William Cowper and George Romney: Public and Private Men

Joan Addison

It was at Eartham, William Hayley's Sussex home, in August 1792, that William Cowper met the artist George Romney. In the previous May, Hayley, benefactor of artists and admirer of Cowper, had made his first visit to the poet at Weston. During his visit, he had written to his old friend Romney, suggesting such a meeting. His intention, he wrote in his *Life of George Romney*, was 'to enliven [him] with a prospect of sharing with me the intellectual banquet of Cowper's conversation by meeting him at Eartham'. When the meeting did take place, Hayley's prediction that the two men would enjoy each other's company proved correct. 'Equally quick, and tender, in their feelings', Hayley wrote, 'they were peculiarly formed to relish the different but congenial talents, that rendered each an object of affectionate admiration'[1].

The pleasure that the poet and the painter shared in each other's company was to result in the production of two notable creations, the portrait Romney made of Cowper during the visit to Eartham, and Cowper's subsequent sonnet, written to Romney in appreciation of his work. 'Romney,' Hayley wrote, was 'eager to execute a portrait of a person so remarkable', and worked quickly in crayons to produce it.[2] An intimate study of Cowper in informal garb, it is now in the National Portrait Gallery. The portrait, twenty-two and a half by eighteen inches, shows the upper part of Cowper's body, against a brown background. He wears a brown coat, with a white stock and morning cap. The poet's face, with its flesh tones, stands out against the brown and white of the rest of the painting. In his biography of Cowper, James King makes reference to Romney's 'justly celebrated crayon drawing', in which he catches 'the quick, darting and virile aspects of Cowper's face', reminders of the poet's younger days.[3] It is a curious response to the portrait: for this writer, at least, the artist shows us a subject of gentle, sensitive demeanour, whose poetic leanings are easily imagined. The artist himself believed it the most successful attempt he had ever made to produce a 'perfect representation of life and character'.[4]

The air of gentle serenity apparently displayed by Cowper during his visit to Eartham, caught in Romney's representation, belied the feelings expressed in his correspondence at the time. His letters to Samuel Teedon, written during his stay, reveal that he was labouring under the sense of paranoid despair, the belief in God's rejection, that continually plagued him. 'I seldom rise from my bed in the morning without many a deep sigh and without wishing that I had never been born', he wrote. 'I know it to be true, that (…) exertions have been made on the part of the great adversary for my destruction'.[5] Depressed as he was, Cowper was unable to write his sonnet of thanks with the same enthusiasm that had prompted Romney to create his portrait. It was only at the end of October, after several attempts at composition, that he was finally able to send to Hayley, for his 'approbation', 'the debt long unpaid, the compliment due to Romney'.[6]

A consideration of what the sonnet expresses reveals the poet's dilemma. In August, Cowper had written to Lady Hesketh from Eartham that 'Romney has drawn me in crayons, and in the opinion of all here'— though he fails at this point to give his own opinion — 'with the most exact resemblance'.[7] His sonnet is the required piece of social courtesy. It begins and ends with direct reference to the 'expert', the artist; centrally, the octet concludes with an acknowledgement of Romney's 'superior grace'.

Romney, expert infallibly to trace
On chart or canvas, not the form alone
And semblance, but however faintly shown,
The mind's impression too on every face —
With strokes that time ought never to erase,
Thou hast so pencill'd mine, that though I own
The subject worthless, I have never known
The artist shining with superior grace.
But this I mark — that symptoms none of woe
In thy incomparable work appear.
Well — I am satisfied it should be so,
Since, on maturer thought, the cause is clear;
For in my looks what sorrow couldst thou see
When I was Hayley's guest, and sat to thee?[8]

The last line of the octet and the first of the sestet juxtapose 'The artist' with 'I', the sitter: the single-syllabled pointedness of 'But this I mark' introduces into the poem Cowper's darker underlying concern. Romney's claim for his best attempt at 'a perfect representation of life and character' has failed, for his subject, in the latter respect, for 'symptoms none of woe/ In thy incomparable work appear'. In such a polished social offering as Cowper's sonnet, this introduction of personal truth is brief, expressed perhaps with a kind of rueful humour. It is quickly set aside as the poet moves on to 'maturer' contemplation. But a truth such as this, disturbing the smooth, bright waters of the verse with a dark ripple from beneath, cannot be ignored, indeed becomes in its unexpected centrality the focus of the work. Its influence is irrevocably present, and the sonnet is born, at last, containing a reference to the poet's real self without which, perhaps, it could never have been made. In social circumstances, as at Eartham, at least at this point in his life, the poet could conceal his psychological truth. When he wrote, however, as his letters and poems constantly show, it is as if creation on the page demanded some form of self-revelation as a necessary facet of expressive integrity.

Self-revelation in Cowper's work can be seen, in part at least, as a result of his embrace of a particular religious outlook. As a fervent partaker in the new Evangelicalism of the eighteenth century, he wrote from the belief that the personal experience of those who were religious should be laid open, as a moral requirement, to public view. His memoir of personal despair and salvation, *Adelphi*, was a straightforward example of religious witness, tracing a spiritual journey from darkness to light by way of the stormy waters which became the staple image of his own periods of psychological dissolution. In an extremity of anxiety, he wrote, he was 'like a man borne away by a rapid torrent into a stormy sea'.[9]
Recent scholarship has questioned the genuineness of Cowper's claim to be a sufferer from religious melancholy, rejected by God, and has suggested that his early collapse into depressed hopelessness could have been a ploy that allowed him to abandon all effort to earn a living.[10] His letters to Samuel Teedon, such as the one quoted above, might be seen, if that was the case, as the outgoings of a manufactured religious pain. Cowper himself admitted to Hayley that in his letters to friends he attempted to adopt a light-hearted tone, which helped to elevate his own spirits. Teedon, who arrived in Olney as a priest in 1775, was an exception. From the early 1790s he became for a while Cowper's confessor and spiritual comforter. It is hard to believe that Cowper's agonised outpourings to him were simply the products of a tailored manipulation.

Cowper's portraitist by no means shared his sitter's sense of spiritual persecution. His 'feelings', however, Hayley wrote, 'were perilously acute'. 'If ever I worship an allegorical divinity', Romney confessed, some weeks before meeting Cowper, 'it shall be kindness (…) it pours a balm into the mind that softens the greatest misery'.[11] In a letter to Hayley, written at the beginning of September 1792, shortly after the Eartham gathering, he wrote that he had been rendered incapable at 'accounts (…) from France' of the progress of the Revolution: 'All the priests that were confined are murdered'. Deeply upset, he was 'unable to do anything'.[12]

The 'perilously acute' feelings of both Cowper and Romney led to similarities of behaviour. Cowper's inability, as a young man, to defend his right to the position of the Clerkship of the Journals at the House of Lords led to the paranoia and attempts at suicide that marked the beginning of his nervous decline. His conviction of exclusion from God's love accompanied a withdrawal from the social life which he had thrived upon in London. Romney too, according to Hayley, was unfitted to cope with the demands that living in the public gaze would bring. He was a notable artist, who had also been instrumental in the creation of 'that noble national project, the Shakespeare Gallery'.[13] It was suggested to him, reasonably enough in view of his contribution to art, that he should join the Royal Academy, with an eventual view to 'presiding in that respectable society'. Hayley, alarmed at the prospect of his friend adopting such a role, set out to dissuade him, convinced that Romney's 'sensibilities' were 'too acute for the peaceful enjoyment of a high public station'.[14]

In spite of the two men's apparent unsuitability for public life, they both had artistic ambition. Two years after beginning his translation of Homer, a task whose magnitude he could not have envisaged at the outset, Cowper wrote to Lady Hesketh that 'I am not ashamed to confess that having commenced as an Author, I am most ardently desirous to succeed as such. *I have, what perhaps you little suspect me of, in my nature an infinite share of ambition*'.[15] Likening Romney to Rousseau, in his longing for fame, Hayley wrote that his artistic friend had a 'vehemence of desire for distinction [and] the same intensity of application for it'.[16]

Romney, like Reynolds and Gainsborough, became one of the most popular portraitists of his day. His interest in classical art, strengthened by a visit to Italy in the early 1770s, was apparent in his painting. Critics of Romney point to the lack of individual expression in the faces of his sitters. His inspiration, however, was the idealized beauty, with its intimations of goodness and peace, once required by the emperor Augustus in reproductions of the imperial family. Romney's commissioned portrait of Sir Christopher and Lady Sykes, walking in the garden of their estate at Sledmere in Yorkshire, has been described as 'Roman statues in modern dress'.[17] It is interesting that the portrait of Cowper, relaxed and informal, so unlike the Roman model, was for the artist the nearest he believed he had come to 'a perfect representation of life and character'. Hayley wrote that it was done '*con amore*': love for the sitter was perhaps the difference here.[18]

In spite of his success as a society painter, Romney's true artistic interests were far removed from 'the interminable parade of portraits' by which he made a living.[19] According to Hayley, Romney had long wanted to distinguish himself 'in the higher province of his art'.[20] From the time of the Italian Renaissance, history painting had been seen as the highest form of artistic endeavour, on a level with epic poetry. In 1667 the French art theorist, André Félibien, articulated what was to become the accepted statement of the theory of painting for

the eighteenth century. Having dealt with the inferior genres of still life and landscape painting, and acknowledged the representation of God's greatest creation, man, as the superior undertaking, he wrote that 'a painter who only does portraits (…) cannot expect the honour due to the most skilled'. To obtain that accolade, 'history and myth must be depicted; great events must be represented'.[21] More than this, the picture must communicate a moral value.

When Romney painted in this way, it was to his beloved Shakespeare that he turned for inspiration. The creation of the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery, to which a number of painters would contribute, was the result of a conversation between Alderman Josiah Boydell and several artists, including Romney, at a dinner in 1786. It was eventually decided that Boydell would produce an edition of Shakespeare illustrated by noted artists, and that the Gallery would contain all the original paintings. In the preface to the Gallery's initial catalogue Boydell wrote that 'no subjects seem so proper to form an English School of Historical Painting, as the scenes of the immortal Shakespeare'.[22] Though the Gallery eventually failed, it was for a decade a celebrated venue for visitors.

Romney had painted his first pictures of Shakespearean scenes long before the Gallery was thought of. His picture 'King Lear in the Tempest, Tearing off his Robes', was painted circa 1758. The statuesque, composed dignity of his human subjects is replaced in this imaginative work by movement and emotion. Beneath black storm clouds, broken by angles of lightning, Lear, to his followers' visual consternation, begins to tear off his clothes, to become 'unaccommodated man'. Rich vestments, like those of Romney's sitters, are of no use in this study of the condition of mankind, which springs from the artist's sensitive response to the Shakespearean model. Lear seems a kind of artist's *alter ego*, forced by circumstance into exchanging, as Romney may have longed to do, a constructed social role for a different psychological reality.[23]

Images of storms in the work of both Cowper and Romney reflect their mental turmoil. Many years later, Romney would contribute to the Boydell Gallery his interpretation of the first scene of *The Tempest*, which again involves a storm. In the picture Miranda and Prospero, his arms raised as he controls the scene, look on as the sailors struggle against the onslaught of crashing waves. It is a strikingly dramatic depiction. While he was painting it, Romney worked on portraits only in the morning, devoting all the time he could to his Shakespearean project. Hayley, in his *Life*, revealed Romney's state of mind at the time:
It was (…) a formidable enterprize for a painter, who had so long devoted himself to (…) painting portraits, to undertake to fill an immense canvas with a multitude of figures under vehement agitation (…) The intense desire of executing a (…) sublime picture, and the apprehension of failing in it, created many a tempest in (…) Romney.[24]

Romney, however, had found a muse. In 1782 he met the seventeen-year-old Emma Hart, mistress of Charles Greville, the nephew of Sir William Hamilton, whom she would later marry. While married to Hamilton she met Nelson, whose mistress she became. Romney was enchanted by her beauty, and painted her over sixty times, often in the guise of a mythological or literary figure. His portrayals of her as Circe are remarkable depictions of combined beauty, innocence and sensuality.[25] Collectors fought to buy the portraits, many of which Romney kept for himself. It is thought that he and Emma were never lovers, an outcome Romney may well have desired, but they were devoted friends. With Emma as his inspiration, Romney could combine portraiture with the mythological and literary themes he longed to represent.

The depictions of Lear and the scene from *The Tempest* are among the few public representations of the art Romney desired to emulate. In spite of his wish for fame, he rarely exhibited his work — in contrast to Cowper, whose considerable public output, from the light-hearted 'Ballad of John Gilpin' to the moral didacticism of *The Task*, was read in its varying manifestations by an appreciative readership. Poetic communication, too, provided a forum in which he could find ease for his troubled heart. And in one notable instance, in 1792, the poet put his gift to use deliberately and very publicly in defence of his own character.

In April of that year, in a letter to Lady Throckmorton, Cowper wrote that he had 'this morning sent (…) to the Northampton paper (…) verses (…) in honour of Mr. Wilberforce', the anti-slave trade campaigner.[26] Ten years before, Cowper had spoken out against slavery in his moral satire, 'Charity'; in the second book of *The Task* he had castigated the man who, finding 'his fellow guilty of a skin/ Not coloured like his own' (ll. 12-13), visits torture and degradation upon him. In 1787 the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade had been formed, and John Newton, who became involved with it, had asked Cowper to contribute verses in support of the cause. The poems Cowper duly produced were intended not for a narrow educated readership, but for popular consumption. In 'The Morning Dream' the poet imagines travelling with the figure of 'Britannia' to a Caribbean island where she overcomes the 'Daemon', 'Oppression.' Described as a 'pastoral ballad', it was published in the *Bath Chronicle* in May 1788, and in *The Gentleman's Magazine* the following November. In 'The Negro's Complaint' the slave laments his cruel treatment at the hands of the 'iron-hearted' slave masters. This too was a ballad, intended to be sung; in 1826 it was published, accompanied by coloured woodcuts, as a moralising book for children.
Cowper had used his poetic powers over a number of years in a pressing humanitarian cause, writing for a wide audience. In spite of this, he was dismayed to learn, as his letter to Lady Throckmorton demonstrates, that though he had made his views on slavery clear in his verse, some 'in this and neighbouring counties' were saying that he was 'in reality a friend to it.' In his distress, he decided that the way to 'effectually refute the scandal' was to write a sonnet to Wilberforce himself, and have it published where a wide readership would find it, in a newspaper.[27]

The sonnet 'To William Wilberforce' was published in the *Northampton Mercury* at the end of April, 1792:

Thy country, Wilberforce, with just disdain,
Hears thee, by cruel men and impious, call'd
Fanatic, for thy zeal to loose th'enthrall'd
From exile, public sale, and slav'ry's chain.
Friend of the poor, the wrong'd, the fetter-gall'd,
Fear not lest labour such as thine be vain!
Thou has achiev'd a part; hast gain'd the ear
Of Britain's senate to thy glorious cause;
Hope smiles, joy springs, and tho' cold caution pause
And weave delay, the better hour is near,
That shall remunerate thy toils severe
By peace for Afric, fenc'd with British laws.
Enjoy what thou hast won, esteem and love
From all the just on earth, and all the blest above![28]

The tone of the sonnet is formal and elevated, designed to appeal to the patriotism of the *Mercury*'s readers, and to convince them of the nobility of Wilberforce's cause. More than this, such nobility is consonant with all that is best of Britain, which includes, the poet implies, the readers themselves. 'British laws' alone, the poet seems to suggest, can bring an end to the injustice, which Cowper's addressee combats, in the hostile responses of powerful 'cruel men and impious'. From the beginning of his poem Cowper celebrates Wilberforce as an agent of social change. The version originally published in the *Northampton Mercury* opens with a ringing personal declaration: 'I praise thee, WILBERFORCE!'. In the later, revised version, which all editions of Cowper's poems follow, and which I quote above, Cowper strengthens his linking of Wilberforce with the nation by altering his opening to juxtapose Britain with its reforming hero: 'Thy country, Wilberforce'. 'Britain's senate' itself, that mighty institution, has listened with favour to his eloquence. He may now accept the 'esteem and love' of all just men on earth — the readers of the poem among them — and of heaven itself. In this way, Cowper praises Wilberforce, appeals to the British pride of his readers, and situates himself as an undoubted mouthpiece for humanitarian justice and British patriotism. Cowper had written on a number of occasions, and in different tones, to express his horror at the plight of slaves: this deliberately formal poem addresses the injustice of slavery, but also the injustice that he keenly felt had been meted out to himself.
The response to the sonnet's appearance in public print vindicated Cowper's effort. He was able to inform Lady Hesketh that his poem had 'produced me a complimentary one in the same paper', persuading him that his poetic retaliation 'had answered its purpose'.[29] Years before, Cowper had shrunk from the prospect of defending himself in the House of Lords. Now he had taken up the pen in his defence, and won his battle.
Six months later, Cowper would complete his sonnet to Romney. It was a private poem, written to be seen by few eyes. In it, he hinted at the state of perpetual anguish that shadowed his days. His sonnet to Wilberforce, composed for wide public display, seems to come from the pen of a different writer, one whose sense of himself as a man and a poet demanded a just hearing.

In spite of his belief that he was spiritually damned, Cowper knew his worth as a poet, as his passionate concern to render a faithful translation of Homer showed. When, in 1784, he took on the task of translating Homer, he wanted both to write a good poem in blank verse, and to render a translation much nearer to the spirit of the original than that produced by Pope earlier in the century. In Cowper's opinion, Pope had sacrificed the sublimity of the original to the exigencies of rhyme and melodious diction. His own translation would take Cowper six years to complete.

The portrait of the poet painted by Lemuel Abbott in the summer of 1792, before Cowper's visit to Eartham, is very different from the one created by Romney. Like his, it is now in the National Portrait gallery. Fifty inches high and forty wide, it is a much larger portrait, much nearer the size of those that were commissioned from society portraitists such as Reynolds, Gainsborough and Romney himself. In it, Cowper sits upright, bewigged and formally dressed in green coat and yellow breeches, facing the artist and the viewer. In his right hand he holds a pen; his left arm and hand rest on a very large open book, its size suggesting the translation of Homer that had taken so many years to produce. In a letter to Hayley, Cowper wrote 'Well! this picture is at last finished, and well finished, I can tell you. Every creature that has seen it (…) has been astonished at the resemblance (…) Tomorrow it goes to town, and will hang some months at Abbott's'.[30] Lady Throckmorton vouched that it was a true representation of her friend in looks, dress and manner. According to Cowper, even his dog

Beau agreed, approaching the picture and wagging his tail. The portrait depicts Cowper as both gentleman and poet, a representation of the public self that is confident of his talent and the esteem it has brought. Cowper's comments to Hayley suggest that the portrait, and the response to it, have pleased him. Its journey to 'town' seems a proxy revisiting to the London he had loved so long ago.

In 1795, after his move to Norfolk, when Cowper visited the home of his cousin Anne Bodham at Mattishall, he found that Abbott's portrait was now hanging on her wall. Cowper was moved at the sight of it, remembering the happier time when it was painted. Perhaps, too, the sight of the pictured gentleman-poet reminded him of an assured self now irrecoverably lost to anxiety and depression.

In 1792, then, two portraits were produced that represent the public and the private Cowper. In the following year, Thomas Lawrence drew him, informally clothed as in the Romney portrait, wearing a morning cap given to him by his cousin Lady Hesketh. Lady Throckmorton found it a pleasing resemblance, although not as true a likeness as Abbott's formal rendition. The picture now hangs in the museum at Olney.

There are portraits of Romney too, one painted several years after his death by Martin Shee. It depicts a dishevelled, brooding Romney standing before the shadowy form of his painting of the scene from *The Tempest*, an artist for the new Romantic age.[31] The most striking portrait, which hangs in the National Portrait Gallery, is an unfinished self-portrait in oils, painted in 1784. In it Romney, dressed soberly in brown, sits against a half completed dark background that seems like an encroaching cloud. Though he stares out unsmilingly at the viewer, his arms are firmly crossed, as if, in the very act of presenting himself to the public gaze, he is defending himself from it. It was not uncommon for Romney to leave pictures unfinished: this incomplete self-portrait seems a symbol for his ultimate failure to attain his artistic goal.

Romney, sensitive and talented, in spite of all his success, never really arrived at what he considered to be the pinnacle of his art, and rarely showed his pictures. Cowper, a kindred spirit, who suffered so much from his conviction of divine persecution, was able to turn his suffering into the art of which his elegant private sonnet to Romney is one example. He was also, however, a public poet. Aware of his place in the literary world, he was confident and passionate enough, in his rendition of Homer, to challenge a great poet's translation of the work of an even greater.

When Hayley met Cowper, he saw that he and Romney would like and understand each other. Their meeting, as amicable as he had hoped, produced two remarkable works of art. Both poet and painter were men of painful sensibilities, for whom artistic endeavour permitted temporary flight from mental and emotional struggle. Both were to decline into madness in their final years. Cowper's life ended after his removal to Norfolk, under the watchful eyes of his concerned relatives; Romney returned to the north country of his birth, where he was nursed in the last two years of his life by the wife he had not seen during all the years of his success in London. The two men, 'equally quick, and tender in their feelings', were yoked also, as Hayley was later to write, 'in one most affecting circumstance of their mortal pilgrimage (…) the destiny of each to lose the use of his enchanting faculties, before his departure'.[32]

Notes

1 William Hayley, *The Life of George Romney* (London: T. Payne, 1809), p. 173.

2 Ibid., p. 177.

3 James King, *William Cowper: A Biography* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1986), p. 30.

4 Hayley, p. 181.

5 3 September 1792, *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, vol. IV, eds. James King and Charles Ryskamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 188.

6 28 October 1792, op.cit., p. 225.

7 29 August 1792, op.cit., p. 182.

8 *Poetical Works of William Cowper*, ed. H.S. Milford, 4th edn. (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 419.

9 *Adelphi*, in King and Ryskamp, vol. 1 (1779), p. 16.

10 For this argument, see Diana Buie, ‘William Cowper: A Religious Melancholic?’, *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 36, No. 1, March 2013, 103-119.

11 Hayley, p. 174.

12 Ibid., p. 184.

13 Ibid., p. 30.

14 Ibid., pp. 100, 102.

15 15 May 1786, op.cit., vol. 2 (1981), p. 543.

16 Hayley, p. 25.

17 David A. Cross, *A Striking Likeness: The Life of George Romney* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), p. 103. The Sykes portrait can be accessed at the-atheneum.org.

18 Hayley, p. 179.

19 Cross, p. 155.

20 Hayley, p. 112.

21 Frederick Turner, ‘The Paradox of the Portrait’, on the Newington-Cropsey Cultural Studies website (nccsc.net).

22 ‘Picturing Shakespeare’, in ‘The Boydell Shakespeare Gallery’, via the.shakespeareblog.com.

23 The painting now hangs in the Abbot Hall Gallery in Kendal, Cumbria, where Romney lived as a young man, and where he died. It can be accessed on the website ‘BBC, Your Paintings’.

24 Hayley, p. 128.

25 Emma Hart as Circe can be seen at Tate Britain, and on its website.

26 16 April 1792, op.cit., vol. IV, p. 61.

27 Ibid.

28 Milford, p. 415.

29 5 May 1792, op.cit., vol. IV, pp. 71-2.

30 July 1792, ibid., p. 160.

31 An engraving by William Bond, after Shee’s portrait, is at the National Portrait Gallery, and on its website.

32 Hayley, p. 183.