

### Book Review

Neil Curry, *William Cowper: A Revaluation*. London: Greenwich Exchange, 2015. 278pp. ISBN: 978-1-906075-86-6. £16.99 (pbk)

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A new critical biography of William Cowper is an event to be welcomed. Neil Curry is very well qualified to be its author. In 2011 Greenwich Exchange published his *Six Eighteenth-Century Poets*, short critical studies of James Thomson, Samuel Johnson, William Collins, Thomas Gray, Christopher Smart and Oliver Goldsmith. Sensitively weaving their lives into fresh and independent readings of their works, Curry shows us why these diverse and attractive poets, in his words, 'deserve to be read' (p.11). Moreover, Curry is himself the author of several volumes of poetry, conveniently brought together in the collection *Other Rooms: New and Selected Poems* by Enitharmon Press (2007). These are consistently lucid, measured and highly approachable poems, written with quiet authority and offering wide-ranging and meticulous observations of the natural world and human mores. His eye focuses on the specific, on the detail. A strong sense of cultural history allied to precision of language often casts a quality of illumination over his subject-matter. He writes, then, as a critical reader, but one who also inhabits the craft of poetry.

*William Cowper: A Revaluation* shares many of the qualities that inform Curry's poetry and earlier critical and biographical work. It is written in a very accessible manner, its style direct and clear. In view of Cowper's own admiration for, and skilful adoption of, a conversational tone, Curry's approach is not only attractive in itself but also appropriate for its subject. It certainly comes as a welcome relief from the more rebarbative styles to which modern academic writing has been prone, though – perhaps significantly – work on Cowper has generally avoided the worst excesses. That said, it may be that some readers will find Curry over-familiar at times, as when Cowper's reference in a letter to the Throckmortons' bailiff deserving a cudgelling (for his excessive cutting back of some shrubs) is translated by Curry's commentary into meriting 'GBH' (p. 224).

Of more significance are Curry's criteria for judging the poetry. His sympathies lie with language that is concrete and detailed. He admires poems which observe precisely and draw realistic pictures of natural and human life. 'This is a scene,' he says of an account of hay-wains in book one of *The Task*, 'we feel sure, that Cowper has witnessed himself more than once' (p. 166). He likes language which convinces us that Cowper has observed and taken note. On the other hand, he dislikes language he sees as over-ornate, and is strongly critical of passages of extended generalisation, such as Cowper's lengthy discourse on liberty in Book V of *The Task*. He is quick to condemn whatever he finds moralising, dull or banal, which rules out large tracts of the 1782 moral satires. He resists writing that has what Keats called a 'palpable design on us'. Poetry should show and not tell.

We all, of course, have our preferences, and Curry is admirably frank about his. However, his poetic and linguistic aversions may pose some problems for an all-round 'evaluation' of Cowper. Lack of sympathy for the didactic not only condemns significant areas of Cowper's *oeuvre*; it also separates a reader from some, at least, of the reasons for Cowper's popularity in his own time and beyond. As a man of wide cultural knowledge, Curry is fully aware of this, and he duly acknowledges that Cowper's habit of moralising contributed greatly to his high reputation. We have her Brother Henry's word for it that Jane Austen's favourite moral writer in verse was Cowper. By going along with later reactions against such poetry, Curry's book is scarcely likely to encourage present-day readers to try those parts of Cowper's works that happen to be out of tune with modern preconceptions.

On the other hand, Curry is refreshingly forthright and vigorous in his advocacy of the kind of Cowper he likes. The 'crazy Kate' passage in *The Task*, for example, 'ought to be granted

a place in any history of English literature' (p. 166). He rightly has no time for belittling terms such as 'pre-Romantic', and observes that Cowper's treatment of this kind of subject has a powerful originality of a kind that still seemed original when Wordsworth 'followed Cowper's example'. He reads 'Hatred and Vengeance' with a true poet's eye for stylistic detail, and resoundingly concludes that this poem is 'an emotional and technical tour de force, unequalled in English poetry until the "terrible sonnets" of Gerard Manley Hopkins' (pp. 104-5). 'Unequalled', note, not 'unsurpassed': Curry's praise is high when it is given. 'To Mary' is sympathetically read, with full awareness of how painful a poem it is and the 'stark simplicity' of its means of communication (pp. 244-6): an 'astonishing poem', is his judgement. When it comes to the *Olney Hymns* – an area which has brought out the worst of prejudiced responses in some illustrious critics – Curry is robustly supportive and challenging. These and many other readings are illuminating and sometimes brilliant. The book is conventional enough in its format. It follows Cowper's life from Berkhamsted to London, St Albans, Huntingdon, Olney, Weston, and finally Norfolk. It intersperses a narrative of his life with readings of a good range of Cowper's poems, pausing to devote whole chapters, entirely appropriately, to the *Olney Hymns*, the Moral Satires and *The Task*. Individual chapters also focus on Cowper's letters and on key figures in his life, John Newton and Lady Austen. The third significant person, Mary Unwin, figures throughout, and Curry is particularly sympathetic to the 'poor woman' (p. 243) who was an abiding but sometimes disregarded presence from Huntingdon in 1765 to East Dereham in 1796. Curry begins, however, with the woman whose absence has been seen by some as dominating Cowper's entire life: his mother. Chapter One moves rapidly from the marriage of Ann Donne and Reverend John Cowper to her death shortly after the birth of William's brother John, and then to Cowper's being sent, fifty-three years later, the picture of his mother which prompted him to write one of his finest poems, 'On the Receipt of My Mother's Picture out of Norfolk'. Curry's discussion of this poem and the circumstances of its composition sound the keynote for his treatment of the relationship between life and art. Curry is here, as he is throughout the book, sceptical of Cowper's projection of his feelings and identity. It is a 'bright and vivid picture' (p. 14) that Cowper paints of his mother's kindness towards her young son, and therefore convincingly 'authentic'. But if she occupied such a potent place in Cowper's memory, why is she rarely present in his other writings, even his memoir where she receives only 'the most perfunctory of passing references' (p. 16)? Curry quotes Cowper's letter to Joseph Hill (6 November 1784), in which Cowper says that not a week, nor even a day, passes without his thinking of her, but subjects the letter to his own critical examination. Hill had written to tell Cowper about the death of Hill's mother at the age of eighty-seven. Cowper replies that to condole with him on the death of a mother at that age would be 'absurd'. On the contrary, Hill ought to be congratulated on having 'enjoyed the company of so amiable, and so dear a relation so long'. This, Curry asserts, is a highly 'insensitive' response; and he sums up the gist of Cowper's letter as: '*You think your situation is sad, well what about mine?*' (p. 15). Cowper's claim that he thinks of his mother almost all the time is, for Curry, one aspect of a self-centredness that takes many other forms, such as his willingness to receive gifts: Hill's response to Cowper's letter was to send him a barrel of oysters.

Taking what Cowper says about himself on trust, and, moreover, reading his poems as a 'quarry from which to excavate the building blocks of his life' (p. 17), is, Curry argues, unsafe. Conversely, if we read the poems through the lens of presumptions about the life, even (or especially) when prompted by Cowper himself, we may end up restricting their significance as poems. As a contemplative poem about childhood, memory, the 'restorative powers of reflection' (p. 20) and, indeed, about contemplation itself, 'On the Receipt of My

Mother's Picture out of Norfolk' is an important and moving poem, equal in significance to Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey'.

A recent reviewer of John Drury's *Music at Midnight*, a study of the life and poetry of George Herbert, has concisely defined the central issue in a literary biography: the problematic relationship between the author's life and work.<sup>1</sup> We care about the life because we care about the work, and we hope that learning about the life will help us to understand the work. But the life and the work may be, at least partially, separate and distinct. To ignore this is to risk 'the pitfall of the biographical fallacy'. We need to remember that biography does not represent a 'key' to a poem, although details of the life may sometimes enrich the work. Such details always remain just 'one source of meaning among others'. They are not a substitute for the effort and pleasure of reading a poem. Conversely, we might add – and this is Curry's main point – reading a poem (or a letter, which may equally be a form of imaginative self-projection) as a means of constructing a life may lead to a distorted biographical understanding. Into this trap, Curry argues, some biographers of Cowper have fallen.

Curry is a shrewdly independent thinker, and his scepticism about received opinion and his close scrutiny of poems and letters ensure that *William Cowper: A Revaluation* is a thoughtful and frequently provocative contribution to the genre of critical biography. Inevitably, some readers will question some of its conclusions. One such question perhaps runs through the book. Its subtitle, 'A Revaluation', is a Leavisite term that promises brisk challenges to existing orthodoxy. It effectively delivers this at times, as when laboured or solemn readings of 'John Gilpin' are amusingly picked up. But is some of the intended iconoclasm aimed at a straw man? If such accusations as that Cowper's letters 'abound in self-pity' (p. 203) may be deemed not entirely fair, Curry explains that he wishes to dent that image of Cowper as 'a benign but rather pathetic little figure who, after drinking his cup of tea and romping about on the Turkey carpet with his pet hares, toddles out into the garden to look at his cucumbers, before coming back in to help Mrs Unwin wind her wool' (p. 204). But has anyone since David Cecil really taken such a reductive view of Cowper? Curry rightly emphasises Cowper's interest in current affairs and politics, his commitment to humanitarian causes such as the anti-slavery movement, and his opposition to cruelty to animals. These, to varying degrees, have been long acknowledged by both academic criticism and the common reader. Recent scholarly work has even explored self-fashioning in Cowper's writing. Some readers, then, may think that Curry is pitching at yesterday's targets. The book's selection of recent secondary sources is, indeed, somewhat narrow. It is, for example, surprising that such major modern scholarly studies as D. Bruce Hindmarsh's *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative* (Oxford University Press, 2005) and J. R. Watson's *The English Hymn* (Clarendon Press, 1997) do not figure. Reference to the latter would have usefully amplified Curry's interesting discussion of the distinction between hymns and poems.

But *William Cowper: A Revaluation* is not a 'scholarly' or 'academic' volume. It is something equally valuable in its own right: an engaging and stimulating book for all readers. It is accordingly more approachable than the standard modern academic biography, James King's *William Cowper: A Biography*, which Curry does both acknowledge and criticise. It would, nonetheless, have benefited from more scholarly presentation. The index is, to say the least, highly selective. There are many omissions of people (eighteenth-century and modern): no Robert Lloyd, Bonnell Thornton or Norman Nicholson, for instance. Lady Hesketh is indexed, but references to her when still Harriot Cowper are left out. The index also omits 'The Poplar-Field', and 'To Mary' appears as 'My Mary'. Samuel Teedon, the Olney schoolmaster, turns into James Teedon. More unfortunately, the text of the book

contains too many errors. The noble savage of *The Task*, Omai, comically becomes Omia four times within one paragraph (and he is absent from the index). Smaller mistakes, such as Horace's Ode I.ix becoming II.ix, are minor irritants for a reader wishing to follow up the reference. But some detract from the text. For example, the effect of Curry's admirable reading of 'The Castaway' is, alas, slightly spoiled by a garbled printing of its final, climactic and powerful, line.

We all live in glass houses where mistakes are concerned, but there are more of these than should have been allowed to slip through unnoticed. All the more is this the case when the author is a man who, like his subject, notices things with such accuracy and precision. And it is the book's many positive qualities that deserve to sound the final note. This is a modern, approachable and lucid book for everyone interested in Cowper and in the power of past poetry to resonate in the present. Neil Curry cares about literature, knowledge and truth, and he communicates with an enthusiasm all the more admirable for his honesty and directness.

<sup>1</sup> Tobias Gregory, review of John Drury, *Music at Midnight: the Life and Poetry of George Herbert*, *London Review of Books*, vol. 36 no. 24, 18 December 2014, pp. 25-8.