

Review Article

K. E. Smith, *William Cowper: A Reappraisal*. Olney: The Cowper and Newton Museum, 2001. ISBN 0-9514570-1-2. 91pp. £5.99.

Ken Smith's concise study of the life and work of William Cowper could hardly be bettered. It is clearly written *con amore*, and yet preserves a proper critical detachment that finds expression in thoroughly sensible estimations of the poetry and sympathetic but unsentimental observations of the life. It is on the whole well written, with a clarity of style and (for the most part) an avoidance of the jargon that passes for thought in some academic contexts. Some word-processing glitches apart, the book is presented agreeably enough. It can be recommended both to those looking for an authoritative introduction to a serious study of Cowper and to those open to a fresh view of familiar material.

In such a brief book, the details of Cowper's life can, of course, be only selectively sketched in. Smith acknowledges this in his preface, where he also asserts that the main reason for presenting aspects of Cowper's life ('biographical interludes', as he modestly calls them) is to establish the context and origins of the major works themselves. I think Smith actually underestimates himself here. It is, rather, one of the main strengths of his discussion that he links life and works in a manner that quietly and undramatically reveals the intimate relationship between Cowper's lived experience and the act of writing.

Smith explicitly rejects some of the more sensational and simplistic interpretations of Cowper's life. For example, he exposes the limitations of the view that it was Cowper's Calvinism that led directly to his religious melancholy and sensibly rejects the all-too-easy attribution of the role of villain to John Newton. While acknowledging the differences in temperament and experience between Cowper and Newton, he points out that Newton possessed intellectual qualities and aspirations—his strenuous and worthy self-education in Hebrew and the Classics, his literary abilities and his willingness to walk and talk—that made him a good companion for the bookish and nature-loving Cowper. He also notes how Cowper was able to speak his mind directly to Newton, as in his defence of the pagan author Homer. Thus the Cowper-Newton relationship emerges as more equal and also more creative than in those accounts that convey a myth of a sensitive Cowper dominated by an assertively energetic Newton.

So, too, Smith refuses to sensationalize the crucial matter of Cowper's religious beliefs, including that of his own damnation. Instead, Smith presents the issues as more complex and deserving of more measured and thoughtful contemplation. Cowper did believe that there could be sure damnation, but, as he writes to Joseph Johnson in August 1781, this is reserved for those who have arrived at 'a final rejection of the Gospel'. Since Cowper was then engaged in writing a series of poems, the still underrated Moral Satires published in 1782, that had the specific aim of spreading the truths of the gospel, such a category could hardly include himself. The key problem lay in Cowper's perception of himself as a man who gained salvation and then lost it again through his rejection of God by the action of attempting suicide and then—paradoxically—by failing to commit suicide. This self-analysis, Smith argues, requires us to understand at once the intractability of Cowper's image of his state and how he could continue to write and, on the whole, live with himself. People—even poets—cannot live in a constant state of crippling anxiety, but get on with the ordinary course of life.

It is Cowper's pleasure in, and celebration of, that sheer ordinariness that draw us close to the heart of his devotion to writing. The letters, that wonderful body of intimate and natural work that stands out even in a great century of letter-writing, give repeated testimony to this. Smith is acute in his summary of the aims and qualities of Cowper's letters. Their 'casual, exploratory nature' he explains by quoting from a letter to William Unwin in August 1780:

A letter may be written upon any thing or Nothing, just as that any thing or Nothing happens to occur. A man that has a journey before him, 20 miles in Length, which he is to perform on foot, will not Hesitate & doubt whether he shall set out or not, because he does not readily conceive how he shall ever

reach the End of it; for he knows that by the Simple Operation of moving one Foot forward first, and then the other, he shall be sure to Accomplish it. ... A Letter is Written, as a Conversation is maintained, or a Journey perform'd, not by preconcerted, or premeditated Means, by a New Contrivance, or an Invention never heard of before, but merely by maintaining a progress.

How characteristic of the humility, the down-to-earth quality, of Cowper to choose a journey on foot, rather than, say, the journey in a stage-coach chosen by Henry Fielding as his narrator's metaphor for the act of writing *Tom Jones*.

As art, so life. Our lives move on through time and space, the key coordinates of our existence and of Cowper's *The Task*, in solitary communion or social conversation. Art—a poem such as *Conversation*—and the acts of living, such as talking or writing to a friend, share this common yet creative form. Smith is nicely sensitive to how Cowper's writing of letters blends with his composition of poetry. For example, he notes how Cowper in his letters presents each new member of the set of Moral Satires as conceived only at the end of the previous one, so that the letters chart a release of natural energy taking form in the poems. And yet, just as Cowper's letters show in their variety of tone and emphasis his distinct awareness of the need to shape each to the nature of its recipient, its immediate readership, so Smith directs us carefully and properly to Cowper's professional approach to his poetry and its publication. 'Repeatedly', Smith writes, 'Cowper would suggest that his reasons for writing poetry were personal ones', while at the same time Cowper declares that 'actual publication, and by extension wide readership, remained a positive influence on him'. For Cowper was fully aware of, and interested in, the world beyond Olney, and excited by the world of literature, publishers and artists. Smith links this to a positive aspect of Cowper's Evangelicalism, his need to be useful, to communicate truth to the wide world. One of the strengths of Smith's book is his acknowledgement of Cowper's sheer worldliness—in the best sense—in respect of contemporary affairs.

If a short study must inevitably be selective about the life of its subject, so too it cannot avoid treating the works with varying degrees of selectivity. Smith generally manages well to combine coverage of the range of Cowper's poetry with effective commentary on the qualities of individual poems. On 'The Cast-away', for instance, he is, as we have come to expect at this stage of the book, judicious about reading it as just the expression of a state of debilitating despair. He points out that its composition followed a lengthy period of sustained poetic activity, and that even after its completion Cowper was still at work in East Dereham revising his translation of Homer's *Iliad* and translating John Gay's fables into Latin. Here again, then, we find the life and the art putting one step in front of another, steadily and sanely. This should act as a balance to our natural tendency to find in 'The Cast-away' Cowper's last will and testament, the culmination of his mental breakdowns. Thus the poem itself manifests, argues Smith, a capacity to 'articulate his moments of extremity with a mixture of terrifying directness and deft artistic control', as Cowper had previously done in 'To Mary' and 'Hatred and Vengeance'. So the poem conveys more to us than just personal dissolution and the agony of abandonment—sharply and painfully etched though those feelings are. In its diction, its 'contained formality', its precise vocabulary and its 'balanced cadencies and carefully-punctuated pauses', there is the artist still at work, plying his trade. Interestingly, Smith connects this activity to Cowper's religion: 'Even in its totalizing negativity "The Cast-away" evinces the more positive Evangelical value of offering a truthful and unflinching account of one's spiritual condition.' The pursuit of truth in as direct and as expressive a manner as possible is a religious as well as an artistic calling.

At other times, it is, I think, true that Smith's treatment of the poetry remains a little thin. The problem, of course, is how to reconcile brevity with adequacy of report. But the remarks on, for example, *On the Receipt of My Mother's Picture Out of Norfolk*, remain—though true ('the poem convincingly embeds this vulnerability within feelings of love and loyalty which take away death's sting')—short and a shade superficial. That poem, more than most, demands a concerted advocacy of its determined refusal to sentimentalize, all the more so because so many critics have mistaken Cowper's honest and powerful dramatization of the temptation to sentimentalize for indulgence in sentimentalism. Cowper is both artistically

cleverer and more humanly aware than many of his critics.

This reader also found Smith's account of *The Task*, undeniably Cowper's central and biggest achievement, somewhat perfunctory. The poem is described in its progress from book to book accurately and adequately, and Smith duly pays tribute to *The Task*'s adroit handling of transitions of mood and subject and its allying of the literal and the symbolic in 'The Garden' and elsewhere. He also, rightly, links the poem to earlier eighteenth-century discursive poems about the countryside, such as James Thomson's *The Seasons*, while noting how highly Christianized is Cowper's version of georgic. But the conclusion that 'readers may still feel that, however much the coherence and broader significance of *The Task* is affirmed, it is yet particular passages which stand out for them as the core of their artistic experience of the poem' is something of an anticlimax. The whole poem, rather, is itself one that works to a tremendous climax through its gathering of the motifs that Smith observes—as well as others that he does not have room to discuss—into a coherence given meaning by its vision of an organic progress through time and space. Thus its total meaning and power are both the result of its parts and greater than their sum.

The concluding pages of Smith's book are, however, noble and powerful in a manner that matches his subject. He sums up Cowper's career admirably, putting emphasis on an 'active, successful Cowper' whose achievements we should admire, celebrate and enjoy. There is, Smith rightly and wonderfully declares, 'no need for excuses or special pleading for Cowper who, with his own distinctive capacities and limits, came nearer than most to achieving all that he had ever actually set out to achieve'. It is not the least of Smith's achievements to make such unambiguous assertions of Cowper's value and capacity to enhance our lives. Just as Smith rightly says that we should not be deceived by Cowper's own modesty about his craft of poetry, so we should not allow Smith's own modesty about his book to obscure the fact that it is the best short study of its subject, and one that frequently matches its subject in its sensitivity, common sense and discretion.

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