

Victorian Valuations of William Cowper

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'I have found what I have been looking for all my life, a poet whom I can read on a Sunday.' Thus rejoiced Hannah More, in several ways a kindred spirit of Cowper's, on receipt of a copy of *The Task* a generation prior to Victoria's accession to the throne, whom Anne Stott quotes in her recent biography significantly entitled *Hannah More: The First Victorian*.¹ It is not difficult to identify which of Cowper's qualities would have appealed to Victorian sensibilities: an enviably unshaken belief in the divine superintendence of the cosmos, which even his episodes of despair served painfully to confirm, the extolling of domestic virtues, and, in an age of practicality mistrustful of Romantic idealism, an unaffected love of nature extending to practical advice on horticulture.

It is the expression of his despair, principally in his most familiar poem, 'The Castaway', which provides one of the richest veins of enquiry. In Charlotte Brontë's novel, *Shirley* (1849), Caroline Helstone and the forthright eponymous heroine embark on a course of female bonding, consciously exclusive of male presence, once the latter arrives in mill-dominated Yorkshire. Despite their contrasting temperaments, Shirley finds Caroline's 'instinct of taste . . . was like her own; such books as Miss Keeldar had read with the most pleasure, were Miss Helstone's delight also.' This is the prelude to an evening together, when Caroline retreats to the 'farthest and darkest end of the room . . . murmuring to herself fragments of well-remembered poetry.' She begins with the first stanza of 'The Castaway', which Brontë quotes, and 'went through it all' at Shirley's insistence, with quotation also of the final stanza. Brontë's work is full of autobiographical resonance, but if we respect the fictional integrity of the text Caroline's calling to mind 'The Castaway' affords a glimpse into the habits of at least one 'common reader'. Digesting the bitter fruits of a broken heart with all the intensity of youth, Caroline responds subjectively, reading her own situation into, or more properly as equivalent to, Cowper's own. Her 'pity' for him, for which he at least found 'relief in writing', is exacerbated in her own case by the privacy of an anguish which it is impossible for her to share even with Shirley.

'One could have loved Cowper,' muses Shirley, to which Caroline replies, 'he was not made to be loved by woman.' Cowper may not have been suited to love in the conjugal sense, but his work does appear to have had a particular appeal for the female reader. Charlotte's sister Anne's poem, 'To Cowper', testifies to her 'lifelong devotion to the poet', which is largely to be explained by 'the fact that much of his poetry of Calvinist despair found its way into the *Methodist Magazine*, read intently within the Brontë household, where the question of the extent of God's grace was hotly debated.' The 'question was to haunt Anne Brontë all her life, and to be the main cause of all her suffering.'² In contrast to the fictional Caroline's reading response, 'To Cowper' traces the growing maturity of the twenty-two year old Anne's continual rereading of the 'celestial Bard', from the subjective reception of 'childhood's years' to a recognition of the 'wilder woe/ [That] filled the Poet's heart'. She protests that 'if God is love' then surely Cowper is saved, before reinforcing Cowper's credentials in contrast to her own in a conclusion which subtly echoes the shift to personal predicament in the last stanza of 'The Castaway':

Yet, should thy darkest fears be true,

If Heaven be so severe,

That such a soul as thine is lost, –

Oh! How shall *I* appear?

Shirley is supposedly an historical novel set in the early nineteenth century at the time of Luddite insurrection, but the porous boundaries between fact and fiction can be traced when ‘Shirley sat at the window, watching the rack in heaven, the mist on earth, listening to certain notes of the gale that plained like restless spirits’ which, ‘had she not been so young . . . would have swept her trembling nerves like some omen, some anticipatory dirge’. There are shades of Emily’s *Wuthering Heights* here, but the atmospheric form the backdrop to an evocation of Cowper – and Anne. For when Caroline ‘hope[s] William Cowper is safe and calm in heaven now’ at the conclusion of her ‘very low’ repetition of ‘The Castaway’, Charlotte herself is almost certainly thinking of her youngest sister, who died in May of the year of *Shirley*’s publication, and who did appear to find peace of mind in a sense of personal redemption on her deathbed.³

It is also quite possible that Charlotte had her own periodic torments in mind, for ‘being imbued like the others with Methodism and with Cowper, problems of faith and salvation were serious and continuous with her [Anne], not fitful and terrible as they were with Charlotte.’⁴ What appears to be the case is that Cowper’s poetry, ‘The Castaway’ in particular, functioned to some extent like a miniature variant of *In Memoriam* for the Brontës, and for many more Victorians besides, providing, like Tennyson’s poem, the consolations of fellow feeling in the face of anguish, if not the remedial promise of eternal life thereafter. It will come as no surprise to learn that the Brontës’ suffering finds an echo in Christina Rossetti, once again filtered through the lens of Cowper’s life and poetry. Her brother William Michael, Edmund Gosse, and her ‘spiritual adviser’ towards the end of her life, the Reverend Charles Gutch, all likened her despair to Cowper’s. Indeed, a later biographer maintains that there were ‘moments when she was shadowed by a sense of doom more dreadful than that which had obsessed the God-haunted Cowper a century before . . . Even in her hours of hope and faith she had had her moments when like the poet Cowper she felt that God had singled her out for his secret wrath.’ Austere Aunt Branwell was largely responsible for Anne Brontë’s spiritual anxieties, while both William Michael Rossetti and Gosse likened Newton’s influence on Cowper to her sister Maria’s influence on Christina.⁵ It is of interest that these similar patterns of affliction cut across the sufferers’ denominational allegiances, which range from the Evangelical wing of the Church of England to the Anglo-Catholic.

Cowper was one of George Eliot’s ‘favourites’, and in the earnestly religious years of her early womanhood he figures in her letters to Maria Lewis, the evangelical teacher of her childhood days when at boarding school in Nuneaton. Her references reveal that her ability persuasively to sympathise with others’ predicaments was already well developed. The Olney hymns are in the correspondents’ bloodstream: ‘Of course you know that sweet one of Cowper’s . . . beginning “’Tis my happiness below” [XXXVI. ‘Welcome Cross’]. I think there are few who know much of mental conflict that would not choose external trial in preference to it’. Eliot must have realised that the hymn’s dwelling on the need to be reconciled to affliction lightens the load that was finally to overwhelm Cowper, as witnessed in the poem it pre-echoes.

Did I meet no trials here,

No chastisement on the way,

Might I not with reason fear

I should prove a castaway?

These lines, indeed the hymn complete, could almost be mistaken for Christina Rossetti, she who asks, and answers: 'Does the road wind up-hill all the way?/ Yes, to the very end' – such is the community of troubled pilgrims that extends beyond historical boundaries. The young Eliot, writing to her childhood tutor, is a little too eager to co-opt Cowper in her self-advertisement of a religiosity certain to find an approving response: 'Do you remember Cowper's Hymn beginning "I was a grovelling creature once"? [LII. 'Lively Hope and Gracious Fear'] It is as rich as the pomegranate and the vine. And the collect for last Sunday – was that not beautiful?' There remains, however, the saving grace of sympathy. Anne Brontë was emphatic that the tortured Cowper was in the arms of a loving God. Eliot's focus turns to the 'Divine character' as 'Comforter' while the collect, for the sixth Sunday after Trinity, could well embrace her own acknowledgement of Cowper saved by the God he undoubtedly served:

O God who has prepared for them that love thee such good things as pass man's understanding: Pour into our hearts such love toward thee, that we, loving thee above all things, may obtain thy promises, which exceed all that we can desire.⁶

If these sketches prove somewhat too oppressive for modern tastes, an exchange of correspondence between Thomas Carlyle and his sister will begin to dispel the gloom. A letter from her prompts Carlyle to a charming evocation of 'Our good old Mother! The image of her, sitting in her little end-room reading Cowper, a little speck of light in the great dead heart of Universal Winter, is infinitely interesting to us!' The 'us', of course, embraces his wife, Jane, herself a fond admirer of Cowper; and although Carlyle's own habitual gloom provides the external *mise-en-scène*, and his 'interesting' appears less than effusive, the 'image' called forth is one of the radiance of Cowper's poetry providing comfort and companionship for the 'good old' lady in her domestic solitude. And just as Cowper was inspired to pen heart-felt and much admired recollections of his mother on receipt of her picture out of Norfolk, so the stern Carlyle is softened into an affectionate calling to mind of his own mother's reading Cowper, on receipt of a pen-portrait of her out of Scotland.⁷ Dickens, as might be imagined, lightens the tone. His library in the 1840s included Southey's edition of Cowper and the poet's Homer, and his letters reveal that he was, like so many, pleasantly familiar with *John Gilpin*. Whatever he knew of *The Task* is spiced with irreverence. A short note to Miss Harriet Hancock in July 1854 gently satirises Cowper's 'innocence' and implies that the poem's tediously moralising tone is its consequence: 'To keep your innocence company, here is Cowper's, whose "Task" I accordingly set you. I fear you may find it a heavy one!'⁸

Among the professional critics the narrative which evolves from Matthew Arnold's evaluations of the poet offers fresh perspectives. Arnold was no lover of the poetry of the eighteenth century, the period he famously dubbed 'the age of prose' in his essay on Gray. His 'A French Critic on Milton', a review of several essays on Milton (including that of his admired and much-loved friend Edmond Scherer on *Paradise Lost*), anticipates T.S. Eliot's notion of the dissociation of sensibility when it criticises the 'ever recurring failure, both in rhythm and diction, which we find in the so-called Miltonic verse of Thomson, Cowper, Wordsworth. What leagues of lumbering movement, what desperate endeavours.'⁹ His critical antennae were much more excited, however, by the appearance of Cowper in Stopford Brooke's *English Literature* in Macmillan's 'Literature Primers' series, 'prepared

by distinguished scholars'. In an obituary of Stopford Brooke which appeared in *The Spectator* in 1916, tribute is paid to this 'literary tour de force of the highest order', familiar to 'thousands of English speaking folk in whose mind his name is inseparably connected with this little book'. Most pertinent is the opening sentence: 'It is no mean achievement to write a standard educational work which wins popularity among generations of schoolboys and schoolgirls, and it is to them not only a source of genuine pleasure, but the gateway through which they have entered into a region of intellectual delight where many of their happiest hours in after life have been spent.'¹⁰ In his 1877 review of the first edition, Arnold considers Brooke's evaluation of Cowper to be 'excellent' but, in anticipation of the Primer's influence on impressionable minds, this vastly experienced and much admired school inspector, ever alarmed by the prospect of popular unrest even while sympathetic to the lower orders' predicament, sounds a note of warning:

Mr. Stopford Brooke's Cowper is excellent, but again there seems to me to be some want of sobriety in the praise given. Philanthropy, no doubt, animated Cowper's heart and shows itself in his poetry. But it is too much to say of the apparition of Cowper and his philanthropy in English poetry: 'It is a wonderful change, a change so wonderful that it is like a new world. It is, in fact, the concentration into one retired poet's work of all the new thought upon the subject of mankind which was soon to take so fierce a form in Paris.' Cowper, with his morbid religion and lumbering movement, was no precursor, as Mr. Stopford Brooke would thus make him, of Byron and Shelley. His true praise is, that by his simple affections and genuine love of nature he was a precursor of Wordsworth.¹¹

Arnold was by no means alone in his ever-present fear of the French fever of revolution visiting these shores – one calls to mind Carlyle, Chartist agitation – but by locating Cowper's qualities in uncontroversial subjects, certainly recognised and appreciated by Victorian commentators, he seeks to rob Cowper's poetry (particularly, perhaps, *The Task*) of its radical potency.

Stopford Brooke could himself poke fun at Arnold, pointing out how the urbane, distinguished promoter of Hellenic culture as a corrective guide to the Victorian 'conduct of life' would himself have been aghast at the uncivilised life of Classical Athens. His unnerving 'Primer' sold twenty-five thousand copies in the first ten months, but he did bow to his senior's 'suggestions' for revision. All traces of the incendiary stuff on Cowper were removed from the 1878 'New Edition'. Under the heading, 'Further Change of Subject – Man. –', the 'fierce extreme' of the French Revolution is referred to, but with no mention of Cowper. In a section embracing Cowper, Crabbe and Burns, in a pocket-sized book of some one hundred and sixty-seven pages tracing 'English' literary history from 670 to 1832, a handsome one and a half pages remain allotted to Cowper, with no sign of the barricade or shadow of the guillotine. But in the later section entitled 'The French Revolution', Brooke's persistence enlists Cowper in the dissolution of that most staunchly held principle of Victorian society – social rank:

Certain ideas relating to Mankind considered as a whole had been growing up in Europe . . . and we have seen their influence on the work of Cowper, Crabbe and Burns. These ideas spoke of natural rights that belonged to every man . . . There was therefore only one class, the class of Man, of which all were equal citizens . . . Such ideas . . . were waiting to be expressed in action, and in the overthrow of the Bastille in 1789, and in the proclamation of the new Constitution in the following year France threw them abruptly into popular and political form.¹²

Had Arnold known Brooke's Sunday afternoon lecture on Cowper, delivered as one of a series in St James's Chapel, Piccadilly in the season of 1872 and first published two years later, he would have been equally, if not more unnerved. As a kind of parallel to the extension lectures of universities or in line with those on offer at workers' institutes, the successful series was designed for the enquiring minds of adults who might not otherwise haunt ecclesiastical precincts. Although Brooke is insistent that Cowper is 'drenched with theology . . . for the first time, as one smells the brine before one sees the ocean, we scent in English poetry, too distinctly to be explained away, the air of those ideas of which the French Revolution was the most local and the most violent outburst.' He sees the 'passion of religion and the passion of political freedom . . . fused into one, and they run up into the highest expression then given in the English language of the poetry of human liberty.' And in his desire 'to rub out the sharp lines drawn by that false distinction of sacred and profane', and to see Christ in all, Brooke anticipates Arnold's late essay, 'The Study of Poetry', which by contrast distinguishes religion from poetry and prophesies our increasing reliance on the latter at the expense of the former as a guide to the conduct of life.¹³

Despite Arnold's disavowal of any revolutionary tendencies in Cowper, Leslie Stephen at least toys with the notion in his substantial late essay, 'Cowper and Rousseau' collected in *Hours in a Library* (1897). For the subject matter of the essay Stephen might have taken his cue from Caroline Helstone's perception of similarities between Cowper and Rousseau in *Shirley*, a novel Stephen claimed to dislike in remarks that denied Charlotte Brontë any claim to greatness. True, he sensibly declares that 'nobody could be less of a revolutionary than Cowper', but this he is keen to qualify:

Cowper, like Rousseau, might see the world through the distorting haze of a disordered fancy, but the world at large was itself strangely disordered, and the smouldering discontentment of the inarticulate masses found an echo in their passionate utterances. Their voices were like the moan of a coming earthquake.

If 'disordered fancy,' 'echo' and 'moan' deprive Cowper's voice of forceful prophecy, so 'his passages of sweet and melancholy musing by the quiet Ouse' offer mere refreshment in prospect of the French Revolution, coming 'like a breath of fresh air to the jaded generation waiting for the fall of the Bastille' and, as Stephen darkly puts it, 'other things.' The long-established recognition of 'thin partitions' between 'wit' and 'madness' resurfaces in Stephen's post-Romantic evaluation of both Rousseau and Cowper who, 'on the verge of madness, should be the most impressive prophets.' The latter's ineffectiveness, however, is attributed to a kind of solipsistic derangement which Stephen neatly likens to Cowper being 'his own prisoner in the Bastille, playing with spiders.'¹⁴

Stopford Brooke's lecture offered a significant corrective to any who might have considered Cowper to be spineless: 'But we must not think that this personal misery or the morbid element in his religion extended over his whole moral life, so as to make him or his poetry unmanly.' Manliness was highly respected in Victorian culture, and Stephen himself belongs to what might be called the Manly School of Criticism, where a moral-aesthetic based on stereotypically masculine values determines, and sometimes distorts, critical assessment. Wordsworth provides the benchmark in the 1802 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, where a 'manly style' he designates 'naked and simple', in contrast to one reliant on 'artificial distinctions'. When the School has Cowper in its sights, however, it is surprisingly even-handed and appreciative. It stretches from Hazlitt, who indulgently ridicules Cowper for being the kind of man who hates being caught in a shower of rain, but vigorously takes Byron to task for peremptorily declaring him to be 'no poet', to Macaulay, who praises 'above all [the]

manliness of taste' of 'the gentle, shy, melancholy Calvinist' in his review of Thomas Moore's *Life of Byron* (1830). It then threads its way through Landor and on to Walter Bagehot's percipient essay on Cowper, before ending up with Stephen. Byron's assessment, despite its abrupt dismissiveness, paradoxically contains the germ of an explanation for the Victorians' regard for Cowper's unadorned poetry in contrast to the various elaborations of unmanly versifiers. It would be impossible here to provide an extensive cultural history of Victorian taste, but both Shelley and indeed Byron himself were taken to task for their effeminate self-indulgence in Henry Taylor's influential Preface to his vast drama, *Philip Van Artevelde* (1834). Arnold himself decried Shelley as an 'ineffectual angel', and criticised Byron's disingenuous parade of his 'bleeding heart' throughout Europe. Much of Tennyson's poetry, up to and including *In Memoriam* (1850), is overshadowed by an anxiety about the manly credentials of poetic composition. In view of Cowper's own unquestionably genuine mental torment, we might assume his 'stricken deer' allusions to have been considered commendably minimal.

In his 1960 *Essay and Bibliography of Cowperian Studies*, Lodwick Hartley implicitly explains Cowper's popularity among the Victorians in the terms with which he laments the subsequent 'marked decline in interest'. 'One may easily see [why] Cowper is neglected by the main body of contemporary critics because his poetry gives them so little to go on. One may study his imagery, but not for long. The search for paradox, irony, symbolism, and ambiguity in his verse offers no excitement.' In the age of practical criticism, the New Criticism, 'what appeal' could Cowper's poetry, unlike that of the admired Metaphysicals, have 'to T.S. Eliot, or William Empson, or Kenneth Burke?'¹⁵

In the conflation of masculinity and matter-of-fact versifying, it is significant that the manly heroine of *Shirley* praises 'The Castaway' for its self-disciplined excellence, filled with a strong 'impulse which, while it would not suffer [Cowper] to stop to add ornament to a single stanza, filled him with force to achieve the whole with consummate perfection.' Leslie Stephen at least half-praises 'On the Loss of the Royal George' for its 'simplest possible language', without 'a single metaphor or figure of speech', where Cowper 'indulge[s] in none but the most obvious of all reflections.' Cowper's reclusiveness accounts for the 'admirable delineation of country scenery and country thoughts' on the one hand, which afforded him 'the most effectual relief', while accounting for an ill-informed, old-ladylike 'querulous[ness]' on the other, which Stephen enjoys deriding. Yet, although 'it was natural that many people [saw] in him an amiable valetudinarian, not qualified for a censorship of statesmen and the world', there remains a 'true masculine vigour underlying Cowper's jeremiads', while his simple virtues are enhanced because 'the most trivial objects really are connected by subtle threads of association with the most solemn thoughts.' In keeping with previous reference to Cowper's consolatory appeal, Stephen also acknowledges 'a vein of religious meditation [that] has recommended [him] to thousands'.

The sequel to Walter Savage Landor's first 'imaginary conversation' on Cowper (1824) appeared at the end of 1842. The conversation is conceived to be between the great classical scholar, Richard Porson (1759 – 1807), and the poet Robert Southey, well known for his life of the poet and as editor of the *Complete Works*. It is a moot point to what extent the exchange is stamped with the personalities of the conversationalists, but the controversy that Landor's conversations generally could provoke suggests that contemporary readers detected the ventriloquist behind the dummies. The technique, however, does at least give the appearance of even-handedness, and thus authority, to Landor's evaluations.

Praise for Cowper's 'philosophy', which is 'neither obtrusive nor abstruse', issues not from the mouth of the classicist, but from Southey. Landor's Victorian contemporaries would at least second the latter's assessment in a conversation marked by mutual high admiration for the poet. 'I am highly gratified by your recommendation of Cowper,' continues Southey, 'than whom there never was a more virtuous and amiable man. In some passages he stands quite unrivalled by any recent poet of this century: none, indeed, modern or ancient, has touched the heart more delicately, purely, and effectively, than he has done in *Crazy Kate*, in *Lines on his Mother's Picture*, in *Omai*, and on hearing *Bells at a Distance*.' Here qualities sure to appeal to Victorian sensibilities are identified in a familiar Victorian conflation of the man and his work. In singling out passages for praise, Southey perhaps anticipates Arnold's development of the idea of exemplary 'touchstones'. Porson finds Cowper's 'Winter' (in *The Task*) 'incomparably better than Virgil's, which is indeed a disgrace to the *Georgics*; or than Thomson's, which [he concedes] in places is grand', while in contrast to Young's indecorous extravagances 'nothing of [Cowper's] is out of place or season.' What is designed as incontestable judgment, coming as it does from the clear-eyed classicist, with ironically his own (or Landor's) taste for embroidery, in part seconds the pronouncements of Macaulay, who saw in Cowper's 'hatred of meretricious ornament' the reforming principles of a new school of poetry:

He was among the first who put to flight the mischievous little imps of allegory, so cherished and fondled by the Wartons. They are as bad in poetry as mice in a cheese-room. You poets are still rather fond of the unsubstantial. Some will have nothing else than what they call pure imagination. Now air-plants ought not to fill the whole conservatory; other plants, I would modestly suggest, are worth cultivating, which send their roots pretty deep into the ground. I hate poetry and wine without body.

Porson insists that 'you [Southey] are talking like a poet; I must talk like a grammarian.' Be that as it may, his 'talk' is governed by criteria deep-rooted in the Victorians' down-to-earth appreciation of Cowper's poetry.¹⁶

Landor might be considered as a somewhat eccentric and crusty old Romantic, who happened to survive into the Victorian period, but no less a critic than R. H. Super, the modern editor of Arnold, maintains that 'about all of [Cowper] he said the right thing. Cowper has nowhere been better praised than here. As a piece of literary criticism the Conversation is well worth reading.'¹⁷ For richly elaborated insight, however, Landor meets his match in Walter Bagehot's substantial essay on Cowper, first published in 1855. The editor of the 1911 collection of his *Literary Studies*, the distinguished scholar critic George Sampson, in true manly guise opines that 'the better part of the world prefers its men of letters to be men of experience . . . Certainly there was no keener man of the world than Bagehot himself.' From this perspective we may consider his assessment of Cowper to be quintessentially of its age. Ostensibly a review of Robert Bell's *Poetical Works of William Cowper*, Bagehot's approval of Cowper's early years for affording him essential experience before his retreat from the world echoes Sampson's observations on Bagehot himself: 'It has been said that at times every man wishes to be a man of the world, and even the most rigid critic must concede it to be nearly essential to a writer on real life and actual manners.' This looks to bode ill for Cowper, but at all times Bagehot is sympathetic to the ways in which Cowper's temperament dictated his daily routine: 'The nature of Cowper was not, indeed, passionate,' preferring the 'daily society of amiable and cultivated women . . . to the rough and argumentative pleasures of masculine companionship.' And it is the complementary theme of 'domestic and rural life', Bagehot observes, that has won for the poet his nationwide popularity. He has 'held up

to the English people exact delineations of what they prefer.’ The exactitude is precisely the point: ‘The sketches have the highest merit – suitability of style. It would be absurd to describe a post-boy as sonneteers their mistress – to cover his plain face with fine similes – to put forward the “brow of Egypt” – to stick metaphors upon him’. This is of a piece with others’ observations, but even while it is overdone it hints at an agreeable aspect of Bagehot’s own style in the way in which wide-ranging allusion evolves from his central subject. Ironically, however, this is a habit of composition detected as a weakness in Cowper himself, who ‘has not the exclusive interest or the undeviating energetic downrightness of mind which would ensure his going through [his argument] without idling or turning aside.’ Bagehot’s language bristles with the desire for manly resolve and determination, and partly supports the severely classical insistence on attention to design which Arnold had advocated in the 1853 ‘Preface’ to his new edition of poetry. But, if Cowper is tempted into deviation, his verse ‘entirely wants the higher and rarer excellencies of poetical expression’.

Bagehot’s comprehensive review of Cowper’s disposition, his lack of sexual drive – ‘he was not a passionate lover’ – his instability and retirement, accounts for the character of his entire corpus. For him (as for Stephen later) Cowper’s sally into satire, where he is dismissively characterised as a ‘scold’, is entirely unsuited to his temperament: ‘Nor has his language any of the sharp intrusive acumen which divides in sunder both soul and spirit, that is necessary for fierce and unforgettable reviling.’ Bagehot’s desire for an intensity of denunciation worthy of an Old Testament prophet surely colours his evaluation, while a not dissimilar attitude accounts for his disapproval of Cowper’s translation of Homer: ‘The most conspicuous feature in the Greek heroes is a certain brisk, decisive activity, which always strikes and always likes to strike . . . It is absurd to expect a man like [Cowper] to sympathise with the stern stimulants of a barbaric age . . . As if to make matters worse, Cowper selected a metre in which it would scarcely be possible for anyone, however gifted, to translate Homer.’ Cowper’s ‘idea that extreme literalness was an unqualified advantage’ was totally mistaken, but, however ill-judged, it is perhaps akin to the undemonstrative style of Cowper’s own domestic poetry which Bagehot and his contemporaries value so highly.

Bagehot’s quintessentially Victorian approval of utility accounts for his finding value in that ‘converting engine’ John Newton’s ‘great idea that Cowper ought to be of some use’, but the result, the *Olney Hymns*, is a ‘very painful record’ of the ‘excitement’ that this most ‘dangerous adviser’ prompted. The ‘gentle round of calm delights’ is the preferred alternative. Whereas ‘to Wordsworth . . . nature is a religion, of this haunting, supernatural, mystical view of nature Cowper never heard.’ And, we might suppose, not to add to his woes, was thereby never troubled. ‘Daily matters . . . light and transitory’ maintained Cowper’s equilibrium ‘if it were not broken by the interruption of a terrible earnestness, and relieved by the dark background of deep and foreboding sadness.’ *The Task*, the record of his domestic life, contains ‘all the best qualities of his genius . . . since its publication his name has been a household word – a particularly household word in English literature.’ With this location of his qualities it is small wonder that the ‘man of the world’ cannot extend his sympathies to Cowper’s indelible religious convictions beyond a grudging recognition of their partial influence. ‘And however tedious the recurrence of those theological tenets may be to the common reader, it is certain that a considerable portion of Cowper’s peculiar popularity may be traced to their expression.’ Such are the peculiar characteristics of his work that he is dubiously praised as ‘the one poet of a class which have no poets.’

What is particularly distinctive, and understandable given his poetic preferences, is the considerable attention Bagehot gives to Cowper’s letters, ‘that copious correspondence on

which so much of Cowper's fame at present rests'. Nostalgia permeates Victorian culture, and for a man in the thick of things, and presumably for many others, the letters have a charm in their evocation of the more leisured life of yesteryear:

You wrote to a man whom you knew nineteen years and a half ago, and told him what you had for dinner, and what your second cousin said, and how the crops got on. Every detail of life was described, and dwelt on, and improved.

The operative word is 'improved': 'Each age should write for itself a faithful account of its habitual existence' but the writing should be enhanced by suitable art. 'All this has now passed away . . . but it is impossible in some respects not to regret the old practice . . . Sir Rowland Hill is entitled to the credit, not only of introducing stamps, but also of destroying letters.' He concludes that 'this species of composition exactly harmonised Cowper's temperament and genius': the life, the unpretentious art of both poetic and epistolary composition Bagehot sees as all of a piece.¹⁸

Wherever one turns in reading the Victorians' own letters one gets a sense of easy familiarity with Cowper. The young, pre-Victorian, Edward Fitzgerald writes to the equally young Thackeray to say how 'glad' he is that he has 'taken to Cowper: some of his little poems are affecting beyond anything in the English language: not heroic, but they make me cry. The Poplar field is one of the best; and Alexander Selkirk.' Notwithstanding the emphasis on manliness, an intensely affective response is often a measure of excellence to the Victorian reader, while the range of emotion in Cowper's poetry furnishes the letter writer with allusions to suit every occasion. But while appreciating that 'Cowper and Pope were men of genius', the mature Victorian Fitzgerald can still belittle the domesticated old-maid manner of Cowper's *Homer*, 'the tea-cup time parody' of the original. ¹⁹ In an early letter (1838), Fitzgerald's friend Tennyson appropriates a line on England from Book 2 of *The Task*, 'With all thy faults I love thee still', to express his local affection for his native Lincolnshire, while in a letter of 1848 he quotes from *The Progress of Error* to confess his anxious misgivings about the worth of his own work prior to his years of acclaim: "'Fancy's hatred for the child she bears'" would often be a much truer reading, as regards myself, than "Fancy's fondness". During illness in old age Tennyson found Cowper a source of comfort:

William Ward came to see him and they talked about religion and the Divinity of Christ. He seemed cheerful. I [his son Hallam] sat up with him at night: he called me every half-hour, and quoted Cowper's lines to his mother's picture when I put 'the fragrant waters on his brow.'

Keen to read Cowper on poetic craftsmanship, a week later finds him 'anxious' to see Cowper's paper on the 'English Sapphics', while eight years earlier 'Of Cowper he said: "Few people could put words together with such exquisite flow and evenness."' Given Tennyson's own scarcely-rivalled mastery of metre no praise could be higher.²⁰

What is appreciated in Cowper is his often achieved sense of decorum, what Bagehot observes as his 'exact delineations' and 'suitableness of style.' In Elizabeth Barrett Browning's own tribute to Cowper, 'Cowper's Grave', decorum is stretched to its limits. A latter-day Romantic visionary, who is never anything but impassioned, her memorial is somewhat hit and miss in its excited, if also exciting, evocation of the poet. Like Stephen or Bagehot, she admires Cowper's stiff upper lip as an essential of the 'poet's high vocation', but fails to follow her own precept. She revitalises the age-old tradition which links inspiration with madness – 'O poets, from a maniac's tongue was poured the deathless

singing!’ – before insisting, in high-pitched harmony with the Brontës, that Cowper is saved. She likens the curative love of mother for child to Christ’s for the ‘frenzy desolated’ poet. And just as Christ was loved when at his most desolate on the Cross, so, through emphatic refrains of ‘not deserted!’ she is adamant that Christ’s own saving grace has redeemed all from suffering. She concludes by focusing on the supposed source for her revelatory inspiration: ‘And I, on Cowper’s Grave, should see his rapture in a vision.’

In keeping with the tenor of so much of her poetry, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, or Elizabeth Barrett as she was when the poem was first published in her 1838 collection, undoubtedly sees in Cowper a reflection of her own life and calling. And just as Victorian readers saw in Cowper an echo of their own spiritual anxieties, so the affirmatory tone of ‘Cowper’s Grave’ offered them a welcome ‘grace abounding’. Judging from letters received from friends and unknown admirers, the poem proved to be the most popular in the volume. If readers saw, or felt, in Cowper’s own ‘Castaway’ in particular, something on a small scale akin to the desolation Tennyson felt for the loss of Hallam in *In Memoriam*, the reassuring journey from darkness to light of ‘Cowper’s Grave’ anticipates in miniature the entire trajectory of Tennyson’s equally, if not more, welcome elegy. The poem was revised by Barrett Browning for her 1850 collection, the year of the publication of *In Memoriam*, when both she and Tennyson were considered for the post of poet laureate following Wordsworth’s demise (Tennyson got the job), and continued to draw effusive praise from reviewers throughout what remained of the Victorian period. In an age racked with doubt, any highly emotive voice yea-saying the sureties of everlasting life was in danger of compromising the aesthetic judgment of both writer and reader. From the *Christian Speaker* in 1862, the year after Barrett Browning’s death, we plainly see the message embraced at the expense of the medium:

We see a strong mind cleared of doubts and difficulties resting in simple faith upon the mediator. She finds one faithful where all others are faithless. Her religion mixes with almost every thought; it is a light in the darkest gloom, a comfort in the deepest woe.

The Glasgow Herald close on a generation later ranks the poem, along with ‘The Cry of the Children’ and *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, as ‘alone sufficient to place her among the immortals of English Literature’. In a review of the late eighties, from the ‘examples of her genius’, ‘Cowper’s Grave’ remains one of the ‘permanent glories of our language and literature, the intensity of Elizabeth Barrett’s feelings . . . will not be doubted for a moment by anyone having belief in “the sublime uses” of her art, and in the “solemn responsibilities” alluded to by their architect.’ ‘Good taste is never offended’, we are questionably assured, and the claim is made ‘that [the poem] offers as clear an elucidation of [Cowper’s] condition as any, or all of the essays, which have multiplied upon the subject’ of what Barrett Browning calls his ‘madness-cloud’ that blinded him to God’s grace. It is only in the early twentieth century that a sourer, but securer, note begins to be sounded. The authoritative critic Oliver Elton observes that ‘while the most popular as well as the most impassioned piece, [‘Cowper’s Grave’] is not the surest in note’, and contrasts Cowper’s own clear-sightedness with Barrett Browning’s near-hysteria: ‘He could not be more lucid had he been clinically watching another person. Mrs. Browning’s verses on his grave show less self-control than any poem of Cowper’s own, and the “maniac” whose “deathless singing” they celebrate could reason about his own fixed idea, though he could not reason it away, with singular rigour.’²¹

This ‘just remark’, as Lodwick Hartley calls it, prompts a summary assessment of Victorian reading responses to Cowper’s own work. It is no surprise to find that Victorians read according to predisposition, but shared similarities of response evolve that see Cowper’s anxieties, his daily round and his technique mirroring their own concerns and values in ways which help to define what we understand as Victorian culture. If there is a gendered divide, it is that women are more acutely sensitive to Cowper’s own tribulations, but both sexes extend a measure of sympathy to what Stephen calls his ‘insanity’, for which the act of writing proved cathartic, and even when fun is poked at Cowper’s timidities it is generally done in a spirit of good humour. Victorians valued fidelity to nature, and all – creative writer, professional critic, common reader – are highly appreciative of Cowper’s unaffected delineations of the domestic scene and rural life. Again, this will come as no surprise. As herald to Victorian values, Macaulay in 1830 praises Cowper who, having ‘found poetry in its lowest state of degradation, feeble, artificial and altogether nerveless . . . possessed exactly the right talents for the task of raising it from that deep abasement.’ The principal virtue is a forthright lack of pretension, which extends to Cowper’s expression of his own suffering. Shirley Keeldar values in Cowper-loving Caroline Helstone the appreciation of ‘true ore’ just before she recalls ‘The Castaway’, in contrast to the ‘flashy dross’ of unspecified others. And George Eliot, in applying her ‘test of realism’, finds Young’s *Night Thoughts* ‘remote, vague, and unknown’ in contrast to Cowper, who presents the commonest objects ‘truthfully and lovingly’, cherishing them in proportion to their nearness.²² In looking back to Cowper, Victorians found an echo of their own idylls, real or imagined, and sympathy, even kinship, with his voice of despair. Cowper’s appeal to the Moderns, who relished the clinical analysis of complex metaphor, might well have diminished, but his attraction for their predecessors is attested to well beyond what this review essay could hope to compass.

Notes

- 1 Anne Stott, *Hannah More: The First Victorian* (Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 273.
- 2 The references to Cowper in *Shirley* are to be found in chapter 12 of the novel. For Anne Brontë, see Winifred Gérin, *Anne Brontë* (Allen Lane, 1976), pp. 33, 38.
- 3 *Ibid.* p.320.
- 4 See Ada Harrison and Derek Stanford, *Anne Brontë: Her Life and Work* (London: Methuen, 1959) pp. 50-51.
- 5 See Maria Zaturenska, *Christina Rossetti: A Portrait with Background* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), pp.70, 233, 282, 291.
- 6 See Gordon S. Haight, ed., *The George Eliot Letters*, 7 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1954 – 6), I, 17, 100.
- 7 See Clyde de L. Ryals and Kenneth J. Fielding, Senior, eds., *The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle*, (Durham [U.S.A.] and London: Duke University Press, 1995), 22, 178.
- 8 See in particular Graham Storey, Kathleen Tillotson and Angus Easson, eds., *The Letters of Charles Dickens* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 7, 317.
- 9 R.H. Super, ed., ‘A French Critic on Milton,’ in *Matthew Arnold: Essays Religious and Mixed* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972) pp. 182 – 3, Vol. VIII of *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*.
- 10 *The Spectator*, 1 April, 1911, 11.
- 11 Super, ed., ‘A Guide to English Literature,’ in *Matthew Arnold: Essays Religious and Mixed*, p.250.

- 12 *Ibid.*, note, p. 441; see also Rev. Stopford Brooke, M.A., *English Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1878), in particular p.151.
- 13 See 'Lecture III, Cowper', in Stopford Brooke, *Theology in the English Poets* (London and Toronto: Dent, 1910), pp. 40 – 54.
- 14 See Leslie Stephen, 'Cowper and Rousseau', *Hours in a Library* (London: Smith, Elder, 1892), III, 208 – 40.
- 15 Lodwick Hartley, *William Cowper: The Continuing Revaluation, an Essay and a Bibliography of Cowperian Studies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1960), p.14.
- 16 See T. Earle Welby, 'Second Conversation', *The Complete Works of Walter Savage Landor* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1927), V, 166 – 213.
- 17 R.H. Super, *Walter Savage Landor: A Biography* (New York: New York University Press, 1954), p.342.
- 18 See Walter Bagehot, 'William Cowper', *Literary Studies*, George Sampson, ed. (London: Dent, 1911), I, ix, and pp. 227 – 74.
- 19 Alfred McKinley Terhune and Annabelle Burdick Terhune, eds., *The Letters of Edward Fitzgerald* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), I, 105; IV, 168.
- 20 See Cecil Y. Lang and Edgar F. Shannon, Jr., *The Letters of Alfred Lord Tennyson* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982, 1990), I, 158, 282; III, 382; Charles Tennyson, *Alfred Tennyson* (London: Macmillan, 1949), p. 452.
- 21 Victorian responses to 'Cowper's Grave' are to be found in Clara Dawson, ed., *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Critical Heritage*, 2 vols. (London and New York: Routledge, 2014). See also Oliver Elton, *A Survey of English Literature 1780 – 1830* (London: Edward Arnold, 1912), I, 80.
- 22 Gordon S. Haight, *George Eliot: A Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 217.