William Cowper and the Material World

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> No object is too small to prompt his song - not the sooty film on the bars, or the spoutless teapot holding a bit of mignonette that serves to cheer the town-lodging with ‘a hint that Nature lives’; and yet his song is never trivial, for he is alive to small objects, not because his mind is narrow, but because his glance is clear and his heart is large.
>
> George Eliot[1]

It is remarkable that George Eliot - polymath, intellectual, cosmopolitan, sceptic – should have so unerringly identified the essential quality of a writer so different from herself as Cowper. While he is above all the celebrant of the small details of daily life, he looks through and beyond them to a wider vision which they express. Like his admirer William Blake he can ‘see a World in a grain of sand, and a Heaven in a wildflower’. But unlike Blake’s, his is not an eye which can rejoice, childlike, in such ‘Auguries of Innocence’, but one clouded by mental torment and schooled by suffering to seek what comfort it can in manifestations of the material world.

Cowper deliberately sought out antidotes to the inner torment which convinced him of his own eternal damnation. His delight in objects for their own sake – domestic, natural, or cultivated – may be seen as a reaching after solid, reassuring reality, something to anchor him to a world of the senses which may be experienced as benevolent or at least unthreatening. George Eliot speaks in the same passage of ‘the calm gladness’ in Cowper’s work ‘that springs from a delight in objects for their own sake, *without self-reference*’ (my italics). She seems to be arguing that the objects are not there to reflect Cowper’s own moods and needs, but to be appreciated for their own essential individuality. This in turn creates a relief from self, absorbed in contemplation of the nature of things.

Eliot’s judgement here perhaps needs to be qualified, in that much of Cowper’s writing is self-reflexive, in the sense that through images and incidents he finds correlatives for his own predicament. In the vulnerability of small animals (hares, caged birds), he clearly images forth and moralises upon his own experience, though seldom as explicitly as in the famous line ‘I was a stricken deer that left the herd’(*The Task III 108*)[2]. The inanimate world too can provide such images, as for example the rock formation off the coast described in a letter to Lady Hesketh, after he and Mary Unwin had moved from Weston Underwood to Norfolk:

> At two miles distance on the coast is a solitary pillar of rock, that the crumbling cliff has left at the high-water mark. I have visited it twice, and have found it an emblem of myself. Torn from my natural connexions, I stand alone and expect the storm that shall displace me.
>
> 27 August 1795[3]

The moralising habit is so strong that he cannot look at a tree or a landscape without using it to reflect upon man’s relationship to the world around him and, by extension, to God. It is indeed true that he anthropomorphises animals, giving them human emotions and characteristics in a way that modern writers such as Ted Hughes try to avoid. In a deeper sense however, it can be argued that Hughes’s attempt to uncover the ‘true’ animal nature of foxes and crows ultimately expresses his own character and concerns as a poet just as much as does Cowper’s method, but with less transparency.

It nevertheless remains the case that, as George Eliot recognised, there is something special and individual about Cowper’s close engagement with the objects around him. He was a keen observer, focusing on his subject as sharply as a painter intent on capturing the essence of what is before him or her. When Cowper notes down the behaviour and individual characters of his hares, or describes the intricacies of making compost, he can temporarily forget his own preoccupations in the effort to render precisely what he sees. The creative shaping of the material thus gathered, to point a moral or dramatise a mental state, represents a later stage in his poetic process.

The ‘gladness’ spoken of by George Eliot finds its supreme expression in *The Task*, and especially in the sections on gardening, where Cowper succeeds for the time being in creating an ordered Paradise resembling prelapsarian Eden. As with the hares, he here creates an environment which he can control, thus imitating the Creator of all things. In his capacity as a good husbandman, by digging, planting, pruning, and expert composting, the poet as gardener provides the nurture through which his plants may thrive. Elsewhere he even (in ‘The Colubriad’) contrives to kill the snake which had infiltrated the earlier Paradise and engineered the Fall.

With outstretched hoe I slew him at the door,
And taught him NEVER TO COME THERE NO MORE[4]

(40-1)

Cowper's letters display the same delight in things, in a different register but in the service of the same vision. Very often, they are written to express gratitude – for gifts or services rendered by his correspondents. While, as a penniless gentleman reliant on friends and relations for most of the necessities of life (and all of its luxuries), he needed to show his appreciation of their help, his reflections on the things they sent are of a piece with his wider world view. 'Gratitude' is literally thankfulness for the receiving of grace, a concept central to the Evangelical religion which was the most significant influence in his life. The gifts of his friends were good in themselves but also symbolic of their - and by extension God's – love and care for him. Under the wit and playfulness there is a serious intention.

Gratitude

The Cowper and Newton Museum possesses an unusually rich collection of objects associated with a literary figure. The range of items – of clothing, accessories, furniture, silver, crockery, toilet articles – can perhaps be paralleled in collections of other writers' memorabilia (Wordsworth, Dickens, Burns) but none is as richly documented and celebrated by the writer himself. The reason for this is that Cowper's literary method was frequently to take an object as his starting point, whatever form he was writing in, whether letters, occasional lyrics or longer poems.

The best-known example is his use of a familiar piece of furniture – 'I sing the Sofa' – as the trigger for what became a poem of epic length, *The Task*; but there are many others. Often, the prompt was a gift which could initiate or consolidate a relationship. Here are a few instances, all, like the sofa, to be found in the museum.

A cap, washstand and shaving mirror, bookshelves (from 'Gratitude', a poem in a letter of April 1788 addressed to Lady Hesketh):

This cap to my cousin I owe,
She gave it, and gave me beside,
Wreathed into an elegant bow,
The ribbon with which it is tied….

(5-8)

This table and mirror within,
Secure from collision and dust,
At which I oft shave cheek and chin,
And periwig nicely adjust….

(21-4)

This moveable structure of shelves,
For its beauty admired and its use…

(25-6

All these are not half that I owe
To One, from our earliest youth
To me ever ready to show
Benignity, friendship and truth…

(41-4)[5]

Note how the last four lines could easily be read out of context as a tribute to 'One' who is higher than any human agency. Cowper's cousin Lady Hesketh here takes on some of the attributes of the ultimate source of gifts, graces and favours, and Cowper's 'thank you' poem, however light-hearted, imparts a sacred character to the bond created by the giving and receiving of gifts.

Cowper and his companion Mary Unwin surrounded themselves with objects, to the extent that they could hardly fit any more into the modest rooms of their house in Olney, Orchard Side. As he wrote to Lady Hesketh, expressing doubt as to where they could put an offered writing desk:

> My dear, we live you must know in a house that has two small parlours….The [one] which we ourselves occupy is already so filled with chairs, tables, &c, not forgetting our own proper persons, as absolutely to forbid the importation of anything more.
>
> 17 November 1785[6]

Harriot Hesketh, his first cousin and the sister of his early love Theadora, was the most constant source of gifts, but they also came from admirers like Mrs King of Pertenhall, whose largesse culminated in a large patchwork counterpane made by herself. This object rich in associations enabled Cowper not only to develop his relationship with the giver but to imagine a crowd of benefactors, all the 'maidens' who had contributed fragments of dress material to the whole, and what would happen if they all combined to retrieve their own patches,

> As if a storm should strip the bowers
> Of all their tendrils, leaves and flowers –
> Each pocketing a shred.
>
> Thanks then to every gentle fair
> Who will not come to pick me bare
> As bird of borrowed feather…
>
> ('To Mrs King', 28-33)[7]

As so often with Cowper, there is a slight uneasiness beneath the banter, a vulnerability and fear, however fanciful, that in some way he is guilty and that the boon could be snatched away in a moment.

In this ritual of exchange, Cowper was almost never in a position to reciprocate in kind. He lived on handouts, and was often reduced to begging unashamedly for items he needed. The recompense to his benefactors was words, meditations on the beauty or interest of the objects received, and on what they meant as mute embodiments of affection and friendship. He made them sing for their givers, and it seems that for most this was accepted as a rich return for their generosity. If he had not been such a poor man, he would not have left us these emanations of the clear gaze which he directed, for his benefactors, onto so many things which he might otherwise have acquired, unnoted, for himself.

The poet as maker

As well as receiving objects and celebrating them, Cowper delighted in engaging with them, and in the craft of making. He took pleasure in the texture of materials and in shaping them for practical and aesthetic purposes. Poetry was one among many such occupations, its materials words and its shaping according to the best models – most frequently classical, or Miltonic.

The same care went into all the occupations he undertook to pass the time usefully, in the deliberately constructed retirement he created for himself after leaving London. Most of these were intimately bound up with the material world, whether carpentry, drawing, gardening, or keeping animals. He designed hutches for his pet hares, he made (or at least designed) a greenhouse and cold frames, he grew difficult and exotic plants and constructed a compost heap on the latest principles, and he reared three young hares successfully by trial and error, minutely studying their habits and diet.

> I built them houses to sleep in; each had a separate compartment so contrived that their ordure would pass through the bottom of it; an earthen pan placed under each received whatever fell, which being duly emptied and washed, they were thus kept perfectly sweet and clean….I discovered by accident that fine white sand is in great estimation with them; I suppose as a digestive. It happened that I was cleaning a birdcage while the hares were with me; I placed a pot filled with such sand upon the floor, to which at once being directed by a strong instinct, they devoured it voraciously….[8]

When it came to poetry or versemaking, although he often mentioned it in the same breath as his other 'amusements', this self-deprecation concealed a serious purpose and considerable ambition. As he wrote to William Unwin on 6 April 1780, 'The necessity of amusement makes me sometimes write verses; it made me a carpenter, a birdcage-maker, a gardener; and has lately taught me to draw…'[9] In another letter to Unwin (postmarked 8 February 1779) he says, 'I have no more right to the name of poet than a maker of mousetraps has to that of an engineer, but my little exploits this way have at times amused me so much that I have often wished myself a good one.'[10] However, when writing to his moral mentor John Newton on 18 September 1781, while he tends to belittle his poetical efforts where they are not overtly of the improving kind, he still likes to emphasise how seriously he takes the craft involved:

> Whatever faults 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.[11]

The seriousness of purpose leaps out in another, highly significant, letter to Newton (3 May 1780). Here he is ostensibly talking about his recently acquired enthusiasm for drawing, but under this cover provides

a key to so much in his poetry and in his attitude to the material world:

I deal much in ink indeed, but not such ink as is employed by poets, and writers of essays. Mine is a harmless fluid, and guilty of no deceptions but such as may prevail without the least injury to the person imposed on. I draw mountains, valleys, woods and streams, and ducks, and dabchicks….O! I could spend whole days and moonlight nights in feeding upon a lovely prospect! My eyes drink the rivers as they flow. If every human being upon earth could think but for one quarter of an hour as I have done for many years, there might perhaps be many miserable men among them, but not an unawakened one could be found from the arctic to the antarctic circle. At present, the difference between them and me is greatly to their advantage. I delight in baubles, and know them to be so; for rested in, and viewed without reference to their Author, what is the earth – what are the planets – what is the sun itself but a bauble? Better for a man never to have seen them, or to see them with the eyes of a brute, stupid and unconscious of what he beholds, than not to be able to say, 'The Maker of all these wonders is my friend!'[12]

This is nothing less than an artistic credo. First, there is the traditional Platonic distrust of poets as liars and deceivers, peddling a view of the world as it is not. Drawing, on the other hand, is supposedly innocent as it merely attempts to represent what is in front of the artist's eyes, without rhetoric or moralising. Earlier in the same letter he laments that his letters are not as attractive or as pure an expression of objective truth as he would like: 'I wish I could make them more splendid than they are, more alluring to the eye, if not more pleasing to the taste'; but unfortunately his melancholy distorts the result: 'my leaf gold is tarnished, and has received such a tinge from the vapours that are forever brooding over my mind, that I think it no small part of your partiality to me, that you will read my letters.'

But then, from trifling with ducks and dabchicks, he suddenly launches into a passionate expression of his love for and delight in all created things. The joy of life proceeds from being awakened to their beauty. The ostensible subject of drawing has provided the opening for a heartfelt statement of his poetic practice, which is a celebration of the world around us. However, there is no point to such celebration without an awareness that the things of this world are baubles compared to the love of God who created them. So at any rate he rationalises his passion, for the eyes of the Rev. John Newton. But there is also an underlying envy of those who 'see them with the eyes of a brute', without the distortions arising from his own despair that the 'Maker of all these wonders' has abandoned him. Could he have had in mind the brute Caliban, who in his unredeemed state is yet given some of the most beautiful lines in *The Tempest*, expressing his uncomplicated joy in natural things?

The natural world

The gardens at Orchard Side and the countryside around Olney provided Cowper with much of the subject matter on which he reflected in his poems and letters. They gave him occupation, exercise, mental stimulation, and a kind of security. Writing to Newton on 27 July 1783, after fifteen years of living in retirement in Olney, he speaks of a powerful 'local attachment' to the place, in spite of the fact that much of that time has been spent in despair.

The very stones in the garden-walls are my intimate acquaintance. I should miss almost the minutest object, and be disagreeably affected by its removal, and am persuaded that were it possible to leave this incommodious and obscure nook for a twelvemonth, I should return to it again with rapture, and be transported with the sight of objects which to all the world beside would be at least indifferent; some of them perhaps, such as the ragged thatch and tottering walls of the neighbouring cottages, disgusting. [13]

This humble environment is the stage on which the quiet drama of his life is played out, and every detail of the scene is significant as something with which he has interacted. The objects he picks out – stones, thatch, walls – are inanimate, but his imagination animates them as 'intimate acquaintance'.

Moving beyond the garden wall, on his daily walks with Mrs Unwin he takes in the wider views along the Ouse valley and observes the changing seasons with an artist's and even a craftsman's eye. One remarkable image recalls the skills of a jeweller or goldsmith: 'the stream/ That as with molten glass inlays the vale'(*The Task*, I, 169-70)[14]. Sometimes the phenomena he sees are so beautiful and intricate as to be beyond description: 'see where [the frost] has hung th'embroidered banks/ With forms so various, that no powers of art,/ The pencil or the pen, may trace the scene!'(*The Task*, V, 107-9)[15]. At others he is the curious naturalist, observing the behaviour of birds and animals in the manner of his contemporary Gilbert White of Selborne, but with an artist-poet's eye.

Mrs Unwin and I, crossing a brook, saw from the footbridge somewhat at the bottom of the water which had the appearance of a flower. Observing it attentively, we found that it consisted of a circular assemblage of

minnows; their heads all met in the centre; and their tails diverging at equal distances, and being elevated above their heads, gave them the appearance of a flower half blown.... The object which had attached them all was a dead minnow, which they appeared to be devouring.[16]

(to the Rev. Mr Hurdis, 23 February 1793)

Inherent in all his nature writing is homage to the Creator, and the vanity of Man's efforts to emulate Him, one of the most striking examples being the description of the Empress of Russia's ice-palace immediately following the description of the frost's work referred to above. Occasionally, as in 'The Poplar-Field', Cowper uses a rural motif to point a simple moral such as the transience of human life. Always, the writing is based on close observation and lived experience, in contrast to the generalised abstractions of many of his contemporaries and immediate predecessors. As he wrote to William Unwin on 10 November 1783,

> Everything I see in the fields is to me an object, and I can look at the same rivulet, or at a handsome tree, every day of my life, with new pleasure. This indeed is partly the effect of a natural taste for rural beauty, and partly the effect of habit…[17]

Cowper's individuality

Most poets write about the material world and quarry it for images, but Cowper's relationship with it is stamped with his unique personality. One has to look to the next generation, to the 'peasant poet' John Clare (1793-1864), to find a poet who paid the same minute attention to everyday objects. Clare greatly admired Cowper, both for his nature writing and for his celebration of the everyday. As Vincent Newey points out, he honours him in his lines 'On Cowper' as poet of nature and rural life, of 'field' and 'homesteads', and

> emphasises how he transformed the commonplace into 'Classic ground' (ll.1-4)…. After brief evocation of scenes and characters from *The Task* – the winter storm, the fireside, the woodman with his dog – Clare ends by recognising the religious aura of Cowper's engagement with the familiar world, for 'every place the Poet trod/ And every place the Poet sung/ Are like the holy land of God/ In every mouth and every tongue' (25-29).[18]

Clare, like Cowper, has a rare quality of empathy for the humblest creatures, and his observation is as close as Gilbert White's – and even more so than Cowper's. However, he carefully distances himself from the general run of natural scientists:

> To look at nature with a poetic feeling magnifies the pleasure yet naturalists and botanists seem to have little or no taste for this sort of feeling they merely make a collection of dried specimens classing them after Linnaeus into tribes and families as a sort of curiosity and fame.[19]

Almost every page of his poetry is crammed with vivid evocations of the natural world in all its manifestations, animate and inanimate, ranging from the broad sweep of skies and earth to the behaviour of insects and small birds and animals. From 'Summer Images', for example:

> And note on hedgerow baulks in moisture sprent
> The jetty snail creep from the mossy thorn
> In earnest heed and tremulous intent
> Frail brother of the morn,
> That from the tiny bents and misted leaves
> Withdraws his timid horn…[20]

As with Cowper, it is the thing itself which enthralls him, the sense of the richness and variety of creation, if without Cowper's Evangelical gloss. For Clare, it is man in harmony with nature which is the bedrock of his beliefs: many of his poems begin 'I love' before launching into yet another celebration, and always man is an integral part of the scene, whether the poet observing, or country people (like Cowper's woodman and his dog) working with the grain of their surroundings.

Why do Clare the agricultural labourer and Cowper the gentleman have so much in common with each other? Part of the answer might be that both suffered from frail mental health, and both found a partial antidote in dwelling on the solidity and materiality of the world around them. Interestingly, both found expression for their secret terrors in describing refuges for small birds threatened by outside predators – Clare in his series of poems on birds' nests, and Cowper in his ode 'On the Death of Mrs Throckmorton's Bulfinch', killed by a rat in its cage. Another partial explanation might be the rise of a new sensibility, where freshness of response to the material world became more highly valued than simply using it as a backdrop for other preoccupations: here Cowper may well have helped to prepare the ground for Clare. It is the same impulse which drove painters in the mid- nineteenth century to renew and refresh, to return to what they saw as the innocence of

‘Pre-Raphaelite’ art, by rendering objects with almost obsessive attention to their colour, shape and texture.

Conclusion

Cowper’s writing, as George Eliot recognised, is firmly grounded in the material world. His life and work are illuminated by the objects with which he was surrounded, and we may read him through them. Just as the sofa could be for him the starting point for an extended meditation on the world and mankind’s place within it, so we can experience many of the things associated with him and use them as a way into understanding his life and work. We are fortunate in being able actually to see and touch many of these, but even those which have not physically survived are so strongly present in his poems and letters that we can adduce them as evidence for his personal vision.

One of the most touching objects in the Cowper and Newton Museum is a bedraggled bunch of feathers pasted onto a card, which in neat handwriting tells us that these belonged to the subject of another of Cowper’s odes: ‘On a Goldfinch Starved to Death in His Cage’(1780). It immediately raises all sorts of questions and issues. Who kept the feathers? The poet himself or one of his household, perhaps Mrs Unwin? Who then preserved them through the centuries since his death, and why? What do they and their survival tell us about Cowper’s reception as a writer, then and subsequently? How significant are such relics in literary interpretation? At the very least they may send us back to the poem, and here as always we find the characteristic note of Cowper, the serious purpose under the elegant musings.

Time was when I was free as air,
The thistle’s downy seed my fare,
My drink the morning dew;
I perched at will on every spray,
My form genteel, my plumage gay,
My strains for ever new.

But gaudy plumage, sprightly strain,
And form genteel were all in vain
And of a transient date,
For caught and caged and starved to death
In dying sighs my little breath
Soon passed the wiry grate.

(1-12)[21]

The world and its wonders are indeed baubles, but they are all we have in this life and are to be celebrated until its inevitable close, when we pass through the wiry grate to whatever lies beyond.

Notes

1 George Eliot, ‘Worldliness and Other-Worldliness: The Poet Young’, *WestminsterReview*, 1857; reprinted in *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), pp. 335-85

2 *Cowper. Poetical Works*, ed. H.S..Milford, Fourth Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 166. Line references to this edition are given in the text.

3 *William Cowper. Selected Letters,* ed. William Hadley, Everyman’s Library No.774 (London: J..M.Dent, 1926), p. 121. Dates and recipients of the letters are given in the text.

4 Milford., pp.340-1.

5 Milford, p.377.

6 *Cowper. Verse and Letters*, ed. Brian Spiller (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1968), p.754. Dates and recipients of letters are given in the text.

7 Milford, p.398.

8 Spiller, pp. 385-6. ‘The History of My Three Hares’, *Gentleman’s Magazine*, June 1784

9 Hadley, p.252.

10 Spiller, p.574.

11 Spiller, p.635.

12 Spiller, p.583.

13 Spiller, p.687.

14 Milford, p. 133.

[15] Milford, p. 202.

[16] Hadley, p.262.

[17] Spiller, p.699.

[18] Vincent Newey, 'Existing at the margins: a double echo of Cowper in Clare', *Notes and Queries*, Vol. 252 (continuous series), No.2, June 2007, 148. Clare quotations from *The Later Poems of John Clare*, ed. Eric Robinson and David Powell (Oxford: Oxford University Press,1954), II, 871.

[19] *John Clare by Himself* , ed. Eric Robinson and David Powell (Manchester: Mid Northumberland Arts Group/Carcanet Press, 1996), p. 62

[20] *Selected Poems of John Clare*, ed. James Reeves (London: Heinemann, 1954) ll. 8-13.

[21] Milford, p. 305.

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