Coleridge, Cowper and Poetic Power

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I SHALL BEGIN with three extracts, 'touchstones', one might say, for aspects of poetry which are important for Coleridge:

The first is from *Notebook II*: 2414 (1805)—pleasure derived from wholeness, i.e. 'plurality in unity'.

> Seeing a nice bed of glowing Embers with one junk of firewood well placed, like the remains of an old Edifice, and another well-nigh mouldered one, corresponding to it, I felt an impulse to put on three pieces of Wood, that exactly completed this perishable architecture, tho' it was two o'clock, tho' I was that instant going to bed, and there could be in common ideas no possible use in it. Hence I seem (for I write, not having yet gone to bed) to suspect, that this desire of totalizing, of perfecting, may be the bottom impulse of many, many actions, in which it never is brought forward as an avowed, or even agnized as a conscious motive/—thence I proceed to think of restlessness in general, its fragmentary nature, and its connection if not identification with the (pains correlative to the) pleasures derived from Wholeness—i.e. plurality in unity—& the yearning left behind by those pleasures often experienced.

The second from *Biographia Literaria* Chapter 15, an example of 'aloofness' or dramatic imagination:

> His [Shakespeare's] *Venus and Adonis* seem at once the characters themselves, and the whole representation of those characters by the most consummate actors. You seem to be told nothing but to see and hear everything'. Coleridge speaks of 'the perpetual activity of attention required on the part of the reader', also of 'the rapid flow, the quick change, and the playful nature of the thoughts and images', and especially 'the alienation… the utter aloofness of the poet's own feelings, from those of which he is at once the painter and analyst'. Venus has caught sight of the dead Adonis; Shakespeare writes:
>
> > Which seen, her eyes as murdered with the view
> > Like stars ashamed of day themselves withdrew;
> >
> > Or as the snail, whose tender horns being hit,
> > Shrinks backward in his shelly cave with pain
> > And there, all smothered up, in shade doth sit,
> > Long after fearing to creep forth again:
> > So at his bloody view her eyes are fled
> > Into the deep-dark caverns of her head.

The third is from a letter by Cowper, reading Captain Cook's *Voyages*—an example of a reader's empathy, which becomes the writer's empathy (as we shall see when I discuss the sea imagery in his poem about his mother's portrait):

> My imagination is so captured upon these occasions that I seem to partake with the navigators, in all the dangers they encountered. I lose my anchor; my main-sail is rent into shreds; I kill a shark, and by signs converse with a Patagonian, and all this without moving from the fireside.
>
> (*Letters II*, to John Newton, 6 October 1783)

This paper plans to explore what Coleridge might have admired in Cowper's poetry. The famous reference to Cowper's 'divine chitchat' which occurs in a letter to Thelwall in December 1796 is preceded by a statement that Coleridge wishes to allow for a range of writing: 'Though my poetry has in general a hue of tenderness or passion over it, yet it seldom exhibits unmixed and simple tenderness or passion. My philosophical opinions are blended with or deduced from my feelings, and this, I think, peculiarises my style of writing. But do not let us introduce an Act of Uniformity against poets'. Hazlitt recalls that Coleridge spoke of Cowper, in Spring 1798, as the best modern poet, and in the first chapter of *Biographia Literaria* there are several admiring references to Cowper's *Task*. There Coleridge writes 'in the more sustained and elevated style, of the then living poets, Bowles and Cowper were, to the best of my knowledge, the first who combined natural thoughts with natural diction: the first who reconciled the heart with the head'. In comparing Thomson's Seasons with Cowper's *The Task*, he concludes that 'in chastity of diction… and the harmony of blank verse, Cowper leaves Thomson immeasurably below him; yet still I feel the latter to have been the born poet'. This is a serious indication that Coleridge at this stage thought of Cowper as a 'talent' rather than a 'productive genius'.

My intention is to take the criteria given in Chapter 15 of the *Biographia Literaria* and test them, or rather test two of the best of Cowper's poems against them. Though I shall draw on Chapter 14 and the Notebooks and letters, I shall leave Chapter 13 and the desynonymisation of 'imagination' and 'fancy' to others more learned and incisive. The talk will be divided as follows:

Part I will highlight 'the four symptoms of poetic power' as listed in Chapter 15, and attempt to qualify the second 'promise of genius'. Part 1 will conclude with a brief look at Cowper's ideas and priorities in poetry writing and reading.

Part 2 will examine in detail Cowper's poem *On the Receipt of my Mother's Picture out of Norfolk* and briefly consider how far it fulfils Coleridge's requirements for 'a legitimate or just poem'.

Part 3 will start with a reading of Cowper's poem 'To Mary' and consider Coleridge's Notebook comments on it.

Part 1

The 'four symptoms of poetic power' and Cowper's Ideals

The four symptoms of poetic potential in the young become, in the course of Chapter 15, criteria for good poetry in general.

The first symptom is 'sweetness of versification': Coleridge adds 'the sense of musical delight, with the power of producing it, is a gift of imagination'.

The second 'promise of genius' is 'the choice of subjects very remote from the private interests and circumstances of the writer'. Since both the Cowper poems I have selected are very much concerned with 'the private interests and circumstances of the writer', this symptom will need to be challenged and modified. One way of dealing with this anomaly is to pass over it in silence. I shall risk taking STC at face value.

The third symptom concerns itself with images. They 'become proofs of original genius only as far as they are modified by a predominant passion; or by associated thoughts and images awakened by that passion or when they have the effect of reducing multitude to unity, or succession to an instant; or lastly, when a human and intellectual life is transferred to them from the poet's own spirit'. He illustrates this last point in a Notebook entry, with a quotation from the storm scene in King Lear:

> I tax you not, you elements, with unkindness
> I never gave you kingdom, called you children…

and in Chapter 15 he gives an example from *Venus and Adonis* in which 'succession is reduced to an instant', concerning the youthful Adonis escaping from the insistent embrace of Venus:

> With this he breaketh from the sweet embrace
> Of those fair arms that held him to her heart,
> And homeward through the dark lawns runs apace;
> Look how a bright star shooteth from the sky!
> So glides he through the night from Venus' eye.

In a note for an 1808 lecture Coleridge wrote of these last two lines 'How many images and feelings are here brought together without effort and without discord— the beauty of Adonis—the rapidity of his flight— the yearning yet hopelessness of the enamoured gazer—and a shadowy ideal character thrown over the whole— or it acts by impressing the stamp of humanity, of human feeling, upon inanimate objects'.

The fourth characteristic is 'depth and energy of thought'. Coleridge's praise of Shakespeare under the second symptom (the choice of remote subjects) is linked with the idea of poetic distance and the way the poet remains aloof from his characters. This dramatic aloofness seems to rule out the lyric, the love poem and the elegy. However, in his Preface to *Poems on*

Various Subjects (1796) he says: 'to censure it [egotism] in a monody or sonnet is almost as absurd as to dislike a circle for being round'.

At the other end of his career it is recorded in *Table Talk*, 23 October 1833 (TT 444), 'Elegy is the form of poetry natural to the reflective mind [it must] always and exclusively [be written] with reference to the poet himself. As he will feel regret for the past… so sorrow and love become principal themes of elegy'. The second symptom therefore needs considerable qualification. For Coleridge, an admirer of Shakespeare's aesthetic distance and his Protean nature, Milton's egotism— the fact that STC says Milton's characters 'are all John Milton'—is also found admirable.

So there is no need to suppose that Coleridge would have objected to the egotistic aspect of Cowper's poem *On the Receipt of My Mother's Picture Out of Norfolk*, and we have it on the evidence of a Notebook entry that he did not object to *To Mary* on these grounds.

As additional background to the symptoms of poetic power listed in Chapter 15, it is worth bearing in mind Coleridge's description of a 'just poem' in Chapter 14:

> The reader should be carried forward, not merely or chiefly by the mechanical impulse of curiosity or by the restless desire to arrive at the final solution, but by the pleasurable activity of mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself. Like the motion of a serpent, which the Egyptians made the emblem of intellectual power…at every step he pauses and half recedes and from the retrogressive movement collects the force which again carries him onward.

Coleridge's view of the *poem as journey* is essentially one of *process and exploration* rather than *product*, an idea which Coleridge develops in a letter to Cottle, March 1815: 'The common end of… all poems is to convert a series into a whole, to make those events, which in real or imagined history move on in a straight line assume to our understanding a circular motion— the snake with its tail in its mouth.' (CL IV 545)

Cowper's own ideals are somewhat different. He says: 'Simplicity is become a very rare quality in a writer'—a very Wordsworthian thought (*Letters II*, p.185, quoted in *A Travelling Man* by Donald Davie). In another letter he says: 'To make verse speak the language of prose, without being prosaic, to marshal the words of it in such an order, as they might naturally take in falling from the lips of an extempore speaker, yet without meanness; harmoniously, elegantly, and without seeming to displace a syllable for the sake of the rhyme, is one of the most arduous tasks a poet can undertake' (*Letters II*, p.10). He also admires the sublime. Cowper finds Milton unsurpassed in sublimity in the following passage concerning the defeated Satan in comparison with his followers, the fallen angels:

> His form had yet not lost
> All her original brightness nor appeared
> Less than archangel ruined and the excess
> Of glory obscured: As when the sun new-risen
> Looks through the horizontal misty air
> Shorn of his beams, or from behind the moon
> In dim eclipse disastrous twilight sheds
> On half the nations, and with fear of change
> Perplexes monarchs

upon which Cowper comments: 'Milton's divine subject afforded him opportunities of surpassing in sublime description all the poets his predecessors… when he compares his lost archangel to the sun new-risen in the misty morning or eclipsed by the moon [he] fills the mind of his reader with astonishing conceptions of grandeur'. Cowper, like Coleridge, was a great admirer of the music of Milton's verse. In a letter to William Unwin, 1st October 1779, he says 'Was there ever anything so delightful as the music of Paradise Lost?… Variety without end! & never equalled unless perhaps by Vergil'.

Cowper's concern with craftsmanship and fidelity to poetic conception is most fully dealt with in *Book Two* of The Task. In the passage beginning 'There is a pleasure in poetic pains Which only poets know' [l.285 ff.], we are told: 'The images' are 'fleeting' and need to be 'arrested', and to be 'held fast' or 'forced to sit' until he has 'pencill'd off A faithful likeness of the forms he views'. The images are to be placed in relation to one another in 'most propitious light', an aspect no doubt of harmony. The poet's technical absorption in the difficulties of writing are seen as a distraction from the anxieties of life, which 'retire' and are forgotten.

Part Two

On Receipt of my Mother's Picture out of Norfolk The Gift of my Cousin Ann Bodham

At this point I shall examine Cowper's poem, in some detail. On the 8th of March 1790, in a letter to his cousin Lady Hesketh, Cowper states 'a new poem is born on the receipt of My Mother's Picture' (*Letters III*, 355). The word 'born' suggests a sense of natural productiveness in the way Cowper is thinking about his art. Cowper's mother, Anne Cowper née Donne, had died on 7 November 1737 after giving birth to his brother John, eight days before the poet's sixth birthday. My interpolated comments are designed to highlight the serpentine movement of the poet's consciousness, thought and feeling, in an attempt to answer the question how far *On Receipt of my Mother's Picture* is a 'legitimate' or 'just' poem in the light of the criteria set out in Chapters 14 and 15 of the *Biographia*.

> O that those lips had language! Life has pass'd
> With me but roughly since I heard thee last.
> Those lips are thine—thy own sweet smiles I see,
> The same, that oft in childhood solac'd me;
> Voice only fails, else how distinct they say,
> 'Grieve not, my child, chase all thy fears away!'
> The meek intelligence of those dear eyes
> (Blest be the art that can immortalise,
> The art that baffles Time's tyrannic claim
> To quench it) here shines on me still the same.

The poet half addresses the reader and half the picture, giving also his mediated emotions, of longing and recollection. He focuses on himself and his 'rough' treatment by life as he looks back on a golden age.

The consolation is still there 'immortalised' by art, despite 'time's tyrannic claim to quench' it. The central paradox of the opening ten lines is the strength of 'meek intelligence', a message from the owner of the eyes. The informality of the verse and the elevated language describing time's obviously destructive power emphasises the theme. The poet has moved forward only to recede and move forward again to present his reflections on the picture from a new point of view. The celebrated value is of a human relationship, and the poem is about its rediscovery and transformation.

> Faithful remembrancer of one so dear,
> O welcome guest, though unexpected here!
> Who bidd'st me honour with an artless song,
> Affectionate, a mother lost so long.
> I will obey, not willingly alone,
> But gladly, as the precept were her own:
> And, while that face renews my filial grief,
> Fancy shall weave a charm for my relief,
> Shall steep me in Elysian reverie,
> A momentary dream, that thou art she.

The picture keeps faith with the poet, is half perceived as the mother herself. The unexpected 'receipt' and its power take the poet unawares. The reenactment of the loss itself converts to gladness. The mother of his 'Fancy' 'shall weave a charm', i.e. cast a spell, 'for my relief': grief is renewed, but at the same time it 'steeps' the poet in Elysian reverie. Compare 'That willing suspension of disbelief for the moment which constitutes poetic faith'. The word 'Elysian' converts the picture of the mortal mother to a blessed spirit. Though it is the reverie that is 'Elysian', the word applies both to the mother and the poet's state of mind. Tension between grief and loss on the one hand and celebration on the other is embodied in this image. The discordant qualities of joy and grief are teased out, fused and reconciled.

My mother! When I learn'd that thou wast dead,
Say, wast thou conscious of the tears I shed?
Hover'd thy spirit o'er thy sorr'wing son,
Wretch even then, life's journey just begun?
Perhaps thou gav'st me, though unfelt, a kiss;
Perhaps a tear, if souls can weep in bliss—
Ah that maternal smile! it answers— Yes.

The actual mother, for the poet the remembrancer, has become the reality by being apostrophised. An alternative view of the bereavement is made available. The serpent of the poem's journey pauses and half recedes from the unqualified sense of loss to renewed contact with the mother. These lines suggest a new possibility of consolation of which the poet was previously unaware.

I heard the bell toll'd on thy burial day,
I saw the hearse, that bore thee slow away,
And, turning from my nurs'ry window, drew
A long, long sigh, and wept a last adieu!
But was it such?—It was—Where thou art gone
Adieus and farewells are a sound unknown.
May I but meet thee on that peaceful shore,
The parting word shall pass my lips no more!

The retrogressive movement collects the force which again carries him onward. The stark reality of death is rediscovered: the sound of the tolling bell is enacted by the monosyllabic diction. The poet as child withdraws to assess the situation. The poet is thus enabled to view his childhood experience with aesthetic distance. He struggles to accept reality, carried forward by a restless desire to arrive at a final solution. The vision of permanence is reassuring, but the longed-for communication impossible. The serpent recedes. Adieus would not be needed because mother and son would never again need to part. Here we also have the first introduction of the sea theme—an extended image of life, incorporating both the mother's experience and his own, which will bring about the achievement of plurality in unity at the end of the poem.

Thy maidens, griev'd themselves at my concern,
Oft gave me promise of a quick return.
What ardently I wished, I long believ'd,
And, disappointed still, was still deceiv'd.
By expectation every day beguil'd,
Dupe of to morrow even from a child.
Thus many a sad to morrow came and went,
Till, all my stock of infant sorrow spent,
I learn'd at last submission to my lot,
But, though I less deplor'd thee, ne'er forgot.

The 'I' of the poem is supported by human sympathy, but the maidens comfort by deceit, now recognised as such by the poet. False comfort is given because of a wish to hide the truth. The poet as child is deceived into expecting the mother's return.

The poet had false expectations which intensified his grief. Acceptance has been earned and learned by experience of wearied hope. This is the turning-point of the poem.

> Where once we dwelt our name is heard no more,
> Children not thine have trod my nurs'ry floor;
> And where the gard'ner Robin, day by day,
> Drew me to school along the public way,
> Delighted with my bauble coach, and wrapp'd
> In scarlet mantle warm, and velvet cap,
> 'Tis now become a hist'ry little known,
> That once we call'd the past'ral house our own.

Others have taken over the place associated with the family name; members of another family use the nursery.

The regular orderly life is recalled: the gardener is part of the extended life in the home. The poet associates his childhood with images of delight. The period of time at Berkhamstead is not remembered by others, has ceased to exist in the social memory.

> Short-liv'd possession! but the record fair,
> That mem'ry keeps of all thy kindness there,
> Still outlives many a storm, that has effac'd
> A thousand other themes less deeply trac'd.
> Thy nightly visits to my chamber made,
> That thou mightst know me safe and warmly laid;
> Thy morning bounties ere I left my home,
> The biscuit, or confectionery plum;
> The fragrant waters on my cheeks bestow'd
> By thy own hand, till fresh they shone and glow'd;
> All this, and more endearing still than all,
> Thy constant flow of love, that knew no fall,
> Ne'er roughen'd by those cataracts and breaks,
> That humour interpos'd too often makes;
> All this still legible in mem'ry's page,
> And still to be so to my latest age,

He is confident that every detail of the plurality of her loving actions to him will remain with him, but still more confident that he will remember the unifying force of her love's 'constant flow'.

> Adds joy to duty, makes me glad to pay

Such honours to thee as my numbers may;
Perhaps a frail memorial, but sincere,
Not scorn'd in Heav'n, though little notic'd here.

Could Time, his flight revers'd, restore the hours,
When, playing with thy vesture's tissu'd flow'rs,
The violet, the pink, and jessamine,
I prick'd them into paper with a pin,
(And thou wast happier than myself the while,
Wouldst softly speak, and stroke my head and smile)
Could those few pleasant hours again appear,
Might one wish bring them, would I wish them here?
I would not trust my heart— the dear delight
Seems so to be desir'd, perhaps I might –
But no— what here we call our life is such,
So little to be lov'd, and thou so much,
That I should ill requite thee to constrain
Thy unbound spirit into bonds again.

Death, looked at here from the point of view of the deceased, is seen as freedom, a freedom emphasised by the traditional, but here especially vivid, extended metaphor of a ship coming triumphantly in to a delectable harbour:

Thou, as a gallant bark from Albion's coast
(The storms all weather'd and the ocean cross'd)
Shoots into port at some well-haven'd isle,
Where spices breathe, and brighter seasons smile,
There sits quiescent on the floods, that show
Her beauteous form reflected clear below,
While airs impregnated with incense play
Around her, fanning light her streamers gay;
So thou, with sails how swift! hast reach'd the shore
'Where tempests never beat nor billows roar',

This image of achieved perfection, of a worked-for unity, is of great stillness and beauty, and fused into the structure of the poem is imaginatively satisfying. The word 'Shoots' combines energy with emotional achievement, and the image of the boat reflected in the still water gives a luminous quality to the emblem. Idea and image seem to be perfectly blended.

And thy lov'd consort on the dang'rous tide
Of life long since has anchor'd at thy side.

This is the first we have heard of the father, and it comes in rather unexpectedly. The dangerous tide is still acknowledged, but peace at the end of the journey ('anchor'd') transcends restlessness.

> But me, scarce hoping to attain that rest,
> Always from port withheld, always distress'd—
> Me howling blasts drive devious, tempest-toss'd,
> Sails ripp'd, seams op'ning wide, and compass lost,
> And day by day some current's thwarting force
> Sets me more distant from a prosp'rous course.

"[F]rom port withheld' gives a sense of incompleteness—compare 'embers' in the first Notebook example. The unachieved ideal of hoped-for rest is contrasted with 'well-haven'd isle'. The extreme contrast of the poet's situation with the imagined situation of his mother and father threatens the somewhat precarious emotional balance of the poem; Cook's *Voyages* are pressed into service here.

> Yet o the thought, that thou art safe, and he!
> That thought is joy, arrive what may to me.

Peace of mind is recovered through his joy in recognition of his parents' blessed state. Empathy for the situation of the dead parents is matched by indifference to self. Cowper here moves between egotistical elegy and dramatic aloofness.

> My boast is not, that I deduce my birth
> From loins enthron'd, and rulers of the Earth;
> But higher far my proud pretensions rise –
> The son of parents pass'd into the skies.

This is a reference to the fact that the Donnes, his mother's family, claimed to be descended from Henry III, King of England; his parents' supposed unimpeachable virtue, and the spiritual peace he feels that they have found, is much more important to him. The tone here seems complex: the hyperbolic treatment dispels any sense of bitterness. The poet's ambitions are neither social nor artistic, but Christian and familial.

> And now, farewell— Time unrevok'd has run
> His wonted course, yet what I wish'd is done.
> By contemplation's help, not sought in vain,
> I seem t'have liv'd my childhood o'er again,
> To have renew'd the joys that once were mine,
> Without the sin of violating thine:

He has not been able to reverse the flight of time, but he has achieved, through his reflections on the picture, a new view of the loss of his mother.

> And, while the wings of Fancy still are free,
> And I can view this mimic show of thee,

Time has but half succeeded in his theft -
Thyself remov'd, thy pow'r to soothe me left.

The realistic re-acquisition of the mother can only be partial; the struggle to reconcile the reality of death with the rediscovery of the essence of his mother has been achieved through both the picture and the poem it has prompted. The various elements of the experience are fused into one, and the multi-faceted presentation of the experience 'totalises' the discordant qualities of joy and loss into a new unity.

Anne Donne Cowper (1703-1737), by Samuel Wright, 1909. This is based on an engraving by William Blake, taken from an original painting by D Heins, which was probably the picture Cowper knew: if it is extant, it has not been located.

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Part Three

To Mary

In the final section of this talk, I shall consider *To Mary*, the only one of Cowper's poems that has anything like a full Notebook commentary by Coleridge, and ask why STC says what he does. I shall try to comment on *To Mary* as a poem, rather than as a piece of autobiography or a case study.

The poem is about change taking place over time, or the perception of change from a significant moment in the past. The poet is longing for escape from the current situation and looks back on previous joint experience that had taken place under a clearer sky. It may be helpful to state that at the time of writing (1792) Mary Unwin was 68 and had just suffered her second paralytic stroke. Cowper was 61.

To Mary

i
The twentieth year is well-nigh past,
Since first our sky was overcast,
Ah would that this might be the last
My Mary!

ii
Thy spirits have a fainter flow,
I see thee daily weaker grow—
Twas my distress that brought thee low
My Mary!

iii
Thy needles once a shining store
For my sake restless heretofore,
Now rust disused, and shine no more
My Mary!

iv
For though thou gladly wouldst fulfil
The same kind office for me still
Thy sight now seconds not thy will
My Mary!

v
Well thou play'dst the housewife's part,
And all thy threads with magic art
Have wound themselves about this heart
My Mary!

vi
Thy indistinct expressions seem
Like language utter'd in a dream,
Yet me they charm, whate'er the theme
My Mary!

vii
Thy silver locks once auburn bright
Are still more lovely in my sight
Than golden beams of orient light
My Mary!

viii
For could I view nor them nor thee
What sight worth seeing could I see?
The sun would rise in vain for me
My Mary!

ix
Partakers of the sad decline
Thy hands their little force resign,
Yet gently prest press gently mine
My Mary!

x
And then I feel that still I hold
A richer store ten-thousandfold
Than misers fancy in their gold
My Mary!

xi
Such feebleness of limbs thou prov'st
That now at ev'ry step thou mov'st
Upheld by two, yet still thou lov'st
My Mary!

xii
And still to love though pressed with ill,
In wintry age to feel no chill
With me is to be lovely still
My Mary!

xiii
But ah by constant heed I know
How oft the sadness that I show
Transforms thy smiles to looks of woe
My Mary!

xiv
And should my future lot be cast
With much resemblance of the past
Thy worn-out heart will break at last
My Mary!

Verse 10 was omitted from William Hailey's 1803 edition, possibly in deference to Lady Hesketh's wish that Cowper's love for Mary should be presented as entirely filial. Coleridge's copy of the poem did not contain this stanza.

Coleridge responded to this poem in a Notebook entry in early February 1805 (CN II, 2433), in ways which show a slightly guilty self-reproof and self-distrustful unease with some of the diction. He wishes to alter the total form of the poem.

Coleridge's approving response to the poem is contained in the phrases 'divine poem', 'original strain of thought', 'feeling honourable to human nature' and 'a diamond', albeit flawed. His objections to the poem are focused on certain individual words, and encourage him to reshape the whole poem: 'I ask whether this divine poem would not have been more perfect if the 3rd, 4th and 5th stanzas has been omitted and the 10th and 11th [i.e.11th and 12th in our version] transposed so as to stand as the third and fourth'. He appears not to be confident in his application of the principles of decorum. He says at first that it is not the meanness of the word 'needles' that he objects to, but then suggests that it might be, partly. There is just a hint of a parallel with Dr Johnson's objection to the use of 'button' in King Lear as a word unsuitable for tragedy. He also objects to 'once a shining store' as being a 'speck in a diamond'. If the poem had not been 'dear' he might have been harsher and blamed the inappropriate phrase on the need for a rhyme—'a rhyme-botch'. It is certainly true that Cowper himself had technical problems with stanzas 3 and 4, since the version we have is a rewrite.

Next he turns his attention to the word 'restless'. This is yet more fascinating. The word, we are told, is 'rather too strong an impersonation for the serious tone and realness of the poem, and seems to tread too closely on the mock-heroic'. Coleridge tends elsewhere to use the word 'restless' with the connotation of 'uneasy in mind or spirit', as in the embers entry, whereas Cowper tends to use 'restless' more literally: in *The Task*, he describes a chair with an upright back, and a continuously turning mill-wheel, as 'restless'. It appears that Coleridge is imposing his selection of connotations on Cowper, and then complaining that they are 'too strong a personation' for rapidly-moving needles. He appears to be displaying 'restlessness' in impertinently destroying Cowper's achieved wholeness in order to carry out his own perfecting and totalizing, treating Cowper's poem like the embers which he couldn't resist altering and rearranging. In any case it is difficult to see how it might seem too strong for the serious tone and for the 'realness' of the poem. It is as if Coleridge feels a proprietorial right to push Cowper's poem about to make it, as he sees it, more perfect. It is, further, difficult to understand why

Coleridge objects to the mention of the restricting effect of poor eyesight, since physical decline is closely related to the main subject and effect of the poem. From my point of view, it is particularly interesting that STC is prepared to jettison the fact of blindness for the preservation of what he judges to be the integrity of the poem as a poem.

When Coleridge says, of stanza five, that the 'graceful and affecting spirit of playfulness' would be appropriate only if the poem had less depth of feeling, he seems to be basing his judgment on the idea of 'threads' using 'magic art'. The impropriety seems to have been imported into the poem by Coleridge; the reader, after all, has responsibilities for propriety as well as the poet himself. The test that he suggests for his own 'improved' version of Cowper's poem is revealing in two main ways. First, he sees it as his job to retotalise someone else's poem; secondly, he prescribes the ideal audience/reader—'a well-educated but natural woman', 'an unaffected gentle being endued with sense and sensibility'. Even then he is not confident of his critical judgment, and says 'I seem to be sure', but he needs the reassurance of other supportive readers who by implication are to receive the poem, as revised by him, as a totality, and agree with his judgment.

Cowper's rhymed octosyllabic stanza is technically demanding , but is handled with musical skill, subtly varying the impact of the refrain. The poem is bound together by an unflinching honesty and recognition of responsibility. The variety of images is 'modified by a predominant passion', and thought and feeling are unified throughout; the simplicity of the repeated 'My Mary' helps to check any excessive emotion. The poem seems to me absolutely to 'contain in itself the reasons why it is so and not otherwise'.

Conclusion

I have chosen to look at two complete poems to discover how far Cowper achieves what Coleridge seems to be looking for in a 'just poem'. I have borne in mind STC's Notebook observation that no criticism can be particularly instructive 'that does not enter into minutiae'. I might have examined parts of longer poems, notably *The Task*, but that would not have given an opportunity for examining 'the flux and reflux of the mind in all its subtlest feelings'. Equally it might have been possible, with more time at one's disposal, to have compared poems by Cowper with parallel poems by Coleridge, such as *The Diverting History of John Gilpin* and the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, or Cowper's *Shrubbery* and the *Dejection Ode*, or the 'sooty films' in *The Task*, Bk. Four, might have been examined in relation to *Frost at Midnight*.

Throughout the poem *On The Receipt of My Mother's Picture Out of Norfolk* Cowper, by mediating his thought and feeling through both his mother's picture and through clear images, achieves at times considerable aesthetic distance, and indeed in the description of the journey to the imagined island comes very close to a Shakespearian aloofness, drawing, as he does, on his reading of Cook's *Voyages*, as I mentioned at the start of the talk. In his

Notebook entry on the embers, the first of the 'touchstones', Coleridge speaks of feeling an impulse of 'totalizing', of 'perfecting', and the 'pleasures derived from wholeness', which nonetheless leaves behind 'a yearning'— in *My Mother's Picture* Time has, after all, been half successful in his theft. If I may go beyond my self-imposed area of reference, and draw on Chapter 22, the whole poem falls not far short of what STC singles out as the fifth beauty of Wordsworth's poetry, 'a meditative pathos, a union of deep and subtle thought with sensibility'. Cowper 'diffuses a tone and spirit of unity that blends and as it were fuses each into each by that synthetic and magical power to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination'.

Coleridge is never easy to pin down. I will finish by adapting what T S Eliot said of Shakespeare: 'About anyone so great as Coleridge, it is probable that we can never be right; and if we can never be right, it is better that we should from time to time change our way of being wrong'.

Mary Unwin, neé Cawthorne, by Slater(?) after Arthur Devis, from the lid of her workbox. Born in 1723, and thus 8 years older than Cowper, she married Morley Unwin in 1744 and got to know Cowper through their evangelical son, William. Cowper became a paying guest in their house in 1765. After the death of her husband in 1767, she and Cowper moved to Olney. She suffered her first stroke in 1791, and by 1793 her speech and movements were severely impaired. She died in 1796.

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