

'The clouds ye so much dread/ Are big with mercy . . .' Were they?

One of the minor pleasures in life is staying with someone, or in their house, and discovering there a book one has not read - or even perhaps thought of reading - but which gives unexpected delight. In the mid-1970s when I was vicar of All Saints Fulham a member of the congregation, Kathleen Epstein, the widow of Sir Jacob, lent my family a beautiful eighteenth-century villa on the edge of Lake Garda. Apart from the fact that it had a significant number of pieces of crockery, which no doubt she had picked up for a few pounds and which were clearly now worth a great deal more, and we lived in some fear of the children dashing these on to the stone floors, it was a magical place to be. Lying around in the house was Lord David Cecil's biography of Cowper, *The Stricken Deer*, first published in 1929 and, I discovered the other day, still in print as a paperback. Some books, when you first read them, not only hold one as though spellbound, they are forever associated with the place you first read them. So it is that I cannot think of that villa on the edge of Lake Garda without also an overwhelming sense of David Cecil's life of Cowper in all its pathos and tragedy. Two of Cowper's poems in particular sum up the theme of Cecil's life. First was *The Task*, published in 1785 when Cowper was 54 which contains the line from which Cecil took the title of his book.

I was a stricken deer, that left the herd
Long since; with many an arrow deep infixt
My panting side was charged, when I withdrew
To seek a tranquil death in distant shades.¹

(III. 108-11)

The other was '*The Castaway*' written in 1799, a year before his death. It tells the story of someone who was swept overboard, who called for help but who was not heard, who struggled for life but who was eventually overwhelmed by the waters. Then in the last verse Cowper writes:

No voice divine the storm allay'd,
No light propitious shone;
When, snatched from all effectual aid,
We perished, each alone:
But I beneath a rougher sea,
And whelm'd in deeper gulphs than he.

(61-66)

That, perhaps even more poignantly than the verse about a stricken deer, indicates the depths of despair to which Cowper sank. He feels that the dark waters that overwhelmed him were deeper even than the experience of physical drowning.

The lines of my title are taken from Cowper's well-known hymn which begins 'God moves in a mysterious way', one of the Olney hymns published in 1771-72. In that line he expresses his faith and hope that however dark the clouds are, yet they are big with mercy 'And shall break / In blessings on your head'. But we have to ask whether for Cowper himself that did indeed turn out to be true and, if so, in what possible sense.

Cowper suffered from severe depression. He records this as first taking hold of him when he took a set of chambers in the Temple at the age of 21.

I was struck not long after my settlement in the Temple with such a dejection of spirits there's none but they who have felt the same can have the least conception of. Day and night I was upon the rack, lying down in horrors and rising in despair. I presently lost all relish to those studies I had been before closely attached to. The classics no longer had any charm for me.²

Apart from this initial attack he experienced four major breakdowns in the course of his life. A non-medical view suggests that his early experience had something to do with this. His mother, of whom he was desperately fond, died when he was six. Much later in life he was sent a painting of his mother and it brought to mind all that he had lost, together with his childhood grief:

Oh, that those lips had language! Life has pass'd
With me but roughly since I heard thee last
Those lips are thine – thy own sweet smiles I see,
The same that oft in childhood solaced me;
Voice only fails, else how distinct they say,
'Grieve not, my child, chase all thy fears away!'
The meek intelligence of those dear eyes . . .

My mother! When I learn'd that thou wast dead,
Say, wast thou conscious of the tears I shed?
Hover'd thy spirit o'er thy sorrowing son,
Wretch even then, life's journey just begun?
Perhaps thou gav'st me, though unseen, a kiss;
Perhaps a tear, if souls can weep in bliss –
Ah, that maternal smile! it answers – yes.
I heard the bell tolled on thy burial day,
I saw the hearse that bore thee slow away,
And, turning from my nurs'ry window, drew
A long, long sigh, and wept a last adieu!

(‘On the Receipt of my Mother’s Picture out of Norfolk’, 1-7, 21-31)

At the age of six Cowper was then sent to school, where he was dreadfully bullied: ‘A particular boy, by his savage treatment of me imprinted such a dread of his very figure upon my mind that I well remember being afraid to lift my eyes upon him higher than his knees, and that I knew him by his shoe buckles better than by any other part of his dress.’ (‘Adelphi’, *LPW*, I, 5). But other people lose their mothers early and are bullied at school without having major breakdowns. Clearly there was something about Cowper’s genetic make up that predisposed him to illness. His first depression occurred when he was 22, his major breakdown with various suicide attempts when he was 32. The other breakdowns occurred when he was 41, 56 and 63. Leaving aside the slight irregularity between 41 and 56, it is noteworthy that his breakdowns occurred at intervals of 10 years from the age of 22 to 63, which suggests something cyclical, something to do with his basic physical make up.

Cowper’s first major breakdown was precipitated by the prospect of having to be examined for a post in the House of Lords, which someone had lined up for him. He tried in a number of ways to commit suicide, taking an overdose of laudanum, drowning in the river and hanging himself, but nothing quite worked. It became apparent that he was not fit for the House of Lords job and some friends managed to get him into a humane home for the insane run by a Dr Cotton in St Albans, where he remained very ill and potentially suicidal for some time. His next breakdown followed on from his engagement to Mary Unwin, which was then broken off. We don’t know what happened before the breakdown when he was 56 but it followed on his move to Weston Lodge. Again we can’t be sure what the precipitating factor was for the breakdown when he was 63, but it was at a time when Mary Unwin, with whom he lived and to whom he was devoted, was badly affected by strokes.

Cowper’s illness is fundamental to understanding his life and religious outlook. For most of the time it took the form of a permanent depressive state but in the acute periods there may have been a manic element and certainly what we term a derangement, or collapse of the ordinary rational processes.

In his religious biography Cowper says that until the thirty-second year of his life he never had any serious impressions of the religious kind. This is simply not true. He records that even when he was badly bullied at school some words of the Psalmist came into his mind: ‘I will not fear what man can do unto me’. He tells us, ‘I applied them to my own use with a degree of trust and confidence in God that would have been no disgrace to a much more experienced Christian.’ At Westminster he was well prepared for confirmation by a man whom he respected and as a result became serious about prayer, at least for a bit. In his periods of depression as a young lawyer he found consolation in the poems of George Herbert and again records that he prayed.

As a result of his failed attempts at suicide, precipitated by the examination for the position in the House of Lords, Cowper developed a very strong sense of sin, believing that he had sinned against the Holy Ghost, and he lived in dread of judgment and eternal damnation. Then a Mr Madan shared with him the gospel couched in evangelical terms. At the time it helped but did not cure his sense of God’s rejection. However, some eight months later in Dr Cotton’s home, reading Romans 3, 25 he did have a sense of his burden being lifted and he counted this as the turning point of his life, his conversion. Thereafter, despite the terrible mental affliction and sense of spiritual rejection, which we shall come to, he continued to regard himself as an evangelical Christian and looked to those who shared his convictions for friendship and support. At this point it might be useful to say something more generally about religion in the eighteenth century.

There was a time when eighteenth-century religion was disparaged as weak and formal until the Evangelical Revival came along. This has now been reassessed and, referring to the great explosion of literature in the past decade either defending the church’s record or attacking its shortcomings, David Hempton concludes, ‘The eighteenth-century church was not as mediocre as its subsequent evangelical, Tractarian and utilitarian critics thought it was, but neither was it a paragon of pastoral devotion and evangelical zeal. It was a working establishment with all the structural and administrative problems associated with a large institution with weak central authority, little proper

control over clerical recruitment and training, and no clear statement of what it wanted to achieve beyond the steady performance of Christian ordinances and the maintenance of social cohesion.’³ We may note first that outright scepticism, though probably shared by few, was associated with such great names as Gibbon and Hume. The great satirist Jonathan Swift, however, suggests that this scepticism went wider than these names. In 1708 Swift wrote an essay arguing against the abolishment of Christianity. He wrote:

It may perhaps be neither safe nor prudent to argue against the abolishing of Christianity at a juncture when all parties seem so unanimously determined upon the point . . . I freely own that all appearances are against me. The system of the gospel, after the fate of other systems, is generally antiquated and exploded, and the mass or body of the common people, among whom it seems to have had its latest credit, are now grown as much ashamed of it as their betters . . . For I look upon the mass or body of our people here in England, to be as free thinkers, that is to say, staunch unbelievers, as any of the highest rank. But I can see some scattered notions about a superior power to be of singular use for the common people, as furnishing excellent materials to keep children quiet when they grow peevish, and providing topics of amusement in a tedious winter night.⁴

Actually Swift was probably referring not just to what we term atheism but to deism, which was discussed and influential among not a few. Deists believed in a creator God but downplayed the necessity of redemption and therefore the divinity and unique role of Christ. It impinges on our story through Cowper’s brother, a very scholarly clergyman in Cambridge, who was extremely tender and affectionate to William. When Cowper first tried to urge his new-found evangelical beliefs upon him, he simply listened because he didn’t want to get into an argument. Eventually William’s point of view began to take hold and John, the brother, began to reassess his whole life. He came to the conclusion that he had been building his glory upon a sandy foundation, pursuing his own ambitions rather than trusting in the saving death of Christ. William visited John when he was very ill and dying, and as part of this reassessment John confessed ‘I was just beginning to be a Deist and had long desired to be so, and I will own to you what I never confessed before, that my function and the duties of it were a weariness to me which I could not bear.’ (*Adelphi*, *LPW*, I, 58)

Less extreme views than Deism but equally criticised by the evangelicals were those regarded as Latitudinarian: people whose views had latitude, who regarded the convictions of others as acceptable without imposing too rigid a framework on orthodoxy and unorthodoxy. Their position has been summed up in these words:

The Latitudinarians undertook the task of reconciling the church to the changes which a new intellectual environment demanded. They believed that the essentials of the faith could be expressed in simple, not technical terms that paid little attention to traditional formulations. Perhaps the greatest exponent of this point of view was Dr Samuel Clarke, whose Boyle lectures on The being and attributes of God impressed his contemporaries as a miracle of lucid and reasonable exposition. The harmony and order of the universe pointed to a creator who is as beneficent as he is wise. The fatherly rule of God demanded of his children a benevolence like his own⁵

The Latitudinarians minimised the speculative element in religion and emphasised its practical implications, our moral duties and the good consequences of acting wisely. Again, this impinges on our story because when William Cowper was living with the Unwins, Mr Unwin, a clergyman, was flung from his horse and killed. Cowper wrote to a friend to say of Mr Unwin that

At those times he was enabled to utter truths, which before, he could never be brought to the belief of. He was one of those many poor deluded persons, whom Dr Clark has infected with his anti-Christian errors, and subsequently denied the divinity of our Lord and the infinite merit of his sufferings. But upon his deathbed he was heard to say, ‘Jesus Christ is God, and therefore he can save me.’⁶

(*LPW*, I, 170)

Then there were those straightforward Anglican Christians who did not regard themselves as either Latitudinarian or evangelical, but who were serious about their religion, even if not serious enough in a way to satisfy evangelicals. Among them in particular I mention Samuel Johnson, about whom I will say more later. Recent work suggests that Johnson was not only a strong churchman but a non-juror, if a somewhat secret one; that is, he and others like him regarded themselves as successors of those in 1688 who refused to take the oath of allegiance to William and Mary on the grounds that it would break their previous oaths to James II and his successors, and so they remained loyal to the Stewart line.⁷

Then, as John Wesley put it, in 1738 in a room in Aldersgate Street, 'I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt that I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation.' Wesley brought about a remarkable revival amongst ordinary people, and although he did not desire any break with the Church of England, Methodism did eventually form as a separate denomination. At the same time, however, evangelical beliefs, through the influence of people like John Newton, became increasingly influential in the Church of England itself in the closing years of the eighteenth century. Some bishops welcomed this revival. Others shared the view of the great Bishop Butler: 'Sir, the pretending to extraordinary revelations and gifts of the Holy Ghost is a horrid thing – a very horrid thing.' One of the endearing features of Cowper is that he knew very well indeed that his enthusiasm for evangelical truth was regarded by most of his contemporaries as unsophisticated folly and madness. Nevertheless that is where, despite everything, he remained.

The turning point in Cowper's life was the experience of assurance in Dr Cotton's benign mental home. 'I am indeed *enlarged*', he wrote about this (*LPW*, I, 95). Amongst other things it was shared evangelical conviction that drew him to Mrs Unwin. It was evangelical ministry they looked for when they moved. He refers to the 'Spiritless, unedifying ministry at Huntingdon' (*LPW*, I, 170). Yet, Cowper believed that he was eternally damned, indeed that he had been singled out by God for what he called His particular malice. It is impossible to exaggerate the extent of the terror and despair that Cowper felt at this prospect for most of his life. It was, literally, hell for him. Although he shared this feeling to some extent with John Newton, Newton became increasingly busy and preoccupied with his ministry elsewhere. It was in fact to a rather strange person that Cowper revealed the depths of his anguish. A Mr Teedon had come from Bedfordshire to Olney to do some freelance teaching. Cowper found him pretty insufferable and didn't hesitate to say so in his letters to others: he found him pedantic and a bore. Cowper dreaded his visits and when he moved away and they corresponded, Cowper's letters are terse and formal in the extreme. Yet it was to this man that Cowper revealed his deepest fears. First of all, Teedon showed unremitting gratitude to Cowper – and indeed Cowper and Newton had sought to find employment and funding for him. And Cowper acknowledges that gratitude covers a multitude of faults. Then Teedon admits to Cowper that one of his most ardent prayers had been to have the company of a person of genius, and that prayer had been answered in the person of Cowper. Yet none of this by itself would have been enough. What seems to have happened is that when Mrs Unwin fell ill with a stroke Teedon assured Cowper that he was praying for her. She seemed to recover reasonably well and, on this basis, Cowper had a glimmer of hope that Teedon's prayers for himself, which he knew were there, might also avail. It was this, I think, more than anything else, that made Cowper share with Teedon his most terrible nightmares, saying, in effect, that the prayers of Teedon were not in fact availing. The following letter is fairly typical.

From 4.00 this morning until after 7.00 I lay meditating terror, such terrors as no language can express . . . I then slept and dreamed a long dream, in which I told Mrs U with many tears that my salvation is impossible for the reasons given above. I recapitulated in the most impassioned accent and manner, the unexampled severity of Gods dealings with me in the course of the last 20 years especially in the year 73 and again in 86, and concluded all with observing that I must infallibly perish, and that the scriptures which speak of the insufficiency of man to save himself, can never be understood unless I perish.

(*LPW*, IV, 285)

One night he dreams that he is about to clasp an iron door handle when he recollects that the heat of the fire in which he is going to be tormented would fuse the metal and would therefore only serve to increase his insupportable misery (*LPW*, IV, 299). He writes about 'Such miseries as hell is unacquainted with, and of being made to feel them' (*LPW*, IV, 427). Any apparent word of comfort in a dream, he immediately gave a negative twist to, so that he receives it in the opposite sense to which it is meant. Any word of comfort from the letters of Teedon or anyone else, he finds simply a teasing torment, so far is he from receiving any assurance about their truth.

What did Cowper think was the cause of his eternal damnation? Towards the end of his life, on the eve of his final breakdown, he kept a spiritual notebook whose disjointed and irrational reflections seem to suggest that his great sin was that of not committing suicide when God ordered him to do so. Earlier however, it is the breakdown itself, which he sees as a sign of God's punishment, that creates in him a sense of being singled out for a particularly perfidious purpose. This seems to have gone together with an experience he had, at least for a few days, as part of this breakdown, of being ushered closely into the presence of God – only then to be banished from it again in punishment. All this seems to indicate that his illness was not just a straightforward depression but what nowadays is called a bi-polar illness, or more frequently manic depression, which sometimes does take a religious turn. So in his manic phase he has an overpowering sense of the presence of God, only for this to

disappear and be followed by a sense of mental chaos, derangement and hounding guilt. So he writes, again to Teedon:

My anxieties however, as I have said, are not lest I should see his face no more, for I verily expect that I shall yet once again have liberty to approach him; but when I recollect that I have twice been indulged with that liberty since my first deprivation of it in the year 73 [in fact he should have written 63] and have since had my fetters clapt on again, I tremble lest I should lose it a third time and recover it nevermore. . . . The hope of an intermediate abatement of my distress avails me little; for, in reality, what advantage is it to be permitted to approach God for a few short days perhaps, and then to be driven from his presence finally and forever. Why do I fear it, you will ask, knowing as I do that God is of one mind, and that whom he loveth, he loveth to the end; I answer, because I cannot help it, and because I know myself to be an object of the enemy's particular and peculiar malice, for reasons best known to God.

(LPW, IV, 188)

In an earlier letter, after remarking that his nights were spent under a constant impression of God's contempt and abhorrence, he writes, 'Such was the last night. You will say – it was an enemy that did this. I answer – true; but you and I differ about the person. You suppose him to be Satan, and I suppose him Satan's master. Who shall decide between us?'

In the light of all this then how can we possibly suggest that the dreadful clouds that overhung most of his life 'Are big with mercy', and in any sense broke in blessings on his head?

Cowper's letters fall into three phases. First there are the light-hearted, skittish letters to his friends as a young man, full of in-jokes and banter. Then there are the letters after his first major breakdown and conversion to evangelical Christianity which are mainly taken up with religious reflections, particularly those to John Newton. Then, thirdly, there are those letters, the great bulk of them, written after he had lost any sense of religious assurance, which for the most part are on non-religious matters. These are the letters for which he is best known, and for which he has gained a reputation as being one of the great English letter writers. What they reveal above all is Cowper's strategy for survival. Given his terrible sense of being doomed, with which he woke up most mornings, and the underlying depression that remained with him throughout the day, how did he get through? The short answer is that he devised a heroic strategy for survival.

When the great nineteenth-century wit Sydney Smith was asked for advice on how to cope with depression he wrote back the following words:

Nobody has suffered more from low spirits that I have done, so I feel for you. 1. Live as well and drink as much wine as you dare. 2. Go into the shower bath with a small quantity of water at a temperature low enough to give you a slight sensation of cold – 75 or 80°. 3. Amusing books. 4. Short views of human life not further than dinner or tea. 5. Be as busy as you can. 6. See as much as you can of those friends who respect and like you. 7. And of those acquaintances who amuse you. 8. Make no secret of low spirits to your friends but talk of them fully; they are always the worst for dignified concealment. 9. Attend to the effects tea and coffee produce upon you. 10. Compare your lot with that of other people. 11. Don't expect too much of human life, a sorry business at the best. 12. Avoid poetry, dramatic representations (except comedy) music, serious novels, melancholy sentimental people, and everything likely to excite feeling or emotion not ending in active benevolence. 13. Do good and endeavour to please everybody of every degree. 14. Be as much as you can in the open air without fatigue. 15. Make the room where you commonly sit gay and pleasant. 16. Struggle by little and little against idleness. 17. Don't be too severe upon yourself, or underrate yourself, but do yourself justice. 18. Keep good blazing fires. 19. Be firm and constant in the exercise of rational religion. 20. Believe me my dear lady Georgiana, very truly yours, Sydney Smith.⁸

If one went through that list systematically you would find that quite independently and without formulating the issue in any way which has survived, Cowper was acting out most of those tenets. So far as he could he no longer thought about or wrote about the big questions of human existence and may possibly have avoided church altogether. Secondly, he did good, so far as he could, particularly caring deeply for Mrs Unwin and looking after her when she became ill. Likewise he was greatly blessed by her tender solicitude and care for him. Thirdly, he kept himself busy in the open air for as much time as possible, making things and gardening. He wrote to a Mrs King, the wife of a school friend at Westminster, to say that once upon a time she might have been overwhelmed by presents from him, all the things he made such as tables and joint-stools:

But I have long since discontinued this practice and many others which I found it necessary to adopt, that I might escape the worst of all evils both in itself and in its consequences, an idle life. Many arts I have exercised with this view, for which nature never designed me.....There is not a squire in all this country who can boast of having made better squirrel houses, hutches for rabbits, or birdcages than myself; and in the art of the cabbage nets I had no superior. I even had the hardiness to take in hand the pencil and studied a whole year of the art of drawing . . . But gardening was of all employments that in which I succeeded best, though even in this, I did not suddenly attain perfection. I began with lettuces and cauliflowers; and from them I proceeded to cucumbers; next to melons. I then purchased an orange tree, to which in due time I added two or three myrtles. These served me day and night with employment during a whole severe winter. To defend them from the frost in a situation that exposed them to its severity, cost me much ingenuity and much attendance. I contrived to give them a fire heat, and I have waded night after night through the snow with the bellows under my arm, just before going to bed, to give the latest possible puff to the embers, lest the frost should seize them before morning.

(*LPW*, III, 222)

And so on. In his letters he constantly mentions the little gifts he has received and the gifts he hopes to send. He writes to ask for some seeds with the sentence 'I am become a great florist and shrub doctor.'*(LPW*, I, 161)

As is well known, Cowper found particular solace from his animals and constantly refers to these in his letters. He kept eight pairs of pigeons that he fed every morning. He had a bulldog called Mungo and a cat with whom Mungo played happily. He had a spaniel and above all of course he had his three hares. He described their characters in an article in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for June 1784. He wrote an epitaph when one died which well sums up the healing effect these pets had on him:

I kept him for his humour's sake,
For he would oft beguile
My heart of thoughts that made it ache,
And force me to a smile.

(‘Epitaph on a Hare’, 33-36)

He also wrote poems on the death of a bullfinch, a retired cat, a nightingale and his spaniel whom he called Beau.

Writing poetry and translating Milton were occupations which kept Cowper's mind from despairing thoughts and enabled him to survive. Some of his poetry is genuinely light-hearted and fun. To these ways of what Samuel Beckett would term 'getting through', one must of course add his letter-writing. Sometimes indeed it was a burden to him, when he was even more down than usual. But 'This occupation above all others assists me in the self-deception to which I am indebted for all the little comfort I enjoy.' And these letters are distinguished, rather surprisingly, by their humour. The humour is a constant aspect in nearly all his correspondence, except to the good schoolmaster to whom he revealed the troubled state of his dreams. The humour takes the form of slight exaggerations, taking seriously what he knows is not too serious, focusing on little things and with gentle mockery treating them as of great importance. It is well known that many comedians are, beneath the surface humour, depressives. The same applies in Cowper's case. We know he was a depressive but the form this took in most of his correspondence, and presumably in most of his intercourse with his friends, was to be light-hearted, not to take things too seriously, except the little things of life which he treated with an almost exaggerated seriousness. That this was a conscious persona may be discerned from one of his letters where he describes how he has to meet a visitor, and in order to put a good face on things gives himself a few drops of laudanum (*LPW*, IV, 266). We could say that he saw it as part of his Christian love of his neighbour to be a cheerful companion, despite his inner turmoil.

All this adds up to what I term a heroic strategy for survival; not just for himself, but as part of the duty he felt he owed to others; at the least, not to burden them with his own burdens, except in the case of certain special intimates to whom he felt he could and should unburden himself.

One of the most fascinating and revealing aspects of Cowper is his attitude to the great Dr Johnson, as disclosed in the letters. During Cowper's lifetime Johnson, about 22 years older than Cowper, was the dominant literary figure. Although Cowper was a recluse, and as far as is possible in inclination from the coffee houses of London, Samuel Johnson loomed large in his mind. He often refers to Johnson's judgements on writers and, in a slightly mocking manner, parodies his style. Lamenting

the lack of opportunity to write, he describes himself as 'Paucified, as perhaps Dr Johnson would have dared to say' (*LPW*, IV, 265). To another correspondent he says 'My brother and I meet every week by an alternate reciprocation of intercourse; as Sam: Johnson would express it.' (*LPW*, I, 120). He refers to a number of Johnson's works and reads his prefaces to the lives of the poets with great attention. After Johnson's death in 1884, he was interested in the letters of Mrs Piozzi and the life of Johnson by Sir John Hawkins and remarked, having read that and Boswell, 'I now think myself almost as much a master of Johnson's character as if I had known him personally.' (*LPW*, III, 298)

It is not surprising then that Cowper was nervous about Johnson's possible reaction to his own first book of poetry, published in 1782, and indeed was very ambivalent about his seeing it at all. He writes to John Newton to say that he has no objection to Newton sending a copy of the poems to Dr Johnson, 'Though I well know that one of his pointed sarcasms, if he should happen to be displeased, would soon find its way into all companies, and spoil the sale.' (*LPW*, I, 520) In fact, Johnson's favourable opinion of the poetry was eventually conveyed to Cowper by Newton.

Cowper admired Johnson and on his death wrote an epitaph praising his strengths. In the light of this, and in the knowledge of Cowper's sensitive character and inclination to withdraw, it is truly remarkable how willing he is to stand up to Johnson and how highly critical he is, both of some of his literary judgements and of some aspects of his character. Above all Cowper took exception to Johnson's disparagement of Milton. He suggests that Johnson fails to appreciate Milton because he has no feeling for blank verse; that he is unfair to him because he dislikes his political views and because, as a critic, he has a wilful desire to put down those whom the general public tends to esteem. Cowper writes to his friend William Unwin, having read some of Johnson's Prefaces, 'With one exception, and that a swingeing one, I think he has acquitted himself with his usual good sense and sufficiency. His treatment of Milton is unmerciful to the last degree'. He then gives various reasons for this judgement, ending 'Oh! I could thresh his old jacket 'till I made his pension jingle in his pocket' (*LPW*, I, 306-8) – a reference to the fact that Johnson received special financial provision from the monarch. He returns to his defence of Milton on literary grounds, and his criticism of Johnson's view of Milton, on a number of occasions, particularly when he is translating Milton's Latin poems into English. At one point he says he will be reverting to the theme of Milton's Latin poems in another letter 'In which it will be ten to one that your friend Samuel Johnson gets another slap or two at the hands of your humble servant.' (*LPW*, III, 508-9)

It is not just on Milton, though, but more generally that Cowper finds Johnson's literary judgements flawed. He differs strongly from Johnson on the poet Matthew Prior. What is particularly interesting is that Cowper is much more prepared than Johnson to make a purely literary judgement, as opposed to one intermingled with moral values. Whilst agreeing with Johnson in his assessment of Dryden and Pope, he disagrees strongly with his opinion of a work by Matthew Prior, writing 'I agree with him that morally considered, both the knight and his lady are bad characters, and that each exhibits an example which ought not to be followed . . . but when the critic calls it dull dialogue, who but a critic will believe him? There are few readers of poetry of either sex in this country, who cannot remember how that enchanting piece has bewitched them, who do not know that instead of finding it tedious, they have been so delighted with the romantic tone of it, as to have overlooked all its defects, and to have given it a consecrated place in their memories, without ever feeling it a burthen.' (*LPW*, II, 4-5) When it comes to Pope's translation of Homer he writes:

Dr Johnson is the only modern writer who has spoken of it in terms of approbation, at least the only one that I have met with. And his praise of it is such as convinces me, intimately acquainted as I am with Pope's performance, that he talked at random, that either he had never examined it by Homer's, or never since he was a boy.

(*LPW*, II, 488)

Writing to another friend about Johnson having no ear for blank verse, and therefore for Milton, he writes:

Good sense, in short, and strength of intellect, seem to me, rather than a fine taste, to have been his distinguishing characteristics. But should you still think otherwise you have my free permission, for so long as you have yourself a taste for the beauties of Cowper, I care not a fig whether Johnson had a taste or not.

(*LPW*, III, 469)

It is an interesting indication of how important it was for Cowper that at least some people recognised the value of his own poetry.

Cowper took a very great deal of trouble over both his poetry and his translations and he knew the strength of his work. For one who was so down on himself from a religious point of view he had what we today would call a proper confidence in his own poetic abilities.

Whatever faults however I may be chargeable with as a poet, I cannot accuse myself of

negligence – I never suffer a line to pass ‘till’ I have made it as good as I can; and though my doctrines may offend this king of critics, he will not I flatter myself, be disgusted by slovenly inaccuracy either in the numbers, rhymes or language. Let the rest take its chance. It is possible he may be pleased, and if he should, I shall have engaged on my side one of the best trumpeters in the kingdom.

(*LPW*, I, 521)

Again we note the slight tone of mockery in the phrases ‘king of critics’ and ‘one of the best trumpeters in the kingdom’.

Cowper laments the fact that virtually none of the poets singled out by Johnson seems to have any religion. He is highly critical of the characters of Dryden and Pope and even of Johnson himself. Referring to Boswell’s journal of their tour to the Hebrides, which Cowper says he found entertaining, though, as he put it, there was much trash in it, as there must be in any narrative that referred indiscriminately to everything that happened, he goes on to say:

But now and then the doctor speaks like an oracle, and that makes amends for all. Sir John was a coxcomb and Boswell is not less a coxcomb, though of another kind. I fancy Johnson made coxcombs of all his friends, and they in return made him a coxcomb, for with reverence be it spoken, such he certainly was, and flattered as he was, was sure to be so.

(*LPW*, III, 289-90)

It is just as well that Cowper and Johnson never met. Cowper’s sensitivity and Johnson’s strident holding forth would not have gone well together. Nevertheless, there are a number of special reasons for thinking of them together. First of all, Johnson himself suffered from severe depression. Indeed, we know from Mrs Thrale’s diary that he entrusted her with a padlock and chain in order that she might restrain him if his mind finally went.

Johnson, like Cowper, was certainly very serious about religion and his fear of hell was especially marked. Towards the end of his life Johnson, suffering amongst other things from dropsy, suddenly lost 20 pints of water after a period of fasting and prayer. Sir John Hawkins, from whom we have the account, coming to see Johnson at the time told him it was a miracle. Johnson clutched at this. If God had performed a miracle for him it meant that even at this late hour he had had mercy on him. Something of this assurance is reflected in the last prayer that Johnson wrote as he prepared to receive Holy Communion for the last time. Cowper heard this story from John Newton and responded, ‘We rejoice in the account you give us of Dr Johnson. His conversion will indeed be a singular proof of the omnipotence of grace.’(*LPW*, II, 246) I don’t think conversion is the right word. Johnson had been a sincere, practising Christian for many years. What he received was an assurance that God accepted him and would receive him into heaven. Paradoxically and tragically, this is just what Cowper himself, despite a powerful conversion, totally lost. Cowper, as always, is aware that the sophisticated world, indeed the world as a whole, tends to deride and mock such experiences. So, referring to Johnson, he says ‘The world will set his age against his wisdom and comfort itself with the thought, that he must be superannuated.’(ibid) Cowper then interestingly recommends that Johnson should not write on religious subjects but should give the rest of his life to something not immediately connected with the interests of religion. ‘He would thus give proof, that a man of profound learning and the best sense, may become a child, without being made a fool, and that to embrace the gospel, is no evidence either of enthusiasm, infirmity, or insanity.’(ibid)

When after Johnson’s death his diaries and meditations appeared, Cowper was highly critical of what he read there and asserted that they should not have been published. He is particularly critical of Johnson writing that he prayed for his wife and fasted on occasion from tea or coffee. He refers to this ‘childish register of the great Johnson, supreme dictator in the chair of literature and almost a driveller in his closet.....it would have been well if the doctor had not recorded his dishes of sugarless tea or the dinner at which he eat too much’(*LPW*, II, 374). In fact the diaries and meditations provide an invaluable insight into the mind of Johnson and if we only had Boswell, Hawkins and the others, we would only know three quarters of the man, if that. Johnson’s lifelong inner struggles, against his depression, against his tendency to do things in extremes including eat and drink, are part of him about which we need to know. But here, as in his criticism of Johnson’s literary judgements and character, William Cowper once again shows a surprising self-assurance, a confidence, which belies his image as a withdrawn depressive of low self-esteem. Nor can this be dismissed as the peevishness of a lesser figure envious of a greater one. For although Cowper is sometimes over-censorious about Johnson’s religion, his literary discernment is more finely honed than that of Johnson and his literary judgements have been widely upheld.

So where were the blessings? There was certainly no religious consolation as far as Cowper himself was concerned, but we see multiple blessings in him – especially the tender, mutually supportive love between Mrs Unwin and himself. After Mrs Unwin’s stroke, followed by creeping paralysis in 1791, Cowper became tied to her side in his care of her but, astonishingly, the two of them defied the immobility of twenty years and went to stay for six weeks with the poet Hayley in Sussex. On their return Cowper wrote what has been described as one of the most beautiful poems ever written of two companions in their old age. Here are some of the 15 verses:

The twentieth year is well-nigh past,
Since first our sky was overcast;
Ah would that this might be the last!

My Mary!

Thy spirits have a fainter flow,
I see thee daily weaker grow-
‘Twas my distress that brought thee low,

My Mary!

Thy needles, once a shining store,
For my sake restless heretofore,
Now rust disus’d and shine no more,

My Mary!

Thy silver locks, once auburn bright,
Are still more lovely in my sight,
Than golden beams of orient light,

My Mary!

Partakers of the sad decline,
Thy hands their little force resign;
Yet, gently prest, press gently mine,

My Mary!

And then I feel that still I hold
A richer store ten thousandfold
Than misers fancy in their gold,

My Mary!

And still to love, though prest with ill,
In wintry age to feel no chill,
With me is to be lovely still,

My Mary!

And should my future lot be cast
With much resemblance of the past,
Thy worn-out heart will break at last,
My Mary!

(‘To Mary’, 1-12, 25-28, 33-40, 45-48, 53-56)

There is also the respect and affection in which Cowper was held by his friends; the courage which he continued to show in simply struggling on from day to day, despite his inner dread, to make a life that was, within the constraints of his class and time, a useful one; the delight and solace he took in his woodwork and gardening and pets. He did not name these things a divine blessing, but we can. Cowper remembered that Dr Nicoll, who prepared him for confirmation at school, used the phrase ‘The passive valour of an ass’. It comes into his mind again much later in his life after Mrs Unwin has had a bad fall and a much-loved cousin has departed. With typical self-deprecating irony he applies it to himself (LPW, III, 248). We may think that the passive valour of an ass is fundamentally a stoic virtue: but patience, fortitude, perseverance, are no less Christian virtues and they were exhibited in Cowper. In the Olney hymn quoted earlier, from which my title comes, the next verse reads:

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust him for his grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.

(‘God moves in a mysterious way’, 13-16)

Unfortunately Cowper, deep in despair, was not able to take his own advice. He did judge the Lord by feeble sense, and that sense told him only of God’s rejection of him. In fact, if anyone is to be

eternally gathered into the hands of a wise and compassionate God, it will surely be Cowper. Despite the terrible dereliction of his inner life, we can see divine blessing in the way he lived. When I first read that biography of Cowper by David Cecil, I was left with an overwhelming impression of a tragic, pathetic life. It was in many ways a tragic life. But it was also a heroic one, with heroism shown not on the field of battle, but in devising a strategy for survival against clawing inner demons, and daily executing tactics in order to maintain that strategy in existence.

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References

- ¹ William Cowper, *Selected Poems*, ed. Nick Rhodes (Manchester: Carcanet, 1988), p.85. All references to the poetry are to this edition and are hereafter bracketed in the text.
- ² 'Adelphi', *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, ed. James King and Charles Ryskamp, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979-86), I, 8. Hereafter cited as *LPW*.
- ³ David Hempton, 'Established Churches and the Growth of Religious Pluralism : A Case Study of Christianisation and Secularisation in England since 1700' in *The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750-2000*, ed. Hugh McCloud and Werner Ustorf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) p.84.
- ⁴ Jonathan Swift, 'An argument to prove that the abolishing of Christianity in England, may as things now stand, be attended with some inconveniences, and perhaps not produce those many good effects proposed thereby' in *Oxford Authors* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 217.
- ⁵ G.R.Cragg, *The Church and the Age of Reason 1648-1789* Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970) p.158.
- ⁶ It is assumed, though not certain, that the Dr Clark referred to is the famous one.
- ⁷ J.C.D.Clark, *Samuel Johnson, Literature, Religion and English Cultural Politics from the Restoration to Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
- ⁸ Letter to Lady Georgiana Morpeth, 16 Feb 1820, New College Library, Oxford, 356 amended by MS Castle Howard, quoted by Alan Bell, *Sydney Smith, A Biography* (Oxford; Clarendon Press, 1980), p.137.