

William Cowper, 'On the Loss of the Royal George'

W. B. Hutchings

Toll for the brave – the Brave that are no more –
All sunk beneath the wave, fast by their native shore –
Eight hundred of the brave, whose courage well was tried,
Had made the Vessel heel and laid her on her side,
A Land-breeze shook the shrouds, and she was overset,
Down went the Royal George, with all her crew complete.
Toll for the brave – brave Kempenfelt is gone,
His last Sea-fight is fought – his work of glory done –
It was not in the battle – no tempest gave the shock,
She sprang no fatal leak, she ran upon no rock,
His sword was in the sheath, his fingers held the pen,
When Kempenfelt went down, with twice four hundred men.
Weigh the vessel up, once dreaded by our foes,
And mingle with your cup the tears that England owes,
Her timbers yet are sound, and she may float again
Full charged with England's thunder, and plough the distant Main –
But Kempenfelt is gone, his victories are o'er,
And He and his Eight hundred must plough the wave no more.

A national disaster calls for public utterance. On 29 August 1782 the Royal George, a 100-gun ship of the line, was moored in Spithead awaiting repairs. To enable these to be carried out, the ship was heeled – that is, leant slightly to one side – by moving guns when, in the words of the Gentleman's Magazine report, 'a sudden gust of wind upset her, and she went to the bottom with about 400 of her crew, and, it is supposed, at least as many women and children'.¹

William Cowper, who, as his correspondence amply demonstrates, maintained an alert and lively interest in current affairs, responded to this naval accident in three forceful, ringing stanzas. He sent them in an undated letter to William Unwin. They were written mostly in alexandrines (lines of twelve syllables) in order, he said, to fit the words to 'the March in Scipio' (Handel's *Scipione*, first performed in 1726) at the request of Lady Austen.² He later told William Unwin that the tune 'laid me under a disadvantage' because alexandrines would 'suit no ear but a French one'.³ However, the extra length over the usual English pentameter and the resultant division of the lines into two balancing halves of three beats arguably assist in giving the poem a formality and dignity appropriate to the weightiness of the subject. Cowper matches a mood of national mourning and shock by adopting inclusive and outward-

facing language. Verbs in the imperative mood ('Toll'; 'Weigh'; 'mingle') engage public attention. Keynote words are repeated and kept simple: notably 'brave' in lines one, three and seven, and the negatives 'no' and 'not' in the phrase 'no more', which closes the first and last lines, and the sequence of alternative and more likely causes of disaster listed in the middle lines of the second stanza. Monosyllabic language dominates, with variants kept at the level of common speech and easily accommodated within the prevailing rhetoric: 'whose courage well was tried', 'she ran upon no rock'. Parataxis – that is, the co-ordination of clauses without conjunctions – assists the marching rhythm, as of a public demonstration of shared sentiment: 'She sprang no fatal leak, she ran upon no rock, / His sword was in the sheath, his fingers held the pen'. Choice of trochaic metre at key places, notably the openings of stanzas, also provides rhythmic force: 'Toll for'; 'Toll for'; 'Weigh the'. This is poetry to dramatize both the power of 'England's thunder' and the quantity of the 'tears that England owes': national grandeur and national grief conjoined in distinctively public expression.

'On the Loss of the Royal George' would have been an ideal vehicle for shared sentiments had it appeared in the press. But it didn't, and it was not published in Cowper's lifetime. The letter containing it is frustratingly difficult to date. King and Ryskamp propose September 1782 on the grounds that Cowper mentions in the letter that William Bull has 'gone to the sea-side with Mrs. Wilberforce' and that Cowper has translated 'several of the poems of Mme. Guion'.⁴ Cowper had written to Bull on 14 August to thank him for sending a copy of Madame Guyon, and a later letter (27 October) indicates that Bull has by then returned and that Cowper has completed his translation. However, Baird and Ryskamp in their edition of the poems note that these conditions – Bull being at the seaside and Cowper translating Mme. Guyon – also fit July 1783;⁵ and Cowper's letter to William Unwin about his use of alexandrines is dated 4 August 1783. That letter makes it sound as though Unwin has only recently received the poem. However, Cowper's undated letter containing the poem states that 'the Summer is going down a-pace', an observation that, even for a correspondent at his gloomiest, suits September much better than July. The sinking of the Royal George would also, of course, have been much more topical in September 1782 than July 1783.

Whenever Cowper did write the poem, it had to wait a long time for public recognition, and even longer to be read in its proper version. William Hayley first published it in his *The Life, and Posthumous Writings, of William Cowper, Esqr.* (1803-4). Samuel Greatheed had sent it to Hayley in the format of three twelve-line stanzas, Cowper's original alexandrines having been cut in half. Hayley took the further step of chopping it into nine stanzas of four lines, the arrangement in which the poem became well known in the nineteenth century. Robert Southey, for example, so printed it in his 1837 *The Life and Works of William Cowper*. Milford restored it to its three-stanza format, but in the twelve-line version, so that will have been the way in which most twentieth-century readers encountered it.

The question why 'On the Loss of the Royal George' was not put before the nation is made

yet more pertinent when set alongside the fact that a Latin version of the poem was published, in the *Public Advertiser* of 23 August 1783. Cowper's undated letter to Unwin contains both texts, presenting the Latin as 'another form' of the English. The Latin version is not, therefore, a later exercise in translation, unless Cowper wrote the English poem as an immediate response to Lady Austen's request and then added a Latin version when sending it to Unwin in 1783 (if that is when the letter was written). By 1783 perhaps Unwin, who submitted the copy to the journal, felt that direct expression of national sentiment was less appropriate than an act of commemoration in a Latin reflection on the event.

Cowper's Latin poem is written in one of the most familiar of Latin literary forms, the Sapphic ode. The term derives from the Greek lyric poet Sappho, who lived on the island of Lesbos in the seventh century BC. The form consists of quatrains with three lines of five feet concluded by a distinctively short fourth line of one dactyl (-∪∪) and one spondee or trochee (- or ∪-). Sapphic metre was widely employed by the eighteenth century's favourite Latin lyrical poet, Horace, and was extensively imitated in English as well as Latin by eighteenth-century poets. Cowper himself used an English version of the form for his 'Lines Written During a Period of Insanity'. Cowper's Latin poem would have been at once recognized by its readers as an example of a form which, while often used for the expression of personal sentiment, was part of a long-standing literary tradition.

The poem's beginning, 'Plangimus fortes', at once establishes a tone of public grief. Rather than the imperative mood of the English version's opening verb ('Toll for the brave'), Cowper here puts his verb in the first person plural: 'We weep for the brave'. He replaces rhetorical gesture with inclusive embodiment of the country's emotion. Unwin may have felt that the Latin opening was more dignified as an expression of shared national grief than the English poem's rhetorical opening. However, Cowper's letter to Unwin presents the two poems together, and right from the start the two texts are mutually reflective. 'Plangimus fortes' is repeated at the beginning of the third stanza as 'Toll for the brave' is repeated at the beginning of the English second stanza; and both openings have the feel of a trisyllabic rhythm ('Plangimus'; 'Toll for the'), even though, strictly speaking, the third syllable in the Latin has a long quantity. Indeed, read together the poems to some extent reinforce each other and even shed light on each other, as in a diptych.

I have thus far emphasized the public tone of the English stanzas, a collective response being demanded for an event suffered collectively by 'the Brave': 'Eight hundred of the brave'. The scale of the disaster was, of course, an essential element of its shock. But when Cowper repeats 'Toll for the brave' at the beginning of the second stanza, he at once modulates into an individual tragedy: 'brave Kempenfelt is gone'. Rear-Admiral Richard Kempenfelt, fresh from his exploits in the naval war with France, was 'writing in his cabin when the accident happened'.⁶ The ship was under the command of Captain Martin Waghorn, but was Kempenfelt's flagship. Waghorn survived to face a court-martial, at which he was acquitted,

but Kempenfelt was among the victims.

Once introduced into the poem, Kempenfelt dominates the second stanza. Cowper's use of parataxis in the middle couplet of the stanza is matched by focus on Kempenfelt before and after: 'His last Sea-fight is fought – his work of glory done'; 'His sword was in the sheath, his fingers held the pen'. The result of Cowper's ordering of the lines is to make the ship's loss apply most strongly to Kempenfelt: the repeated 'she' for the Royal George is surrounded by a pounding sequence of 'his'. The general irony, that a ship of such renown should be lost while at anchor in home waters rather than abroad in dangerous seas, is narrowed to an individual irony, that a man of military valour and achievement should perish holding not his sword but a pen. Cowper ensures that a sense of decorum is maintained, in the final line of the stanza, by reverting to the general disaster via his repetition of Kempenfelt's name: 'When Kempenfelt went down, with twice four hundred men.' Focus on one man does not lead him to forget or neglect the rest. But the poem's centre of gravity has shifted in a way that cannot but register a subdued personal frisson. Death can come suddenly, when one is least expecting it. These lines are in the process of being written by another pen held by another hand.

The Latin equivalent of this small but resonant detail is yet more subtly personal: 'calamoque dextram im-/pleverat Heros'. Cowper's use of the word 'hero' wryly emphasizes the disparity between his own persona and Kempenfelt's public glory, renown and status. But, at this moment, he – like Kempenfelt – is filling his right hand ('dextram') with his pen. For the Latin, Cowper chooses the word 'calamus', originally a reed, but extended to mean a pen made with a reed in some poems of the classical period, including Horace's *Ars Poetica* (line 447) where the context is correcting badly written verses. No doubt Kempenfelt was engaged in written tasks of a more practical and professional nature; it would not be untypical of Cowper to be indulging in a little joke at his own expense.

Other details in the Latin ode bring out a quietly sinister quality less conspicuous, though still present, in the English. The loss of the Royal George acts as a public manifestation of one of Cowper's recurring concerns, the vulnerability of all living things to the least expected and seemingly slightest of adversity's blows. A ship that has endured and survived battles and storms has succumbed at a moment of apparent safety. The victims were 'fast by their native shore'. 'Patrium propter ... littus' in the Latin poem is a literal equivalent, although the more flexible word order of Latin allows Cowper to lay emphasis on the word 'Patrium' ('native') by placing it at the beginning of the line and before the preposition 'propter' ('near'). The irony of death occurring when so close to the comforting security of home is thus subtly stressed.

Moreover, appearances can be not merely deceptive but treacherous. Those same men whose 'courage well was tried' in times of evident danger now carried out a routine and familiar manoeuvre, that of heeling the ship, in order to enable repairs to ensure its safety. By doing

so they unwittingly created the conditions for its and their own destruction. The gust of wind that 'overset' the vessel was a 'Land-breeze': a counter-current of air which blows from the land.⁷ It was no tempest at sea, but came from 'their native shore'. In the Latin, Cowper uses the word 'aura', which could be used to refer to various degrees of air movement but generally refers to a gentle breeze, a light wind. Horace uses the word several times in this way. Again, Cowper deftly manipulates Latin word order, in this case to emphasize the irony by placing 'aura', the subject, after its verb and so at the end of the emphatic short fourth line of a Sapphic stanza: 'Depulit aura' ('a breeze cast down'). It takes so little to destroy a great ship and a great man.

In the English poem's final stanza, a telling distinction is made between the Royal George and Kempenfelt the hero. Cowper appeals for the vessel to be raised and holds out hope that it may be restored to its former state and continue its glorious and patriotic course. Actually, as the Gentleman's Magazine more realistically reported, despite the waters in which the ship sank not being very deep, 'it is doubtful whether she ever can be weighed up'.⁸ Perhaps Cowper's 'Weigh the vessel up' is a defiant response to such pessimism. Cowper was not to know that the court-martial's findings would subject his own lines to further irony. It found that the Royal George had not been over-heeled, but that its frame had given way on account of 'the general state of the Decay of her Timbers'. For Cowper, optimism about the ship sets in contrast the elegiac and blunt truth about the human victims: 'But Kempenfelt is gone, his victories are o'er, / And He and his Eight hundred must plough the wave no more.' Contrast between ship and men is pointed up by Cowper's repetition from line 16 of the familiar metaphor of a ship 'ploughing' the sea. And, as we have noted, his final phrase, 'no more', repeats the first line of the poem, just as 'is gone' repeats the first line of the second stanza. The final full-stop is indeed final.

At least the English version refrains from a detail which makes the Latin ode yet more disconcerting. Cowper there calls for the victims to be lifted from the sea and returned to the friends who have survived them, but renders the scene more grotesquely striking by referring to the dead as 'putrescentes ... amicos' (their 'rotting friends'). He even doubles the image by then using the adjectival form to make a contrast with the 'ratis nondum putris' ('the ship not yet rotting'). The Latin version does close on a positive note, that the ship may return to war and 'raise the name of Britain to the stars' ('Britonûmque nomen / Tollere ad astra'). Unwin may have seen in that ending something more uplifting than the desolate 'no more' with which the English poem concludes.

Or perhaps the journalistic eye of the Public Advertiser's editor recognized the shock value of that very physical image. The journal's owner and printer was Henry Sampson Woodfall, whose most lasting contribution to the politics of the period was arguably his publication of the letters of Junius from 1768 to 1772, in the course of which Woodfall found himself exposed to trial for publishing seditious libel. Junius's letters have come down to us as a

notable expression of regard for the British constitution allied to healthy distrust of the executive.⁹ Not a man, then, to fight shy of a little controversy, Woodfall may have seen in Cowper's Latin ode a nice combination of sensational detail and patriotic gesture, and – if he was given a choice – opted for that rather than the English version's elegiac ending. Cowper, we know, was sympathetic, if guardedly so, to Whiggish fears about the perceived increase in the tendency of the executive to interfere in parliamentary procedures.¹⁰ Only just over a month before the loss of the Royal George Cowper wrote an extensive letter to William Unwin about the current political uncertainties. Lord North's administration fell in March 1782 following a low point in British foreign and military policy signalled by Lord Cornwallis's surrender at Yorktown in October 1781, which, in effect, marked Britain's defeat by the American colonists and their allies. The Marquis of Rockingham formed a coalition in which there were clear divisions over foreign policy, in particular the question of peace with America, between Shelburne and Fox (respectively secretaries for home and foreign affairs) and their followers. Hopes that Rockingham might be able to steer a course through the difficult waters were wrecked by his sudden death on 1 July. In his letter to Unwin, Cowper, showing his customary awareness of his addressee's point of view, turns the death of Rockingham into an example of human vanity in putting their trust in mortals rather than God: 'The Marquiss of R—m is Minister – all the world rejoices, anticipating success in war and a glorious peace. The Marquiss of R—m is dead – all the world is afflicted and relapses into its former despondence. What does this prove but that the Marquiss was their Almighty; and that now he is gone, they know no other? ... Thus God is forgot, and when he is, his judgments are generally his Remembrancers.'¹¹ Cowper ventures no comment on the politics rather than the theology of the situation. When, however, he comes to send Unwin his twin poems on the sudden loss of a ship whose name bears that of Britain's controversial monarch – and thus conveys a dreadful reminder that no human being, however exalted, is safe from the unexpected blows of fate – his manner is not moralistic but by turns ironic, elegiac, patriotic, personal and uncompromising. I suspect he was not displeased that one version, at least, appeared in a journal well known for its fearless commitment to free expression and willingness to engage critically with those charged with authority over the ship of state.

Notes

1 *Gentleman's Magazine*, 52 (August 1782), p. 405; quoted in *The Poems of William Cowper*, eds John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 311.

2 Letter to William Unwin, *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, eds James King and Charles Ryskamp, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), pp. 78-9.

3 *Letters*, vol. 2, pp. 154-5.

4 Letters, vol. 2, p. 77.

5 Poems, vol. 2, p. 311.

6 Gentleman's Magazine, 52 (September 1782), p. 450; quoted by Baird and Ryskamp, Poems, vol. 2, p. 311.

7 Oxford English Dictionary, 'breeze', sb 2b, cites Cowper's poem as an instance of this meaning.

8 Gentleman's Magazine, September 1782, p. 450; see James Sambrook (ed.), William Cowper: The Task and Selected Other Poems (London: Longman, 1994), pp. 290-1.

9 See The Letters of Junius, ed. John Cannon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).

10 See W. B. Hutchings, 'William Cowper and 1789', The Yearbook of English Studies, 19 (1989), pp. 71-93.

11 To William Unwin, 16 July 1782; Letters, vol. 2, p. 65.