lines 13-20. All references to Cowper's poetry are from *Poems*, ed. Baird and Ryskamp (n.7 above).

Book Review

John Bugg (ed.) *The Joseph Johnson Letterbook*

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Kate Bostock

At the start of his introduction to this first-ever edition of Joseph Johnson's *Letterbook*, John Bugg describes Johnson's bookshop as a hub for some of the most important writers and artists of the time, 'like City Lights in Beat-era San Francisco, or Sylvia Beach's Shakespeare and Company in 1920s Paris'. As an American academic at Fordham University, Bugg has successfully made a transatlantic leap to set Johnson in the context of the European enlightenment and the English book trade.

For anyone interested in the history of print culture in the late eighteenth century, the chance rediscovery of one of Joseph Johnson's business letterbooks has been akin to finding the holy grail. Johnson was in business as a bookseller-cum-publisher for almost fifty years. His *Letterbook* includes copy letters and memos written in the fifteen-year period leading up to 1809, the year of Johnson's death. He was the publisher of Joseph Priestley and of Thomas Paine, of Mary Wollstonecraft and Maria Edgeworth, and of course of John Newton and William Cowper. Leslie Chard considered Johnson 'the most important publisher in England from 1770 until 1810'.¹ His imprints included religion, science and medicine, languages, literature, politics, education, fiction and poetry. He was a shrewd businessman but one who also nurtured his authors. He was known by contemporaries for the weekly dinners that he gave at 72 St Paul's Churchyard, where he lived above the shop. Some of the greatest minds of the age met around his table to eat boiled cod, veal and vegetables.

It was thought that all the records of Johnson's business had disappeared, apart from a few letters found in his authors' archives. And then, from nowhere, this one small *Letterbook* surfaced in 1994 at Pickering & Chatto in London. It was then bought by the New York Public Library. An export licence was granted subject to photocopies of the *Letterbook's* pages being made available at the British Library. Until

the appearance of this edition by John Bugg, British scholars have had to make sense of the *Letterbook* via a mass of un-numbered and unwieldy photocopies. But his excellent edition now makes this key source for English literary history easily available.

The 217 copy letters and memos transcribed in this edition were mainly written by Johnson, or on his behalf, between the years 1795 and 1809 to some 130 correspondents. Most of the contents of the new edition come from the *Letterbook* itself, but Bugg has also usefully included a few of Johnson's earlier letters found in other archives and so far unpublished. These include five letters addressed to William Cowper.

The *Letterbook* brings to life the relations between a late eighteenth-century bookseller and his authors and printers. The letters also bear witness to the challenging conditions in which booksellers like Johnson had to do business. There was a constant threat of piracy from Scotland and beyond. Books had to be parcelled up and sent by carriage to the country or by ship, sometimes on long voyages to America and even India. Booksellers like Johnson were just beginning to invest in the burgeoning export business to the colonies, but payment could take years to arrive. Liberal-minded booksellers like Johnson ran the gauntlet of government suspicion as revolutionary ideas flooded in from abroad; one of the most moving letters in this collection was written by Johnson from the Kings Bench Prison where he was incarcerated in 1799 on the charge of seditious libel. And the frequency of Johnson's letters chasing non-payment of old debts, even from prison, helps explain why so many bookselling businesses foundered.

Towards the end of Johnson's lifetime he was recognised as 'the Father of the Trade'. But the business disappeared within a few decades of his death. Unlike some other prominent booksellers of the time such as the well-documented family businesses of John Murray and the Longmans, Joseph Johnson had no direct heirs. Gerald P. Tyson devoted a monograph to him, *Joseph Johnson, A Liberal Publisher* (University of Iowa Press, 1979), but its value was restricted by the lack of archival sources. Now, thanks to this edition of the rediscovered letterbook, we can document Johnson's business practice. John Bugg has provided an up-to-date biographical introduction and an assessment of Johnson's importance in the book trade. Additional sections in the introduction

discuss Johnson and science, Johnson's encouragement of women writers, in particular Mary Wollstonecraft whom he knew well, his role in the transatlantic book trade, and his trial and imprisonment.

As Bugg recognises, Joseph Johnson stands apart from most of his contemporaries for one particular reason. Unlike some more fashionable booksellers he was a dissenter. Johnson came from a Baptist family near Liverpool, and retained his social and professional connections with the nonconformists. He was apprenticed to a minor London bookseller who had ties to the dissenting community in Liverpool, and it was probably through these connections that he came into contact with Newton and later with William Cowper. On 13 March 1764 Newton was in London and wrote to his wife Polly, then in Liverpool, telling her to direct his correspondence care of Johnson.² This was the year that Joseph Johnson published Newton's anonymous *Authentic Narrative of Some Remarkable and Interesting Particulars in the Life of******, documenting Newton's early career as a slave trader and his religious conversion.

The *Letterbook* includes no letters to Newton himself. Presumably, once Newton moved from Olney to St Mary Woolnoth in London, a brisk walk away from St Paul's Churchyard, there was no need to write. But there are letters in the *Letterbook* about the printing and reprinting of Newton's works, both to the Warrington printer William Eyres and to Murray & Cochrane in Edinburgh. The print orders were substantial; in 1807 Johnson ordered 2000 more copies of *The Olney Hymns* from Murray & Cochrane, 750 more copies of *Cardiphonia* and 250 copies of Newton's entire *Works* in nine volumes.

As for the five previously unpublished letters to William Cowper, four come from the Hannay Collection at the Firestone Library at Princeton, and one from the Morgan Library in New York. The first dates from 1782, when Johnson was already at work on the publication of Cowper's first volume of poems. It is clear from Cowper's published letters that he was impressed by the quality of Johnson's editing. He had written to John Newton on 25 August 1781 to praise his new bookseller:

I forgot to mention that Johnson uses the discretion my poetship has allowed him with much discernment. He has suggested several alterations, or rather marked several defective passages which I have corrected much to the advantage of the poems.³

Thanks to Bugg's inclusion of these extra letters we can now understand at first hand Johnson's reluctance to include Newton's intended preface to the *Poems*. On 18 February 1782 Johnson wrote to Cowper to warn that the preface 'will infallibly prejudice the critics against the work before they have read a line, & their judgment has no small influence on the success of poetical compositions'. He does at the same time acknowledge 'Mr N's genius & worth'. Evidently, despite Johnson's own nonconformist background he was sensitive to contemporary Anglican antipathy to evangelicalism.

Any letters that Johnson might have written to Cowper about the lack of success of the 1782 *Poems*, or the remarkable success of the second volume containing *The Task*, published by Johnson in 1786, are yet to be found. And there are no references in the *Letterbook* to any payments owing to Cowper; Johnson of course had published the *Poems* at his own risk and Cowper was paid nothing for them. But, also undocumented in the *Letterbook*, when in 1793 Johnson published a fifth edition of *The Task* he presented Cowper with the profit.⁴

The second unpublished letter that Bugg provides is dated 17 September 1788. Johnson refers to Cowper's preoccupation with his translation of Homer and encloses an unnamed manuscript for him to look at. The remaining three letters, all from the Hannay Collection and dated 1791, refer to Johnson's plan for a 'Milton Gallery' to rival Boydell's successful Shakespeare Gallery. Johnson proposed that Henry Fuseli would provide the illustrations. Cowper subsequently agreed to act as editor and to provide translations of Milton's Latin and Italian poems, a project that he continued to work on until his death in 1800.

Cowper and Johnson never met. Cowper did however invite Johnson to visit Weston Underwood in the summer of 1791. Johnson responded to the invitation on 22 August that year:

I thank you very much for your kindness, there is no excursion for me this summer, my first and last officers are both ill, & I think it my duty rather to work double tides than dismiss a servant for the visitation of God.

I am Dr Sir

Yr obedt

J. Johnson

The Milton project was to bring Cowper into contact with his future biographer William Hayley. The *Letterbook* includes several mentions of the publication of *The Life of Cowper*, one of the few books that Johnson published for which he failed to obtain copyright. According to Hayley's own *Memoirs*, in 1801 Johnson travelled to Hayley's house at Felpham in Sussex by post-chaise to meet him and discuss terms. Hayley described the meeting thus:

Terms were soon adjusted with the author, when Johnson, after an ineffectual contest, acquiesced in the positive requisition of Hayley to have his work printed in his native city of Chichester.⁵

For Johnson it must have been an unsatisfactory meeting. Unusually, Johnson's role was restricted to distributing the book rather than editing it and having it printed; 'You are sensible I have not interfered in the slightest manner in the work in which you are engaged', he wrote to Hayley on 4 January 1802, while offering him the benefit of his forty years' experience as a bookseller. Later, in January 1807, he was to advise one of his authors, Elizabeth Hamilton of Edinburgh, that 'A partnership between author and bookseller I do not recommend. It rarely turns out satisfactory'. He advised Miss Hamilton that authors should cede control of publication to their bookseller, presumably in return for an agreed fee.

... the Authors have nothing to do but to send their manuscript in a legible state to the bookseller; furnishing paper and employing a printer and corrector of the press, advertising, vending, in short, everything else will be his business.

John Bugg's edition of the *Letterbook* is, as one would hope from Oxford University Press, elegantly produced, with generous notes and some useful supporting appendices. There are twelve black and white illustrations. The four appendices include business letters written after Johnson's death, no doubt using up some spare pages at a time when paper was expensive. Bugg also provides a hard-to-locate account of Johnson's dinners by an American visitor, William Austin, taken from *Letters from London Written During the Years 1802 & 1803* (Boston, 1804). Austin found himself dining at Johnson's house in St Paul's Churchyard alongside Johnson's two great friends, the painter Fuseli

and the mathematician John Bonnycastle. The conversation ranged far and wide, but as Austin writes, ‘The English don’t say much till the first course is finished. But their manner of eating soon throws them into a gentle fever, which invites to sociability, when they have sufficient confidence in their company’.

The mention of Johnson’s friends Fuseli and Bonnycastle is significant. When Johnson died they were beneficiaries in Johnson’s will. Johnson died a comparatively wealthy man, no doubt thanks in part to his ownership of Cowper’s copyrights. His estate was valued at £60,000, and Bugg refers to the division of the estate between friends and family, making reference to an often-quoted article by Phyllis Mann, ‘Death of a London Bookseller’⁶. The business, to be known as J. Johnson and Co. was put into the hands of Johnson’s assistants, his great-nephews John Miles and Rowland Hunter. But neither Mann nor Bugg were perhaps aware of a privately-printed collection of papers put together by Johnson’s nephew, also called Joseph Johnson, who was co-executor of the estate with Miles and Hunter. The collection, ‘References to the Case of Mr Fuseli’s Legacy under the will of the late Joseph Johnson’ lurks in the British Library, awaiting a full study.

Hunter and Miles did their best to exclude their co-executor from the settlement of the estate, and he found it necessary to contest the will in the Ecclesiastical Courts. He accused Miles and Hunter of failing to hand over the promised legacies to Fuseli and Bonnycastle, and of withholding information about the copyrights owned by the company. He had their correspondence printed as a record, in readiness for the lawsuit. The bound compilation includes sensational accounts, ‘printed and sold by all Booksellers and Newsmen, 1817, Price One Shilling’, of a fraud committed by Miles and brought before the Court of Chancery in 1817. Despite this, the company lingered on until it was taken over by Simpkin, Marshall & Co, whose records were apparently destroyed in World War II. How this one *Letterbook* survived remains unknown.

The only other small criticism one might have of this otherwise excellent edition is of the index, which is underwhelming, at least in reference to William Cowper. The *Letterbook* contains at least two letters written by Johnson in 1796, to Messrs Morison of Perth who had printed Cowper’s poems without permission, perhaps misunderstanding

how Johnson had registered the copyright of the poems. Similarly Johnson's copyright dispute with Joseph Cottle, the Bristol-based publisher of Wordsworth and Coleridge, is not indexed under Cowper's name. Such piracy was an important indicator of Cowper's popularity. Johnson's fury at the theft is evident from his letter to Cottle, dated 6 December 1804: 'Had you, in your collection, taken thirty or even sixty lines from Cowper I should not have objected, but you have taken nearly one thousand, this is insufferable...'

But despite these minor criticisms, this edition of Joseph Johnson's *Letterbook* is a magnificent addition to our understanding of the history of publishing in this period and a work of real scholarship. Beg, borrow, or better still buy, a copy.

Notes

- ¹ Leslie Chard, 'Joseph Johnson: Father of the Book Trade', *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 79 (1975), 82.
- ² I am indebted to Marylynn Rouse of the John Newton Project for this reference.
- ³ *Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, ed. James King and Charles Ryskamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), I, 513.
- ⁴ Russell, Norma, *A Bibliography of William Cowper to 1837* (Oxford: Oxford Bibliographical Society, 1963), 45.
- ⁵ William Hayley, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of William Hayley, Esq., the Friend and Biographer of Cowper*, (London: Henry Colburn, 1823), II, 32.
- ⁶ *Keats-Shelley Memorial Bulletin*, 15 (1964), 9.

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the *Shandean*

The Shandean is a peer-reviewed scholarly journal dedicated to the life, work and times of Laurence Sterne.

The Editors invite discussion of Sterne and his contemporaries within the broader contexts of eighteenth-century literature and culture. We welcome scholarship on his impact on material culture and visual depiction, on related cultural topics such as the Grand Tour, sentimentalism and the abolition movement, and on reception (imitations, afterlife, translations, adaptations).

Send your offers of articles, notes and queries, and books for review to the Editor at theshandean@fastmail.fm.

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