

Cowper's Importance for George Eliot

John Rignall

Cowper's poetry was an enthusiasm of George Eliot's youth. The young MaryAnn Evans first read him at the Misses Franklin's school in Coventry and he appears to have been one of her favourite authors in her early years.¹ The residue of that youthful encounter was the ability she displayed throughout her life to quote from his poems or allude to them with easy familiarity. In an earnestly self-scrutinizing letter of September 1839 in which she describes her life as restless and her mind as 'more than usually chaotic', Cowper is listed alongside Shakespeare, Wordsworth and Milton as a source of those 'scraps of poetry' that form part of that 'assemblage of disjointed specimens' which constitute her mental furniture.² Those scraps were to endure and, like Shakespeare and Wordsworth though on a much smaller scale, Cowper remains an informing presence in her life and work.

In her late teens and early twenties, a period of her life marked by earnest Christian piety of an Evangelical kind, she was much taken with the Olney hymns, referring to "'Tis my happiness below"³ in a letter of February 1839 as a 'sweet one' (*Letters*: I, 17), and pronouncing 'I was a groveling creature once'⁴ in July 1841 to be 'lovely and rich as the pomegranate and the vine' (*Letters*: I, 100). In those early years her letters also show her to be familiar with *The Task*: she cites 'the stir of the great Babel' (*The Task*: IV, 89–90) in describing a visit to London in August 1838 with her brother Isaac (*Letters*: I, 6), and claims that she was a 'not less ardent lover' of the 'prolixity of shade' (*The Task*: I, 265) than Cowper himself when she is regretting the loss of 'the free range of walking' she enjoyed at Griff after she and her father had moved to Coventry in 1841 (*Letters*: I, 93).

However, it was nearly two decades later that her familiarity with Cowper's poetry was to bear its most significant fruit when she uses his example to throw into relief the weaknesses of another of her once favourite poets, Edward Young, in her 1857 essay for the *Westminster Review*, 'Worldliness and Other-Worldliness: The Poet Young'.⁵ By this time she had forsaken her Christian faith, and Cowper is valued not for his religious sensibility (as a Calvinist, his religion is 'dogmatically [...] more gloomy' (381) than Young's Arminianism) but for his love of the immanent world. 'Where is the poem', she asks, 'that surpasses the "Task" in the genuine love it breathes, at once towards inanimate and animate existence [...]?' This love manifests itself in 'truthfulness of perception and sincerity of presentation', and 'in the calm gladness that springs from a delight in objects for their own sake, without self-reference' (381). By contrast, Young, 'a cross between a sycophant and a psalmist' (337), is castigated for his 'radical insincerity as a poetic artist' (366) as he either indulges in flattery of his social superiors or 'descants perpetually on virtue, religion, "the good man," life, death, immortality, eternity—subjects which are apt to give a factitious grandeur to empty wordiness' (367). It could be said of Cowper, as she says of Young, that he was the object of her 'youthful predilections and enthusiasm' (358), but, unlike Young's, his poetry stands up to 'the sober and repeated reading of maturer years' (358); and she contrasts 'the easy, graceful melody of Cowper's blank verse' (381) in *The Task* with Young's perpetual recourse to a pause at the end of a line throughout long passages, which 'makes them as fatiguing to the ear as a monotonous chant' (380). The essay culminates in a point-by-point comparison between the two poets, juxtaposing Young's empty grandiloquence with Cowper's modestly expressed love of, and attention to, the world around him. It concludes by contrasting Young as 'the type of that deficient human sympathy, that impiety towards the present and the visible, which flies [...] to the remote, the vague and the unknown', with Cowper as 'the type of that genuine love which cherishes things in proportion to their nearness, and feels its reverence grow in proportion to the intimacy of its knowledge' (385). One favourite poet of her early years thus serves as an instrument in the brilliant critical demolition of another.

'Worldliness and Otherworldliness' was begun in April 1856 but not completed until after George Eliot had taken her first steps as a novelist by writing the first of the *Scenes of Clerical Life*, 'The Sad Fortunes of the Rev. Amos Barton', which was completed on 5 November 1856. The comparison with Cowper, which occupies the last five pages of the essay, was thus most probably written in the weeks immediately following that date, leading up to the completion of the piece on 4 December. The proximity of story and essay is instructive, for the qualities she praises in Cowper resemble those she is aiming for in her early fiction. There is a clear affinity between 'the most every-day forms of human life' she praises his 'large and tender heart' for embracing and the representation of ordinary provincial life that she is attempting in taking as the subject of her first story a man as 'palpably and unmistakably commonplace' as the unprepossessing clergyman Amos Barton.⁶ That she had Cowper in mind as she wrote 'Amos Barton' is suggested in the opening chapter by the scene of Mrs Patten's tea party, which reproduces quite closely the snug interior of

'The Winter Evening', with the bright fire 'reflected in her bright copper tea-kettle' (45) 'while it is freezing with February bitterness outside' (46); and the suggestion is confirmed when the narrator quotes 'the cups that cheer but not inebriate' (*The Task*: IV, 39–40) in relation to one of the guests at the party (47).

George Eliot's choice of subject matter in her early fiction and her belief in the moral function of art are customarily seen as owing much to Wordsworth's prefaces and his *Lyrical Ballads*, but the importance of Cowper's poetry for providing examples of the kind of subject and treatment that she aspired to deserves more attention than it has hitherto received.⁷ Her description of the cottager's wife in *The Task* 'painfully nursing the embers on her hearth' (*Essays* 383), and of 'the spoutless teapot holding a bit of mignonette (sic) that serves to cheer the dingy town-lodging' (382), closely resemble the motifs of Dutch paintings that she famously singles out in chapter seventeen of *Adam Bede* for their 'rare, precious quality of truthfulness': 'an old woman bending over her flower-pot, or eating her solitary dinner', with the light just touching 'the rim of her spinning-wheel, and her stone jug, and all those cheap common things that are the precious necessaries of life to her'.⁸ What she found to praise in the Dutch paintings she encountered in Munich in 1858, she had earlier found in Cowper's poetry. He, too, takes ordinary lives and 'the commonest objects' (382) that surround them and 'compels our colder natures to follow his in its manifold sympathies', not by exhortation 'but by presenting to us the object of his compassion truthfully and lovingly' (383: George Eliot's italics). His poetry seems to fulfil in exemplary fashion the extension of sympathy that she took to be the primary function of art, maintaining as she did in a celebrated passage of her 1856 essay 'The Natural History of German Life' that art is a 'mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot', and claiming in a letter of 1859 that 'if art does not enlarge men's sympathies, it does nothing morally' (*Letters*: III, 111). In that letter the same combination of the truthful and the loving that she had earlier found in Cowper occurs again in the description of a state of mind—clearly her own—which most people are incapable of comprehending: one 'which cares for that which is essentially human [...] and desires to exhibit it under all forms with loving truthfulness' (Ibid). Cowper's delight in common objects and ordinary lives and his capacity for awakening a sympathetic interest in them through truthful representation lie close to her heart in her early days as a novelist; and when she acclaims in his poetry 'that close and vivid representation of particular sorrows and privations, of particular deeds and misdeeds, which is the direct road to the emotions' (382), she could be said to be defining both the goal and the achievement of her own fiction.

The closing pages of the essay on Young represent her most extensive and significant engagement with Cowper's poetry, but she continued to allude to it or quote from it at intervals throughout her life. A detail from 'The Winter Morning Walk', the cattle standing 'in unrecumbent sadness' (*The Task*: V, 29), which serves in the essay as an illustration of Cowper's acute attentiveness to the animal world, is quoted again in the description of a snow-bound landscape in *The Mill on the Floss* when Tom Tulliver comes home from school for Christmas.⁹ The writing of her own winter scene seems to trigger in the novelist's mind a memory of Cowper's, and his strikingly expressed observation provides an appropriate incidental detail of the bleakness of the natural world that acts as foil to the warmth and colour of the Christmas festival. The sadness that Cowper ascribes to his winter cattle George Eliot also associated with the poet's own life, observing that there was a 'real and deep sadness involved in Cowper's personal lot' (381) and pointing out in an early letter of 1840, written when she claimed to be in low spirits herself, that 'Cowper wrote John Gilpin under a fit of mental depression' (*Letters*: IX, 332). In her own career as a writer she, too, suffered from bouts of depression and lack of self confidence, and it is possible that she drew strength from Cowper's example of writing in the face of mental adversity, but if she did, she never mentioned it.

It is the poetry she prized in her youth that remains imprinted on her memory, and in her last novel *Daniel Deronda*, published twenty years after the essay on Young, she alludes tellingly to another poem about an animal, 'The Dog and the Water-lily'. When the haughty, coldly unbending Grandcourt, who has decided to marry Gwendolen Harleth but has yet to propose to her, takes her in the company of others on a tour of the grounds of his house, the party pauses to be amused by the action of his water-spaniel Fetch 'bringing a water-lily to the bank like Cowper's spaniel Beau'.¹⁰ Wanting to be alone with Gwendolen, Grandcourt uses the pause to suggest that they walk up to a knoll together, but he introduces his suggestion by a reaction to the dog's accomplishment—'This is a bore'—that is entirely characteristic of his languid indifference to the life about him and a clear indication of his defective moral sensibility. Where Cowper is charmed by the deed and declares that 'My dog shall mortify the pride / Of man's superior breed', the aristocratic Grandcourt remains unmoved, impregably armoured by a pride that cannot be mortified and an unshakeable sense of his own superiority. Cowper takes the incident as a moving expression of his dog's love for him that enjoins him to be similarly prompt in his love of God, while Grandcourt's indifference can

be read as an indication of his incapacity for love of any kind. To the alert reader, Grandcourt in his attitude to his spaniel is shown up by the allusion to Cowper to be the exact opposite of the poet who, for George Eliot, is to be admired for his 'lovely, sympathetic nature' and the 'genuine love' his poetry 'breathes, at once towards inanimate and animate existence' (*Essays* 381).

Notes

- ¹ Gordon S. Haight, *George Eliot: A Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), pp. 13, 24.
- ² *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1954–78), vol. I, p. 29. Further references to the volume and page of the *Letters* will be given in the text.
- ³ Hymn no. 36, 'Welcome Cross', *The Poetical Works of William Cowper*, ed. H. S. Milford, 3rd edition (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), p. 456.
- ⁴ Hymn no. 52, 'Lively hope, and gracious fear', *Poetical Works*, p. 466.
- ⁵ *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), pp. 335–85. Further page references to this edition will be given in the text.
- ⁶ *Scenes of Clerical Life*, ed. David Lodge (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 80. Further page references to this edition will be given in the text.
- ⁷ Cowper has received little attention in George Eliot criticism. U. C. Knoepfelmacher, *George Eliot's Early Novels: The Limits of Realism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), p. 49, makes passing reference when the character of Amelia Barton in the first of the *Scenes of Clerical Life* is compared to Cowper for representing 'a sublime capacity for loving'; and W. J. Harvey, *The Art of George Eliot* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961), p. 63, citing the last paragraph of the essay on Young, ranks the novelist with Cowper in kind but claims she passes him in degree. Harvey also finds an analogy between her deliberate attempts in her early work to use inflated diction to humorous effect and the occasions when Cowper has recourse to latinate diction and pompous sub-Miltonic inversions in gentle mockery of the literary mode he has adopted, as in 'Yardley Oak', with its 'sides embossed / With prominent wens globose' (p. 211). Graham Handley, in his entry on Cowper in the *Oxford Reader's Companion to George Eliot*, ed. John Rignall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 61, has the most to say about Cowper's importance for George Eliot, and I am indebted to his brief survey.
- ⁸ *Adam Bede*, *The World's Classics*, ed. Valentine Cunningham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 177.
- ⁹ *The Mill on the Floss*, *The World's Classics*, ed. Dinah Birch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), Bk II, Ch. 2, p. 152.
- ¹⁰ *Daniel Deronda*, *Everyman paperbacks*, ed. John Rignall (London: J. M. Dent, 1999), Ch. 13, p. 128. Since George Eliot gives the spaniel's name, which is not mentioned in this poem though it is in another, it is possible, as Graham Handley suggests, that she also knew of the incident from Cowper's letters (see letter to Lady Hesketh of 27 June 1788).