

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

R E V I E W

James King and Charles Ryskamp, eds., *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, vol. 2: Letters, 1782-1786

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Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 17, Issue 1, Summer 1983, pp. 26-29



The Letters and Prose Writings of WILLIAM COWPER

Volume III 1787-1791

EDITED BY

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James King and Charles Ryskamp, eds. *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper. Vol. II: Letters, 1782-1876.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981. xxviii + 652 pp. \$98.00.

Reviewed by Donald H. Reiman

In discussing the first volume of this edition of Cowper's letters (reviewed together with the first volume of Cowper's *Poems in Blake*, 15, 149-51), I highly praised the quality of Cowper's letters and their value for students of Blake and the Romantic poets and commended the editorial principles and textual accuracy of the volume. At the same time, I questioned some of the editors' annotations, and I severely criticized the Clarendon Press's production procedures and standards. At the outset of this review, let me say that the intelligent editorial principles and the high standard of textual accuracy continue in Volume II and that the annotation has markedly improved (though there are, inevitably, small slips, as on page 343, where the poem quoted in fn. 3 is marred by a typo and where fn. 4 contains a speculation apparently

refuted on page 344). The Clarendon Press, however, continues to turn out an inferior physical artifact. My review copy contains two cognate leaves, comprising pages 79-82, that have never been sewn in at all and arrived laid in the book, completely unattached to the binding. It appears that the same kind of workmen are producing Clarendon's books and New York City's buses and subway cars. One cannot be killed by a badly manufactured edition of Cowper's *Letters*, but the question remains to why anyone should have to pay \$98 per volume to buy one.

If, however, you have the good fortune to hold a copy together long enough to read it, this second volume contains a fund of valuable information on the craft of writing verse and the process of publishing it in the 1780s (and for some years thereafter), as well as a treasury of marvelous anecdotes illustrative of the daily life and social mores of England on the eve of the French Revolution. Besides all these pragmatic attractions, Cowper's letters are among the very wittiest and most interesting I've ever read. Though they lack the apparent spontaneity of Byron's and Lamb's, they offer the reader glimpses of a gentleman writing, in varied tones appropriate to his relationships with his correspondents, on the whole range of religious, political, social, literary, and personal concerns that characterized the period. It thus provides both a self-portrait of the artist at work by the leading poetic talent in *England* at the time (Burns was in Scotland) and holds up a mirror to the social conditions of the age.

Let me illustrate, first, the kind of social understanding these letters provide. For one thing, both justice and lawlessness in the period seem to have been directed at particular persons. In March 1783, Cowper tells that there passed through Olney "a body of Highlanders" who

lately mutinied at Portsmouth. Convinced to a man, that General Murray had sold them to the East India Company, they breath nothing but vengeance, and swear they will pull down his house in Scotland as soon as they arrive there . . . as Men, if their charge against the General be well supported, I cannot blame them. . . . None of their principal Officers are with them; either conscious of guilt, or . . . suspected as . . . partners in the iniquitous bargain, they fear the resentment of the corps. . . . General Murray's skull was in some danger among them, for he was twice felled to the ground with the Butt end of a Musquet. The Sergeant Major rescued him, or he would have been for ever render'd incapable of selling Highlanders to the India Company. (pp. 113-14)

Not only Cowper, but the government decided that the Highlanders were in the right and discharged the men instead of punishing them. On their way north, they attended various evangelical churches, well received by the people.

In November 1783, Cowper reports the first of a series of fires set by arsonists, who used the confusion to

steal things when people abandoned their houses or carried their valuables outside. "George Griggs is the principal sufferer. He gave 18 Guineas or nearly that Sum to a woman whom in his hurry he mistook for his wife He has likewise lost 40 pounds worth of wool" (p. 176). Two weeks later, Cowper writes again:

The Country around us is much alarm'd with apprehensions of fire. Two have happen'd since That of Olney. One at Hitchin, where the damage is said to amount to 11,000 £ Since our Conflagration here, we have sent two Women and a Boy to the Justice for depredation. Sue Riviss for stealing a piece of Beef, which, in her excuse, she said she intended to take care of. This Lady . . . escaped for want of evidence. Not that evidence was indeed wanting, but Our men of Goatham judged it unnecessary to send it. With her, went [another woman who had] filled her apron with wearing apparel, which she likewise intended to take care of. She would have gone to the County Gaol, had Billy Raban, the Baker's son, who prosecuted, insisted upon it. But He . . . interposed in her favor and begg'd her off. The young Gentleman who accompanied these fair ones, is the Junior Son of Molly Boswell. He had stolen some Iron work the property of Griggs the Butcher. Being convicted he was order'd to be whipt He seem'd to show great fortitude but it was all an imposition upon the public. The Beedle who perform'd it had filled his left hand with red Ocre, through which after every stroke he drew the lash of his whip, leaving the appearance of a wound upon the skin, but in reality not hurting him at all. This being perceived by Mr. Constable Henscomb . . . , he applied his cane without any such management or precaution to the shoulders of the too mercifull Executioner. The scene immediately became more interesting, the Beedle could by no means be prevailed upon to strike hard, which provoked the Constable to strike harder, and this double flogging continued, 'till a Lass of Silver End, pitying the pitiful Beedle thus suffering under the hands of the pitiless Constable, joined the procession, and placing herself immediately behind the latter, seized him by his capillary Club and pulling him backward by the same, slapt his face with a most Amazonian fury. This Concatenation of events has taken up more of my paper than I intended it should, but I could not forbear to inform you how the Beedle thresh'd the thief, the Constable the Beedle, and the Lady the Constable, and how the thief was the only person concern'd, who suffer'd nothing. (pp. 180-81)

There are numerous other incidents of similar interest, including two situations in which married men are accused—and assumed to be guilty—of having sexual relations with a ten-year-old girl (p. 251) and with young boys, respectively (p. 314). In each case, Cowper and, presumably, the community seem to pity the men (who are removed from their churches) and their families more than the children involved. Cowper, indeed, seemed to have only limited sympathy for those in whose situations he cannot imagine himself (such as being the parent of

such an abused young child). He could, however, feel the pangs of hunger and cold that afflicted the poor of Olney and did his best to raise money from wealthy friends to relieve their sufferings (see, for example, pp. xxvi, 86-87, 91, 94-95, and 328-29).

Of all Cowper's sympathies, his religious and political ones are the most interesting because they show the contrast between his (and his age's) thinking on these matters and the ideals of the later Romantics. That someone was pious or religious and lived morally were more important to Cowper at this point than *what* religion one espoused. We find him not only being cordial to the Throckmortons, neighboring Roman Catholic gentry, but also encouraging the Rev. William Unwin to develop ties with Lord Petre, *his* Catholic neighbor. Cowper gives aid and comfort to all persons who seem to be religious but withdraws his approval as soon as he learns that they are licentious, or hypocritical, or unduly avaricious. He leaves final judgment to God—but he assumes that God does and will judge, and that, therefore, people need not exert themselves to punish vice on earth. (All being sinners, all stand rather equally in need of punishment anyway.) Cowper, therefore, though he fears robbers and incendiaries, does not show an inclination to organize counter-measures or to call out for improved earthly justice.

This same quietistic attitude also governs his political thinking. He roundly condemns parliament more than once for overtaxing the poor and for producing no benefits for the people. But rather than seeking reform, he falls back on his faith that God ultimately governs and judges all human affairs (see, for example, pp. 103-105). On the one occasion when a parliamentary candidate calls on him and solicits his influence, Cowper does not discuss the candidate's qualifications or the issues, but assures the man that—contrary to the testimony of his Olney neighbors—he has no influence with the enfranchised freeholders (see pp. 229-30).

One of the most delightful discoveries in this volume is how excited Cowper and, indeed, all the gentry with whom he corresponded became about the new experiments with hot-air balloons, which interest—though not easily traceable in a volume with an index only of proper names—forms one of the staple topics of his correspondence. One of the least edifying surprises is Cowper's strong objection to a concert commemorating the hundredth anniversary of Handel's birth because, as "a religious service instituted in honor of a Musician, and performed in the house of God" (p. 254), it bordered on sacrilege.

But the chief interest of this volume, beyond the brilliant portraiture of the writer and his friends, lies in Cowper's response to the growing reputation of *Poems* and *John Gilpin*, his writing and publication of *The Task* volume, and his embarkation on the translation of Homer. Cowper's remarks ought to show Romanticists

clearly the distinction in attitudes that separated *professional* literary men such as Dr. Johnson from those, including Cowper, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, and Shelley, who began publishing not to earn a living but to disseminate their views or to win literary fame. Cowper himself comments on the distinction in remarks on Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*: Cowper himself, who reads

merely for his amusement, . . . is pleased with what is really pleasing, and is not over curious to discover a blemish . . . But if he once becomes a critic by trade, the case is altered. He must then . . . establish, if he can, an opinion in every mind, of his uncommon discernment, and his exquisite taste. This great end, he can never accomplish by thinking in the track that has been beaten . . . He must endeavour to convince the world, that their favourite authors have more faults than they are aware of, and such as they have never suspected. (p. 9)

The key phrase here is "critic by trade," which, like identifying a person as being in any other "trade," marked him or her as being beneath the level of a gentleman.

Cowper, as gentleman author, was very much concerned with the details and fine points of his writing, its production, the reactions of his friends and acquaintances to it, and—to a lesser extent—the reputation it gained from the reviews of "critics by trade." Cowper seems neither to have expected nor received any money from his *Poems* (1782) or *The Task* (1785). In February 1783, Cowper says that he hasn't heard from Joseph Johnson about the earlier volume since publication (p. 107) and when in October 1784, apparently still ignorant of the sales of *Poems*, he asked William Unwin to approach Johnson about publishing *The Task*, he cautioned him:

If when you make the offer of my book to Johnson, he should stroak his chin and look up to the ceiling and cry Humph! anticipate him I beseech you at once, by saying that you know I should be sorry that he should undertake for me to his own disadvantage, or that my volume should be in any degree press'd upon him. . . . The Idea of being hawked about . . . is insupportable. Nicols I have heard is the most learned Printer of the present day. He may be a man of taste as well as of learning . . . He prints the Gentleman's Magazine, and may serve us if the others should decline. If not, give yourself no further trouble about the matter. (pp. 286–87)

Only by late December 1785, when Cowper described himself to the playwright George Colman the Elder as "Once an Author and always an Author" (he had embarked on his translation of Homer), did he turn his thoughts to money: "Hitherto I have given away my Copies, but having indulged myself in that frolic twice, I now mean to try whether it may not prove equally agreeable to get something by the bargain. . . . I shall print by Subscription" (p. 436).

The point to be drawn from Cowper's attitude is

that, though Defoe and Dr. Johnson (to say nothing of numerous hacks) had earned their livings for periods of time from their publications, in Blake's day the thought was still something of a novelty for a serious poet. Therefore, Blake's or Shelley's or Keats' unsucccess as a commercial author signified nothing in itself, but came back to bother the three only in their self-comparisons with the phenomenal success of Lord Byron, whom they recognized to be a great poet as well as a prolific and popular one. Most serious writers of Blake's early years expected to find the means to live by inheritance or patronage (Cowper combined these to live modestly), or by achieving some post in church, university, or government. The only poets of the Romantic period who attempted to live on earnings from their writings were Southey, Moore, Hunt, and—with great unhappiness during his journalistic period—Coleridge. None could continue long to write ambitious non-occasional poems under these circumstances.

Cowper's attention to the details of his poetry was like that of other non-commercial poets, though Cowper confined his attention to the texts of the poems—the diction, punctuation, and orthography, even down to the use of elisions—rather than to the visual presentation (which was of concern not only to Blake but, to a lesser extent, to Wordsworth and Shelley). An examination of some of Cowper's statements in this volume about details of orthography should dispel any lingering notions that—at least for the serious *poets* of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—such matters were willingly left to compositors and proofreaders. For example, in writing to Joseph Johnson about the proofs of *Poems* (1782), Cowper says: "I have made some othe[r] corrections, which though they be for the most part bu[t] a Letter or a Stop, are yet such as were very necessary either to the Expression or the Sense" (p. 14; see also p. 22). Four years later, regarding his translation of Homer, Cowper raised an even smaller matter: "As to those elisions of the vowel before a vowel, . . . they are of the very essence of the manner, that I have adopted, and in my judgment are no blemishes" (p. 472). To this statement, King and Ryskamp key a very valuable note that quotes "the Preface to the second edition of his Homer (p. xlvii, 1802)" upon the article *the*:

. . . when this article precedes a vowel, shall [an author] melt it into the substantive, or leave the *hiatus* open? Both practises are offensive to a delicate ear. The particle absorbed occasions harshness, and the open vowel a vacuity equally inconvenient. Sometimes, therefore, to leave it open, and sometimes to engraft it into its adjunct seems more adviseable; this course Mr. Pope has taken, whose authority recommended it to me; though of the two evils I have most frequently chosen the elision as the least.

Though the Romantic poets, in their proto-democratic

age, didn't go around appealing to the "delicate ear," they, too, obviously felt the harshness of the *hiatus* arising from the juxtaposition of a word ending in a vowel and a succeeding word that began with one. In Coleridge's poems elisions are frequent, and even in Shelley's *Adonais* we find "th'intense atom glows" and "Torturing th'unwilling dross" (lines 179, 384). The point I am making, through Cowper's articulation of his interest in such minutiae, is that any form of modernization can be dangerous to poetic texts of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, possibly destroying or muddling details that the authors who were not "in trade" felt were important to the meaning or the aesthetic effects of their poems.

Beyond the value of these letters for the modern scholar in their revelations about Cowper's times and the ways of literary men then, Cowper's correspondence presents models of civilized social intercourse that can teach (most of) us a great deal about how to treat our friends. As the first volume showed Cowper coming through his first bout with madness a bit selfish and self-righteous, almost celebrating the painful deaths of his brother and Morley Unwin, this volume finds his ego healed through poetic recognition and his conscience cleansed by his years of kindness and civility to both those around him at Olney and his correspondents.

One aspect of being a gentleman author was to refrain from discussing one's writing with every friend and correspondent. In preparing *Poems* (1782), Cowper had taken into his confidence only John Newton, who had arranged for Joseph Johnson to publish the volume. That decision had made William Unwin, son of Cowper's beloved Mary Unwin, feel slighted, and Cowper decided to show his regard for Unwin by taking him into his confidence about *The Task* and allowing him, rather than Newton, to arrange for the publication. When he notified Newton that *The Task* was in press and Newton took umbrage, Cowper handled the situation politely but firmly (see pp. 291-322). Again, Cowper's behavior is unlike that of most modern authors, but it bears scrutiny. As a man indebted to both Newton and Unwin, his closest intellectual companions over the years, Cowper repaid their friendship in the best coin he knew—by taking each into his confidence and associating him with one of Cowper's two major claims to immortality. First, he put his poetry into the hands of Newton, who had earlier involved Cowper in the joint venture of *Olney Hymns*. Then he turned to the modest younger man and attempted to raise Unwin's self-image through the trust he placed in him and by means of the dedication to Unwin of "Tirocinium" (an attack on contemporary education published with *The Task*). It is well that Cowper expressed his friendship when he did. Volume II of the *Letters* opens in January 1782 with one addressed to Unwin as "My dear friend"; when it closes in December 1786, Cowper is still in shock over William Unwin's death on

29 November. By this date, Cowper was well on his way toward publishing his translation of Homer, but the turn of the year 1787, which will begin Volume III of the *Letters*, marks the beginning of a six-month period of depression, the fourth major one in Cowper's life, that is undoubtedly related to William Unwin's death, just as a fifth and final period of severe depression was to follow Mary Unwin's paralytic strokes and her physical deterioration.

When Shelley in his *Defence of Poetry* speaks of poets as "those of the most delicate sensibility and the most enlarged imagination," he was thinking of the great, strong imaginations of Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton—those capable of embodying "sorrow, terror, anguish, despair itself" in "chosen expressions of an approximation to the highest good"; he was not thinking of Cowper, Chatterton, Gray, Collins, or Smart. In some of these he would have recognized the "delicate sensibility," but, again, the Romantics wrote and thought to survive in the tough-minded world of the French Revolution and the succeeding twenty-five years of pan-European wars. Cowper is separated from us by at least two more violent shocks to a "delicate sensibility," events that have left us with larger offenses than the *hiatus* to delicate ears. If there ever succeeds a time of peace when ideological ferment subsides, Cowper's poems and letters, like the fiction of Henry James, will provide subtle lessons in humanity for ladies and gentlemen of "delicate sensibility" and "delicate ear."

