

## William and Theadora: An Early Love Affair

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I find myself wondering sometimes whether the sophistication of the recording devices available to us today might not have blunted our memories somewhat, and perhaps even our imaginations.

Let me begin, for instance, by asking *you* to imagine that we are not in Olney in the early years of the twenty-first century, but in Germany at the beginning of the nineteenth, and that we have just heard the very first performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. We'd be a bit thunderstruck I think, and what memories we'd take away with us, because we would realise that the chances of us hearing it again were slim. But nowadays we can hear it whenever we want; we just have to put on a CD. So we don't *remember* it, certainly not in the same way. And it is the same with images. If I ask you to call to mind, say, Isambard Kingdom Brunel, I expect almost everyone will have a picture in their minds of him standing before that huge pile of chains and wearing a curious hat.

And writers: we certainly have standard images of them. Dickens with his beard. George Bernard Shaw in his knickerbocker suit, riding his bike. And William Cowper, always sitting down, and looking in one portrait as though he had just put the tea-cosy on his head, perhaps to amuse Mrs Unwin. The images are always of these men in middle age, when they had achieved their iconic status. But they didn't always look like that. Shakespeare wasn't always bald. When he was little he might have had a head of golden curls for all we know. They were all *children* once and today I want to consider William Cowper as he was in his late teens and early twenties, when he was in love with his cousin, Theadora. Now if I am going to talk about Cowper's love life, I have inevitably to talk about his sex life, or lack of it. And I have to say something about the various stories suggesting that he was a hermaphrodite, or sexually deformed in some way. But all I have to say on this score is to put another very simple question to you. If you, any one of you in this room, had a small son who was malformed in this way, would you send him off at the age of eight to an English boarding school? No, not unless you were very sadistic, you wouldn't. And Cowper's father certainly was not. Far from it.

Clearly something was wrong though. One has only to think of his engagement to Mrs Unwin. Only gossip and local pressure made him agree to it at all, and once he had agreed to it, he tried to kill himself. A tad extreme, you might think. Clearly the problem was an emotional one and I would tentatively suggest some degree of latent and unacknowledged homosexuality. I have noticed the number of times in his poems that he is angered by what he sees as 'effeminacy'. And this might explain why he was so attractive to women. It is not uncommon. One of my close friends, who is married to his gay partner, is nevertheless adored by almost every woman he meets. And Cowper was adored, not only by Mrs Unwin, but by Lady Austen, and by his cousins Harriet and Theadora.

But I want to go back for a moment to his schooldays. At one of his first schools we know that he was bullied; we know this because he gave us such a vivid account of his tormentor in his memoir *Adelphi*. He writes: '...he had 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.' It is such a very *vivid* and brilliant image that it has for some writers coloured his entire school life, but when he went to Westminster School he was both happy and successful, and he made friendships there which lasted a lifetime. He was not, as some writers make him out to be, a timid wimp. He became head of his house, and wimps don't get that position in a boarding school. I have taught in one and I know. He was also ranked third academically in the Sixth Form, and in a letter to William Unwin he claimed that he 'excelled' at cricket and football. There is, however, no record of what position he played as a footballer. I would see him, I think, as a reliable central defender.

When he left Westminster, he did not go to university. If he had, all might have turned out very differently. Instead he was pressurised by his father into following the family tradition and was aimed at a career in the law. In retrospect I think we can see what a disastrous decision that was, but his grandfather, Spencer Cowper, had been a judge, and his uncle William, the first earl Cowper, was twice Lord Chancellor. Law was in the Cowper family, but it was not in William Cowper. In later life he wrote, 'I spent twelve years in The Temple where I made no progress in that science to cultivate which I was sent thither' (letter, 3 March 1788). The tone of that sentence tells us a lot too, I think: '...sent thither'. Twelve years doing almost nothing, and as he himself recognised, he needed 'constant employment' to avoid depression. The Temple was a recipe for disaster, and proved to be so.

But there was one aspect of his life at that time which he could look back on with delight and that was the time

he spent with his cousins at 30 Southampton Row. Southampton Row was a very different place then from what it is now. It is hard to imagine, but it was then a quiet rural retreat. When Thomas Gray lived there, he said that he had a view ‘commanding all the fields as far as Highgate and Hampstead’. Fields! In Highgate. There were three cousins: Harriot, Theadora and Catherine. Harriot, the eldest, married Sir Thomas Hesketh, but even so, in the year before she died, she wrote to William Hayley, ‘I really think there was no period of *my Life* in which I should not have not gloried in being known to the whole World, as the decided Choice of *Such a Heart as Cowper’s*’ (15 May 1806). She could hardly have put it more positively, could she? But William fell in love with Theadora. He was 19 and she was 16 when they first met in 1750 and they behaved just as one might expect young people to behave. ‘There was I,’ he recalled, ‘the future Lord Chancellor, constantly employed from Morning till Night in giggling and making giggle’, instead of studying the law. What a wonderful word that is: *giggle*. And we get a clearer picture of all this giggling from a story he published in *The Connoisseur* in April 1756. Writing under the name of ‘Mr Country’ he describes a visit to a friend who has a wife and three unmarried daughters, a very thin disguise for his cousins’ family.

Upon these occasions, my entry into the room is sometimes obstructed by a cord fastened across the bottom of the door- case, which as I am a little near-sighted, I seldom discover till it has brought me upon my knees before them. While I am employed in brushing the dust from my black rollers [i.e. His stockings] or chafing my broken shins, my wig is suddenly conveyed away, and either stuffed behind the looking-glass, or tossed from one to the other so dexterously and with such velocity, that after many a fruitless attempt to recover it, I am obliged to sit down bare-headed, to the great diversion of the spectators.

So the Age of Elegance could also, we are glad to see, be an age of horseplay.

What were they like, these young people? William has kindly left us a self-portrait. It is called ‘A Character’ and begins

William was once a bashfull Youth,  
 His Modesty was such,  
 That one might say (to say the Truth)  
 He rather had too much;  
 Some said that it was want of Sense,  
 And others want of Spirit,  
 (So blest a thing is Impudence)  
 While others could not bear it;  
 But some a different Notion had,  
 And at each other winking,  
 Observ’d that tho’ he little said  
 He paid it off with thinking;  
 Howe’er it was, by Slow degrees  
 He mended and grew perter,  
 In Company was more at ease,  
 And Dress’d a little Smarter;  
 Nay now and then would look quite gay  
 As other People do,  
 And often said or try’d to say  
 A witty thing or so;<sup>1</sup>

(1- 20)

Of Theadora we do not really know very much. Her sister Harriot tells us that she had the face and figure of an angel. We are also told that she was, like Cowper himself, modest, refined and shy. Yet when challenged by her father as what she would do if she married Cowper, she is said to have replied, ‘Wash all day, and ride on the great dog all night’. What a curious, and curiously erotic reply, that is. I have to say though that while I have seen this remark quoted in two biographies, I have never seen any source cited for it, so I am not all that sure about it, and if anyone can help I’d be grateful.

Their relationship lasted for several years but eventually her father put a stop to it, forbidding any thought of marriage between them. His reasons for this have attracted speculation. In one respect it is hardly surprising. Cowper was obviously *not* studying law. He therefore had no prospects and no fortune. What would they live on? It has also been suggested that he had serious doubts about Cowper’s mental health and maybe, as we shall see in a moment, of Theadora’s too. Also, they were first cousins, but had their consanguinity been the main issue, he would surely have made his objections clear much earlier.

Like all love affairs their relationship had its ups and down and Cowper records them in a sequence of 19 love poems addressed to *Delia*, the name he chose, as was customary, to cover her real identity.

These poems, which have received almost no critical attention, were never published in Cowper’s or Theadora’s lifetimes. She died in 1824, when James Croft, her nephew and executor, inherited them. They had been written out for her by Cowper himself and Croft published them in 1825 under the title *Poems, the early*

*Productions of William Cowper.* Sadly there is now no trace of that manuscript. The printers probably threw it away when they'd finished with it.

The poem with which the sequence begins cannot in fact have been the actual first poem, as it refers to a previous poem which he had written, but would not let Delia see. This is by way of being a written apology. His muse, he says, feared that she was not equal to the praise Delia deserved. And in saying so he is of course praising her fulsomely.

'An Apology for not Showing her What I had Wrote'

Did not my muse (what can she less)  
Perceive her own unworthiness,  
Could she by some well chosen theme,  
But hope to merit your esteem,  
She would not thus conceal her lays,  
Ambitious to deserve your praise.  
But should my Delia take offence,  
And frown on her impertinence,  
In silence, sorrowing and forlorn,  
Would the despairing trifler mourn;  
Curse her ill-tuned, unpleasing lute,  
Then sigh and sit for ever mute.

(1-12)

It puts me in mind of Jane Austen's *Emma* where the young people, you will remember, play at riddles and so on. It is a part of courtship – well, Georgian courtship. I'm not sure much of this kind of thing goes on now. After apologising to her, in the next poem he accuses her of being 'th'unkindest girl on earth'. Well, that's the way love goes. This time *she* is doing the refusing. He has asked for a lock of her hair, claiming that possessing it would defy the 'spoiler' time. It would not lose its gloss or colour and so he would be preserving 'everlasting youth'.

'Delia, th'unkindest girl on earth'

Delia, th'unkindest girl on earth,  
When I besought the fair,  
That favour of intrinsic worth,  
A ringlet of her hair,

Refused that instant to comply  
With my absurd request,  
For reasons she could specify,  
Some twenty score at least.

Trust me, my dear however odd  
It may appear to say,  
I sought it merely to defraud  
Thy spoiler of his prey.

Yet when its sister locks shall fade,  
As quickly fade they must,  
When all their beauties are decay'd,  
Their gloss, their colour, lost,

Ah then! if haply to my share  
Some slender pittance fall,  
If I but gain one single hair,  
Nor age usurp them all;

When you behold it still as sleek,  
As lovely to the view,  
As when it left thy snowy neck  
That Eden where it grew

Then shall my Delia's self declare,  
That I profess'd the truth,  
And have preserved my little share  
In everlasting youth.

The theme is common enough but I do think Cowper handles it skilfully. It always strikes me when I look at anthology of eighteenth-century verse how technically accomplished even poets I have never heard of are. It is a skill quite lost today, it would seem. They can manage a regular 8:6 stanza so there is never a false note anywhere. The metre is perfect and the rhymes come trotting out with an air of absolute inevitability, as though no other way of putting it was possible. When we think of Cowper we tend to think instantly of the blank verse

of *The Task*, but here he is writing lyrics, which are for the most part technically faultless. But there is more here than surface skill. The situation puts him in mind of Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, even though he is a humble suitor and not Lord Petre, the villain and 'rapist' of that poem, and if we look carefully there are three echoes of Pope here. The first one looks almost insignificant, but it is there. In line 9 Cowper's 'Trust me, my dear', would call up the famous speech of Camilla in Canto V of Pope's poem:

And trust me, dear! good-humour can prevail  
When airs, and flights, and screams, and scolding fail.  
(V. 31-32)

But the second echo is more obvious. Cowper has written:

Yet when its sister locks shall fade,  
As quickly fade they must

Here he is consciously echoing Pope's:

The sister-lock now sits uncouth, alone  
(IV. 171)

and combines elements from four other lines from Pope:

Curl'd or uncurl'd, since Locks will turn to grey;  
Since painted or not painted, all shall fade,  
(V. 26-27)

and

When those fair suns shall set, as set they must,  
And all those tresses shall be laid in dust.  
(V.147-148)

And finally the lines:

Ah then! if haply to my share,  
Some slender pittance fall

are a deliberate echo of the famous couplet:

If to her share some female errors fall,  
Look on her face and you'll forget 'em all.  
(II. 18-19)

Now there is a real point to this. It is not simply academic quibbling — source hunting and echo-location. And my point is that this poem is *not* merely a hastily-scribbled piece of light verse, done to amuse his girl friend. It is light verse, yes, but it was not hastily scribbled. I think that is clear. It has been carefully considered and thought out. Carefully crafted too. And it is an intelligent piece of work. This young man is taking the writing of verse seriously, even if it is light-hearted. He is already a real poet and, I would suggest, sees himself as such. And the poem also adds something to the very little we know about Theadora. Cowper, I believe, expected her to recognise what he was doing. So this young girl — she was about seventeen — must have read Pope and could be expected to recognise the allusions. They didn't just giggle, these two young people. So, we have had two quarrels, two fallings-out: he has refused to show her his poem and she has refused him a lock of her hair. Lovers' tiffs. But as he says in the third poem in the sequence beginning 'This Evening, Delia, you and I' — the great thing about lovers' tiffs is that they provide such a splendid opportunity for making up again, and he concludes this poem with a delightful simile:

For friendship, like a sever'd bone,  
Improves and gains a stronger tone  
When aptly reunited.

Not broken hearts, you notice, but broken bones.

I would not wish to make extravagant claims for the poems in this sequence. There are some conventionalities that make one cringe. This one on tears:

Since for my sake each dear translucent drop  
Breaks forth, best witness of thy truth sincere,  
My lips should drink the precious moisture up,  
And, e'er it falls, receive the trembling tear.

*Translucent drop*, and *precious moisture*, yes, well, we'll press on.

It was probably about this time that Theadora gave him a red carnelian seal ring featuring Omphale wearing the lion's skin of Heracles. Omphale was the queen of Lydia, and Heracles was a slave in her palace, so the message seems to have been that Cowper was to be Theadora's slave, but the future looked promising, as when Omphale freed Heracles, she became his mistress and according to my book of myths he then spent his days 'in ease and indolence'. You really have to warm to this young woman, don't you?

Some of the poems do definitely refer to actual events in their love, and to actual quarrels. In the PS to a whimsical letter to his friend Chase Price, dated 21 February 1754, he writes:

You may remember that there was some small Difference between me and the Person I hinted at in the Beginning of my Letter; the Enclosed was wrote [that curious piece of eighteenth-century grammar!] upon that Subject since I saw you last. All is Comfortable & Happy between us at present and I doubt not will continue so for ever. Indeed we had neither of us any great reason to be dissatisfied, & perhaps Quarrel'd merely for the sake of the Reconciliation— which you may be sure made Ample Amends.

The poem he enclosed was entitled 'Written in a Quarrel' which has as a subtitle 'The delivery of it prevented by a reconciliation'. It is rather a stereotypical love poem though, with little to commend it.

Sadly, the note of optimism in his letter was misplaced. Their happiness was not to 'continue so for ever'. He soon begins to sense this. It is not going to work. 'How Blest the youth whom fate ordains/A kind relief from all his pains' is how he begins one poem. But he realises that he is not to be so blest. He fears 'Fortune's fickle pow'r'. Then the expected blow arrives and her father puts a stop to any thought of marriage. As well as Cowper's poor career prospects, the consanguinity - they were first cousins - might have bothered him, though if so you would have expected him, as I have already said, to have stepped in earlier - and then they were both liable to fits of depression, which would have led to some instability in the marriage. Whatever the reasoning, Cowper's response is contained in a poem headed '1755' and it does strike me as rather pompous and self-righteous. It's all down to money, he says, and his own obvious lack of it. 'All-worshipp'd gold', he begins and conjures up an image of him and Theadora together in Eden where money would be irrelevant.

'1755'

If in my bosom unperceived there lurk  
The deep-sown seeds of av'rice or ambition,  
Blame me, ye great ones, (for I scorn your censure)  
But let the gen'rous and the good commend me;  
That to my Delia I direct them all,  
The worthiest object of a virtuous love.  
Oh! to some distant scene, a willing exile,  
From the wild uproar of this busy world,  
Were it my fate with Delia to retire;  
With her to wander through the sylvan shade  
Each morn, or o'er the moss-imbrowned turf,  
Where, blest as the prime parents of mankind  
In their own Eden, we would envy none;  
(10-23)

It is all very Miltonic, a lot of posturing. And the close is more of the same. He may not have any money, but, he claims, he has Virtue, which of course will not count against his lack of prospects.

He has not totally given up all hope, but he realises the folly of it and what is interesting is that he uses an image of a drowning seaman. And years later of course he will use this image again in one of his most famous poems, 'The Castaway'.

And as often seems to be the case, bad tidings come in threes. In 1756 his father dies and then his close friend Sir William Russell is drowned in the Thames.

'Doom'd, as I am, in solitude to waste'  
Doom'd, as I am, in solitude to waste  
The present moments, and regret the past;  
Depriv'd of every joy, I valued most,  
My Friend torn from me, and my Mistress lost;  
Call not this gloom I wear, this anxious mien,  
The dull effect of humour, or of spleen!  
Still, still, I mourn, with each returning day,  
Him snatch'd by Fate, in early youth, away.  
And Her - thro' tedious years of doubt and pain,  
Fix'd in her choice, and faithful - but in vain!

(1-10)

'Fix'd in her choice and faithful.' And indeed she was, as we are about to see. And again, in 'Written after leaving her at New Barns', we read

Yet e'er we look'd our last farewell,  
From her dear lips this comfort fell:  
'Fear not that time, where'er we rove,  
Or absence, shall abate my love.'

(33-37)

He knows that there will be other men interested in her and addresses one of them in a poem called 'Upon a

Venerable Rival'. She is being courted apparently by someone so Venerable – well guess how old he is!

Full thirty frosts since thou wert young  
Have chill'd the wither'd grove,  
Thou Wretch! And hast thou lived so long  
Nor yet forgot to love?

(1-4)

Fancy, carrying on like that at the age of thirty!

Then in what looks to be the closing poem in the sequence, and is simply called 'To Delia', he accepts the inevitability of their separation, but declares that as long as her future life is a happy one, he will be content. As for himself, apart from her, his life can never be happy. He wants her to be happy. Yes, but not with anyone else! Not *that* happy! He does not want her to 'warm with transport any heart but mine'! There will, as he foresees, be suitors who unlike him will have position and wealth, and so, unlike him, will win her parents' approval, but such approval is not the same as winning Delia, he warns them:

Ye who from wealth th'ill-grounded title boast  
To claim whatever beauty charms you most;  
Ye sons of fortune, who consult alone  
Her parents' will, regardless of her own,  
Know that a love like ours, a gen'rous flame,  
No wealth can purchase, and no pow'r reclaim.  
The soul's affection can be only given  
Free, unextorted, as the grace of heaven.

(13-20)

Maybe some other suitor will appear on the scene who truly loves her, but

Let him alone dispute the real prize,  
And read his sentence in my Delia's eyes;  
There shall he read all gentleness and truth,  
But not himself, the dear distinguish'd youth;  
Pity for him perhaps they may express –  
Pity, that will but heighten his distress.  
But, wretched rival! he must sigh to see  
The sprightlier rays of love directed all to me.

(29-36)

As for himself, he will of course remain true to her for ever:

Believe, my love! no less the gen'rous God  
Rules in my breast, his ever blest abode;  
There has he driven each gross desire away,  
Directing ev'ry wish and ev'ry thought to thee!  
Then can I ever leave my Delia's arms,  
A slave, devoted to inferior charms?  
Can e'er my soul her reason so disgrace?  
For what blest minister of heavenly race  
Would quit that heaven to find a happier place?

(41-49)

Well, words are all very fine, but as we know he did *not* stay true to Delia/Theadora. After his breakdown he found himself a mother-figure in Mary Unwin, who cared for him and nursed him through many a crisis. And then there was the relationship he had with Lady Austen. She certainly thought it was a relationship, and so, I think, did Mrs Unwin, hence the frosty letters. What Cowper wanted was the security of a quiet, domestic life, one where he would be cared for, mollycoddled one might go so far as to say, without any danger of an emotional entanglement or commitment. And that is exactly what he managed to achieve. A relationship in which he took and received, but gave very little in return. And he never mentioned Theadora again. Not once does her name appear in any of his hundreds of letters. Not even in those to her sister.

And what of Theadora? Well, after Cowper's suicide attempts he was put in the care of Dr Cotton in a private madhouse (that's what they were called in those days) in St Albans; after he had left there Theadora also had a breakdown and was also put in the care of Dr Cotton in St Albans. An irony no fiction writer could get away with. And Cowper seems to have known this, as in a letter to his friend Joseph Hill (5 August 1769) he refers to a 'near relation' filling a vacancy in what he called Dr Cotton's 'Collegium Insanorum'.

Theadora outlived him by a quarter of a century, dying in 1824 at the age of 90. She never married, and kept by her every scrap of paper he had ever written on, and every memento she had of the love they had once felt for each other. Stories of her poor mental health are for the most part hearsay, but there seems to be little doubt of the despair she felt. In a letter she wrote late in life (10 May 1807) to William Hayley, Cowper's biographer,

she wrote, 'I have long since been a Wanderer and a Vagabond upon the Face of the Earth', and 'Among the Evils attendant upon Sorrow, it is not one of the least that by a long Continuance of it, the Mind loses the Power of being susceptible of Joy.' In later life, after Cowper was dead, she came across an anonymous love poem in a journal and convinced herself not only that it was by Cowper, but that it was addressed to her, and that he had never stopped loving her.

She never did stop loving William and sent him gifts, including a snuff box with a picture of his three pet hares on it. These gifts were from 'Anonymous' and culminated in an annuity of £50 and a beautiful writing desk. The desk delighted him and he wrote to Harriot saying that it was 'the most elegant, the compactest, the most commodious desk in the world, and of all the desks that ever were or ever shall be, the desk I love the most'. He must surely have guessed who Anonymous was, but he kept up a pretence, always referring to 'him'. Once, coyly asking Lady Hesketh, 'Who's there in the world that has, or can think that he has, reason to love me to the degree that he does? I believe you, my Dear, to be in full possession of all this mystery, you shall never know me while you live, either directly or by hints of any sort, attempt to exhort or to steal the secret from you.' To acknowledge that he knew who still loved him so would have involved him in some awkward moments of conscience perhaps. And when he was in need of money, especially Theadora's annuity, he was not above asking Harriot to *hurry up with it*. People had always helped him with money and gifts of all kinds and he not only depended upon this, he came to *expect* it. He was, I'm afraid it has to be said, something of a freeloader.

Well, that is their story and I am sorry to have to end it on this rather negative note, but it cannot be avoided. It is not an aspect of his character which does him much credit, but we have to remind ourselves that he was not always that benign figure with the tea-cosy on his head. William Cowper was not only a poet, he was human, like the rest of us, like all of us here in this room today, and being human he was complex, he was moody, and, of course, like us, he was fallible.

*Ulverston*