

Detached Cowper and His Critical Eye

Ashley Chantler, University of Chester

‘Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the
LORD GOD had made’ (Genesis, 3.1)

At the 2001 Cowper and Newton Day, in Olney, readings were given of Cowper’s poetry and prose. I chose to read ‘The Colubriad’ (written 1782, published 1806), a witty poem about an encounter with a snake in a garden. The poem is based on an actual incident recorded in a letter from Cowper to William Unwin (3 August 1782), but what the poem does that the letter does not do is to create a character of whom the reader is supposed to be critical.

‘The Colubriad’ opens with an earnest poet ‘passing swift and inattentive by’ three kittens in a doorway, ‘Not much concern’d to know what they did there, / Not deeming kittens worth a poet’s care’.¹ However, when he sees a ‘viper’ by the kittens, one of which is being licked on the nose by the snake, he is spurred into action:

On to the hall went I, with pace not slow,
But swift as lightning, for a long Dutch hoe;
With which well arm’d I hasten’d to the spot,
To find the viper. But I find him not;
And, turning up the leaves and shrubs around,
Found only, that he was not to be found.

The rush to arm, the hastening to battle, the anti-climatic ‘But I found him not’, the desperate ‘turning up [of] the leaves and shrubs’, and the bathetic (and pathetic) ‘Found only, he was not to be found’: all this undermines the aloof authority of the man. He is brought down to earth which, in its comicality, increases the reader’s distance from him. Furthermore, the repetition of ‘found’ not only emphasizes the loss of the snake but also suggests that the poet is, ironically, lost for words, that he is unable to articulate his fall.

When the poet finally finds the snake, which is now in front of a cat who ‘with velvet paw’ is ‘gently’ patting the snake’s head, the man, ‘Fill’d with heroic ardour at the sight’, ‘slew him at the door, / And taught him NEVER TO COME THERE NO MORE’. The ‘heroic ardour’ and the slaying are, of course, unheroic, and to suggest that the snake has been ‘taught’ a lesson is absurd, not only because the snake is a snake but also because it is dead.

By writing with wit and honesty about a past ‘I’, the narrator implies that the incident taught him various lessons, one being that kittens are actually ‘worth a poet’s care’. But why? The snake was not an aggressor, the poet, the ignorant and unquestioning warrior, was: whilst he is finding his hoe, the snake does not attack the kittens, it leaves them and is befriended by the cat. Perhaps the ‘I’ who is writing in retrospect learned a wrong lesson? A dog might guide us towards a conclusion.

In the poem ‘Beau’s Reply’, a dog responds to criticisms levelled against him in a previous poem, ‘On a Spaniel, Called Beau’, subtitled ‘Killing a Young Bird’. After the spaniel has justified his actions, he ends: ‘What think you, Sir, of killing time / With verse address’d to me?’ This conclusion seems to undermine ‘On A Spaniel, Called Beau’, but if it does so, it also undermines itself: while writing against writing about a dog, Cowper is simultaneously writing about a dog. Assuming that it is unlikely that Cowper actually believes the poems to be a waste of time, it seems that there is a fictional ‘I’ narrating ‘On a

Spaniel, Called Beau', an obviously fictional 'I' narrating 'Beau's Reply', and that detached from them both is the evasive Cowper. But why create two fictional narrators?

The conclusion of 'Beau's Reply' invites the reader to consider what type of verse is not a waste of time. The antithesis of 'On A Spaniel, Called Beau' and 'Beau's Reply' would be a humourless poem that preaches simplistic dogma to its readers and, as we all know, such a poem is likely to alienate more of its readers than convince them of its arguments. By creating two narrators and by rendering images, Cowper can illustrate issues of power, violence, nature, education and ignorance, and deny the reader the use of the naïve categories of 'right' and 'wrong'. Beau's question does not undermine the poems; the poems undermine the question.

In light of 'On a Spaniel, Called Beau' and 'Beau's Reply', it seems that the narrator of 'The Colubriad' learned the right lesson, that kittens are 'worth a poet's care' because they can be the stuff of which are made entertaining poems that subtly engage with complex issues. One of these issues is the possible result caused by the judgemental blind 'I'. The three poems can then also be read perhaps as a satire on God and those who act in His image. In the day we read thereof, then our eyes shall be opened to the tyranny of 'good' and 'evil' and to a different Cowper from that of his hymn, 'Light Shining Out of Darkness'.

Note

¹ All quotations are from William Cowper, *Selected Poems*, ed. Michael Bruce (London: Everyman, 1999).