Book Review

Jane Darcy, *Melancholy and Literary Biography, 1640–1816.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. xii + 235 pp. ISBN: 978-1-137-27108-2.

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Writing in *The Rambler* in 1750, Samuel Johnson famously declared that 'no species of writing seems more worthy of cultivation than biography'. 'Narratives of the lives of particular persons', he says, 'enchain the heart by irresistible interest' because their readers identify with the joys or sufferings of people like themselves. In a later essay (in *The Idler* in 1760) Johnson singled out literary biography – 'memoirs of the sons of literature' – as offering abundant examples of how 'nothing detains the reader's attention more powerfully than deep involutions of distress or sudden vicissitudes of fortune'.

Jane Darcy's book takes as its major theme Johnson's suggestion that there is an intimate connection between literary biography and the extremes of mental suffering that were then described as 'melancholy' and that we would now describe as 'depression'. Her argument is that it was only during the eighteenth century that biography began to quarry the inner lives of writers, expressed at its most profound in experiences of melancholy. The first half of her book is dominated by Johnson, as theorist of biography, as biographer, and as himself a notable melancholic. Her account of the centrality of melancholy to Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791) is detailed and convincing. Boswell – who himself suffered repeated bouts of melancholy – was concerned to counter Sir John Hawkins's *Life of Samuel Johnson* of 1787, which had suggested that Johnson's habitual melancholy was a mental illness bordering at times on madness. For Boswell, melancholy was a sign of intellectual and social refinement, not a sign of madness, and Darcy argues that because of this, though he produced a literary biography of unrivalled anecdotal vividness, he offered only limited insight into Johnson's inner life and mental sufferings.

The second half of the book focuses on three literary biographies of the pre-Romantic period: William Godwin's *Memoirs* of Mary Wollstonecraft (1798); James Currie's *Account* of the life of Robert Burns (1800); and William Hayley's *Life* of William Cowper (1803). These are presented as instances of 'philosophical biography', a new and short-lived genre that Darcy identifies as having emerged in the 1790s. She emphasises that though the subjects of these biographies were in many ways very different from one another, they all saw their own lives as having been marked by melancholy, and in their own ways drew upon these painful inner experiences in their writing. Their biographers in turn were faced with difficult ethical issues over the publication (or not) of private letters which revealed evidence of deep mental disturbance, and how to present and understand the meaning of the suffering of these writers. The publication of all three biographies resulted in bitter controversies over their effect on the reputations of their subjects. This was partly because in each case the treatment of their experience of melancholy could not be kept separate from other difficult issues with which the biographers had to deal – radical politics and a highly unorthodox lifestyle in the case of Wollstonecraft, drinking and womanising in the case of Burns, and a set of uncompromisingly Calvinist religious beliefs in the case of Cowper.

There is no space to do justice to Darcy's absorbing account of the ways in which Godwin and Currie handled these complicated problems, so I will concentrate on her discussion of Hayley's life of Cowper. That Cowper suffered extremely from melancholy was known to his immediate friends and family, and in the funeral sermon he preached after Cowper's death, Samuel Greatheed made no secret of the fact. It seems certain (though Darcy does not herself say so) that Greatheed had seen a copy of the narrative of his early life and religious conversion that Cowper wrote in 1767, and which circulated in manuscript prior to its (unauthorised) publication in 1816 under the title *Adelphi*. When Harriot Hesketh, Cowper's

cousin, saw a draft of the sermon she was furious at Greatheed's references to Cowper's prolonged states of 'hopeless dejection', the mental distress that 'drove him to attempt self-murder', and how in his 'wholly distracted' state he had come to see God as 'an implacable oppressor'.

When Hayley was appointed to write Cowper's biography, Hesketh made it plain that no information concerning his mental instability was to be included, in case his writings might thought to be 'the delirious Raving of a Lunatic'. According to Darcy, however, she had little need to worry, because Hayley was quite happy to downplay not only the details of Cowper's melancholy and madness but evidence of the extreme nature of his evangelical beliefs. He regarded it as his duty to write as if 'under the immediate and visible direction' of Cowper himself, and to omit anything that the poet would not have wished to appear. Accordingly, passages in his letters that might lead readers to regard Cowper as a religious 'enthusiast' are quietly suppressed. In the same way, the extent of his melancholy is toned down, and is explained variously by Hayley as a constitutional weakness, or as a consequence of the early death of his mother, or as a response to 'thwarted love'. No alarming details of the effects of this melancholy are given, of the kind that Cowper had included in *Adelphi*, and there is no suggestion that the poet's sanity was ever at risk. Hayley's approach is to present Cowper as above all a man of sensibility, whose genius is inseparable from and in no way diminished by his melancholy: 'He seems to have received his rare poetical powers as a gift from Providence, to compensate for much personal calamity, and to enable him to become … a singular benefactor to mankind'.

Despite Hayley's best efforts, however, rumours of Cowper's madness began to circulate, and reviewers homed in on this very issue. The question at stake was whether Cowper's evangelical religious beliefs, and his Calvinism in particular, had caused, or at least contributed to, his mental illness. A reviewer in the *Christian Observer* of 1803 argued that his 'deep and dreadful sufferings' were primarily physical in nature: they had originated solely in 'the circumstances of his bodily constitution', and were 'in no degree increased by his religious principles'. Leigh Hunt, by contrast, writing in 1809, saw Cowper as a pitiable victim of the frightful religious doctrines preached by the likes of John Newton and George Whitefield. With the publication of two editions of *Adelphi* in 1816, much of the evidence of the extremity of Cowper's religious melancholy that Hayley had suppressed was now in the public domain. Even though these published versions were heavily cut in an effort to minimise the extent of Cowper's despair in the years following his conversion, and are much less harrowing to read than the manuscript version (a fact that Darcy might have commented on), they reinforced the arguments of those who saw his belief that he had been destined by God for damnation as the cause – and not merely a symptom – of Cowper's madness.

Jane Darcy's book is well written, thoughtful and perceptive throughout. It is a richly textured and original contribution to the history and development of literary biography, setting this in the context of changes in the medical and theological understanding of the causes of melancholy and insanity in the later eighteenth century. For students of Cowper, it offers also new ways of thinking about the issues at stake in the still current debate about the part played by his religious beliefs in his long and painful struggle with melancholy, despair and madness.