

## **‘With what intense desire she wants her home’: Cowper’s Influence on Jane Austen**

Jane Darcy

Fanny Price, the timid heroine of *Mansfield Park*, never feels at home. Taken at nine from the chaos of her family house in Portsmouth, she grows up in the grandeur of Mansfield Park, under the care of her uncle and aunt, Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram. But although Sir Thomas at the outset declared, ‘Let her home be in this house’, he fails to see the divisiveness of Mrs Norris’s insistence that Fanny be brought up to know her place, never to consider herself on an equal footing with the Bertram children. It is Mrs Norris who plans this relegation in concrete terms, suggesting Fanny be given ‘the little white Attic, near the Old Nurseries ... close by the housemaids’.<sup>1</sup>

Such security as Fanny has is threatened when she is fifteen. Widowhood means Mrs Norris must leave the parsonage and move to a smaller cottage. The Bertrams assume, wrongly, that she will do her duty by Fanny and take her to live with her. When the news is casually broken by Lady Bertram, Fanny is aghast:

‘And am I never to live here again?’

‘Never, my dear; but you are sure of a comfortable home. It can make very little difference to you, whether you are in one house or the other.’<sup>2</sup>

Fortunately for Fanny, this does not come to pass. But this failure to understand the difference between a house and a home remains a quietly powerful revelation of the Bertrams’ lack of sensibility in a novel which takes home, homelessness and exile as its central theme. It is one of great personal significance to Jane Austen herself. Her loss of her own family home in her mid-twenties affected her severely. In this essay I want to explore the profound influence of Cowper on Austen’s thoughts and feelings about the necessity of finding a true home. Her love of Cowper’s poetry is, of course, well known. Many of us remember Fanny Price’s passionate reaction to the proposed felling of an avenue of trees on a neighbouring estate:

‘Cut down an avenue! What a pity! Does not it make you think of Cowper?  
“Ye fallen avenues, once more I mourn your fate unmerited”.’<sup>3</sup>

But I what I hope to demonstrate in this essay is the more profound and pervasive influence of Cowper on Jane Austen.

### **‘This nest of comforts’**

Only when Fanny is eighteen does Austen reveal how she has responded to her banishment to the ‘little white Attic’. Over time she has developed a consolatory response to her situation, creating her own tiny domain. On the floor below her attic bedroom is the old schoolroom where she and the Bertram girls had been tutored. No longer in use, it has now been grandly retitled ‘the East room’. But it is a space that no one wants. So when Fanny begins to colonise it with her books and plants, spending more and more time there, it becomes generally accepted that the East room belongs to her. Even Mrs Norris’s spiteful stipulation for ‘there never being a fire in it on Fanny’s account’, cannot spoil the deep pleasure Fanny takes in it.<sup>4</sup> Austen rarely gives details of rooms or costumes, but at this moment we are invited to gaze at the space which Fanny has transformed into a home:

The aspect was so favourable, that even without a fire it was habitable in many an early spring, and late autumn morning, to such a willing mind as Fanny’s, and while there was a gleam of sunshine, she hoped not to be driven from it entirely, even when winter came. The comfort of it in her hours of leisure was extreme. She could go there after any thing unpleasant below, and find immediate consolation in some pursuit, or some train of thought at hand. – Her plants, her books – of which she had been a collector, from the first hour of her commanding a shilling – her writing desk, and her works of charity and ingenuity, were all within her reach.<sup>5</sup>

Those of us who know Cowper will recognise here a poignantly Cowperian sensibility. Cowper’s evocations of himself, comfortably insulated from the world, dreaming beside a wintry fire, had appealed to his readers, Jane Austen among them, from the publication of *The Task* (1785). His posthumously published letters added to this new literary celebration of intimate domestic space. We think of him in his greenhouse (‘a cabinet of perfumes’) or playing with a new kitten (‘she is dressed in a tortoise-shell suit’).<sup>6</sup> But as he revealed in ‘On the Receipt of My

Mother's Picture out of Norfolk', his childhood was overshadowed by his mother's death just before his sixth birthday. Writing in 1790, he continues to cherish the memory of maternal love:

Thy nightly visits to my chamber made,  
That thou mightst know me safe and warmly laid;  
Thy morning bounties ere I left my home,  
The biscuit, or confectionary plum;  
The fragrant waters on my cheeks bestow'd  
By thy own hand, till fresh they shone and glow'd;  
All this, and more endearing still than all,  
Thy constant flow of love, that knew no fall ... (58-65)

Fanny too is a wounded spirit, the only one of Jane Austen's heroines we have followed since her troubled childhood; we know her still to suffer acutely from fears and anxieties. Like Cowper, Fanny finds consolation in retreat to a space whose psychological significance we are now attuned to – a room of her own. Here she can read and write and think: in other words, attend to her inner life. Her possessions are few but imbued with great personal meaning:

She could scarcely see an object in that room which had not an interesting remembrance connected with it. – Every thing was a friend, or bore her thoughts to a friend...<sup>7</sup>

Her writing desk reminds us of Jane Austen's own treasured mahogany box, a present from her father. Fanny, far from feeling deprived or resentful at the luxuries allowed her cousins, draws enormous contentment from this modest room. Indeed Austen reinforces the theme of true domestic happiness in this novel by using the words 'comfort' and 'comfortable' some two hundred times.

But let us return to where we left off:

Every thing was a friend, or bore her thoughts to a friend; and though there had been sometimes much of suffering to her – though her motives had been often misunderstood, her feelings disregarded, and her comprehension undervalued; though she had known the pains of tyranny, of ridicule, and neglect, yet almost every recurrence of either had led to something consolatory; her Aunt Bertram had spoken for her, or Miss Lee had been encouraging, or what was yet more frequent or more dear – Edmund had been her champion and her friend; – he had supported her cause, or explained her meaning, he had

told her not to cry, or had given her some proof of affection which made her tears delightful – and the whole was now so blended together, so harmonized by distance, that every former affliction had its charm.<sup>8</sup>

It is a quite extraordinary sentence. Its length, with its gently oscillating thoughts, reflects Fanny's lengthy meditations on the meaning of suffering. Jane Austen well understood a child's vulnerability to pain. '... & yet one's heart aches for a dejected Mind of eight years old', she exclaimed in a letter of 1808 as she thought of a niece who had just lost her mother.<sup>9</sup> But Austen also understood how seemingly minor knocks to a sensitive child can be experienced as deep wounds, as 'the pains of tyranny, of ridicule, and neglect'. Equally significant, however, is the very evident strength afforded to Fanny by her developing inner world. Her acute sensibility has allowed her to transform her suffering: 'almost every recurrence of either had led to something consolatory', 'and the whole was now so blended together, so harmonized by distance, that every former affliction had its charm.' She is able to recall the pleasure of feeling championed and comforted by one of the few guardian figures in the novel. For Fanny, who frequently feels invisible, these moments of being seen, of being cherished, are very dear indeed.

Fanny's finely tuned sensibility has enabled her to find a way to heal former wounds, although it cannot entirely protect from future ones, as Austen goes on to illustrate. By the time she began writing *Mansfield Park* in 1811, Austen's understanding of the true nature of sensibility had deepened from her earlier writing. In her boisterous juvenile fiction, fashionable sensibility was one of the main targets of her satire. In 'Amelia Webster', for example, George is suitably overwhelmed by the beauties of the eponymous heroine: 'I saw you thro' a telescope, and was so struck by your Charms that from that time to this I have not tasted human food.'<sup>10</sup> Even *Sense and Sensibility* begins, at least, by inviting us to laugh at Marianne Dashwood's self-conscious displays of sensibility in the early scenes. It is she who uses her love of Cowper's poetry to condemn Edward Ferrars as an unworthy suitor for her sister.

'I could not be happy with a man whose taste did not in every point coincide with my own. He must enter into all my feelings; the same books, the same music must charm us both. Oh! mama, how spiritless, how tame was Edward's manner in reading to us last night ... I could hardly keep my seat.

To hear those beautiful lines which have frequently almost driven me wild, pronounced with such impenetrable calmness, such dreadful indifference!’ –

‘He would certainly have done more justice to simple and elegant prose. I thought so at the time; but you *would* give him Cowper.’

‘Nay, mama, if he is not to be animated by Cowper!’ –<sup>11</sup>

But as the novel progresses it becomes a far more subtle reflection on different modes of sensibility. Elinor Dashwood’s dignified silence on her own sufferings shows them to be just as intense as Marianne’s. The popular novels of sensibility, however, placed strong emphasis on the *immediate* nature of feelings. No sooner had the man or woman of sensibility witnessed the suffering of some unfortunate than tears would course freely down their cheeks in sympathy. Marianne Dashwood can hardly keep her seat or her temper. A whole influential branch of social and political philosophy developed from the medical understanding of the responsiveness of the body’s nerves.

But what Jane Austen shows in Fanny Price’s mature reflections on her beloved possessions, is something more profound – the workings of a responsive sensibility over time. Even the modest furnishings of her room are invested by Fanny with value:

The room was most dear to her, and she would not have changed its furniture for the handsomest in the house, though what had been originally plain, had suffered all the ill-usage of children.<sup>12</sup>

Its ‘greatest elegancies and ornaments’ consist of ‘a faded footstool of Julia’s work, too ill done for the drawing room’ and ‘three transparencies, made in a rage for transparencies’, of Tintern Abbey, a moonlit lake in Cumberland and a cave in Italy. There is also a collection of family profiles ‘thought unworthy of being anywhere else’. Pride of place, however, goes to ‘a small sketch of a ship sent four years ago from the Mediterranean’ by her brother William, a midshipman, ‘with HMS Antwerp at the bottom, in letters as tall as the main-mast’.

But the particular moment when Jane Austen shows us Fanny’s room in such detail is one when Fanny is perplexed and troubled: ‘To this nest of comforts Fanny now walked down to try its influence on an agitated, doubting spirit’.<sup>13</sup> It is here, with the image of a ‘nest of comforts’,

that we sense Austen consciously or unconsciously recalling a letter of Cowper's written to William Unwin on 30 April 1785:

Your mother and I walked yesterday in the Wilderness. As we entered the gate, a glimpse of something white, contained in a little hole in the gate-post, caught my eye. I looked again, and discovered a bird's nest, with two tiny eggs in it. By and by they will be fledged, and tailed, and get wing-feathers, and fly. My case is somewhat similar to that of the parent bird. My nest is in a little nook. Here I brood and hatch, and in due time my progeny takes wing and whistles.<sup>14</sup>

He will famously describe his 'nook' to Joseph Hill, 25 June 1785:

I write in a nook that I call my *Boudoir*. It is a summerhouse not much bigger than a sedan chair, the door of which opens into the garden, that is now crowded with pinks, roses, and honey-suckles, and the window into my neighbour's orchard. It formerly served an apothecary, now dead, as a smoking-room; and under my feet is a trap-door, which once covered a hole in the ground, where he kept his bottles. At present, however, it is dedicated to sublimer uses. Having lined it with garden mats, and furnished it with a table and two chairs, here I write all that I write in summer-time.... It is secure from all noise, and a refuge from all intrusion; for intruders sometimes trouble me in the winter evenings at Olney. But (thanks to my *Boudoir*!) I can now hide myself from them. A poet's retreat is sacred.<sup>15</sup>

We will not find it difficult to account for Jane Austen's liking for the miniature, familiar as we are with her remark about her 'little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory on which I work with so fine a Brush', although we should be aware of the ironic context of her comment – a jovial letter to a nephew on his aspirations to be a novelist.<sup>16</sup>

But why might she have been so attuned to Cowper's evocation of his little nook, where he can both take refuge and peep out at the world?

### **Jane Austen and melancholy**

I think the answer lies in a full ten years of Jane Austen's life about which we know very little – the years between her father's announcement of his retirement as rector of Steventon, and the diminished family of Mrs Austen, Jane and Cassandra finding a permanent home at Chawton Cottage. Only a scattering of Austen's letters was preserved from this period, enough for us to be able to trace most of her movements. We know the family took a succession of lodgings in Bath from 1801

onwards; that some summers were spent at the seaside, others with relatives; that following the Rev George Austen's death in 1805, the family moved first to Clifton and then to Southampton to be nearer the two naval sons. Two years after this first move, she recalls the 'happy feelings of Escape!'.<sup>17</sup> The house in Castle Square in Southampton feels more like a home; there is a garden which she energetically starts to plan. She insists on lilacs, and: 'I could not do without a Syringa, for the sake of Cowper's Line' adding 'We talk also of a Laburnum',<sup>18</sup> referring to the lines in 'A Winter Walk at Noon', Book VI of *The Task*:

... Laburnum rich  
In streaming gold; syringa iv'ry pure (149-150)

But the really telling thing about this extended period is that Jane Austen simply stops writing. She has been a writer since childhood, producing a series of brashly comic fragments, novels, plays and poetry, throughout her teenage years. In the early 1790s she completes 'Elinor and Marianne', and 'First Impressions' – which will not be published until 1811 and 1813 respectively under their new titles of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*. Later in the 1790s she wrote 'Susan' which would eventually become *Northanger Abbey*. But then she falls silent. She tries revising 'Susan' for publication in 1802 and starts, but abandons *The Watsons* in 1804.

The fact that she does not start writing again until the move to Chawton in 1809, and the speed with which she produces all her novels, revised and new, between then and her death in 1817, would suggest that this long period of effective homelessness had a crushing effect on her. It seems particularly striking that the first new novel she embarks on after this extended silence is *Mansfield Park*, a book which draws its emotional intensity from ideas of home and homelessness, of feeling an outsider, an exile. I believe Jane Austen experienced these silent years as, at least in part, a time of personal melancholy. She was probably never ill, prostrated with the sort of nerves that perpetually trouble Mrs Bennet. Rather, I think that internal evidence provided by her later novels, in particular *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*, strongly suggests she had no option but to choke back her own unhappiness. And in the background of her novels there is always the sense of insecurity, that a

death in the family may bring instant eviction from a family home. She may make fun of Mrs Bennet's perpetual fretting in *Pride and Prejudice* about the entailed estate – the death of Mr Bennet and their eviction by the usurping Mr Collins simply an unwittingly comic fantasy. But *Sense and Sensibility* opens with the devastating loss of the Dashwoods' family home; in *Emma*, ever since the loss of the rectory (now the home of the Eltons) following her husband's death, Mrs Bates and her daughter have lived in severely reduced circumstances; and Anne Elliot in *Persuasion* loses her family home for a different reason – the extravagances of her father that necessitate their having to rent out Kellynch.

### **'He that attends to his interior self'**

It is telling, therefore, that 'home' for Fanny Price is a matter of very modest possessions. Austen mentions her pot of geraniums and shows us she is well supplied with books – she is currently reading a life of Lord Macartney and Crabbe's newly published *Tales* (1812).<sup>19</sup> The presence of a copy of Samuel Johnson's *Idler* essays is a nod to Austen's favourite prose writer. This little collection gains in poignancy when we learn that the consequence of the Austens leaving Steventon Rectory was that everyone's books had to be sold. Not only did her father's considerable library have to go – his 500 volumes representing quite a collection for a financially encumbered rector and father of eight – but Jane Austen's own collection of books went too. Clothes can be transported from one place of lodging to another, but the Austens evidently were not to be burdened in their new itinerant life with their books. Jane Austen's piano, too, had to be left behind. Her writing desk assumes even greater importance when we see how very little she then possessed.

It is significant therefore that Austen emphasises the central place of books in Fanny's life, going as far as to name those currently on her desk. This is unusual for Austen. Some of her heroines are great readers – Mr Darcy's veiled compliment to Elizabeth Bennet implies that she improves her mind by extensive reading; some are not – Mr Knightley knows Emma has been making lists of edifying books since she was twelve but never had the staying power required to read them. Austen rarely *names* books or authors, however. So Fanny's choice of serious historical biography, contemporary (if uncontroversial) poetry,

and edifying, entertaining prose, with no mention of novels, signals both Fanny's intelligence and her intellectual curiosity. But it is more than this. Here, as never before in Austen, books are emblems of Fanny's rich inner life.

Again we can see the influence of Cowper. Today we have no difficulty imagining a writer retiring to some secluded cottage in order to write. But in Cowper's day literary life happened predominantly in London, the centre for booksellers and publishers, for reviewers and critics. There was a flourishing of literary circles – Dr Johnson founded the Literary Club and even the shy Cowper enjoyed the Nonsense Club. For Cowper to make a deliberate decision to leave the metropolis for a life of permanent rural retirement was certainly unusual. All the more surprising was it, therefore, that it was only at the age of sixty that he found literary success with *Poems* in 1782 and *The Task* in 1785. The poet whom Jane Austen heard read aloud since childhood (she turned ten in 1785) was a new, fresh voice. Cowper fully understood his originality, writing to William Unwin in 1784,

My descriptions are all from nature: not one of them second-hand. My delineations of the heart are from my own experience: not one of them borrowed from books....<sup>20</sup>

It is revealing, I think, that both Jane Austen's favourite writers, Johnson and Cowper, were melancholics. Although biographical details of the extent of their personal sufferings would not emerge until after their deaths in 1784 and 1800 respectively, the melancholic sensibility of each was clear in their published writings. For both, their principal concern was human suffering. It is the focus of some of Johnson's most profound *Rambler* essays. 'The sharpest and most melting sorrow,' he writes in *Rambler* 17, 'arises from the loss of those whom we have loved with tenderness', adding 'friendship between mortals can be contracted on no other terms, than that one must sometime mourn for the other's death'. *Rambler* 47 again addresses the theme:

But for sorrow there is no remedy provided by nature ... it requires what it cannot hope, that the laws of the universe should be repealed; that the dead should return, or the past should be recalled.

We know she read Cowper's 1782 *Poems* from her breezy declaration that she is 'Mistress of all I survey' in 1813 as she enjoys the splendours of her brother's Godmersham library, an allusion, of course, to 'Verses, supposed to be written by Alexander Selkirk'.<sup>21</sup> But she would also have known his reference in 'Retirement' to melancholy being the malady that 'claims most compassion, and receives the least'(302) and his telling lines:

But, with a soul that ever felt the sting  
Of sorrow, sorrow is a sacred thing. (315-6)

She would, of course, have been familiar with the most poignant autobiographical passages in *The Task*. But there are other quiet moments in that poem which seem also to have shaped her thinking. Let us take Cowper's important articulation of the importance of the inner life from Book III:

He that attends to his interior self,  
That has a heart, and keeps it; has a mind  
That hungers, and supplies it; and who seeks  
A social, not a dissipated life,  
Has business; feels himself engag'd t'achieve  
No unimportant, though a silent task. (373-8)

The heroines of both *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*, Jane Austen's later novels, are unusual in being introverted young women. The attention each pays to her inner life, her 'interior self', gives each an exceptional depth. With this depth, of course, comes the capacity for suffering, but also for intense if quiet joy. We note that Austen writes of Fanny late in the novel:

but her happiness was of a quiet, deep, heart-swelling sort; and though never a great talker, she was always more inclined to silence when feeling most strongly.<sup>22</sup>

Cowper's poetry would have demonstrated to Jane Austen that it was possible to have a vivid inner life while living in seclusion. She would have seen too that this inner life could be outward-looking, fully engaged from within 'the loop-holes of retreat' with the exterior world.<sup>23</sup> The range of topics Cowper addressed was wide – contemporary British

politics, war with the Americans and their European allies, the slave trade, the Gordon Riots, hunting, education, enclosure, earthquakes.

She would have been drawn, as Coleridge was, by Cowper's celebration of the simple delights of home on a wintry night, the 'fireside enjoyments, home-born happiness', the hours 'Of long uninterrupted ev'ning' while outside the frost rages abroad.<sup>24</sup> It is an evocation of hearth and home that has yet to be subsumed into an ideology of family life by the Victorians. What Cowper is rejoicing in is a sort of delicious solitude.

Jane Austen's letters reveal her own love of solitude – either of quiet companionship, or the rare treat of having a room all to herself. 'To sit in idleness over a good fire in a well-proportioned room is a luxurious sensation', she wrote to her sister Cassandra in 1800, adding 'Sometimes we talked & sometimes we were quite silent'. Some years later, staying at her brother's at Godmersham, we see her snatching half an hour to write to Cassandra, sketching herself as 'Very snug, in my own room, lovely morn'g., excellent fire, fancy me'. On a wet day in the summer of 1809 she reported: 'I am moved down into the Library for the sake of a fire which agreeably surprised us ... & here in warm and happy solitude proceed to acknowledge this day's Letter'.<sup>25</sup>

Happy solitude beside a fire! It is all the more evocative, therefore, later in *Mansfield Park* when Sir Thomas Bertram discovers that Fanny has never been allowed a fire in her room. As so often in this most subtle of novels, the interior drama for Fanny is painfully complex, but cannot be explained to anyone else. Sir Thomas for the very first time has sought out Fanny in her domain. He has come to put well-meaning pressure on her to accept Henry Crawford's offer of marriage. Fanny has had abundant evidence of the impulsive immorality underlying Henry's exterior charm. But even her champion Edmund is blinded by his infatuation for Mary Crawford, Henry's sister. And to no one – not even to herself – can she fully confess her feelings for Edmund. Sir Thomas briefly considers and immediately rejects the idea that this might underlie Fanny's inexplicable reluctance to encourage Henry Crawford: 'It is hardly possible that your affections –' he begins, before dismissing the notion: 'No, No, I know *that* is quite out of the question'. As readers we feel the blow of this callous dismissal. And worse is to follow when

Sir Thomas becomes angry with Fanny: ‘You do not owe me the duty of a child. But Fanny, if your heart can acquit you of *ingratitude* –’. The scene ends with Fanny in tears with ‘no one to take her part’.<sup>26</sup>

What are her feelings, then, when despite his evident displeasure, Sir Thomas has ordered a fire to be lit in Fanny’s room, its symbolic warmth now compromised by Fanny’s painful feelings of being misunderstood?

Where Cowper’s influence might be behind Jane Austen’s symbolic use of the lit fire – Fanny is being newly cherished by the family – it can also be seen in the novel’s sharply satirical commentary on the new eighteenth-century craze amongst the gentry for ‘improving’ their houses and estates. As Maria Bertram approaches twenty-one, she eyes up her prospects. Marriage to the stolid Mr Rushworth ‘would give her the enjoyment of a larger income than her father’s’, a house in town, and the fine country estate of Sotherton.<sup>27</sup> At the same time Mansfield welcomes the eligible siblings, Henry and Mary Crawford. The ensuing discussion about Sotherton, its house and grounds, is full of subtle clues.

Rushworth only has to see how a friend, the owner of Compton, has ‘had his grounds laid out by an improver’ to feel Sotherton looks like a prison, despite its seven hundred acres. His impulsive decision to have a particular avenue of oaks cut down to improve the ‘prospect’ famously emboldens Fanny’s response already quoted.<sup>28</sup>

Mary Crawford, meanwhile, assesses the eligibility of Tom Bertram purely in terms of his property:

... he and his situation might do. She looked about her with due consideration, and found almost every thing in his favour, a park, a real park five miles round, a spacious modern-built house, so well placed and well screened as to deserve to be in any collection of engravings of gentlemen’s seats in the kingdom, and only wanting to be completely new furnished .... It might do very well; she believed she should accept him. <sup>29</sup>

Henry Crawford, we are told, has a ‘great dislike’ to ‘anything like a permanence of abode, or limitation of society.’<sup>30</sup> But later in the novel, with his new project of making Fanny fall in love with him, he tells the assembled company of accidentally coming across Thornton Lacey, Edmund’s future living. The parsonage, he decides ‘is by no means bad’, but it must be improved: ‘the house must be turned to front the east

instead of the north' and 'some very pretty meadows' must be bought so that they can form a new garden. Even when Edmund politely states that the house and grounds can be 'made comfortable' without any major changes, Henry persists.<sup>31</sup> Edmund must transform the parsonage. It is unstylish, merely

a solid walled, roomy, mansion-like looking house, such as one might suppose a respectable old country family had lived in from generation to generation, through two centuries at least –

We are alert to Henry's dismissive tone: with very little effort it might become 'a gentleman's residence'. But Edmund should set his sights higher, Henry insists: 'you may raise it into a *place*'. We note the fashionable 'place', a term which robs the house of any home-like qualities.

Ever chameleon-like, Henry suddenly decides he wants to rent Thornton Lacey himself, so he can come up from London and hunt. He has, he announces, 'set his heart upon ... a little homestall –'.<sup>32</sup> The resonance of the unusual word 'homestall' becomes evident when we realise Austen found it in *The Task*. The context redoubles her comic irony, for Cowper is writing about Omai, the Tahitian brought to England by Captain Cook in 1774. Cowper imagines Omai's return to Tahiti in 1776:

...thou hast found again,  
Thy cocoas and bananas, palms and yams,  
And homestall thatch'd with leaves. (I. 639-41)

'But hast thou found/ Their former charms ...?' Cowper asks. In the ensuing passage he meditates on home and homesickness. He imagines Omai, after his period of celebrity in London, no longer at home in Tahiti:

Methinks I see thee straying on the beach,  
And asking of the surge that bathes thy foot  
If ever it has wash'd our distant shore. (654-56)

Jane Austen, in other words, not only uses Cowper's 'homestall' to reinforce Henry Crawford's shallowness, but as another subtle reflection on home and homelessness. So too would she have known Cowper's powerful satire on the period's relentless drive for 'improvement' – 'the

idol of the age’ – and the glib readiness to swap one house for another, the embodiment of which was Capability Brown:

He speaks. The lake in front becomes a lawn,  
Woods vanish, hills subside, and vallies rise,  
And streams as if created for his use,  
Pursue the track of his directing wand  
Sinuous or straight, now rapid and now slow,  
Now murm’ring soft, now roaring in cascades  
Ev’n as he bids. (*The Task*, III. 774-780)

I will not develop here *Mansfield Park*’s masterfully comic scene set in the Sotherton’s ‘wilderness’, with its symbolically locked gate, as this has been the focus of many insightful readings. I want instead to pursue Austen’s profound understanding of the significance of home and the ways in which she draws on Cowper’s reflections on the importance of the familiar landscape, and of a home imbued with memories.

### **‘As if to be home again’**

In less psychologically acute novels, a heroine’s separation from her family at a young age might be no more than a convenient plot device. But in the final third of *Mansfield Park* Jane Austen develops the theme of home and homelessness with extraordinary insight, clearly influenced by her reading of Cowper. For the eighteen-year-old Fanny time has not dulled her feelings. Instead she has cherished an image of home that has become increasingly idealised. When Sir Thomas Bertram suggests she spend two months with her family, she is delighted. But she is unaware that his underlying motive is to make her reconsider Henry Crawford’s unwelcome proposal of marriage. For Fanny, the offer seems wholly benevolent, and her joy in it releases long suppressed feelings:

The remembrance of all her earliest pleasures, and of what she had suffered in being torn from them, came over her with renewed strength, and it seemed as if to be home again would heal every pain that had since grown out of separation.<sup>33</sup>

With that phrase – ‘as if to be home again’ – Austen quietly reveals the pathos of Fanny’s feelings. After nearly ten years, we realise, Fanny still feels she is not at home in Mansfield and remains unvalued. Her

reflection immediately afterwards evokes the dream of home that she has cherished:

To be in the centre of such a circle, loved by so many, and more loved by all than she had ever been before, to feel affection without fear or restraint, to feel herself the equal of those who surrounded her ... This was a prospect to be dwelt on with a fondness that could be but half acknowledged.<sup>34</sup>

Austen shows the damage done to Fanny's sense of worth. She has evidently rationalised the silence from her birth family as being her own fault:

She had probably alienated Love by the helplessness and fretfulness of a fearful temper, or been unreasonable in wanting a larger share than any one among so many could deserve.<sup>35</sup>

The bitter irony for Fanny is that her childhood home – her parents and siblings in Portsmouth – is nothing like the idealised circle of which she had dreamt. The squalid house, the loud, drunken father, negligent mother and squabbling siblings, the youngest forever 'chasing each other up and down stairs, and tumbling about and hallooing', come as a rude shock. Left alone in the company of her father, absorbed in a newspaper and ignoring her, Fanny's distress is evident in her broken thoughts: 'She was at home. But alas! It was not such a home, she had not such a welcome, as – she checked herself; she was unreasonable. What right had she to be of importance to her family?' Once again, Fanny finds herself virtually invisible.<sup>36</sup>

Fanny's unhappiness intensifies over the weeks as no news comes from Mansfield. She begins to fear that she has been forgotten. A further dread is her expectation of hearing that Edmund has married Mary Crawford. Then Edmund writes of his painful discovery of a certain shallow worldliness in Mary, but that he continues to hope that away from the influence of her London friends she may still agree to marry him. His misery allows him to articulate his feelings towards Fanny – not yet feelings of romantic passion – but a deep fraternal love which Fanny has long craved. And more than this, he expresses the need he and his parents have for Fanny to return:

You are very much wanted. I miss you more than I can express. My mother desires her best love, and hopes to hear from you soon. She talks of you

almost every hour, and I am sorry to find how many weeks more she is likely to be without you. My Father means to fetch you himself, but it will not be till after Easter, when he has business in town. You are happy at Portsmouth, I hope, but this must not be a yearly visit. I want you at home, that I may have your opinion about Thornton Lacey.<sup>37</sup>

Half hidden in this request for advice on his future home is what is possibly *Mansfield Park*'s most touching line: '*I want you at home*'.

Shortly afterwards Tom Bertram's serious illness moves the normally indolent Lady Bertram to write directly to Fanny 'how glad I should be, if you were here to comfort me.'<sup>38</sup> But Easter comes and goes and still Fanny is not sent for. Her private suffering is intense:

... it was a cruel, a terrible delay to her. The end of April was coming on; it would soon be almost three months instead of two that she had been absent from them all, and that her days had been passing in a state of penance...<sup>39</sup>

Her eagerness, her impatience, her longings to be with them, were such as to bring a line or two of Cowper's 'Tirocinium' for ever before her. 'With what intense desire she wants her home', was continually on her tongue, as the truest description of a yearning which she could not suppose any schoolboy's bosom to feel more keenly.<sup>40</sup>

The fact that, at the painful crisis of the novel, Fanny turns to Cowper and to this particular poem is highly significant. Events have caused all the central characters to focus on what home really means to them. Maria, unknown to her family, is about to abandon her stifling marital home, while illness has made Tom Bertram newly appreciate Mansfield. Edmund continues to agonise over Mary Crawford, knowing that a country parsonage has little appeal to her. Meanwhile Mary, disturbingly, calculates that Tom Bertram's death would mean Edmund's becoming heir to Mansfield, making him a vastly improved prospective suitor. Meanwhile both Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram discover Mansfield is not home without the comforting presence of Fanny.

We have already considered the powerful psychological influence on Jane Austen of finally acquiring a permanent home in 1809. Those of us who, like her, love William Cowper's poetry will be fully aware of the deep emotional attachment he had throughout his life to the idea of home. Austen would have read Cowper's moving poem about receiving his mother's portrait, the gift of which unleashes an intense flood of

memories of his boyhood and in particular the death of his mother. We will also have read *Adelphi*, Cowper's spiritual autobiography, as Austen probably had not, with its painful evocation of the bullying he experienced as a young boy at Westminster School.

His feelings give particular intensity to 'Tirocinium'. Addressed to his friend William Unwin, the poem is a stern indictment of boarding schools. Separating father and child will, Cowper writes, 'lac'rate both your heart and his!' (558). He strongly recommends that Unwin tutor his two young sons at home, painting a picture of a homesick boy at boarding school, sadly marking off the days till the holidays:

Th' indented stick, that loses day by day,  
Notch after notch, till all are smooth'd away,  
Bears witness, long ere his dismissal come,  
With what intense desire he wants his home. (559-62)

Jane Austen suggests that Fanny has taken the line deeply to heart. And the poem's influence continues to be felt in what follows. For there is further pain awaiting Fanny on returning home, as there is for Cowper's schoolboy. 'A disappointment waits him even there', Cowper writes:

Arrived, he feels an unexpected change;  
He blushes, hangs his head, is shy and strange,  
No longer takes, as once, with fearless ease,  
His fav'rite stand between his father's knees,  
But seeks the corner of some distant seat,  
And eyes the door, and watches a retreat,  
And, least familiar where he should be most,  
Feels all his happiest privileges lost.  
Alas, poor boy!—the natural effect  
Of love by absence chill'd into respect. (566-76)

And here is Fanny experiencing the same disappointment:

When she had been coming to Portsmouth, she had loved to call it her home, had been fond of saying that she was going home; the word had been very dear to her; and so it still was, but it must be applied to Mansfield. *That* was now the home. Portsmouth was Portsmouth; Mansfield was home.<sup>41</sup>

Fanny, of course, will be rewarded with a true home – first at Mansfield Park itself and then at Mansfield's parsonage as Edmund's wife. But Jane Austen herself has found a new happiness, not in a sudden *coup*

*de foudre* of romantic love, but in a Cowperian vision of quiet domestic happiness. Comfortable and content at Chawton for what would be the remainder of her short life, she could echo Cowper's line 'Domestic happiness, thou only bliss', and share his vision of the secret of that happiness:

Friends, books, a garden, and perhaps his pen,  
Delightful industry enjoy'd at home...<sup>42</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Mansfield Park*, p.10, ch.1

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p.23, ch.3

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p.48, ch.6; Fanny quotes from *The Task*, l.338-9

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p.126, ch.16

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p.126, ch.16

<sup>6</sup> Cowper, Letter to William Bull, 3 August 1784; Letter to Lady Hesketh, 10 Nov. 1787

<sup>7</sup> *Mansfield Park*, p.126, ch.16

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Jane Austen, Letter to Cassandra Austen, 15-16 Oct 1808.

- <sup>10</sup> *Juvenilia*, pp.59-60.
- <sup>11</sup> *Sense and Sensibility*, p.19, ch.3
- <sup>12</sup> *Mansfield Park*, pp.126-7, ch.16
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p.127, ch.16
- <sup>14</sup> Cowper, Letter to William Unwin, 30 April 1785
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, Letter to Joseph Hill, 25 June 1785
- <sup>16</sup> Jane Austen, Letter to James Edward Austen, 16-17 Dec. 1816
- <sup>17</sup> Jane Austen, Letter to Cassandra Austen, 30 June-1 July 1808
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* Letter to Cassandra, 8-9 Feb. 1807
- <sup>19</sup> *Mansfield Park*, p.130, ch.16
- <sup>20</sup> Cowper, Letter to William Unwin, 10 Oct. 1784
- <sup>21</sup> Jane Austen, Letter to Cassandra Austen, 23-24 Oct. 1813
- <sup>22</sup> *Mansfield Park*, p.306, ch.37
- <sup>23</sup> *The Task*, IV.88
- <sup>24</sup> *The Task*, IV.140, 142, 309.
- <sup>25</sup> Jane Austen, Letters to Cassandra, 8-9 Nov. 1800, 6-7 Nov.1813, 30 June – 1 July 1809
- <sup>26</sup> *Mansfield Park*, pp.261, 263, 265, ch.32
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* p.34, ch.4
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* p.45, ch.6
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* p.41, ch.5
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* p.36, ch.4
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* p.201, ch.25
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* pp.202, ch.25
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* p 306, ch.37
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p.306, ch.37
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* p.307, ch.37
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* p.317, ch.38
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* p.347, ch.44
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* p.349, ch.44
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* p.352, ch.45
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* p.353. ch.45
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* p.353, ch.45.
- <sup>42</sup> *The Task*, III.41, 355-6