

William Cowper, ‘Hope’, lines 75-110
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To rise at noon, sit slipshod and undressed,
To read the news or fiddle as seems best,
Till half the world comes rattling at his door,
To fill the dull vacuity till four,
And just when evening turns the blue vault grey,
To spend two hours in dressing for the day, 80
To make the sun a bauble without use,
Save for the fruits his heavenly beams produce,
Quite to forget, or deem it worth no thought,
Who bids him shine, or if he shine or not,
Through mere necessity to close his eyes 85
Just when the larks and when the shepherds rise,
Is such a life, so tediously the same,
So void of all utility or aim,
That poor Jonquil, with almost every breath
Sighs for his exit, vulgarly called death: 90
For he, with all his follies, has a mind
Not yet so blank, or fashionably blind,
But now and then perhaps a feeble ray
Of distant wisdom shoots across his way,
By which he reads, that life without a plan, 95
As useless as the moment it began,
Serves merely as a soil for discontent
To thrive in, an incumbrance, ere half spent.
Oh weariness beyond what asses feel,
That tread the circuit of the cistern wheel, 100
A dull rotation never at a stay,
Yesterday’s face twin image of to-day,
While conversation, an exhausted stock,
Grows drowsy as the clicking of a clock.
No need, he cries, of gravity stuffed out 105
With academic dignity devout,
To read wise lectures, vanity the text;
Proclaim the remedy, ye learned, next,
For truth self-evident with pomp impressed,
Is vanity surpassing all the rest. 110

The set of eight moral satires that make up the greater part of Cowper’s 1782 volume have long been, and remain, the least-regarded poems in his *oeuvre*. Why is this so? I would hazard three principal causes of their neglect. First, they lack the highly personal note that, for many readers, is the most endearing feature of Cowper’s poetry. Secondly, their subject-matter is largely not external nature, as it is in, say, many of the best-loved passages in *The Task*. It is significant that most of the critical attention devoted to the moral satires has settled on ‘Retirement’, the last of them to be written and the one that gets closest to nature as a topic. Thirdly, their dominant tone is didactic, and poetry that seeks to inculcate moral lessons has generally received a bad press since, at least, the Romantic period. More congenial to most modern readers are poems expressing states of internal tension, such as, to cite an extreme, ‘The Castaway’. Poetry should

be about questioning, not lecturing. In sum, as one critic trenchantly put it, they are ‘verse essays … not of much interest as poetry; for they lack imaginative order as well as firmly structured arguments’.¹ They don’t have what poetry should have, and what they do – make arguments like essays – they don’t do well. It looks to be a hopeless case.

But perhaps the problem lies in how we are looking at the poems. From the perspective of the circumstances of their publication, some light, at least, is shed on them. It was the appearance in May 1780 of a treatise called *Thelyphthora*, by Martin Madan, a relative of Cowper, that got things going. Madan was Chaplain of the Lock hospital for women suffering from sexual diseases. In order to prevent seduced women from being reduced to prostitution, Madan argued that a man who ‘takes a girl’s virginity must regard her, economically at least, as his wife, and as such entitled to a competence for life.’² *Thelyphthora* unsurprisingly proved to be a cause of controversy, not least on account of its apparent endorsement of polygamy. John Newton, now occupying the living of St Mary Woolnoth in London, encouraged Cowper to join in the debate on, of course, the side of Madan’s critics. Since Cowper’s breakdown of 1773, he had begun writing occasional short poems as therapy and amusement. Here would be a useful new subject for Cowper to have a go at. Not only Newton, but, more significantly, Newton’s publisher Joseph Johnson thought the result, a two-hundred-line verse mock-romance entitled *Anti-Thelyphthora*, good enough to print. No doubt it was the spiciness of the debate that helped persuade Johnson, and the pamphlet was, of course, published anonymously in early 1781; but no publisher would have gone ahead unless he saw merit in Cowper’s lively story of ‘Sir Airy del Castro’ being defeated in knightly combat by ‘Sir Marmadan’.

Johnson must have been pleased with the outcome and confident in Cowper’s ability to produce entertaining poetry, for he soon agreed to publish a volume of Cowper’s work, originally consisting of four long moral satires (‘The Progress of Error’, ‘Truth’, ‘Table Talk’ and ‘Expostulation’) together with shorter pieces written over the past few years. A delay in publication until 1782 enabled Cowper to add ‘Hope’, ‘Charity’, ‘Conversation’ and ‘Retirement’. He was writing eagerly and quickly, and was, judging by the impatience he admits to in letters, clearly excited by the prospect of a book with his name on it: *Poems by William Cowper, of the Inner Temple, Esq.* Cowper was not a shrinking violet when it came to publishing his work.³

All the moral satires declare the importance of faith. ‘Hope’ and ‘Charity’ explicitly complete the Pauline triad. The strong basis of these poems in theological certainty is matched by the language Cowper uses. ‘Hope’, he declares in the poem of that title, ‘as an anchor, firm and sure, holds fast / The Christian vessel, and defies the blast’ (lines 167-8). We are reminded that a decade earlier Cowper had been working on the *Olney Hymns* with John Newton. That project was cut short by Cowper’s 1773 breakdown, but Newton saw the volume through to publication in 1779, just two years before Cowper set to work on the moral satires. The language in which Cowper enunciates Christian beliefs carries over from the *Hymns* into the 1782 volume.

But hymns are not satires. Cowper, immensely well-read as he was in earlier English and classical poetry, where satire had occupied a major if sometimes ambiguous place, was perfectly equipped to take on the new genre. This task involved extending his range to meet the demands of a form that largely works by contrast and conflict between registers of language. The term satire derives from the Latin ‘satura’ meaning a mixed dish, a medley. Satire locates its victims in the context of explicit or implicit moral norms, attacking them for their failure to adhere to proper principles of conduct. Language appropriate for the depiction of moral degradation will be at variance from that fitting for confirming principles, especially when those principles are seen as theologically endorsed by biblical example.

Hope’s anchor holds fast as the poem’s response to its opposite, the despair invited by hopelessness. Our example of the latter, in the lines quoted at the head of this essay, is a fashionable youth called Jonquil, whose existence Cowper describes in a lively comic vein which reminds us that, as a young man about town, he himself had mixed with Westminster wits and literati, and had contributed to Colman and Bonnell Thornton’s *The Connoisseur*.

Jonquil evokes from Cowper a kind of writing far distant from that of hymnography. His vocabulary is at once racy, contemporary and aware of its satirical roots. ‘Slipshod’ (line 75), that is to say wearing slippers rather than proper shoes, captures Jonquil’s slovenly neglect of propriety and summons up a Hogarthian image. Indeed, Cowper had previously used the word in his description of the shivering wretch with ‘slipshod heels’ who accompanies an ancient prude as she walks sanctimoniously through Covent Garden in Hogarth’s painting and engraving ‘Morning’ (‘Truth’, line 144). The word also brings with it echoes of literary satire, from Henry Fielding’s sluttish Mrs Slipslop in *Joseph Andrews* (1742) to the ‘slipshod sibyl’ who guides Colley Cibber to the underworld in Alexander Pope’s *Dunciad* (1742: book 3,

line 15).

‘Slipshod’ takes its fitting place amid Cowper’s sparkling account of Jonquil’s vacuous life of ‘fiddling’ (line 76) and waiting for visitors to come ‘rattling at his door’ (line 77). Again, Cowper has his finger on the pulse of both eighteenth-century London mores and satirical precedents. He doesn’t explicitly locate Jonquil in London, but doesn’t really need to, as a reader would directly connect the lifestyle depicted with the capital’s notorious vices. Fielding had already done this in *Tom Jones* (1749). As soon as Tom arrives in London he experiences for the first time the violent sounds of footmen thundering at the door to announce the presence of visitors (book 13, chapter 4). It is not just fashionable society that knocks loudly at Tom’s door. It is his summons to the world of the Lady Bellastons, of profound and dangerous moral corruption. As for fiddling, Pope had made it one of the supreme and royal arts that mark the apogee of the reign of the goddess Dullness: ‘Others import yet nobler arts from France, / Teach Kings to fiddle, and make Senates dance’ (1742: book 4, lines 597-8). Pope’s mock-solemn note on the line assures us that fiddling is not just a modern French fashion, but was an ‘ancient amusement of Sovereign Princes’, such as Achilles, Alexander and Nero. Jonquil is in good company.

This, then is the lively setting for Cowper’s depiction of his satiric figure. As the passage proceeds, so Cowper’s artistry develops and deepens his dissection of ‘dull vacuity’. The couplet in which he names his man lies at the heart of the matter. This couplet completes the resolution of the extended syntax of the paragraph’s first section, in which a sequence of infinitives at the start of lines (‘To rise’, ‘To read’, ‘To fill’, ‘To spend’, ‘To make’) defers the main clause as lengthily as Jonquil defers activity. It thereby marks the first main break in the sentence structure:

Is such a life, so tediously the same,
So void of all utility or aim,
That poor Jonquil, with almost every breath
Sighs for his exit, vulgarly called death:

It is sometimes remarked by critics belittling Cowper’s achievement in the moral satires that his handling of the heroic couplet – rhyming pairs of pentameter, ten-syllable, lines – lacks the dense deployment of antithesis and other rhetorical features that characterize the work of the masters of the couplet, notably Pope. This is, I think, a double misapprehension. First, it ignores Pope’s own development of a looser, flexible and more conversational handling of couplets in his *Imitations of Horace*. Secondly, it commits the critical sin of admonishing a writer for not doing something he doesn’t intend to do. For Cowper is looking for a flexible manner closer to Pope’s mature style. Cowper himself, in a letter to Newton, noted that he intended ‘Conversation’ to introduce the second set of moral satires, as ‘Table Talk’ does the first.⁴ There is more to this strategy than decoying readers into the volume by beginning with a ‘trifle’, as Cowper had earlier claimed when endeavouring to justify to Newton the role of ‘Table Talk’.⁵ The titles of the two poems signify an entire style, a method of composition. However, Cowper’s use of the couplet allows him, when he wants, to exploit its inherently balanced or antithetical form for rhetorical and thematic purposes. Cowper expertly suits flexibility of style to his satire’s mixed dish.

In the Jonquil couplet, Cowper establishes a key antithesis through the rhyme of ‘breath’ and ‘death’, supported by the parallel order of ‘Sighs’ and ‘exit’, and lightened by the satirical touch of ‘vulgarly called’. That Jonquil should use his breath, the sign of his existence, to wish for death is the contradiction at the centre of Cowper’s depiction of an inverted life. Jonquil dresses for the day when the day is coming to an end (lines 79-80). He goes to sleep when nature and human beings – larks and shepherds – rise (line 86). His own name, ironically, locates him within the natural order that his behaviour denies.

Jonquil rejects the sun, converting it from giver of light and life to a mere ‘bauble’ without use (line 81), as a child’s plaything.⁶ This line sets up two intersecting ideas. First, Jonquil’s rejection of light is qualified by the assertion in the second part of the paragraph that he is not so completely mentally dead as not to be conscious of the futility of his self-generated state of discontent. ‘Now and then perhaps a feeble ray / Of distant wisdom shoots across his way’ (lines 93-4). The second, and crucial, idea derives from the word ‘use’ in ‘bauble without use’. The sun is, of course, the very opposite of useless: it is that which sustains all life. So it is apt that Jonquil’s feeble ray of light allows him to read ‘that life without a plan, / As useless as the moment it began, / Serves merely as a soil for discontent’ (lines 95-7). The importance of the word ‘utility’ is further signalled by its presence in the resolution of the syntax of the first sentence: ‘void of all utility or aim’ (line 88).

Cowper, then, allows Jonquil to be aware of how useless is his existence. This ray of light renders his state worse than complete unconsciousness. Cowper sums this up in the striking image that dominates the

later part of the paragraph:

Oh weariness beyond what asses feel,
That tread the circuit of the cistern wheel,
A dull rotation never at a stay,
Yesterday's face twin image of today

Vincent Newey perceptively points to the ‘adventurous, strange, and yet thoroughly confident’ nature of this image, to the “tread” and “dull rotation” of the verse-rhythm’ and the ‘suspension of time and motion in the see-saw balance of “Yesterday” and “today”’. The ‘experiential authenticity’ Newey sees in this image lights up the self-destructive paradox of Jonquil’s life. It is a strong enactment of the uselessness of his existence, its power assured by its being so vividly apparent even to the ‘feeble ray’ of his limited vision.

So is Jonquil a hopeless case? The ‘remedy’ (line 108) is obvious even to him, and requires no deep learning to disinter. The remedy for hopelessness is, of course, Hope itself. Cowper’s next paragraph states this self-evident truth explicitly. He then modulates into the hymnological language of anchors and stormy blasts by way of echoes of the language of our paragraph. Men deal with life, he says, ‘as children with their play, / Who first misuse, then cast their toys away’ (lines 126-7). But, to set against this human propensity to immature behaviour, Hope has the capacity to convert misuse to proper use. It has ‘the wondrous virtue to educe / From emptiness itself a real use’ (lines 155-6). If even emptiness can be revivified, if even the feeblest ray of the sun can enlighten and warm us to action, then no case is hopeless.

For the reasons I gave at the outset, Cowper’s moral satires will, I imagine, not appeal to all readers in the way that other parts of his *oeuvre* do. But they at least deserve to be read on their own terms. Cowper serves up the medley of his satire by modulating his language between registers, varying his use of the couplet form, setting up patterns of words and images, and moving between comic and serious tones. They are not ‘verse essays’ with ‘firmly structured arguments’ any more than they are confessional lyrics. Their ‘imaginative order’ lies in the artistry with which Cowper mixes his ingredients. The dish may not be to all tastes, but anyone interested in poetry should surely applaud the chef.

Notes

¹ William Norris Free, *William Cowper* (New York: Twayne, 1970), p. 142

² *The Poems of William Cowper*, eds John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980). p. 501.

³ I am delighted to acknowledge conversations with Neil Curry for prompting me towards this conclusion.

⁴ To John Newton, 22 July 1781. *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, vol. 1, eds. James King and Charles Ryskamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 499.

⁵ To John Newton, 18 February 1781. op. cit., p. 444.

⁶ Cf. ‘Yardley Oak’, line 17: ‘Thou wast a bauble once ...’.

⁷ Vincent Newey, *Cowper’s Poetry* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1982), p. 63.