

HEAVEN IS NOT FOR HIM

WILLIAM COWPER (1731-1800)



For Ignatius Sancho, religion is a blessing, which bestows comfort and support; for William Cowper, it turns into a curse. During a few years of his early adulthood, Cowper is indeed happy in his faith until he falls victim to unending nightmares that convince him he is among the damned. They infect him with a soul-destroying melancholy as deep as Johnson's, and more than once he sinks into the madness that Johnson only fears.

In spite of his evil fate, generations of readers have found delight in the letters describing the rural retreat, gentle occupations, and pleasing friendships in which this unfortunate man takes solace. However, a full appreciation of his correspondence requires equal attention to his disclosure of his sufferings: his letters, like his life, are full of stark contrasts.

The first blow to Cowper's psyche strikes in 1737, when his mother dies just before his sixth birthday. His father, however, ensures that he gets a good classical education at Westminster School. Enrolment at the Middle Temple and apprenticeship to a lawyer follow, but the future poet neglects his law studies preferring to make merry with other young men of literary bent, to compare Pope's translations of Homer's epics with the original Greek, and to giggle with his first cousins Theodora and Harriet Cowper. About 1756 Ashley Cowper forbids his daughter Theodora to marry the unpromising law student, and in this year, his father dies. Ashley obtains an appointment for the young man as Clerk of the Journals for the House of Lords. Disastrously, this entails his appearance before the Bar of the House for interrogation about his qualifications. So extreme is his nervousness that he has a fit of insanity and attempts suicide.

William Cowper's younger brother John now takes over his care and has the sufferer admitted to Dr. Cotton's asylum at St. Albans, where he regains his sanity. Deciding that he has previously only thought himself a

Christian, he acquires an ardent evangelical faith, and he emerges from the asylum to settle into a retired life, financed by relations, at the country town of Huntingdon. Here he forms an intimate acquaintance with the Unwin family, with whom he is soon lodging. Mrs. Unwin, though only six years older than himself, is, he writes to a cousin, "so excellent a person, and regards me with a friendship so truly Christian, that I could almost fancy my own mother restored to life again." A few months later, he declares, "her son and I are brothers." When in 1767 her husband, the Rev. Morley Unwin, falls from his horse and dies, there is gossip, and his widow and Cowper move to Olney, another small town. Its Calvinist vicar, a reformed slave trader named John Newton, becomes a lifelong friend and spiritual counsellor of the poet, who is especially pleased when Newton publishes a tract arguing that an evangelical clergyman can conscientiously serve in the Church of England. Cowper and Newton compose between them the famous *Olney Hymns*, of which sixty-seven are Cowper's and two hundred and eighty-one are Newton's.

At this stage, Cowper believes that during the mental illness that removed him so painfully from an unregenerate life, he was granted "grace and mercy" and "received ... into favour." Then, in January 1773, in one night, everything changes. In a life-rending dream, he hears his doom pronounced: "*Actum est de te, periisti!*" ("It is all over with thee, thou hast perished!") Henceforward he believes that God has banished him from his presence, forbidding him to attend church, and dooming him to everlasting perdition. Not all the arguments of Newton, Mrs. Unwin, her son William (himself now an evangelical clergyman), Samuel Teedon (an Olney schoolmaster who believes he receives divine communications), and his cousin Harriet (now Lady Hesketh) can persuade him otherwise. His nights are often turned into torture by further soul-tormenting dreams, and each year the approach of January is a terror. In the later months of 1773, he has another mental breakdown and again tries to kill himself. On his recovery, he takes such refuge as he can in mild pursuits—gardening, carpentry, drawing, keeping pets, writing poems and letters, and cultivating a few selected friendships, including one with the vivacious Lady Austen, whose suggestion that he write a poem on the sofa leads him to compose *The Task*. But, always under the surface of his mind cruelly lurks the consciousness of his present and future fate. Eventually he finds that the composition of verse, and only that, becomes so absorbing that it can temporarily blot out this horror, and while ensconced in his village refuge he becomes the outstanding poet of his time.

The publication of his didactic *Poems* in 1782 and his masterpiece *The Task* (supplemented by the comic "John Gilpin" and other pieces) in 1785 brings Cowper a revival of his relationship with Lady Hesketh as well as

several new friendships, especially with the law student Samuel Rose and with his young cousin John Johnson. After completing *The Task*, at a loss for another subject to write on, he undertakes the translation of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and the quest for an English equivalent of Homer's Greek becomes an obsession.

Soon after he has begun work on his translation, Cowper moves from Olney, with Mrs. Unwin, to rent a pleasant house from his amiable friends the Throckmortons at the nearby town of Weston. Here, except for a memorable visit to the seaside home of the then esteemed poetaster William Hayley in 1792, he remains for close to nine years. In 1787 and 1794, he suffers further breakdowns, and in 1795 John Johnson, now a clergyman, removes him and Mrs. Unwin to Norfolk, where they reside sometimes on the coast and sometimes in Johnson's home at East Dereham. Mrs. Unwin dies in December 1796 and Cowper in April 1800. During his last years, he is still making revisions to his Homer for a new edition.

As one reads through the letters — many delightful, many tragic — that emerge from this life, one meets with clues to the course that it has taken. Remarking on a common belief that the English nation is peculiarly prone to melancholy, Cowper tells his friend Mrs. King that he was born in "a house more than commonly subject to it." How deeply his early bereavement cut into him is most clearly visible in his filial relationship with Mrs. Unwin, but he can still declare, when congratulating Rose on his mother's recovery from a dangerous illness, "The loss of a good mother is irreparable; no friend can supply her place."

Cowper reveals another aspect of his mental fragility when he counsels the young Samuel Rose to make every effort to overcome the shyness — the "vicious fear" — that keeps him from associating with respectable people of "good sense and good breeding." "It is," he urges, "the worst enemy that can attack a man destined to the forum; — it ruined me." Doubtless, he is thinking of his own fear of appearing before the Bar of the House of Lords and the consequent collapse of his worldly prospects, his sanity, and ultimately his spiritual hopes. Later, he gives similar advice to John Johnson, who is "shy as a bird" and takes "always two or three days to open his mouth before a stranger." Unlike Rose, who is famously to defend the poet William Blake successfully against a charge of sedition, and Johnson, who is to have a clerical career, Cowper never subdues his bashfulness, and during his happy days at Huntingdon decides not to take holy orders, explaining, "they who have the least idea of what I have suffered from the dread of public exhibitions, will readily excuse my never attempting them hereafter."

While Cowper's shyness is common to all phases of his life, the evangelical Christian who emerges from the hell of madness to settle at

Huntingdon in June 1765 is very different from the playful young man who takes his law studies too lightly. He now shuns the London that he once loved and does not care that there would be widespread contempt among professing Christians for his belief that God has guided him to the Unwin family and that by refusing to play cards or dance, he and the Unwins "have acquired the name of Methodists." At this time, those who dominate the Anglican Church, still influenced by memories of the Civil War with its armies of Puritans who claimed to receive divine inspiration, are suspicious of any assertions of religious experience beyond an awed response to the majesty of creation. They lay little stress on the theology of the Atonement and view a personal belief, characteristic of the Evangelicals that one's repentance has been accepted and the burden of one's sins lifted as a dangerous venture into the irrational.

On the secular plane, as he writes to his relations, this ardent Christian has found in "beloved retirement" at Huntingdon a haven where he enjoys congenial company, books, health, leisure, and swimming, and learns to ride. A pleasant letter describes the mixture of Bible and sermon reading, church attendance and religious conversation with music, walking and gardening that he relishes in the Unwin family. The tenor of their lives is glimpsed when he describes a visit from his brother, a Cambridge don whose eyes are not "opened to the things that concern his peace": "He is with us, and his presence necessarily gives a turn to the conversation that we have not been used to. So much said about nothing, and so little said about Jesus, is very painful to us, but what can be done?"

Cowper describes Huntingdon as a place "agreeable to me in all respects," but every paradise has its serpent, and one problem nags at his mind. As a mentally frail man, he is dependent on the bounty of his relatives, to whom, he acknowledges, he has usually been "a disappointment and a vexation." Luckily Joseph Hill, formerly his fellow law student and the only friend he retains from his days at the Temple, manages his finances and also lends him money, perhaps with little hope of repayment. "More debts than money," he confesses in one of the many letters he addresses to Hill, "has been my distress this many a day, and is likely to continue so."

In his early years at Olney, Cowper continues in his devout path and is happy to be able to write to Joseph Hill of the deathbed conversion of his Cambridge brother to the evangelical view that human nature is utterly corrupt: "he ... learnt to renounce his righteousness, and his own most amiable character, and to submit himself to the righteousness which is of God by faith." After the nightmare of 1773 that convinces him that God has rejected him, he continues to cling to this dismal theology. Examining himself in his wretchedness, he writes to Newton:

as the bright beams of the sun seem to impart a beauty to the foulest objects, and can make even a dunghill smile, so the light of God's countenance, vouchsafed to a fallen creature, so sweetens him and softens him for the time, that he seems, both to others and to himself, to have nothing savage or sordid about him. But the heart is a nest of serpents, and will be such while it continues to beat.... This I always professed to believe from the time that I had embraced the truth, but never knew it as I know it now.

It is from suffering, Cowper tells the Rev. James Hurdis, who is grieving over his sister's dangerous illness, "that we must learn, if we ever truly learn it, the natural depravity of the human heart, and of our own in particular" and hence "our indispensable need of atonement" since we are incapable of earning salvation for ourselves." So impressed is he with Calvin's emphasis on this doctrine that when he urges John Johnson to let his divinity be "the divinity of the glorious Reformation," he adds, "The divinity of the Reformation is called Calvinism, but injuriously. It has been that of the Church of Christ in all ages."

His evangelical faith leaves Cowper no room for broad-mindedness. While his cavalier dismissal of the freethought that substitutes Chance for Providence is no surprise, it is disappointing to find him convinced "that the Roman Catholic is the apostate and antichristian Church."

Such narrow views are characteristic, too, of John Newton, and after this clergyman exchanges the living of Olney for that of St. Mary Woolnoth in London in January 1780, Cowper embarks on a lifelong correspondence with him. In letter after letter, alongside much pleasanter matter, his woes pour out like lava from a volcano. He laments that "Nature revives again; but a soul once slain lives no more," and in 1785 he reminds his friend that "I had a dream twelve years ago, before the recollection of which all consolation vanishes, and as it seems to me, must always vanish." Fifteen months later, he explains how his work on Homer "has served at least to divert my attention, in some degree, from such terrible tempests as I believe have seldom been permitted to beat upon a human mind." When he thanks Mrs. Newton for a present of the fish that he loves, he declares that he would rejoice to exchange "A good fireside and a well-spread table" for "the rags and unsatisfied hunger of the poorest creature that looks forward with hope to a better world."

Other intimate friends are allowed to know of Cowper's plight. The Rev. William Unwin learns how he envies those "that have found a God, and are permitted to worship Him," while he, "having enjoyed the privilege some years, has been deprived of it more, and has no hope that he shall live to recover it." As a poet, he finds it necessary to plead with the

Rev. William Bull, “ask not hymns from a man suffering by despair as I do ... banished as I am, not to a strange land, but to a remoteness from His presence.” Consoling Hill on his aged mother’s death, Cowper remembers his own early bereavement and observes, “when I reflect on the pangs she would have suffered, had she been a witness of all mine, I see more cause to rejoice than to mourn, that she was hidden in the grave so soon.” To his fellow writer Hayley, he discloses, “I am hunted by spiritual hounds in the night season.” During his last decade, his fullest communications about his affliction are with the schoolmaster Teedon, to whom he writes especially of terrifying sentences he hears spoken in dreams or just as he emerges from sleep. “I never wake,” he exclaims, “without words that are a poignard in my bosom, and the pain of which I feel all the day.” On 16 November, 1792, he records how “I have had a terrible night—such a one as I believe I may say God knows no man ever had”: he had found himself being prepared for execution in about four days, after which he was “destined to suffer everlasting martyrdom in the fire.” Soon after, he insists, “For though all things are possible to God, it is not possible that He should save whom He has declared He will destroy.” He does not hide his wretchedness from Lady Hesketh, though he evidently describes it with more restraint, as when he writes to her from Hayley’s beautiful home at Eartham in Sussex, “As to that gloominess of mind, which I have had these twenty years, it cleaves to me even here.” However, he discloses to her his disordered mental condition of 1773 from which it derives:

I was suddenly reduced from my wonted rate of understanding to an almost childish imbecility.... This state of mind was accompanied ... with misapprehension of things and persons that made me a very untractable patient. I believed that every body hated me, and that Mrs. Unwin hated me most of all; was convinced that all my food was poisoned, together with ten thousand megrims of the same stamp.

Cowper’s intimates do not believe that he is damned, but the assurances and arguments even of the most devout and evangelical are defeated by the nocturnal battery of his assailants. “Your sentiments with respect to me,” he writes to Newton, “are exactly Mrs. Unwin’s. She, like you, is perfectly sure of my deliverance, and often tells me so. I make but one answer, and sometimes none at all.” To Bull’s counsel, he replies, “Prove to me that I have a right to pray, and I will pray without ceasing; yes, and praise too, even in the belly of this hell, compared with which Jonah’s was a palace, a temple of the living God.” When Newton urges him to think “more rationally and scripturally,” he replies that he knows not when he will have

the power. No more effective are Teedon's confidence that it is Satan, not God, who makes his nights a torture, or Lady Hesketh's recommendation that he pay heed to Elizabeth Carter's argument that dreams are not to be believed.

Brooding over his suffering, Cowper sometimes concedes that it is indeed Satan who invades his nights, but not without God's implicit concurrence. In 1782, addressing Bull, he mysteriously attributes his fate to a sin which "you would account no sin, you would even tell me that it was a duty." In 1794 he refers to a twenty-year-old sin which he has told Teedon of and which is the origin of all his misery. (This suggests some connection with his attempted suicide of 1773.) He is convinced, he insists to Teedon, that he has "unpardonably offended" God, and he informs Lady Hesketh, "He who made me, regrets that ever He did." Equally characteristic are his assertions to Newton that he finds his doom a complete mystery: "The dealings of God with me," he protests, "are to myself utterly unintelligible. I have never met, either in books or in conversation, with an experience at all similar to my own."

Cowper does, however, enjoy occasional brief interludes of spiritual hope, and once even the belief he has permission to pray, but such relief is always followed by relapse into his former misery. Typical is his confession to Newton, "Indeed, since I told you that I had hope, I have never ceased to despair; and have repented that I made my boast so soon." At his most desperate, he writes to Newton of such happier moments, "God gave them to me in derision, and took them away in vengeance." He concludes, as Teedon is told, "no terms are to be kept with me whom God I fear considers as a traitor." Again, this hints at attempted suicide.

A sentence in a letter to Joseph Hill clarifies the relation between Cowper's unconquerable, underlying misery and the pleasures to which the poet has recourse as a refuge: "My mind has always a melancholy cast, and is like some pools I have seen, which, though filled with a black and putrid water, will nevertheless, in a bright day, reflect the sunbeams from the surface." The gardening on which he embarks while he is still a happy man continues to soothe him. Excusing himself to William Unwin for not writing at greater length, he explains, "I like very well to write; but then I am fond of gardening too, and can find but little leisure for the pen, except when the weather forbids me to employ myself among my plants." One January, he informs Hill, "The cold is excessive; but I have a little greenhouse, which by the help of a little fire is as blooming and as green as May." The time comes when he turns this greenhouse into a summer parlour and writes to Newton, "The walls hung with garden mats, and the floor covered with a carpet, the sun too in a great measure excluded, by an awning of mats which forbids him to shine any where except upon the carpet, it

affords us by far the pleasantest retreat in Olney." As summer turns to autumn, it gives him a different pleasure:

I sit with all the windows and the door wide open, and am regaled with the scent of every flower in a garden as full of flowers as I have known how to make it. We keep no bees, but if I lived in a hive I should hardly hear more of their music. All the bees in the neighbourhood resort to a bed of mignonette, opposite to the window, and pay me for the honey they get out of it by a hum, which, though rather monotonous, is as agreeable to my ear as the whistling of my linnets.

The letters contain many references to heat, cold, rain, floods and thunderstorms as well as to the writer's physical complaints—rheumatism, disordered stomach, and inflamed eyes. Cowper writes of the gravel paths where he and Mrs. Unwin take exercise in bad weather. When it is fine, they walk into the countryside. "O!" he exclaims to Newton, "I could spend whole days and moonlight nights in feeding upon a lovely prospect! My eyes drink the rivers as they flow." To William Unwin, he describes how "Every thing 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."

Besides plants, Cowper likes for a time to work with wood making such articles as stools and rabbit hutches, and with glass to make garden frames and mend windows: he asks William Unwin to buy him a glazier's diamond pencil. Animals have a cherished place in his life, and his correspondents hear about his kitten's antics, of his hare who gives him the slip and runs through the town, of his caged linnet who occasionally flies round the room, of a goldfinch who escapes from captivity but will not leave his still imprisoned comrade, and of his brave dog Mungo who barks loudly at each thunderclap. His loving and loved spaniel Beau, who once swims to fetch a water lily that his master cannot reach with his cane, accompanies him to Hayley's home at Eartham and later to Norfolk. This dog cuts a pleasing figure in a letter to Lady Hesketh:

I forgot to tell you that my dog is spotted liver-colour and white, or rather white and chestnut. He is at present my pupil as well as dog, and just before I sat down to write I gave him a lesson in the science of fetch and carry.... To teach him is necessary, in order that he may take the water, and *that* is necessary in order that he may be sweet in summer.

Although Cowper gives Lady Hesketh, without qualms, a detailed account of the triumphant end of a foxhunt, he can protest, "All the notice that we

lords of the creation vouchsafe to bestow on the creatures, is generally to abuse them."

Cowper's capacity for enjoyment extends to food and drink. Living inland, he especially appreciates gifts of fish and shellfish, and Hill, Unwin, Newton and their wives, and later Rose and Lady Hesketh, often receive thanks for these.

Eventually Cowper finds that only one activity can subdue what preys on his mind: "so totally absorbed have I sometimes been in my rhyming occupation, that neither the past nor the future (those themes which to me are so fruitful in regret at other times), had any longer a share in my contemplation." When in 1780 he begins to compose a series of lengthy didactic poems in heroic couplets, Cowper is turning from an amateur versifier into a serious poet. He is a rigorous critic of his own and others' work. "I never," he writes, "suffer a line to pass till I have made it as good as I can," and he cautions Newton, "I am sure you would not suffer me unadmonished to add myself to the multitude of insipid rhymers, with whose productions the world is already too much pestered." In the work of most contemporary writers, he finds that either "the style is affected, or the matter is disgusting," and when he tells Hill about his reading, he explains, "Poetry, English poetry, I never touch, being pretty much addicted to the writing of it, and knowing that much intercourse with those gentlemen betrays us unavoidably into a habit of imitation, which I hate and despise most cordially."

The bulk of his short poems Cowper writes for his own pleasure, but when he composes "The Progress of Error," "Truth," and their companion works, he has a serious intent. He informs a cousin,

My sole drift is to be useful; a point which, however, I knew I should in vain aim at, unless I could be likewise entertaining. I have therefore fixed these two strings upon my bow, and by the help of both have done my best to send my arrow to the mark. My readers will hardly have begun to laugh before they will be called upon to correct that levity, and peruse me with a more serious air.

Those readers, he tells the Rev. Bull, "are children: if we give them physic, we must sweeten the rim of the cup with honey."

Cowper's publisher is Joseph Johnson, an intellectual as well as a businessman, and the patron of such advanced thinkers as Mary Wollstonecraft and Thomas Paine. In 1785, he goes on to publish the poet's next work, *The Task*, the best poem in blank verse between Milton's last volume and Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey."

Cowper finds Johnson unusually liberal, but repeatedly complains that he and his printers are infuriatingly dilatory. Some of their negotiations, which are carried out through intermediaries—Joseph Hill and later Samuel Rose—loom large in the correspondence.

Cowper finds blank verse harder to write than couplets. He explains to Newton:

Not having the music of rhyme, it requires so close an attention to the pause and the cadence, and such a peculiar mode of expression, as render it, to me at least, the most difficult species of poetry that I have ever meddled with.

The punctuation, he points out to William Unwin, is especially important in blank verse, where it must “direct the voice” of the reader.

After completing *The Task*, Cowper is at a loss for a new subject and decides to give the public a more accurate translation of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* than Pope’s and one far closer to the spirit of the original. “It is a pretty poem,” the classical scholar Richard Bentley had said to Pope about his version of the *Iliad*, “but you must not call it Homer.” Cowper finds it necessary to defend his labour on a pagan author to Newton, observing that “Homer, in point of purity, is a most blameless writer; and, though he was not an enlightened man, has interspersed many great and valuable truths throughout both his poems.” Six years later, he is happy to be able to write to his friend, “You oblige me by saying, that you will read him for my sake” and adds, “He may suggest reflections that may not be unserviceable even in a sermon.”

From many letters written while he is working on Homer, we learn how Cowper thinks poetry should be translated, about his readiness to make use of helpful criticisms, including those of Joseph Johnson and of Johnson’s associate the Swiss artist Fuseli. In time, he finds that for some passages he needs help from ancient commentators and modern editors. He resents the reading public’s intolerance of inversions and elisions such as Milton employs in *Paradise Lost*, and he blames Pope for training the modern ear to demand an emasculating smoothness in verse. (He complains that Pope’s modern imitators cannot recapture “the closeness and compactness of his expression” which are needed to complement this smoothness.) Greek, he holds, is “the finest language that ever man uttered,” and he regrets that no perfect translation is possible.

To complete and publish his version, Cowper needs help. Making a fair copy of his work from the much corrected manuscript he describes as “slavish work, and of all occupations that which I dislike the most.” Luckily, friends and relatives volunteer to transcribe for him. His pub-

lisher is still Joseph Johnson, and the method of publication is by advance subscription. In letters requesting correspondents to seek subscribers and thanking them for doing so, a new Cowper emerges: Cowper the businessman. Among those whom the reclusive poet induces to recruit subscribers are the landed gentleman John Throckmorton, the lawyer Joseph Hill and his wife, the evangelical clergyman John Newton, the Irish parliamentarian Clotworthy Rowley, the law student Samuel Rose, the Cambridge undergraduate John Johnson, and the socialite Lady Hesketh.

Even after his translation of the two epics is published, Cowper continues to make revisions, but he reluctantly accepts Joseph Johnson's request that he serve as editor of a deluxe illustrated edition of the works of Milton. Before committing himself, he is "clearly persuaded by Mr. Teedon's experiences and gracious notices that he is called to it," and he feels some satisfaction in being able to state, "when I have finished it, I shall have run through all the degrees of my profession, as author, translator, and editor." Owing to his ailments, including inflammation of the eyes, and further breakdowns, he is unable to complete his editorial task.

In one letter, Cowper declares that his veneration for John Milton, "this first of poets," equals his veneration for Homer, and that *Paradise Lost* is "the finest poem in the world," though in another he allows first place to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Milton himself he regards as "spotless ... as a man and a citizen," and he has great difficulty in fairly judging Dr. Johnson, who, in his opinion, has basely traduced him in his *Lives of the Poets*. "Oh! I could thresh his old jacket," he ejaculates, as he denounces Johnson, "till I made his pension jingle in his pocket." Yet he recognizes that Johnson "writes, indeed, like a man that thinks a great deal, and that sometimes thinks religiously" and is pleased to learn that the lexicographer approves of his own first volume of poems.

Cowper is glad that he has turned out to be a poet and not a musician, for "A poet may, if he pleases, be of a little use in the world, while a musician, the most skilful, can only divert himself and a few others." In his letters, as in his poems, Cowper denounces his countrymen for their defects and wickedness. Near the end of the war with the American colonies, he declares to Newton, "The country indeed cannot be saved in its present state of profligacy and profaneness." He has a special horror of what he judges to be the corruption of most of the clergy, now "an order which the laity retain but little respect for." He knows seven or eight in his own district "who have shaken hands with sobriety, and who would rather suppress the Church, were it not for the emoluments annexed, than discourage the sale of strong beer in a single instance." The bishops earn his censure for failing to impose discipline on their inferiors, though he is pleased to acknowledge that there are exceptions. That the Duke of Gloucester should

hold a rout on a Sunday appals him, but he sadly declines to join William Unwin in a campaign against perjury, Sabbath travel, and the multiplication of public houses since it would be ineffective.

While it is hardly surprising that Cowper does not welcome Lord Peterborough's living openly in his neighbourhood with a mistress, Lady Anne Foley, his indignation at a church service being held in honour of Handel is a different matter. Beneath some of his views can be heard the faint rumble of an ugly puritanism, though he himself is too humane to play the religious tyrant. He has, for example, the good sense to recognize the difference between the vice of drunkenness and the moderate consumption of wine—he enjoys port—and he warns that a minister should not harangue his congregants. "I believe no man," he tells Newton, "was ever scolded out of his sins," and goes on to give an acute analysis of the angry preacher:

There is no grace that the spirit of self can counterfeit with more success than a religious zeal. A man thinks he is fighting for Christ, and he is fighting for his own notions. He thinks that he is skilfully searching the hearts of others, when he is only gratifying the malignity of his own, and charitably supposes his hearers destitute of all grace, that he may shine the more in his own eyes by comparison. When he has performed this notable task, he wonders that they are not converted.

Among Britain's sins are conquests in India and the abomination of slavery. Referring to "This contention about East Indian patronage," he asserts, "I would abandon all territorial interest in a country to which we can have no right, and which we cannot govern with any security to the happiness of the inhabitants." More prominent than his protest against colonialism is his denunciation of slavery, an atrocity that so impresses itself on his mind that he cannot help asking, in a letter to Newton, "Is it essential to the perfection of a plan concerted by infinite wisdom, that such wretches should exist at all, who from the beginning of their being, through all its endless duration, can experience nothing for which they should say, It is good for us that we were created?" He sees a parallel between their plight and his own. "The day hardly ever comes," he confesses years later to Teedon, "in which I do not utter a wish that I had never been born."

The defence of liberty is a sacred duty to Cowper, who was raised by his father as a Whig, and holds that power should be equally divided between the King, the Lords, and the Commons. When the poor at Weston are subjected to compulsory inoculation against smallpox, he observes indignantly to Lady Hesketh, "We talk of our freedom, and some of us are

free enough, but not the poor": such impositions, he suggests, "perhaps in France itself could hardly be paralleled."

Politics is never more than peripheral in the life and the letters of Cowper. When he believes he enjoys divine favour, he mentions to Hill his near indifference to them, but sixteen years afterwards he asks the same friend to send him news and his opinions about it to supplement what he learns from the papers in his rural retreat. In 1791, while the French Revolution rages, he informs Lady Hesketh, "As for politics, I reckon not, having no room in my head for anything but the Slave Bill." While he considers that George III is sometimes unwise, he is always loyal to the King and fears rebellion as much as royal despotism. He believes that there can be reform without revolution, but for him politics is always subordinate to religion: the sins of London bring on the Gordon Riots, and Parliament cannot mend itself, for "Man never was reformed by man; nor ever can be."

Though they are both Whigs, Cowper is more conservative than Horace Walpole and ardently opposes the Americans in their War of Independence. He maintains that,

the King is bound, both by the duty he owes to himself and to his people, to consider himself with respect to every inch of his territories, as a trustee deriving his interest in them from God, and invested with them by divine authority for the benefit of his subjects. As he may not sell them or waste them, so he may not resign them to an enemy, or transfer his right to govern them to any, not even to themselves, so long as it is possible for him to keep it.

Cowper holds that the hidden motive of the French in aiding the rebellious American colonies is to seize them for themselves—a view in keeping with his low regard for that people. They are, Cowper considers, of a "restless and meddling temper," and they "pay little regard to treaties that clash with their convenience." Moreover, their superior refinement goes with "profligacy of principle" and they corrupt Britain as the Greeks corrupted the originally noble and heroic Romans. When the French Revolution breaks out, he sympathises with the aspirations of the people and characteristically proposes, "That nations so long contentedly slaves should on a sudden become enamoured of liberty ... seems difficult to account for from natural causes." After the mob invades the palace of the Tuileries in August 1792, he hopes the French can attain freedom while abandoning "their sanguinary proceedings." "My daily toast," he states, "is, Sobriety and Freedom to the French." Not till the execution of Louis XVI does he repudiate the Revolution, admitting to Hayley, "I will tell you what the

French have done. They have made me weep for a king of France, which I never thought to do, and they have made me sick of the very name of liberty, which I never thought to be."

In July 1790, a year after the Revolution begins, Cowper is already wary of an egalitarianism that would abolish the social classes. "Differences of rank and subordination," he asserts, "are, I believe, of God's appointment, and consequently essential to the well-being of society." Though he passes through life in a cocoon of woe—a cocoon invisible except to his intimates—because he believes that God spurns him, he cares about the figure he cuts before his fellow humans. It is strange to find this obsessively religious man anxious to obtain "a genteelish toothpick case" and a hat "furnished à la mode" and enquiring whether the stocks with which he would like to replace his worn out neckcloths are fashionable. A strong class consciousness underlies an observation on his publisher Joseph Johnson: "I verily believe that though a bookseller, he has in him the soul of a gentleman. Such strange combinations sometimes happen, and such a one may have happened in his instance." In 1785 Cowper explains to Lady Hesketh how his income, had it not been combined with Mrs. Unwin's larger one, "would not have enabled me to live as my connections demanded that I should." One purpose of his translation of Homer is to augment his funds. Bitterly he complains about the "enormous taxation" in 1793, when Britain is soon to be at war with France, an imposition "which makes it impossible for a man of small means like me, to live at all like a gentleman upon his income."

While Cowper resents the impact of heavy taxes on his own lifestyle, he is even more indignant at the way they increase the burden of the poor. A new tax on candles, which will send them to bed in the dark, makes him especially angry. It is luxuries, he justifiably maintains, that should be taxed, and wishes that the minister "would visit the miserable huts of our lace-makers at Olney, and see them working in the winter months, by the light of a farthing candle, from four in the afternoon till midnight." In the "mud-wall cottages of our poor at Olney," he finds "assembled in one individual, the miseries of age, sickness, and the extremist penury." When he declines an opportunity to read Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man*, insisting, "No man shall convince me that I am improperly governed, while I feel the contrary," it does not seem to occur to him that the poor he has compassion for may not feel as properly governed as he does.

Alongside enticing descriptions of life in countryside and garden, Cowper sends his correspondents accounts of the misery and degradation he witnesses. Commending a proposal to start a Sunday school, he laments, "Heathenish parents can only bring up heathenish children; an assertion no where oftener or more clearly illustrated than at Olney; where children

seven years of age, infest the streets every evening with curses and with songs, to which it would be unseemly to give their proper epithet." The Sabbath, he grieves, is "a day of more turbulence and riot than any other."

Cowper and Mrs. Unwin extend what charity they can to alleviate the suffering of the local poor and also distribute donations received from others, especially Robert Smith (later Lord Carrington). They pass on Smith's largesse only to the deserving: "The profane are so profane, so drunken, dissolute, and in every respect worthless, that to make them partakers of his bounty would be to abuse it."

Although Cowper likes to say that little happens at Olney, scattered sparingly through his letters are anecdotes that give some notion of life in a small country town. Mr. Raban lends him and Mrs. Unwin a room from which to watch a military exercise, in which the defenders of a bridge, after much resistance, are "obliged to quit it and run" and eventually "surrender prisoners of war." When a fire breaks out at night, there is looting, and people in fear for their homes pile goods in safer houses, including Cowper's. To his discomfort, Curate Scott finds himself marrying a profane, drunken, insolent bridegroom to a pregnant bride. A thief is supposedly being whipped by the beadle at the cart's tail, but the beadle keeps pulling the lash through red ochre in his left hand and spares the culprit's skin. On being visited by the parliamentary candidate William Wyndham Greville, who seems "a most loving, kissing, kind-hearted gentleman," Cowper, who has no vote, is surprised to hear from a local draper that he nevertheless has much influence. A dissenting minister soliciting donations to meet his congregation's debt is seen "leading a female companion into a wood." Visited by the soldier Corporal East, who professes to be an earnest Christian, Cowper is at first taken in and lends him money. On discovering the man is a hypocrite, he declares, "The Word is a flaming sword; and he that touches it with unhallowed fingers, thinking to make a tool of it, will find that he has burnt them."

Olney's own church politics are troubled. Curate Scott feuds with Mr. Raban, a carpenter and preacher, who wants to be his deputy, and Curate Page leaves the town having "quarrelled with most of his acquaintance" and "neither left admirers behind him, nor taken any with him: unless perhaps his wife be one, which admits some doubt."

Several of the incidents Cowper recounts are comical. A beggar given vermicelli soup stirs it about with the spoon for a while, before saying, "I am a poor man it is true, and I am very hungry, but yet I cannot eat broth with maggots in it." Fearing that a letter to Mrs. Throckmorton from her chaplain may not have reached her, Cowper explains that it was entrusted to a boy who had never before been more than four miles from home:

“when the Doctor gave him his direction to Bucklands, he asked, very naturally, if that place was in England.”

His humour, one of the weapons with which Cowper contends against his despair, enriches his letters. “If you find many blots, and my writing illegible,” he excuses himself to Newton, “you must pardon them in consideration of the cause. Lady Hesketh and Mrs. Unwin are both talking as if they designed to make themselves amends for the silence they are enjoined while I sit translating Homer. Mrs. Unwin is preparing the breakfast, and not having seen each other since they parted to go to bed, they have consequently a deal to communicate.” To the young clergyman John Johnson, he writes, “You have done well to leave off visiting, and being visited. Visits are insatiable devourers of time, and fit only for those who, if they did not that, would do nothing.” On one occasion, Cowper is more merry than kind. Having sent a set of mock-queries to the *Gentleman’s Magazine*, he gleefully reports to Mrs. Throckmorton, that these “are at last censured, censured severely, and censured by the man of all the world whom I should have most wished to censure them, a grave, fusty, worm-eaten antiquarian. I have already sent up a reply in which I have given him a good dressing, and should it but make him as angry as I think it cannot fail to do, we shall have rare sport all the summer.”

At the centre of Cowper’s letters is the self-portrait of a man who turns to friendship, humour, gardening, pets, rural walks, and the composition of poetry to make his life as endurable as it can be despite the terror smouldering beneath the surface of his consciousness. Closely associated with the much esteemed poet are a few memorable men and women. Foremost among these is Mrs. Unwin, a soft-hearted, intelligent person, who “would not set her foot over the threshold, unless she had, or thought she had, God’s permission.” She shares his walks and his charities, enjoys the company of his friends and relatives, critiques his writings before they are published, knits his stockings, and attends to all his comforts. He takes great pleasure in reading histories and travel books to her in the evenings. When he is deranged for six months in 1787, she is the only person he can bear near him. About a year and a half after his recovery, Mrs. Unwin falls on the ice, and her decline begins. The fall is followed by two strokes, leaving her unable to use needles or read. A smitten Cowper willingly repays her devotion, remembering, “She has been my faithful and affectionate nurse for many years.” He has described their routine at different periods, making it clear how his work fitted into their day. Now, engaged to edit Milton’s writings, he informs Teedon, “My work is all of a stand, and I have written to tell Johnson that in all appearance it will be impossible for me to be ready at the time.” To Samuel Rose, he explains, “I cannot sit with my pen in my hand, and my books before me, while she is in effect

in solitude, silent, and looking at the fire." The kindness and compassion which make her, when devoid of rags, "ready to beg them on her knees for the use of two miserable women on the point of producing," survives into her years of decrepitude. After her second stroke, she will not let Cowper, in spite of the expense, thwart the heartfelt ambition of his servant Sam Roberts and the carpenter he is working with who are building a much too elaborate garden shed.

Mrs. Unwin's tenderness extends to her son, the Rev. William Unwin, to whom she forbids the poet to send his "mournful" pieces. This man, whom he is afterwards to remember as "learned, polite, and amiable," combines the qualities of the perfect gentleman, which Lady Austen finds him to be, with those of the devout Christian and the congenial companion. Cowper praises him as one of the few "that can do good, and keep their own secret," and Lady Hesketh notices, when he has just ended a visit to Olney, that the remaining company has "spent near half an hour together without laughing." Cowper finds it necessary, however, to scold him a little for his lack of assertiveness: he is too forbearing to a delinquent curate, and he needs to realise that, despite superficial appearances, neither Jesus nor Paul opposes recourse to a law court to defend oneself against a wrongdoer.

Charged with failing to send John Newton some minor poems he has not withheld from William Unwin, Cowper explains to the former how he regards him with some awe: "If I walked the streets with a fiddle under my arm, I should never think of performing before the window of a Privy Councillor, or a Chief Justice, but should rather make free with ears more likely to be open to such amusement." Newton is sternly puritanical in his outlook and puts his literary abilities to the service of his creed. He and Cowper are collaborators. Cowper not only contributes largely to the *Olney Hymns*, but also sometimes receives Newton's help in dealing with his publisher, makes corrections in a Latin manuscript of Newton's, and translates a book of Latin letters by a Dutch minister who has been converted by reading Newton's *Cardiphonia*. A puritanical creed does not preclude kindness. Newton gives Cowper and Mrs. Unwin great delight when he visits Olney. Usually Newton tries, in vain, to persuade Cowper that spiritual despair invariably gives way to hope. Once, however, hearing rumours that he and Mrs. Unwin "have both deviated into forbidden paths, and lead a life unbecoming the Gospel" by associating too freely with "people of the world," he declares that he has never before so much doubted Cowper's redemption. However, he accepts the explanation that their social inferiors have drawn false conclusions from often seeing them climb into Lady Hesketh's carriage. Newton remains faithful to Cowper till

the end: in April 1799, the afflicted poet sends thanks to him from Norfolk for a letter and a book.

A clergyman whose visits give Cowper much solace at Olney is the Congregationalist minister William Bull, a learned, meditative, slightly melancholy man, who introduces him to the poems of the French Quietist Mme Guyon. This minister's one imperfection is that he smokes, but the affection he inspires is such that Cowper can write to him, "My greenhouse, fronted with myrtles, and where I hear nothing but the pattering of a fine shower and the sound of distant thunder, wants only the fumes of your pipe to make it perfectly delightful." In 1786, Cowper tells Joseph Johnson that Bull "is the only neighbour of mine with whom I can converse at all."

The clergyman who plays the largest part in Cowper's last years is his cousin John Johnson. When they first become acquainted, Johnson is a shy but good-humoured and entertaining youth studying mathematics at Cambridge and planning to enter the Anglican ministry. Cowper is rapidly captivated by his guileless personality, but successfully encourages him to switch his subject of study, to the indignation of his University tutor, away from mathematics; he selects civil law. Playing music, a pastime of Johnson's, Cowper allows is praiseworthy, provided it is only an avocation, and he observes, "I have known very good performers on the violin very learned also." In 1792, as the young graduate prepares for ordination, Cowper applauds his scruples about his own inclination to levity, and a year later praises his willingness to follow the evangelical path despite the prejudice against it even in the Church: "The quarrel that the world has with evangelic men and doctrines, they would have with a host of angels in the human form: for it is the quarrel of owls with sunshine; of ignorance with divine illumination." When Cowper enters his fragile last period, Johnson spends as much time caring for him as his clerical duties permit. He treats the aging poet with great kindness but also firmness, and the man Cowper has first referred to as "the wild boy Johnson" and then as "Johnny" he now speaks of as "Mr. Johnson."

One of Olney's inhabitants is a poverty-stricken, pedantic, well-meaning schoolmaster named Samuel Teedon, who believes he enjoys divine communications. Like his relationship with John Johnson, Cowper's relationship with Samuel Teedon undergoes a transformation. At first, the behaviour of this civil but tedious man is an irritant. He can make a wearisome long story out of "facts that might have been compressed into a much smaller compass" and can keep the poet and Mrs. Unwin standing in a cold wind in peril of sore throats while he pours out verbose thanks for a donation from John Newton. The time comes when Cowper confesses to Lady Hesketh, "I blame myself often for finding him tiresome, but cannot help it. My only comfort is that I should be more weary of thousands

who have all the cleverness that has been denied to Teedon." Eventually Cowper does start to believe that his less than brilliant friend does receive messages from on high. He writes to him that he would not have ventured to take the ailing Mrs. Unwin on a journey to visit Hayley "Without an answer from God as explicit and satisfactory as that which you have obtained for me." It is, unhappily, another story when Teedon believes his messages mean that Cowper is not doomed: "I get no comfort," the latter admits, "from the words you sent me yesterday, which comfort you so much. On the contrary, they filled me with alarm and terror the moment I saw them." He even has the goodness to caution his would-be helper, "I ... am not a little concerned lest your own bodily health at least should suffer by the frequent mortifications and disappointments which you receive from me."

Opposite to Teedon in personality, fortune, and their effect on Cowper's life are the gracious and elegant Throckmortons, wealthy landowners of Weston. Although as Roman Catholics they suffer civil disabilities, they are patriotic enough to hold a public celebration with illuminations, rockets, a bonfire and flowing beer to celebrate one of George III's periods of recovery from madness. When Mr. Wright has a bad fall from his horse during a foxhunt, John Throckmorton and his brother-in-law are the only riders who stop to help him. To his credit, his hostility to the theology of the Roman Church and to the papacy does not prejudice Cowper against individual Catholics. He writes to Newton that the lives of the brothers John and George Throckmorton "though they have but little of what we call evangelical light, are ornaments to a Christian country." When the Throckmortons invite him to an attempted launch of a balloon, he informs Newton, "They have lately received many gross affronts from the people of this place, on account of their religion. We thought it, therefore, the more necessary to treat them with respect." As the reserve wears off on both sides, a friendship slowly develops between the poet and this cultured, generous-spirited family who have given him the run of their grounds and free use of their vegetable garden. Mrs. Throckmorton plays the harpsichord and in 1786 can recite more of his recently published *Poems* than Cowper himself can. He discovers an unsuspected gift in John and George when they show him the massive portfolio of their architectural drawings. The days when he could have congenial conversations only with Mrs. Unwin and the Rev. Bull are behind him. Though they avoid debating religion or politics—the Throckmortons favour the most left-wing Whigs led by Charles James Fox—they often dine together, usually but not always at the family's Hall. Lady Hesketh meets them when she visits, though Cowper finds that her suspicions make it necessary for him to defend his friendship with their chaplain, Dr. Greyson. He asserts:

I do not at all suspect that his kindness to Protestants has any thing insidious in it, any more than I suspect that he transcribes Homer for me with a view for my conversion. He would find me a tough piece of business, I can tell him; for when I had no religion at all, I had yet a terrible dread of the Pope. How much more now!

In his friendship with the Throckmortons, Cowper sympathises with the desire of Roman Catholics and Nonconformists for equal citizenship with Anglicans. He declares to Joseph Hill:

The dissenters, I think, Catholics, and others, have all a right to the privileges of all other Englishmen, because to deprive them is persecution; and persecution on any account, but especially on a religious one, is abomination.

In 1798, John Throckmorton, now Sir John, visits Cowper in Norfolk.

The kindness and affection of another wealthy friend of Cowper's later years, William Hayley, earn his lasting devotion. Hayley first contacts Cowper to reassure him that there will be no clash between the biography of Milton he is writing and Joseph Johnson's edition of that poet's works. Hailing a defence of John Milton the man against what he deems the libel against him in Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*, Cowper soon succeeds in hosting Hayley at Weston. The latter takes the opportunity his journey offers to call on Lady Hesketh in London, and Cowper triumphantly claims, "I knew that you would fall in love with Hayley. Every body here has done so, and wherever he goes, every body must." Hayley happens to be at Weston when Mrs. Unwin has her second stroke, and his ministrations—he has some medical knowledge—are so helpful that Cowper finds it difficult, despite his wrenching fears, to refuse him a return visit. As a result, he, who regrets having never seen mountains, soon finds himself "a little daunted by the tremendous height of the Sussex hills," as a carriage carries him and an untroubled Mrs. Unwin across them by moonlight. His letters describe how he and Hayley work on each other's verse and prose, both at the latter's "elegant mansion," where he meets the writer Charlotte Smith and the artist George Romney, and at his humbler home in Weston. However, he sees William Hayley as an equal—"Whether you or I have the most genius I know not, nor care a fig," he asserts—and in his oblivion to the superiority of his own poetic gift, he is never irritated, as William Blake later is, by the lesser writer's limitations.

Two ladies who belong to fashionable society rather than the intellectual milieu of Hayley do much at different times to brighten Cowper's life: Lady Austen, who injects a temporary sparkle into it, and Lady Hesketh,

the Harriet Cowper of his youth, who brings a steady light. From mid-1781 for about three years, with a short break, the staid hermitage of Cowper and Mrs. Unwin is cheered for much of the time by the presence of a woman who “laughs and makes laugh, and keeps up a conversation without seeming to labour at it.” Soon after her arrival, Cowper reports to William Unwin that Lady Austen “has fallen in love with your mother and me” and describes how,

We did not want company, but when it came, we found it agreeable. A person that has seen much of the world, and understands it well, has high spirits, a lively fancy, and great readiness of conversation, introduces a sprightliness into such a scene as this, which, if it was peaceful before, is not the worse for being a little enlivened.

Some letters make it clear that she combines her vivacity with a “sense of religion, and seriousness of mind” and is of a charitable disposition, but we learn from other sources that she makes the mistake of thinking that the poet means to marry her—such verses as “The star that beams on Anna’s breast” do seem to be written by a lover—and she breaks off all connection.

Two years after the departure of the misguided woman, Cowper is overjoyed to receive a letter from Lady Hesketh, sister of the Theodora Cowper he had once desired for his wife and now a rich widow. When he moves to Olney, he thinks their separation is permanent, but the publication of his poems, especially “John Gilpin,” wins him the renewal of their dear friendship. She arranges to visit, and his letters convey his mounting excitement, as well as Mrs. Unwin’s, at the prospect. When she arrives with her carriage, servants, cheerful conversation, and sweet temper, Cowper’s high expectations are fulfilled. Mrs. Unwin shares the poet’s delight in her companionship, and she carries them about in her carriage to make new acquaintances in their own district. A strong Tory, Lady Hesketh sees John Throckmorton’s brother, who is a Whig, as a Jacobin, and Cowper teases her, quipping, “all the Tories now-a-days call all the Whigs Republicans. How the deuce you came to be a Tory is best known to yourself; you have to answer for this novelty to the shades of your ancestors, who were always Whigs ever since we had any.” Cowper does not hide his spiritual plight from her, but so great is the impact of her presence that he is able to write to Newton, “Lady Hesketh is here, and in her company even I, except now and then for a moment, forget my sorrows.” However, though she helps him in every way she can—by her society, by transcribing passages of his Homer, by procuring subscribers, and by contributing to his income and soliciting others to contribute—she has another life, and, as a society lady,

she does not leave London till Parliament is prorogued, for that is when the season ends.

Read in chronological order, as letters usually should be, Cowper's portray the transformations he undergoes: from an easy-going, pleasure-loving (though not vicious) and neglectful law student to a strict moralist and dedicated evangelical who looks back regretfully to a time when he only thought himself a Christian; from a Londoner to a city-hating country dweller who resolves never to revisit the capital; from a youth who judges a man by the extent of his classical scholarship to a man who judges others primarily by their devoutness; from a Christian who hopes for salvation to a Christian who believes himself utterly and everlastingly rejected by God; from an amateur versifier to a serious poet and professional man of letters; from a sequestered inhabitant of Olney to a member of a social circle at Weston; and from that happier state to a victim of senility in the care of his cousin John Johnson in Norfolk.