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R E V I E W

James King, William Cowper: A Biography

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memorable sentences on this development can stand for the vision and cogency to be found throughout Kernan's book:

> The rejection of capitalist society and its rationalistic thought in favor of older idealized felt values of community and imagination ironically provided romantic literature with a firm, though not a centrally important, place in modern culture as the defender in art of certain "higher" values and more humane ways of feeling. But this strategy, insofar as it was ever planned, had its costs, for it involved literature in a fundamental social contradiction by placing its aesthetics and metaphysics in direct opposition to its actual social circumstances. This rub has been felt heavily and consistently in ways that are revealed by the persistently difficult relationship of romantic literature and print technology. (294)

And hence, at last, one is tempted to add (though Kernan does not), Jacques Derrida and his conception of "grammatology," "a *general science of writing*" born "during a certain period of the world's history (beginning around the eighteenth century)" (*Of Grammatology*, trans. G. C. Spivak, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976, 27).

In this context of "the social construction of letters in the age of print" (314), Blake's practice carries a deep burden. Blake literally took more care with and of writing than any other author, and this care—the concept extends to Heideggerian *sorge*—is his authentification, together with the many playful games he shares on the conventions of "print logic." Enacted on the etched, illuminated, and self-published page and in the unresting attempt to co-ordinate the infinity of minute particulars, this care seems to me what Blake has most to teach. It is somewhat more than being "a proud and efficient professional." The quality of "authenticity" is, no doubt, itself relative to a culture in turn determined by changing modes of technology/production; but what humanist author other than Blake will so profit by the diffusion of video disk and high resolution monitor?

No book is perfect. The howler on page 185 which has Johnson's mother dying "while he was working on the *Dictionary*" is a disquieting reminder of the slips awaiting one "who has not written on Johnson before" (xi), and especially in a book so concerned with printing technology one is struck by a page like 129, where over half of the thirty-four lines end in hyphens. But this is trifling. Alvin Kernan has written an engaging and provocative book for anyone concerned with print and letters in eighteenth-century England; with printing, bookselling, readers, and writers in eighteenth-century London; with making the writer's role in a print culture; with creating an aura for literary texts in print culture; with the place and purpose of letters in print society; with the social construction of romantic literature (introduction and chapters 2, 3, 5, 7, 8) and a host of collateral topics—a book, in short, for almost every reader of this journal.

James King. *William Cowper: A Biography.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1986. xiv + 342 pp. $35.00.

Reviewed by Donald H. Reiman

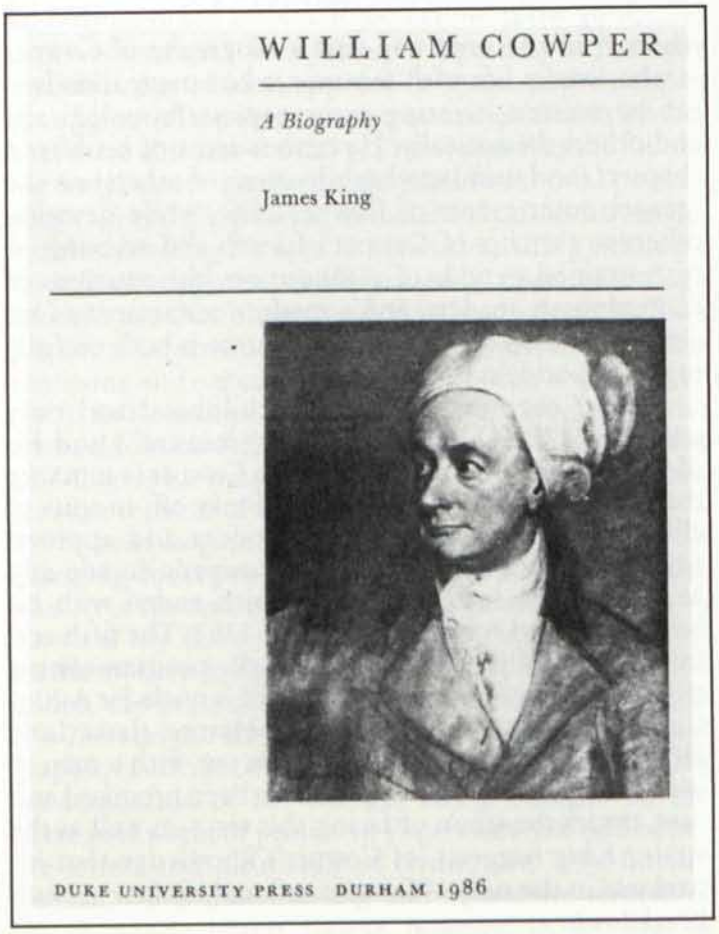
James King, who with Charles Ryskamp has prepared the distinguished five-volume edition of *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979–1986), has now written the biography of Cowper that grows naturally out of his research for the *Letters*. Though it would overstate the case to call his biography definitive, King has given us a sane, balanced, and serviceable overview of Cowper's life and career as a poet that will undoubtedly be the volume to turn to in the foreseeable future.

King writes well enough, and he has organized his material in the only way that a biography of Cowper—who lived a life with few events but many moods—can be written, treating some topics chronologically and others thematically. He centers some of his fifteen chapters (and numbered subdivisions of others) on the meager outer events of Cowper's life, while devoting others to sketches of Cowper's friends and accounts of his sustained periods of composition, the reactions of contemporary readers, and a modern assessment of his achievements. The index to the volume is both usefully organized and accurate.

After chapters on Cowper's childhood and early schooling ("Berkhamsted and Westminster") and his ill-fated love for his cousin Theodora Cowper (a romance that, in the end, William Cowper broke off, in spite of clear signs of affection from Theodora and approval from her father), King takes up Cowper's decade as a London lawyer, wit, and beau, which ended with his breakdown and suicide attempts of 1763. The fifth and final section of chapter 3 tells how the position offered to Cowper through the patronage of his uncle Sir Ashley Cowper, father of Theodora and Harriot (later Lady Hesketh), turned into a competitive test with a man to whom the particular post had earlier been promised and how, under the strain of facing this test—as well as the strain, King suggests, of Cowper's knowledge that his rival was in the right—Cowper suffered his first nervous breakdown.

In attempting to explain both Cowper's periods of mental illness and his withdrawal from commitment to Theodora and, later, to Mary Unwin, King argues that Cowper was psychically wounded in early childhood by the death of Ann Cowper, his mother, at the age of

thirty-four (in the month of William's third birthday), six days after she gave birth to John, her sixth child and the only one besides William who survived early infancy. Using a tactful psychoanalytic approach to explain Cowper's periods of depression and attempts at suicide in terms of threatened or actual repetitions of this primary loss, King does not pursue the line over-rigorously and, in fact, fails to note that some of William Cowper's obvious distance from his brother John may have originated directly from feelings that John had not only displaced him as the family infant, but may have seemed responsible for their mother's death. It is not clear to me exactly how Ann Cowper's death relates to her son's fear of competition for the clerkship at the House of Lords, but it might be connected with his failures in earlier competitions with his brother John, who was chosen to go to Cambridge and became a don there, after William had been shunted into a less prestigious (and less congenial) legal career.



The next three chapters, which rely heavily on Cowper's letters and *Adelphi*, his spiritual autobiography, examine his first mental illness and recovery, his friendships with the Unwins and the Rev. John Newton, his life with Mary Unwin at Olney, and the writing and publication of the *Olney Hymns* and "*Poems* (1782)." On pages 57–61, in chapter 4, King again sketches his central thesis—that Cowper's mental breakdowns (as well as many of his positive decisions) should be viewed as reenactments (or as his attempts to avoid the reenactment) of the loss of his mother. Yet Cowper speaks several times in his letters about another basic hang-up—his fear of travel—that seems to me to have little directly to do with the parental loss but something, perhaps, to do with the death of Morley Unwin as the result of a fall from his horse—a "providential" demise that permitted Cowper to live with the widowed Mary Unwin as his new "mother." (This incident may also be relevant to the grotesque humor of Cowper's ballad about John Gilpin's terrifying ride.)

Similar groupings of three chapters treat: Cowper's friendship with Lady Austen (who may also have wanted Cowper to marry her), *The Task*, and the ascendancy of his cousin Harriot, now Lady Hesketh (chapters 7–9); the move to Weston Underwood and his relations with the Throckmortons, the arrival of Cowper's Norfolk cousin Johnny Johnson, and Cowper's "heroic" work on his translation of Homer (10–12); and, finally, the start on his edition of Milton, his new friendship with William Hayley, Mary Unwin's physical and Cowper's mental deterioration, the move to Norfolk, and the sad final years before his death in 1800 (chapters 13–15).

Having read the full range of Cowper's letters and *Adelphi* for earlier reviews in *Blake*, I expected—or, at least, hoped for—something more from his biography. My enthusiasm for King's achievement is tempered, not by my awareness of any glaring factual errors, or by any strong disagreements with his speculations, judgments, or conclusions. I cannot help feeling, however, that Cowper's was a more complex personality, with more impressive intellect, talent, and presence than James King—and most other modern readers—have found in him.

King may have cut Cowper a size smaller than he actually was by pursuing a policy of limitation that narrows the focus from William Cowper in his times to William Cowper as an individual in his human relationships. Thus, King never mentions Cowper's strong political opinions or reactions to contemporary events, such as his outbursts against the colonies during the American Revolution, his attacks on those who rioted against authority in England, or his changing feelings toward the French Revolution. There is only passing mention (mainly in connection with Lady Hesketh's Tory politics) of Cowper's clearly stated Whig principles and no word of how those beliefs may have affected his relations with either such Whigs as Hayley or with the hardnosed Tory Lord Chancellor Thurlow (his former London friend). Nor does King mention that such a political bias, as well

as literary differences and rivalries, may partly explain Cowper's affinity for Milton and his criticism of Pope and Dr. Johnson.

Cowper's own evangelical religious experience is, inevitably, a major subject, but there is little mention of his sympathy for the Roman Catholics (aroused by his friendship for the Throckmortons) and his hopes for the lifting of the Catholic disabilities (another Whig cause). Even Cowper's modest—though lastingly influential—efforts on behalf of the abolition of the slave trade are diminished in King's account. On the other hand, knowing Cowper chiefly through his own writings, I found most helpful King's detailed account of Cowper's last years (1792–1800), when his deep depression prevented him from writing many letters. From the letters and manuscript accounts and poems by Lady Hesketh, John Johnson, and others who knew Cowper in Norfolk, King has woven a skillful narrative that conveys both the grimness of Cowper's debilitated state and the brave and selfless efforts of Johnson and others to restore to him a modicum of happiness. (This impressive fresh picture suggests that those unfamiliar with Cowper's letters may find King's biography as a whole more satisfying than I do.)

Throughout the biography, King follows a strategy that—though it enjoys the recommendation of Leon Edel and other master biographers—seems to me to be fundamentally mistaken. He tries to tailor the life of a very diverse and complicated human being to a simplified central (Freudian) pattern. As an African sculptor may reshape all the parts of the human body to echo the central motif of a barrel that the figure is holding, so King uses and reshapes all the events of Cowper's life to recapitulate Cowper's loss of his mother. By centering on this single theme (though it is certainly not as external as the barrel), the Freudian biographer runs the risk of eliminating other shapes of the life that are attributable to less elemental human feelings and experiences—emotional conflicts arising from Cowper's later relations with his father, stepmother, and brother John; his classical education and legal training; his theological and political views; and other cultural and personal influences. As I have indicated, some of these could be related to his feelings for his lost mother: even Cowper's strong feelings that the American colonies should not be permitted to secede *might* have been triggered by an extended, political fear of separation of mother country and offspring colony! But to reduce all of Cowper's opinions and springs of action to such elemental forms would risk a loss of credibility for the central thesis itself. Instead, the Freudian biographer chooses to ignore or deemphasize those aspects of the subject's experience that do not obviously fit the major thesis, thereby simplifying and, inevitably, distorting the biography.

All who are not true believers in one or another psychological dogma will agree that the human mind and its development are far more complex and mysterious than any single theory now available to us can accommodate. Cowper's failure to marry, despite several favorable opportunities to do so, and his final fears of abandonment by God are likely to be explained a century hence by a new theory of biochemical imbalances that will render the psychoanalytical theories now current as much out of date as the religious explanations current among the Evangelicals in Cowper's day now seem to us. The best course for the biographer (as for the editor) may be, then, not to try to simplify and summarize the subject's life in a neat bundle, with a bow pre-tied by Freud, but to lay out the complexities and contradictions of the subject's experience—with generous quotations from the individual and those who knew him best (the primary evidence on which the biographer's judgments rest)—and then to hazard an interpretation as *a possible*—not *the only*—interpretation. Such a course may leave a biography shaggier and less manicured than a thesis-driven reformulation of the evidence, but it will be truer to the lives that people have to lead who do not arrange their actions according to a psychology of humors, the ruling passion, or the conflicts arising during early sexual development. Biographers should suggest the possibility of a psychological mainspring to the life, or to major aspects of it, deriving their thesis from the subjects' central early experiences, but they should rely on the events to which the subjects themselves recurred and evidence provided by the people who knew them during their lifetimes, rather than upon abstractions from later theorists, arrived at on the basis of analyzing other—and, I daresay, quite different—subjects in different cultural environments.

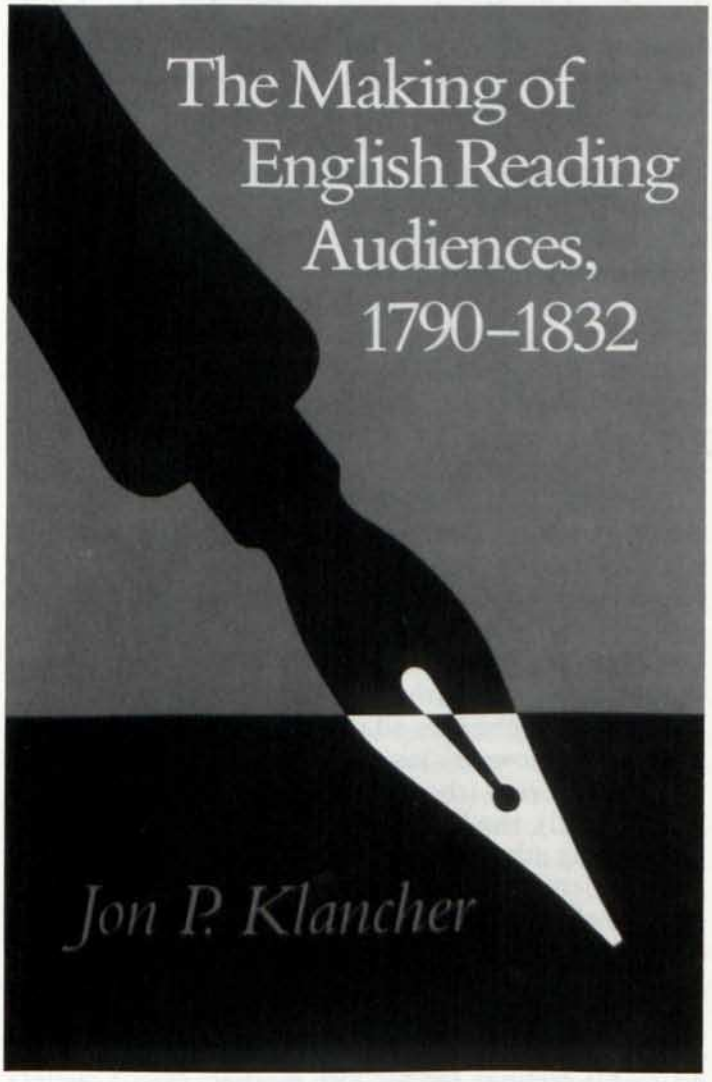
Among literary biographies that I have worked with closely over a period of years, the one that holds up best is Leslie A. Marchand's three-volume *Byron: A Biography* (1957; now, sadly, out of print). With all the rich scholarship and criticism on Byron that has followed—including the work from which Marchand himself has corrected a few points in his one-volume *Byron: A Portrait* (1970), Marchand's fullscale treatment presents more evidence (accurately) and allows the complexities of the characters and the events to unfold more fully than in any other single literary biography I know, thereby giving readers the clues they need to explore beyond even the considered judgments of the master biographer himself. King could retort that publishers will no longer grant the biographer the luxury of three volumes even for Byron, much less for Cowper; and I would simply say that with Cowper's less eventful (and more meagerly documented) life, the single volume would suffice, if he had not resorted to the artificial limitation of the Freudian master-key.

If we are, in our age, limited to psychological explanations, we can at least begin with the premise that several elements and events in Cowper's life were important. Besides the death of Ann Cowper, these included William's obvious rivalry with his brother John, with Thurlow, and with Morley Unwin. There were sociological influences, such as the residual feudal system under which Cowper grew up and which was the mainstay of the Cowper family through its power, patronage, and privilege. (On page 59, King comments critically on Cowper's dependency on others to maintain his style of living, but Cowper and the friends who patronized him would have seen nothing in the least wrong with this, so long as he expressed the gratitude proper to a dependent.) Cowper's objections first to the American and later to the French Revolution may have grown out of a fear that reform at home (as advocated by the English supporters of both overseas outbreaks) would mean the end of the privileged positions that he and his patrons enjoyed. King's biography, while certainly the reference volume to consult on Cowper's life, should be read by students of the period along with the larger panoply of evidence found in his poetry and letters. For nonspecialist teachers and students, King's *William Cowper* provides an adequate view of the life—if not the times—of a very significant writer.

Jon P. Klancher. *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790–1832.* Madison & London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987. xi + 210 pp. $25.00.

Reviewed by David Simpson

If there is in the current fashion for something called history any potential for a genuinely new set of approaches to literary criticism, and for a redefinition of how we go about constructing historical periods, then Jon Klancher's book deserves attention both as prototype and performance. It may be one of the most important books written on romanticism for a good many years, but its exposition signals such a drastic reconceptualization of what romanticism was that it is likely to remain ignored by those still hooked on the major writers and the more readily memorialized events. While Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley are dealt with substantially and quite brilliantly, Blake and Byron are only briefly mentioned; Keats, Crabbe, and Austen not at all. Klancher is concerned with the "still largely unknown world of text-making" (ix) that he finds in the periodicals, travel diaries, and political tracts of the period. The book is no mere catalogue of the illustrious unread, and indulges not at all in the rhetoric of the "strangely ignored" or the "regrettably unknown." It proposes "four strategically crucial audiences" as variously addressed and created by non-fictional prose outside the realm of high literature, as we have come to know it: "a newly self-conscious



middle-class public, a nascent mass audience, a polemical radical readership, and the special institutional audience—what Coleridge called the clerisy" (4). The new periodical writing, beginning in the 1790s, is seen to dramatize "the discontinuity of publics" (44). There is no assumption of a unitary audience, whether actual or potential; the readership is selected, and selects itself, according to clearly recognized divisions of class and interest. In his convincing demonstration of this state of