

Byron's Cowper: A Re-appraisal

Bernard Beatty

There are many ways of coming at the relationship between Byron and Cowper as persons and poets. A perceptive short article on the poets in *The Athenaeum* in 1834 suggested that: Cowper and Byron may be compared together for the alternations of gaiety and gravity in their works. The author of 'Childe Harold' was the author of 'Beppo'; and the author of 'The Task' was the author of 'John Gilpin'. The prettiest flowers will sometimes grow upon the gloomiest precipices...had the two men met, we may suppose it possible that Byron would have revered Cowper's religion, and that Cowper would have sympathized with Byron's warmth of feeling'.¹

The last point is pure speculation but it is true that both poets alternate gaiety and gravity and this significantly distinguishes them from their contemporaries. Moreover, Byron's most celebrated intertextual use of Cowper is, indeed, in *Beppo*:

England! with all thy faults, I love thee still (*Beppo* 369)

Byron means this quite as much as Cowper does but he undercuts it by evident irony. Byron says that he likes English beer, beef-steaks, a sea coal fire, stable parliamentary government, a free press, and temperate weather, though he also lists the things that he does not like such as the fact that it rains all the time. Cowper agrees with Byron about English weather and makes it even grimmer:

Though thy clime

Be fickle, and the year, most part, deform'd

With dripping rains, or wither'd by a frost (*The Task*, II, 209-211)²

Yet Cowper goes on to say that he would not dream of exchanging England's 'sullen skies' for France 'with all her vines', nor 'for Ausonia's warmer groves' (214). This is exactly what Byron, who wrote *Beppo* in 'Ausonia' (Cowper's characteristically Miltonic word for Italy), chose to do. He is more openly enthusiastic about Italy than England:

Italy's a pleasant place to me,
Who love to see the Sun shine every day,
And Vines (not nailed to walls) from tree to tree (321-324)

Closely associated with this is Byron's stated preference for 'the women too' (353). The poem is in praise of Eros as no poems of Cowper are apart from the early 'Delia' lyrics to his cousin Theadora Cowper. Byron's reference suggests that he is not only an observer of Italy and Italians but, as tone and context make clear, literally enters into them. 'Ausonia' is a significance for Cowper but a reference for Byron. He writes from it, and from within it, as well as about it.

Yet the distinction is not quite so simple, for Byron is only half an outsider. He is, after all, writing racy English to the English in Italian verse form, so Cowper, curiously, is as much the direct progenitor of *Beppo*'s subject-matter as Hookham Frere is of its form. Byron standing, delighted, in Italy and quoting Cowper, remembers Cowper's context. Cowper, despite England's weather and Italian charms, prefers England and anchors himself in it. Byron appears to prefer Italy but writes a poem about the rival claims of the two. Byron's imagination is inherently antithetical, paradoxical, and dialectical. Actual Italy, and Cowper's contrast between Ausonia and England, are the triggers for the fictional *Beppo*.

There are more comparisons of this kind that we might pursue. But I think it more helpful to face, fair and square, Byron's apparently most withering assessment of Cowper in an 1820 letter to Murray:

... he [Thomas Campbell] does not know to whom Cowper alludes, when he says that there was one who 'built a church to God, and then blasphemed his name' —it was 'Deo erexit Voltaire' to whom that maniacal Calvinist and coddled poet alludes.³

There is a second, toned-down version of this in a note to Byron's *Don Juan* ⁴. Here Byron omits 'maniacal' and 'coddled' and refers to Cowper simply as 'the Calvinist', doubtless for reasons of decorum since the insulting epithets are more allowable in a letter than in a note addressed to the public at large. Nevertheless, the accusatorially periphrastic pattern is repeated. Cowper is not a particular person – 'William Cowper' – but always a type of something that Byron dislikes – 'The Calvinist'.

Yet, to pile 'nevertheless' upon 'nevertheless', we must note that Byron is implicitly here siding with Cowper as a poet like himself whose poetry often depends upon recognising historical and political allusions. Broadly speaking, both write long, rhetorically-based, ethical poems as well as moving easily from the grave to the gay. It is the unforced joining of confessional and rhetorical modes in their verse that partly explains their huge reputation in the early nineteenth century. That same article in *The Athenaeum*, comparing both writers, notes that 'they are read by multitudes' (595). Doubtless the multitudes were mostly of very different kinds. Not many middle-class Evangelicals read Byron systematically, though they might peer at *Cain* or *Don Juan* in horror. But there must have been some cross-over. Jane Austen's admiration for Cowper is well documented but she certainly read Byron, copied out some lines from his 'Napoleon's Farewell' and, as Sarah Wootton has convincingly argued, *Persuasion* shares some of the 'central preoccupations' of Byron's poetry.⁵ There is a similar divergence and convergence between Byron and Cowper. Together they largely represent the British audience for poetry in the early nineteenth century.

The two poets fell out of favour later when these things – the confessional ('sincere' 'private') and the rhetorical ('eloquent' 'public') – increasingly became strongly dissociated. John Stuart Mill, a year before the *Athenaeum* article took for granted the immense popularity of Cowper's and Byron's kind of poetry, confidently asserted it wasn't really poetry at all, for Eloquence supposes an audience. The peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude.⁶

This prescription would seem to fit Cowper better than Byron. Yet *The Task* and *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* – poems of approximately equal length – notwithstanding Mill's insistence, do not divide the confessional from the rhetorical any more than St Augustine did. It is clear, too, that Byron must have read Cowper's poetry and prose fairly extensively and closely. In the letter to Murray, he remembers lines towards the end of 'Retirement' (697-698) as readily as, in *Beppo*, he remembers *The Task*. Why then do we find such unmasked vituperation in 'that maniacal Calvinist and coddled poet'?

We can reasonably bypass the many obvious objections that Byron would have had to Cowper. He revered Pope's translation of Homer that Cowper's translation had sought to critique and displace. Byron always attacks those who attack Pope, which Cowper had done in his gibe (admittedly through the protection of a speaker within his poem) that Pope had 'Made poetry a mere mechanic art' (*Table Talk* 654). Byron preferred rhyme to blank verse. But there seems to be something more unsettling than this, that got under Byron's skin when he read Cowper. Partly I think this is a matter of antitheses but it is also one of recognition. Essentially the recognition centres in 'maniacal' and 'Calvinist'. Byron is, in his own way,

both. But he would not seem to be, in fact or aspiration, ‘coddled’. I want to look at each of these in turn and in this order.

Kay Jamison more or less takes for granted that Cowper was manic-depressive and she argues extensively, in her *Touched With Fire: Manic-depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*, that Byron was too.⁷ Cowper’s mental breakdowns and temporary incarcerations were well known through his own admissions in prose and verse and through early biographies. He became an exemplum in the increasingly frequent suggestions in the early nineteenth century that there was a link between artistic creativity and mental disorder. Byron was sometimes numbered as an example too, partly perhaps through his own revelation in the first canto of *Don Juan* that his wife had, early in 1816 just prior to the separation, tried to have him certified:
But as he had some lucid intermissions,

She next decided he was only bad (I, 27).

Certainly Byron often worried aloud that he might, like Swift, end up mad. It is striking that these anxieties seem to cluster particularly round about 1819-1821,⁸ the time when he flings the accusatory epithet ‘maniacal’ at Cowper. Cowper, Byron’s antithesis, is also, horrifyingly, in Baudelaire’s famous phrase from his preface poem to *Les Fleurs du Mal*, ‘mon semblable, mon frère’. The possibility of this connection between the two men is obvious enough but it is also possible that Byron found his ‘semblable’ in some parts of Cowper’s verse.

Byron, for instance, wrote a rather heartless parody of Cowper’s ‘To Mary’, addressing his publisher. He turns the last line of each stanza from ‘My Mary!’ into ‘My Murray’. For all that, Byron, like Cowper, can attend closely, and not without tenderness, to increasing vacancy of mind. He does so in his observation of the Prisoner of Chillon’s descent into ‘vacancy absorbing space’ (243) and in the image of the rainbow by the violent waterfall at Terni which is ‘Like Hope upon a death-bed’ (*Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* IV, 643) and ‘Love watching Madness with unalterable mien’ (*Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* IV, 648). I don’t know whether Cowper’s Mrs Unwin or, more to the point, his Crazy Kate influenced Byron, but there is affinity of a kind between the minds of the two poets as well as in the distraught figures to whom they attended.

Byron, for example, presents himself as a pilgrim throughout *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*. It is a word like ‘hermit’ that, as Bernard Groom notes⁹, Cowper avoided as perhaps too ‘Catholic’ and, by the end of the eighteenth century, too hackneyed an expression for his fastidious taste in diction. Nor does Cowper like professional ‘wanderers’ of any kind, which is one of Byron’s favourite self-descriptions. Byron classes himself as one of the wanderers o’er Eternity

Whose bark drives on and on, and anchored ne’er shall be.

(*Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* III, 669-670)

Cowper, who despises the wandering gypsies in *The Task*, very much wants to be anchored. He lauds ‘Domestic happiness’ as the ‘only bliss/Of Paradise that has survived the fall!’ (III, 41-42) and would, doubtless, have been appalled by Byron’s public poems in 1816 blaming his wife for the collapse of their ‘domestic happiness’. Yet it is only some eighty lines further on in Book III, that Cowper – in the most celebrated self-image in his poetry – sees himself as a stricken deer.

The odd thing, from a Christian point of view, is that the poet is healed like the deer, but not healed so that he can rejoin the herd which is, after all, the point of the New Testament parable about the lost sheep (*Matthew* 18, 12-14). Rather, he is sent into ‘remote and silent

woods' as a set-apart sign like John the Baptist, where he is to 'wander, far from those/My former partners of the peopled scene.' (III, 117-119). In this privileged outsiderly position, he can see that 'all are wanderers, gone astray/Each in his own delusions' (III, 124-125). This is not so far as we might assume from Byron's 'Self-exiled Harold, wanders forth again' (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, III, 136). Similarly, Cowper's 'this prison-house the world' (*The Task* II, 661) anticipates Byron's insistence that 'we are darkly bound' (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* III, 207). Both use the same image to suggest the absurd transitoriness of human life: we are 'like the fly,/That spreads his motley wings in th'eye of noon' (*The Task* III, 134-136) and Harold disports 'like any other fly/ Nor deem'd before his little day was done/One blast might chill him into misery' (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* I, 29-31). Similarly both feel pain and pride in that they are remote from 'the herd'¹⁰. The two poets need to be outsiders (in Olney, Weston, or Italy) in order to focus their satire upon English society and politics, but they also like this stance and make it their boast. The difference lies more in Byron's aristocratic and deliberately theatrical staging of these positions than in the positions themselves.

I think that we can discern a similar pattern in both poets' recoil from their apartness and from their suffering into something which both call 'rapture' in their immediate presence in 'Nature' (*The Task* III, 723; *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, IV, 1595). Cowper boasts in Book VI that he wanders wherever he chooses 'unmolested' and nothing can prevent his 'joy' (295-298). Whether 'maniacal' is quite the right word for this might be disputed, but there is a startlingly 'over the top' quality to their exulting in what Vincent Newey calls 'aliveness'. Of both, we could use Newey's words: 'the meaning resides primarily in *that* – in the experience – rather than any stated or even implied beliefs and ideas'.¹¹ Both can bound from a sense of confinement and restriction into an open space of rapturous delight. 'Liberty', in both a political and quasi-metaphysical sense ('liberty of heart') is a good word for them (see *The Task* V, 446 and V, 545) or they can develop a narrow concentration that broadens into infinity. For instance, the prisoner in Book I of *The Task*, released from his 'dark abode' (439), 'walks, he leaps, he runs – is wing'd with joy/And riots in the sweets of ev'ry breeze' (443-444). Or, in the exactly reversed sequence, a confined space broadens out. Thus, Cowper's greenhouse is 'warm and snug' yet boasts 'exotic beauty' (III, 568). Cowper delights in bringing extravagantly burgeoning distant plants into an English setting. Amongst these (from 'Portugal', 'western India', 'Levantine regions' etc. [III, 572,583]) there are living plants from 'Ausonia' (582). So if Byron lives in and writes about Ausonia, and Cowper eschews it, yet Cowper's narrowed place is flooded with the same extravagant Italian foliage that delights Byron.

This interplay between suffering in isolation and delight in Life can attach a certain defiant or Promethean quality to Life's surviving overthrow of obstacles and restraint. Byron will seek out extreme images of this, as in his image of Alpine fir trees growing:

Loftiest on loftiest and least sheltered rocks,
Rooted in barrenness. (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* IV, 172-173).
Cowper's version of this is less theatrical but still subtly Promethean:

But trees, and rivulets whose rapid course
Defies the check of winter. (VI, 109-110)

Moreover, his admonition that such scenes 'seize at once/ The roving thought, and fix it on themselves' (116-117) is, essentially, the same point that Byron makes about the irrepressible vitality of tall trees rooted in barrenness – 'the mind may grow the same' (IV, 180). Cowper holds resiliently onto his outsiderly broken life, sometimes level-headed, sometimes exultant,

as an ineradicable given, even though, at times, ‘whelm’d in deeper gulfs’ than even Byron knew.

Cowper characteristically rejoices in being a ‘self-sequestered man’ (*The Task*, III, 386) and thus limits his wanderings to gardens and adjacent small-scale landscapes, whereas Byron wanders the world at large and savages the Lake Poets (and probably, by implication, Cowper) for their ‘narrowness’ so that he wishes that they would ‘change your Lakes for Ocean’ (*Don Juan* Dedication 39-40). Yet the timbre and structure of *The Task*, just as much as *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, depend upon the poet’s unchecked mental wanderings. William Norris Free, for instance, argues that *The Task* has ‘no other purpose than to follow the moment-to moment, day-to-day ramblings of the mind’¹². Cowper himself talks of his ‘wand’ring Muse’ (III, 692) and disarms his readers by admitting, with an insouciance that Byron will make constitutive of the mode of his *ottava rima* poems, that ‘Roving as I rove,/ Where shall I find an end, or how proceed?’ (IV, 232).

A particularly striking example of this is in the parallel procedures that they adopt in the midst of their work. Both look back, Byron at the beginning of Canto III of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* and Cowper at the beginning of Book III of *The Task*, to take stock of the course of their poems in order to determine their future direction. They deploy, both apologetically and with a certain boastfulness, the motif of mental wandering to explain and justify their poetic procedures to themselves and their readers.

Cowper says that in setting up the first two books of his poem he has ‘rambled wide’ (III, 14), plunged ‘from slough to slough’ (5) because he found his ‘devious course uncertain’ (3) so that he has been ‘entangled’ and ‘sore discomforted’ (III, 14, 5, 3, 2, 5). Byron talks more dramatically about singing of ‘One’ (Childe Harold) who was ‘The wandering outlaw of his own dark mind’ (III, 19, 20). He bears this with him forward into the renewed poem but it leaves behind in the poet’s past and present mind

The furrows of long thought, and dried-up tears,
Which, ebbing, leave a sterile track behind. (III, 24-25)

Cowper, of course, though he has intermittent characters or emblems such as his Castaway or the ‘stricken deer’, never seeks to develop any extended fictional hero or narrative as Byron characteristically does. Moreover, the point of his confession here is to announce that he has emerged from this Bunyanesque loss of direction (‘from slough to slough’) into open space and clearer direction (‘I feel myself at large’ III, 18) whereas Byron’s renewed creativity seems rooted in barrenness, as in the image of the giant tree rooted in unyielding rocks. If we stand back a little, however, the larger pattern is surprisingly similar.

Cowper announces a change of direction in his poem and so does Byron who, in sharing with his readers his self-consciousness about creating Harold and revealing the close correspondence of his own ‘dark mind’ with that of his hero, prepares the way for the abandonment of Harold altogether so that, in the remaining two cantos, he will talk directly in his own voice as Cowper does. And it is this voice which will conduct the whole poem to an affirmatory conclusion in its praise of Art and St Peter’s and something invincible in the creativity of the human spirit, just as Cowper shapes his poem towards affirmation of God’s creative purpose as its conclusion. Both, having reached this point, end with modest codas.

Nor are ‘sterile track’ and ‘barren being’ (*Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* IV, 829) Byron’s only words for his poetic self. In the celebrated sixth stanza of the third canto he talks of living in and through a projected and fecund creativity which is quite separate from the nothingness of his familiar self. In this other ‘invisible and gazing’ self he glows (III, 52) just as Cowper does

at the prospect of Spring growth which will 'flush into variety' (VI, 180). The major difference is that Cowper, so to say, flushes in the livingness of what he perceives, whereas Byron's exultation and exaltation are usually in the vocative. He normally needs to address a 'Thou' of some kind. Even his projected self is addressed as 'Thou' (III,50). Cowper's expansion of spirit is more usually occasioned by an expansive immersion in the object that he perceives rather than an address to it.

If 'maniacal' links Byron and Cowper, 'coddled' seems to distinguish them. 'Coddled' or 'caudled' according to the OED originally meant parboiled food associated with feeding invalids. Byron criticises the home, woman-controlled, upbringing of his Don Juan:

No – No – I'd send him out to betimes to college,
For there it was I pick'd up my own knowledge. (I, 414-415)

Byron celebrates his own emancipation from his mother and his nurse. He never lauds or fondly remembers his mother or his domestic upbringing in the way that Cowper remembers his mother stroking his head or her gifts of 'biscuit, or confectionary plum' ('On the Receipt of my Mother's Picture' 79, 61). We hear of Manfred's father (III, iii, 16-25) but not of his mother. Byronic heroes live in exile or return to a 'solitary hall' (*Lara* I, 181) as, by and large, Byron did himself.

Cowper was indeed, by contrast, 'coddled' in the sense that his needs were looked after by the Unwins. This, presumably, is what Byron means. They mothered him and he, in turn, mothered his animals, especially his pet hares, constructing a hutch for them in the same way that a home had been made available for him. Byron, who lived in and wrote about a public world, seems the antithesis of this but is so only up to a point. It is often overlooked how much time Byron spent on his own, reading and writing in rooms such as his apartment in Albany, Piccadilly. He, too, befriended animals of all kinds throughout his life. He was, in his own way, almost as self-sequestered as Cowper. He delights in showing Juan being restored to health by Haidee who 'watch'd him like a mother' (*Don Juan*, II, 1258). Juan is 'her bird reposing in his nest' (II, 1340). The two men, however unlike in character and class, needed both independent apartness and dominant female companionship.

Cowper belongs, as Byron did not, to a class of writers who had the knack or fortune to largely live off others or on small annuities – Collins, Coleridge, and Swinburne are examples. In this sense, Cowper could be called 'coddled' but the epithet implies weakness and protection from life. Perhaps Byron intended this too. He claimed to have lived a life 'At once adventurous and contemplative' (*Don Juan* IV, 850). Cowper could only claim the latter epithet, but he faced his inner adventures with a steadiness and steadfastness, however horror-stricken, that matches Byron's courage. Byron, strong swimmer that he was, notes the bubbling cry

Of some strong swimmer in his agony (*Don Juan* II, 423-424)

where the use of 'strong' highlights the horror in exactly the same way that Cowper tells us, for the same reason, that his castaway is 'Expert to swim' (14). The shipwreck section of *Don Juan* is full of references to the Deluge, the subject of Byron's later poem *Heaven and Earth*. There some despair and blasphemy before they drown but one – *A mortal* – is given an eleven-line lyric in which to profess his absolute faith in God despite this (I, iii, 883-904). Byron knew the Bible as well, perhaps even better, than Cowper and made the same associations between drowning and damnation, and between water and salvation (even more perhaps, for he had, increasingly, more of a sacramental sense than Cowper), as the earlier poet. It is this sort of shared Biblical knowledge and presumption that, once again, sets Byron and Cowper apart from most of their 'Romantic' contemporaries. Blake and Coleridge knew

the Scriptures well, Shelley quite well, but that is as far as it went. This immersion in the Bible provides the right context for approaching Byron's final gibe – 'Calvinist'.

The Calvinist connection of the two poets is well known. James D. Boulger's recently re-issued study, *The Calvinist Temper in English Poetry*,¹³ devotes 19 pages to Cowper and 31 to Byron. Though Cowper was a believing Calvinist in a sense that Byron was not (Byron's mother was Episcopalian, his practice was first vaguely Anglican, then sceptical, and later often proto-Catholic), I think that this proportion is a correct one. It would be difficult to discuss 'The Castaway' without referring to Cowper's conviction that he was irretrievably damned irrespective of anything (repentance, good works, prayer) that he could do about it. John Newton and others were appalled by Cowper's despair as, probably, Calvin would have been, but Calvin clearly bears some responsibility for the formulation and authority of Cowper's conviction. Nevertheless, if we knew nothing of Cowper's life, I very much doubt whether readers, left to their own devices, would find Calvinism writ large in *The Task* nor even in the *Olney Hymns*, whereas the Calvinist beliefs that Byron repudiated but which had shaped his Aberdeen education and always had a dark appeal for him, crop up in some form or another throughout his writings. Someone said that the eighteenth-century Enlightenment disposed of Heaven and Hell but, at the beginning of the next century Chateaubriand re-invented Heaven and Byron re-invented Hell¹⁴. As with 'maniacal', Byron's contemptuous 'Calvinist' for Cowper is as much, in Wilde's words in the preface to *Dorian Gray*, 'the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass' as it is a spectator's accusation *ab extra*.

Luther began with his experience of sin. Like Marlowe's Dr Faustus, he could not get rid of it and thus despaired of his self and all its possible activities. Justification by faith was the balm that took away this burden. God could wonderfully displace Luther's felt inadequacy by imputing Christ's innocent self to Luther's tainted one. Calvin began the other way round. God's absolute sovereignty and his unsearchable electing will came first. He moved from the Catholicism that he had defended to Protestant conviction as a result of thought, however personally shaped, rather than out of psychological crisis. In this sense, Cowper seems closer to Luther, and Byron, who never had any kind of religious conversion though, clearly, he could have had¹⁵, seems a long way from both. The odd thing is Byron seems to have a much stronger and more comprehensive sense of sin than Cowper ever had.

There are many (though not that many) references to sin in the *Olney Hymns* (see especially 440, 442, 443, 451, 453, 469). Cowper acknowledges himself as besieged by sin. But even in the most extreme case – 'The Shining Light' where his 'former hopes are fled' and thus 'My terror now begins'(1-2) – the very title presages the concluding consolation. Curiously, for once, it uses a self-dramatisation as 'pilgrim'(18). The normal pattern, explicit in 'Welcome to the Table', is:

If guilt and sin afford a plea,
And may obtain a place (17-18)

It is normal for Christians to root their hope in their own acknowledgement of sin. Thus the Abbot commends the strong sense of sin in Byron's Manfred, for 'the commencement of atonement is/The sense of its necessity' (III, i, 84-85). The first injunction of the Gospel is 'Repent' but Cowper's account of his own conversion, both in prose and more emblematically in 'Praise for the Fountain opened', though of course acknowledging sin, seems more like a recognition of transference – 'I saw the sufficiency of the atonement that Christ had made'¹⁶ – than anything else. He is no longer where he was. I am not denying the reality of Cowper's conversion but it is striking that when, later, he finds his 'former hopes are fled' what happens is horror – 'My terror now begins' – rather than guilt. He reverts in an instant to the 'Buried above ground' (20) mood of 'Lines written during a period of Insanity' written the year before his conversion, where sin is not mentioned apart from the self-

comparison with Judas. Cowper stepped out of this and then back into it again. Sin is a pivot which makes you eligible for grace or for damnation. It can flip either way. But it is not exactly a stepping into and out of sin, nor even some ultra-Calvinist dramatic backdrop to this movement, for Cowper says simply not only that God ‘disowns him’ (rather than judges him) but that so, too, does Man and the Hell which he cannot enter. He is not in some version of Dante’s *Inferno* but in some strange No Man’s Land – absolute estrangement as such rather than estrangement from God. Only in the penultimate line does Cowper use the word ‘judgement’ but in a curious way with an extraordinarily dark conceit that Donne would have admired:

I, fed with judgment, in a fleshly tomb, am

Buried above ground. (19-20)

Who but Cowper would ever imagine ‘judgment’ as a form of feeding? Here is the familiar opposition in Cowper between a ‘he’ who suffers and the poet himself whose own suffering is imaged in the ‘he’ but only as a marker for something unimaginably more extreme. I cannot think of a more vicious parody of Divine grace or bitter inversion of Herbert’s ‘So I did sit and eat’. For Herbert, God is the host who feeds, but in Cowper’s poem He is a calculating torturer who, like Zeus with Prometheus, feeds His prisoner in order to prolong his agony – but worse than Zeus, since He feeds him specifically with the knowledge of his damnation as sustenance. Yet Cowper, unlike Byron or Job, or in his way Aeschylus, does not arraign God for the apparently callous arbitrariness of His ways. Such an arraignment, an appeal to justice after all, always implicitly acknowledges the possibility of reply. Cowper, like his drowning Castaway, knows what it is to live without reply.

Hence Byron’s versions of metaphysical estrangement in *The Prisoner of Chillon*, *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, *Manfred*, and *Cain*, and his sometimes Calvinist sense of God as a sadistic antagonist¹⁷, though realised with immense dramatic vigour, are less hopeless than Cowper’s bleak conviction which is not as overtly Promethean-defiant as Byron or his speakers but more starkly assertive in its chiselled articulation of ‘here I am still’. Perhaps, however oddly, this can be linked to Byron’s much greater sense of ‘this uneradicable taint of sin’ (*Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* IV, 1128). Byron’s spectacular sinners are linked with a much wider acknowledgement of sin as omnipresent in the human heart. It is this which enables Byron, in his later poems, to become increasingly interested in its antithesis – forgiveness and kinds of resurrection to new life – which move away from or situate dramatised interiority rather than writing out of it. He moves out of Calvin’s shadow. Cowper, Wordsworth’s harbinger, always holds onto the privileged sense of his own being, where Byron both flaunts and relinquishes it.

We end up with a difference. *The Athenaeum* article concludes ‘What an immense difference between the gravity of Byron and the gravity of Cowper! And what an equally immense difference between their respective gaiety!.... How like – and yet how unlike!’¹⁸ I have pressed the ‘How like’ as far as I can since it both more accurately discloses this difference and reveals its permanent interest to us.

Notes

1 *The Athenaeum* No. 354, 9 August 1834, 595.

2 All Cowper quotations are from *The Poetical Works of William Cowper*, ed. H.S. Milford, London: Oxford University Press, 1905, enlarged and re-issued 1934.

- 3 *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie Marchand, London: John Murray, 1973-82, 13 vols. 7 (1820), 101.
- 4 *Byron: the Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983-1992, 7 vols. V, 710. All Byron quotations are from this text.
- 5 Wootton, S., 'The Byronic in Jane Austen's *Persuasion* and *Pride and Prejudice*', *Modern Language Review*, 2007, 102(1): 26-39.
- 6 Mill, John Stuart, 'The Two Kinds of Poetry', *The Monthly Repository*, n.s.VII (Nov. 1833), 714-24. 714.
- 7 Jamison, Kay. '*Touched With Fire*': *Manic-depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*', New York: The Free Press, 1996. In the opening article of *Byron's Temperament: Essays in Body and Mind*, ed. Bernard Beatty and Jonathon Shears, Scholar Press, 2016 [forthcoming], I contest Jamison's view that Byron is 'explained' by manic depression.
- 8 See for instance his letters of 23 August 1819 to Hobhouse, to John Murray 24 August, to Teresa Guiccioli 29 Sept 1820, and his Ravenna Journal entries for 6 January and 2 February 1821.
- 9 Groom, Bernard, *The Diction of Poetry from Spenser to Bridges*, London: Oxford University Press, 1955. 147.
- 10 For instance Byron writes in his Journal (March, 1814) that he disliked what he called 'for its own sake to go out amongst the mere herd, without a motive, pleasure, pursuit –'sdeath! "I'll none of it"'. BLJ 3. 249-50
- 11 Newey, Vincent *Cowper's Poetry*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1982. 112.
- 12 Free, William Norris, *William Cowper*, New York: Twayne, 1970.
- 13 Boulger, James D., *The Calvinist Temper in English Poetry*, New York: Mouton, 1980. Re-issued 2013.
- 14 I read this somewhere many years ago and it stuck in my mind but I have never been able to find the source.
- 15 Scott said to Byron: "I don't expect your conversion to be of such an ordinary kind. I would rather look to see you retreat upon the Catholic faith, and distinguish yourself by the austerity of your penances." He smiled gravely, and seemed to allow I might be right'. Quoted in Leslie Marchand, *Byron: A Biography*. London: John Murray, 1957. II, 529.
- 16 Cowper, William, *Memoir*, London: R. Edwards, 1816. p.97.
- 17 Calvin said that the episode of Jacob wrestling with the angel teaches us that God 'as an antagonist, descends into the arena to try our strength. This, though at first sight absurd, experience and reason teaches us to be true.' Calvin, Jean, *Commentaries on the first book of Moses called Genesis*, 2 vols. Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1948. II, 195.
- 18 *op. cit.* 595.