

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.

The irony at the heart of ‘On the Death of Mrs. Throckmorton’s Bullfinch’ is that to protect Bully’s delicate feathers Maria Throckmorton got him a cage made of ‘wands from Ouse’s side’, rather than one of metal, but in so doing exposed him to the deadly assault of a foraging rat:

For, aided both by ear and scent,
Right to his mark the Monster went—

Ah, Muse! forbear to speak,
Minute, the horrors that ensued,
His teeth were strong, the cage was wood—

He left poor Bully’s beak.

(ll. 49-54)

This is Cowper’s dream of how death might come, for captive birds and domesticated poets alike — on a sudden, violently, when ‘All seem’d secure’ (l. 31). Yet horror is of course not the only ingredient of this tragical poem. Cowper takes a sober sad delight in Mrs Throckmorton’s improvidence, for being broken in upon provides a quick way out, be the confines those of the cage or of the ‘fleshy tomb’.

In ‘The Castaway’ ironies abound. The mariner canted overboard in a storm, in whose ordeal Cowper near the end of life traces the shape of his own past and present existence, feels the peculiar pain of being ‘Deserted, and his friends so nigh’ (l. 36). The man’s comrades try to rescue their ‘outcast mate’ (23) by throwing him ‘[t]he coop, the cask, the floated cord’ (27, but in this ironic universe the wind that carries to them his cries for help also drives the ship inexorably away from him. At the climax we learn the bitter truth that the more the sailor struggles to stay afloat, ‘[s]upported by despair of life’ (18), the closer he comes to death by exhaustion:

At length, his transient respite past,
His comrades, who before
Had heard his voice in every blast,
Could catch the sound no more;
For then, by toil subdued, he drank
The stifling wave, and then he sank.

(ll. 43-8)

If Cowper experienced a subterranean glee at Bully’s quick demise and escape from confinement, the mixed impressions given by this stanza

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).