

# Cowper's 'The Snail'

Ben Field

I am a kind of human snail, locked in and condemned by my own nature. The antients believed that the moist track left by the snail as it crept was the snail's own essence, depleting its body little by little; the farther the snail toiled, the smaller it became, until it finally rubbed itself out.

Cynthia Ozick<sup>1</sup>

## The paradox of Cowper and home

Domestic happiness, thou only bliss  
Of Paradise that has survived the fall!  
Though few now taste thee unimpair'd and pure,  
Or tasting, long enjoy thee ...

(*The Task*, III, 39–42)

Cowper has been described as 'the poet of home life', but in fact he never tasted 'pure' domestic life, as the poem puts it, inasmuch as he remained unmarried and preferred to avoid responsibility for the households in which he lived.<sup>2</sup> This is one of several apparent paradoxes about this 'self-contradictory man'<sup>3</sup> and one which is contained perfectly by 'The Snail', Cowper's 1799 translation of Vincent Bourne's 'Limax' and perhaps the best of his Bourne translations.<sup>4</sup> The poem describes a portable home, unified with its tenant, and is translated from a Latin poem by one of Cowper's schoolmasters; in its content and in its intertextual links with other works, 'The Snail' describes Cowper's need to generate a personal homeliness during his time in Norfolk, and the very act of producing the poem amounts to the creation of a protective shell at this very vulnerable stage in Cowper's own life. This essay will briefly address the idea of home in Cowper's life and work, in general terms, before explicating some specific details of the poem; it will then trace some lines of affiliation between speaker and subject and explore the comforting and nostalgic implications of the very act of translation, to show how this poem embodies Cowper's relationship to the idea of home.

*The Task* depicts various idealised versions of home, including the ‘low-roofed lodge’ which is called ‘the *peasant’s nest*’ (I, 227):

Oft have I wished the peaceful covert mine.  
Here, I have said, at least I should possess  
The poet’s treasure, silence, and indulge  
The dreams of fancy, tranquil and secure.

(I, 233–6)

This recalls the summer house at Orchard Side, which Cowper describes in a letter to Joseph Hill written in the same year in which *The Task* was published:

I write in a nook that I call my Bouderie; It is a Summer house not much bigger than a Sedan chair, the door of which opens into the garden which is now crowded with pinks, roses, and honey-suckles, and the window into my neighbour’s orchard [...] Having lined it with garden-mats and furnished it with a table and two chairs, here I write in summer-time [...] secure from all noise, and a refuge from all intrusion.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the garden-mat lining and the cuteness of the summer-house, Cowper comically acknowledges the likely reality of the peasant’s nest and the hyperbole of pastoral tropes, in a letter to Lady Hesketh the following year:

You must always understand, my Dear, that when poets talk of Cottages, hermitages, and such like matters, they mean a house with 6 sashes in front, two comfortable parlours, a smart stair-case, and three bed-chambers of convenient dimensions; in short, exactly such a house as this.<sup>6</sup>

Elsewhere in his letters and poetry, especially in ‘Tirocinium’ and ‘Retirement’, Cowper advocates passionately for the importance of home life, an emphasis which has led to some exaggeration and misrepresentation of his domesticity; for example, J. C. Bailey says that Cowper ‘lived in a dull and obscure country village among old maids and dissenting clergymen and knew nothing of the commanding minds of his day’.<sup>7</sup> This judgement is heavy-handed almost to the point of falsehood, but does reflect the high importance given to the *domesticity* of domestic bliss in Cowper’s work.

With all this in mind, let us remind ourselves that from an early age Cowper did not have a home. After his mother’s death when he was six, he lived at the miserable boarding school run by Dr Pittman, then with

Mrs Disney the oculist; after his years at Westminster, he lived with Mr Chapman the solicitor and at the Inns of Court. Although there seems to have been the opportunity for settled domestic life with Theadora in 1763, he found himself unable or unwilling to act, and a short time later he had his most well-documented breakdown and left London, living first at Dr Nathaniel Cotton's and then as a bachelor in Huntingdon for a time before moving in with the Unwins. Cowper's life with Mary Unwin was a long period of domestic stability, only brought to an end by her death. Cowper spent his last days in Norfolk, and 'The Snail' was written during this last displacement from his home.

## The poem

### The Snail

To grass, or leaf, or fruit, or wall,  
 The snail sticks close, nor fears to fall,  
 As if he grew there, house and all,  
 Together. 5

Within that house secure he hides  
 When danger imminent betides  
 Of storm, or other harm besides  
 Of Weather.

Give but his horns the slightest touch,  
 His self-collecting pow'r is such, 10  
 He shrinks into his house with much  
 Displeasure.

Where'er he dwells, he dwells alone,  
 Except himself has chatells none,  
 Well satisfied to be his own 15  
 Whole treasure.

Thus hermit-like his life he leads,  
 Nor partner of his banquet needs,  
 And if he meet one, only feeds  
 The faster. 20

Who seeks him must be worse than blind,  
 (He and his house are so combined),  
 If, finding it, he fails to find  
 Its master.<sup>8</sup>

I propose to tease out the resonances of some key phrases in the poem in which Cowper is alluding to other English poets in his verbal choices as translator; the use of allusion combines with Cowper's thematic exploration of *home*, such that the very act of writing the poem generates an inward comfort and homeliness that cannot be taken from him.

'house and all'

The phrase 'house and all' in line three briefly misleads the reader – for a moment we understand this as an image of continuance or integration in which the snail is a natural part of the house on whose *wall* he is affixed. This reading is corrected by 'that house' in line five: the real home of the snail is not the one to which he temporarily affixes himself, but rather the one which surrounds and extends from his own body.

'danger imminent'

With this phrase, we shift from a material to a spiritual register. The poetic inversion certainly achieves a good deal more metrical smoothness than 'imminent danger', and is a Spenserian, rather than Miltonic, phrase.<sup>9</sup> The phrase 'imminent danger' is common in evangelical literature, found, for example, in Doddridge's works and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and its presence here hints at a spiritual, even allegorical, reading of the snail as soul.

'Give but his horns the slightest touch, / [...] shrinks'

With the third stanza, the language and allusions engineer a slightly more surprising shift, from the spiritual to the erotic. The sympathetic image and especially the use of 'shrinks' recalls this passage from Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*:

Or as the snail, whose tender horns being hit,  
Shrinks backward in his shelly cave with pain,  
And there, all smoth' red up, in shade doth sit,  
Long after fearing to creep forth again ...<sup>10</sup>

These lines describe Venus reacting as she sees that Adonis has been gored by a boar. This usage can be admitted into the sense set up by Cowper's poem through the function of eyes, which may gaze attentively, as in 'The Snail', or with love, as in *Venus and Adonis*, but

do not come into direct contact with the objects of their curiosity or desire. Venus shows a pronounced preference for not-seeing when the object of her desire is injured, made more hurtful because *touching* has been refused by Adonis and because he has been touched and penetrated by the boar – her love rival, for Adonis declined her company in favour of hunting. The almost playful layering in *Venus and Adonis* is inverted in ‘The Snail’: we witness the implicit meeting of the eyes of the snail, inquisitively extended on stalks, and the eyes of the poet, generously taking in the detail of the creature.

The flaccid withdrawal of the snail’s horns matches the softness of Venus’s desires, which are based on looking. Adonis has snubbed these desires, choosing to hunt rather than see Venus. The hard and violently penetrative tusk is the culmination of this rivalry between Venus and the boar, and the sudden inversion of Adonis’s desire to pursue by his quarry’s refusal to flee brings his preference for action to its terminal point, after which Venus can never have him. This is a characteristically complex overlaying of power, gaze, and rejection, and the quietly reported sexual narrative is almost lost in the sensitively drawn image of these lines. The poem does not show us the mortal thrust, instead describing the reaction of Venus when she looks once again at Adonis. This positioning of the narrative view and its emphasis on the act of looking reflects the voyeuristic position of the reader, bringing them into a closer identification with Venus in her misery and heightening the emotional pitch. The passage suggests other ramifications, but the effect of the lines proceeds from the perceptive and caring vision of the snail rather than the latent tale of fraught longing evoked by the snail in *Venus and Adonis* – and part of this effect is the memorably evocative *shrinking* that we find in Cowper’s poem.<sup>11</sup>

Shakespeare’s *shrinking* snail also exerts an indirect influence on Cowper, mediated by Erasmus Darwin. Cowper wrote his admiring verses ‘Lines Addressed to Dr. Darwin, Author of the Botanic Garden’ in 1792, having in 1789 reviewed for *The Analytical Review* ‘The Loves of Plants’, the second part of Erasmus Darwin’s long poem *The Botanic Garden*.<sup>12</sup> In the review, Cowper speaks highly of the poem in general and particularly admires the following passage: ‘Now with young wonder touch the sliding snail, / Admire his eye-tip’d horns, and painted

mail' (ll. 147-8). He notes that 'There is a beauty in that expression, the *eye-tip'd horns of the snail*, which an ordinary writer would not have attained in half a dozen laboured couplets'.<sup>13</sup> Although *horns* is not being set to unusual use here, and there is a great deal of poetic precedent for Cowper's use of the word, the praise given to Darwin's lines in this review marks them as an influence, and earlier in the same poem Darwin uses the same image – 'Slide here, ye horned snails, with varnish'd shells' (l. 29).<sup>14</sup> Both Cowper and Darwin shared a curiosity about the natural world, but their approaches could hardly be more different: Cowper's nature descriptions are organised by the principle of association, Darwin's by taxonomic rigour; Cowper writes empathetically of the snail, and perhaps would not have included its response to touch except for the literary precedent, whereas Darwin's speaker performs the touching himself and describes his keenness to do it.<sup>15</sup>

'feeds / The faster'

Like Darwin, Cowper was not only a keen observer of the natural world but an avid gardener, and as such we can be sure that he knew about the potential for snails to damage or destroy his handiwork. Snails are warded off in the early Latin poem 'Horti Ad Floram Dedicato. 1753'. In 'The Snail', the creature's dinner is essentially antisocial, as he prefers no company, seeks to deprive any guests of a meal, and plunders the agronomic efforts of others. However, the poem's empathetic rendering relates partly to a sense of shared identity between snail and poet. As such, there is tension between Cowper's recognition of the snail's greedy dependence and his own parasitic lifestyle. This may be fully resolved by reading the poet as a gardener and the snail as a pest, which permits some liberality of feeling about the snail so long as it does not intrude or aggress – we see this in *The Task*:

I would not enter on my list of friends  
(Though graced with polish'd manners and fine sense,  
Yet wanting sensibility) the man  
Who needlessly sets foot upon a worm.  
An inadvertent step may crush the snail  
That crawls at evening in the public path:  
But he that has humanity, forewarn'd,

Will tread aside, and let the reptile live.  
The creeping vermin, loathsome to the sight,  
And charged perhaps with venom, that intrudes,  
A visitor unwelcome, into scenes  
Sacred to neatness and repose, the alcove,  
The chamber, or refectory, may die:  
A necessary act incurs no blame.

[...]

The sum is this: if man's convenience, health,  
Or safety interfere, his rights and claims  
Are paramount, and must extinguish theirs.

(VI, 560-73; 581-3)

This passage relates closely to an observation Cowper makes in a letter to Unwin, written during the period at which he is working on *The Task*, in which he confides that 'I allow the life of an animal to be fairly taken away, when it interferes either with the Interest or convenience of Man. Consequently Snails and all reptiles that spoil our crops either of fruit or grain may be destroyed if we can catch them'.<sup>16</sup> In both of these passages the snail is an absolute inferior to mankind, subject to destruction by man, and generously allowed to live only so long as it does not intrude – even in the first excerpt there is no engagement with or description of the snail, only a broad censure of unnecessary killing. 'The Snail' is a rather different case. The subject is brought into such sustained and sympathetic focus that to 'extinguish' takes on the character of murder.

Before further discussion of the murder of snails, we should note Cowper's use of the word 'vermin' to describe snails in *The Task*. We see the same use in a 1790 letter to Clotworthy Rowley, in which Cowper describes booksellers as 'the most dilatory of mankind', asks if Rowley is 'possessed of any secret that will make a snail gallop', and calls them 'tedious vermin' – referring to their slowness, rather than any other snail-like qualities.<sup>17</sup> In specific relation to the idea of home, vermin, though not specifically snails, are imagined in Cowper's description, in a 1786 letter to Newton, of the 'forlorn and woeful spectacle' of Orchard Side 'deserted of its inhabitants', which has become 'the habitation of vermin and the image of desolation.'<sup>18</sup>

Cowper's sense of the unimportance of a snail's death is also suggested by his remarks on William Lawrence Brown's *An Essay on Sensibility* (published in *The Analytical Review*):

In page 142 we find a *foe quash'd*. We thought the term confined to the bar, where long usage has made it almost tolerable, and in poetry we did not expect it. Let indictments be *quash'd*; and we have no objection to the *quashing of snails, slugs, and rotten eggs*, but for Sensibility's sake let us not *quash* our enemies.<sup>19</sup>

In this 'quashing of snails' we may hear an echo of Gay's 'The Butterfly and the Snail', where the reader is exhorted to 'crush then the slow, the pilfering race'.<sup>20</sup> The suggestion of foes being quashed or crushed, snail-like, seems especially abhorrent to Cowper in this poem, partly for the lack of euphony but also because, as a fate which Cowper himself visited upon the pests in his garden, it is a peculiarly undignified way to describe the destruction of a human enemy.

'hermit-like'

The image of the hermit is a standard figure in the Spenserian verse of the eighteenth century; but instead of being ascetically uninterested in his cell or even nomadic, Cowper's snail is a hermit who is identified by and identical with his home. The possibility of company or friendship is fraught in the poem, and even the 'harm besides / Of weather' in lines 7–8 may include the arrival of a partner – which is seen as negative if not outright threatening in lines 18–20. This leads the snail to his 'hermit-like' existence, and yet there is sad resignation when compared with the desire for companionship elsewhere in Cowper's writing:

I praise the Frenchman, his remark was shrew'd–  
How sweet, how passing sweet is solitude!  
But grant me still a friend in my retreat,  
Whom I may whisper, solitude is sweet.

'Retirement', ll. 739–42

This hermitude of the snail recalls the 'hermitage' in the letter to Lady Hesketh quoted earlier in this paper, in which Cowper poked fun at the surprisingly material comforts of most 'hermitages'. However, the idea of 'chatells none' is one of the conditions of hermitude in the poem, and



often in his letters Cowper (albeit disingenuously) represents himself as having few possessions.

‘he / [...] Its master’

The sexing of the snail in this poem aligns with the overwhelmingly masculine snails found in Shakespeare, the Bible, and in literature more broadly; and ‘limax’ is a masculine noun. However, there is a poem by John Bunyan called ‘Upon A Snail’, in which the snail is female. Bunyan wrote the poem for the instruction of children, but Cowper might have known it. It was first published 1686 in a book of rhymes for children, republished in 1724 under the title *Divine Emblems for Children*. Bunyan’s poem focuses solely on the persistence and success of the snail, with the strength of his image relying on the snail’s surprising success in the face of her apparent resourcelessness; he does not evoke the vulnerability of the snail, and uses no images which might evoke the material characteristics of a snail (eyes on stalks, shell, trail, sliminess, softness). The second half of the six-stanza poem offers a ‘comparison’ between the snail – slow but sure – and the steadfast Christian soul. It’s difficult to know what to make of Cowper’s sexing of his snail; perhaps it’s a gesture of masculine self-reliance?

### **The homeliness of translation**

Cowper found employment necessary to his stability and wellbeing, and after completion of *The Task* he sought this in translation. The choice of texts to translate is revealing in its own right. His version of Homer is a single activity that brings together the comparative exercise of his school days, comparing the Greek to Pope’s translation; the fierce rivalry he felt with Pope for the full length of his mature poetic life; and his admiration of Milton’s style. The translations of Gay into Latin and Bourne into English also represent an employment which creates a return to childhood. Cowper’s early fondness for Gay’s fables is well-established, and Vincent Bourne was his usher at Westminster. Additionally, Bourne translated some of Gay’s work into Latin, and Cowper had previously translated some of Bourne’s Latin work into English.<sup>21</sup> This triangulation creates a particular homeliness around the act of translating Bourne.

As with Churchill, whom in ‘Table-Talk’ Cowper claims ‘[c]ontemporaries all surpassed’ (670), Cowper’s affection for Bourne may have suggested critical positions that required *post hoc* justifications. In a 1781 letter to William Unwin he explains

I love the memory of Vinny Bourne. I think him a better Latin poet than Tibullus, Propertius, Ausonius, or any of the Writers in *his* way, except Ovid, and not at all inferior to *Him*. I love him too with a Love of Partiality, because he was Usher of the 5<sup>th</sup> form at Westminster when I pass’d through it.<sup>22</sup>

In similar vein, Cowper writes again to Unwin in 1783 about Bourne’s translations of ballads by Gay and poems by Prior, observing that

The Ballads that Bourne has translated, beautifull in themselves are still more beautifull in his version of them, infinitely surpassing in my judgment, all that Ovid or Tibullus have left behind them. They are quite as elegant, and far more touching and pathetic than the tenderest strokes of either.<sup>23</sup>

This is high praise indeed, and Cowper’s affection for Bourne and his works was enduring; he is translating him during the late Norfolk period, but as early as 1777 he had asked Hill to send a copy of Bourne’s poems to Olney.<sup>24</sup>

There is personal warmth of feeling as well as appreciation for Bourne’s craft of verse in Cowper’s reflections on him. He writes to Samuel Rose in 1788 that

I shall have great pleasure in taking now and then a peep at my old friend Vincent Bourne, the neatest of all men in his versification, though when I was under his ushership at Westminster, the most slovenly in his person. He was so inattentive to his boys, and so indifferent whether they brought him good or bad exercises, or none at all, that he seem’d determined, as he was the best, so to be the last Latin poet of the Westminster line; a plot which I believe he has executed very successfully, for I have not heard of any who has at all deserved to be compared with him.<sup>25</sup>

Cowper’s last point here is very witty, and debunked only by Cowper’s own Latin poetry. The point of Cowper’s history with Vincent Bourne is worth recalling in relation to his work on ‘The Snail’ and other poems during his time in Norfolk. Bourne was selected by Cowper because Bourne himself was a token reminder of Cowper’s Westminster days, and because the translation of Bourne was an activity first undertaken

during Cowper's years in Olney. Intriguingly, Cowper began translating Gay's 'The Butterfly and the Snail' shortly before turning to 'Limax', although he only produced the title and opening couplet. The links between Gay and Bourne are clear: Cowper was always reminded of one by the other, and sentimentally invested in both.<sup>26</sup>

### **Home thoughts**

Martin Priestman, writing on *The Task*, gives several examples of topography as an organising principle of Cowper's poetry, one of which is 'The Snail':

Another way of being comically at once abroad and at home is by taking the home itself on the journey, like the snail in the best of Cowper's translations from Vincent Bourne [...] The point in all these cases is protection from exposure, and therefore from real contact with the conditions of the journey. Such protection often seems to strike Cowper as so paradoxical that he leaves such images simply to stand in his poems in all their absurdity or miraculousness.<sup>27</sup>

The recognition of this 'paradox' is, in its simplest application, borne out by Cowper's pleasure in walking even when adverse conditions led Mary Unwin to stay at home. However, this strolling is mediated and reshaped by the reflection and versification of *The Task*, and the sofa and the walk are the two poles between which the poem necessarily oscillates.

Because the translation of 'The Snail' was made in the spring of 1799, it is tempting to respond to the poem in more final, grave, and valedictory terms than the text itself invites. Nonetheless, the poem is more than the translation of a skilled hobbyist, and both the text and the act of its creation arise from Cowper's relationship to the idea of home. The closing moment of the poem is a light quip, but reminds us that Cowper 'once passed Pope's Lodgings, when a boy, and looked for him but he was not to be seen'.<sup>28</sup> In its particular context of composition in Dereham, 1799, the near-unity of self and home in the poem makes some claim of homeliness in the very creation of the text and the existence of its creator despite Cowper's recent removal from familiar life; further than this, the closeness of the shell is not only cosily self-containing but also a confinement, recalling the phrases 'fleshly tomb' and '[b]uried

above ground' in the much earlier 'Hatred and Vengeance' (ll. 19-20). Vincent Newey has written of the 'topos of the happy-unhappy shut-in' which the poetry of Gray and Cowper inaugurated.<sup>29</sup> If 'Hatred and Vengeance' delineates the darkest and most Calvinist version of the idea in Cowper's poetry, 'The Snail' offers a more happily secular and down to earth vision. Like 'To Mary', it is written in a gentler variation of the more violent Sapphic metre which Cowper used for 'Hatred and Vengeance', and the metrical similarities between 'To Mary' and 'The Snail' suggest that the solitary domesticity of the latter is an apt emblem for this stage in Cowper's life, after Mary's death in 1796.

More happily, the image of the snail also recalls the famous portrait of Cowper in his cambric cap. Indeed, snails and hats remind us of the Fool in *King Lear*, who says 'I can tell why a snail has a house. [...] Why, to put his head in; not to give it away' (I. v. 21, 23). This in turn reminds us of Rosalind in *As You Like It*, declaring that she would be as well wooed by a snail as by Orlando: 'though he comes slowly, he carries his house on his head; a better jointure, I think, than you make a woman: besides he brings his destiny with him' (IV. i. 49-51). Although Rosalind then descends into banter about cuckoldry, the endearing image of the snail resonates with Cowper's life with women and the 'happy man' who would 'make his fate his choice' in *The Task* (VI, ll. 906, 910).

The snail of the poem is very much like Cowper, easily injured, carefully observing the world with inquisitive and mobile eye-stems; also self-possessed and somewhat parasitic. He is no fixed and static limpet, but moves, taking his home with him wherever he goes. 'The Snail' as a translation is an example of this, as a satisfying and self-contained activity that reaffirms his identity as poet and reconnects him with poems and people that he knew and loved in his youth. This self-collecting shell is irremovably anchored to the body of the poet or gastropod and protects it from the harshness of the world. Erasmus Darwin wrote that 'if a part of [a snail's] shell be broken it becomes repaired in a similar manner with mucus, which by degrees hardens into shell.'<sup>30</sup> In the same way, the poet's defensive shell is made of language, a perceptive and controlling tool by which he may seize and reorder his world, which requires continual secretion and hardening in order to protect him. Cowper's life-long production of poetry was a way of

carrying his home with him wherever he went; writing left a visible trail of where he had been, and this record allowed him to revisit people, books, and moments of earlier life so as to enter into the homely comfort of his memory. This is, in varying degrees, true of much of Cowper's writing, but is neatly illustrated by this poem in particular.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> 'The Seam of The Snail' in *New Yorker* (1989); repr. in *Metaphor and Memory* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 109-10.
- <sup>2</sup> Charles Bullock, ed., *The Poet of Home Life: Centenary Memories of William Cowper* (London: Home Words, [1900]).
- <sup>3</sup> James King, *William Cowper: A Biography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1986), 93.
- <sup>4</sup> Hayley seems to have thought so. As noted by Ryskamp and Baird, 'Hayley published all but three of the translations from Bourne, omitting 'The Grief of an Heir', 'The Serious Trifler', and 'My Taper His Perpetual Aim'. He followed the order of the poems in the Norfolk MSS, except to draw attention to 'The Snail' by placing it last'; see John Baird and Charles Ryskamp, eds, *The Poems of William Cowper*, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980-95), III, 358. Unless otherwise noted, all citations from Cowper's poems are from this edition. Although Bourne and Cowper both wrote about a snail, *Limax* can refer to a snail or a slug, with *strigilis* and *cochlea* specifically indicating *slug* and *snail* respectively. The text of Bourne's 'Limax' is reproduced here in full:

Frondebis, et pomis, herbisque tenaciter hæret  
Limax, et seeum portat ubique domum.  
Tutus in hac sese occultat, si quando perielum  
Imminet, aut subitæ decedit imber aquæ.  
Cornua vel leviter tangas, se protinus in se  
Colligit, in proprios contrahiturque lares.  
Secum habitat quacunq̄ue habitat; sibi tota supellex;  
Solæ, quas amat, quasque requirit, opes.  
Secum potat, edit, dormit; sibi in ædibus isdem  
Conviva et comes est, hospes et hospitium.  
Limacem, quacunq̄ue sit, quacunq̄ue moretur,  
(Siquis eum quærat) dixeris esse domi.

Vincent Bourne, *Poematia* (London: J. Bettenham, 1764), 231. The Latin text is also printed in Baird and Ryskamp, *Poems*, III, 382.

- <sup>5</sup> Cowper to Hill, 29 June 1785 (*Letters*, II, 359-60). All citations from Cowper's letters are taken from James King and Charles Ryskamp, eds, *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979-86).
- <sup>6</sup> Cowper to Lady Hesketh, 26 November 1786 (*Letters*, II, 599).
- <sup>7</sup> J. C. Bailey, ed., *The Poetical Works of William Cowper* (London: Methuen, 1905), ix.
- <sup>8</sup> As printed by Ryskamp and Baird, *Poems*, III, 235. It appears in the Milford and Milford/Russell editions at 560; in Bailey 611-2.
- <sup>9</sup> It occurs several times in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, for example: III, iv, 58, 4; III, x, 41, 3. See Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. by Hiroshi Yamashita *et al.* (London: Longman, 2006), 331, 384.
- <sup>10</sup> *Venus and Adonis*, ll. 1033-36. All Shakespeare quotations are taken from Gary Taylor *et al.*, eds, *The New Oxford Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
- <sup>11</sup> Shakespeare extends the possibilities of reading softness and hardness as qualities of love in another use of 'tender horns', in *Love's Labour's Lost*: 'Love's feeling is more soft and sensible / Than are the tender horns of cockl'd snails' (IV, iii, 307). The snail is used to signify slowness in *Merchant of Venice*, II, v, 45; *Richard III*, IV, iii, 53; *As You Like It*, II, vii, 145; a mere mention of snails in *Midsummer Night's Dream* II, ii, 23.
- <sup>12</sup> See Erasmus Darwin, *The Botanic Garden: a poem in two parts* (1791; Menston, Yorkshire: Scholar Press, 1971). Darwin was also an influence on Cowper's late poem 'Montes glaciales in oceano Germanico Natantes' and its English version, 'On the Ice-Islands Seen Floating in the Germanic Ocean' (1799), and the subject of 'To Doctor Darwin' (1792).
- <sup>13</sup> *Letters*, V, 90, 98, 99.
- <sup>14</sup> From Darwin's 'The Loves of Plants': 'Slide here, ye horned snails, with varnish'd shells' (l. 29; *The Botanic Garden*, 137).
- <sup>15</sup> Cowper also invokes the horns of a snail in a letter to Joseph Hill, 16 March 1780: 'If I had had the Horns of a Snail I should have drawn them in, the moment I saw the reason of your epistolary brevity, because I felt it too' (*Letters*, I, 323).
- <sup>16</sup> Cowper to William Unwin, 20 October 1784 (*Letters*, II, 87).
- <sup>17</sup> Cowper to Clotworthy Rowley, 16 September 1790 (*Letters*, III, 417).
- <sup>18</sup> Cowper to John Newton, 16 December 1786 (*Letters* II, 618-9).
- <sup>19</sup> *Letters and Prose*, V, 121.
- <sup>20</sup> *Fables*, XXIV. 22. See Vinton Dearing and Charles Beckwith, eds, *John Gay, Poetry and Prose*, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), II, 334.

- <sup>21</sup> ‘The Glow-Worm’, ‘The Jack Daw’, ‘The Cricket’, ‘The Parrot’, and ‘The Cantab.’; all but ‘The Cantab.’ were included in the first edition of Cowper’s *Poems* (1781).
- <sup>22</sup> Cowper to William Unwin, 23 May 1781 (*Letters*, I, 481-2).
- <sup>23</sup> Cowper to William Unwin, 4 August 1783 (*Letters*, II, 155).
- <sup>24</sup> Cowper to Joseph Hill, 13 July and 23 October 1777 (*Letters*, I, 272; 273).
- <sup>25</sup> Cowper to Samuel Rose, 30 November 1788 (*Letters*, III, 233-4).
- <sup>26</sup> Gay has a charming section on a snail in *The Shepherd’s Week*, ‘Thursday’, from l. 49 onwards (*Poetry and Prose*, I, 110).
- <sup>27</sup> Martin Priestman, *Cowper’s Task: Structure and Influence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 40; 41.
- <sup>28</sup> ‘John Johnson’s notation on the second flyleaf of Cowper’s copy of Pope’s translation of the *Iliad* (London, 1715): “E. Dereham / Novr 14.1798. / Mr Cowper told me that he once passed Pope’s Lodgings, when a boy, and looked for him but he was not to be seen – It was in Great Queen Street at a Goldbeater’s.” [...] it must have been between April 1742, when Cowper came to Westminster, and May 1744, when Pope died.’ Charles Ryskamp, *William Cowper of the Inner Temple, Esq.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 58n.
- <sup>29</sup> Vincent Newey, *Cowper’s Poetry: A Critical Study and Reassessment* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1982), 314-22.
- <sup>30</sup> Darwin’s *Botanic Garden*, I, ‘The Economy of Vegetation’, note to l. 162.