John Wordsworth as Cowper's 'Cast-away'

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Abstract

The three elegies that Wordsworth wrote after the death of his brother John in 1805 contain echoes of Cowper's poem 'The Cast-away'. Wordsworth first encountered this poem shortly before John drowned, in volume two of Hayley's work *The Life, and Posthumous Writings, of William Cowper*. Wordsworth's echoes of images and phrases from 'The Cast-away' in his elegies show him attempting to resist his memories of Cowper's poem. Specifically, he raises and then refutes the possibility that John resembled the Cast-away in having been abandoned to a life at sea. The first elegy, 'To the Daisy', originally contained two stanzas which described John's shipwreck in terms that echoed Cowper's poem, yet Wordsworth deleted these stanzas in the manuscript. As he worked through the series of elegies, Wordsworth increasingly came to accept the accidental resemblances between John and the Cast-away, until he made the identification clear in the third elegy, 'Distressful gift'.

Wordsworth's elegies for his brother, John, contain a series of echoes of William Cowper's poem 'The Cast-away'. These echoes suggest, and then work to refute, the idea that John Wordsworth was a version of the drowned sailor abandoned by his friends in Cowper's poem. 'The Cast-away' was Cowper's last original composition, written in April 1799 while he was living under the care of his kinsman, John Johnson, in Norfolk. It records Cowper's acceptance of approaching death in the absence of God's grace, likening his fate to that of a sailor washed overboard: 'No voice divine the storm allayed, / No light propitious shone, / When, snatched from all effectual aid, / We perished, each alone' (Hayley 2: 217). Cowper uses the details of the sailor's death to reflect on his personal history, while distilling 'emblematic truth out of the particular experience of the "castaway", who is now indivisibly both self and narrative subject' (Newey 307). This focus on the sailor's final thoughts made it a powerful point of reference for Wordsworth's elegies. There is no shipwreck in 'The Cast-away', but it describes the death of a sailor in terms which closely resemble the circumstances of John's death, and provides a memorial which was highly charged for Wordsworth when he was grieving. Wordsworth echoed phrases and images from 'The Cast-away' in each of his elegies, but he often echoed them in order to reject or modify them. One might say that Wordsworth composed his elegies *against* his memories of Cowper's poem, resisting the idea that his brother had suffered like the Cast-away.

John Wordsworth drowned on 5 February 1805 when his ship, *The Earl of Abergavenny,* was wrecked off Portland Bill. Between 20 May and 5 July, Wordsworth wrote three elegies for him: 'To the Daisy', 'I only look'd for pain and grief', and 'Distressful gift! this Book receives' (*Poems* 608n., 611n., 617n.). These were followed the next year by 'Elegiac Stanzas, Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle', which appeared in *Poems, in Two Volumes* (1807). All of these poems contain echoes of 'The Cast-away', which Wordsworth read when it was published by William Hayley in volume two of *The Life, and Posthumous Writings, of William Cowper* (1803-4). Duncan Wu notes that Wordsworth read this work 'probably by 24 Sept. 1804, and frequently thereafter' (66). The fact that Wordsworth first read 'The Cast-away' less than five months before his brother drowned explains why he recalled it when writing his elegies. As a model, Wordsworth might equally have drawn upon Milton's 'Lycidas', which commemorates the death of Edward King at sea. Milton's poem, with its claim that 'we were nursed upon the self-same hill' (l. 23), does make itself felt in Wordsworth's elegies. Yet, as Jeffrey Hammond has noted, what prevails in 'Lycidas' is 'an elaborately staged threat to – and recovery of – poetic vocation worked out through the key elements of pastoral … the reassertion of continuity and purpose in response to rupture and

anxiety' (208-9). Wordsworth's elegies for John were far less public performances than 'Lycidas': there is no sense of 'the reassertion of continuity', as in Milton's final line 'Tomorrow to fresh woods, and pastures new' (l. 193). Rather, Wordsworth's elegies express private grief, building towards the acceptance, in 'Peele Castle', that 'A power is gone, which nothing can restore' (l. 35). Wordsworth's recollections of 'The Cast-away' centre on the theme of abandonment which runs through the poem. Cowper focuses on the fact that the storm prevents the sailor's companions from rescuing him: 'He shouted: nor his friends had failed / To check the vessel's course, / But so the furious blast prevailed, / That, pitiless perforce, / They left their outcast mate behind, / And scudded still before the wind' (ll. 19-24). This aspect of Cowper's poem appears to have evoked Wordsworth's guilt, firstly for having seen his brother only once since he left Grasmere on 29 September 1800, and secondly for having allowed him to risk his life by going to sea.

On 16 March, Wordsworth wrote to James Losh, explaining that John had spent the previous five years trying to earn money to support him as a poet: 'He encouraged me to persist in the plan of life which I had adopted; I will work for you was his language and you shall attempt to do something for the world' (*Letters* 1: 563). In a recent article on Wordsworth's elegies for John, Peter Swaab concludes that 'John's death was a pivotal moment when Wordsworth adopted an idea of himself as a professional poet, with the responsibilities, status and self-presentation of one in office' (37). The echoes of 'The Cast-away' in these elegies shed further light on the mixture of gratitude and guilt with which he received this 'office' as a gift from his brother. Before considering these echoes in detail, it is worth stating the similarities between John's death and Cowper's poem a little more clearly. In his letter to Losh, Wordsworth explained that his brother was washed overboard by a huge sea which sunk the Ship, he was seen struggling with the waves some time afterwards having laid hold, it is said, of a rope. He was an excellent swimmer, but what could it avail in such a sea encumbered with his cloaths [*sic*] and exhausted in body as he must have been. (*Letters* 1:564)
When he wrote this, Wordsworth claimed to have seen 'an extract' from the official pamphlet on the disaster 'containing [Thomas] Gilpin's deposition, the 4th Mate' (*Letters* 1:564). Wordsworth's account of John's death derives from the pamphlet, but the events which he describes also resemble several details from 'The Cast-away'. Cowper's sailor is also 'Washed headlong from on board' (l. 4) by a huge wave, is 'Expert to swim' (l. 14), lays hold of a 'floated cord' (l. 27), and proceeds to battle with the ocean for an hour before succumbing to exhaustion. More important, however, is Cowper's emphasis on the sailor's thoughts during this final hour:

Nor, cruel as it seemed, could he

Their haste himself condemn,

Aware that flight, in such a sea,

Alone could rescue them;

Yet bitter felt it still to die,

Deserted, and his friends so nigh. (ll. 31-6)

Wordsworth echoed this image of desertion throughout the elegies he wrote for his brother. His claim that John had been 'cast / Upon a way of life unmeet' ('To the Daisy', ll. 45-6) need not be a deliberate allusion to 'The Cast-away', but when considered together the

numerous similarities between the poems show Wordsworth working through the implication that John – like Cowper's sailor – had been abandoned to the sea. In 'When first I journeyed hither', composed 1800-4, Wordsworth had introduced his account of John as a 'silent Poet' with the line 'I have a Brother' (l. 41). In doing so, he perhaps recalled Cowper's lines about his own brother, John, in Book Two of *The Task*: 'I had a brother once.— / Peace to the mem'ry of a man of worth' (ll. 780-1). After John's death, Wordsworth's grief was exacerbated by the memory of 'all which [John had] lost' ('When first I journeyed hither', l. 104). His echoes of 'The Cast-away' in his four surviving elegies show him striving, and sometimes failing, to come to terms with the fact that John had finally sacrificed everything to the 'joyless ocean' (l. 92).

Mark Reed noted that the first elegy Wordsworth wrote for his brother has been lost (281-2). Dorothy referred to this poem in a letter to Lady Beaumont on 11 April, claiming that: 'it does [William] good to speak of John as he was, therefore he is now writing a poem upon him. I should not say a *poem* for it is a *part* of the Recluse' (*Letters* 1: 576). A few paragraphs later, Dorothy wrote that:

I am going to read the Life of Cowper, and the last Volume of letters published since—I expect great pleasure from the [ ]—the Man appears so very amiable whenever I have dipped [in]to them. (*Letters* 1:577)

Though the manuscript of the letter is slightly damaged, it shows the strength that both William and Dorothy derived from Cowper's life and writing around the time of John's death. In October 1804, Cowper's poem 'Yardley Oak', also printed for the first time in Hayley's *Life*, had provided the inspiration for William's poem 'Yew-Trees' (Wu 66-7). At the time, Dorothy told Lady Beaumont that: 'We have received great pleasure from that poem of Cowper which you mentioned to us. I believe that it did my Brother some good and set him on to writing after a pause sooner than he would otherwise have done' (*Letters* 1: 508). Her letter from 11 April 1805 suggests that William once again derived strength from Cowper's writing as he worked on his elegies. It is telling that she turns to Cowper's *Life* in the wake of John's death, and that she refers to William's poem *The Recluse* as 'the Task of his life'. The likelihood that Dorothy was echoing the title of Cowper's poem *The Task* is increased by the fact that William used the same phrase ('the *task* of my life', emphasis in the original) in a letter to Sir George Beaumont on 3 June 1805 (*Letters* 1: 594-5); he had also applied it to John in his letter to Losh on 16 March (*Letters* 1: 565). This suggests that Cowper's paean to 'Domestic life in rural leisure passed' (*The Task*, III, l. 292) helped to inform not only *The Recluse*, but also the aims of peace, family, and security that William and John had been working towards in 1805. The Wordsworths were intimately acquainted with Cowper's writing at this time. When Dorothy re-read Hayley's *Life*, she would once again have encountered 'The Cast-away', and this poem played a complex role in the genesis of William's elegies for John.

'To the Daisy' ('Sweet Flower!')

Alethea Hayter suggested that the first of Wordsworth's elegies for John was 'I only look'd for pain and grief', composed in early June (191). Jared Curtis, however, follows the fair copy in Dove Cottage MS. 57 by placing 'To the Daisy' first (*Poems* 608n., 611n.). Curtis's decision fits with Richard E. Matlak's observation that 'To the Daisy' is 'unripe in its consolation' (141), and indeed the echoes of 'The Cast-away' in this poem seem to be the freshest in Wordsworth's mind. Initially, 'To the Daisy' echoes not only 'The Cast-away',

but also another of Cowper's works: 'On the Loss of the Royal George', which was written in 1782, but also first published in Hayley's *Life* as 'a favourite production of the Poet's' (1: 126-8). Cowper's poem commemorates Richard Kempenfelt and the 800 men who died 'Fast by their native shore' (l. 4) when *The Royal George* sank off Portsmouth on 29 August 1782. Wordsworth appears to echo this phrase when he claims that John, too, 'Sleeps by his native shore' (l. 7). Cowper's refrain of 'Toll for the brave!' might be seen to recur in Wordsworth's description of John as 'A meek Man and a brave!' (l. 52), and where Cowper claims that Kempenfelt died with 'His work of glory done' (l. 16), Wordsworth adds in a parenthesis that John left 'All claims of duty satisfied' (l. 40). The similarities are subtle but cumulative: though these are stock elements of shipwreck elegies, they show Wordsworth beginning to fit John's death into a literary tradition, possibly taking Cowper's account of the tragic death of Kempenfelt as a recent and moving example of this genre. This was one way in which Wordsworth sought to defend John's reputation against claims that he had been responsible for the loss of life when *The Earl of Abergavenny* sank. In his letter to Sir George Beaumont on 23 February 1805, Wordsworth complained that 'Some of the newspapers carelessly asserted that he did not wish to survive his ship' (*Letters* 1: 547). Even the *Authentic Narrative*, published by the East India Company in order to correct other accounts, only partially refuted the claim that 'had the proper precautions been taken, not a life would have been lost' (D[almeida] 17). Matlak argues that when he wrote 'To the Daisy', Wordsworth was 'absorbed in creating a palatable truth from the gathered accidentals of the public and privately reported event' (140). While Wordsworth's echoes of 'On the Loss of the Royal George' work to correct the publicly reported event, his engagement with 'The Cast-away' speaks more to the private event, and to his regret that John died trying to redress the family's precarious finances.

The version of 'To the Daisy' which Dorothy Wordsworth sent to Lady Beaumont on 7 August 1805 omits two stanzas which Mary had transcribed into DC MS. 57 (*Letters* 1: 613-14; *Poems* 610n.). These stanzas resemble 'The Cast-away' in focusing on the sailors' agonies at sea: 'through the stormy night they steer / Labouring for life in hope and fear, / To reach a safer shore—how near, / Yet not to be attained' (*Poems* 610n.). Wordsworth's image of 'Labouring' for something 'not to be attained' resembles 'The Cast-away', in which Cowper also describes how the sailor 'with unspent pow'r / His destiny repell'd' (ll. 39-40). Similarly, Wordsworth appears to echo Cowper's account of how the other sailors looked back for the Cast-away in the lines: 'But one dear remnant of the night / For him in vain I seek' (*Poems* 610n.). By excising these stanzas from the early version of 'To the Daisy', Wordsworth removed some of the parallels with 'The Cast-away' and idealised the events of John's death, lapsing into oneiric language in the lines: 'Six weeks beneath the moving Sea / He lay in slumber quietly' (ll. 36-7). Later, in 'Peele Castle', Wordsworth wrote of a time when 'I could have fancied that the mighty Deep / Was even the gentlest of all gentle Things' (ll. 11-12). In 'To the Daisy', Wordsworth had indulged a comparable fantasy in order to avoid confronting the 'rougher sea' and 'deeper gulphs' which Cowper had described in 'The Cast-away' (ll. 65-6).

Despite these omissions, the echoes of 'The Cast-away' in 'To the Daisy' still suggest that Wordsworth held himself partly accountable for John's death. The couplet in the second stanza of 'The Cast-away' undercuts the optimism of its first four lines: 'He loved them both, but both in vain, / Nor Him beheld, nor Her again' (ll. 11-12). In Cowper's poem, 'Him' refers to the ship's Captain, while 'Her' refers to England. These lines seem to have exerted a powerful effect on Wordsworth's imagination. In his reading of the poem, it is as if the pronouns 'Him' and 'Her' were transferred to himself and Dorothy, suggesting that John had

loved them both ‘in vain’ by setting out to provide for them. Though intelligible without the reference, the seventh stanza of Wordsworth’s poem takes on new meaning when read in relation to Cowper’s couplet about loving in vain:

Vain service! yet not vainly done

For this, if other end were none,

That he, who had been cast

Upon a way of life unmeet

For such a gentle Soul and sweet,

Should find an undisturb’d retreat

Near what he lov’d, at last. (ll. 43-9)

The idea of loving in vain from ‘The Cast-away’ appears to become bound up in a figure of repetition (‘Vain service! yet not vainly done’) in which Wordsworth wrestles with the possibility that he and Dorothy had not requited John’s love. Matlak found a ‘withering irony’ in these lines: ‘“Vain service!” though perhaps “not vainly done,” if the goal were a “senseless Grave” at last’ (140). Yet Wordsworth can hardly have missed the double-meaning of his phrase ‘senseless Grave’ (l. 56), which suggests, on one level, that John’s death was ‘senseless’ since he should never have been encouraged to set sail. His description of John as one ‘who had been cast / Upon a way of life unmeet’ expresses this guilt. The passive construction ‘had been cast’ suggests Wordsworth’s uneasy sense that perhaps he was the one who had cast his brother away. Matlak, then, is right to say that ‘To the Daisy’ is ‘unripe in its consolation’ (141), but this is not just because the poem is trying to correct the public record of John’s death; rather, the poem marks the beginning of Wordsworth’s attempt to come to terms with the fact that he had failed to protect his brother.

‘I only looked for pain and grief’

According to Curtis’s arrangement, the next elegy that Wordsworth composed was ‘I only looked for pain and grief’ (*Poems* 611n.). This poem follows on from ‘To the Daisy’ in working through Wordsworth’s feelings of remorse at having invested in a voyage that led to his brother’s death. In addition, it begins to engage with the psycho-drama of ‘The Cast-away’, as Wordsworth builds on Cowper’s account of his reprobation in order to ask why a just God would have allowed John to drown. In the poem’s third line, Wordsworth claims that ‘God’s unbounded love is here’, but later in the same stanza he begins to question this assertion, arguing that the celandine has grown ‘Not surely now without Heaven’s grace’ (l. 8). Here, Wordsworth places a double negative around two further qualifiers: ‘Not surely now without’. This assertion – if it warrants the name – speaks to the final stanza of ‘The Cast-away’, where Cowper recognises that, in his greatest hour of spiritual need, he is in fact ‘surely now without Heaven’s grace’: ‘No voice divine the storm allay’d, / No light propitious shone, / When, snatch’d from all effectual aid, / We perish’d, each, alone’ (ll. 61-4). Wordsworth echoes these ideas when he describes his former hope that ‘Heaven’ ‘had laid … A consecrating hand’ on his brother, and his subsequent discovery that ‘such a faith was dust’ (ll. 58-62). Where Cowper describes how the sailor ‘waged with Death a lasting strife / Supported by despair of life’ (ll. 17-18), Wordsworth recognises that ‘Peace built on

suffering will endure' (l. 16), and that he, too, must 'suffer and believe … Not cheerless, though forlorn' (ll. 38-40).
Vincent Newey has argued that in 'The Cast-away' Cowper paradoxically found strength by accepting his abandonment: 'In solitary struggle and solitary death he discovered not only horror but privilege; from the archetypal figure of the "much-afflicted" and "much enduring" hero-sufferer he took for himself a last positive identity' (313). In a similar way, Wordsworth concludes that he can only continue to exist by confronting the full extent of his loss: the Cast-away is 'Supported by despair' in the same way that Wordsworth builds peace 'on suffering'. Peter Swaab has discussed the recurrence of this theme in 'Peele Castle', observing that:

'Peele Castle' ends with an affirmation about hope, in a resonant epigrammatic line standing syntactically alone: 'Not without hope we suffer and we mourn.' … It seems to mean more than 'not in despair'; perhaps it locates hope within and not despite affliction; the import of the consolatory final line is richly indefinite. (33)

As Swaab suggests, this idea of locating hope 'within' affliction is the final stance which Wordsworth adopts in his elegies for John. Yet this stance also recalls Cowper's identification with the sailor who 'waged with Death a lasting strife / Supported by despair of life' (ll. 17-18). There is a difference, in that 'The Cast-away' shows Cowper losing his Christian hope, while John's death played a significant role in helping Wordsworth to *find* his. As Newey suggests, however, 'The Cast-away' is not solely a religious poem, but also a meditation on the human capacity to endure suffering (273). In 'I only looked for pain and grief', Wordsworth emulates the Cast-away's tenacity of life in attempting to remain 'self-upheld' in his grief ('The Cast-away', l. 38).

Alethea Hayter claimed that 'God's heartlessness was a lurking idea in [Wordsworth's] mind as he wrestled with grief over John's death' (199). This theme assumed new significance on 1 March 1805 when Wordsworth received a letter from Thomas Clarkson. Matlak notes that William Wilberforce became one of the backers of John's voyage, and that he did so because 'he saw an opportunity to reclaim in John a young man for Christ' (85). In his letter, Clarkson informed Wordsworth that Wilberforce had 'considered himself as the Patron of a Young Man who was lost' (Matlak 85). In the light of this letter, John's spiritual condition seems to resemble that of Cowper's Cast-away, whose life and salvation had both been determined by a struggle at sea. Wordsworth's awareness of this struggle and his identification of John with the Cast-away both make themselves felt in 'I only looked for pain and grief', for example in the third stanza, which includes an image of abandonment that recalls Cowper's poem. Having described the spot near the outlet of Grisedale Tarn where he and John had parted in 1800, Wordsworth observes a 'Buzzard' take to the air, and exclaims:

Oh could he on that woeful night

Have lent his wing, my Brother dear!

For one poor moment's space to Thee—

And all who struggle with the Sea

When safety is so near. (ll. 26-30)

The phrase 'When safety is so near' recalls one of Cowper's phrases: 'Yet bitter still it felt to die / Deserted, and his friends so nigh' (ll. 35-6). In both cases, there is a sense that not only

God, but also those closest to the sailor had abandoned, instead of saving him. The image of Wordsworth descending as the Buzzard in order to 'len[d] his wing' to John makes an imaginative atonement for the distance between them, but one which he immediately dismisses: 'Thus in the weakness of my heart / I said (but let that pang be still) / When rising from the rock at will, / I saw the Bird depart' (ll. 31-4). In the end, Wordsworth accuses himself of having failed to intercede for his brother in 1800 when he had the chance. The poem ends, in a similar vein to 'The Cast-away', by instructing its readers not to rely 'On any earthly hope, however pure' (l. 100). John's final words, as reported in the *Authentic Narrative*, were: 'It cannot be helped – God's will be done' (D[almeida] 17). Like 'The Cast-away', 'I only looked for pain and grief' asks what consolation can be found when 'God's will' is either wanting, or appears to be opposed to every 'earthly hope'.

'Distressful gift! this Book receives'

Carl H. Ketcham notes that 'Distressful gift' records the 'transcribing of the other two poems … into a book originally meant to accompany John on his voyages' (Ketcham 62-3). This elegy is the most reminiscent of 'The Cast-away', since both poems involve the poet reflecting on a book in order to mediate the process of grieving. In his introduction to 'The Cast-away', Hayley noted that Cowper's poem was 'founded on an anecdote in [George] Anson's voyage [*Round the World*, 1748], which [Cowper's] memory suggested to him, although he had not looked into the book for many years' (2: 213-14). The passage in Anson's *Voyage* is brief, but it emphasises the themes of self-preservation and desertion which Cowper developed in 'The Cast-away'. Anson wrote that after the sailor was swept overboard 'it was with the utmost concern that we found ourselves incapable of assisting him', particularly since it was clear 'from the manner in which he swam, that he might continue sensible for a considerable time longer, of the horror attending his irretrievable situation' (79-80). In his introduction to Cowper's poem, Hayley praised the 'extraordinary powers of the Poet, whose lyre could sound so forcibly, unsilenced by the gloom of the darkest distemper' (2: 214). As he read Anson's account, Cowper's fears of damnation led him not only to sympathise with, but also to inhabit the sailor's final moments. At the end of 'The Cast-away', this leads to the conflation of their two identities in the line 'We perished, each alone' (l. 64), which fuses the experiences of the poet and the sailor he is memorialising. The strength of this memorial made 'The Cast-away' a formidable model for Wordsworth when he found himself needing to elegise his brother. In 'Distressful gift', Wordsworth followed Cowper's example in using other texts (both 'The Cast-away' and his own two elegies) as prompts to make his lyre sound forcibly, 'unsilenced by … the darkest distemper' of grief. This final elegy bears several resemblances not only to 'The Cast-away' itself, but also to Hayley's introduction to this poem in his *Life* of Cowper.

Stanzas nine and ten of 'The Cast-away' contain a highly affective scene of reading, which suggests that reading itself can serve as a potent form of mourning. Describing the origins of his poem in Anson's account of the drowned sailor, Cowper claims that:

No poet wept him, but the page

Of narrative sincere

That tells his name, his worth, his age,

Is wet with Anson's tear,

And tears by bards or heroes shed

Alike immortalize the Dead.

I, therefore, purpose not or dream,

Descanting on his fate,

To give the melancholy theme

A more enduring date,

But Mis'ry still delights to trace

Its semblance in another's case. (ll. 49-60)

In these lines, Cowper uses 'the page / Of narrative sincere' as a prompt to guide and focus his mourning. 'The Cast-away' departs from the conventions of the elegy, since it is in effect a self-elegy in which Cowper is both elegist and elegised: he reads about Anson's sailor, but primarily he is moved to grief by applying this narrative to his own spiritual condition. In 'I only looked for pain and grief', Wordsworth had resisted the kind of memorial, described by Cowper, which reduces the sailor to 'his name, his worth, his age', lamenting: 'He who had been our living John / Was nothing but a name' (ll. 69-70). In 'Distressful gift', however, he followed Cowper in using the 'written leaf' (l. 36) to evoke and focus his grief. This rhyme between 'leaf' / 'grief' (and, by extension, 'relief') is one which Wordsworth uses in the final stanza of 'Distressful gift', where he implies that leafing through John's book has provided him, if not with 'relief', then at least with a kind of stability in grieving. As Lucy Newlyn has noted, the act of turning the pages 'o'er and o'er / One after one and score by score' (ll. 24-5) becomes in itself a kind of memorial (129-30). Where Cowper finds solace in the fact that 'the page / Of narrative sincere … Is wet with Anson's tear', Wordsworth describes shedding his own tears in the poem's opening lines – 'Distressful gift! this Book receives / Upon its melancholy leaves' (ll. 1-2) – and claims to write 'what neither Thou / Must look upon, nor others now, / Their tears would flow too fast' (ll. 15-17). The image of mourning an individual by shedding tears upon a page is a striking one. Implicitly, Wordsworth realises Cowper's claim that 'tears by bards or heroes shed / Alike immortalize the Dead'. In both cases, the book that receives the tears becomes an intermediary: Cowper uses the passage in Anson's *Voyage* as a prompt which enables him to shed tears for his own approaching death; similarly, the act of re-reading his previous elegies enables Wordsworth to recall more clearly his memories of the 'living John' who is the real object of his grief.

Wordsworth echoes 'The Cast-away' throughout the second and third stanzas of 'Distressful gift', further exploring the implications of Cowper's claim that 'Mis'ry still delights to trace / Its semblance in another's case' (ll. 59-60). Wordsworth's second stanza opens with the lines: 'Alas, alas, it is a Tale / Of Thee thyself; fond heart and frail' (ll. 8-9). These lines embody Wordsworth's recognition that his earlier elegies are not merely poems, but memorials for the 'living John': re-reading them draws him out of the process of composition, and confronts him afresh with the reality of John's death. In the same way, 'The Cast-away' calls upon its readers to recognise that the poet and the sailor are one, and to respond sympathetically as Wordsworth does: 'Alas, alas, it is a Tale / Of Thee thyself'. In this sense, 'Distressful gift' responds to the pattern of mediated mourning which Cowper had established in 'The Cast-away'. It also implies Wordsworth's recognition of the resemblances between Cowper's poem and John's death: the process of grieving leads him to find a 'semblance' of his

brother's ordeal in the events of 'The Cast-away'. Both Cowper and Wordsworth were prompted by their reading 'To give the melancholy theme / A more enduring date' ('The Cast-away', ll. 57-8), finding it helpful to commune with the dead through what Kurt Fosso has termed 'the bonds of mourning'.

In a letter written shortly after John's death, Wordsworth claimed that 'I shall never forget him, never lose sight of him, there is a bond between us yet, the same as if he were living, nay far more sacred' (*Letters* 1: 547). Wordsworth tries to define this bond in the third stanza of 'Distressful gift'. In doing so, he continues to elaborate on Cowper's idea that 'Mis'ry still delights to trace / Its semblance in another's case' (ll. 59-60). He explains why he finds it helpful to re-read his earlier elegies, claiming: 'Some solace thus I strive to gain, / Making a kind of secret chain, / If so I may, betwixt us twain / In memory of the past' (ll. 18-21). There seems to be a contradiction in seeking 'solace' by drawing out the process of grief, yet the same tension is present in Cowper's phrase 'Mis'ry still delights to trace / Its semblance'. In both cases, the poet extends his grief by reading and writing. 'Descanting' on the 'melancholy theme' in this way allows both poets to feel connected, in Cowper's case to the sailor with whom he identified, and in Wordsworth's case to his brother. Wordsworth's claim to make a 'secret chain' between the poet and the subject of his memorial is reminiscent of 'The Cast-away', in which Cowper also tries to form a private bond between himself and Anson's sailor, referring to him as 'such a destin'd wretch as I' (l. 3). In both cases, the process of grieving leads the poet imaginatively to inhabit the sailor's final moments. Cowper switches into the perfect tense for the line 'We perish'd, each, alone' (l. 64), imagining himself to have drowned with the Cast-away. As noted by Newey, this line recalls the fateful dream of February 1773, in which Cowper heard the words '*Actum est de te, periisti*' (313). It also anticipates the physical reality of death, and acknowledges the implication that Cowper's spiritual death involves the 'voluntary action' of embracing despair and renouncing the hope of salvation (Newey 273). Wordsworth's 'secret chain' is different, in that it holds out a possibility of 'solace' which is categorically denied to the speaker of 'The Cast-away'. Wordsworth's technique resembles Cowper's, however, to the extent that both poets deal with the finality of death by using the act of writing to keep a channel of communication open, not only with the dead, but also with future readers. When Wordsworth claims to 'write what neither Thou / Must look upon, nor others now' (ll. 15-16), he echoes the Cast-away's knowledge that he would be unable to share his final thoughts with anyone, while paradoxically sharing this knowledge with an absent but anticipated reader. What Newey calls the 'superb irony' of 'The Cast-away' is also at work in 'Distressful gift' (313): the act of writing rescues the solitary death from meaninglessness, with the reader's eye puncturing the solitude and atoning, albeit infinitesimally, for the absent eye of God.

The echoes of 'The Cast-away' in 'Distressful gift' are more developed than those in Wordsworth's other two elegies for John. Whereas 'To the Daisy' shied away from echoing Cowper's description of the tempestuous ocean, and 'I only looked for pain and grief' became stranded on the question of God's will, 'Distressful gift' acknowledges the ways in which writing 'The Cast-away' helped Cowper to come to terms with – though never to overcome – his own spiritual grief. In the process of defining what consolation he could draw after John's death, Wordsworth also had to work through his response to 'The Cast-away', considering the ways in which Cowper's poem did and did not reflect his brother's final thoughts. Behind Wordsworth's echoes lies another 'secret chain', in which he identifies John with the sailor – and, by extension, the poet – of 'The Cast-away'. In 'Distressful gift', Wordsworth finally admits the extent to which John resembled Anson's sailor, paying his

brother the tribute of recognising this fact, and finding 'solace' in expressing his guilt about the resemblance.

In the final stanza, the poem's Christian connotations become overt, as Wordsworth implores 'gracious God' to prevent him from finding 'Worse matter or a heavier mind … Grant this, and let me be resign'd / Beneath thy chast'ning rod' (ll. 40-3). Lucy Newlyn has observed that in 'Distressful gift' 'the lines separating poet from reader become blurred, so that Wordsworth swaps places with John, to become the reader of a book his brother has "framed"' (130). In its final stanza, this blurring leads the poet himself to become a version of the Cast-away, resigning himself to endure certain suffering at the hands of a God who seems set upon thwarting all of his earthly – and perhaps even spiritual – hopes. At the same time, Wordsworth's claim that John's 'eye for the beauties of Nature was as fine and delicate as ever Poet or Painter was gifted with' allows him to associate John with Cowper, the poet whose *Life* helped to trigger Wordsworth's writing of the elegies (*Letters* 1: 548). The 'Silent poet' whom Wordsworth had described in 'When first I journeyed hither' thus becomes a version of Cowper in 'The Cast-away': 'cast / Upon a way of life unmeet / For such a gentle Soul and sweet' ('To the Daisy', ll. 45-7).

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