

William Cowper, 'The Poplar-Field'

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The Poplars are fell'd, farewell to the shade
And the whispering sound of the cool colonnade,
The winds play no longer and sing in the leaves,
Nor Ouse on his bosom their image receives.

Twelve years have elapsed since I last took a view
Of my favourite field and the bank where they grew,
And now in the grass behold they are laid,
And the tree is my seat that once lent me a shade.

The black-bird has fled to another retreat
Where the hazels afford him a screen from the heat,
And the scene where his melody charm'd me before,
Resounds with his sweet-flowing ditty no more.

My fugitive years are all hasting away,
And I must e'er long lie as lowly as they,
With a turf on my breast and a stone at my head
E'er another such grove shall arise in its stead.

'Tis a sight to engage me if any thing can
To muse on the perishing pleasures of Man;
Though his life be a dream, his enjoyments, I see,
Have a Being less durable even than he.

'The Poplar-Field' has always held its place as one of Cowper's best-known poems. It was first published in January 1785 in the reputable and widely-read pages of *The Gentleman's Magazine*, where his 'Epitaph on a Hare' had appeared the previous month. Cowper at this time was, he told William Unwin, in the habit of submitting poems in pairs: 'As fast as Nichols prints off the poems I send him, I send him new ones. My remittance usually consists of two, and he publishes one of them at a time.'¹ Cowper regarded the prestigious *Gentleman's Magazine* as 'a respectable repository for small matters, which when entrusted to a Newspaper, can expect but the duration of a day.' 'The Poplar-Field' did indeed last more than a day.² *The European Magazine* picked it up in 1789, and *The Gentleman's Magazine* reprinted it after Cowper's death.³ It was first included in Cowper's collected *Poems* in 1800, in a version that incorporated revisions Cowper made for his Entry Book and for the Manners Sutton Collection manuscript.⁴ I still recall being presented with this revised version as a 'poetry appreciation' exercise in the fourth form of my Hammersmith grammar school. This was not the most propitious circumstance in which to encounter my first Cowper poem, and I suspect that the somewhat jejune outcome of my labours failed to brighten up my hard-pressed teacher's day. Still, the experience must have made some impression, as lines from it still come first to mind if I am asked for a Cowper quotation.

Some of the reasons for the poem's memorability are readily apparent. 'The Poplar-Field' is accessible, easy to read and to sympathise with. It has immediacy and liveliness, deriving from its largely anapaestic rhythm (which gives it a dance-like feel), strong but economical scene-setting and attractive sound quality. 'Liquid' and 'lilting' were probably the kinds of

words expected of a juvenile poetry appreciator in the 1960s to describe the succession of 'l' sounds varied with shifting vowels in the opening lines: 'fell'd', 'farewell', 'cool colonnade', 'play no longer', 'leaves'. Higher marks may have been the happy reward for those able to observe that Cowper matches his principal alliterative scheme with a recurrent pattern of voiced and unvoiced 's/z' sounds ('poplars', 'whispering sound', 'winds', 'sing', 'leaves', 'Ouse', 'bosom', 'receives'), and supports both with more subdued echoes, such as 'whispering ... winds' and 'bosom ... image'. Best marks of all, perhaps, awaited any pupil able to show how Cowper matches sound patterns to meaning, so that the poetry is not merely vaguely descriptive or onomatopoeic but expressive of a relationship between language and the experience being evoked. The 'whispering sound' in line two is the result of the 'winds' of the next line, the repeated 'w' asking the reader to exhale in consonance. 'Whispering' and 'wind' share the same following vowel, which is then echoed in 'sing', itself part of the consonantal pattern that includes the phrase 'whispering sound'. The phrase 'cool colonnade' juxtaposes an architectural metaphor for the line of poplars and the effect felt by whoever once strolled or lingered beneath them. 'Cool' differs from the first syllable of 'colonnade' by no more than a change in vowel length, so the adjective flows euphoniously into its noun as readily as the colonnade bestowed its pleasing shade.

Cowper's anapaestic metre contributes much to the poem's lyrical quality, so making its rhythm expressive of the joyful song that matches the attractive natural scenes. Thus 'Nor Ouse on his bosom', like 'of the cool colonnade', brings a sonic echo into a dancing succession of rising double- or triple-syllable phrases. Switching from repeated anapaests and iambic/anapaestic alternation ('of the cool colonnade' is the former, 'Nor Ouse on his bosom' the latter) ensures that rhythm is maintained but varied to avoid tiresome repetition. Such a principle probably lay behind Cowper's alteration of the 1785 text's 'Nor the Ouse' to the iambic 'Nor Ouse', in addition to the revision's avoidance of a slightly awkward slurring of successive vowels ('the Ouse').

Fusion of form and experience lies at the poem's very heart, its central quatrain. The blackbird is the natural world's equivalent of the lyrical poet, its unique fluty warbling song an appropriate model for a poet seeking to imitate a melodic line in verbal form. As Cowper's song is prompted by the sounds filtering through the pleasing 'shade', the 'leaves' of the 'cool colonnade', so the blackbird searches out a 'retreat' – the word is placed at the end of the stanza's opening line as 'shade' is in the first stanza – where trees protect him from the heat of day and where he can sing his 'melody' in the form of a 'sweet-flowing ditty'. The blackbird's song thus shares the lilting movement established in the opening stanza. More repeated 'l' sounds ('hazels', 'melody', 'flowing') create Cowper's 'sweet-flowing ditty', whose subdued metaphor echoes the literal waters of the Ouse in the first stanza. 'Ditty' is a word straight out of poetic vocabulary, combining the general sense of lyrical composition in verse with the specific meaning of a bird's song. The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites 'The Poplar-Field' for these senses of 'short simple song' and 'the song of birds'.⁵ The two meanings exist in a reciprocal relationship. The blackbird's song invites the poet's; his song incorporates and, as it were, imitates the blackbird's. Both human being and bird form the full natural world as they share 'shade', 'retreat'.

And yet, strongly as these responses attest to the lyrical expertise of a writer for whom the craft of poetry was a recurrent study, there is something else going on alongside the poem's echoing mellifluousness. There is indeed at first sight something slightly strange about 'The Poplar-Field' as an entity. Its sentiments, notably in stanzas four and five, are sad, not to say

gloomy. Regret is an entirely natural response to the felling of trees. In our twenty-first century, indeed, a sharpened ecological awareness of the human capacity to wreak havoc on the very environment that supports our existence is likely to deepen our sense of irreparable loss for an individual and, perhaps, a species. Fading flowers, fallen trees, shed leaves are all, of course, familiar and perfectly natural images for general mortality. The reader can see reflected in them her or his own participation in the natural cycle. These are, as Samuel Johnson said about Thomas Gray's *Elegy*, 'sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo'.⁶ Incidentally, Cowper wrote an epitaph for Johnson, who died in December 1784, while waiting for Nichols to publish 'The Poplar-Field' in *The Gentleman's Magazine*. He joked to William Unwin that he would not send it before Nichols's 'obstetrical aid' had brought out 'The Poplar-Field'.⁷ In the event, the epitaph did not appear in the magazine. This was a pity, as, despite Cowper's frequent impatience with Johnson's views, the lines he wrote in his memory are generous and noble, well deserving a place in that 'respectable repository' for short poems worthy of more than an ephemeral life. The distant echoes in language between Johnson's encomium on Gray's *Elegy* and 'The Poplar-Field' ('bosom'; 'returns' / 'Resounds') suggest that Cowper may have had Johnson's commentary on the eighteenth century's most famous elegy in his mind when writing of the fallen trees. So far, then, so natural. But it perhaps takes a particular kind of sensibility to convert fallen trees into an image of one's own grave so physically precise and uncomfortable as Cowper's:

And I must e'er long lie as lowly as they,
With a turf on my breast and a stone at my head.

Not only does Cowper envisage in starkly literal terms his own displacement of the trees, he does so suddenly. There is no hint of this morbidness, if that is not too strong a term, in the previous stanza, the central celebration of the blackbird's 'sweet-flowing ditty'. The poem's rhythm does not acknowledge a change in mood, but carries on lilting away in lively anapaests and lyrical diction: 'long', 'lie', 'lowly'. It is as if the joyfully song-like rhythm has failed to notice what the words are actually saying. In the final stanza a chiasmic pattern of alliteration ('muse on the perishing pleasures of Man': m/p/p/m) plays attractively on the strangely self-obsessed idea that symbolically fallen trees are the only sight that can engage Cowper's attention – and then only just: 'if any thing can'. This appears to strike an inauthentic note: the earlier stanzas have recorded a poet whose imagination is very well able to be engaged by sights and sounds of nature at her beautiful and harmonious best. In the light of his demonstration that he is a responsive and sensitive admirer of nature, the later stanzas seem oddly determined to assert the opposite.

Now, it is the case that Cowper's depictions of natural beauty in the first and third quatrains are all qualified by negatives. The 'whispering sound of the cool colonnade' is being bidden 'farewell'; the winds play 'no longer'; the bird's 'sweet-flowing ditty' resounds 'no more'. But these negative words and phrases are themselves incorporated seamlessly within the dominant lively rhythms and trippingly alliterative and assonantal pattern of the verse. 'Farewell' and 'no longer' take part readily in the succession of liquid sounds, and 'no more' happily rhymes and alliterates with 'melody charm'd me before'. Is it going too far to suggest that, so dominant is the poem's lyrical measure, the negative phrases skip by almost unnoticed?

A telling comparison is with Cowper's earlier short lyric 'The Shrubbery', which had been published in his 1782 volume. This poem expresses the poet's psychological dislocation from scenes of natural beauty. Nature shows off her delightful and attractive dress, but the poet cannot respond:

This glassy stream, that spreading pine,
Those alders quiv'ring to the breeze,
Might sooth a soul less hurt than mine,
And please, if any thing could please. (ll. 5-8)

The stanza scrupulously devotes half its length to nature and half to the poet's damaged spirit, the two-line units brought into strong juxtaposition by sequence and rhyme. Some of Cowper's phrasing anticipates 'The Poplar-Field', notably 'if any thing could please' (compare 'if any thing can'), but whereas the later work's longer, fluent lines embrace all aspects of the poem in one rhythmic march, in 'The Shrubbery' the shorter lines, regular iambic measure and strong division into antithetical halves carry a very different charge. There is no doubt that this poem is about how affliction – its subtitle is 'Written in a Time of Affliction' – has an entirely destructive and desolating effect on human sensibility. Cowper follows up the quoted stanza with a ruthless denial that any recovery is possible:

But fixt unalterable care
Foregoes not what she feels within,
Shows the same sadness ev'ry where,
And slights the season and the scene. (ll. 9-12)

'Don't talk to me about nature's healing power', says Cowper. Psychologically, depression cuts one off entirely from any such comforting notions about nature's agency. The poet's care is fixed and unalterable, a tautology that insistently crowds out any potential alternative. Instead the verbs in the second, third and fourth lines – each placed firmly at the beginning – demonstrate that all potential action is the product of the mind, or of the deep state that has taken over the mind. 'Care' will not be balked of its power, is universal and all-encompassing, and rides roughshod over beauty. Yes, alders do quiver in the breeze much as wind plays and sings in poplar leaves, but it is for other, happier people to enjoy, not for the poet. 'The Shrubbery' powerfully expresses in its form and language a profound mental dissociation from normal human feelings. The reader is left with an overwhelming impression of how intense distress destroys everything except itself. The poem, like the poet, is captive to an inescapable psychosis.

'The Shrubbery', though, dates from a very different time in Cowper's life. He may well have written it in 1773, the year of his third mental breakdown and his fatal dream, though Baird and Ryskamp opt for 1779 or 1780 as the likely date.⁸ 'The Poplar-Field', by contrast, emerged from a much more hopeful period. The 1782 volume *Poems by William Cowper, of the Inner Temple, Esq.* had been published, to, on the whole, a favourable reception, and he had been continuing to write regularly and with success. 'John Gilpin' appeared in *The Public Advertiser* in November 1782. He had met Lady Austen, and, through her influence, was engaged on his most substantial original poem, *The Task*. 'The Poplar-Field' was another of his works associated with Lady Austen. It was composed, according to Samuel Greatheed, as a song written to one of her favourite tunes. Cowper had 'conducted Lady Austen to the site of a Poplar Grove, which he intended to show her, but found just cut down'.⁹ Dating the composition of the poem precisely is problematic. Cowper saw Lady Austen for the last time in May 1784. Baird and Ryskamp argue for 1783 on the grounds that the scene described in the poem is summer rather than the cold spring of 1784. Kenneth Povey earlier suggested autumn 1783 because autumn was the usual time for tree-felling.¹⁰ Whatever its precise date, 'The Poplar-Field' owes its origins to one of the happier times in Cowper's life. The scene of the poplar grove had personal associations ('my

favourite field'), and Cowper was clearly keen to share it with Lady Austen. He later, in 1786, told his cousin Lady Hesketh that the field was in a 'neighbouring parish called Lavendon' and that one side was 'planted with poplars, at whose foot ran the Ouse, that I used to account a little paradise: but the poplars have been felled, and the scene has suffered so much by the loss, that though still in point of prospect beautiful, it has not charm sufficient to attract me now'.¹¹ So 'The Poplar-Field' records an outing with Lady Austen to a favourite spot of his in a lyrical form fitting a favourite tune of hers: all very intimate and friendly. Here, then, we have the most obvious explanation for the poem's melodic regularity. It is a lyric in the strict sense of the term, and its bouncy rhythm conveys irrepressible pleasure even if the verbal sentiments are mixed. Like Cowper's revisiting of the scene, it records both joy and disappointment: the former expresses itself in the lyrical rhythms, the latter in the gloomy recognition that all good things, whether a poplar grove, a friendship or a life, come to an end. Joy lies in recollection: hence any delight the poem expresses in the scene is retrospective, an act of verbal memory.

'The Poplar-Field' is a monologue, a personal song to Lady Austen, the valued and even intimate friend with whom the experience it records has been shared. A detail in the poem itself points to quite a degree of intimacy. It is easy to overlook, in the poem's dancing rapidity, that

Twelve years have elapsed since I last took a view
Of my favourite field and the bank where they grew.

On reflection, we might ask why, if the field was such a favourite, the poet has not been back there for all of twelve years. Our knowledge from Cowper's published correspondence that the site of the poplar grove was near Lavendon Mill, little over a mile and a half from Cowper's home in Olney, only renders his absence more strange. After all, *The Task*, which Cowper began to write in July 1783 at Lady Austen's behest, contains early on in Book I a rightly famous passage in which Cowper, as it were, leaps from the sofa and its association with gouty limbs to recollect his childhood love of rambling 'O'er hills, through valleys, and by rivers' brink' (I, 113), and to celebrate his continuing enjoyment, despite the passing years, of

Th' elastic spring of an unwearied foot
That mounts the stile with ease, or leaps the fence,
The play of lungs, inhaling and again
Respiring freely the fresh air, that makes
Swift pace or steep ascent no toil to me. (I, 135-9)

The poet who takes such joy in his vitality and in accompanying another 'dear companion of my walks' – Mary Unwin – to gain a prospect of the same river Ouse and 'our fav'rite elms' (I, 144; 167) ought, surely, to have been drawn back at least once or twice in twelve years to that poplar field before the arrival of Lady Austen?

Now, it may be objected that this is taking our poet too literally, too much at his word, and denying him the breadth of poetic licence, let alone the natural inconsistency that flesh is heir to. But it is remarkable that, in the Latin version of 'The Poplar-Field', which he probably wrote in January 1785 and published in *The Gentleman's Magazine* in August that year, Cowper went out of his way to include what the English poem omits to mention: an actual if mysterious explanation for the twelve-year gap. He was, he tells us, absent from these woods and his favoured retreat for twice six years while tormented by grief ('bis senos dum luctu torqueor annos', l. 5). The Latin is quite shocking in its intensity: 'dum luctu torqueor' uses

the language of torture, applied in Roman literature to both physical and mental suffering. A strict biographical reading of this assertion puts Cowper's last visit to Lavendon in 1772-3, the time of his third mental breakdown and, probably, 'The Shrubbery'. The biographical invitation, then, is to ascribe Cowper's rejuvenation and recovery to the woman with whom he at last revisited this favourite scene. Without that reference to extended anguish, the original English version risks raising a distracting puzzle for those not privy to Cowper's personal life. Well, it certainly did so for Robert Southey, who, in his fifteen-volume edition of Cowper's life and works (1835-7), silently emended the line 'Twelve years have elapsed since I last took a view' to 'Twelve years have elapsed since I first took a view', a reading which appears to render a more likely version of experience, and which infiltrated some later printings.¹² Incidentally, T. S. Grimshawe's much-derided edition, published at the same time as Southey's, maintained the apparently less likely, but correct, reading.

The English version avoids that teasingly confessional reference. It is, nevertheless, an unflinchingly personal poem that does, perhaps, benefit from knowledge of how it came to be written. Readers of *The Gentleman's Magazine* in 1785 would not, of course, have had our access to those circumstances. Cowper's eagerness to put the poem before a general readership may be explained by the final stanza's 'moral' for all of us:

'Tis a sight to engage me if any thing can
To muse on the perishing pleasures of Man;
Though his life be a dream, his enjoyments, I see,
Have a Being less durable even than he.

Some may find these generalities unpalatable. For example, the American critic William Norris Free, in his Twayne English Authors volume on Cowper, responds favourably to the opening stanza's evocation of a scene and a mood, but is scathing about the poem's descent into 'clichés, platitudes, and trite sentimentalities' which he sums up as 'monstrous banalities'.¹³ This is vehement, even intemperate, critical language, but it is certainly the case that, as even such a sympathetic reader of Cowper as Norman Nicholson admits, Cowper's general observations remain at a highly conventional and commonplace level.¹⁴ Incidentally, this quatrain is the one which gave Cowper most difficulty. Whereas earlier variations between the version published in *The Gentleman's Magazine* and that recorded in Cowper's Entry Book are on the whole minor, the final stanza was rewritten. The 1785 version ran:

The change both my heart and my fancy employs;
I reflect on the frailty of man and his joys.
Short-liv'd as we are, yet our pleasures, we see,
Have a still shorter date, and die sooner than we.

Cowper's revision in no way reduces the 'banality' of the sentiments (if one chooses to be so hostile), so confirming his confidence in concluding with a familiar moral. 'The Poplar-Field' is not a poem to be read for its new insights into life; but then few songs are. Its true point, and its subtlety, lie elsewhere.

Norman Nicholson, himself a distinguished poet, offers the sharpest and most sensitive insight into how this remarkable poem works. It manages, he says, to accommodate the 'tripping' rhythms of light verse and sentiments of 'poignancy', the highly personal and the very general, a specific scene and common sentiments. It is all these contrarities at the same time. Nicholson comments with especial vigour that 'the landscape is so closely identified

with the poet that it becomes almost an aspect of his own personality, yet it never ceases to be clearly and unchallengeably itself. The trunks of the poplars are browned and blurred by Cowper's own sentiments, but they are still solid enough to kick your toes against'.¹⁵ The poplar field is both internalised and vividly objectified. The whole poem reflects inner sadness at loss, the disappointment of anticipated pleasure thwarted, and at the same time stimulates exuberant delight in the recollection of past joy and musical re-creation of natural vitality. The natural world so strongly summed up by the verse is the symbolic nexus for both emotions. The trees are both alive in the past and felled in the present. The blackbird has fled, but 'to another retreat' where its song may, even now, be entertaining other ears. Even if it is alone, with no human company, its song still exists. It is experienced in the poem as both joyous presence and sad loss. The trees in the poem both whisper delightfully and are reduced to stumps so that, Cowper observes (ruefully and with a touch of self-deprecating humour), 'the tree is my seat that once lent me a shade'.

Cowper is a great poet of both joy and despair: of the Ouse valley passage in Book I of *The Task* and of 'The Shrubbery'. 'The Poplar-Field' compresses both states into one poem, as the experience itself is simultaneously a source of joy (the walk with Lady Austen and the recollection of delight) and of sadness at the loss that inevitably succeeds all human relations and all human pleasures. It is a poem of 'both / and', not 'either / or'. The simultaneity of cheerful and gloomy makes the two intertwine, reflect one another, as the Ouse reflects now the trees, now nothing.

Heightened joy can exist alongside heightened sorrow; pleasures are as intense as they are fleeting. This is the perception of such critically acknowledged lyrics as John Keats's 'Ode on Melancholy'. Less often praised are those examples of ostensibly 'light' verse in which the skilful practitioner poignantly fuses sadness with jollity. Such poems have the merits of being moving and at the same time refusing to take themselves entirely seriously. John Betjeman's 'Sun and Fun', from his 1954 volume *A Few Late Chrysanthemums*, is a monologue in which an ageing nightclub owner, gazing over the wreckage of the night before, looks back nostalgically on her youth, 'When my nose excited passion, / When my clothes were in the fashion' (ll. 18-19). Her melancholy awareness of irretrievable loss is accompanied by comic recognition of her tipsy self-indulgence:

There was sun enough for lazing upon beaches,
There was fun enough for far into the night.
But I'm dying now and done for
What on earth was all the fun for?
For I'm old and ill and terrified and tight. (ll. 21-5)¹⁶

She is frightened of dying and conscious that she is hung over. Betjeman, craftsman of language that he was, now gives her comic colloquialisms ('done for', 'tight'), now intersperses a real frisson ('terrified'). The poem's subtitle is 'Song of a Night-Club Proprietress'. The songs of the past – youth, summer, sun – continue the rhythms of last night's fun. The dance goes on even among the unemptied ashtrays of perished pleasures.

Betjeman's lines are looser and freer in rhythmic pattern than Cowper's in 'The Poplar-Field'; but Cowper does, as we have seen, vary his underlying anapaestic pattern, and his poem maintains a similar fluid rapidity of movement. Both poems are songs; both are about loss. Both poems are sad; both skip along in lively dance. Both poems state obvious yet inescapable and desolating truths about the singer and all humankind, but are also aware that

they edge into self-drama. Both poems are monologues in which the speaker confronts the tragedy which he or she shares with us all; both implicitly recognise an element of absurdity in their portentousness. Both singers are prompted by the ruins of their past; both can see the bathos (unemptied ashtrays; ‘the tree is my seat that once lent me a shade’).¹⁷

Cowper’s is the braver poem, for he sets himself up as the speaker, whereas Betjeman imagines his nightclub owner. ‘The Poplar-Field’ also digs deeper than ‘Sun and Fun’ by raising expectations of subject-matter and forms which have their place, in all seriousness, elsewhere in Cowper’s oeuvre, and then taking the axe to them. Its title opens up various possibilities: the pastoral (idealisation of landscape), the descriptive poem (verbal rendering of responses to landscape), the retirement poem (escape from town to country). Its first four words – ‘The Poplars are fell’d’ – chop them all down: there’s nothing left to idealise or describe, nothing to retreat to. But Cowper resiliently incorporates the language of these lost genres (‘shade’, ‘whispering’ sound, winds that ‘play’) in his reminiscence of times past. The echoing sounds of the two ‘shade’s (lines one and eight) nicely link loss of a pastoral world with his serio-comic acknowledgement that even fallen ideals can have their mundane uses. That echo, I think, justifies Cowper’s revision of the 1785 eighth line, despite the latter’s slightly more accentuated bitter-sweetness: ‘And I sat on the trees under which I had stray’d’.

The poem then tries to turn itself into another staple genre of eighteenth-century poetry, the graveyard poem. ‘The black-bird has fled’ echoes ‘The Poplars are fell’d’ in its rhythm and its curt past participle, ‘fled’ being a metathesis of ‘fell’d’. A parting reminiscence of pastoral – ‘sweet-flowing ditty’ – gives way to ‘My fugitive years’, a self-referential sonic and etymological echo of ‘fled’ (‘fugitive’ derives from the Latin ‘fugere’, meaning ‘to flee’). Graveyard poems all eventually reduce nature to the individual human being, an egocentricity both caught and mocked in ‘a turf on my breast and a stone at my head’. They are, of course, true and sad; but ‘The Poplar-Field’ cannot quite employ its language without a touch of absurd posturing. There is nothing left, then, but for the music to play on until it has to stop, and another of life’s transient pleasures perishes. For songs, too, are both expressions of lyrical pleasure and, in their transience, themselves symbols of the brevity of all human things. Serio-comic poems of this high quality both render the sadness of life and ruefully observe themselves in the act of grieving. They humorously express awareness of their own emotional egotism. They are conscious of their own consciousness. Perhaps that’s why ‘The Poplar-Field’ is so memorable: its mingled sentiments echo in our consciousness, too.

Notes

1 Letter to William Unwin, 7 February 1785, *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, eds James King and Charles Ryskamp, vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 323. ‘The Poplar-Field’ appeared in *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, vol. 55 (January 1785), p. 53. John Nichols had become sole printer and principal editor of *The Gentleman’s Magazine* in 1780.

2 Letter to William Unwin, 15 January 1785, *Letters and Prose Writings*, vol. 2, p. 318.

3 *European Magazine*, vol. 15 (1789), pp. 330-1; *Gentleman’s Magazine*, vol. 72 (1802), p. 252.

4 See *The Poems of William Cowper*, eds John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 316. Quotations from Cowper’s poems are taken from this edition.

5 *Oxford English Dictionary*, ‘ditty’ sb. 2.

- 6 Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the Poets*, ed. Roger Lonsdale, vol. 4 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), p. 184.
- 7 Letter to William Unwin, 15 January 1785, *Letters and Prose Writings*, vol. 2, p. 318.
- 8 See *Poems*, vol. 1 (1980), p. 553.
- 9 Letters of Samuel Greatheed to William Hayley, 9 and 18 September 1800. See *Poems*, vol. 2, p. 316.
- 10 *Review of English Studies*, vol. 10 (1934), p. 426. See *Poems*, vol. 2, p. 316.
- 11 Letter to Lady Hesketh, 1 May 1786, *Letters and Prose Writings*, vol. 2, pp. 531-2.
- 12 *The Works of William Cowper*, ed. Robert Southey, vol. 10 (London: Baldwin and Cradock, 1837), p. 69.
- 13 William N. Free, *William Cowper* (New York: Twayne, 1970), pp. 156, 168.
- 14 Norman Nicholson, *William Cowper* (London: John Lehmann, 1951), p. 159.
- 15 Nicholson, *William Cowper*, pp. 159-60.
- 16 *John Betjeman's Collected Poems*, 2nd ed. (London: John Murray, 1962), p. 217.
- 17 Betjeman cited Cowper as one of the influences on his own verse. See Derek Stanford, *John Betjeman* (London: Neville Spearman, 1959), p. 27. Betjeman wrote in 1982 that his favourite poet '[at] the moment ... is Cowper' (Letter to Charles Thomson, 17 May 1982, *John Betjeman. Letters*, vol. 2, ed. Candida Lycett Green, London: Methuen, 1995, p. 575). Candida Lycett Green, Betjeman's daughter, recounts that he delivered a parody of 'The Poplar-Field', 'one of his favourite poems', at a meeting to protest against building a proposed airport in Buckinghamshire (*John Betjeman. Letters*, vol. 2, p. 375). I expect Cowper was there in spirit.