

## **‘But now we float’: Cowper, Air-Balloons, and the Poetics of Flight**

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In early December 1783, William Cowper wrote to John Newton (Anglican clergyman and Cowper’s collaborator on *Olney Hymns*) to share his thoughts about the recent air-balloon flights in France:

My mind however is frequently getting into these Balloons, and is busy in multiplying speculations as airy as the regions through which they pass. The last account from France, which seems so well authenticated, has changed my jocularly upon this occasion, into serious expectation [...] But now we float; at random indeed pretty much, and as the wind drives us, for want of nothing but that steerage which Invention the conqueror of many equal if not superior difficulties, may be expected to supply. – Should the point be carried, and man at last become as familiar with the air as he has long been with the Ocean, will it, in its consequences, prove a mercy or a Judgement? I think a Judgement. First because if a power to convey himself from place to place like a bird, would have been good for him, his maker would have formed him with such a capacity. But he has been a groveller upon the earth for six thousand years, and now at last when the Close of this present state of things approaches, begins to exalt himself above it.<sup>1</sup>

This letter is remarkable for the poet’s trepidation at the prospect of aerial travel and its possible divine repercussions, but also for the connection he traces between the air as region of travel and as a form of thought. Cowper’s phrasing at the beginning of this passage does not suggest that he has been merely thinking about balloons, but that, by getting ‘into’ them, his mind has embodied the path of their flight or even journeyed away from him via his ‘speculations’. His description of these ‘speculations’ as ‘airy’ similarly captures a quality of thought as flighty and insubstantial, yet also as capable of carrying you into other ‘regions’ entirely. The rise of aerial travel in the late eighteenth-century revealed, as Clare Brant observes, ‘much unknowing’, at the same time as it brought air into sharper focus as an ‘imaginative medium’.<sup>2</sup> Scientific progress and the creative imagination met in the image and potential of balloons, as the ‘dream of flight’ that had ‘haunted men – especially poets’ became an emergent reality.<sup>3</sup> Through close attention

to his letters from the period 1782-5, this essay will consider Cowper's conflicted interest in air balloons, noting in his reactions to the advances in ballooning a negotiation between wonder and fearful scepticism. Balloon flights, and their promise of new forms of liberation and knowledge, captured Cowper's intellectual curiosity and imagination as much as they caused him to grapple with the place of the human and everyday life in relation to the air as an emergent region (a conflict that was informed particularly by his faith and spiritual anxiety). However, balloons also, as I will explore through a reading of his poem 'An Ode to Apollo: On An Ink-Glass Almost Dried in the Sun' (1792), offered Cowper a means of thinking about poetry in relation to flight and to aerial invention.

Cowper seems an unlikely participant in the so-called 'balloomania' of the late eighteenth century, and yet his letters are full of anecdotes about and references to air balloons.<sup>4</sup> The above letter in particular, with the poet's mention of the 'last account from France', sees Cowper participating in the pique of public interest in aeronautical developments. The rise of air ballooning (especially in France and England) in the eighteenth century has been well-documented by Clare Brant, Siobhan Carroll, and Richard Holmes, and Michael R. Lynn, to name a few.<sup>5</sup> Their work recovers a various history of air ballooning, but they all agree that the Montgolfier brothers (Joseph and Etienne) remain pivotal figures in the development of aeronautics in the period. Whilst Lynn argues persuasively that we need to look beyond the Montgolfiers and towards 'the many other balloonists, and the hundreds of other launches, across Europe and North America who brought this new invention to the forefront of the cultural lives of people at the end of the eighteenth century', it was the experiments carried out by these two brothers that ignited the public imagination and that first captured Cowper's interest.<sup>6</sup> The 'last account from France' that Cowper refers to above was the first manned hydrogen balloon flight orchestrated by Dr Jacques Alexandre Charles and Nicolas-Louis Robert on 1 December 1783. Their balloon was launched from the Jardin des Tuileries in Paris, with the voyage lasting for about two hours and covering roughly 27 miles.<sup>7</sup> This short voyage was, however, a culmination of efforts and experiments sparked initially by the Montgolfiers, who first launched their hot air balloon

in Annonay, France, in June 1783. An unmanned vessel, this balloon was constructed from painted silk sections and heavy paper that were buttoned together and filled with hot air; it travelled less than two miles. The brothers then made a second attempt at Versailles in September 1783, where their balloon the ‘Aerostat Reveillon’ was launched, this time manned supposedly by a sheep, a duck, and a rooster who had been selected over a human pilot due to fears about the effects of flight and shifts in altitude on the human frame. The more sophisticated hydrogen balloon launched by Charles and Robert in the December of that year was of course an improvement aided by the discoveries of Joseph Priestley and, later, the French chemist Antoine Lavoisier. Priestley’s treatises on *Experiments and Observations on Different Kinds of Air* (1774-7) traced his endeavours to discover the composition of air and to isolate its elements, most significantly his identification of what he called ‘dephlogisticated air’, later identified as oxygen. It was Lavoisier who built on the work of Priestley and made this final identification in 1778. Lavoisier also, crucially, identified hydrogen in 1783, a discovery which fuelled the development of aeronautic technology due to its buoyancy.

Cowper’s correspondence makes no overt references to the scientific developments lying behind aerial travel, but his tracking of the ‘accounts’ from France bears witness to them. His letters tuned into the Montgolfiers’ initial experiments. Writing to Newton in September 1783, the poet’s discussion of the ill-health of various villagers in Olney, as well as his and Newton’s recent illnesses, led him to reflect on the place of this sickly community in the grander scheme of things:

Oh what things pass in Cottages and hovels, which the Great never dream of.  
French Philosophers amuse themselves, and according to their own phrase,  
cover themselves with glory, by inventing Air-balls which by their own  
buoyancy ascend above the clouds, and are lost in regions which no human  
could ever penetrate before.<sup>8</sup>

News of the Montgolfiers’ launches in June and September had reached Olney, and with it the microcosm of ‘cottages and hovels’ that Cowper was immersed in seemed a stark contrast to the new regions that ‘Air-balls’ were supposedly capable of reaching. The poet’s comparison of his local acquaintances with the ambitions of ‘French Philosophers’ is also symptomatic of, as Arden Hegele traces, the disruption of ‘the identity

politics of home and nation' that air travel introduced.<sup>9</sup> The clumsiness of Cowper's description is fitting, and expressive of the novelty of this invention as his vocabulary strains to accommodate it. That something as surprisingly solid-sounding as an 'air-ball' could be buoyant enough to ascend 'above the clouds' captures both the captivating and alienating qualities of air balloons; the 'air-ball' as a man-made object which can then fly into realms beyond human reach or recognition straddles both the known and the unknown. The fact that the balloon is also figured as ascending purely by its 'own buoyancy' makes it all the more startling. If Cowper responds to the first launches of the Montgolfiers here, then it is the idea that their flights were unmanned that also grabs his interest. Balloons entered his consciousness as objects that are 'lost' to our control once they are in the air, marking a significant advance in human invention but also transcending the bounds of lived, quotidian experience. As his later letter to Newton shows, the newly manned hydrogen balloon flight of Charles and Robert that followed the Montgolfiers' efforts brought home to Cowper the potential for aerial travel to take humanity into those mysterious regions, albeit in potentially disruptive ways, which I will discuss later on in this essay.

Alongside his suspicion of air balloons, however, was Cowper's 'jocularity' at their invention. This was perhaps best expressed through his sudden interest in Vincenzo Lunardi, the Italian aeronaut who manned a balloon flight launched from the Honorable Artillery Company's grounds in London in September 1784. Lunardi's significance in relation to the popular interest in ballooning in Britain especially is well-documented.<sup>10</sup> The fashionable 'Lunardi bonnet' memorably depicted in Burns' 'To a Louse' (1786) is just one example of how air balloons became pervasive in late eighteenth-century literature and culture. Cowper was given a copy of Lunardi's *An Account of the First Aerial Voyage in England* (1784) by William Unwin's niece, also named Mary like his mother, and stated that 'I have read Lunardi with pleasure. He is [a] lively sensible young fellow, and I suppose a very favourable sample of the Italians'.<sup>11</sup> The poet was seemingly caught up in the celebrity culture of ballooning as much as he was captivated by the developments of aerostatic engineering and the exciting new form of travel they suggested could be possible for everyone.

Indeed, it was not just via Lunardi's *Account* that Cowper got closer to balloon travel. 'Balloonomania' eventually reached Olney, and the poet's letters reveal his participation in aerial launches: 'Balloons are so much the mode, that even in this Country we have attempted a Balloon'. The poet and Mary Unwin were invited numerous times by their friend 'Mr. Throckmorton' (John Courtenay Throckmorton) to 'an attempt to throw off a Balloon'. These attempts seemed to arouse a large amount of excitement in the village residents ('The whole Country were there'), but came to little success. On two occasions the balloon 'could not be filled', and on the third that Cowper records, it 'went up, and came down no more [...] it kindled in the air, and was consumed in a moment'.<sup>12</sup> As seems to be characteristic of Cowper's discussion of air-balloons in his letters, the humour and 'jocularity' found in this long-anticipated launch, culminating in the balloon bursting into flames, is tinged with something more ominous. He quickly, albeit still perhaps with a sense of irony, turns to discussion of this disaster as an 'omen', musing that 'I [...] shall wonder a little, if the Newton Shepherd prognosticate any thing less from it than the most bloody war, that was ever waged in Europe'.<sup>13</sup> Again, the anxiety that air-balloons and aerial travel provoked about national identity and relations can be detected in Cowper's playful, if doom-laden, prophecy. It is striking how quickly the poet can shift from depicting balloons as a parochial, communal form of entertainment into a looming threat to domestic stability.

Air-balloons are certainly a significant vehicle for thinking about Cowper's complex attachment to the safe and the familiar. In the same letter to Newton that recounts the catastrophic balloon launch, he jokingly reflects on his somewhat introverted way of living in Olney. Aware that Newton is currently visiting the port town of Lymington, Cowper compares his own situation: 'I am not however, totally destitute of such pleasures as an inland country may pretend to [...] if I have not an hermit in a grotto, I have nevertheless myself in a greenhouse'.<sup>14</sup> The poet sequestered in his beloved greenhouse is a recognisable image of the kind of private, domestic sanctuary with which Cowper is frequently associated. And yet, from this secure vantage point, he suddenly turns outwards: 'nor are we in this nook altogether unfurnished with such means of philosophical experiment and speculation, as at present the

world rings with. On Thursday morning last, we sent up a balloon from Emberton-meadow'.<sup>15</sup> Ever interested in the 'loop-holes of retreat' (*The Task*, IV, l. 88), Cowper enjoys both the secure hermitage of his greenhouse and exposure to the cultural fascination with scientific developments, materialised for him here in the air-balloon. The confident position he offers in this letter, as possessing both the pleasures of retirement and the excitement of new technology, is surprising given a previous letter to Unwin where he is more reserved in his enthusiasm:

I hear that Mr. Throckmorton is making another Balloon, a paper one, containing 16 quires. It is to fly upon the wings of ignited spirits, and will therefore I suppose be sent up at night. I take it for granted that we shall be invited to the spectacle but whether we shall have the courage to expose ourselves to the inconveniences of a nocturnal visit is at present doubtful.<sup>16</sup>

Aware of the exciting draw of the balloon launch, Cowper is wary of abandoning his home comforts here. If air-balloons and their launches are important as communal social events as much as they are markers of scientific and 'philosophical' progress, then the poet treads these boundaries coyly. He seems happy enough with the idea of balloons arriving in Olney, but less sure of the necessary 'courage' needed to venture out and witness one for himself. Once aerial travel encroaches onto Cowper's home territory, it causes him to reassess his own domestic boundaries, weighing up whether inclusion in cultural and scientific 'spectacle' is worth the risk of venturing out of his habitual routine. He seems to want to hold onto both possibilities - that of having an 'invitation' and of being able to decline if he wants to - and in doing so draws air-balloons and their novelty into a negotiation of social politeness as well as of the threshold between participation and retirement.

Although air-balloons in some ways interrupted Cowper's sense of self-containment, they also offered the poet a freer form of imaginative transport and play. His excitement at the fact that 'the balloons prosper' turned into dreams and speculations about the fantasy of flight.<sup>17</sup> A yearning for balloon travel arose strongly in Cowper during episodes of perceived confinement, where staying indoors felt enforced rather than preferred. He wrote during a particularly harsh winter in 1785, for example, that his local surroundings had 'been render'd impassable by frost', keeping him 'so close a prisoner'.<sup>18</sup> Looking for a solution to such

episodes of seasonal imprisonment, the poet turned to the skies: 'Long live the Inventors and Improvers of Balloons. It is always clear over head, and by and by we shall use no other road'.<sup>19</sup> Cowper strikes a curious balance between confident prediction and enjoyable fantasy here, looking forward to a time when the inconveniences of the weather will no longer keep him cooped up indoors, and enjoying the imaginative freedom that thinking of his liberation offers in the present moment of captivity. This is not the only occasion where Cowper fantasises about balloon flight. In another letter, he also recalled a bizarre but exciting dream, claiming that 'upon my own experience [...] this way of travelling is very delightfull. I dreamt a night or two since that I drove myself through the upper regions in a Balloon and pair, with the greatest ease and security [...] my horses prancing and curvetting with an infinite share of Spirit'.<sup>20</sup> Clare Brant recognises in Cowper's poem 'The Diverting History of John Gilpin' (1782-4) a 'fantasia of horse-powered speed' that 'anticipates balloon madness: all sorts of things in the poem are flying – windows, gates, cloaks, horse and rider'.<sup>21</sup> If Brant suggests that this poem and its depiction of Gilpin's horse galloping him 'away' at speed can be read as an anticipation of flight, then Cowper's letter makes this connection all the more clear.<sup>22</sup> The poem does not fit recognisably into the category of 'balloon writings' that flourished in this period, but Cowper's dream permits a reading of the 'chaise and pair' in 'The Diverting History' as fancifully reimagined into a fully-fledged mode of aerial travel (his 'Balloon and pair').<sup>23</sup> The image of horses flying through the air, guiding a balloon, is a strange configuration that aligns an emergent technology with an everyday mode of transport. Moving beyond his earlier, and rather more practical, fantasy of balloons allowing him to overcome the inconveniences of being snowed in, Cowper takes pleasure in a more artful and dynamic ('prancing and curvetting') path of flight that is still safely within his control ('I drove myself'). Horses are made newly strange here as much as balloons are made to seem secure and reliable.

In another letter to Unwin, Cowper again exercised this tendency not only to marvel at balloons, but to use them as a means of reimagining and destabilising the familiar:

By the way, what is your Opinion of these Air-Balloons? I am quite charmed with the discovery. Is it not possible do you suppose to convey such a quantity

of inflammable Air into the Stomach and Abdomen, that the Philosopher no longer gravitating to a Center, shall ascend by his own comparative Levity, and never stop 'till he has reached a Medium exactly in Equilibrio with himself? May he not by the help of a pasteboard Rudder, attached to his posteriors, steer himself in that purer element with ease, and again by a slow and gradual discharge of his aerial contents, recover his former tendency to the earth, and descend without the smallest danger or inconvenience? These things are worth enquiry, and I dare say they will be enquired after as they deserve. The Pennae non homini datae [wings not given to man], are likely to be less regretted than they were, and perhaps a flight of Academicians, and a Covey of fine Ladies may be no uncommon spectacle in the next Generation.<sup>24</sup>

The imagery that Cowper brings forth here goes beyond his imagining of airborne horses driving him in a balloon, to conceive the human form itself as a form of aerial technology. There is obvious comedy in this image of the poet's 'Philosopher' who is somehow inflated and fitted with a 'pasteboard rudder', only to have to 'discharge' his own 'aerial contents' in order to descend. Indeed, Cowper's description brings to mind the lively visual culture associated with eighteenth-century air balloons, especially when they were depicted in satirical prints that either 'focussed on ballooning directly or incorporated references to ballooning as part of their ironic account of other social issues'.<sup>25</sup> Paul Sandby's 'The English Balloon' (1784), which likened the enthusiasm for ballooning to a form of madness, depicted an air-balloon resembling a giant inflated head, with donkey's ears and fool's cap, being launched outside the gates of Bedlam.<sup>26</sup> James Gillray's mockery of the church, 'He Steers His Flight, Aloft Incumbent on the Dusky Air' (1810), displayed a bishop tethered to a balloon in the act of flinging his tracts and sermons overboard in order to lighten his load. The bishop's body appears also to be inflated, a smaller copy of the spherical balloon that floats above him. Cowper may be poking fun at 'Philosophers' who are 'full of air' and seemingly flighty speculations, but his physiological reimagining of the human frame as a form of balloon also demonstrates the captivating way that he engaged with air travel as a means of playing with physical and social orders and categories.

Cowper's frequent reference to balloons and the aerial as predominately the domain of 'Philosophers' reveals, as I discussed in the opening

of this essay, his tendency to explore flight and being ‘in’ the air as a figure of thought and of stretching the boundaries of knowledge. In the same letter to Unwin where he fantasises about the human frame itself becoming an air-borne vessel, Cowper claims that there are:

many good consequences that may result from a course of experiments upon this Machine; and amongst others that it may be of use in ascertaining the shape of Continents and Islands, and the face of wide extended and far distant countries. An End not to be hoped for, unless by these means of extraordinary elevation, the Human prospect may be immensely enlarged, and the Philosopher exalted to the skies, attain a view of the whole Hemisphere at once.<sup>27</sup>

It is not only the potential that air-balloons held for geographical expansion and discovery that Cowper is exploring here, but also how this newly enlarged ‘prospect’ could stretch the horizon of human thought and capacity. Furthermore, it seems here that the widening of the human prospect is more important for Cowper than actual travel or a developed understanding of the earth’s geography; that it is an ‘End not to be hoped for’ unless it also ushers in a reconfiguration of the human mind. The ‘Philosopher’ that could achieve a ‘view of the whole Hemisphere at once’ would seemingly have improved his or her mental flexibility over and above their capability to actually travel to such far-flung regions. In *The Matter of Air* (2010), Steven Connor explores how ‘from the end of the eighteenth century onwards’ there was a noticeable conception of air as a medium akin to the process of thought.<sup>28</sup> He uncovers an idea of air as a kind of ‘thought-form’, an element that is expressive of the ‘immaterial action of thought’.<sup>29</sup> Cowper certainly seems captivated by an affinity between thought and air, as figured in his own assessment that his ‘speculations’ have become ‘airy’ and his ‘mind’ is getting ‘into’ balloons. It is not just the capacity for travel and innovation that excited Cowper about balloons, then, but the way in which they promised to materialise the air as a region of thought itself, and to therefore immerse us in new ways of thinking and feeling.

That Cowper considered the air as a medium, and a region conducive to different ways of knowing and being, is already apparent from his poetic explorations of birds and their flight. Take his poem ‘The Jackdaw’ (1782), for example. In his study of the bird and its roosting behaviours,

Cowper seems to insist on humans as being inherently dissimilar to birds, and therefore not formed for participation in an aerial domain:

There is a bird who by his coat,  
And by the hoarseness of his note,  
    Might be suppos'd a crow;  
A great frequenter of the church,  
Where bishop-like he finds a perch,  
    And dormitory too.

Above the steeple shines a plate,  
That turns and turns, to indicate  
    From what point blows the weather;  
Look up – your brains begin to swim,  
'Tis in the clouds - that pleases him,  
    He chooses it the rather.

Fond of the speculative height,  
Thither he wings his airy flight,  
    And thence securely sees  
The bustle and the raree-show  
That occupy mankind below,  
    Secure and at his ease.

[...]

Thrice happy bird! I too have seen  
Much of the vanities of men,  
    And sick of having seen 'em,  
Would cheerfully these limbs resign  
For such a pair of wings as thine,  
    And such a head between 'em.

*(Poems, I, 422-23, ll. 1-18, 31-6)*

This poem offers a striking contrast between human and non-human experience of the aerial. The jackdaw that sits nonchalantly upon the weather vane at the top of the church steeple is positioned above not only the 'customs' and 'business' of human life, but also above the need to measure and order the aerial region he inhabits. When Cowper turns our view away from this safety of aerial measurement (the weather

vane) and towards 'the clouds' themselves - the airy region given over to the bird - the sense of control gives way to a feeling of mental and bodily disorientation: 'Look up – your brains begin to swim, / 'Tis in the clouds; - that pleases him'. Contemplation of the clouds themselves brings about a series of interruptions to the iambic metre, the halting dashes and semi-colon, that do not completely disrupt the rhythm but halt its progress in comparison to the steady run of the previous three lines. Cowper also confuses the distinction between 'your brains', already in a state of swimming disarray, and the bird itself in these lines – we don't know if 'Tis in the clouds' refers to the jackdaw or to the 'brains' that are suddenly struggling under the effects of being 'in the clouds'. The clouds that are so easily navigated by the jackdaw are dizzying for the speaker, with Cowper's use of the second-person perspective also offering this disordered experience to the reader. These lines show him to be captivated both by our attempts to control and record the aerial, and our mental and physical vulnerability to its effects that might estrange our faculties from us.

And yet, in the last stanza of 'The Jackdaw', Cowper's speaker expresses the wish 'for such a pair of wings as thine / And such a head between 'em'. The air as a region, as much as it seems to shut out or to confuse human experience, also calls to Cowper as a form of escape, or an emergence into a new way of being and knowing. He explores a similar idea in the letter to Newton that opens this essay, where birds and balloons meet in his discussion of man's emergent ability to fly. Brant's discussion of air-balloons as a site of 'much-unknowing' in the late eighteenth century also suggests that these new vehicles of flight challenged ideas of discipline and categorisation. This was most apparent in the vocabularies that people fell back on to describe the novelty and innovation of balloons. Cowper's clumsy use of 'air-balls', and his fanciful imagining of people themselves being inflated and launched into the air, are some initial examples that show him feeling around for a way to describe and explore this new aerial phenomenon. Turning to the topic of balloons in this letter, the poet turned to what was already in the skies for inspiration, observing how there is

in every fowl of the air a pattern which now at length it may be sufficient to imitate. Wings and a tail indeed were of little use while the body so much

heavier than the space of air it occupied, was sure to sink by its own weight, and could never be held in equipoise by any implements of the kind which human strength could manage.<sup>30</sup>

If ‘The Jackdaw’ suggested that the skies were a realm unsuited to human experience, then here air-balloons possess the capacity to bring us closer to the freedom of birds. The person who achieves flight in the form of ballooning becomes for Cowper a kind of human-bird hybrid, finally buoyant enough for ‘wings and a tail’ to become a real possibility, or at least not physically out of the question. Drawing on ‘patterns’ that are already familiar becomes a way not only to find a language to talk about and define balloons, then, but also to anticipate the directions that their development might take.

It is not just birds that offered a model for balloons to follow, either. Cowper also compared the innovations in aerostatics to our navigation of the sea, pondering how the ‘first boat or canoe that was ever formed [...] being only a hollow tree that had casually fallen into the water [...] was a more perfect creature in its kind, than a balloon at present’.<sup>31</sup> The initial distance between boats and balloons as effective methods of transport that Cowper sets up, however, is bridged when he moves from considering the vessels themselves to the mediums they travel in: ‘But the atmosphere, though a much thinner medium, we well know resists the impression made upon it by the tail of a bird, as effectually as the water that of a ship’s rudder’.<sup>32</sup> This comparison between the matter of air and sea, and between flight and sailing, is better understood in light of Brant’s observation that ‘in eighteenth-century parlance’ air ‘is understood simultaneously as both self-standing and coupled with water, as people located aerostation in relation to sea-based knowledge, especially navigation’.<sup>33</sup> Siobhan Carroll also notes how ‘the invention of human flight invited Britons to imagine the atmosphere as a space along the lines of, and perhaps a potential rival to, the contested ocean’.<sup>34</sup> Cowper is not exceptional, therefore, in drawing on his knowledge of one medium in order to try and understand our sudden ability to inhabit the other. What is remarkable, however, is the intellectual curiosity and flexibility he employs—where human, bird, sea, and air are held up against each other only to have their differences challenged and partially dissolved—in light of other more rigid anxieties he held about our entrance into the aerial region.

Although Cowper was clearly excited by the development of air-balloons as a form of imaginative exercise, a social ‘spectacle’, and as a mode of travel that he was keen to see become more ubiquitous, he also worried about their consequences. He expressed this most clearly when writing to Newton about his spiritual anxiety. Carroll’s exploration of balloon-flight in the eighteenth-century imagination characterises the air as one kind of ‘atopia’, characterised as ‘forms of space deemed penetrable but inhospitable’ that are contrasted with ‘the familiarity, stability, and security implied by idealized sites of dwelling’.<sup>35</sup> For Cowper, the air certainly takes on an atopic quality in some respects. His letter to Newton, where he worries over our emergent ability to float ‘at random’ into the sky, suggests a degree of fear about the air as an unknown, uncontrolled region. However, it is not simply aerostation’s threat to an idea of familiar, human dwelling that concerns Cowper, but also a disruption of divine order. The air is not a completely unknown entity to the poet, but exists already as a space laden with spiritual connotations. In an earlier letter to his aunt, Mrs Madan, in September 1768, Cowper wrote:

How much of Heaven does a believing view of Jesus as our all-sufficient Good bring down into the soul! We seem to breathe the pure air of that better country where all the inhabitants are holy, and more than seem to converse with God.<sup>36</sup>

Here, inhalation and salvation are concurrent, as Cowper envisages Heaven as an aerial region to be encountered through the breath. Significantly, though, this is a divine experience that has to be brought ‘down’ to the human; faith may be realised through aerial metaphor and a sense of the divine ‘spirit’, but it keeps man firmly on the ground. The emergence of air-balloons frightens Cowper because they precipitate a human trespass upwards into a heavenly region, not an unknown and inhospitable atopia. It is not surprising, therefore, that he should anticipate ‘judgement’ as a result of air-balloons upsetting an established spiritual topography and order. In the 1783 letter to Newton where Cowper compared the ambitions of French ‘philosophers’ with his own provincial circle, the impending death of a fellow villager caused him to reflect on the relationship between flight via air-balloon, and true spiritual salvation:

An English Taylor, an Inhabitant of the Dung-hills of Silver End, prays, and his prayer ascends in the Ears of the Lord of Sabaoth [...] he will never discover the art of flying nor send a globe of Taffata up to heaven, but he will go thither Himself. I am afraid there is hardly a philosopher among them that would be wise enough to change conditions with him if he could, yet certainly there is not one that would not be infinitely a gainer by doing so.<sup>37</sup>

Whilst Cowper has previously been shown to engage with air-balloons as a site of categorical play, finding new similarities between sea and sky or man and bird, he strikes a harder boundary here in his assertion that flight via balloon cannot become equivalent to true spiritual ascension. He does not condemn the ‘art of flying’ here, but is instead alert to it as a technological harnessing of the air rather than a true immersion in it as a divine region.

For Cowper, then, the realisation that air-balloons opened up a new space that we could ‘float’ freely into was cause for both excitement and trepidation. The turn in his letter to Newton towards a sense of balloons as an intrusion into divine space should not be taken as his renouncing this aerial technology altogether, but rather as one strand of the complex and sometimes contradictory opinions he held about it. Cowper’s letters from the period 1782-5 are perhaps the best resource we have for revealing how far the poet was immersed in balloons as a social and cultural phenomenon, how far they occupied his thought and pushed him into new figurations of knowledge, and how they ignited his imagination. They offer a vivid, and sometimes humorous, archive that feeds into our understanding of the wider reception of air-balloons in eighteenth-century literature and culture. Yet these letters also, by way of conclusion, offer a means of thinking about how balloons caused Cowper to reflect on the practice of writing itself and on poetic composition in particular. Air-balloons make no explicit appearances in his poetry, and yet, there is one letter in particular where he gestures towards their relationship with poetic imagination and inspiration. Writing to Unwin in 1785 about Jean-Pierre Blanchard’s crossing of the English Channel by balloon, he admitted his ‘insatiable thirst’ to ‘know the philosophical reason why their vehicle had like to have fallen in the sea, when, for aught that appears, the Gas was not at all exhausted. Did not the extreme Cold condense the inflammable air and cause the globe to collapse? Tell

me, and be my Apollo forever'.<sup>38</sup> The mention of 'Apollo' (as the god of poetry and poetic inspiration) here is immediately telling of the union of the poetic and the aerostatic in Cowper's thought. The idea that the person who could make legible the scientific intricacies of balloon flight would be akin to the governor of poetic inspiration is striking. Brant's suggestion that 'the association between poetry and elevated thought was so strong that poets were figuratively airborne before balloons', is curious to consider in light of Cowper's questions to Unwin; he seems to appeal to his friend to divulge the secrets, and indeed the mechanics, of his own flights of inspiration to him, as poetry becomes aligned with this aerial technology as much as with classical notions of the 'spirit' of composition.<sup>39</sup>

If Cowper makes no mention of balloons specifically across his poetic works, then the above letter does make room for a re-reading of one particular poem in light of his captivation with ballooning. 'An Ode to Apollo: On An Ink-Glass Almost Dried in the Sun' (1792) reflects on the nature of inspiration, finding in a drop of evaporated ink a different, airborne model of composition:

Patron of all those luckless brains  
 That, to the wrong side leaning  
 Indite much Metre with much pains  
 And little or no meaning,

Ah why, since Oceans, rivers, streams  
 That water all the Nations,  
 Pay Tribute to thy glorious beams  
 In constant exhalations,

Why, stooping from the noon of day  
 Too covetous of drink,  
 Apollo, hast thou stol'n away  
 A Poet's drop of ink? -

Upborn into the viewless air  
 It floats a vapour now,  
 Impell'd through regions dense and rare  
 By all the winds that blow.

[...]

Illustrious drop! and happy then  
Beyond thy happiest lot  
Of all that ever pass'd my pen,  
So soon to be forgot! -

Phoebus, if such be thy design,  
To place it in thy bow,  
Give wit, that what is left may shine  
With equal grace below.

(*Poems*, II, 28-29, ll. 1-16, 25-8)

Significantly, the manuscript of this poem was composed in September 1783, around the time of Cowper's emergent recognition of the air-balloon launches of that year. The idea that his 'drop of ink' that 'floats a vapour now' could conceive of evaporation as an inverted form of inspiration (his poetry floating upwards back into the atmosphere rather than being taken in from it), also leaves room to consider how the technology of aerial travel influences Cowper's conception of poetic composition. Brant discusses how classical myth and allusion provided many eighteenth-century poets with a familiar structure through which to filter the novelty of air-travel, 'acknowledging the startling and strange effects of balloons'.<sup>40</sup> Here, it also seems as if balloons offer Cowper a new form for thinking about the strangeness of the poem and how it comes into being. His spherical ink-drop that floats in the air, directed by the winds, seems to become an ideal image of poetry shaped by contemporary scientific developments, in the same way that Anna Laetitia Barbauld's floating soap bubbles of 'verse' in 'Washing Day' (1797) are made akin to the Montgolfiers' 'silken ball'.<sup>41</sup> As a spectator of balloons, Cowper may have expressed anxiety about what would become of us when we were able to 'float' aimlessly into the air. As a poet, however, he seems to delight in an artful floating, where his formal control finds some mastery over the aerial at the same time as he expresses joy in relinquishing creative control. It seems fitting that the poet who wanted both the safety of his home as well as the spectacle of balloons would find, through the poem, a way to articulate the aimless freedom of flight from the security of the page. The last letter of Cowper's to mention air-balloons exclaims 'Long live the Inventors

and the Improvers of Balloons. It is always clear over head, and by and by we shall use no other road'.<sup>42</sup> Cowper could be seen to be testing out that 'road' in this poem, writing with a view to flight, but from a position firmly on the ground.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Cowper to John Newton, 15 December 1783, *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, ed. James King and Charles Ryskamp, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979-86), II, 188-90.
- <sup>2</sup> Clare Brant, 'The Progress of Knowledge in Regions of Air?: Divisions and Disciplines in Early Ballooning', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 45.1 (2011), 71-86; 72.
- <sup>3</sup> Richard Holmes, 'Ballooning in Heaven', in *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science* (London: Harper Collins, 2008), 125-62; 125.
- <sup>4</sup> Holmes, *Age of Wonder*, 125. For further discussion of ballooning and Cowper, see also Fiona Stafford, 'The surprising 'hot air balloon' mania of Romantic literature', *Oxford University News and Events*, December 17 2014, <http://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2014-12-17-surprising-%E2%80%98balloon-maniaromantic-literature> (accessed 7 March 2018).
- <sup>5</sup> See Clare Brant, *Balloon Madness: Flights of Imagination in Britain, 1783-1786* (Boydell Press, 2017); Holmes, *The Age of Wonder*; Siobhan Carroll, *An Empire of Air and Water: Uncolonizable Space in the British Imagination, 1750-1850* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 2015); Michael R. Lynn, *The Sublime Invention: Ballooning in Europe, 1783-1820* (London: Routledge, 2015).
- <sup>6</sup> Lynn, *The Sublime Invention*, 3.
- <sup>7</sup> See Holmes, *Age of Wonder*, 129-30.
- <sup>8</sup> Cowper to John Newton, 23 September 1783 (*Letters*, II, 162-3)
- <sup>9</sup> Arden Hegele, 'Romantic Balloons: Towards a Formalist Technology of Poetics', *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, 15.2 (2017), 201-16; 204.
- <sup>10</sup> See, for example, Holmes, *Age of Wonder*, 137-43.
- <sup>11</sup> Cowper to William Unwin, 29 November 1784 (*Letters*, II, 306).
- <sup>12</sup> Cowper to William Unwin, 20 May 1784 (*Letters*, II, 247); Cowper to John Newton, 10 May 1784 (*Letters*, II, 246); Cowper to William Unwin, 20 May 1784 (*Letters*, II, 248); Cowper to John Newton, 16 August 1784 (*Letters*, II, 272-3).

- <sup>13</sup> Cowper to John Newton, 16 August 1784 (*Letters*, II, 273).
- <sup>14</sup> Cowper to John Newton, 16 August 1784 (*Letters*, II, 272).
- <sup>15</sup> Cowper to John Newton, 16 August 1784 (*Letters*, II, 272).
- <sup>16</sup> Cowper to William Unwin, 14 August 1784 (*Letters*, II, 270).
- <sup>17</sup> Cowper to William Unwin, 10 November 1783 (*Letters*, II, 179).
- <sup>18</sup> Cowper to Joseph Hill, 22 January 1785 (*Letters*, II, 321).
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>20</sup> Cowper to John Newton, 17 November 1783 (*Letters*, II, 181-2).
- <sup>21</sup> Brant, *Balloon Madness*, 67.
- <sup>22</sup> Cowper, 'The Diverting History of John Gilpin', *The Poems of William Cowper*, ed. John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980-95), II, 298, l. 7. All subsequent references to Cowper's poetry are taken from this edition and will be cited in the main text with reference to specific volume, page, and line numbers.
- <sup>23</sup> Ivan Orvitz, 'Fancy's Eye: Poetic Vision and the Romantic Air Balloon', *Studies in Romanticism*, 56.2 (2017), 253-84; 254.
- <sup>24</sup> Cowper to William Unwin, 29 September 1783 (*Letters*, II, 165-6).
- <sup>25</sup> See Paul Keen and Melissa Speener, "'Philosophical Playthings'": The Spectacle of Air-Balloons', *Romantic Circles Gallery*, <https://www.rc.umd.edu/gallery/exhibit/miniaturizing-the-sublime-hot-air-balloon-flight-in-the-romantic-era> (accessed 7 March 2018).
- <sup>26</sup> See Paul Keen, 'The "Balloonomania": Science and Spectacle in 1780s England', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 39.4 (2006), 507-35; 527 for further discussion of this image.
- <sup>27</sup> Cowper to William Unwin, 29 September 1783 (*Letters*, II, 166).
- <sup>28</sup> Steven Connor, *The Matter of Air: Science and the Art of the Ethereal* (London: Reaktion, 2010), 105.
- <sup>29</sup> Connor, *Matter of Air*, 105.
- <sup>30</sup> Cowper to John Newton, 15 December 1783, *Letters*, II, 189.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>33</sup> Brant, 'The Progress of Knowledge in Regions of Air?', 73.
- <sup>34</sup> Carroll, *An Empire of Air and Water*, 118.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.
- <sup>36</sup> Cowper to Mrs Madan, 24 September 1768 (*Letters*, I, 204).
- <sup>37</sup> Cowper to John Newton, 23 September 1783 (*Letters*, II, 163).

- <sup>38</sup> Cowper to William Unwin, 15 January 1785 (*Letters*, II, 318).
- <sup>39</sup> Brant, *Balloon Madness*, 69.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.
- <sup>41</sup> Anna Laetitia Barbauld, 'Washing Day', *The Poems of Anna Laetitia Barbauld*, ed. William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft (Athens; London: University of Georgia Press, 1994), 133-5.
- <sup>42</sup> Cowper to Joseph Hill, 22 January 1785 (*Letters*, II, 321).