

# Romantic Reclusion in the Works of Cowper and Wordsworth



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***Abstract***

The end of the eighteenth century witnessed an imaginative mass migration as authors wrote about withdrawing from society. This thesis traces the origins of ‘Romantic reclusion’ in the works of Cowper and Wordsworth, particularly Cowper’s poem *The Task* and Wordsworth’s unfinished masterwork *The Recluse*, which epitomise the tradition. Romantic reclusion differs from ‘solitude’ and ‘retirement’ in that its motives were social. Cowper and Wordsworth wrote about withdrawing in order to criticise the increasing commercialism and competition they saw in British society. Both poets imagined seceding into a community of individuals who would care for a shared set of values, envisaging this as a form of non-violent political protest leading to reform. The thesis builds on recent studies of Romantic community, and develops Raymond Williams’s cultural criticism, to refute the New Historicist position that Romantic writing elides history. It proceeds by historicising Cowper’s and Wordsworth’s concepts of reclusion, tracing echoes of their extensive reading about this subject in what they wrote. Romantic reclusion emerges as an artistic attempt to defend the individual against the dehumanising effects of contemporary society. Its aims can be grouped under four interrelated headings—‘creative’, ‘medical’, ‘political’, and ‘natural’—which form the basis of the chapter divisions.

Chapter One argues that Cowper and Wordsworth both presented Milton as a precedent for their poetic reclusion. They withdrew from literary society and cut themselves off from the diction of eighteenth-century poetry, because they believed that it turned words into luxury items which could only be purchased by the imaginations of a few. Cowper’s translations of Madame Guyon and Wordsworth’s modernisations of Chaucer both attempted to develop a plain style which would unite a wider, non-hierarchical community of readers.

Chapter Two explores the origins of Cowper's reclusion in his spiritual crisis of 1763-5. Beginning with a study of medical books owned by Cowper's doctor, Nathaniel Cotton, it argues that Cotton regarded Cowper's illness as a product of eighteenth-century models of sociability. Both Cowper and Wordsworth employed Robert Burton's concept of 'Honest Melancholy', or sorrow for the state of one's country, to critique social competition and call for new models of community. Chapter Three examines Cowper's and Wordsworth's presentations of reclusion as the best response to the violence of the American and French Revolutions. Drawing on the works of Classical and modern historians, both poets argued that political revolutions would only succeed once individuals learned to renounce self-interest and govern their selfish passions. The 'retired man' becomes the unexpected political hero of *The Task*, which in turn forms the basis for Wordsworth's conception of *The Recluse*. Finally, Chapter Four explores Cowper's and Wordsworth's interests in natural theology, arguing that both poets built on the works of writers including Calvin, David Hartley, and Joseph Butler to explain the psychological mechanism by which reclusion in nature could help to reform the mind, eliminating the selfish passions and teaching individuals to live in an active, mutually responsible community.

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## ***Introduction***

*'Community is made of what retreats from it': The theory of reclusion*

The eighteenth century in Britain is often characterised as the age of sociability. John Mullan has interpreted the sentimental literature of this period as an array of 'projects for showing that there could be social exchange which transcended self-interest'.<sup>1</sup> He suggests that the portrayal of sympathy in eighteenth-century novels played an important role in 'the production of society'.<sup>2</sup> More recently, Jon Mee has shifted the focus from sympathy to conversation, arguing that literary depictions of 'conversation as a polite performance aiming to consolidate certain kinds of social behaviour' helped to facilitate 'the creation of community'.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the appearance of Rousseau's essay *Du contrat social (The Social Contract)* in 1762, the 'creation of community' and 'the production of society' emerged as central themes at the end of the eighteenth century. Yet the close of this century also saw an imaginative mass migration, as authors began to write about individuals withdrawing from society. Among the more famous examples, one might name Charlotte Turner Smith (*Ethelinde, or The Recluse of the Lake*, 1789), Coleridge ('Fears in Solitude', 1798), Godwin (*St Leon*, 1799), Thelwall (*Poems Chiefly Written in Retirement*, 1801), Hemans ('The Domestic Affections', 1812), the Shelleys (*Alastor, or The Spirit of Solitude*, 1816; *Frankenstein*, 1818), and Byron (*Manfred*, 1817). In the literature of the Romantic period, the concept of sociability seems to give way to its opposite. To what extent did this process involve a critique of the concept of sociability,

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<sup>1</sup> John Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1988), 14.

<sup>2</sup> Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability*, 17.

<sup>3</sup> Jon Mee, *Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention, and Community 1762 to 1830* (Oxford, 2011), 37.

and to what extent did the authors writing about withdrawal see it as a positive means of understanding the creation of society?

This thesis sets out to explore the literary phenomenon that I propose to call ‘Romantic reclusion’. In order to do so, it focuses on the works of William Cowper and William Wordsworth. These two authors epitomise the tradition to a greater extent than their contemporaries, because both of them made it a guiding principle of their writing throughout their careers. Cowper wrote about his choice to retire from London to Huntingdon in his conversion narrative, *Adelphi* (c. 1769); he then wrote a founding work of Romantic reclusion in *The Task* (1785). After March 1798, Wordsworth structured much of his writing around what Alan Bewell has called the ‘governing intention’ of *The Recluse*.<sup>4</sup> By focusing on Cowper and Wordsworth, I hope to do justice to the scope of their works, and to trace the genesis of their ideas about reclusion. In addition, I aim to offer a timely reassessment of Cowper’s importance to Romanticism, and to meet the need for a comparative study of his writing with Wordsworth’s. Several critics have made comparisons between these two poets.<sup>5</sup> Kenneth Johnston has also recognised *The Task* as an influence on *The Recluse*.<sup>6</sup> Yet no one has written in detail about Cowper’s role in bequeathing to Wordsworth the theme of reclusion, or resolved the question of why Wordsworth assigned it such a central role in his writing.

Until recently, Romantic criticism has tended to accept Shelley’s charge of apostasy in his sonnet ‘To Wordsworth’: ‘thy voice did weave / Songs consecrate to truth and liberty,— / Deserting these, thou leavest me to grieve, / Thus having been, that thou

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<sup>4</sup> Alan Bewell, *Wordsworth and the Enlightenment: Nature, Man, and Society in the Experimental Poetry* (New Haven and London, 1989), 3.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Kevis Goodman, *Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism: Poetry and the Mediation of History* (Cambridge, 2004), 81-4; Mary Jacobus, *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth’s Lyrical Ballads (1798)* (Oxford, 1976), 44-51; Martin Priestman, *Cowper’s Task: Structure and Influence* (Cambridge, 1983), 162-98; and Jonathan Wordsworth, *William Wordsworth: The Borders of Vision* (Oxford, 1982), 231-2.

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth R. Johnston, *Wordsworth and the Recluse* (New Haven and London, 1983), 13.

shouldst cease to be'.<sup>7</sup> My contention is that, despite Wordsworth's move towards Anglican Christianity and Tory politics later in life, his writing about reclusion was not part of the apostasy that Shelley describes. My argument centres on the contention that Romantic 'reclusion' differs from 'solitude' and 'retirement' in that its motive was social. Many critics have read Wordsworth's interest in reclusion as his 'way of distancing himself from his earlier enthusiasms for revolutionary projects'.<sup>8</sup> Both before and after New Historicism, critics have figured Wordsworth's decision to write about withdrawal as a 'denial of historical reference'.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps one reason that Romantic criticism has been slow to move beyond this position is that critics like Jerome McGann have provided—what we might otherwise lack—an explanation of the Romantic turn that Shelley described in his sonnet. For McGann, the withdrawal from social commitments was part of the 'Romantic Ideology':

The field of history, politics, and social relations is everywhere marked in the Romantic Period by complex divisions and conflicts previously unprecedented in Europe ... The Romantic position—it is an historically limited and determinate one—is that ... poetry by its nature can transcend the conflicts and transiencies of this time and that place.<sup>10</sup>

Jonathan Bate famously resisted this argument by advancing the Ecocritical position that 'the economy of human society may in the end be dependent on something larger, the economy of nature'.<sup>11</sup> Romantic writers, he argued, were engaging with an ecological problem even more pressing than the political consequences of the French Revolution. Yet such claims do not meet the New Historicist charge of apostasy head-on: Ecocriticism has left the works of critics like McGann, Chandler, Levinson, Simpson, and Liu unanswered on their own terms. This thesis attempts to provide such an answer, by arguing that New

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<sup>7</sup> Percy Shelley, 'To Wordsworth', ll. 11-14, *The Poems of Shelley*, ed. Geoffrey Matthews and Kelvin Everest, 3 vols (London and New York, 1989), vol. 1, 455.

<sup>8</sup> Johnston, *Wordsworth and the Recluse*, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Alan Liu, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (Stanford, 1989), 47.

<sup>10</sup> Jerome McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago and London, 1983), 69.

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (London, 1991), 57.

Historicist critics did not sufficiently historicise the concept of reclusion involved in the supposed Romantic turn from history.

David Simpson has argued that in *The Prelude* Wordsworth ‘accepted as a matter of faith that the “glorious creature” that man is capable of becoming is to be found ‘One only in ten thousand’ (12: 90-1) ... Thus a solitary wandering is now, paradoxically, the poet’s best image of a community’.<sup>12</sup> Though I concur that for Wordsworth ‘solitary wandering’ does become the ‘best image of a community’, I disagree with Simpson’s description of this turn as a ‘matter of faith’ or an ideological ‘displacement’.<sup>13</sup> Both Wordsworth and Cowper have been accused of making what John Barrell calls ‘a retreat to the domestic, the small-scale’.<sup>14</sup> Yet each of them spent years contemplating the merits and demerits of such reclusion, from their earliest published works to their last. The concept of the Romantic Ideology is historically reductive of the emotional experience of these authors: it does not contextualise the motives for their withdrawal. When one does so, by replicating their reading of eighteenth-century social theorists and writers within the tradition of retirement literature, Cowper’s and Wordsworth’s commitments to reclusion begin to make sense as social commitments: the result of their investment in the idea of community. Rather than being a ‘way of distancing [themselves] from [their] earlier enthusiasms for revolutionary projects’,<sup>15</sup> Romantic reclusion begins to seem like the logical and direct continuation of these projects.

Only now are critics beginning to revisit the theme of community in Romantic writing. For a long time, consensus has tended towards Michael H. Friedman’s view that ‘Wordsworth’s growing concern with the humble classes ... signified a ratification of the

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<sup>12</sup> David Simpson, *Wordsworth’s Historical Imagination: The Poetry of Displacement* (New York and London, 1987), 125.

<sup>13</sup> Simpson, *Wordsworth’s Historical Imagination*, 126.

<sup>14</sup> John Barrell, ‘Afterword: moving stories, still lives’, in Gerald MacLean, Donna Landry, and Joseph P. Ward (eds), *The Country and the City Revisited: England and the Politics of Culture, 1550-1850* (Cambridge, 1999), 231-50, 245.

<sup>15</sup> Johnston, *Wordsworth and the Recluse*, 13.

established social structure'.<sup>16</sup> More recently, John Rieder revised this argument by claiming that:

Wordsworth's turn—or, as he would have it, his return—to poetry as the locus of authentic community and utopian desire takes part in a widespread mid-1790s movement away from political activism, and it involves the problematic, but classically sanctioned, ethical status of rural retirement as opposed to civic participation.<sup>17</sup>

Since Rieder made these remarks, critics have begun to uncover a more genuine commitment to community in Romantic writing. One of the first to do this was Regina Hewitt, in her book *The Possibilities of Society* (1997). Hewitt approached the writings of Wordsworth and Coleridge from a sociological perspective. She argued that although sociology did not develop as an independent discipline until the later nineteenth-century, Wordsworth and Coleridge's works anticipated many of its major concerns. Hewitt contends that their reflections on the failure of the French revolution 'turned them away from the specific political events and toward the social nature of all human activity. They did not so much retreat from politics as approach politics from a different point of view'.<sup>18</sup> For Hewitt, '[t]he poet emerges as someone who develops an interpretive understanding of social relationships—in short, as a sociologist'.<sup>19</sup> Though I prefer to contextualise Cowper's and Wordsworth's writing using texts that they themselves read, and therefore do not use the term 'sociology', Hewitt's insights remain important for uncovering a fundamental concern with community in works which New Historicist critics read as turning away from history and society.

Hewitt uses the concept of community to unite New Historicist and Ecocritical readings of Romantic poetry, observing that 'concern with nature is a type of concern with

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<sup>16</sup> Michael H. Friedman, *The Making of a Tory Humanist: William Wordsworth and the Idea of Community* (New York, 1979), 297.

<sup>17</sup> John Rieder, *Wordsworth's Counterrevolutionary Turn: Community, Virtue, and Vision in the 1790s* (Newark and London, 1997), 19.

<sup>18</sup> Regina Hewitt, *The Possibilities of Society: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the Sociological Viewpoint of English Romanticism* (Albany, 1997), 45.

<sup>19</sup> Hewitt, *The Possibilities of Society*, 101.

society'. For Hewitt, 'society' denotes not just the relationships within a human collective, but also those of the self with other beings.<sup>20</sup> Going further back, Raymond Williams argued the same thing in his landmark study *Culture and Society* (1958). Williams, whose cultural criticism remains extremely important to my arguments about reclusion, opposed 'culture' to what he called the 'dominative mood' of industrial society: 'the theory and practice of man's mastering and controlling his natural environment'.<sup>21</sup> Against the dominative mood, he argued,

the idea of culture is necessary, as an idea of the tending of *natural* growth ... We have to live by our own attachments, but we can only live fully, in common, if we grant the attachments of others, and make it our common business to keep the channels of growth clear.<sup>22</sup>

The organic metaphors in this passage highlight the inseparability of society and ecology. Williams implies that the distinction between the human and the non-human is an artificial one, and that a commitment to community should involve an equal respect for both human society and the environment. In this context, it is striking that Williams dismissed McGann's contention in *The Romantic Ideology* some twenty-five years before that book appeared. '[T]he supposed opposition,' he wrote, 'between attention to natural beauty and attention to government, or between personal feeling and the nature of man in society, is on the whole a later development'.<sup>23</sup> For Williams, this development was a result of the 'dissociation of interests' brought about by the development of individualism within industrial society.<sup>24</sup> The concept of community, then, might enable us to avoid the dichotomies between nature and society that preoccupied critics in the 1980s and '90s. Williams's work continues to offer an important corrective by reminding us that Wordsworth's intention to write a poem about '*Nature, Man, and Society*' was not self-

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<sup>20</sup> Hewitt, *The Possibilities of Society*, 58.

<sup>21</sup> Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (London, 1958), 336.

<sup>22</sup> Williams, *Culture and Society*, 337.

<sup>23</sup> Williams, *Culture and Society*, 30.

<sup>24</sup> Williams, *Culture and Society*, 30.

contradictory or even tripartite.<sup>25</sup> What Wordsworth wanted to write, in effect, was a poem about community taken in its true, inclusive sense.

In recent years, Kurt Fosso's book *Buried Communities* has done much to advance the understanding of community in Wordsworth's poetry. Fosso contends that 'mourning in fact underlies and makes possible most of the communities Wordsworth envisioned for his turbulent, reform-minded Romantic age'.<sup>26</sup> Fosso suggests that by rooting his vision of community in mourning Wordsworth expresses an elegiac longing for the principle of community itself:

Unlike the universalist visions of community or society constituted by a common essence, as proposed by Spinoza, Rousseau, Edmund Burke, and other late-Enlightenment philosophers, such community is predicated not upon an essence or presence but upon something or someone *missing*.<sup>27</sup>

Building on Fosso's work, I argue that in the case of reclusion, the missing individual serves as a synecdoche, expressing the fact that what is truly 'missing' is the principle of community itself. Yet I depart from Fosso's argument to the extent that it still depends on a version of New Historicist turn, which he describes as 'the watershed of 1804'.<sup>28</sup> Fosso argues that '[r]etreat becomes the frequent figure of the works composed after 1804, with the hermitage serving as the emblem of a desire for protection from the cares of the moral world, especially from those of incessant and disquieting remembrance'.<sup>29</sup> The model of the poet's development implied in this image of 'retreat' is, I would argue, too reductive: it tends to gloss over the complexities of all that Wordsworth (like Cowper) read and wrote about his interest in reclusion.

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<sup>25</sup> William Wordsworth, 11 March 1798, *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest De Selincourt, rev. Chester L. Shaver, Mary Moorman, and Alan G. Hill, second edition, 8 vols (Oxford, 1967-93), vol. 1, 214.

<sup>26</sup> Kurt Fosso, *Buried Communities: Wordsworth and the Bonds of Mourning* (Albany, 2004), 3.

<sup>27</sup> Fosso, *Buried Communities*, 8.

<sup>28</sup> Fosso, *Buried Communities*, 192.

<sup>29</sup> Fosso, *Buried Communities*, 203.

The tradition of Romantic reclusion does not respond well to being read in Freudian terms as a psychological defence mechanism. Such readings inevitably portray it as an ahistorical (or even anti-historical) stance, because they fail to historicise the poet's decision to withdraw. In his book on *Solitude*, Anthony Storr argues that the 'especial need to be alone in adult life is derived from, or has been enhanced by, some degree of insecure attachment in early life'.<sup>30</sup> He later points to the fact that both Cowper and Wordsworth lost their mothers at a young age.<sup>31</sup> As psychological observations these comments are certainly valid, but when it comes to interpreting what Cowper and Wordsworth wrote about reclusion, they are more limited. By dividing my chapters into discussions of the creative, medical, political, and natural motives for withdrawal, I have tried to emphasise the fact that for both poets reclusion was a political choice, as well as a psychological need. In his 1782 poem 'Retirement', Cowper sought to distinguish reclusion from solitude: 'For solitude, however some may rave, / Seeming a sanctuary, proves a grave, / A sepulchre, in which the living lie, / Where all good qualities grow sick and die'.<sup>32</sup> Cowper's reference to 'good qualities' is important, because it shows that he values reclusion as a state which nurtures these qualities for the good of society. In his landmark study of Cowper's poetry, Vincent Newey argued that '*The Task* does not, and could not, offer models of collective life other than those it condemns in its survey of city and countryside, state and corporation. What it does give is the model of an alternative existence—the life of rural and domestic retreat'.<sup>33</sup> The following chapters build on Newey's work to argue that, although Cowper may not have offered a model of collective life, his 'alternative existence' in reclusion helped to create and disseminate the spirit of community.

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<sup>30</sup> Anthony Storr, *Solitude: A Return to the Self* (London, 1989), 95.

<sup>31</sup> Storr, *Solitude*, 133-41.

<sup>32</sup> William Cowper, 'Retirement', ll. 735-8, *The Poems of William Cowper*, ed. John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, 3 vols (Oxford, 1980-95), vol.1, 396.

<sup>33</sup> Vincent Newey, *Cowper's Poetry: A Critical Study and Reassessment* (Liverpool, 1982), 179.

Throughout their writings, Cowper and Wordsworth developed a paradoxical model of community in which individuals learn to value and contribute to society as a result of withdrawing from it. Here, I use ‘individual’ in the sense which Williams described in *Keywords*, to designate ‘both a unique person and his (indivisible) membership of a group’.<sup>34</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy outlined a similar model of reclusion as a route back to community in his work *La communauté désœuvrée* (*The Inoperative Community*, 1983). In the ‘Preface’ to this work, he wrote that:

The community that becomes *a single* thing (body, mind, fatherland, Leader...) necessarily loses the *in* of being-*in*-common. Or, it loses the *with* or the *together* that defines it. It yields its being-together to a being *of* togetherness. The truth of community, on the contrary, resides in the retreat of such a being. Community is made of what retreats from it: the hypostasis of the “common,” and its work. The retreat opens, and continues to open, this strange being-the-one-with-the-other to which we are exposed.<sup>35</sup>

Like Cowper and Wordsworth, Nancy senses the paradoxical yet crucial role that reclusion plays in the formation of community: ‘Community is made of what retreats from it’. Community, he argues, does not comprise the assumption of a common identity or a perfectly shared set of values between its members. On the contrary, he writes that ‘communal fusion ... contains no other logic than the suicide of the community that is governed by it’.<sup>36</sup> The reason for this is that community is based on the recognition and respectful sharing of differences between its members. ‘Sharing is always incomplete,’ Nancy argues, ‘[f]or a complete sharing implies the disappearance of what is shared.’<sup>37</sup> If the ideal of a totally homogenised community were realised, then that community would cease to exist in any real sense, since the sympathetic co-existence of differences between individuals would be at an end. In claiming this, Nancy arrives at a version of the argument made by Raymond Williams: ‘we have to live by our own attachments, but we

<sup>34</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London, 1983), 165.

<sup>35</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney (Minneapolis and Oxford, 1991), xxxix.

<sup>36</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 12.

<sup>37</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 35.

can only live fully, in common, if we grant the attachments of others, and make it our common business to keep the channels of growth clear'.<sup>38</sup> For this reason, reclusion becomes an integral part of Nancy's model of community, since it encourages people to retain their individual differences and thus helps to produce the experience of 'being-the-one-with-the-other' which underlies community.

Cowper and Wordsworth both believed that the principle of community entailed the recognition of the different needs and aims of every living being. Nancy's description of 'being-the-one-with-the-other' thus sheds light on some of the most famous passages in their writing. For Nancy, 'it is impossible for us to lose community. A society may be as little communitarian as possible; it could not happen that in the social desert there would not be, however slight, even inaccessible, some community.'<sup>39</sup> Cowper expressed a similar faith towards the end of Book Four of *The Task*, when he wrote:

'Tis born with all: the love of Nature's works  
Is an ingredient in the compound, man,  
Infused at the creation of the kind.  
And though the Almighty Maker has throughout  
Discriminated each from each, by strokes  
And touches of His hand, with so much art  
Diversified, that two were never found  
Twins at all points—yet this obtains in all. (IV, 731-8)

Cowper captures the experience of 'being-the-one-with-the-other' when he recognises that 'two were never found / Twins at all points': like Williams, he acknowledges that 'we can only live fully, in common, if we grant the attachments of others'. The differences between individuals remain as the basis of a sympathetic co-existence. Like Williams, Cowper extends this concept of community to every element of the natural world, anticipating Nancy's claim that 'it is not obvious that the community of singularities is limited to "man"'.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, the emphasis on human community is stronger than it might

<sup>38</sup> Williams, *Culture and Society*, 337.

<sup>39</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 35.

<sup>40</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 28.

appear in this passage, as Cowper sympathetically observes and accepts the differences between human minds, celebrating the fact that God has ‘Discriminated each from each, by strokes / And touches of His hand, with so much art / Diversified’. Throughout his works, Cowper maintains the sense of being equal though different as the foundation of community.

Such moments of ‘being-the-one-with-the-other’ are ubiquitous in Wordsworth’s poetry. On a human scale, they may be found in poems like ‘Old Man Travelling’, ‘The Discharged Soldier’, ‘Resolution and Independence’, and the image of the ‘blind Beggar’ in Book Seven of *The Prelude* (VII, 612ff.). Broadening out to include a sense of community with the natural world, similar moments occur in ‘Lines written in Early Spring’, *Peter Bell*, ‘Nutting’, ‘Hart-Leap Well’, and the nature lyrics of 1802. One particularly important example of the operation of community occurs in ‘To Joanna’ from the ‘Poems on the Naming of Places’. Lucy Newlyn has observed that Wordsworth’s depiction of Joanna Hutchinson in this poem is inaccurate. She notes that he ‘describes Joanna as a city-dweller (whereas she grew up in Penrith), and refers to a walk taken in her company at a time when the Wordsworths were in Germany’.<sup>41</sup> Nonetheless, Wordsworth uses these inaccuracies to support Cowper’s claim in *The Task* that ‘the love of Nature’s works ... is a flame that dies not even there / Where nothing feeds it: neither business, crowds, / Nor habits of luxurious city life’ (IV, 731-45). Cowper, like Wordsworth, believed that these things negated the spirit of community by preoccupying people with their own interests. Both poets concluded that individuals paradoxically had to *withdraw* from society into community. Wordsworth makes this argument through his gentle but firm critique of Joanna’s youth spent in the city:

you learned,  
From years of quiet industry, to love

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<sup>41</sup> Lucy Newlyn, *William and Dorothy Wordsworth: ‘All in Each Other’* (Oxford, 2013), 127.

The living Beings by your own fire-side,  
 With such a strong devotion, that your heart  
 Is slow towards the sympathies of them  
 Who look upon the hills with tenderness.<sup>42</sup>

For Nancy, community is ‘a workless and inoperative activity’: ‘It is not a matter of making, producing, or instituting a community ... it is a matter of incompleting its sharing’.<sup>43</sup> Here, Wordsworth suggests that Joanna’s ‘quiet industry’ risks eradicating the differences between ‘The living Beings by [her] own fire-side’. In more contemporary terms, he rejects Burke’s claim that ‘to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections’.<sup>44</sup> Wordsworth goes on to argue that his own ‘little platoon’ ‘Who look upon the hills with tenderness, / And make dear friendships with the streams and groves’ (ll. 7-8) retain the experience of ‘being-the-one-with-the-other’. By withdrawing from society and ‘Dwelling retired in [their] simplicity’, he claims, they have opened themselves to the experience of community.

Later in the poem, when Joanna’s laugh rebounds around the hills, she too is initiated into the community. Wordsworth claims that when ‘Joanna, looking in my eyes, beheld / That ravishment of mine, [she] laughed aloud. / The rock, like something starting from a sleep, / Took up the Lady’s voice, and laughed again’ (ll. 52-5). What occurs in these lines is not so much an admonishment of Joanna’s laughter, as an enactment of the process of community. In Williams’s terms, Joanna learns to ‘grant the attachments of others’.<sup>45</sup> Upon seeing the ‘ravishment’ in the poet’s eyes, she responds with laughter because she is unable to share his experience. The rock, however, takes up her voice ‘like something starting from a sleep’, awakening her to its existence and to the fact that, in this landscape, she is the outsider and her laughter is singularly out of place. Joanna responds

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<sup>42</sup> William Wordsworth, ‘To Joanna’, ll. 2-7, in *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems, 1797-1800*, ed. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca and London, 1992), 244.

<sup>43</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 35.

<sup>44</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France, The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, gen. ed. Paul Langford, 9 vols (Oxford, 1981-2000), vol. 8, 97.

<sup>45</sup> Williams, *Culture and Society*, 337.

to this realisation with fright, but the poet also notes that ‘while we both were listening, to my side / The fair Joanna drew, as if she wished / To shelter from some object of her fear’ (ll. 74-6). In doing so, she becomes initiated into a community not only with her companions, but also with the landscape around her. ‘To Joanna’, then, may be read as demonstrating the process by which reclusion gives rise to community.

Both Cowper and Wordsworth envisioned their reclusion as a critique of British society at the close of the eighteenth century. In *The Inoperative Community*, Nancy stresses the importance of ‘questioning the breakdown in community that supposedly engendered the modern era’.<sup>46</sup> He argues that:

*Society* was not built on the ruins of a *community*. It emerged from the disappearance or the conservation of something—tribes or empires—perhaps just as unrelated to what we call “community” as to what we call “society.” So that community, far from being what society has crushed or lost, is *what happens to us*—question, waiting, event, imperative—in the wake of society.<sup>47</sup>

Nancy’s conviction that community is not a political system (in other words, it is not the same as society) poses a challenge to Williams’s argument about the ‘dissociation of interests’ within industrial society. Certainly, Cowper and Wordsworth believed that British society at the end of the eighteenth century was undergoing such a dissociation of interests, but Nancy reminds us that community can subsist ‘*in the wake of society*’.

Cowper and Wordsworth, I believe, shared this view: if their choice to withdraw expresses the breakdown of society, the ideal of reclusion which they developed testifies to their continued faith in community. Benedict Anderson has defined the idea of a nation as ‘an imagined political community’, claiming that: ‘i[t] is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion’.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 9.

<sup>47</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 11.

<sup>48</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York, 2006), 6.

Cowper's and Wordsworth's imagined communities did not correspond to the idea of nation in this way. Rather, they resembled the concept of 'knowable communities'—in which the values of the community could be 'simply known' and 'simply communicated'—developed by Raymond Williams in *The Country and the City*.<sup>49</sup> Cowper and Wordsworth did not argue for community as a source of national pride, but for a model of community as a shared ethical undertaking which promoted the moral, creative, social, and intellectual flourishing of each of its members.

*'No need to inquire outside yourself': Critics of sociability*

The project of Romantic reclusion can be read as a critique of eighteenth-century models of sociability. Cowper and Wordsworth were both familiar with the exemplars of these models, including *The Tatler*, *The Spectator*, and the Earl of Shaftesbury's *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711). They rejected them to the extent that these works encouraged competition between individuals and thus opposed the spirit of community. Cowper, in particular, mounted critiques of eighteenth-century sociability in some of his earliest works, most notably in a series of essays he wrote for *The Connoisseur* (a periodical edited by his Westminster schoolmates Bonnell Thornton and George Colman). Addison, Steele, and their collaborators had advanced a model in which the 'market of public opinion' would bind society together and render its members more polite.<sup>50</sup> In Issue 164 of *The Tatler*, Steele observed that his claim to establish Isaac Bickerstaff as the national 'Censor' had prompted a flurry of correspondence:

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<sup>49</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London, 1985), 165.

<sup>50</sup> Erin Mackie (ed.), *The Commerce of Everyday Life: Selections from The Tatler and The Spectator* (Boston, 1998), 41.

It would indeed be very dangerous for me to read over the many Praises and Eulogiums which come Post to me from all the Corners of the Nation, were they not mixed with many Checks, Reprimands, Scurrilities and Reproaches, which several of my good-natured Countrymen cannot forbear sending me.<sup>51</sup>

Steele argues that people become more polite by trading in ‘Praises’ and ‘Reproaches’, encouraging each other to conform to a shared set of social standards. His claim that post has arrived from ‘all the Corners of the Nation’ suggests that *The Tatler*’s model of sociability has taken hold, though he expresses a playful contempt for his ‘good-natured Countrymen’ in claiming that they ‘cannot forbear’ from writing to him. Nonetheless, this fact implies that Steele’s readers have followed Bickerstaff’s example and set themselves up as censors, meaning that the whole nation has bought into the market of public opinion. Yet Steele recognises the flaws of this model when he admits that there is ‘no Particular’ in which his correspondents ‘universally agree, except only in their Thirst after Scandal’: ‘It is impossible to conceive how many have recommended their Neighbours to me upon this Account’.<sup>52</sup> *The Tatler* develops into a work of social commentary, as Steele observes that British politeness is actually founded upon competition and the wish to humiliate one’s neighbours.

To an even greater extent than *The Tatler*, *The Spectator* expresses reservations about the model of sociability it describes. Like Steele, Addison foregrounds the concept of observation by assuming the persona of Mr Spectator. The entire periodical is established upon a profound irony, however, as in the first Issue Mr Spectator declares that ‘the greatest Pain I can suffer, is the being talked to, and being stared at’.<sup>53</sup> Aware that this irony would not stop people from reading, Addison suggests that the model of sociability he is advancing will prove painful for many individuals. Nancy has argued that in any community ‘the mode of existence and appropriation of a “self” ... is the mode of an

<sup>51</sup> *The Tatler*, ed. Donald F. Bond, 3 vols (Oxford, 1987), No. 164, vol. 2, 411-12.

<sup>52</sup> *The Tatler*, No. 164, vol. 2, 411.

<sup>53</sup> *The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond, 5 vols (Oxford, 1987), No. 1, vol. 1, 5-6.

exposition in common and to the in-common'.<sup>54</sup> He maintains that this exposure of the self to the judgments of the community does not need to be painful, but becomes so when the community loses its respect for differences and assumes a common identity. In this case, he argues, the process of exposure gives rise to feelings of censure and rejection, and is experienced as a 'laceration of the singular being'.<sup>55</sup> This is the experience which Mr Spectator describes, and which Cowper later expanded upon in his essays for *The Connoisseur*. *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* both raise the question of whether the market of public opinion will reach a consensus: in other words, whether the community will become 'a being of togetherness', whose members are all expected to behave in the same way. Nancy argues that a true community would reject this form of censure, promoting what Williams referred to as the need to 'grant the attachments of others'.

In his essays for *The Connoisseur*, Cowper foregrounded the tensions inherent in the model of sociability promoted by *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*. In doing so, he began to develop the arguments for reclusion which proliferate throughout the rest of his writing. *The Connoisseur* as a whole adopted a sceptical stance towards sociability. It was structured as a dialogue between Mr Town—a nod to Edward Cave's persona Mr Urban in *The Gentleman's Magazine*—and his cousin Mr Village. Mr Town announced himself as the 'Censor-General', or censor of censors, suggesting that he would criticise Isaac Bickerstaff and the other censors who had gone before him. By introducing Mr Village, the editors of *The Connoisseur* contrasted the model of sociability operating in the town with alternative models of society and community. In Issue 115, Cowper wrote to Mr Town using the persona of Christopher Ironside, an 'Old Bachelor' whose letter voices objections to the concept of sociability. The letter begins:

SIR!

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<sup>54</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, xxxvii.

<sup>55</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 28.

No man is a sincerer friend to innocent pleasantry, or more desirous of promoting it, than myself. Raillery of every kind, provided it be confined within due bounds, is in my opinion an excellent ingredient in conversation; and I am never displeas'd if I can contribute to the harmless mirth of the company, by being myself the subject of it; but in good truth, I have neither a fortune, a constitution, nor a temper that will enable me to chuckle and shake my sides, while I suffer more from the festivity of my friends, than the spleen or malice of my enemies could possibly inflict upon me.<sup>56</sup>

Cowper's final claim stretches the irony of Mr Spectator's aversion to 'being talked to, and being stared at' to breaking point, making it clear that *The Spectator's* model of sociability is profoundly anti-communal. Ironside professes himself to be polite by claiming to welcome the ideas of 'pleasantry' and 'Raillery'. Yet he proceeds to focus on the subjective experience of raillery, describing what Nancy would term the 'laceration of the singular being'.<sup>57</sup> In the phrase 'being myself the subject of it', 'myself' is not the grammatical subject, but actually functions as the object of the noun 'subject'. Through this wordplay, Cowper describes the subjective experience of being made the object of ridicule. The phrase 'shake my sides' is particularly effective at doing this, since to those observing it is not quite clear whether this gesture is caused by laughing or sobbing. In other words, those reading the surface effects of raillery are unable to perceive how much suffering it causes. Cowper demolishes *The Spectator's* model of sociability by revealing precisely how hostile and anti-social it can become.

By objecting specifically to 'Raillery', Cowper engages not only with *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*, but also with the argument of Shaftesbury's *Characteristicks*. In the section of this work entitled 'Sensus Communis, an Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour in a Letter to a Friend', Shaftesbury argues that raillery performs an important social function. He likens conversation to a free market and claims that 'Freedom of

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<sup>56</sup> William Cowper, 'To Mr. Town' from *The Connoisseur*, No. 115, *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, ed. James King and Charles Ryskamp, 5 vols (Oxford, 1986), vol. 5, 8.

<sup>57</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 28.

Raillery' is important, because it allows the members of a society to refine one another's opinions:<sup>58</sup>

For Wit is its own Remedy. Liberty and Commerce bring it to its true standard. The only danger is, the laying an Embargo. The same thing happens here, as in the Case of *Trade*. Impositions and Restrictions reduce it to a low Ebb: Nothing is so advantageous to it as a *Free-Port*.<sup>59</sup>

When describing the 'laceration of the singular being', Nancy claims that 'there is no open cut in which the inside would get lost in the outside'.<sup>60</sup> Yet this 'open cut' is exactly what Shaftesbury's metaphor of personal identity as a '*Free-Port*' suggests: the image evokes a model of interiority in which society can import or export what it will, bringing the individual 'to its true standard', and shaping the community into a 'being *of* togetherness'. In his letter to *The Connoisseur*, Cowper does not lay an 'Embargo' on raillery, but he does attempt to regulate it. Christopher Ironside accepts raillery 'provided it be confined within due bounds': in other words, as long as it does not turn hostile and attempt to invade the private sphere. Cowper objects to the fact that individuals are required to endure 'the greatest Pain [they] can suffer' for the sake of a model of sociability which actually works against the principles of community.<sup>61</sup>

Cowper's engagement with Shaftesbury's ideas is discussed in greater detail at the beginning of Chapter Two. At this point, it is important to note that Shaftesbury, to an even greater extent than Addison and Steele, was aware of the tensions in his model of sociability. Whereas *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* ironized their visions of society, Shaftesbury went as far as to offer reclusion as an important corrective to his. In 'A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm', he wrote that: 'We can never be fit to contemplate anything above us, when we are in no Condition to look into ourselves, and calmly examine the

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<sup>58</sup> Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, 3 vols (London, 1711), vol. 1, 69.

<sup>59</sup> Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks*, vol. 1, 64.

<sup>60</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 30.

<sup>61</sup> *The Spectator*, No. 1, vol. 1, 5-6.

Temper of our own Mind and Passions.’<sup>62</sup> Throughout the *Characteristicks*, Shaftesbury argues that the habit of introspection is what qualifies a person to become part of polite society. Even in ‘Sensus Communis’, which is the most ‘conversable’ of the essays, he suggests that sociability does not necessarily give rise to community. In the third part, he discusses the origin of the phrase ‘*sensus communis*’ in Juvenal’s Eighth Satire. According to Juvenal’s commentators, Shaftesbury claims, the true meaning of *sensus communis* is the ‘*Sense of Public Weal, and of the Common Interest*’:

Love of the *Community* or *Society*, Natural Affection, Humanity, Obligingness, or that sort of *Civility* which rises from a just *Sense* of the *common Rights* of Mankind, and the *natural Equality* there is among those of the same Species.<sup>63</sup>

Like Cowper and Wordsworth after him, Shaftesbury believed that reclusion played an important role in developing this ‘Love of the *Community*’. In a footnote, he traced the idea of *sensus communis* back to Stoic philosophy, particularly the meditations of Marcus Aurelius. Quoting from Claude Salmasius’s commentary in the *Historia Augusta* (1671), Shaftesbury claimed that the Greek equivalent to *sensus communis* was ‘*κοινονοημοσύνη* [*koinonoēmosunē*], which Salmasius interprets *the moderate, the usual and respected mind of a man, which takes thought for the communal good in some way and does not refer everything to its own advantage*’.<sup>64</sup> On the one hand, this is a thoroughly civic virtue; but on the other hand, the kind of Stoic detachment which Marcus Aurelius describes begins to sound like the Epicurean principle of *ataraxia*.

Lawrence E. Klein suggests that the ‘stoics ... offered Shaftesbury a number of themes’, including ‘the importance of self-knowledge and moral discipline and

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<sup>62</sup> Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks*, vol. 1, 32-3.

<sup>63</sup> Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks*, vol. 1, 104.

<sup>64</sup> Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks*, vol. 1, 103-4n; translation from Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. Lawrence E. Klein (Cambridge, 1999), 48n.

autonomy'.<sup>65</sup> He contends that Shaftesbury found a 'counterpoint to these emphases ... in Epicureanism with its denial of world order and rejection of public service':

The gods were remote from the world of men since they themselves were devoted to a lofty existence of *ἀταραξία*, *ataraxia*, a condition of serene impassiveness ... This meant a withdrawal from the world of politics and business and even from marriage and reproduction in order to live in a quiet community of philosophical adepts.<sup>66</sup>

In his essay on 'Sensus Communis', Shaftesbury combines the Stoic emphasis on engagement with the Epicurean virtue of detachment. Put simply, he argues that one must withdraw from the temptations of society in order to overcome self-interest, before attempting to re-engage with civic functions: the cultivation of *ataraxia* through reclusion is an important means of developing and sustaining one's 'Love of the *Community*'.

Christopher Gill explains that Stoicism 'stressed the centrality of moral intention and of the kind of ethical character that is expressed in each thought, emotion, and action, regardless of whether this issues in other-benefitting outcomes, including public ones'.<sup>67</sup> Partly mediated through Shaftesbury's *Characteristicks*, this Stoic ideal in turn became a key principle of Romantic reclusion in the works of Cowper and Wordsworth.

Recently, Adam Potkay has traced Wordsworth's debts to Shaftesbury in his book *Wordsworth's Ethics*. He argues that '[w]ith Shaftesbury and his neo-Stoic followers, Wordsworth concurs in seeing *joy* as the crucial element in the formation of the habitual actions that constitute moral virtue'.<sup>68</sup> Wordsworth's borrowings from Shaftesbury run in other directions as well. As well as emphasising 'joy' as a foundation of virtue, he also drew on Shaftesbury's advocacy of solitary reflection as a means of developing the moral sense. In the poem 'I am not One who much or oft delight', for example, he engaged with the tension between action and reflection which runs through Shaftesbury's

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<sup>65</sup> Lawrence E. Klein, 'Introduction', in Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks*, ed. Klein, xxvi.

<sup>66</sup> Klein, 'Introduction', xxvi.

<sup>67</sup> Christopher Gill, 'Commentary', in Marcus Aurelius, *Mediations Books 1-6*, trans. Christopher Gill (Oxford, 2013), 73.

<sup>68</sup> Adam Potkay, *Wordsworth's Ethics* (Baltimore, 2012), 36.

*Characteristicks*. In the poem's final stanza, Wordsworth champions the principle of *ataraxia* over that of sociability, claiming:

Nor can I not believe but that hereby  
 Great gains are mine: for thus I live remote  
 From evil-speaking; rancour, never sought,  
 Comes to me not; malignant truth, or lie.  
 Hence have I genial seasons, hence have I  
 Smooth passions, smooth discourse, and joyous thought:  
 And thus from day to day my little Boat  
 Rocks in its harbour, lodging peaceably.<sup>69</sup>

Wordsworth's description of 'Smooth passions, smooth discourse, and joyous thought' closely follows the Stoic ideal of Seneca's essay 'De Tranquillitate Animi'. In this essay, Seneca announces that: 'I resolve to confine my life within its own walls ... let my mind be fixed upon itself, let it cultivate itself, let it busy itself with nothing outside, nothing that looks towards an umpire; let it love the tranquillity that is remote from public and private concern.'<sup>70</sup> Seneca's noun *tranquillitas* now bears a Wordsworthian suggestiveness, given Wordsworth's famous definition of poetry as 'emotion recollected in tranquillity'.<sup>71</sup> 'I am not One who much or oft delight' may be read as a poem in which Wordsworth revisits the poetic theory he outlined in the 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads*, filling in this Stoic context and advocating the need for poets to lead reclusive lives. Both Cowper and Wordsworth thought carefully about eighteenth-century models of sociability and disengaged from them, arguing that reclusion led to a more virtuous and, as a result, a more communal way of living.

<sup>69</sup> William Wordsworth, 'I am not One who much or oft delight', ll. 43-50, in *Poems, in Two Volumes, and Other Poems, 1800-1807*, ed. Jared Curtis (Ithaca and New York, 1983), 255.

<sup>70</sup> Seneca, 'De Tranquillitate Animi' I.xi, in *Moral Essays*, trans. John W. Basore, 3 vols (London and Cambridge, MA, 1958), vol. 2, 208-9: 'Placet intra parietes suos vitam coercere ... sibi ipse animus haereat, se colat, nihil alieni agat, nihil quod ad iudicem spectet; ametur expers publicae privataeque curae tranquillitas'.

<sup>71</sup> Wordsworth, 'Preface', in *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems*, 756.

*'The world is too much with us': Reclusion as dissent*

The opening lines of Wordsworth's sonnet 'The world is too much with us', published in *Poems, in Two Volumes*, express one of the central tenets of Romantic reclusion: 'The world is too much with us; late and soon, / Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers: / Little we see in nature that is ours; / We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!'<sup>72</sup>

Wordsworth and Cowper thought deeply about the effects which Britain's growing commercialism was having on its communities. Both poets made resisting this commercialism one of their main reasons for withdrawing from society. In Wordsworth's phrase 'sordid boon', the adjective 'sordid' functions as a transferred epithet: it applies not to the 'hearts', but to the process by which they have been 'given ... away' when everything else has a price. Wordsworth asks why people have accepted a commercial system that pits them against one another as competitors, failing to defend their natural rights of liberty and community. In *Culture and Society*, Raymond Williams wrote about the emergence of 'culture' in the Romantic period as 'a court of appeal in which real values were determined, usually in opposition to the "factitious" values thrown up by the market and similar operations of society'.<sup>73</sup> To a great extent, the project of Romantic reclusion belongs to this model of culture as a forum for opposing the 'factitious' values of a marketised society.

The New Historicists complicated this model of culture as a form of dissent by suggesting the unstated and often selfish motives which might have led Romantic writers to withdraw from society. Nicholas Roe began to look beyond the New Historicist position in his essay on 'The Politics of "Tintern Abbey"', claiming that: 'No longer identified with revolutionary action or progress, human regeneration [became] the prerogative of the

<sup>72</sup> Wordsworth, 'The world is too much with us; late and soon', ll. 1-4, *Poems, in Two Volumes*, 150.

<sup>73</sup> Williams, *Culture and Society*, 34.

individual mind in communion with nature and, introspectively, with itself'.<sup>74</sup> The scope of Roe's project, however, did not permit him to historicise the developing social motivations for Wordsworth's interest in reclusion. This thesis sets out to do so, by tracing the origins of Romantic reclusion in Cowper's poetry, and then carrying its readings into the early 1800s when Wordsworth was most consistently thinking about and working towards *The Recluse*. In the process, it emerges, firstly, that Wordsworth's interest in reclusion both pre- and post-dates what Roe called his 'radical years', and, secondly, that Romantic reclusion itself functioned as a model of 'revolutionary action or progress'. Cowper and Wordsworth read extensively about the subject of reclusion, ranging across the fields of literature, medicine, theology, philosophy, history, and politics. When interpreted in the light of what they had read, their writing resembles Williams's notion of culture as an 'opposition to the "factitious" values thrown up by the market'. Wordsworth's claims in 'The world is too much with us' look forward to Herbert Marcuse's account of advanced industrial society in *One-Dimensional Man*. Like Wordsworth, though in stronger terms, Marcuse described 'the progressive enslavement of man by a productive apparatus which perpetuates the struggle for existence and extends it to a total international struggle which ruins the lives of those who build and use this apparatus'.<sup>75</sup> Both Cowper and Wordsworth spent years reading and writing about reclusion in order to dissent from the market values of industrialised society and argue for new, more integrated models of personal freedom and community.

Cowper gave a detailed account of his decision to retire from London to Huntingdon in his evangelical conversion narrative, *Adelphi* (c. 1767). In this work, he describes the spiritual crisis which he suffered in 1763, having moved to the Middle Temple aged twenty-one: 'I was struck not long after my settlement in the Temple with

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<sup>74</sup> Nicholas Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years* (Oxford, 1988), 273.

<sup>75</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (London, 1964), 144.

such a dejection of spirits as none but they who have felt the same can have the least conception of. Day and night I was upon the rack, lying down in horrors and rising in despair'.<sup>76</sup> Cowper continued to analyse these experiences in his poetry after recovering at Nathaniel Cotton's Collegium Insanorum in St Albans. As discussed in Chapter Two, Cotton adopted an exceptionally modern approach to Cowper's treatment, encouraging him to think about the social causes of his illness. This, I argue, led Cowper to become interested in reclusion, and to spend the rest of his life mounting poetic arguments about the need to resist the morally and psychologically harmful effects of commercial society. In mounting these arguments, Cowper engaged with other writers who had criticised the moral and social effects of commercialism. Chief among these was the cleric and essayist John Brown (1715-66), who rose to prominence with his *Essays on the Characteristics* (1751). In this work, Brown developed a powerful critique of Shaftesbury's model of sociability, claiming that 'there is not a Passion that infects human Life, whose Consequences are so generally pernicious as those of *indulged Contempt*'.<sup>77</sup> Shaftesbury's principle of raillery, Brown argued, was not the basis on which to build a society, but rather the 'Instrument by which Individuals, Families, Sects, Provinces, and Nations, are driven from a State of mutual Charity, into that of Bitterness and Dissention'.<sup>78</sup> Cowper no doubt drew on these arguments when writing his own essays for *The Connoisseur*.

Six years after the *Essays on the Characteristics*, Brown published another influential book entitled *An Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times* (1757). This work, discussed in Chapter Three, predicted that commercialism would bring about the disunion of British society and enable France to win the Seven Years' War. Though Brown's *Estimate* waned in popularity after a series of British victories in 1759, Cowper continued to rate it highly, referring in his poem 'Table Talk' to 'Th'ineestimable estimate

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<sup>76</sup> William Cowper, *Adelphi: An Account of the Conversion of W. C. Esquire*, in *Letters*, vol. 1, 8.

<sup>77</sup> John Brown, *Essays on the Characteristics of the Earl of Shaftesbury* (London, 1751), 105.

<sup>78</sup> Brown, *Essays*, 105.

of Brown' (l. 384). Brown reasoned that 'exorbitant Trade and Wealth ... tend to destroy the Principle of public Spirit':

In the commercial State, Avarice represents *Wealth*, in the mixed State Effeminacy represents *Pleasure*, as the *chief Good* ... These Delusions create a new Train of Wants, Fears, Hopes, and Wishes: All these terminating in selfish Regard, naturally destroy every Effort of generous public Principle.<sup>79</sup>

Brown's concept of 'public Principle', by which individuals live according to a set of communal values, lies at the heart of the project of Romantic reclusion. It is this ideal for which Cowper and Wordsworth fought in their writing, and its absence in British society is what led them to imagine withdrawing. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), Adam Smith had begun to challenge this concept, along with the idea that 'it was benevolence only which could stamp upon any action the character of virtue'.<sup>80</sup> By the time he wrote *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), he countered it directly, arguing that the shift from feudalism to capitalism had proved 'public Principle' to be unnecessary, even obstructive:

A REVOLUTION of the greatest importance to the publick happiness, was ... brought about by two different orders of people, who had not the least intention to serve the public. To gratify the most childish vanity was the sole motive of the great proprietors. The merchants and artificers, much less ridiculous, acted merely from a view to their own interest, and in pursuit of their own pedlar principle of turning a penny wherever a penny was to be got.<sup>81</sup>

Smith re-casts Brown's emphasis on 'public Spirit' and 'public Principle' in terms of 'publick happiness', changing the meaning of 'public' so that this 'happiness' no longer belongs to the community as a whole, but is instead simply an aggregate of the happiness of each individual. Throughout their work, Cowper and Wordsworth wrote against Smith's model, arguing that individuals needed to preserve the principle of community, by withdrawing from a society whose members were linked 'merely from a view to their own interest'.

<sup>79</sup> John Brown, *An Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times* (London, 1757), 174.

<sup>80</sup> Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (London and Edinburgh, 1759), Part VII, Section II, Chapter III, 460.

<sup>81</sup> Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 2 vols (London, 1776), Book III, Chapter IV, vol. 1, 504.

On occasions, Cowper and Wordsworth both figured the anti-commercial principles of Romantic reclusion as an opposition between town and country (for example, in Book Three of *The Task* and Book Seven of *The Prelude*, respectively). However, this was only one expression of a more thoroughgoing critique of the self-interest and competition which pervaded the whole of British society. In his landmark study *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams sought to break down the distinction that gave his book its title. He argued that:

a knowable community, within country life as anywhere else, is still a matter of consciousness, and of continuing as well as day-to-day experience. In the village as in the city there is division of labour, there is contrast of social position, and then necessarily there are alternative points of view.<sup>82</sup>

Cowper's and Wordsworth's descriptions of London in *The Task* and *The Prelude* both engage with the need to find 'knowable communities'. This thesis examines the concept of reclusion less as a geographical move from the city to the country (one can, of course, lead a reclusive life in the city), than as an attempt to dissent from competitive market values in the interests of preserving such a community. Williams claimed that 'Wordsworth saw that when we become uncertain in a world of apparent strangers ... we can retreat, for security, into a deep subjectivity, or we can look around us for social pictures, social signs, social messages'.<sup>83</sup> By contrast, I would argue that Cowper and Wordsworth both saw subjectivity—in the form of reflection and self-government—not as a 'retreat', but as the route back to community.

In his ambivalent portraits of London in *The Task*, Cowper complicates Brown's arguments about the consequences of commercial society, adding a psychological understanding of the effects of London life which was derived from his own experience.

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<sup>82</sup> Williams, *The Country and the City*, 166.

<sup>83</sup> Williams, *The Country and the City*, 295.

At the end of Book Three, he breaks down the economic relations which underlie London society:

The shark is there  
 And the shark's prey. The spendthrift and the leech  
 That sucks him. There the sycophant and he  
 That with bare-headed and obsequious bows  
 Begs a warm office, doom'd to a cold jail  
 And groat per diem if his patron frown.  
 The levee swarms, as if in golden pomp  
 Were character'd on ev'ry statesman's door,  
 "BATTER'D AND BANKRUPT FORTUNES MENDED HERE."  
 These are the charms that sully and eclipse  
 The charms of nature. 'Tis the cruel gripe  
 That lean hard-handed poverty inflicts,  
 The hope of better things, the chance to win,  
 The wish to shine, the thirst to be amused. (II, 816-29)

Cowper challenges Smith's claim that the self-interested individuals in the city unknowingly bring about a 'revolution of the greatest importance to the publick happiness'. His use of parataxis in the opening lines—omitting the verbs which would link one individual to another—suggests that there are no relationships between these people other than the principle of predation. Following Brown, Cowper describes a 'Train of Wants, Fears, Hopes, and Wishes' brought into being by commercialism: 'The hope of better things, the chance to win, / The wish to shine, the thirst to be amused'. Underlying them all, Cowper suggests, is the 'cruel gripe / That lean hard-handed poverty inflicts'. The phrase 'cruel gripe' functions as a synecdoche to reduce all human interactions down to the level of hands snatching from one another, literalising the principles of *Wealth of Nations* and suggesting that they cannot possibly result in a community. Here, as elsewhere in *The Task*, Cowper shows that the only way to recover a more genuine experience of community is to withdraw.

Wordsworth's description of London in Book Seven of *The Prelude* carries on the critique which Cowper began in *The Task*. Like Cowper, Wordsworth engages with the rhetoric of commercialism in order to reveal its detrimental effects on society. Towards the

end of Book Seven, he describes Bartholomew Fair, attempting, like Cowper, to convey the psychological effect of a crowd that has been brought together by the search for profit and pleasure:

O blank confusion! And a type not false  
 Of what the mighty City is itself  
 To all except a Straggler here and there,  
 To the whole swarm of its inhabitants;  
 An undistinguishable world to men,  
 The slaves unrespited of low pursuits,  
 Living amid the same perpetual flow  
 Of trivial objects, melted and reduced  
 To one identity, by differences  
 That have no law, no meaning, and no end;  
 Oppression under which even highest minds  
 Must labour, whence the strongest are not free!<sup>84</sup>

Wordsworth not only describes, but also enacts the destruction of community when he figures the inhabitants of London as a ‘swarm’. In *Culture and Society*, Williams argued that the concept of the ‘masses’ arose with the Industrial Revolution: ‘There are in fact no masses; there are only ways of seeing people as masses. In an urban industrial society there are many opportunities for such ways of seeing.’<sup>85</sup> Earlier in Book Seven, Wordsworth describes how the city turns people into objects, as he walks against ‘The endless stream of men, and moving things’ (VII, 158) and refers to seeing ‘The Comers and the Goers face to face, / Face after face’ (VII, 172-3). He ends up being able to distinguish individuals solely by their direction of movement, reducing them to ‘Comers’ and ‘Goers’. Wordsworth shows what happens to community when people’s identities are reduced to their capacity for labour and their shared purpose of ‘getting and spending’. He argues that individuals need to restore the sense of individual differences, which formed the basis of a ‘knowable community’, praising the mind that ‘sees the parts / As parts, but with a feeling of the whole’ (VII, 212-13).

<sup>84</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, ed. Mark L. Reed, 2 vols (Ithaca and London, 1991), Book VII, ll. 696-707, vol. 1, 210-11.

<sup>85</sup> Williams, *Culture and Society*, 300.

In Book Eight of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth recounts how the experience of seeing a shepherd and his dog emerge from the mist as ‘inhabitants / Of an aerial Island floating on’ (VIII, 97-8) taught him to respect the immensity of the forces with which humans contend. The ability to sympathise with humans *en masse*, he claims, stems from the ability to keep on seeing them as individuals in the natural world. In this context, the hopes, needs, and fears of each individual are restored to the dignity which they deserve. Wordsworth claims that he learned this reverence and love for mankind ‘Upon the mountains ... With gleams of sunshine on the eyelet spots / And loop-holes of the hills’ (VIII, 85-9). This last phrase looks back to Book Four of *The Task*, where Cowper receives the newspapers from London and then exclaims that ‘’Tis pleasant through the loop-holes of retreat / To peep at such a world’ (IV, 88-9). Cowper views the loop-holes in the original sense of fortifications ‘to allow the passage of missiles’ (*OED*, ‘LOOP-HOLE’, *n.*, 1.a.). For Wordsworth, however, the ‘eyelet spots / And loop-holes’ function more like spotlights: they set the individual lives of the shepherds into relief against the background of nature’s beauty and power, making them seem freshly miraculous. Both poets look back to Milton’s reference, in Book Nine of *Paradise Lost*, to Adam and Eve retreating to ‘loopholes cut through thickest shade’ after eating the apple.<sup>86</sup> Here, the loopholes throw Adam and Eve’s lives into relief, not against the beauty of nature, but against shadows which hint at their weakness and need for salvation. Wordsworth captures this sense of fallen mortals trying to live well in a world filled with ‘blank confusion’. Like Cowper, he advocates the need to withdraw to ‘loop-holes of retreat’, claiming that such reclusion can reverse the dehumanising effects of commercial society.

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<sup>86</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, IX, 1110, ed. Alastair Fowler (Harlow, 2007), 534.

*'Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife': Political retirement literature*

In advocating withdrawal as a form of dissent, Cowper and Wordsworth drew on a tradition of political retirement literature which stretches back to Theocritus. Though it is not possible to trace this tradition in full, it is necessary to give a brief summary here in order to distinguish Romantic reclusion from earlier retirement literature. The question of whether pastoral poetry is or should be political has occasioned centuries of critical debate, as discussed by Annabel Patterson in her landmark study *Pastoral and Ideology: Virgil to Valéry*. Patterson takes as her starting point the opening lines of Virgil's First Eclogue, addressed by Meliboeus to Tityrus:

Tityre, tu patulae recubans sub tegmine fagi  
silvestrem tenui musam meditarus avena:  
nos patriae finis et dulcia linquimus arva:  
nos patriam fugimus: tu, Tityre, lentus in umbra  
formosam resonare doces Amaryllida silvas.

[*You, Tityrus, lie under the canopy of a spreading beech, wooing the woodland Muse on slender reed, but we are leaving our country's bounds and sweet fields. We are outcasts from our country; you, Tityrus, at ease beneath the shade, teach the woods to re-echo "fair Amaryllis".*]<sup>87</sup>

These lines contain a paradox that recurs in Cowper's and Wordsworth's writing about reclusion: namely, that Meliboeus, who appears committed to his country, is forced to withdraw, while Tityrus, who at least appears to be indifferent to its welfare, is able to remain. Generations of writers, Patterson argues, have grappled with this problem of the responsibilities which the individual—particularly the individual artist—bears towards his or her society. Patterson's argument follows a trajectory in which writers from the Romantic period onwards began to distance themselves from the concept of social responsibility, advocating the importance of art for its own sake. Discussing Romantic

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<sup>87</sup> Virgil, *Eclogues*, I, 1-5, in *Eclogues, Georgics, Aeneid I-VI*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, rev. G. P. Goold (Cambridge, MA and London, 2004), 24-5.

period pastoral, she claims that ‘the new aesthetic movement was consciously postrevolutionary [*sic.*], partly conceived in response to the failure of the French Revolution ... [it] substitutes introspection for social analysis, and imaginative and spiritual advances for institutional change.’<sup>88</sup> Patterson’s argument incorporates the New Historicist concept of a defensive drive towards disengagement with society in Romantic writing. Yet the oppositions which she draws between ‘introspection’ and ‘social analysis’ and between ‘imaginative ... advances’ and ‘institutional change’ are not inevitable and perhaps not even logical ones. Cowper and Wordsworth both argued that in order for institutions to change, individuals first had to undergo the kind of ‘imaginative and spiritual advances’ that would enable them to entertain new visions of society.

Such models of reclusion pervade and unite the works of Cowper and Wordsworth. As Patterson has shown, their works grew out of a much larger tradition of politically-engaged retirement literature, drawing especially on Virgil’s *Georgics*, Horace’s Second Book of *Satires* (composed on the Sabine farm), and Ovid’s *Tristia* (written in exile at Tomis). In a letter to Coleridge on 27 February 1799, Wordsworth praised Theocritus for having captured the timeless aspect of human ‘manners’ in his *Idylls*: ‘not transitory manners reflecting the wearisome unintelligible obliquities of city-life, but manners connected with the permanent objects of nature’.<sup>89</sup> The retirement tradition, Wordsworth suggests, is permanently political, in that it allows individuals to dissent from the ‘wearisome unintelligible obliquities of city-life’, and enter a community which unites the whole of humanity, past and present, in sharing a common set of ‘manners connected with the permanent objects of nature’. Cowper, too, recognised the political potential in the Classical retirement tradition. In 1782, he translated Book V, Elegy 12 from Ovid’s *Tristia*, metaphorically applying Ovid’s experience of exile at Tomis

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<sup>88</sup> Annabel Patterson, *Pastoral and Ideology: Virgil to Valéry* (Oxford, 1988), 267.

<sup>89</sup> William Wordsworth, Letter to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 27 February 1799, *Letters*, vol. 1, 255.

to his own withdrawal from London, as discussed in Chapter One. The theme of being forced to withdraw while remaining loyal to one's country is central to Romantic reclusion. In his translations of Horace, Cowper continued to focus on works which fell within the scope of his wider thinking about the political need for reclusion. He referred to Horace in Book IV of *The Task* as 'The Sabine Bard' (IV, 190), using this epithet to invoke the Roman satirist as an exemplar of the politically-engaged retired life. His translations from Horace's works are too numerous to discuss in full, but they include Book I, Satires 5 and 9 and Book II, Odes 10 and 16, all of which engage in some way with the theme of retirement. Book II, Ode 16, for example, follows on from Horace's complaint about the proliferation of luxury in Roman society and adopts a serio-comic stance of withdrawal whose tone Cowper catches well in his translation: 'On Me Indulgent Fate bestow'd / A Rural Mansion, Neat and Small, / This Lyre—and as for yonder Crowd, / The Glory to Despise them All' (ll. 37-40).<sup>90</sup> In his choice of translations, Cowper styled himself as an inheritor of a politically-engaged tradition of retirement literature which criticises the city from afar. Both Cowper and Wordsworth engaged with this tradition as part of a wider programme of thinking and reading about the virtues of reclusion, deliberately trying to develop these ideas in their own works.

With both Biblical and Classical influences, retirement tropes recur throughout the history of English literature. In her Book *Shakespeare and the Solitary Man*, Janette Dillon has offered a fuller survey of the Medieval and Renaissance retirement tradition than it would be possible to provide here.<sup>91</sup> Among the early examples of this tradition in English is *Piers Plowman*, a poem steeped in the Christian tradition of retirement. Set against the backdrop of the Peasant's Revolt, William Langland's poem opens with the

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<sup>90</sup> See Horace, Book II, Ode 16, ll. 37-40, in *Odes and Epodes*, trans. Niall Rudd (Cambridge, MA and London, 2004), 128: 'mihi parva rura et / spiritum Graiae tenuem Camenae / Parca non mendax dedit et malignum / spenere vulgus'.

<sup>91</sup> See Janette Dillon, *Shakespeare and the Solitary Man* (London and Basingstoke, 1981), 3-31.

protagonist—Will—disguising himself ‘In abite as an heremite’ in order to distance himself from and reflect upon ‘A fair field ful of folk ... Of alle manere men, / þe mene and þe pore, / Worchyng and wandryng as þis world ascuth [asks]’.<sup>92</sup> The social satire that unfolds in Will’s subsequent dream visions prefigures Bunyan’s description of Vanity Fair in *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678). Wordsworth rated the poem highly, and encouraged Robert Anderson to include ‘P. Ploughman’s Vision and Creed’ in the revised edition of his *Complete Edition of the Poets of Great Britain*.<sup>93</sup> In the poem, Langland drew extensively on Christian discussions of the active versus the contemplative life, particularly those in the works of Augustine. In Passus II, he introduced the figure of Lady Meed (‘Reward’), who spreads corruption through every level of society. The rest of the poem describes how characters including Reason, Conscience, Patience, and Imaginatif work to overcome her influence. In calling on individuals to withdraw from a corrupt society, Cowper and Wordsworth invoked an idea which has roots in every period of English literature, as well as in Christian and Classical writing.

Wordsworth’s writing about reclusion was significantly influenced by the works of Edmund Spenser. His description, in Book Three of *The Prelude*, of ‘Sweet Spenser, moving through his clouded heaven / With the moon’s beauty and the moon’s soft pace’ (III, 281-2) is typical of his depictions of Spenser as a solitary inhabitant of ‘Faery-land’. The adjective ‘clouded’ captures the allegorical nature of Spenser’s fables, hinting at the darker political context of Spenser’s effective expulsion from England for satirising Lord Burghley in ‘Mother Hubberd’s Tale’ and his subsequent involvement in Irish politics during the Desmond Rebellions and the Nine Years’ War. Wordsworth alluded to these events again in his poem ‘Scorn not the Sonnet’ (1827), where he claimed that the sonnet

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<sup>92</sup> William Langland, ‘Prologue’, ll. 3, 19-21, in *Piers Plowman: An Edition of the C-text*, ed. Derek Pearsall (London, 1978), 27-8.

<sup>93</sup> William Wordsworth, 7 September 1814, *Letters*, vol. 3, 152, 154.

form ‘cheered mild Spenser, called from Faery-land / To struggle through dark ways’.<sup>94</sup>

No doubt recalling the ‘Prefatory Sonnet’ of *Poems, in Two Volumes* (‘Nuns fret not at their Convent’s narrow room; / And Hermits are contented with their Cells’, ll. 1-2),

Wordsworth co-opts the sonnet as the chosen form of exiled poets. Elsewhere,

Wordsworth figures Spenser as a reclusive role-model in the sonnet ‘Occasioned by the Same Battle [Waterloo]. February 1816’. This sonnet describes ‘The Bard, whose soul is meek as dawning day’ as being ‘Assoiled from all incumbrance of our time’.<sup>95</sup> The second

of these lines is a deliberate allusion, which Wordsworth signalled in a footnote, to Book VI, Canto v of the *Faerie Queene*, where Serena, Arthur, and their companions encounter

a Hermit: ‘The name of knighthood he did disauow, / And hanging vp his armes and warlike spoyle, / From all this worlds incombraunce did himselfe assoyle’.<sup>96</sup> In his sonnet,

Wordsworth applies Spenser’s description of the Hermit to the poet (and, through the

carefully-signalled footnote, to Spenser himself). The implication is that the poet, too, must assoil (i.e. absolve) himself from the encumbrances of history, not by retreating, but

by being virtuous enough to avoid corruption.

As in the case of Spenser, both Cowper and Wordsworth tended to depict

Shakespeare as a pastoral and reclusive poet. In Book Three of *The Task*, Cowper used an

extended simile to describe the serried rows of plants in his greenhouse: ‘So once were

ranged the sons of ancient Rome, / A noble show! while Roscius trod the stage; / And so,

while Garrick as renown’d as he, / The sons of Albion; fearing each to lose / Some note of

Nature’s music from his lips’ (III, 596-600). This serio-comic image equates Shakespeare

with natural imagery and—through the phrase ‘Nature’s music’—the pastoral mode.

Beyond this, it suggests that Shakespeare’s writing helped to form the ‘sons of Albion’

<sup>94</sup> William Wordsworth, ‘Scorn not the Sonnet; Critic, you have frowned’, ll. 10-11, in *Last Poems, 1821-1850*, ed. Jared Curtis (Ithaca and London, 1999), 82.

<sup>95</sup> William Wordsworth, ‘Occasioned by the Same Battle. February 1816’, ll. 1, 9, in *Shorter Poems, 1807-1820*, ed. Carl H. Ketcham (Ithaca and London, 1989), 172.

<sup>96</sup> Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton (London and New York, 1977), 659.

into a community, as the audience attentively crowd round Garrick to hear his performance. In Book Eight of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth also characterised Shakespeare as a pastoral poet by referring to idealised shepherds, such ‘As Shakespeare in the Wood of Arden placed’, who ‘in Arcadian Fastnesses / Sequester’d handed down among themselves ... the golden Age’ (VIII, 183-7). Though Wordsworth here distances himself from the ‘Arcadian’ pastoral of *As You Like It*, his other references to the Forest of Arden (discussed in Chapter Four) suggest a more politicised reading of the play.

Both Cowper and Wordsworth celebrate a reclusive strain in Shakespeare’s writing which Janette Dillon studied in detail. She posited a transition during the sixteenth century ‘away from the medieval idealisation of the bonds between men towards an increased reverence for the individual enclosed in his inner world’.<sup>97</sup> Though the model of ‘solitariness’ with which Dillon works is consciously antisocial—her discussion begins with Richard III’s ‘devotion to self at the expense of society’<sup>98</sup>—her conclusions end up having more in common with the concept of reclusion. She argued that: ‘Hamlet finds that in order to be true to himself he has to play false in society, and that is an indictment of the society in which he finds himself rather than of him’.<sup>99</sup> Dillon proceeds to argue that *Hamlet* criticises a society which is ‘corrupted and in which the most sacred of the social bonds have been violated’.<sup>100</sup> This reading of Shakespeare looks forward to the project of Romantic reclusion, to the extent that withdrawal becomes a form of dissent. Yet Cowper and Wordsworth did not credit the dichotomy between being ‘true to oneself’ and being ‘true to society’. Rather, they believed that reclusion overcame this dichotomy, by offering the model of a community whose members made it their ‘common business to keep the

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<sup>97</sup> Dillon, *Shakespeare and the Solitary Man*, xiii.

<sup>98</sup> Dillon, *Shakespeare and the Solitary Man*, xi.

<sup>99</sup> Dillon, *Shakespeare and the Solitary Man*, xv.

<sup>100</sup> Dillon, *Shakespeare and the Solitary Man*, xv.

channels of growth clear',<sup>101</sup> so that individuals could serve their own interests and those of the community at the same time.

During the seventeenth century, many writers experimented with the idea of figuring withdrawal from the centres of society and government as a deliberate act of opposition. This was the case especially during the Civil War, in which both Royalist and Parliamentary poets developed highly nuanced languages of withdrawal in order to voice opposition when they lost influence over the country. The chief seventeenth-century influence on Cowper's and Wordsworth's writing about reclusion was undoubtedly Milton. Cowper's and Wordsworth's debts to Milton in this—as in every—respect are so complex that they deserve to be studied separately, and are therefore tackled in Chapter One. A lesser, but nonetheless important, influence on the development of seventeenth-century retirement literature was his friend and fellow Parliamentarian Andrew Marvell. Marvell wrote 'Upon Appleton House' for Thomas Fairfax in 1651, while he was serving as tutor to Fairfax's daughter. Fairfax had become famous as a commander of the Parliamentarian forces, but in 1650 he had retired to Appleton House in protest at the Council of State's decision to send an army to suppress Royalists in Scotland.<sup>102</sup> In the poem, Marvell boasts: 'How safe, methinks, and strong, behind / These trees I have encamped my mind' (ll. 601-2). Here, the woodland shelter symbolises the retired position of the writer, yet the fact that Marvell's mind is 'encamped' suggests that he is still figuratively engaged in fighting the Civil War. Later in the same stanza, he claims to be hidden 'where the world no certain shot / Can make, or me it toucheth not. / But I on it securely play, / And gall its horseman all the day' (ll. 605-8). These lines signal the political intent behind Marvell's reclusion: he aims to criticise Parliamentarian leaders from the safety of Appleton House. Marvell's poem thus provides a good example of how

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<sup>101</sup> Williams, *Culture and Society*, 337.

<sup>102</sup> See Andrew Marvell, *Upon Appleton House*, in *The Poems of Andrew Marvell*, ed. Nigel Smith (Harlow, 2003), 210-12.

writers used retirement tropes to criticise those who wielded power during the Civil War, and exert political influence from afar.

In contrast to Milton and Marvell, there are also many examples of Royalist writers who also engaged with a politicised retirement tradition during the Civil War. These examples show that reclusion emerges as a favoured subject of all writers who regard themselves, for whatever reason, as voicing political opposition to a dominant power. The Royalist poet John Denham figured Charles I first as a huntsman and then as the hunted ‘stagg’ seeking a safe retreat in ‘Cooper’s Hill’,<sup>103</sup> perhaps helping to suggest Cowper’s description of himself as a ‘stricken deer’ in Book Three of *The Task* (III, 108). Elsewhere, Abraham Cowley deployed withdrawal motifs during and after the Interregnum, when Charles II regarded him with suspicion for having seemingly renounced the Royalist cause in the preface to his *Poems* (1656). Cowley’s collection *Several Discourses by Way of Essays, in Verse and Prose* (1668) features the essays ‘Of Solitude’ and ‘Of Obscurity’, the latter of which opens with a quotation from Horace’s *Epistles*: ‘Nam neque Divitibus contingunt gaudia solis, / Nec vixit male, qui natus moriensque Fefillit’ (I, xviii, ll. 9-10). Cowley translates these lines as: ‘God made not pleasures only for the Rich, / Nor have those men without their share too liv’d, / Who both in Life and Death the world deceiv’d’.<sup>104</sup> He grounds the rest of the essay in a discussion of the phrase ‘deceiving the world’, claiming that it refers to ‘those who live and dye so obscurely, that the world takes no notice of them’.<sup>105</sup> Cowley supports his argument by interspersing his essays with translations of passages from writers including Virgil and Horace which might serve as an anthology of retirement literature. In Book Four of *The Task*, Cowper joins Cowley’s name with Milton’s as a pair of reclusive nature poets and

<sup>103</sup> John Denham, ‘Cooper’s Hill’, in *The Poetical Works of Sir John Denham*, ed. Theodore Howard Banks, second edition (Hamden, Connecticut, 1969), 81ff., ll. 241ff.

<sup>104</sup> Abraham Cowley, ‘Of Obscurity’, in *The Essays and Other Prose Writings*, ed. Alfred B. Gough (Oxford, 1915), 136.

<sup>105</sup> Cowley, *Essays*, 136.

claims that, in spite of the former's Royalism, 'I still revere thee, courtly though retired ... finding rich amends / For a lost world in solitude and verse' (IV.727-30). By writing this, Cowper acknowledged Cowley's role in fashioning the tradition of political retirement literature which lay behind his own stance of reclusion in *The Task*.

A number of women writers also used the tropes of retirement literature for the purposes of political self-fashioning during the Civil War. Katherine Philips, for example, faced a unique challenge in articulating her own Royalism while being married to the prominent Welsh Parliamentarian James Philips. She signalled both her Royalism and her respect for Cowley in the poem 'An ode upon retirement, made upon occasion of Mr. Cowley's on that subject', and developed Cowley's language of withdrawal in her 'Invitation to the Country'. In this poem, Philips writes that: 'Man, unconcern'd without, himself may be / His own both prospect and security. / Kings may be slaves by their own passions hurl'd, / But who commands himself commands the World'.<sup>106</sup> The first couplet gains new energy if one refuses to read 'Man' as a universal pronoun: men are 'unconcern'd without' because they do not depend on a marriage 'prospect' in order to achieve financial 'security'. Women have neither of these privileges, Philips implies, and this alters their experience of reclusion. With the phrase 'who commands himself commands the World', Philips not only signals her Royalist intention to withdraw from a country controlled by Parliamentarian 'folly', but also signals a desire to minimise her dependence on a sphere of politics controlled by men. A similar argument might be made for Anne Finch's poem 'The Petition for an Absolut Retreat'. This poem was written after 1690, when Anne Finch's husband Heneage had refused to swear allegiance to William and Mary and been arrested as a Jacobite. Banished from public life because of her husband's loyalty to Charles II, Finch complains about having been disenfranchised both

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<sup>106</sup> Katherine Philips, 'Invitation to the Countrey', ll. 37-40, *The Collected Works, The Collected Works of Katherine Philips, the Matchless Orinda*, ed. Patrick Thomas, 3 vols (Stump Cross, 1990-3), vol. 1, 174-5.

for her gender and her politics. Like Philips, she embraces retirement and calls for an ‘absolute retreat’ in which she might spurn the public sphere.

In the eighteenth century, writers began to map the tradition of political retirement literature onto the emerging division between Whigs and Tories. In his book *The Garden and the City*, Maynard Mack argued that Pope’s poems of the 1730s engage in ‘the pursuit of politics from the vantage of retirement’.<sup>107</sup> Specifically, Mack saw Pope as launching an attack on the ministry of Robert Walpole in his imitations of Horace, while pretending to be leading a life of retirement in his garden at Twickenham. Earlier in his career, Pope had defined two distinct types of withdrawal: the urbane retirement of poems like ‘Windsor-Forest’ (1713) might be compared to Milton’s ‘L’Allegro’, whereas the more melancholy isolation of works like ‘Eloisa to Abelard’ (1717) is better likened to ‘Il Penseroso’. In ‘Windsor-Forest’, Pope calmed Tory fears about a Whig ascendancy after the death of Queen Anne by comparing his childhood home to a ‘bright Court’,<sup>108</sup> a seat of political authority to rival the national throne. He used the same technique to challenge Walpole in ‘The First Satire of the Second Book of Horace Imitated’ (1733), claiming: ‘Know, all the distant Din that World can keep / Rolls o’er my *Grotto*, and but sooths my Sleep. / There, my Retreat the best Companions grace, / Chiefs out of War, and Statesmen, out of Place’ (ll. 123-6). As in ‘Windsor-Forest’, Pope described Twickenham as an alternative centre of power, populated by his Tory friends, the ‘Chiefs’ and ‘Statesmen’ whom Walpole has removed from office. Pope’s tactics were challenged, however, by the Whig writer, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, who launched a complex political attack on Tory retirement literature. In her ‘Epistle [to Lord Bathurst]’, she satirised Bathurst’s inability to choose between retirement and public life, claiming: ‘With Thoughts like these, the shining Court

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<sup>107</sup> Maynard Mack, *The Garden and the City: Retirement and Politics in the Later Poetry of Pope, 1731-1743* (London, 1969), 116.

<sup>108</sup> Alexander Pope, ‘Windsor-Forest’, l. 235, *The Poems of Alexander Pope: A One-Volume Edition of the Twickenham Text*, ed. John Butt (London and New York, 2005), 202.

you seek / Full of new projects for—allmost a Week.’<sup>109</sup> The adjective ‘shining’ is particularly apt for suggesting Bathurst’s selfish reasons for approaching the court, and implying that he only left it again because, like Pope, he found himself out of favour.

Until the mid-eighteenth century, political retirement literature tended to be partisan, engaging with the disputes between Parliamentarians and Royalists or Whigs and Tories. The phenomenon of Romantic reclusion differs in that the poet’s reasons for withdrawing extend beyond party lines into a defence of community and a resistance to commercialism. One of the first authors to write in this vein was James Thomson, whose poem *The Seasons* (1730) advocated the virtues of withdrawal in ways that directly enabled the poetry of Cowper and Wordsworth. In ‘Autumn’, for example, Thomson extolled reclusion in the lines ‘happiest he! Who far from public Rage, / Deep in the Vale, with a *choice* Few retir’d, / Drinks the pure Pleasures of the RURAL LIFE’.<sup>110</sup> Such ideas had a profound impact on Cowper and on Wordsworth, as shown in the latter’s ‘Lines Written Near Richmond, Upon the Thames, at Evening’, which allude to Collins’s Ode on the death of Thomson. In ‘Winter’, Thomson praised the ‘Sons of *Lapland*’, claiming: ‘wisely They / Despise th’insensate barbarous Trade of War; / They ask no more than simple Nature gives’ (ll. 843-5). Many themes of Romantic reclusion are already present in these lines: opposition to commercialism; criticism of modern life as ‘barbarous’ because it lacks community; the attempt to regulate the passions and ‘ask no more than simple Nature gives’; and love of nature as a model for the bond between humans. Romantic reclusion can thus be seen to have developed out of the tradition of political retirement literature, coming into being when party-political dissent became a more general objection to the values of advanced industrial society.

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<sup>109</sup> Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, ‘Epistle [to Lord Bathurst]’, ll. 33-4, *Essays and Poems and Simplicity, A Comedy*, ed. Robert Halsband and Isobel Grundy (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 243.

<sup>110</sup> James Thomson, ‘Autumn’, ll. 1236-8, in *The Seasons*, ed. James Sambrook (Oxford, 1981), 196.

John Sitter proposed a similar line of argument in his book *Literary Loneliness in Mid-Eighteenth Century England* (1982). In this book, Sitter posited a ‘Flight from History in Mid-Century Poetry’, arguing that in the works of poets like Gray, Collins, and the Wartons ‘the very calls to depoliticize poetry and to lift it “above” the conflicts of modern history constitute a new politicization of poetry’.<sup>111</sup> He contended that these writers figured the poet as a ‘sensitive fugitive from ... society’ in order to express ‘a general protest against various capitalistic tendencies, if not an analysis of them’:

success is suspect, as is the “ambition” required to achieve it. Commerce is unattractive, as is the city in which it is in most evidence ... The best people do not often, perhaps not usually, rise to the top, because the competition for “places” in society and in history is ruthless and demeaning.<sup>112</sup>

The phenomenon of Romantic reclusion grew out of the mid-century movement which Sitter describes. Yet Romantic reclusion differs in that where Sitter saw ‘a general protest ... not an analysis’ of current events, Cowper and Wordsworth spent years reading and writing about reclusion in order to provide just such an analysis. To a greater extent than the poems which Sitter discussed, *The Task* and *The Recluse* were intended as works of cultural criticism which would advocate the need for community in Britain. Nevertheless, Sitter’s work remains important, since it offered to inaugurate a line of criticism which was arguably diverted by the appearance of *The Romantic Ideology* the following year. The ‘flight from history’ quickly came to be interpreted as an evasion of, rather than a protest against, late eighteenth-century social conditions. As a result, Cowper’s and Wordsworth’s writing about reclusion still needs to be read in its historical context, as part of a long-running tradition of retirement literature and a critical response to the events of the American, French, and Industrial Revolutions.

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<sup>111</sup> John Sitter, *Literary Loneliness in Mid-Eighteenth Century England* (Ithaca and London, 1982), 77, 107.

<sup>112</sup> Sitter, *Literary Loneliness*, 106-7.

As I have suggested in the case of Thomson, some of the retirement literature written in the mid-eighteenth century did in fact begin to undertake the ‘analysis’ of capitalistic tendencies’ that I have defined as characteristic of Romantic reclusion. Goldsmith’s poem ‘The Deserted Village’ (1770) and Gray’s ‘Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard’ (1751) may both be read as articulating a politicised model of reclusion. In these poems, reclusion ceases to be a matter of nobility retiring from national politics, becoming instead a virtue that all individuals can cultivate. By praising ‘village-Hampden[s]’, ‘mute inglorious Milton[s]’, and ‘Cromwell[s] guiltless of [their] country’s blood’, Gray celebrated the retired virtue of those who had never been privileged enough to ‘read their history in a nation’s eyes’.<sup>113</sup> In ‘The Deserted Village’, Oliver Goldsmith imagined the ‘rural virtues’ of ‘Contented toil’, ‘hospitable care’, ‘connubial tenderness’, ‘piety’, ‘steady loyalty’, and ‘faithful love’ assembling on the ‘strand’ with the villagers from the previous verse paragraphs who are preparing to set sail for America (ll. 398-406): ‘And thou, sweet Poetry, thou loveliest maid, / Still first to fly where sensual joys invade; / Unfit, in these degenerate times of shame, / To catch the heart or strike for honest fame ... Farewell’ (ll. 407-17). Goldsmith transforms ‘Poetry’ itself into an ordinary woman who has been forced into exile by the effects of rampant commercialism. In urging her to ‘Teach erring man to spurn the rage of gain’ (l. 424), Goldsmith begins to figure reclusion as a means of defending the principle of community by dissenting from economic war of all against all.

A final, crucial source for Cowper’s and Wordsworth’s ideas about reclusion was Rousseau, whose works played an important role in developing the Romantic ideal of solitude. Rousseau first engaged with the structure of society and, implicitly, with the desirability of withdrawal in his *Discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inégalité*

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<sup>113</sup> Thomas Gray, ‘Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard’, ll. 57-64, in Roger Lonsdale (ed.), *The Poems of Thomas Gray, William Collins, Oliver Goldsmith* (London and Harlow, 1969), 127-9.

*parmi les Hommes* [*Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men*] (1755). In this essay, he revised Hobbes's account of how society arose from the state of nature. The development of community, he argued, was a spontaneous development for the good, but civil society corrupted people's natural instinct of self-preservation ('*amour de soi*') into a more destructive form of self-love ('*amour-propre*'):

the Savage lives within himself, whereas the Citizen, constantly beside himself, knows only how to live in the Opinion of others; insomuch that it is, if I may say so, merely from their Judgement that he derives the Consciousness of his own Existence. It is foreign to my subject to shew how this Disposition engenders so much Indifference for good and evil ... how everything, being reduced to Appearances, becomes mere Art and Mummery; Honour, Friendship, Virtue, and even Vice itself, which we at last learn the secret to boast of.<sup>114</sup>

Rousseau's critique of civil society permeated Cowper's and Wordsworth's respective philosophies of reclusion, but there remain important differences between them. In *The Task*, Cowper argues that, though society may 'corrupt ... our natural inclinations', it also enables man's 'faculties' to flourish: 'Man in society is like a flower / Blown in his native bed. 'Tis there alone / His faculties expanded in full bloom / Shine out' (VI, 659-62).

Wordsworth may be seen to adopt a more Rousseauian position at the beginning of *Salisbury Plain* (1793), where he compares the life of the 'hungry savage' to that of civilised man and concludes: 'The thoughts which bow the kindly spirits down' derive from 'reflection on the state / Of those who on the couch of Affluence rest'.<sup>115</sup> There is an important difference, however, in that Rousseau examined the merits of society *per se*, whereas Cowper and Wordsworth never doubted the importance of community.

In his later works, Rousseau moved towards accepting the fact, if not the contemporary conditions, of civil society. In the sixth chapter of *Du contrat social* (a work which is discussed in more detail in Chapter Three), he hypothesised a point in the

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<sup>114</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse upon the Origin and Foundation of the Inequality among Mankind*, trans. William Kenrick (London, 1761), 180.

<sup>115</sup> William Wordsworth, 'Salisbury Plain', ll. 3, 19-24, in *The Salisbury Plain Poems of William Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill (Ithaca and Hassocks, 1975), 21.

development of mankind when ‘the obstacles to their preservation, in a state of nature, prevail over the endeavours of individuals’.<sup>116</sup> At this point, Rousseau argued, humans enter a social pact which forms a ‘public personage’:

This act of association accordingly converts the several individual contracting parties into one moral collective body, composed of as many members as there are votes in the assembly, which receives also from the same act its unity and existence.<sup>117</sup>

Despite Rousseau’s reference to ‘unity’, his concept of the ‘public personage’ differs from Nancy’s ‘being *of* togetherness’. For Rousseau, the ‘public personage’ was ‘a moral and collective body’: not a shared set of values, but a shared commitment to the idea of value, to holding values and respecting those held by others values. In this sense, the ‘public personage’ represents the ethical undertaking which underlies community, and which, paradoxically, motivated Cowper’s and Wordsworth’s decisions to withdraw from a corrupt society.

This notion of ethically-motivated withdrawal appears in *Émile, ou de l’éducation* (1762), published in the same year as *Du contrat social* (1762). In this work, Rousseau attempted to trace the education necessary to produce a person who could remain uncorrupted in society. In Book Two, he claimed that ‘[t]he most sublime virtues are negative’, and that the first and highest rule of morality should be ‘never to do an injury to any one’:<sup>118</sup>

The injunction of doing no one harm, infers that of doing the least possible harm to the community in general; for in a state of society the good of one man necessarily becomes the evil of another. This relation is essential to the thing itself, and cannot be changed. We may enquire, on this principle, which is best, man in a state of society or in a state of solitude?<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Treatise on the Social Compact; or The Principles of Politic Law*, trans. William Kenrick (London, 1764), 19.

<sup>117</sup> Rousseau, *A Treatise on the Social Compact*, 22.

<sup>118</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emilius and Sophia: or, A New System of Education*, trans. William Kenrick, 2 vols (London, 1762), vol. 1, 164.

<sup>119</sup> Rousseau, *Emilius*, vol. 1, 165n.

Both Cowper and Wordsworth explore similar ideas in their writing, but they avoid Rousseau's conclusion that it might be better to avoid human interaction. Rather, they suggest that individuals should defend the principle of community by refusing to become selfishly invested in the social structure by seeking positions of power and recognition. Cowper argues that 'Man in society is like a flower / Blown in his native bed' (VI, 659-60), but he questions whether Britain still offers the experience of society. At the end of *The Task*, he describes the 'retired man' as a 'solitary saint' (VI, 948), claiming that reclusion enables the individual to uphold the principle of community—'never to do an injury to any one'—when all around have reneged on this promise. As discussed in Chapter Three, Cowper's 'retired man' subsequently became the basis for many of the solitary characters in Wordsworth's poetry.

Rousseau's greatest influence on Cowper and Wordsworth, however, arguably came not from his writings, but from his life as a retired author. Rousseau began to fashion his reclusive identity in *Émile*, declaring himself to be 'a plain man, a friend to truth, attached to no system nor party ... a mere Solitary, who, conversing little with mankind, has less opportunity of imbibing their prejudices'.<sup>120</sup> After *Du contrat social* was censored and *Émile* was publicly burned in Paris, Rousseau fled to Neuchâtel. Several years later, he composed first *Les Confessions* and then *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* [*The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*], both of which were published posthumously in 1782. In *Les Rêveries*, Rousseau justified his reclusive lifestyle. In the 'First Walk', he claims that: Being no longer able to do any good that does not turn out bad, being no longer able to act without prejudicing myself or some one, to abstain is become my sole duty. But in this inactivity of body, my soul remains active, it still produces sentiments, thoughts; and internal and moral life seem to grow out of the death of all terrestrial and temporal interests.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Rousseau, *Emilius*, vol. 1, 178.

<sup>121</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'First Walk', in *The Confession of J. J. Rousseau: with the Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, trans. Anon., 2 vols (London, 1783), vol. 2, 153.

In these lines, Rousseau figures himself much as Cowper was to describe the ‘solitary saint’ of *The Task*, retiring from society in order to develop his ‘moral life’ in private. Rousseau’s persona had a profound effect on Cowper’s and Wordsworth’s writings about reclusion. They may not have shared all of his ideas about the origins and effects of society, but his ethical stance of withdrawal was something they adopted and developed in their own works. By the time that Cowper and Wordsworth were writing, the ideas that reclusion offered a form of dissent and a means of personal improvement were readily available to them.

*‘A pure form of Society’: The reclusive revolution*

Romantic reclusion was not a defensive response to the French revolution; rather, it was a work of cultural criticism, a means of dissent, and part of a much longer tradition of political retirement literature. Having shown this, however, it is important to acknowledge the ways in which the French Revolution did help to shape the reclusive mode at the end of the eighteenth century. Properly speaking, this is the purpose of Chapter Three, but here it is necessary to offer some context by way of introduction. The idea of a small group of individuals withdrawing from society in order to form a model community surfaced repeatedly during the Romantic period. Most notably, it emerged in the scheme of ‘Pantisocracy’ developed by Coleridge and Southey after they met in Oxford in June 1794. The plan was for Coleridge and Southey, along with a small group of their friends and relatives, to move to the banks of the River Susquehanna in America to establish new community. On 21 October 1794, Coleridge explained that ‘[t]he leading Idea of Pantisocracy is to make men *necessarily* virtuous by removing all Motives to Evil—all

possible Temptations'.<sup>122</sup> Coleridge and Southey sought to eliminate the selfish passions which, they believed, had led to the failure of the French Revolution.

The scheme of Pantisocracy shared many aims with the literary project of Romantic reclusion, and Coleridge's recollections of it no doubt influenced Wordsworth's writing after they met. On 13 November 1795, after the scheme had collapsed, Coleridge wrote to Southey accusing him of having broken his promises by deciding to study law. In the letter, Coleridge reiterated his former hopes that:

we should remove the *selfish* Principle from ourselves, and prevent it in our children, by an *Abolition* of Property: or in whatever respects this might be impracticable, by such similarity of Property, as would amount to a *moral Sameness*, and answer all the purposes of *Abolition*. Nor were you less zealous: and thought, and expressed your opinion, that if any man embraced our System, he must comparatively disregard 'his father and mother and wife and children and brethren and sisters, yea, and his own Life also': or he could 'not be our disciple'.<sup>123</sup>

The language of this passage reveals certain flaws in Coleridge and Southey's model of community. Although the name 'Pantisocracy' was coined from Greek to mean 'equal government by all', the '*moral Sameness*' that Coleridge describes begins to sound like Nancy's 'being *of* togetherness', with individuals having to adopt a uniform set of ideas. Beyond this, the noun 'disciple' (which Coleridge attributes to Southey) contradicts the spirit of community, as does the idea that the members of a Pantisocracy must 'disregard' their closest relations. Yet the scheme resembles Romantic reclusion in aiming to 'remove the *selfish* Principle' from human conduct and has much in common with the works of Cowper and Wordsworth. When devising the scheme, Coleridge misspelled the name of Thomas Cooper, whose book *Some Information respecting America* (1794) he read by way of research. In a letter, Coleridge instructed Southey: 'By all means read & ponder on Cowper'.<sup>124</sup> Though a simple mistake, this suggests that *The Task* was on Coleridge's

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<sup>122</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 21 October 1794, *Collected Letters*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols (Oxford, 1956-81), vol. 1, 114.

<sup>123</sup> Coleridge, 13 November 1795, *Letters*, vol. 1, 163-4.

<sup>124</sup> Coleridge, 21 October 1794, *Letters*, vol. 1, 115.

mind as he developed his plans for reclusion. In a letter to Thomas Poole on 23 March 1801, Coleridge objected to ‘the depravity of the public mind’ caused by ‘pestilent Commerce’ and the ‘unnatural Crowding together of men in Cities’: ‘I would go to America, if Wordsworth would go with me ... Society has become a matter of great Indifference to me—I grow daily more & more attached to Solitude’.<sup>125</sup> Ultimately, the system of Pantisocracy resulted in ‘Solitude’, not reclusion, but it nonetheless formed an important context for *The Recluse*.

An equally important French Revolution context for Wordsworth’s writing was John Thelwall’s volume *Poems Chiefly Written in Retirement* (1801). Thelwall famously stayed with Coleridge and Wordsworth at Nether Stowey in 1797, attracting the attention of the government agent James Walsh.<sup>126</sup> His ‘Prefatory Memoir’ to *Poems Chiefly Written in Retirement* describes how he retired to Llys-Wen farm following his arrest and trial for sedition in 1794. Accounting for his decision to withdraw from active involvement in politics, Thelwall wrote (in the third person) that he ‘perceived, with anguish, that, from the fury with which he was pursued, every effort he made, instead of producing the Reason he loved, only irritated to the Violence he abhorred’:

The prospect, on all sides, became abhorrent to his nature; and he determined thenceforward to lock up his sentiments in the silence of his own bosom; to concentrate his feelings in the private duties of life; and turn his attention towards making, if not a comfortable, at least, a quiet establishment, for his encreasing family.<sup>127</sup>

This is the kind of reclusion which Nicholas Roe described when he claimed that ‘[n]o longer identified with revolutionary action or progress, human regeneration [had] become the prerogative of the individual mind in communion with nature and, introspectively, with

<sup>125</sup> Coleridge, 23 March 1801, *Letters*, vol. 2, 710.

<sup>126</sup> Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth: A Life* (Oxford, 1989), 126-8.

<sup>127</sup> John Thelwall, ‘Prefatory Memoir’, in *Poems Chiefly Written in Retirement, 1801* (Oxford, 1989), xxxiv-v.

itself'.<sup>128</sup> Yet Thelwall's emphasis on 'private duties' quietly belies Roe's denial that reclusion can lead to 'revolutionary action or progress'.

Cowper's and Wordsworth's writing about withdrawal hinges upon Rousseau's claim that '[t]he most sublime virtues are negative',<sup>129</sup> and that 'internal and moral life seem to grow out of the death of all terrestrial and temporal interests'.<sup>130</sup> Like Thelwall, both of these poets believed that the most direct and secure route to 'revolutionary action [and] progress' was for individuals to attend to their 'private duties' and defend the ideal of community by withdrawing from the corrupting influences of society. Thelwall's 'Lines, written at Bridgewater' show how the reclusive stance can also become a powerful source of social commentary:

for my soul  
Is sick of public turmoil—ah, most sick  
Of the vain effort to redeem a Race  
Enslav'd, because degenerate; lost to Hope,  
Because to Virtue lost—wrapp'd up in Self,  
In sordid avarice, luxurious pomp,  
And profligate intemperance—a Race  
Fierce without courage; abject, and yet proud;  
And most licentious, tho' most far from free.<sup>131</sup>

These lines could almost be a direct quotation from Book Two of *The Task*, which opens with Cowper excoriating British society in similar terms: 'My soul is sick with every day's report / Of wrong and outrage with which earth is fill'd' (II, 6-7). Both writers argued that until individuals attended to their 'private duties', public causes would continue to be corrupted by selfish interests and all attempts at revolution would fail. Cowper suggests that a population's capacity for revolution depends upon the spirit of community which exists within it. Thelwall, likewise, claims to have abandoned direct involvement in politics, which only produced 'the Violence he abhorred', in order to live retired among

<sup>128</sup> Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge*, 273.

<sup>129</sup> Rousseau, *Emilius*, vol. 1, 164.

<sup>130</sup> Rousseau, 'First Walk', *Confession ... with the Reveries*, vol. 2, 153.

<sup>131</sup> Thelwall, 'Lines, written at Bridgewater, in Somersetshire, on the 27th of July, 1797; during a long excursion, in quest of a peaceful retreat', *Poems Chiefly Written in Retirement*, 129.

friends ‘With kindly interchange of mutual aid’.<sup>132</sup> In the context of the eighteenth-century tradition of retirement literature, writing about reclusion was itself a viable and highly-theorised form of political action.

As is argued in Chapter Three, Romantic reclusion engaged closely with the political events of the Age of Revolution. Cowper’s and Wordsworth’s writing about withdrawal was not a means of distancing themselves from these events, but an attempt to imagine a way of reforming British society without giving rise to the violence that had occurred in America and France. The political implications of Romantic reclusion emerge when one places Cowper’s and Wordsworth’s works in the context of their extensive reading not only of retirement literature, but also of political, theological, and medical texts, all of which dealt with the theme of withdrawal. In her book *Reading, Writing, and Romanticism*, Lucy Newlyn has examined the ways in which ‘allusive language ... is charged with personal, poetic, and political significance’.<sup>133</sup> Building on this idea, this thesis adopts the traditional historicist method of close reading passages from Cowper’s and Wordsworth’s writing alongside works which they had read. By studying echoes and allusions, I trace the impact which their reading of political, philosophical, medical, and scientific works had on their writing about withdrawal. In this way, I trace the extent of the project of Romantic reclusion, showing that Cowper and Wordsworth each envisaged a far-reaching work of cultural criticism, which argued for withdrawal as a means of resisting commercialism and protecting the spirit of community. By following Cowper’s and Wordsworth’s habits of reading, I have tried to recover the full complexity of the associations which the concept of ‘reclusion’ had for them. In the process, I suggest that ‘reclusion’ deserves to be regarded as a keyword for Romantic culture.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Thelwall, *Poems Chiefly Written in Retirement*, 129.

<sup>133</sup> Lucy Newlyn, *Reading, Writing, and Romanticism: The Anxiety of Reception* (Oxford, 2000), 364.

<sup>134</sup> Williams did not include it in *Keywords*.

Romantic reclusion was an artistic attempt to defend the individual against the dehumanising effects of commercial society. I propose that its aims and ends can be grouped under four interrelated headings—‘creative’, ‘medical’, ‘political’, and ‘natural’—which form the basis of my chapter divisions. Cowper’s and Wordsworth’s writing criticises British society on all of these fronts and shows how the act of withdrawing promises to repair the anti-communal effects of competition and self-interest. Chapter One argues that Cowper and Wordsworth both presented Milton as a precedent for their poetic reclusion. Cowper drew on Locke’s associationist model of language in his *Poems* (1782), dismissing poetic diction as a form of linguistic luxury and a product of fashionable sociability. Wordsworth amplified these concerns in the ‘Preface’ to *Lyrical Ballads*, but worried that by having ‘cut himself off from ... the common inheritance of Poets’ he would descend into a private language.<sup>135</sup> Cowper’s translations of Madame Guyon and Wordsworth’s modernisations of Chaucer both attempted to develop a plain style which would unite a wider, non-hierarchical community of readers, proving that there was a language of the passions ‘universally intelligible even to this day’.<sup>136</sup> Chapter Two explores the origins of Cowper’s reclusion in his spiritual crisis of 1763-5. My study of medical books owned by Nathaniel Cotton, Cowper’s doctor at the Collegium Insanorum, suggests that Cotton regarded Cowper’s illness as a product of eighteenth-century models of sociability. Cowper wrote about the social causes of mental illness in his conversion narrative, *Adelphi*, and in portions of *The Task* which Wordsworth developed in *Salisbury Plain*. Both Cowper and Wordsworth employed Robert Burton’s concept of ‘Honest Melancholy’, or sorrow for the state of one’s country, to critique social competition and call for new models of community.

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<sup>135</sup> Wordsworth, ‘Preface’, *Lyrical Ballads*, 748.

<sup>136</sup> Wordsworth, ‘Preface’, *Lyrical Ballads*, 744.

Chapter Three examines Cowper's and Wordsworth's presentations of reclusion as the best response to the violence of the American and French Revolutions. It begins by analysing Cowper's interest in Whig historiography, particularly Catherine Macaulay's indictment of the British political system for spreading the 'detestable principle of private interest'.<sup>137</sup> The 'retired man' becomes the unexpected political hero of *The Task*, a 'solitary saint' who 'Walks forth to meditate at even tide' (VI, 948-9), withdrawing from a corrupt society to bind together the remains of his community. The second part of the Chapter considers Cowper's works as a key influence on Wordsworth's decision to call his masterwork *The Recluse* and to structure it around 'the sensations and opinions of a poet living in retirement'.<sup>138</sup> Finally, Chapter Four considers Cowper's and Wordsworth's presentation of reclusion in nature as a means for individuals to reform their selfish passions. It traces Cowper's interest in natural theology and his belief that 'The man to solitude accustom'd long / Perceives in ev'ry thing that lives a tongue' ('The Needless Alarm', ll. 55-6). In 'Tintern Abbey', Wordsworth echoes Cowper's account of looking out across the River Ouse at the start of *The Task*. According to David Hartley, this process of introspection enables individuals 'to cherish and improve' their good associations and to 'check and root out such as are mischievous and immoral'.<sup>139</sup> Both poets sought to explain the psychological mechanism by which reclusion in nature could help to reform the mind, eliminating the selfish passions and teaching individuals to live in an active, mutually responsible community. Finally, the conclusion unites the four strands of the argument by returning the focus to the works of Raymond Williams, and to the importance of reading Romantic reclusion as a piece of cultural criticism. Cowper's and Wordsworth's arguments against commercialism and competition are important not only

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<sup>137</sup> Catherine Macaulay, *The History of England from the Accession of James I to that of the Brunswick Line*, 8 vols (London, 1763-83), vol. 1, ix.

<sup>138</sup> William Wordsworth, 'Preface', *The Excursion*, 38.

<sup>139</sup> David Hartley, *Observations on Man, 1791*, 2 vols (Poole and Washington DC, 1998), I:II:XIV, vol. 1, 81.

for understanding their time, but for the critical light which they continue to shed on society today. By moving beyond the New Historicist hermeneutic of suspicion, this thesis aims to reactivate the vein of cultural criticism in Cowper's and Wordsworth's works, showing how their writing about reclusion functions primarily as a form of dissent.

## ***1. Creative Reclusion***

### *Poetic exiles and hermeneutic hermits*

Both Cowper and Wordsworth renounced eighteenth-century poetic diction, characterising it as a form of linguistic luxury. In his 1782 poem 'Table Talk', Cowper wrote that language was 'Elegant as simplicity ... till luxury seduc'd the mind' towards meaningless ornamentation.<sup>1</sup> In the 1798 'Advertisement' to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth famously rejected 'the gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers'.<sup>2</sup> In each case, the poet rejects elaborate poetic diction as a side-effect of a burgeoning consumer society: Wordsworth's noun 'gaudiness' connotes the decoration of words as trinkets, while Cowper's claim that 'luxury seduc'd the mind' suggests that the consumer impulse corrupts not only language, but also the passions. Cowper and Wordsworth saw the elaboration of poetic language as part of a wider cultural tendency towards consumerism. They objected to it on moral, as well as aesthetic grounds, arguing that the commodification of language would impede poetic communication. The elaboration of diction, they reasoned, had diverted poetry from its true aim of expressing universal passions, leading poets to trade in phrases as luxury items, which could only be 'purchased' by the imaginations of a small, initiated circle of fashionable readers. Cowper and Wordsworth attempted in their own ways to banish poetic diction from their writing. As a result, each of them worried about having entered a kind of linguistic solitude, fearing that their refusal to meet their readers' expectations about how poetry should sound would prevent their works from being understood. Paradoxically, their attempts to write in a

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<sup>1</sup> William Cowper, 'Table Talk', ll. 588-600, in *The Poems of William Cowper*, ed. John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, 3 vols (Oxford, 1980-95), vol. 1, 257.

<sup>2</sup> William Wordsworth, 'Advertisement', in *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems, 1797-1800*, ed. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca and London, 1992), 738.

language that was universally intelligible led them to fear being exiled from the literary marketplace and from the community of readers.

*'What dost thou in this world?': Miltonic precedents*

Milton offered the archetypal image of a poet who had been exiled from his society while attempting to serve it. Cowper and Wordsworth each drew on his writing when presenting themselves as withdrawing from the literary marketplace, developing Milton's image of himself as a Samson-like recluse driven from his community. By echoing Milton's writing about reclusion in their own works, Cowper and Wordsworth inherited an already politicised model of withdrawal, in which the artist maintained a commitment to community but was forced into solitude for resisting political injustice.

Milton engaged with the concept of withdrawal throughout his career, imbuing it with diverse moral and political meanings, many of which prefigure the themes of Romantic reclusion. Most enduring is his description of Samson being 'exiled from light ... To live a life half dead, a living death, / And buried'.<sup>3</sup> To the extent that Samson represents Milton, betrayed by his country during the post-Restoration reprisals, when he was imprisoned and his works burnt, *Samson Agonistes* offers an image of a poet not so much entering as being forced into reclusion. At the same time, it looks back to the portrayals of reclusion in some of Milton's earliest works, such as 'Comus' (written 1634). The unnamed 'Lady' in this masque falls prey to the enchantments of the wizard Comus in solitude, but also displays the fortitude to resist them: 'Thou canst not touch the freedom of my mind / With all thy charms, although this corporal rind / Thou hast immanacled,

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<sup>3</sup> John Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, ll. 98-101, in *Complete Shorter Poems*, ed. John Carey (Harlow, 2007), 361.

while heaven sees good' (ll. 662-4). In this, as in many of Milton's later works, 'freedom of ... mind' becomes the last bastion of those who lose their physical battles against restraint and oppression, but who remain committed to a moral or political ideal. Solitary experience tests people's virtue and causes them to reveal their true character, with the ability to withstand reclusion coming to symbolise both devotion and heroism.

In *Paradise Lost*, Abdiel also acts the part of the solitary 'warfaring Christian' when he confronts the Angels and turns his back on Pandemonium:<sup>4</sup> 'Among the faithless, faithful only he; / Among innumerable false, unmoved, / Unshaken, unseduced, unterrified / His loyalty he kept ... Though single' (V, 897-903). This description of Abdiel resonates with Milton's description of his own situation as an author in Book Seven:

I sing with mortal voice, unchanged  
To hoarse or mute, though fallen on evil days,  
On evil days though fallen, and evil tongues;  
In darkness, and with dangers compassed round,  
And solitude. (VII, 24-8)

These lines set out a model of creative reclusion which Cowper and Wordsworth both incorporated into their own poetic identities. Milton describes himself as having been exiled from society for conforming to his principles, but insists that the correct course of action is to continue to defend his ideals 'with ... voice, unchanged / To hoarse or mute' in 'solitude'. In Milton's case, isolation was far less voluntary than it was for either Cowper or Wordsworth. In the great works which he published at the end of his career, Milton fashioned an identity for himself as a reclusive hero, a type of the figure whom he had first portrayed as the unnamed Lady in 'Comus'.

The final, but most important, representation of reclusion in Milton's works came in *Paradise Regained* (1671), where Milton presented Christ as the archetypal recluse. This poem is structured as a series of dialogues based on the Temptation of Christ, in

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<sup>4</sup> John Milton, *Areopagitica*, in *Prose Works of John Milton*, gen. ed. Don M. Wolfe, 8 vols (New Haven and London, 1953-82), vol. 2, 514-15.

which Satan transports Christ from the wilderness to the top of a mountain and repeatedly tempts him with lavish visions of banquets, riches, and kingdoms. Throughout, Satan's arguments hinge on the fact that Christ has yet to prove himself by acting in the world. In Book Two, Milton describes Christ's life as having been 'Private, unactive, calm, contemplative' (II, 81), using a string of adjectives which should be antonyms for the plot and hero of an epic poem. Satan himself questions whether this is a fitting description of the Son of God:

These godlike virtues wherefore dost thou hide?  
Affecting private life, or more obscure  
In savage wilderness, wherefore deprive  
All earth her wonder at thy acts...?' (III, 21-4).

Christ's answer, and Milton's, is adamant: the true Christian hero will of necessity be reclusive, since 'he who reigns within himself, and rules / Passions, desires, and fears, is more a king' than his earthly counterparts (II, 466-7). Christ argues that any individual who does not attain this self-government 'ill aspires to rule / Cities of men, or headstrong multitudes, / Subject himself to anarchy within, / Or lawless passions in him which he serves' (II, 469-72). This argument, which stemmed directly from Milton's experiences of Cromwell and other leaders during the Civil War, proved crucial to Cowper's and Wordsworth's responses to the American and French Revolutions the following century. Milton sets out both a Christian pattern for heroism and a new vision for epic poetry in *Paradise Regained*, providing a model which proved extremely important to Cowper's and Wordsworth's writing about reclusion. As a poem, *Paradise Regained* arguably had as great an impact on the Romantics as *Paradise Lost*, yet its impact has been far less studied.

By the end of the poem, an exasperated Satan exclaims:

Since neither wealth, nor honour, arms nor arts,  
Kingdom nor empire pleases thee, nor aught  
By me proposed in life contemplative,  
Or active, tended on by glory, or fame,  
What dost thou in this world? (IV, 368-72)

The answer, of course, is that Christ's concern is not with 'this world': he does not share its values and is able to redeem it precisely because he does not allow himself to share its corruption. The final lines of *Paradise Regained* describe how Christ 'unobserved / Home to his mother's house private returned' (IV, 638-9). Between them, Milton's 1671 poems *Samson Agonistes* and *Paradise Regained* provide a remarkable vision of a reclusive form of heroism whose far-reaching historical implications only became clear the following century.

*'His genius fed on manna': Cowper's Milton*

Cowper deserves to be numbered among the earliest British Miltonists. In a letter from 1791, he claimed that 'Few people have studied Milton more, or are more familiar with his poetry than [mys]elf'.<sup>5</sup> When he wrote this letter, he had just undertaken to edit a 'magnificent edition of Milton's works ... to be published in the Boydell stile, with notes; Fuseli, the Painter'.<sup>6</sup> This edition, commissioned by Joseph Johnson, was intended to rival John Boydell's edition of Shakespeare, which was published between 1791 and 1803 and featured engravings of paintings from Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery by the likes of Joshua Reynolds.<sup>7</sup> Cowper spent the next year translating Milton's Latin and Italian poems and preparing a 'Commentary' on *Paradise Lost* for the edition. He also befriended the poet William Hayley, whom Boydell had hired to write Milton's biography for his own edition. The act of publishing a celebratory edition of the works of a famous republican during the French Revolution was a radical one, yet Cowper continued to support Hayley's

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<sup>5</sup> William Cowper, Letter to Clotworthy Rowley, 22 October 1791, *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, ed. James King and Charles Ryskamp, 5 vols (Oxford, 1979-86), vol. 3, 579.

<sup>6</sup> Cowper, 6 September 1791, *Letters*, vol. 3, 570.

<sup>7</sup> Timothy Clayton, 'Boydell, John (1720-1804)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004; online edition 2008), <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/3120>>, accessed 13 March 2013.

project precisely because of its politics.<sup>8</sup> When George Nicol, Hayley's bookseller and also bookseller to the King, objected to the democratic tendency of the *Life of Milton*, Cowper sprang to defend it:

I am impatient for the appearance of it, because impatient to have the spotless credit of the great poet's character as a man and a citizen vindicated as it ought to be and as it never will be again.<sup>9</sup>

Cowper had long regarded Milton as an inspired poet, praising him in *The Task* as one 'whose genius had angelic wings, / And fed on manna' (III, 256-7). While Hayley set out to defend Milton's 'character as a man and a citizen' from recent biographical attacks like the one in Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the Eminent English Poets* (1779-81), Cowper intended his edition to uphold Milton's poetic reputation by showing that his style derived from directly from scripture.

Throughout the eighteenth century, a series of editors and commentators had criticised Milton's poetic language, characterising him as a writer who distorted his expressions to the point of unintelligibility. In his essays on *Paradise Lost*, Joseph Addison famously claimed that Milton's 'Language sunk under him' and that his works contained many linguistic 'Defects'.<sup>10</sup> Kristine Louise Haugen has observed that Richard Bentley began work on his 1732 edition of *Paradise Lost* 'by reading Addison with pen in hand', and then 'emended passages ... that Addison quoted'.<sup>11</sup> Bentley sought to defend Milton by supposing that the 'monstrous faults' in his text had been introduced by the incompetent 'Editor' on whom he was forced to rely when he was 'poor', 'friendless', and

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<sup>8</sup> For more details, see my article on the subject: Tom Clucas, 'Editing Milton during the French Revolution: 'Cowper and Hayley as "Brother Editor[s]"', *Review of English Studies* (forthcoming 2014; published online, 24 February 2014), < <http://res.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2014/02/24/res.hgu004.abstract> >, accessed 21 June 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Cowper, 8 December 1793, *Letters*, vol. 4, 438-9.

<sup>10</sup> *The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond, 5 vols (Oxford, 1985), no. 291, vol. 3, 37 and no. 297, vol. 3, 62.

<sup>11</sup> Kristine Louise Haugen, *Richard Bentley: Poetry and Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA and London, 2011), 221.

‘obnoxious to the Government’.<sup>12</sup> Yet all this achieved was to provide ammunition to those who believed that Milton’s language was distorted as a result of his republicanism, implying that his radical beliefs made his works unreadable and that his ‘fit audience’ would become fewer over time (*Paradise Lost*, VII, 31). In his ‘Commentary’ on *Paradise Lost*, Cowper refuted the charge that Milton’s language was unclear. He sought to return Milton to the poetic regard from which he believed earlier commentators had exiled him, and to gather a new audience for his works.

Throughout the ‘Commentary’, Cowper argues that Milton’s language is universally intelligible because it derives directly from Scripture. He answers the objections to *Paradise Lost* raised by earlier commentators including Addison, Bentley, Thomas Newton, Jonathan Richardson, Zachary Pearce, Robert Thyer, and Voltaire, showing in each case that Milton’s poetry has a Biblical basis. ‘It ought ... to be observed for the honour of the Bible,’ he claims,

that to his firm belief of it and his familiar acquaintance with it, this divine poet, and truly such, was in a great measure indebted as well for the beauty of the stile and sentiments, as for the matter of his poem.<sup>13</sup>

Here, Cowper is defending God’s speech about the compatibility of predestination and free will (III, 80-134) from Pope’s claim that Milton’s ‘God the Father turns a School-Divine’.<sup>14</sup> ‘With respect to the composition of this speech,’ Cowper asserts, ‘it is as unexceptionable as the matter of it. The expressions are nervous, and notwithstanding the abstruseness of the subject, beautifully clear’ (p. 174). Elsewhere, Cowper celebrates Milton as the greatest of epic poets, claiming that his Christianity elevates him above Homer and Virgil. Where Milton’s critics had characterised him as an unintelligible radical, Cowper insists that his language is as plain as human language can be. Of the

<sup>12</sup> Richard Bentley, ‘Preface’, in John Milton, *John Milton’s Paradise Lost. A New Edition*, ed. Richard Bentley (London, 1732), pages unnumbered.

<sup>13</sup> Cowper, ‘Commentary on *Paradise Lost*’, *Letters*, vol. 5, 141-78, 173.

<sup>14</sup> Alexander Pope, ‘The First Epistle of the Second Book of Horace’, l. 102, *The Poems of Alexander Pope: A One-Volume Edition of the Twickenham Text*, ed. John Butt (London and New York, 2005), 639.

invocation to Book Three, he argues against Thomas Newton that there is a 'vein of unaffected piety which winds through it, and occasionally discovers itself as he proceeds' (p. 172). Cowper denies that Milton is prone to '*gratis dictum* for embellishment-sake merely, much less the language of ostentation' (p. 172). His particular contribution to Hayley's project to protect Milton's reputation during the French Revolution was to defend Milton against the charge of obscurity. He attempted to defend Milton's poetic reputation from his posthumous opponents, like Warton and Johnson, who had tried to exile him from the literary canon. In order to do this, Cowper argued that Milton's critics had invented objections to the style of his works solely because they found their political content uncomfortable.

Cowper's familiarity with Milton's Latin and Italian poems would have supported his reading of Milton as a political recluse. In December 1638, Milton visited John Baptista Manso in Naples during his Italian tour. His poem 'Mansus' thanks Manso for his hospitality and notes Milton's sense of exile from England, where Charles I had refused to call Parliament for a decade and where William Laud had begun persecuting Puritans. One passage in 'Mansus', which describes Apollo's exile from heaven for killing the Cyclopes, expresses Milton's sense of alienation from England and figures Manso's home as a haven. Cowper translated it thus:

But gentle Chiron's cave was near, a scene  
Of rural peace, clothed with perpetual green.  
And thither oft as respite he requir'd  
From rustic clamours loud, the God retir'd.  
There, many a time, on Peneus' bank reclin'd  
At some oak's root, with ivy thick entwin'd,  
Won by his hospitable friend's desire  
He sooth'd his pains of exile with the lyre. ('Manso', ll. 65-72)

Cowper's phrase 'rustic clamours loud' renders Milton's '*clamosos ... bubulcos*' ('clamorous ... herdsmen').<sup>15</sup> Whether or not Cowper read this as a reference to the Civil War, he would have recognised an autobiographical element in Milton's description of how Apollo retired from active life (serving as a herdsman to Admetus) to a creative 'exile'. Furthermore, the poem suggests that retirement does not signal the end of political engagement. In Cowper's translation, it expresses Milton's intention to 'disperse / Our Saxon plund'ers in triumphant verse' and 'recall hereafter into rhyme' King Arthur and 'all his martial Knights' (ll. 93-6). The reclusive poet will thus compose a national epic which engages with contemporary politics from afar (for example, by allegorising Charles I's court as the 'Saxon plund'ers'). Milton develops a similar view of the need for epic poets to live in reclusion in an earlier poem, written in 1629, which Cowper translates as 'Elegy VI: To Charles Deodati'. Describing the authors of epic poems, the speaker claims that:

Their youth should pass, in innocence, secure  
 From stain licentious, and in manners pure,  
 Pure as the priest's, when robed in white he stands  
 The fresh lustration ready in his hands. (ll. 63-6)

Milton's poem complicates the familiar idea that poetic inspiration requires seclusion. The speaker Christianises the epic tradition, claiming that 'The promised King of peace employs my pen' (l. 81). He argues that epic poets need to live secluded lives because their task is one of reforming a corrupt nation. The noun 'lustration' (which Cowper retains from Milton's plural adjective '*lustralibus*', l. 65) can refer both to a 'purification by religious rites' and the 'action of going round a place, viewing, or surveying it' (*OED*, LUSTRATION, *n.*, 1.a. and 3). The epic poet must survey the condition of his country, all the while remaining detached from its impurities, and then purify it through verse. Milton's

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<sup>15</sup> Milton, 'Mansus', l. 59, in *Shorter Poems*, 266.

Christian image of the role of the epic poet offers a paradigm of the poet-as-recluse which forms the basis of *The Task*.

*Milton as Wordsworth's 'great Predecessor'*

Wordsworth followed Cowper in deriving his identity as a reclusive poet from Milton. In a letter to Thomas Poole, written on 28 April 1814, he referred to Milton as the 'great Predecessor' for his own efforts on *The Recluse*.<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, the 'Prospectus' to *The Recluse*, which Wordsworth published with *The Excursion* in 1814, is the most densely Miltonic of his works. The editors of the Cornell edition note no fewer than seven allusions to *Paradise Lost* in the 107 lines of the 'Prospectus',<sup>17</sup> to which may be added many more instances of Miltonic language and syntax. Drawing on the work of Harold Bloom, Nicholas Roe has argued that 'Wordsworth discovered his individual poetic identity' by responding to 'Milton's earlier experience of revolutionary defeat', and that the 'Prospectus' transforms 'the "outward grace" of Revolution into the inner radiance of the Romantic imagination'.<sup>18</sup> There is certainly what Bloom called a 'move to the interior' in the 'Prospectus',<sup>19</sup> yet this is arguably because Wordsworth sought to announce the reclusive poet as the figure best placed to reform British society. Famously, Wordsworth alludes to Milton's invocation of Urania at the beginning of Book Seven in the lines: "fit audience let me find though few!" / So prayed, more gaining than he asked, the Bard, /

<sup>16</sup> Wordsworth, 28 April 1814, *Letters*, vol. 3, 146.

<sup>17</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, ed. Sally Bushell, James A. Butler, and Michael C. Jaye, with the assistance of David García, The Cornell Wordsworth (Ithaca and London, 2007), 374-5n.

<sup>18</sup> Nicholas Roe, 'Wordsworth, Milton, and the Politics of Poetic Influence', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 19 (1989), 112-26, 125-6.

<sup>19</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry* (Ithaca and London, 1971), 2.

Holiest of Men'.<sup>20</sup> By alluding to this line in *Paradise Lost*, Wordsworth recalls Milton's description of himself as 'fallen on evil days ... with dangers compassed round, / And solitude' (VII, 23-6). He models his persona for *The Recluse* on Milton's image of himself as a political and poetic exile during the post-Restoration reprisals, bereft of allies and readers because of his support for the Parliamentarians. In lines originally composed for MS. B of *Home at Grasmere*, probably 'between spring, 1800, and early spring, 1802',<sup>21</sup> Wordsworth appropriated Milton's reclusive persona for his own situation following the French Revolution. Revised as the 'Prospectus', these lines elevate the reclusive figure of 'the Bard, / Holiest of Men' to the status of a saint, suggesting that reclusion gives the poet-prophet the creative and moral independence necessary to reform a corrupt society.

Throughout the 'Prospectus', Wordsworth claims that he seeks to internalise the epic, taking it 'into the Mind of Man, / My haunt, and the main region of my Song'.<sup>22</sup> Yet his references to Milton's works, both poetry and prose, emphasise the fact that his ideal of reclusion remains political. The noun 'region', for example, is one which Milton applies to the 'Mind' in Book Nine of *Paradise Lost*, just after the Fall, when he describes Adam and Eve's 'inward state of mind, calm region once / And full of peace, now tossed and turbulent' (IX, 1125-6). Milton figures the Fall as an unsuccessful revolution in the mind, in which the Aristotelian ideal of mixed government is corrupted and the 'will' and 'understanding' end up 'in subjection ... To sensual appetite' (IX, 1127-9). Wordsworth writes similarly of the need for government in the mind when he outlines his own vision

Of moral strength, and intellectual power;  
Of joy in widest commonalty spread;  
Of the individual Mind that keeps her own  
Inviolat retirement, subject there  
To Conscience only, and the law supreme  
Of that Intelligence which governs all. (ll. 17-22)

<sup>20</sup> Wordsworth, 'Prospectus', ll. 23-5, *Excursion*, 39.

<sup>21</sup> William Wordsworth, *Home at Grasmere: Part First, Book First, of The Recluse*, ed. Beth Darlington (Ithaca and London, 1989), 22.

<sup>22</sup> Wordsworth, 'Prospectus', ll. 40-1, *Excursion*, 39.

The phrase ‘widest commonalty’, with its republican connotations, is particularly Miltonic, as is the idea of the mind being regulated by ‘Conscience only’. The latter phrase appears—together with the strange syntactic pattern ‘only, and’—in the opening to Book Two of *The Reason of Church-Government* (1642): ‘neither envy nor gall hath enterd me upon this controversy, but the enforcement of conscience only, and a preventive fear’.<sup>23</sup>

What might have been a coincidence is made more interesting by the fact that Wordsworth alludes to *The Reason of Church-Government* both in the ‘Preface’ to *The Excursion* and in the letter to Poole in which he claims Milton as his ‘great Predecessor’.<sup>24</sup> His ambition to write ‘a Poem which ... future times will “not willingly let die”’ echoes Milton’s account of his aspirations as an author in *The Reason of Church-Government*.<sup>25</sup> In 1800-2, the lines that became the ‘Prospectus’ seem to have been influenced not only by *Paradise Lost*, but also by Milton’s description of the role of the poet-prophet in *The Reason of Church-Government*:

For surely to every good and peaceable man it must in nature needs be a hatefull thing to be the displeaser, and molester of thousands; much better would it like him doubtlesse to be the messenger of gladnes and contentment, which is his chief intended business, to all mankind, but that they resist and oppose their own true happinesse. But when God commands to take the trumpet and blow a dolorous or a jarring blast, it lies not in mans will what he shall say, or what he shall conceal. (p. 803)

Milton proceeds to compare himself to Jeremiah, compelled by God to confront the Israelites with their sins (*KJV*, Jeremiah 5:19) and punished by them as a result.

Wordsworth, I would argue, aimed to assume this mantle in *The Recluse*.

Wordsworth drew on the Miltonic ideal ‘Of the individual Mind that keeps her own / Inviolat retirement’ in the *Two-Part Prelude*, which echoes an important phrase from *Paradise Lost*. In Book Nine, Adam concedes to Eve that ‘solitude sometimes is best society, / And short retirement urges sweet return’ (IX, 249-50). This idea has origins in

<sup>23</sup> Milton, *The Reason of Church-Government*, in *Prose*, vol. 1, 806.

<sup>24</sup> Duncan Wu, *Wordsworth’s Reading 1800-1815* (Cambridge, 1996), 148.

<sup>25</sup> Wordsworth, 28 April 1814, *Letters*, vol. 3, 146; cf. Milton, *Reason*, 810.

Cicero's remark in *De re publica* that Scipio Africanus was 'never doing more than when he was doing nothing, and never less alone than when alone'.<sup>26</sup> Milton referred back to it in Book One of *Paradise Regained*, describing how Christ withdrew into the wilderness with 'such thoughts / Accompanied of things past and to come / Lodged in his breast, as well might recommend / Such solitude before choicest society' (I, 299-302). In the *Two-Part Prelude*, Wordsworth described how solitary experience in nature helped to form his moral sympathies:

The seasons came  
And every season brought a countless store  
Of modes and temporary qualities  
Which but for this most watchful power of love  
Had been neglected, left a register  
Of permanent relations, else unknown:  
Hence life, and change, and beauty, solitude  
More active even than "best society,"  
Society made sweet as solitude  
By silent inobtrusive sympathies.<sup>27</sup>

In these lines, as in the quotation from Cicero, solitude becomes 'active', a state of reflection which gives rise to sympathy and thus helps the individual to realise the ideal of 'best society'. By quoting this phrase, Wordsworth signals his debt to Milton's vision of the Christ-like hero and sets it alongside the Aristotelian language of 'qualities' and 'relations'. Aristotle used these terms in the *Categories* and argued in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that 'every formed disposition of the soul realizes its full nature in relation to and in dealing with that class of objects by which it is its nature to be corrupted or improved'.<sup>28</sup> He defined the development of 'moral virtue' as a process of contemplation which leads, as Wordsworth describes, from 'qualities' to 'relations', 'moral virtue' being 'the quality

<sup>26</sup> Cicero, *De re publica*, I, xvii, 27, in *De re publica, De Legibus*, ed. Clinton Walker Keyes (Cambridge, MA and London, 2000), 48-9: 'numquam se plus agere, quam nihil cum ageret, numquam minus solum esse, quam cum solus esset'.

<sup>27</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, 1798-9*, II, 336-46, ed. Stephen Parrish (Ithaca, 1988), 62-3.

<sup>28</sup> Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, II, iii, 5 (1104b), trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA and London, 2003), 80-1: 'πᾶσα ψυχῆς ἕξις, ὑφ' οἷων πέφυκε γίνεσθαι χεῖρων καὶ βελτίων, πρὸς ταῦτα καὶ περὶ ταῦτα τὴν φύσιν ἔχει'.

of acting in the best way in relation to pleasures and pains'.<sup>29</sup> Wordsworth claims that reclusion is necessary for this process of reflection, because the 'watchful power of love' which helps to infer 'relations' from 'qualities' is strongest when the mind is undisturbed by other stimuli. In the lines quoted above, he implies that Milton's reclusive Christ fits Aristotle's image of the perfectly ethical individual. Wordsworth credits Milton with having developed the ideal of an ethical hero, perfectly disposed towards society and poised between contemplation and action. He drew on this character in his own description of the Pedlar, who 'kept, / In solitude and solitary thought, / His mind in a just equipoise of love' and thus achieved Aristotle's ideal of the golden mean.<sup>30</sup>

In 1802, Milton's sonnets famously helped to refocus Wordsworth's political energies. In her *Grasmere Journal* entry for 21 May, Dorothy recounted that 'Wm wrote two sonnets on Buonaparte, after I had read Milton's sonnets to him'.<sup>31</sup> Years later, Wordsworth recalled having been 'singularly struck with the style of harmony, and the gravity, and republican austerity of those compositions'.<sup>32</sup> In his own sonnet entitled 'London, 1802', Wordsworth figured Milton as one of his own Christ-like heroes:

Thy soul was like a Star and dwelt apart:  
 Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea;  
 Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,  
 So didst thou travel on life's common way,  
 In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart  
 The lowliest duties on itself did lay. (ll. 9-14)

The last line of the sonnet emphasises Milton's Christ-like humility and his willingness to undertake the 'lowliest duties' above all of his other virtues. In this line, Milton himself

<sup>29</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, II, iii, 6 (1104b), 80-1: 'ὀπόκειται ἄρα ἡ ἀρετὴ εἶναι ἢ τοιαύτη περὶ ἡδονᾶς καὶ λύπας τῶν βελτίστων πρακτικῆ'.

<sup>30</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Pedlar*, MS. E, ll. 312-13, in *The Ruined Cottage and The Pedlar*, ed. James Butler (Ithaca, 1989), 408.

<sup>31</sup> Dorothy Wordsworth, *The Grasmere Journal*, 21 May 1802, in *The Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*, ed. Pamela Woof (Oxford, 2002), 101.

<sup>32</sup> Wordsworth, 20 April 1822, *Letters*, vol. 4, 125-6.

comes to resemble the ‘mute inglorious Milton’ of Gray’s ‘Elegy’.<sup>33</sup> Wordsworth figures him as being like Aristotle’s ethical individual, focusing on his ‘relations’ to the world around him by travelling ‘on life’s common way’ (a phrase which has republican undertones), but also withdrawing to a contemplative distance: ‘Thy soul was like a Star and dwelt apart’. This line, which resembles Wordsworth’s wish for ‘The Prospectus’ to shine ‘With star-like virtue’ (l. 89), characterises Milton as a reclusive moral guide, who perfectly balanced the need for withdrawal with exercising political leadership. Late into his life, Wordsworth retained the image of Milton as a political leader, writing to Isabella Fenwick in 1844 to describe the sacrifice involved in his dual investment: ‘Look at the case of Milton, he thought it his duty to take an active part in the troubles of his country, and consequently from his early manhood to the decline of his life he abandoned Poetry.’<sup>34</sup> In his 1802 sonnet, Wordsworth praised Milton for his twin virtues of reclusion and political commitment, implying that he wished *The Recluse* to perform the same star-like function.

As Wordsworth worked on *The Recluse*, he continued to incorporate Milton’s stance of reclusion into his political response to the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. As discussed in Chapter Three, he concluded his pamphlet on *The Convention of Cintra* by arguing for the importance of withdrawing ‘from the too busy world—not out of indifference to its welfare, or to forget its concerns—but ... for wider compass of eye-sight’.<sup>35</sup> At this point, Wordsworth quoted from the ‘Digression’ to Milton’s *History of Britain*, which retrospectively described the failure of the English Civil War and argued that future attempts to secure liberty were

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<sup>33</sup> Thomas Gray, ‘Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard’, l. 59, *The Poems of Thomas Gray*, William Collins, Oliver Goldsmith, ed. Roger Lonsdale (London and Harlow, 1969), 128.

<sup>34</sup> Wordsworth, 5 October 1844, *Letters*, vol. 7, 614.

<sup>35</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Convention of Cintra*, in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols (Oxford, 1974), vol. 1, 342.

unlikely to go otherwise; unless men more than vulgar bred up in the knowledge of ancient and illustrious deeds, invincible against many and vain titles, impartial to friendships and relations, had conducted their affairs.<sup>36</sup>

Milton argued that a figure like Christ in *Paradise Regained* would need to emerge in order to lead a successful political revolution, a demand which Wordsworth took seriously and made central to the project of *The Recluse*. In April 1808, shortly before *The Convention of Cintra*, he had to write to Francis Wrangham praising Wrangham's prose translations of Milton, but claiming that he had 'not done justice (who indeed could?) to that fine stanza "Cultu simplici gaudens Liber, etc. etc." it is untranslatable.'<sup>37</sup> This is the opening stanza of Milton's Latin poem 'Ad Joannem Rousium Oxoniensis Academiae Bibliothecarium' ('To John Rouse, Librarian of Oxford University'), in which Milton claims that he wrote his *Poems* (1645) 'while he wandered in play through the shades of Italy or the green fields of England, roaming about, untainted by the crowd'.<sup>38</sup> In this poem, which was actually written in the midst of the Civil War, Milton deliberately adopted a stance of reclusion. Milton's phrase '*Insons populi*' literally translates as 'innocent of the people' and conveys the idea of a Christ-like hero, as does '*humum vix tetigit pede*' ('his feet hardly touching the ground', l. 12), which figures the poet as a mediator between the worldly and the divine—in touch with, but not immersed in, earthly concerns. Like Cowper, Wordsworth adopted this image of the poet from Milton, testing it in his own poetry to see if the poise between intervention and withdrawal could really be sustained.

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<sup>36</sup> Wordsworth, *Prose*, vol. 1, 343.

<sup>37</sup> Wordsworth, 17 April 1808, *Letters*, vol. 2, 213.

<sup>38</sup> Milton, 'Ad Joannem Rousium Oxoniensis Academiae Bibliothecarium', ll. 7-9, *Shorter Poems*, 303, 306: 'Dum vagus Ausonias nunc per umbras / Nunc Britannica per vireta lusit / Insons populi'.

*'A wretched exile's song': Cowper and the plain style*

Cowper developed a lifelong interest in the plain style, which he credited jointly to Milton and to Scripture. In his 'Commentary on *Paradise Lost*', he insisted that 'Milton is the poet of Christians' (p. 144n.) and that his style derived from the Bible: 'to his firm belief of it and his familiar acquaintance with it, this divine poet, and truly such, was in a great measure indebted ... for the beauty of [his] stile' (p.173). The style of the Bible, as Cowper makes clear, is one of plainness. He singles this characteristic out for praise, remarking that '[t]he first verse in the Bible tells us with a most magnificent simplicity that "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth"' (p. 169). Such an emphasis on plain language had been a facet of Christian rhetoric since the early Church. Saint Augustine, for example, noted the plainness of the two commandments that Christ issues in Matthew 22:35-40:

But you see how very accessible to all is the very style in which scripture is composed, though very few can enter deeply into it. Like a close friend, it speaks without pretense those clear ideas it contains to the heart of the unlearned and of the learned.<sup>39</sup>

Throughout his 'Commentary', Cowper praises Milton for having emulated the Bible's 'magnificent simplicity' in *Paradise Lost*. He celebrates the plain style as the Christian—and therefore the highest—ideal of poetic language, praising Milton above Homer and Virgil for his 'sublime piety' (p. 144). In doing so, he echoes the general preference for plainness of diction that Peter Auski has described among Protestant writers:

For the Reformation as a whole, both the clarity and simplicity of the Bible and the unvarnished, naked example of Christ called for novel, untainted, and truly spiritual forms of prose. The seed of this urge, as Erasmus had sensed, is rejection and separation: "for how much Chrystes wysdom is in dystaunce from the wysdom of the worlde (the dystaunce is unmeasurable) so much ought the christen eloquence dyfferre from the eloquence of the worlde."<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Saint Augustine, Letter 137, in *Letters*, trans. Roland Teske, 4 vols (Hyde Park, NY, 2001-5), vol. 2, 223.

<sup>40</sup> Erasmus, *A Sermon of the Chylde Jesus* (London, 1536?), Aii<sup>r</sup>, quoted in Peter Auski, *Christian Plain Style: The Evolution of the Spiritual Ideal* (Montreal and London, 1995), 267.

Like many evangelical writers, Cowper took very seriously the ideal that Christian writing, and specifically Christian poetry, ought to ‘dyfferre from the eloquence of the worlde’.

Donald Davie noted that in many ways this evangelical model of plain poetic diction anticipated Wordsworth’s arguments in the ‘Preface’ to *Lyrical Ballads*: ‘Before it was Wordsworthian, this diction was evangelical—in Charles Wesley, in Cowper, and in the Watts who wrote hymns and versions of the Psalms’.<sup>41</sup> Davie was certainly correct to see similarities between Cowper’s and Wordsworth’s views on poetic language, yet these similarities run deeper than he suggested, since they have origins not only in Cowper’s spiritual writing, but also in the urbane verse and periodical essays which he wrote before his evangelical conversion in 1764, and in his general distaste for poetic diction as a form of linguistic luxury.

During the late 1750s and early 1760s, Cowper was a member of the ‘Nonsense Club’, ‘a group of Old Westminsters and London wits who met regularly every Thursday evening’.<sup>42</sup> In his study of the club, Lance Bertelsen lists its core members as having been Bonnell Thornton, George Colman, Robert Lloyd, Cowper, and, to a lesser extent, Charles Churchill.<sup>43</sup> These writers became famous in the mid-century for launching a number of successful periodicals, including *The Connoisseur*, which was intended to correct the ‘snobbery and diletantism’ which Colman and Thornton ascribed to Edward Moore’s journal *The World*.<sup>44</sup> In trying to make the language of their persona, Mr Town, differ from the eloquence of *The World*, the members of the Nonsense Club engaged with contemporary debates about the rise of luxury in British society. Bertelsen comments that:

The cornucopia of material goods and cultural sophistication and the threatening growth of luxury and insubordination form the antitheses between which Mr Town moves in a continual state of attraction and repulsion.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Donald Davie, *The Eighteenth-Century Hymn in England* (Cambridge, 1993), 53.

<sup>42</sup> Lance Bertelsen, *The Nonsense Club: Literature and Popular Culture, 1749-1764* (Oxford, 1986), 2.

<sup>43</sup> Bertelsen, *Nonsense Club*, 2.

<sup>44</sup> Bertelsen, *Nonsense Club*, 36-7.

<sup>45</sup> Bertelsen, *Nonsense Club*, 45.

Cowper, in particular, engaged with these concerns in his essays for *The Connoisseur*, and took them further in his parodic ‘Dissertation on the Modern Ode’, which he published in Robert Lloyd’s journal *The St. James’s Magazine*, in April 1763. The ‘Dissertation’ is one of the most substantial pieces that Cowper wrote for the Nonsense Club, and mounts a strong opposition to the kind of poetic diction which Cowper had already parodied in poems like ‘Verses Written at Bath, in 1748, on Finding the Heel of a Shoe’ and ‘Why thou Scurvy Curmudgeon’. Cowper’s objections to poetic diction resemble Wordsworth’s arguments in the ‘Preface’ to *Lyrical Ballads*, especially on the subject of epithets:

The words Fountain and Stream have in all ages had attendant epithets to wait upon them, which were no more than *murmuring*, *querulous*, &c. but we, who love, not only to make persons of inanimate objects, but also to give them the powers of real life, are not content with a *Rill* (for that is now the fashionable expression) than runs along *weeping* and *tinkling*, unless it also *babbles* and *prattles*. A stone must be *mouldring*, or perhaps for alliteration sake, a *Smouldring* one; oaks must be bound in *Ivy-chains*, and a Tower will make a very insignificant appearance that is not *moss-grown* as well as *cloud-capt*.<sup>46</sup>

Before Wordsworth, Cowper objected to the personification not only of ‘inanimate objects’, but also of abstract nouns such as ‘Wisdom or Folly, Mirth or Melancholy’.<sup>47</sup> The epithets he lists resemble the adjective-noun pairings (‘smiling mornings’, ‘reddening Phoebus’, ‘amorous descant’, etc.) that Wordsworth later criticised in Gray’s ‘Sonnet on the Death of Richard West’.<sup>48</sup> Cowper also drew many of his examples of poetic diction from the works of Gray. Of those quoted above, four occur in Gray’s ‘Elegy’ (‘*Rill*’, l. 111; ‘*babbles*’, l. 104; ‘*mouldring*’, l. 14; ‘*ivy-mantled*’, l. 9), while ‘*moss-grown*’ appears in Gray’s ‘Ode on the Spring’ (l. 13) and ‘*cloud-capt*’ comes from his poem ‘The Bard’ (l. 57).<sup>49</sup> Cowper implies that despite Gray’s reclusive stance in the ‘Elegy’ and despite his claim to focus on the ‘rude forefathers of the hamlet’ (l. 16), his language is not far enough

<sup>46</sup> Cowper, ‘*The St. James’s Magazine* (April 1763)’, *Letters*, vol. 5, 38.

<sup>47</sup> Cowper, *Letters*, vol. 5, 35; cf. Wordsworth, ‘Preface’, *Lyrical Ballads*, 747.

<sup>48</sup> Gray, ‘Sonnet on the Death of Mr. Richard West’, ll. 1-3, quoted in Wordsworth, ‘Preface’, *Lyrical Ballads*, 749.

<sup>49</sup> Cowper, *Letters*, vol. 5, 38n.

removed from ‘the eloquence of the worlde’. The language of luxury runs subtly through the passage quoted above: Cowper criticises the fact that certain nouns have become ‘fashionable’, and figures the ‘attendant epithets’ as servants that ‘wait upon them’. He also rebukes poets for their tendency ‘not only to make persons of inanimate objects, but also to give them the powers of real life’, suggesting that words too have been caught up in the fetishism of commercial society. Before his evangelical conversion, and long before Wordsworth wrote the ‘Preface’, Cowper recommended the plain style as an alternative to the overly elaborate and deliberately exclusive poetic diction he saw in much eighteenth-century poetry.

Cowper’s commitment to the plain style strengthened following his move to Olney in September 1767.<sup>50</sup> There, he came into contact with John Newton, the former slave-trader who had become an evangelical curate. Soon after his arrival, Cowper began to collaborate with Newton on a collection which became the *Olney Hymns* (1779). In the process, he modified his views on Christian poetry, particularly the versification of the Psalms, and developed the evangelical objection to poetic diction which Donald Davie has described.<sup>51</sup> Early on, Cowper voiced respect for the hymn-writer Isaac Watts, claiming in 1766 that ‘I know no greater Names in Divinity than Watts and [Philip] Doddridge’.<sup>52</sup> However, in an essay printed in *The Gentleman’s Magazine* in September 1758, he had criticised Thomas Sternhold and John Hopkins for their collection of *The Whole Booke of Psalmes, Collected into English Meter* (1562), protesting that ‘the spirit and meaning of the original is certainly much better preserved in prose than in verse’.<sup>53</sup> By 1780, Cowper’s views had changed and he was able to praise Sternhold and Hopkins in his poem ‘Table Talk’: ‘Though Butler’s wit, Pope’s numbers, Prior’s ease, / With all that fancy can invent

<sup>50</sup> James King, *William Cowper: A Biography* (Durham, NC, 1986), 72.

<sup>51</sup> Davie, *Eighteenth-Century Hymn*, 53.

<sup>52</sup> Cowper, 18 April 1766, *Letters*, vol. 1, 143.

<sup>53</sup> Cowper, ‘*The Gentleman’s Magazine* (September 1758)’, *Letters*, vol. 5, 30.

to please, / Adorn the polish'd periods as they fall, / One madrigal of theirs is worth them all' (ll. 764-7). Newton's 'Preface' to the *Olney Hymns* argues strongly for the plain style, and suggests that the two poets had discussed this subject:

There is a stile and manner suited to the composition of hymns, which may be more successfully, or at least more easily attained by a versifier, than by a poet. They should be *Hymns*, not *Odes*, if designed for public worship, and for the use of plain people. Perspicuity, simplicity and ease, should be chiefly attended to; and the imagery and coloring of poetry, if admitted at all, should be indulged very sparingly and with great judgment.<sup>54</sup>

Newton's reference to '*Odes*' recalls Cowper's parodic 'Dissertation on the Modern Ode' and suggests that Cowper had a hand in shaping Newton's views on poetic diction. The distinction between 'versifier' and 'poet' implies that Newton's idea of the plain style, beyond the ideals of 'Perspicuity, simplicity and ease', involves the use of metre without poetic diction (what Newton calls the 'coloring of poetry'). In this respect, Newton anticipates Wordsworth's claim in the 'Preface' that there is no essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition'.<sup>55</sup> Like Wordsworth, Newton expresses the hope that his poems will be universally understood by 'plain people';<sup>56</sup> when this seems uncertain, he responds by imagining himself being rejected by his audience and driven into a state of poetic exile: 'as I might have done if I had composed hymns in some of the newly discovered islands in the South-Sea, where no person had any knowledge of the name of JESUS, but myself'.<sup>57</sup>

Cowper demonstrated his commitment to the plain style in the sixty-seven pieces he composed for the *Olney Hymns*. His collaboration with Newton had a lasting effect on his diction, providing him with an evangelical register which partially replaced the mock-epic style of his Nonsense Club years and helped give rise to the tonal diversity of *The*

<sup>54</sup> John Newton, 'Preface', *Olney Hymns, in Three Books* (London, 1779), vii-viii.

<sup>55</sup> Wordsworth, 'Preface', *Lyrical Ballads*, 749.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Wordsworth, emphasis on the 'plainer and more emphatic language' of '[I]ow and rustic life', 'Preface', *Lyrical Ballads*, 743.

<sup>57</sup> Newton, 'Preface', *Olney Hymns*, ix.

*Task.* He not only composed in a plain style, but also explained this decision in several of his hymns. For example, in ‘A Living and a Dead Faith’ he wrote that:

The LORD receives his highest praise,  
From humble minds and hearts sincere;  
While all the loud professor says,  
Offends the righteous Judge’s ear.

...

Easy, indeed, it were to reach  
A mansion in the courts above,  
If swelling words, and fluent speech  
Might serve, instead of faith and love.

But none shall gain the blissful place,  
Or GOD’s unclouded glory see;  
Who talks of free and sov’ reign grace,  
Unless that grace has made *him* free. (ll. 1-24).

The last stanza exhibits the Calvinism which Newton unapologetically announced in the ‘Preface’ to *Olney Hymns*:<sup>58</sup> Cowper uses the figure of chiasmus (‘free ... grace ... grace ... free’) to show that God’s grace is not freely available, but free only to the elect. Yet he also follows Calvin in ensuring that his diction is plain, adopting techniques like chiasmus precisely because of their clarity (there is another example in the third stanza: ‘Not words alone it cost the LORD ... Return the Saviour words alone’, ll. 9-12). In addition to its diction, the hymn achieves plainness through its end-stopped long metre, for the most part matching line-breaks with syntactic divisions so that the sense is contained in the line. From the outset, Cowper emphasises the link between faith and plainness, for example in the claim that ‘The LORD receives his highest praise, / From humble minds and hearts sincere’, which finds a parallel in Calvin’s *Institutes*:

For this also was not done without the singular prouidence of God, that the high mysteries of the heauenly kingdome should for the most part be vttered vnder a contemptible baseness of words, least if it had beene beautified with more glorious speech, the wicked should cauill that the onely force of eloquence doth raigne therein. But when that rough and in a manner rude simplicitie doth raise vp a greater reuerence of it selfe then any

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<sup>58</sup> Newton, ‘Preface’, *Olney Hymns*, x.

Rhetoricians eloquence, what may we iudge, but that there is a more mightie strength of truth in the holy Scripture, than that it needeth any Art of words?<sup>59</sup>

Calvin argued that ‘the eloquence of the worlde’ merely contaminates truth and faith, a claim which Cowper echoed in his line about ‘swelling words, and fluent speech’. He proceeded to distance himself from such eloquence, adopting a Miltonic stance of withdrawal throughout the *Olney Hymns*. In ‘The House of Prayer’, for example, he internalised Mark’s account of how Christ drove the moneychangers out of the temple (11:17): ‘Thy mansion is the christian’s heart, / O LORD, thy dwelling-place secure! / Bid the unruly throng depart, / And leave the consecrated door’ (ll. 1-4). The ‘sharp designing trade’ which ‘Sin, Satan, and the world maintain’ (ll. 8-9) with the ‘christian’s heart’ in this hymn is partly—though not exclusively—a trade in words, which prompts Cowper to flee from the ‘din’ of the ‘bustling crowd’ so that ‘their voice’ is no longer ‘heard within’ (ll. 13-15). He thus distances himself from such worldly eloquence in favour of an evangelical plain style. Yet, as Donald Davie observed: ‘language is public property; and inwardness, the “inner light” that the oldest dissenters insisted on, makes it private’.<sup>60</sup> There is a risk, implicit in Cowper’s earlier works and realised later on, that disowning ‘the eloquence of the worlde’ would drive him into poetic exile.

Cowper returned to think about this risk in his first single-author volume, *Poems* (1782), which can be read as a manifesto for the poet’s role in society. The volume displays a trajectory from a social to a withdrawn model of the poet, with Cowper rejecting the urbane stance of his Nonsense Club years in favour of plainer diction and a greater degree of introspection. Most obviously, he signalled this shift through his ordering of the group of poems known as the ‘Moral Satires’, which begins with ‘Table Talk’ and culminates in ‘Retirement’. He also signalled it through his choice of the second epigraph

<sup>59</sup> Jean Calvin, *The Institution of Christian Religion*, trans. Thomas Norton (London, 1611), 1:8:1, 23.

<sup>60</sup> Davie, *Eighteenth-Century Hymn*, 92.

for *Poems*, which comes from the section ‘De la Vérité’ in *La Jouissance de Soi-Même* (1758) by Louis-Antoine de Caraccioli:

Nous sommes nés pour la vérité, et nous ne pouvons souffrir son abord. les figures, les paraboles, les emblèmes, sont toujours des ornements nécessaires pour qu’elle puisse s’annoncer. et soit qu’on craigne qu’elle ne découvre trop brusquement le défaut qu’on voudroit cacher, ou qu’enfin elle n’instruise avec trop peu de ménagement, ou veut, en la recevant, qu’elle soit déguisée.

[We are born for the truth, and yet we cannot abide it at first. It requires tropes, parables, and emblems in order to announce itself. Otherwise, we fear that it discovers too abruptly that fault which we would wish to hide, or that it instructs with too little discretion and wants, when received, proper disguise.]<sup>61</sup>

In a letter to John Newton, Cowper claimed that this epigraph was ‘peculiarly apposite to [his] purpose’ in *Poems*.<sup>62</sup> He later explained that he thought ‘no book more calculated [than *La Jouissance*] to teach the Art of pious Meditation, or to enforce a conviction of the vanity of all pursuits that have not the soul’s best interest for their object’.<sup>63</sup> Yet *Poems* (1782) not only responds to Caraccioli’s call for moral value of introspection; it also draws on his model of poetic diction as a disguise for truth. Caraccioli recognised that satire alienates its readers when it implicates them in its criticisms. He argued that the ornaments of poetic diction (‘les figures, les paraboles, les emblèmes’) introduce ambiguity into moral writing and therefore soften its invective. When vices are disguised under layers of metaphor, the reader will not immediately perceive them as his or her own and will therefore be lulled into benefiting from moral instruction.

In his first solo volume, Cowper wanted to criticise contemporary manners without offending his readers. His epigraph offers them a compromise: he will modulate his moral instruction with poetic diction, rendering it general and inoffensive, as long as they accept the truth that he is hinting at. The first poem, ‘Table Talk’, observes this agreement strictly, but as Cowper proceeded he made his diction plainer and his moral

<sup>61</sup> Cowper, *Poems*, vol. 1, 240; my translation.

<sup>62</sup> Cowper, 7 November 1781, *Letters*, vol. 1, 539.

<sup>63</sup> Cowper, 8 March 1784, *Letters*, vol. 2, 221-2.

tone more strident. John Newton announced as much in his ‘Preface’ to the volume, claiming that

[Cowper’s] favourite topics are least insisted on in the piece entitled Table Talk; which, therefore, with some regard to the prevailing taste, and that those who are governed by it may not be discouraged at the very threshold from proceeding further, is placed first.<sup>64</sup>

Here, Newton echoes a letter from March 1781 in which Cowper explained the motives behind ‘Table Talk’: ‘If the world had been filled with men like yourself I should never have written it, but thinking myself in a measure obliged to tickle if I meant to please, I therefore affected a Jocularly I did not feel’.<sup>65</sup> Cowper uses the noun ‘Jocularly’ to refer to the ‘prevailing taste’ of eighteenth-century poetry, including the epigrammatic wit and poetic diction which he attempted to imitate. Later, he distanced himself further from ‘the modish dress I wear in Table-talk’ and ‘Conversation’, claiming that ‘when I am jocular I do violence to myself’.<sup>66</sup> Cowper favoured the plain style, but adopted poetic diction in the first poems he composed for *Poems* (1782), because he feared that otherwise he might drive away his readership.

Towards the end of ‘Table Talk’, Cowper stages his objections to poetic diction as a dialogue between the poem’s two personae. He claims that ‘In Eden e’er yet innocence of heart / Had faded, poetry was not an art; / Language [was] above all teaching ... Elegant as simplicity, and warm / As ecstasy’ (ll. 584-9). The phrase ‘warm / As ecstasy’ suggests that the language of Eden was so plain as to be almost wordless, involving the direct transfer of thought. This idea recalls Book Eight of *Paradise Lost*, where Adam recounts having found himself able to name each ‘bird and beast ... as they passed, and understood / Their nature, with such knowledge God endued / My sudden apprehension’ (VIII, 349-54). John Leonard has described what he calls the ‘infection of language in Paradise’, arguing that ‘[w]hen Adam and Eve lapse into “alter’d stile”, their

<sup>64</sup> Cowper, *Poems*, vol. 1, 569.

<sup>65</sup> Cowper, 5 March 1781, *Letters*, vol. 1, 455.

<sup>66</sup> Cowper, 22 October 1781, *Letters*, vol. 1, 534.

words are not new words, but familiar words used in a new way.’<sup>67</sup> This ‘alter’d stile’ is the ornate, luxurious language of the tempting Serpent, whose ‘eloquence’ Milton likens to that of a Greek or Roman ‘orator’ (IX, 670-1). Only Jesus, in *Paradise Regained*, is able to see through Satan’s rhetoric and favour the plain style:

Remove [the] swelling epithets thick-laid  
As varnish on a harlot’s cheek, the rest,  
Thin-sown with aught of profit or delight,  
Will far be found unworthy to compare  
With Sion’s songs. (IV, 343-7)

While Jesus favours the plain style, Satan lures Adam and Eve out of it, tempting them with a luxurious language laden with ‘epithets’. After the Fall, Adam begins to speak this language to Eve, conceding: ‘now I see thou art exact of taste, / And elegant, of sapience no small part, / Since to each meaning savour we apply’ (IX, 1017-19). He conflates language with fruit, describing words in terms of their ‘taste’ and ‘savour’. Throughout Book Nine, Milton suggests that Satan’s mouth-watering language is what leads Adam and Eve astray. Cowper draws on this idea in ‘Table Talk’, claiming that ‘modern taste / Is so refin’d and delicate and chaste, / That verse, whatever fire the fancy warms, / Without a creamy smoothness has no charms’ (ll. 510-3). Modern habits of consumption, he suggests, have created a new language whose ‘creamy smoothness’ has replaced the plain style of divine inspiration. He adapts Milton’s account of the linguistic Fall in *Paradise Lost*, tying his discussion of language to a contemporary debate about luxury.

Eighteenth-century linguists reached a consensus that Britain’s increasing wealth was affecting the language. In his supplement to Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Étienne Bonnot de Condillac argued that when this occurred in Classical civilisations it had led linguistic decline:

We see figures and metaphors heaped upon one another, and the style overloaded with ornaments, whilst essentials are neglected ... In morals, as in physics, there is an utmost

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<sup>67</sup> John Leonard, *Naming in Paradise: Milton and the Language of Adam and Eve* (Oxford, 1990), 177.

period of increase, after which, things must tend to dissolution ... Thus it is that figures and metaphors, which in the beginning had been invented through necessity, and afterwards were applied to the purposes of mystery, are become an ornament to discourse ... and thus it is that by the abuses made of them, they have been the first and principal cause of the decline of languages.<sup>68</sup>

By the time that Cowper wrote, this belief had become commonplace. In his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783), Hugh Blair praised Hebrew poetry for avoiding the pitfalls of linguistic excess, noting that the Hebrew people were '[I]ittle addicted to commerce; separated from the rest of the world by their laws and their religion; they were, during the better days of their state, strangers in a great measure to the refinements of luxury'.<sup>69</sup> Two years before Blair, Cowper made the same point, arguing that 'while virtue kindled [man's] delight / The song was moral, and so far was right. / 'Twas thus till luxury seduc'd the mind, / To joys less innocent, as less refin'd' (ll. 598-601). Earlier in 'Table Talk', he cited 'Th' inestimable estimate of Brown' (l. 384), namely John Brown, whose *Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times* (mentioned in the Introduction) complains that 'in the State and Period of Luxury or Refinement, active religious Principle is lost thro' the attentive Pursuit of *Pleasure*'.<sup>70</sup> Against this model of linguistic consumption, Cowper followed Milton in offering an image of the solitary poet-prophet:

I know the mind that feels indeed the fire  
The muse imparts, and can command the lyre,  
Acts with a force, and kindles with a zeal,  
Whate'er the theme, that others never feel.  
If human woes her soft attention claim,  
A tender sympathy pervades the frame,  
She pours a sensibility divine  
Along the nerve of ev'ry feeling line. (ll. 480-7)

As an alternative to the 'bacchanal' of modern poetry (l. 602), Cowper proposes returning to a version of the plain style which is 'Elegant as simplicity, and warm / As ecstasy', assenting to Calvin's proposition: 'what may we iudge, but that there is a more mightie

<sup>68</sup> Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, *An Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge. Being a Supplement to Mr. Locke's Essay on the Human Understanding*, trans. Thomas Nugent (London, 1756), 282-3.

<sup>69</sup> Hugh Blair, 'Lecture XLI', *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, 2 vols (London, 1783), vol. 2, 395-6.

<sup>70</sup> John Brown, *An Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times* (London, 1757), 166.

strength of truth in the holy Scripture, than that it needeth any Art of words?'<sup>71</sup>

Tentatively, Cowper advances a model of the divinely-inspired poet cut off from the rest of humanity, yet still communicating with 'th'astonish'd crowd' (l. 491). By deferring the verb 'Acts' until the third line, Cowper briefly makes an experiential claim to prophecy: 'I know the mind that feels indeed the fire / The muse imparts'. In a remarkable image, he figures the poem as an extension of the poet's nervous system, claiming that the poet is able to diffuse his or her sensibility 'Along the nerve of ev'ry feeling line'. The poet's nervous system becomes part of the text from which humanity can read the presence of God in the world. The poet becomes a prophet, who 'hears the thunder e'er the temper low'rs, / And arm'd with strength surpassing human pow'rs, / Seizes events as yet unknown to man' (ll. 496-8). Yet Cowper acknowledges that the task of describing 'events as yet unknown to man' (l. 498) is a formidable one and that the poet who attempts to 'prophesy' (l. 479) risks becoming isolated from his or her readership.

Cowper develops the Miltonic image of the poet-prophet as a poetic exile in 'Expostulation', the fourth of the 'Moral Satires'. The poem opens with the question 'Why weeps the muse for England? (l. 1) and then describes the nation's 'luxury' (l. 6) in a lengthy passage which parodies the diction of contemporary poetry: 'Her fields a *rich expanse of wavy corn* / Pour'd out from plenty's *overflowing horn*, / *Ambrosial gardens* in which art supplies / The fervour and the force of *Indian skies...*' (ll. 9-12; my emphases). The italicised epithets closely resemble those which Cowper mocked in his 'Dissertation on the Modern Ode'. He proceeds to reject such ornate diction in favour of the plain style which he attributes to God: 'Through all he spoke a noble plainness ran, / Rhet'ric is artifice, the work of man' (ll. 135-6). Cowper blames luxury for England's precarious situation (in 1781, the country was heavily in debt and simultaneously at war with

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<sup>71</sup> Calvin, *Institution of the Christian Religion*, 1:8:1, 23.

America, France, Spain, and Holland).<sup>72</sup> He structures 'Expostulation' like a homily, repeating the phrase 'Hast thou' at the start of successive verse paragraphs to make the reader question his or her collusion in the country's decline. Cowper's own response is to withdraw from the consumer economy both of actual commodities and of ornate poetic diction, following his exhortation to 'fly the world's contaminating touch / Holy and unpolluted' (ll. 446-7). Yet the consequence of renouncing contemporary poetic diction, he implies, is losing his audience. The poem closes with a reference to Psalm 137 as Cowper claims to renounce his prophetic vocation and 'hang [his] harp upon yon aged beech' (l. 718): 'I know the warning song is sung in vain, / That few will hear, and fewer heed the strain' (l. 724-5). Cowper offers a pessimistic revision of Milton's hope that *Paradise Lost* would find 'fit audience ... though few' (VII, 31). In advocating the Christian plain style, he claims fellowship with the Psalmist, who asks: 'How shall we sing the LORD's song in a strange land?' (Psalm 137:4) Throughout *Poems* (1782), Cowper figures himself as an outsider singing in a 'strange land'. This experience, perhaps, is what led him to translate part of Ovid's *Tristia*, probably also in 1782. In Book Five, Elegy Twelve, Ovid complained about the linguistic isolation he suffered having been exiled to Tomis by Augustus: 'Ill fares the bard in this unletter'd land ... The purest verse has no admirers here, / Their own rude language only suits their ear' (Cowper's translation, ll. 52-5). Cowper, who followed Calvin in celebrating the 'rough and in a manner rude simplicities' of the Bible, would not have condoned Ovid's distinction between 'purest verse' and 'rude language'.<sup>73</sup> Yet he clearly identified with Ovid's claim to be singing 'a wretched exile's song' (l. 37), since he felt that his vocation as a moral poet was becoming an impossible one. Translation was one means by which he expressed this problem, though it also helped him to overcome it.

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<sup>72</sup> Cowper, *Poems*, vol. 1, 527n.

<sup>73</sup> Calvin, *Institution of Christian Religion*, 1:8:1, 23.

In July 1782, Cowper's friend William Bull encouraged him to begin translating poems by the French mystic Jeanne-Marie Bouvier de la Mothe Guyon (1648-1717), commonly known as Madame Guyon.<sup>74</sup> The task of translating thirty-eight poems occupied Cowper intermittently for a year and helped to develop his ideas about the Christian plain style, as well as contributing to the confessional voice of *The Task*. Madame Guyon was born to an aristocratic family and at a young age developed an interest in religious mysticism. She was advised by a Franciscan staying in Montargis: 'Develop the habit of looking for God in your heart and you will find him there.'<sup>75</sup> The next day, she had a visionary experience of her faith as 'a deep wound' which prepared her to begin her prolific career as a mystical writer in both poetry and prose.<sup>76</sup> Her work became associated with the Quietism of Miguel de Molinos, with which it shared emphases on 'pure or disinterested love, abandonment to God, and contemplation as a continuous state'.<sup>77</sup> Yet Guyon fell out of favour with France's Catholic authorities; she was arrested in December 1695 and imprisoned in the Bastille from June 1698 until 1703. British interest in her work revived with Thomas Digby Brooke's 1775 translation of *A Short and Easy Method of Prayer* and through John Wesley's publication of *An Extract of the Life of Madam Guion* (1776). Cowper, however, was the first person to translate her poems. Guyon composed most of these after her release from the Bastille, when she moved to Blois to live quietly with her son. As a result, they accorded with Cowper's sense of literary and theological isolation in 1782. In his translations, he emulated Guyon's combination of plain language with intense feeling, subsequently drawing on her model of Christian eloquence and her stance of poetic exile.

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<sup>74</sup> King, *William Cowper*, 134.

<sup>75</sup> Jeanne-Marie Guyon, *La Vie de Madame Guyon, écrite par elle-même*, ed. Benjamin Sahler (Paris, 1983), 73, translated by Patricia A. Ward, 'Madame Guyon (1648-1717)', in Carter Lindberg (ed.), *The Pietist Theologians: An Introduction to Theology in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Oxford, 2005), 161-74, 164.

<sup>76</sup> Ward, 'Madame Guyon', 164.

<sup>77</sup> Ward, 'Madame Guyon', 168.

The first poem that Cowper translated into his notebook for William Bull was entitled ‘Dieu n’est point connu ni aimé’ (which Cowper rendered as ‘God neither Known nor Loved by the World’). His translation of the poem suggests that he saw it as an affirmation of Guyon’s poetic creed and therefore deemed it fit to open the sequence. In the poem, Guyon complains that humans have abandoned Christian eloquence for the eloquence of the world: ‘’Tis therefore I can dwell with Man no more, / Your fellowship, ye warblers, suits me best, / Pure love has lost its price though prized of yore, / Profan’d by modern tongues, and slighted as a Jest’ (ll. 13-16; Cowper’s translation). In Guyon’s original, the last two lines read: ‘L’amour dans le siècle où nous sommes, / S’il est pur, paroît un abus’ (‘In our age love, if it is pure, seems an abuse’; my translation).<sup>78</sup> Cowper re-interprets them in light of the poem’s concern with language, arguing that the love of God has been ‘Profan’d by modern tongues, and slighted as a Jest’. Like Guyon, he argues for a plain, affective language of love—closer to birdsong than human language—and rejects the elaborate diction and jocular tone of contemporary poetry. Both poets imagine cutting themselves off from human communication, especially the idolatrous language of poetic ornament, in order to speak a solitary but sincere language of pure love.

The subject of a private language of praise recurs in one of Guyon’s poems grouped under the title ‘Veiller à Dieu de coeur pendant la nuit’ (which Cowper rendered as ‘Watching unto God in the Night-Season’). Guyon wrote three poems under this heading, all of which Cowper translated, but she focused on the notion of a private language in the second (Cowper’s ‘On the Same’, Volume 3, *Cantique* 72). The poem expresses the speaker’s preference for praying at night: ‘Universal nature slumbers, / And my soul partakes the calm, / Breathes her ardour out in numbers, / Plaintive song, or lofty psalm’ (ll. 13-16). Here, Cowper expands upon Guyon’s original fifteenth and sixteenth

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<sup>78</sup> M. B. de la Mothe Guion, *Poésies & Cantiques Spirituels Sur divers Sujets qui regardent la Vie Intérieure*, 4 vols (Cologne, 1722), vol. 2, 13.

lines: 'Là je puis exhaler ma flame; / A l'amour j'offre des saints airs' ('Here I can exhale my flame; / To love I offer saintly songs'; my translation).<sup>79</sup> Guyon's metaphor of exhaling the flame of her faith captures her ideal of plain expression: the language of love should need no translation and no artifice. Cowper preserves this image of effortless, spontaneous expression in his collocation of 'Breathes' and 'numbers'. He adds specificity, however, to Guyon's 'saints airs', in the line 'Plaintive song, or lofty psalm' which puns on 'plain' and 'Plaintive', suggesting that the complaint of the soul longing for God should be uttered in plain language:

Worldly prate, and babble, hurt me;  
 Unintelligible prove;  
 Neither teach me, nor divert me;  
 I have ears for none but Love.  
 Me, they rude esteem, and foolish,  
 Hearing my absurd replies;  
 I have neither arts' fine polish,  
 Nor the knowledge of the wise.

Simple souls, and unpolluted  
 By conversing with the Great,  
 Have a mind and taste, still suited  
 To their dignity and state;  
 All their talking, reading, writing,  
 Are but talents misapplied;  
 Infants' prattle I delight in,  
 Nothing human chuse beside. (ll. 25-40)

The line 'Worldly prate, and babble, hurt me' is Cowper's own; he substitutes it for Guyon's 'Tous les hommes me sont à charge' ('All men are my dependents').<sup>80</sup> In doing so, he shies away from Guyon's suggestion that the Christian poet has a duty to communicate the message of pure love to other souls. Taking a more pessimistic view, he argues that the poet is incapacitated by 'Worldly prate', which threatens to stop even the faithful from attending to the language of love. Like Guyon, however, Cowper perceives a mutual unintelligibility between poet and audience, claiming that his readers deem his

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<sup>79</sup> Guion, *Poésies*, vol. 3, 103.

<sup>80</sup> Guion, *Poésies*, vol. 3, 104.

poems ‘absurd’ because they lack the ‘fine polish’ which readers of poetry have come to expect. Clearly, Cowper regarded the second stanza quoted above as the crux of Guyon’s poem, because he amplified four of her lines into eight of his own: ‘Ah, qu’une ame simple a de peine / De vivre avec ceux qui se disent grands! / On est avec eux à la gêne: / Je n’aime rien que les enfans’ (‘Ah, a simple soul has trouble / Living with those who call themselves great! / It is an embarrassment to them: / I love none but children’, ll. 33-6; my translation).<sup>81</sup> Cowper expanded these lines in order to return them to the theme of language, claiming: ‘All their talking, reading, writing, / Are but talents misapplied; / Infants’ prattle I delight in, / Nothing human chuse beside’. Cowper posits an inverse hierarchy of language in which ‘Infants’ prattle’ is closest to the language of God, arguing that human language falls further from the ideal of pure love as it becomes more worldly and sophisticated. Translating Guyon’s works helped Cowper to overcome the worries about singing ‘a wretched exile’s song’ which he had suffered while composing *Poems* (1782). Guyon’s poems not only exemplified the Christian plain style to which Cowper aspired, but also dealt with the subject of poetic exile which had begun to occupy him while he completed his own volume. Rather than worrying about alienating her readers by writing in a plain style, Guyon embraced her role as a hermeneutic hermit, ‘sing[ing] the LORD’s song in a strange land’. The act of translating her poetry convinced Cowper that it was possible to write in such a style and still find an audience both at home and abroad. Becoming Guyon’s ideal reader gave him confidence in finding his own.

The new faith in the plain style which Cowper gained from translating the works of Madame Guyon spurred him on to the last major project of his life: the translation of Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Cowper first publicised this project in a letter to *The Gentleman’s Magazine* in August 1785. In the letter, he criticised Pope’s translations of

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<sup>81</sup> Guion, *Poésies*, vol. 3, 104.

Homer for being too ornate and outlined a manifesto for a blank verse translation of Homer in the plain style. Cowper argued that this style was better suited to the original: '[Homer] contented himself with speaking the thing as it was, deriving a dignity from his plainness to which writers more studious of ornament can never attain'.<sup>82</sup> Once again, Cowper's criticisms of Pope's diction are rooted in a debate about the commodification of language. He claims that in Pope's hands the 'simplicity' of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* was 'overwhelmed with a profusion of fine things'.<sup>83</sup> In *The Task*, Cowper had recently named 'profusion' as the cause behind the corruption of British society, claiming that:

Profusion deluging a state with lusts  
Of grossest nature and of worst effects,  
Prepares it for its ruin; hardens, blinds,  
And warps the consciences of public men  
Till they can laugh at virtue. (II, 688-92)

Cowper's arguments about Pope's language have wider ramifications, tapping into a suspicion of excessive commercialisation which extends from the arts to every sphere of life. Drawing on Madame Guyon, and on Hugh Blair's claim that the Hebrews were 'strangers in a great measure to the refinements of luxury',<sup>84</sup> Cowper argues that 'the simplicity, the almost divine simplicity, of Homer is worth more than all the glare and glitter that can be contrived'.<sup>85</sup> In making this claim, he aligns himself with the views of eighteenth-century Homeric critics. Thomas Blackwell, for example, had argued in his *Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (1735) that Homer lived in a society whose culture and language were both in their infancy: 'so unaffected and simple were the Manners of those Times, that the Folds and Windings of the human Breast lay open to the Eye'.<sup>86</sup> Blackwell extended his arguments to language, too, arguing that a 'Language thoroughly polished in the modern Sense, will not descend to the *Simplicity* of Manners

<sup>82</sup> Cowper, 'The Gentleman's Magazine, August 1785', *Letters*, vol. 5, 54.

<sup>83</sup> Cowper, *Letters*, vol. 5, 54.

<sup>84</sup> Blair, 'Lecture XLI', *Lectures on Rhetoric*, vol. 2, 395-6.

<sup>85</sup> Cowper, *Letters*, vol. 5, 57.

<sup>86</sup> Thomas Blackwell, *An Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (London: Anon., 1735), 34.

absolutely necessary in *Epic-Poetry*'.<sup>87</sup> Cowper went further than Blackwell, calling Homer's simplicity 'divine' and declaring that 'Scriptural poetry excepted, I believe that there is not to be found in the world poetry so simple as his.'<sup>88</sup> Throughout his work on the translations, he attempted to apply his ideal of the Christian plain style to Homer's verse, casting Homer, as he had cast Milton, in the role of a divinely inspired bard.

When defending his decisions as a translator in the 'Preface' to *The Iliad and Odyssey of Homer* (1791), Cowper repeatedly likened Homer to Milton.<sup>89</sup> He explained his choice of blank verse, for example, by echoing Milton's criticism of 'the troublesome and modern bondage of rhyming' in his own claim that Pope 'was fettered, and his fetters were his choice'.<sup>90</sup> 'Having mentioned Milton,' Cowper remarks, 'I cannot but add an observation on the similitude of his manner to that of HOMER'.<sup>91</sup> Cowper referred to Milton frequently in the notes and modelled his style on that of *Paradise Lost*. In making the comparison, Cowper sought to identify Homer and Milton as fellow recluses. Thomas Blackwell had presented Homer as a wandering '*Rhapsodist*',<sup>92</sup> arguing that his solitary life had contributed to his genius: 'the Man who lives plain, and at times steps aside from [the] *Din of Life* ... obtains ravishing Views of *silent Nature*, and undisturbed contemplates her solitary Scenes'.<sup>93</sup> In his translations, Cowper appealed to Blackwell's image of Homer as a recluse, likening him to Milton and trying to translate his works as a plainly as possible. The extensive, unpublished manuscripts of his drafts and revisions for *The Iliad and Odyssey of Homer* are now held in the Wren Library at Trinity College, Cambridge. They show Cowper attempting to hone the plain style which he used in the

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<sup>87</sup> Blackwell, *Enquiry*, 59.

<sup>88</sup> Cowper, *Letters*, vol. 5, 54.

<sup>89</sup> William Cowper, 'Preface', *The Iliad and Odyssey of Homer, Translated into English Blank Verse, by W. Cowper, of the Inner Temple, Esq.*, 2 vols (London, 1791), vol. 1, x.

<sup>90</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 55; Cowper, *The Iliad and Odyssey of Homer*, vi.

<sup>91</sup> Cowper, *The Iliad and Odyssey of Homer*, xi.

<sup>92</sup> Blackwell, *Enquiry*, 119.

<sup>93</sup> Blackwell, *Enquiry*, 121.

published edition of his translations. On the first page of his draft for the *Odyssey*, for example, Cowper added a note saying that ‘Homer alone has given us an example that it is possible to begin a great poem, neither singing, nor imploring the Muse to sing. He says plainly, *Εννεπε* [‘tell’]’.<sup>94</sup> Cowper attempted to imitate this plainness as he drafted and redrafted his translation of the poem’s opening lines. In Rothschild 687 d.3.2, the version on the left (in pencil) has been crossed out and replaced with the version on the right (in ink), published in 1791:

Muse, tell me of the Man whom never floods  
 Could drown of adverse fortune; far and wide  
 A Wanderer, after Sack of sacred Troy;  
 Who many cities view’d, and manners learn’d  
 Of human-kind various, while many woes  
 He sufferd also on the ocean tost  
 His own life still, and the return to Greece  
 Of his associates anxious to secure;  
 Yet all his care them saved not; impious they,  
 By their presumption perish’d, self-destroy’d;  
 Fools! who the oxen of the glorious sun  
 Devour’d, and, for the crime by Phoebus doom’d,  
 The home they eager sought saw never more.<sup>95</sup>

Muse, make the man thy theme, for shrewdness famed  
 And genius versatile, who far and wide  
 A Wand’rer after Ilium overthrown,  
 Discover’d various cities, and the mind  
 And manners learned of men in lands remote.  
 He num’rous woes, on ocean toss’d, endured,  
 Anxious to save himself and to conduct  
 His followers to their home; yet all his care  
 Preserved them not; they perish’d self-destroyd  
 By their own fault; infatuate! who devoured  
 The oxen of the all-oeerseeing Sun,  
 And, punish’d for that crime, return’d no more.<sup>96</sup>

The opening of the first draft emulates the plainness of Homer’s original: ‘Muse, tell me of the Man’. Yet Cowper made the published version plainer, pruning it down from thirteen lines to twelve by removing unnecessary epithets and inversions. For example, he replaced the phrase ‘human-kind various’ with ‘men in lands remote’ and simplified the syntax of ‘impious they, / By their presumption perish’d, self-destroy’d’ to read ‘they perish’d self-destroyd / By their own fault’. Similarly, Cowper condensed the lines ‘for the crime by Phoebus doom’d, / The home they eager sought saw never more’ into the single line ‘[They], punish’d for that crime, return’d no more’. Cowper continued to revise his translations of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* after publishing them in 1791. He began preparing a second edition in 1793 and returned to this task towards the end of his life, in 1798-9.

<sup>94</sup> William Cowper, Rothschild 686 D.7.3, Wren Library, Trinity College, Cambridge, 1.

<sup>95</sup> Cowper, Rothschild 686 d.7.3, 2.

<sup>96</sup> William Cowper, Rothschild 687 d.7.4, Wren Library, Trinity College, Cambridge, 2.

Throughout the revisions, he attempted to do justice to the plain style which he attributed to Homer's original. By developing the concept of poetic exile, and rejecting ornate diction on the grounds that it turned words into luxury objects, Cowper anticipated many of the arguments which Wordsworth made in the 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads*.

*'Farewell!—farewell, Popinjay!': Wordsworth's linguistic solitude*

In the 1800 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth developed the concept of poetic exile from Cowper and Milton. He used David Hartley's model of associationist psychology to explain how poets might descend into personal languages despite striving to make their works universally intelligible. Early in the 'Preface', Wordsworth stated his intention to create 'a species of poetry which is genuine poetry ... in its nature well adapted to interest mankind permanently, and likewise important in the multiplicity and quality of its moral relations'.<sup>97</sup> Such a species of poetry must appear at once universally familiar and universally new: familiar in its ability to 'interest mankind permanently', new in its ability to instruct through the 'multiplicity and quality of its moral relations'.

Wordsworth shared this commitment to 'genuine' poetry with Cowper, who claimed in *The Task* that 'my raptures are not conjured up / To serve occasions of poetic pomp, / But genuine' (I, 151-3). In the 'Appendix' on poetic diction which he added to the 'Preface' in 1802, Wordsworth also complained about 'poetic pomp', criticising modern poets for their 'mechanical adoption' of 'figures of speech' 'composed apparently in the spirit of the original figurative language of passion', yet lacking the essential 'animating passion' (p.

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<sup>97</sup> Wordsworth, 'Preface', *Lyrical Ballads*, 760; cf. p. 742.

761-2). Initially, Wordsworth promised to 'bring [his] language near to the language of men' (p. 747) and rejected the reclusive stance of contemporary poets

who think that they are conferring honour upon themselves and their art in proportion as they separate themselves from the sympathies of men, and indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression in order to furnish food for fickle tastes and fickle appetites of their own creation. (p. 744)

Wordsworth follows Cowper in rejecting consumerist approaches to language, criticising those who attempt to make their poems luxurious by loading them with what he had previously called 'gaudiness and inane phraseology'.<sup>98</sup> The verb 'indulge' signals excessive consumption, while the phrase 'furnish food' relates elaborate phrases to other types of imported luxury goods. As has been noted, Wordsworth's discussion of Thomas Gray's 'Sonnet on the Death of Mr. Richard West' in the 'Preface' resembles Cowper's analysis of Gray's poetry in his 'Dissertation on the Modern Ode'. Like Cowper, Wordsworth identifies the excessive use of epithets as the primary fault of contemporary poetry, especially when these epithets are transferred from their proper object. In his analysis of Gray's poem, phrases like 'smiling mornings', 'reddening Phoebus', 'golden fire', 'amorous descant', 'cheerful fields', 'green attire', etc. come to seem like jewels sewn into the text purely to make it more luxurious (p. 749).

Like Cowper, Wordsworth condemns poets who make their diction fashionable in order to exclude the uninitiated from reading their works. He argues that 'fickle tastes and fickle appetites' for 'arbitrary and capricious habits of expression' serve, like any other fashion, merely to 'confer honour' upon a group of individuals who choose to 'separate themselves' from society. He prefers the language of 'Low and rustic life' because it does not engage with this luxury economy. Rather than being a manufactured product, it is rooted in the 'soil' and remains close to nature's raw materials—'the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived' (p. 743-4). In making this argument,

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<sup>98</sup> Wordsworth, 'Advertisement', *Lyrical Ballads*, 738.

Wordsworth echoes the eighteenth-century view that the earliest words were names for objects in the natural world. In his *Observations on Man* (1749), David Hartley argued that ‘the language, which *Adam* and *Eve* were possessed of in paradise was very narrow, and confined in great measure to visible things’.<sup>99</sup> From a secular standpoint, Rousseau followed Condillac’s reasoning that language arose from the ‘the Cry of Nature’ when men and women began to ‘expres[s] visible and moveable Objects ... by imitative Sounds’.<sup>100</sup> Wordsworth takes these ideas further by considering what happens to language when individuals congregate in commercial cities. He assumes that those living in ‘Low and rustic life’ speak and write less artificially than the upper classes, because the ‘narrow circle of their intercourse’ means that they are ‘less under the action of social vanity [and] convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions’ (p. 744).

Like Cowper, Wordsworth chose to withdraw from the economy of language by adopting a ‘purified’ and ‘plain’ diction which he describes in Protestant terms. In doing so, he claims to have ‘cut himself off from a large portion of phrases and figures of speech which from father to son have long been regarded as the common inheritance of Poets’ (p. 748). Wordsworth figures himself as a linguistic recluse, ‘cut ... off’ from contemporary poetry by refusing to accept elaborate diction as his poetic ‘inheritance’. He condemns what he sees as attempts to convert language into a form of capital to be passed along a patrilineal succession. Later on, he asks his readers to join with him in withdrawing from the consumer economy when he claims that ‘in order entirely to enjoy the Poetry which I am recommending, it would be necessary to give up much of which is ordinarily enjoyed’ (p. 760). In 1802, he concluded the ‘Appendix’ by citing Cowper’s ‘Verses, Supposed to be Written by Alexander Selkirk’ as an example of the plain language which he is

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<sup>99</sup> David Hartley, *Observations on Man, 1791*, 2 vols (Poole and Washington, D.C., 1998), III:I:lxxxiii, vol. 1, 298.

<sup>100</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse upon the Origin and Foundation of the Inequality among Mankind*, trans. William Kenrick. (London, 1761), 54-5.

espousing. Having criticised the fourth stanza as an example of how even ‘so chaste a writer as Cowper’ sometimes trades in epithets, Wordsworth praises the fifth for its ‘natural language so naturally connected with metre’ (p. 764). In choosing ‘Alexander Selkirk’ as his model, Wordsworth both signals his indebtedness to Cowper’s linguistic practice and makes a point about the relation between language and solitude. Cowper’s poem is cast as a dramatic monologue spoken by Selkirk ‘during his solitary abode on the island of Juan Fernandez’, in which he expresses his linguistic isolation: ‘I am out of humanity’s reach, / I must finish my journey alone, / Never hear the sweet music of speech, / I start at the sound of my own’ (ll. 9-12). Wordsworth contends that Selkirk’s solitude removes him from artificial diction and naturalises his language. Cowper’s poem, he claims, exemplifies the ‘pervading spirit of a system ... imperfectly explained in the Preface, namely, that in proportion as ideas and feelings are valuable, whether the composition be in prose or verse, they require and exact one and the same language’ (pp. 764-5). With the example of Alexander Selkirk, Wordsworth attempts to counter an unsettling implication of the ‘Preface’: namely, that by rejecting poetic diction he may have placed himself ‘out of humanity’s reach’.

In the ‘Preface’, Wordsworth claims to bring his language closer to the ‘real language of men’ (p. 741) by tracing ‘the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement’ (p. 743). Here, he draws on David Hartley’s associationist psychology, accepting Hartley’s belief that language develops from sense impressions through the association of ideas. Following Locke, Hartley argued that:

Any Sensations *A, B, C, &c.* by being associated with one another a *sufficient Number* of Times, get such a Power over the corresponding Ideas *a, b, c, &c.* that any one of the Sensations *A*, when impressed alone, shall be able to excite in the Mind *b, c, &c.* the Ideas of the Rest.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Hartley, *Observations on Man*, I:II:x, vol. 1, 65; italics removed.

Wordsworth summarised his adaptation of Hartley's theory of language in a passage of the 'Preface' which invites grammatical scrutiny:

For our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings; and as by contemplating the relation of these general representatives to each other, we discover what is really important to men, so by the repetition and continuance of this act feelings connected with important subjects will be nourished, till at length, if we be originally possessed of much organic sensibility, such habits of mind will be produced that by obeying blindly and mechanically the impulses of those habits we shall describe objects and utter sentiments of such a nature and in such connection with each other, that the understanding of the being to whom we address ourselves, if he be in a healthful state of association, must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, his taste exalted, and his affections ameliorated. (p. 745)

This passage relies on its plural pronouns to do a lot of work. Wordsworth begins by describing 'our thoughts' and 'our ... feelings', phrases which allow for the possibility that writer and reader share a common set of experiences. His grammar sidesteps the fact that Hartley's theory involves each individual in a hermeneutic circle, in which people can 'modify' and 'direct' their 'feelings' along chains of private associations until they bear little or no resemblance to those of others. Wordsworth later concedes that even though he has tried to write about 'the great and simple affections of our nature' (p. 745), his poems may give a 'shock ... to the Reader's associations' (p. 755). In claiming this, he acknowledges Hartley's recognition that 'different associations' may be 'transferred upon the same words by the difference in the accidents and events of our lives'.<sup>102</sup> In the passage quoted above, however, Wordsworth follows Hartley in using the language of sociability ('representatives', 'relation', 'connected') to describe the make-up of the individual mind, suggesting commonality between minds where in fact there might be difference. His confidence that people can communicate by following their habits of association 'blindly and mechanically' sits uncomfortably beside his later rejection of the 'mechanical adoption' of 'figures of speech' (p. 761-2). Beyond this, the grammatical strain in this passage manifests in the plural phrase 'we address ourselves', where Wordsworth and his

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<sup>102</sup> Hartley, *Observations on Man*, III:I:lxxx, vol. 1, 283.

reader become one, combined into a plural identity, collectively addressing a second, newly-implied reader. In order to make certain that his readers identify with his poetry, Wordsworth has to make them the authors of it. The passage quoted above is a single sentence—itsself like a chain of associations—which begins confidently by chaining dependent clauses, but then becomes conditional (‘if we be...’, ‘if he be...’). Wordsworth begins to introduce hedges (‘in some degree’) that reflect the contingent steps by which associating minds might begin to diverge from one another.

Throughout the 1800 ‘Preface’, Wordsworth remained aware that introspection might lead individuals, especially poets, to form personal languages, associating their ideas in ways which are unintelligible to others. Hartley asserted that ‘mankind, in all ages and nations, agree, in general, in their complex and decomplex ideas’, yet he recognised that there may be differences owing to ‘age, constitution, education, profession, country, age of the world, &c., *i.e.* in [people’s] impressions and associations’.<sup>103</sup> Reverting to Rousseau and Condillac, Wordsworth chose to write about ‘Low and rustic life’, because he reasoned that in this state ‘our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity’ and maintain contact with ‘the beautiful and permanent forms of nature’ from which all humans derive their first words (pp. 743-4). Yet Wordsworth realised that even the ‘world of nature’ offers ‘endless combinations of forms and imagery’ (p. 754), and that he was therefore dependent on his readers to undertake the sympathetic act of perceiving ‘similitude’ in the ‘dissimilitude’ between minds (p. 756). He candidly accepts that his ‘language may have suffered from those arbitrary connections of feelings and ideas with particular words, from which no man can altogether protect himself’ (p. 747), with the result that ‘in some instances feelings even of the ludicrous may be given to my Readers by expressions which appeared to me tender and pathetic’ (p. 757). The divergence

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<sup>103</sup> Hartley, *Observations on Man*, I:II:xii, vol. 1, 78.

between ‘tender’ and ‘ludicrous’ is so great, however, that it questions the possibility of poetic communication. Ironically, Wordsworth’s attempt to use associationist psychology to ‘bring [his] language near to the language of men’ (p. 747) led him to recognise that not only poets, but all language-users, are potentially solitary.

In the years 1800-1802, Wordsworth considered the troubling implications of the ‘Preface’ in several poems which explore the solitary status of the poet and the isolating effects of language. The third of the ‘Poems on the Naming of Places’, for example, exists in dialogue with the ‘Preface’ and prefigures Wordsworth’s description of the poetic character in 1802:

There is an Eminence,—of these our hills  
The last that parleys with the setting sun.  
... ’Tis in truth  
The loneliest place we have among the clouds.  
And She who dwells with me, who I have lov’d  
With such communion, that no place on earth  
Can ever be a solitude to me,  
Hath said, this lonesome Peak shall bear my name. (ll. 1-17)

Stone-Arthur exemplifies the ‘beautiful and permanent forms of nature’ that Wordsworth described in the ‘Preface’ as the source of our first sense impressions and, ultimately, of language (pp. 743-4). Beyond this, it symbolises Wordsworth’s concept of the poetic vocation by being the ‘last’ ‘of these our hills’ that ‘parleys with the setting sun’. As in the ‘Preface’, there is a sense that the poet must be the last upholder of a language derived from, and capable of relating to, the natural world. On the one hand, the verb ‘parley’ connotes a colloquial familiarity in speech. On the other, it denotes the act of holding ‘[a] meeting between opposing sides in a dispute’, especially ‘a conference with an enemy, under truce’ (*OED*, PARLEY, *n.*<sup>1</sup>, 2.a.). In the latter sense, Stone-Arthur becomes a ‘parley hill’, an obsolete Scottish and Irish compound noun denoting a ‘mound where disputes between neighbouring districts were debated and settled’ (*OED*, PARLEY HILL, *n.*). By using the parley hill as a symbol for the poet, Wordsworth tasks the poet’s language with

negotiating an understanding between human minds and the natural world. The poem can thus be seen to anticipate his description in 1802 of the poet as ‘the rock of defence of human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying every where with him relationship and love’ (p. 753). He uses the image of sunlight reflecting on Stone-Arthur to represent this spirit of relationship, demonstrating his belief that the poet should ‘[bind] together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time’ (p. 753). Like the poet that Wordsworth describes in 1802, Stone-Arthur is at once ‘distant’ and ‘visible’—a solitary but universal presence. He emulates the mountain’s ability ‘to send / Its own deep quiet to restore our hearts’, aiming to communicate a similar ‘deep quiet’ through his poetic language. By describing himself and Dorothy ‘pursu[ing] our walk / Along the public way’, Wordsworth undercuts the implication that the poet is lofty and withdrawn (the verb ‘pursue’ suggests that the task of maintaining social cohesion has become difficult, but that he intends to attempt it anyway). He suggests that he is uniquely fitted to the poet’s vocation because of his ‘communion’ with Dorothy, which means that ‘no place on earth / Can ever be a solitude to me’. Wordsworth uses his bond with his sister to reassure himself that, as a poet, he could never enter the state of linguistic solitude predicted by the ‘Preface’.

In 1800, Wordsworth’s thinking about the nature of language also influenced *Home at Grasmere*, reaching a crisis in the passage describing a shepherd calling his sheep in the valley (ll. 398-438). This passage can be read as an anti-‘Lyrical Ballad’, contradicting Wordsworth’s Hartleian faith in ‘general sympathy’ (p. 751) which he promoted elsewhere. In the narrative of *Home at Grasmere*, this passage serves to counteract the ‘complacency’ in Wordsworth’s conviction that ‘They who are dwellers in this holy place / Must needs themselves be hallowed’.<sup>104</sup> Responding to the ‘voice / Which

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<sup>104</sup> Wordsworth, *Home at Grasmere*, MS. B, ll. 395 and 366-7, 60-2.

is as a presiding Spirit here' (l. 363-4), Wordsworth convinces himself that the valley's inhabitants have no need of human language to exchange ideas because they already exist in a spirit of 'overflowing love' (l. 375). He describes this private train of associations as a 'pleasant stream' (l. 381) down which he floats, asking why he should 'reprove' himself for indulging in such introspection when 'the stream / Is flowing, and will never cease to flow' (ll. 383-4). Yet he then interrupts his reverie with the dramatic purpose of challenging his own views about language:

An awful voice,  
 'Tis true, I in my walks have often heard,  
 Sent from the mountains or the sheltered fields,  
 Shout after shout—reiterated whoop  
 In manner of a bird that takes delight  
 In answering to itself, or like a hound  
 Single at chace among the lonely woods—  
 A human voice, how awful in the gloom  
 Of coming night, when sky is dark, and earth  
 Not dark, nor yet enlightened, but by snow  
 Made visible, amid the noise of winds  
 And bleatings manifold of sheep that know  
 Their summons, and are gathering round for food—  
 That voice, the same, the very same, that breath  
 Which was an utterance awful as the wind,  
 Or any sound the mountains ever heard. (ll. 407-22)

This passage probably dates from the same year as the 'Preface',<sup>105</sup> where Wordsworth claimed to adopt the language of men in 'Low and rustic life' because 'such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived' (pp. 743-4). Despite this, the speaker of *Home at Grasmere* (a version of Wordsworth) signally fails to identify with the shepherd in the valley. Wordsworth demonstrates this failure of empathy through his use of repetition. The speaker characterises the shepherd as having an 'awful voice' (in the sense of causing dread, rather than inspiring reverence) and then refuses to deviate from these words. The 'voice' is

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<sup>105</sup> Beth Darlington conjectures that the manuscripts from 1800, now lost, 'must have carried versions of most of lines 1 to 457 of MS. B', Beth Darlington, 'Introduction' in Wordsworth, *Home at Grasmere*, 13.

finally dignified with the epithet 'human' in l. 414, but remains 'That voice, the same, the very same', as if it is singularly repellent and does not warrant a more poetic noun.

Similarly, Wordsworth deploys the adjective 'awful' three times in the short passage quoted above, suggesting that the speaker is incapable of moving beyond his first impression towards a more sympathetic interpretation. He repeatedly denies the shepherd's humanity, referring to his call onomatopoeically as an animal cry, a 'whoop', and comparing him first to a 'bird' and then to a 'hound'. The repetitive nature of the shepherd's call is made to seem disgusting: 'Shout after shout—reiterated whoop'. The speaker cannot enter into the shepherd's 'delight' and therefore characterises him as being pre-linguistic, cut off from the possibility of communication like a bird 'answering to itself' or a hound 'Single at chace'. In truth, of course, there is no difference between the shepherd privately making play out of his work and Wordsworth floating down his own 'pleasant stream' of associations a few lines earlier. Yet the speaker (or perhaps Wordsworth himself) cannot see the similarity and dismisses the shepherd's state of mind as one that is variously: 'Debased', 'under prophanation', 'senseless', 'tainted', marked by 'ribaldry', 'blasphemy', 'wrath', 'drunkenness', 'evil', 'selfishness', 'envy', 'revenge', 'Flattery and double-dealing, strife and wrong' (ll. 424-38). In *The Prelude* (1805), this shepherd would have (and arguably did) become one of the awe-inspiring figures in Book Eight who taught Wordsworth his 'love of mankind'. The shepherd standing on 'an aerial Island floating on' (VIII, 98) seems symbolically to have joined Wordsworth on his stream of associations, while the other shepherd with his dog has become an adept language-user, 'who with voice / And hand waved to and fro as need required / Gave signal to his Dog, thus teaching him / To chace along the mazes of steep crags / The Flock he could not see' (VIII, 106-10). In 1800, however, Wordsworth thrust both himself and the shepherd into linguistic solitude, giving vent to his fears about the private nature of language in a rare

failure of sympathy. Wordsworth's confidence revives as he concludes that the valley contains many 'fit associates' (l. 680)—people who share his own habits of association. Yet his failure to identify with the voice of the shepherd fundamentally challenged his claim to associate with the 'real language of men in a state of vivid sensation' (p. 741).

In the 'Preface', Wordsworth claimed that 'a language arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings is a more permanent and a far more philosophical language than that which is frequently substituted for it by Poets' (p. 744). He might have borrowed the term 'philosophical language' from Hartley, who used it to denote a language with which people 'could at pleasure denote all their conceptions adequately, *i.e.* without any deficiency, superfluity, or equivocation'.<sup>106</sup> To support his claim that such a language might in fact exist, Wordsworth included a footnote: 'It is worth while here to observe that the affecting parts of Chaucer are almost always expressed in language pure and universally intelligible even to this day' (p. 744n.). Wordsworth's argument is not a primitivist one; rather, he posits a core vocabulary for describing the passions which does not change over time. Following his difficulties with *Home at Grasmere*, Wordsworth needed to put his linguistic theories to the test. Arguably, this was one of his motives in December 1801 when he began to modernise four Chaucerian texts. Bruce E. Graver has written about Wordsworth's habits as a translator. He demonstrates that Wordsworth was unusually scrupulous in the claim, made when he published 'The Prioress's Tale' in *The River Duddon* (1820), to have introduced 'no farther deviations from the original than were necessary for the fluent reading, and instant understanding, of the Author'.<sup>107</sup> Whereas Chaucer's eighteenth-century modernisers, including Dryden and Pope, had rewritten his poems according to 'a progressive theory of the development of language',<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Hartley, *Observations on Man*, III:I:lxxxiv, vol. 1, 315.

<sup>107</sup> William Wordsworth, 'The Prioress's Tale, From Chaucer', *Translations of Chaucer and Virgil*, ed. Bruce E. Graver (Ithaca and London, 1998), 36.

<sup>108</sup> Wordsworth, *Translations*, 5.

Graver observes that Wordsworth took ‘great pains to follow Chaucer line for line’ and ‘refus[ed] to update Chaucer’s language and idiom more than [was] absolutely necessary’.<sup>109</sup> Dryden’s ‘Preface’ to *Fables Ancient and Modern* (1700) had used the metaphors of linguistic luxury which Wordsworth had criticised in the ‘Preface’. Dryden commented that Chaucer was a ‘rough Diamond’ and undertook to ‘polish’ him, claiming:

I have not ty’d myself to a Literal Translation; but have ... added somewhat of my own where I thought my Author was deficient, and had not given his Thoughts their true Lustre, for want of Words in the Beginning of our Language.<sup>110</sup>

Wordsworth had already challenged such attitudes in the ‘Preface’, which inverts the hierarchy of linguistic purity and contends that Chaucer wrote in a ‘language pure and universally intelligible even to this day’. His decision to ‘modernise’ Chaucer constituted an attempt to test not only this claim, but also the wider argument of the ‘Preface’ that modern writers had obscured the universal language of the passions by converting words into luxury items.

The four Chaucerian texts which Wordsworth chose to modernise engage in various ways with the problem of linguistic prejudice and the isolation that ensues. ‘The Prioress’s Tale’ relates the miracle of a Christian boy whose throat is cut in a Jewish neighbourhood for singing the ‘Alma Redemptoris Mater’. ‘The Manciple’s Tale’ narrates how Phoebus punishes a crow for informing him of his wife’s adultery by debasing its song: ‘Whilom thou sung like any Nightingale / Henceforth, false thief, thy song from thee is gone’ (ll. 190-1). The extract from *Troilus and Cresida* describes how Troilus begins to descend into a private language of madness after Cresida departs for the Greek camp: ‘in no other space ... Feel I a wind, that soundeth so like pain; / It saith, Alas, why severed are we twain?’ (ll. 158-61). The text which deals most directly with the question of linguistic severance, however, is ‘The Cuckoo and the Nightingale’, then believed to be Chaucer’s,

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<sup>109</sup> Wordsworth, *Translations*, 10.

<sup>110</sup> Dryden, *Fables*, 39-40.

but now attributed to John Clanvowe. This poem elaborates the traditional belief that for lovers ‘it was good to hear the Nightingale, / Ere the vile Cuckoo’s note be utterèd’ (ll. 49-50). The speaker describes how he went out at dawn to hear the ‘sweet Birds’ harmony’ but was distressed when ‘the Cuckoo, bird unholy, / Broke silence’: ‘Now, God, quoth I, that died upon the rood, / From thee and thy base throat, keep all that’s good, / For little joy have I now of thy cry’ (ll. 83-95). Here, the social undertones of the adjective ‘base’ speak directly to Wordsworth’s own linguistic concerns. In the passage that follows, social value judgements become explicit in the dispute between Cuckoo and Nightingale:

Good Cuckoo, seek some other bush or brake,  
And, prithee, let us that can sing dwell here;  
For every wight eschews thy song to hear,  
Such uncouth singing verily dost thou make.

What! quoth she then, what is ’t that ails thee now?  
It seems to me I sing as well as thou;  
For mine ’s a song that is both true and plain,—  
Although I cannot quaver so in vain  
As thou dost in thy throat, I wot not how.

All men may understanding have of me,  
But, Nightingale, so may they not of thee;  
For thou hast many a foolish and quaint cry:—  
Thou say’st OSEE, OSEE, then how may I  
Have knowledge, I thee pray, what this may be?

Ah, fool! quoth she, wist thou not what it is?  
Oft as I say OSEE, OSEE, I wis,  
Then mean I, that I should be wonderous fain  
That shamefully they one and all were slain,  
Whoever against Love mean aught amiss.

...

Ay, quoth the Cuckoo, that is a quaint law,  
That all must love or die; but I withdraw,  
And take my leave of all such company,  
For mine intent it neither is to die,  
Nor ever while I live Love’s yoke to draw. (ll. 112-40)

Wordsworth’s translation stays so close to his source text (from Robert Anderson’s *The Works of the British Poets*) that he only replaces four of the rhyme words in the passage

above ('brake', 'make', 'I', and 'withdraw'). He rarely alters Chaucer's lexical choices, restricting most of his changes to matters of orthography and syntax. Wordsworth makes his first major lexical change at the end of the first stanza quoted, where he substitutes the line 'Such uncouth singing verily thou dost make' for the original line 'Thy songis ben so elenge, in gode fay'.<sup>111</sup> The archaic adjective 'elenge' in fact means 'Remote, lonely; dreary, miserable', although it was later glossed as 'strange, foreign' (*OED*, ELENGE, *adj.*, 2. and 3.). Wordsworth travels via this second sense to the adjective 'uncouth', which strengthens the connotations of social judgement. Because the Cuckoo refuses to gratify the other birds' taste for linguistic display, choosing to sing a 'true and plain' song instead of 'quaver[ing]', her language is deemed uncouth and she is cast out: 'every wight eschews thy song to hear'. The dispute between the Cuckoo and the Nightingale thus dramatizes the 'Preface's argument for plain language over the luxurious language of contemporary taste, with the Cuckoo defending Wordsworth's position. The birds who 'obey' the 'God of Love' (l. 133) come to seem like contemporary poets, adopting meaningless and elaborate phrases merely for their luxurious status. Because she dissents from this practice, the Cuckoo is expelled from community and driven into poetic exile.

When Wordsworth was revising his modernisation of 'The Cuckoo and the Nightingale' for Thomas Powell's edition of *The Poems of Geoffrey Chaucer, Modernized* (1840), he added in three stanzas which Southey's nephew had discovered on a manuscript in the Bodleian the previous year.<sup>112</sup> In what became stanza 44 of the poem, the speaker describes how he intervened on the Nightingale's behalf by throwing a stone at the Cuckoo. In the source text, this stanza comes after the Nightingale has complained: 'my hertè woll to breke, / To herin thus this leudè birdè speke'.<sup>113</sup> In Clanvowe's day, the

<sup>111</sup> [John Clanvowe], 'The Cuckowe and the Nightingale', lines unnumbered, in Robert Anderson (ed.), *A Complete Edition of the Poets of Great Britain*, ed. Robert Anderson, 13 vols (London, 1792-5), vol. 1, 499.

<sup>112</sup> See Graver's account in Wordsworth, *Translations*, 23-5.

<sup>113</sup> Anderson (ed.), *Complete Edition of the Poets*, vol. 1, 500.

adjective ‘lewd’ had a range of meanings, including ‘unlettered’ and ‘[o]f low social status’ (*OED*, LEWD, *adj.*, 2.a., and 3.). Wordsworth captures these senses, again emphasising the fact that the Nightingale deems the Cuckoo to be socially inferior, with the adjective ‘churlish’ (l. 212). At this point, the speaker throws his stone at the Cuckoo, who flies away and ‘ever and aye / Kept crying, “Farewell!—farewell, Popinjay!” / As if in scornful mockery of me’ (ll. 221-3). By 1801, the noun ‘popinjay’ (which originally denoted ‘[a]n ornamental representation of a parrot, esp. on a tapestry’) had come to allude to the bird’s ‘gaudy plumage or its mechanical repetition of words and phrases’ (*OED*, POPINJAY, *n.*, 1.a. and 2.b.). In other words, the Cuckoo mocks the other birds for their poetic diction and implies that by throwing the stone the speaker has shown himself to be a linguistic snob. Wordsworth’s belief, which he stated in a footnote to the revised manuscript, that these stanzas ‘are necessary to complete the sense’ of the poem suggests that he read it as a fable of class-based linguistic prejudice.<sup>114</sup> The language of *Clanvowe*’s original is readily intelligible, meaning that Wordsworth barely had to alter it. This, in part, was the purpose of modernising the poem: to show that the task was unnecessary. Beyond this, the fable of ‘The Cuckoo and the Nightingale’ vindicated the value which Wordsworth had assigned to the language of ‘Low and rustic life’ in the ‘Preface’. ‘Modernising’ the poem renewed Wordsworth’s confidence in his own theory, proving that language change is minimal and that it is possible to write poetry which will ‘interest mankind permanently’, as long as both the poet and reader set aside their linguistic prejudices.

Wordsworth carried the linguistic confidence which he gained from modernising Chaucer into the lyrics he wrote over the next few years. In ‘To the Cuckoo’, composed March-June 1802, Wordsworth reversed the folk belief about the Cuckoo, claiming: ‘I

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<sup>114</sup> Wordsworth, *Translations*, 51n.

have heard, / I hear thee and rejoice: / O Cuckoo!’ (ll. 1-3). Perhaps subconsciously, Wordsworth echoed the repetitive cry of the shepherd from *Home at Grasmere* when he wrote: ‘While I am lying on the grass, / I hear thy restless shout: / From hill to hill it seems to pass, / About, and all about!’ (ll. 5-8). Wordsworth now feels able to take joy in the sound, claiming that ‘Thou tellest, Cuckoo! in the vale / Of visionary hours’ (ll. 11-12). He welcomes the bird as ‘an invisible Thing, / A voice, a mystery’ (ll. 15-16). In 1800, the shepherd’s cry had caused Wordsworth to feel solitary and to doubt the possibility of bridging the associative gap between them. In 1802, he opened his mind to the sound of the Cuckoo and made the kind of sympathetic leap which he had previously thought impossible. He celebrates this sympathetic opening of his associative mind when he joyously repeats the claim ‘I can listen’, ‘Can lie upon the plain / And listen’ (ll. 25-7), rejoicing in the simple receptiveness which has allowed him to escape from his associative solitude. In June 1802, Wordsworth described this receptivity in his famous letter to John Wilson. Perhaps with ‘The Cuckoo and the Nightingale’ in mind, he wrote:

You will recollect a passage in Cowper where, speaking of rural sounds, he says—  
 “and *even* the boding Owl  
 That hails the rising moon has charms for me.”

Cowper was passionately fond of natural objects yet you see he mentions it as a marvellous thing that he could connect pleasure with the cry of the owl ... There are many aversions of this kind, which, though they have some foundation in nature, have so slight a one, that though they may have prevailed hundreds of years, a philosopher will look upon them as accidents. So with respect to many moral feelings, either of [lo]ve or dislike..<sup>115</sup>

In this letter, Wordsworth writes like a man newly able to articulate a long-standing belief. He explains the aim of *Lyrical Ballads* as having been to overcome the associative gulfs which isolate and separate people from their surroundings, invoking Cowper as a predecessor in carrying out this work. Rejecting his own feelings regarding the Grasmere shepherd, Wordsworth criticises those who ‘are disgusted with the naked language of some of the most interesting passions of men, because either it is indelicate, or gross, or

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<sup>115</sup> Wordsworth, 7 June 1802, *Letters*, vol. 1, 356.

[vu]lgar'.<sup>116</sup> The aim of the *Lyrical Ballads*, newly-stated, becomes that of 'stripping our own hearts naked, and ... looking out of ourselves'.<sup>117</sup> Wordsworth asserts that people are wrong in assuming that 'human nature and the persons they associate with are one', where the phrase 'associate with' refers to mental association as well as social interaction. He suggests that one has to make an active effort to follow someone's mental habits of association in order to understand them. Using the example of 'The Idiot Boy', Wordsworth rearticulates the aim of *Lyrical Ballads* as having been to encourage this practice. Behind the claim that he aims not only to 'delineate merely such feelings as all men *do* sympathise with', but also 'such as all men *may* sympathize with' lies the new confidence in overcoming poetic exile which he had gained by modernising Chaucer.<sup>118</sup>

By the time he composed Book Twelve of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth was able to articulate a new, more confident version of his poetic manifesto. In doing so, he answered his concerns about poetic exile and described a mechanism by which the poet could bring his habits of association in line with those of his readers. As in the 'Preface', Wordsworth sought to describe the associative process by which language and thought develop from 'the passions of men incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature'.<sup>119</sup> Yet his account of this process in *The Prelude* differs in important ways from that given in the 'Preface'. Gone is the solitary poet of 1802, who relied on 'his own passions and volitions', 'delighting to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the Universe' (p. 751). The poet of the 'Preface' responds introspectively to 'absent things as if they were present', trusting in his 'ability of conjuring up in himself passions, which are indeed far from being the same as those produced by real events' (p. 751). In truth, this emphasis on solitary meditation does an injustice to Wordsworth's

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<sup>116</sup> Wordsworth, 7 June 1802, *Letters*, vol. 1, 354.

<sup>117</sup> Wordsworth, 7 June 1802, *Letters*, vol. 1, 355.

<sup>118</sup> Wordsworth, 7 June 1802, *Letters*, vol. 1, 358.

<sup>119</sup> Wordsworth, 'Preface', *Lyrical Ballads*, 743-4.

poetic habits of observation in the *Lyrical Ballads*. Book Twelve of *The Prelude*, however, more accurately describes the process by which Wordsworth learned ‘To look with feelings of fraternal love / Upon those unassuming things, that hold / A silent station in this beautiful world’ (XII, 50-2). Where the ‘Preface’ speaks abstractly of ‘the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived’, Book Twelve of *The Prelude* sharpens its focus, as Wordsworth had done in the nature lyrics of 1802-4. Regarding the problem posed by the shepherd in *Home at Grasmere*, he recounts how he found ‘Once more in Man an object of delight’ (XII, 54). He attributes this development to 1793, but also speaks of the present when expressing the need ‘To seek in Man ... what there is / Desirable, affecting, good or fair, / Of kindred permanence’ (XII, 39-42), a list of epithets which symbolically atones for the insults hurled at the shepherd in 1800.

Wordsworth claims that: ‘When I began to inquire, / To watch and question those I met, and held / Familiar talk with them, the lonely roads / Were schools to me in which I daily read / With most delight the passions of mankind’ (XII, 161-5). Communication remains complex, as shown by the fact that Wordsworth needs not only to ‘question’, but also to ‘watch’ and ‘read’, supplementing language with visual observation and personal surmise. Yet his confidence in ‘familiar talk’ is largely restored. He claims to have discovered in ‘lonely roads’ the ideal space for sympathetic communication, a paradox which prompts him to modify his attitudes to language:

There are who think that strong affections, love  
Known by whatever name, is falsely deemed  
A gift, to use a term which they would use,  
Of vulgar Nature, that its growth requires  
Retirement, leisure, language purified  
By manners thoughtful and elaborate,  
That whoso feels such passion in excess  
Must live within the very light and air  
Of elegances that are made by man.  
True is it, where oppression worse than death  
Salutes the Being at his birth, where grace  
Of culture hath been utterly unknown,

And labour in excess and poverty  
 From day to day pre-occupy the ground  
 Of the affections, and to Nature's self  
 Oppose a deeper nature, there indeed,  
 Love cannot be; nor does it easily thrive  
 In cities, where the human heart is sick,  
 And the eye feeds it not, and cannot feed:  
 Thus far, no further, is that inference good. (VIII, 185-204)

Here, Wordsworth revises the claims about 'Low and rustic life' which he made in the 'Preface'. In 1800, he suggested that people 'speak a plainer and more emphatic language' when their 'elementary feelings exist in a state of greater simplicity' (p. 743). This implies that 'language' and 'feelings' both obey the same laws of association: as society becomes more 'refined', people's passions will become more complex as well as their language. As a result, people's passions will diverge with their experiences, contradicting Wordsworth's faith in 'the great and simple affections of our nature' (p. 745).

In the lines quoted above, Wordsworth asserts, through a double negative, that 'love' is a 'gift' of 'vulgar Nature'. He implies that passions are universal, but that the use of different names for them distorts this fact and introduces false social distinctions. He signals his suspicion of giving refined names to the passions in the phrases 'love / Known by whatever name' and 'to use a term which they would use'. It is unclear from the context whether the 'term' which his opponents would use is the noun 'gift' or the adjective 'vulgar'. If 'strong affections' are not a 'gift', they implicitly become a commodity to be earned or purchased: Wordsworth might be objecting to this commodification of feeling. Equally, he might be punning on the senses of the adjective 'vulgar', suggesting that rather than being 'coarse', passions are 'vulgar' in the sense of being 'vernacular'—common to everyone. Either way, he categorically denies that the 'growth' of 'love' requires 'Retirement, leisure, language purified / By manners thoughtful and elaborate'. 'Retirement', he claims, is a wealthy form of withdrawal which can only serve to make 'language' and 'manners' 'thoughtful and elaborate': it has no effect on the feelings.

Wordsworth uses the language of consumerism ('leisure', 'elaborate', 'excess', 'elegances ... made by man') to criticise the idea that 'Retirement' can strengthen the affections by refining them within cultured surroundings. Such 'Retirement', he argues, merely makes people's vocabulary more luxurious and ultimately gives rise to personal languages.

Yet Wordsworth does advocate a different form of withdrawal—'reclusion'—as the means to sustain strong habits of feeling. He contests the idea that some people's 'affections' are stronger by 'Nature', claiming that this is only the case where 'the grace / Of culture hath been utterly unknown' and 'labour' and 'poverty' 'pre-occupy the ground / Of the affections'. Wordsworth dismisses the newer sense of 'culture' as 'refinement' and reverts to its primary sense of 'cultivation of the land'. Unless they are hindered by 'labour in excess and poverty', he suggests, the 'affections' will grow spontaneously in the 'ground' of human nature. This is the very same argument which Raymond Williams made in *Culture and Society*, when he claimed that:

the idea of culture is necessary, as an idea of the tending of *natural* growth... We have to live by our own attachments, but we can only live fully, in common, if we grant the attachments of others, and make it our common business to keep the channels of growth clear.<sup>120</sup>

Wordsworth argues that the 'channels of growth' are not clear 'In cities, where the human heart is sick, / And the eye feeds it not'. In cities, he argues, 'culture hath been utterly unknown' in the sense of having been forgotten or unlearned. The conditions of life in competitive society scramble people's natural associations, damaging the 'affections' and opposing 'Nature's self' with another selfish 'nature' which is 'deeper' but nonetheless social in origin. One must therefore withdraw, Wordsworth implies, from 'cities' and the economy of alienated labour into the natural world and into 'Nature's self', with its 'vulgar' 'gift' of 'strong affections'. Reclusion becomes a matter of withdrawing from society in order to restore one's natural habits of association and the spirit of 'love' that

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<sup>120</sup> Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (London, 1958), 337.

these produce. Because these ‘affections’ are universal when not hindered by ‘labour in excess and poverty’, Wordsworth argues that he does not risk isolating himself from human sympathies by withdrawing. He is not ‘retiring’ in order to develop ‘manners thoughtful and elaborate’—to elevate himself and his language above other individuals—but in order to restore his natural and universal ‘affections’.

Wordsworth’s commitment to plain language and his fears about poetic exile were more ambivalent than Cowper’s. Whereas Cowper became more and more adamant that the plain style was a desideratum of Christian poetry, Wordsworth’s project to ‘bring [his] language near to the language of men’ led him to doubt the possibility of speaking across the divisions of social class.<sup>121</sup> His attempt to use Hartley’s associationist philosophy to prove ‘the great and simple affections of our nature’ (p. 745) ironically confronted him with the prospect that language users might become tangled in private chains of association and personal languages. Despite this, Wordsworth followed Cowper in rejecting the commodification of words into luxury items. The experience of modernising Chaucer gave him the confidence to recommend a form of reclusion which was not the leisured cultivation of ‘manners thoughtful and elaborate’ (XII, 190), but rather an attempt to promote ‘*natural* growth’ of universal passions and sympathies.<sup>122</sup> Wordsworth argued that these sympathies were best cultivated in nature, and that individuals should withdraw from the fashionable, urban circles that regarded poetic diction as belonging to the elite. Here, however, the discussion intersects with Cowper’s and Wordsworth’s arguments for ‘natural reclusion’, which are the subject of Chapter Four.

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<sup>121</sup> Wordsworth, ‘Preface’, *Lyrical Ballads*, 747, 760.

<sup>122</sup> Williams, *Culture and Society*, 337.

## 2. *Medical Reclusion*

*'Honest melancholy'*

Among the many subdivisions in the *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), Robert Burton included a type of 'Love-Melancholy' which he called 'Rational' or 'Honest Melancholy'.<sup>1</sup> In the 'Analysis of the Third Partition' of his work, Burton observes that Rational Love can take as its objects the 'Common good, our neighbour, countrey, friends, which is charity; the defect of which is cause of much discontent and Melancholy'.<sup>2</sup> As with other forms of Love-Melancholy, Burton implies that Rational Love gives rise to Melancholy when denied its object, in this case 'charity'. He argues that '[a]s nuptial love makes, this perfects mankind': 'Take this away, and take all pleasure, joy, comfort, happiness, and true content out of the world; 'tis the greatest tye, the surest Indenture, strongest band'.<sup>3</sup> Burton discusses Honest Melancholy further in the prefatory letter from 'Democritus Junior to the Reader'. Here, he declares that not only individual bodies, but also 'Kingdoms, Provinces, and politick bodies are likewise sensible and subject to this disease'.<sup>4</sup> In the persona of Democritus Junior, he rails against the lack of charity in the world, asking:

Is not this *Mundus furiosus*, a mad world, as [Cornelius Jansen] terms it, *insanum bellum* [a mad war]? are not these mad men ... which leave so frequent battels, as perpetual memorials of their madness to all succeeding ages? Would this, think you, have enforced our *Democritus* to laughter, or rather made him turn his tune, alter his tone, and weep with *Heraclitus*, or rather howl, roar, and tear his hair in commiseration, stand amazed; or as the Poets faign that *Niobe* was for grief quite stupefied, and turned to a stone?<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy: What it is, With all the Kinds, Causes, Symptomes, Prognostickes, and Seuerall Cures of it* (London, 1676), 251.

<sup>2</sup> Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, 251.

<sup>3</sup> Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, III:i:3, 267.

<sup>4</sup> Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, 27.

<sup>5</sup> Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, 19.

Burton's prefatory letter frames *The Anatomy of Melancholy* as a work of social criticism, arguing that it is indeed rational to suffer melancholy in such a world. His stance of Honest Melancholy is one which Cowper and Wordsworth both adopted in their own writing, using it to develop medical arguments for reclusion.

In 1783, contemplating Britain's wars in America, India, and the Netherlands, as well as its involvement in the slave trade, Cowper complained that 'My ear is pain'd / My soul is sick with ev'ry day's report / Of wrong and outrage with which earth is fill'd. / There is no flesh in man's obdurate heart, / It does not feel for man'.<sup>6</sup> Wordsworth described a similar sense of melancholy in Book Ten of *The Prelude*, recalling how he had suffered when England went to war with France in 1793. He claimed to have 'felt / The ravage of this most unnatural strife / In my own heart',<sup>7</sup> arguing that the decision to go to war had torn 'From the best Youth in England, their dear pride, / Their joy in England' (X, 277-8). Here, Wordsworth expresses the same idea as Burton about charitable love for one's country: 'Take this away, and take all pleasure ... out of the world'.<sup>8</sup> He proceeds to relate how, during the Terror in France, there was 'no cure for those / Whose souls were sick with pain of what would be ... Most melancholy at that time, O Friend! / Were my day thoughts, my dreams were miserable' (X, 365-9). With the phrase 'souls were sick', Wordsworth echoes Cowper's claim in Book Two of *The Task*: 'My ear is pain'd / My soul is sick'. Cowper and Wordsworth both present reclusion as the best available 'cure' for those who suffer Honest Melancholy as a result of investing too much emotional energy in the fate of their country. In their writing, the poet becomes a figure, like Burton's Democritus Junior, who registers the ills of the body politic through his own suffering. Each poet models his persona on Milton's portrait of 'divinest Melancholy' in 'Il

<sup>6</sup> William Cowper, *The Task*, II, 5-9, *The Poems of William Cowper*, ed. John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, 3 vols (Oxford, 1980-95), vol. 2, 139.

<sup>7</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, X, 249-51, ed. Mark L. Reed, 2 vols (Ithaca and London, 1991), vol. 1, 274.

<sup>8</sup> Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, III:i:3, 267.

Penseroso'.<sup>9</sup> Milton figures Melancholy as a 'pensive nun' (l. 31), her 'looks commercing with the skies' (l. 39), and writes: 'There held in holy passion still, / Forget thyself to marble, till / With a sad leaden downward cast / Thou fix them on the earth as fast' (ll. 41-4). In the line 'Forget thyself to marble', Milton invokes the Niobe legend in a similar way to Burton, to describe one who 'stand[s] amazed' at the corruption of society. Like Milton, Cowper and Wordsworth depict their reclusion as serving two functions: on the one hand, it registers what is wrong with society through the 'sad leaden downward' look of sympathetic social criticism; on the other, reclusion serves a curative function, providing the poet with the 'holy passion' needed to keep his anger sympathetic.

*Cowper at 'The College': Reclusion as a cure for melancholy*

William Cowper derived his belief in reclusion as a remedy for melancholy from Nathaniel Cotton (1705?-88), his doctor at the Collegium Insanorum in St Albans between 7 December 1763 and 17 June 1765.<sup>10</sup> Cowper was unsurprisingly reticent about the time he spent at the 'The College', stating in the text now known as *Adelphi* (written c.1767) that '[i]t will be proper to draw a veil over "the secrets of my prison house"'.<sup>11</sup> Despite this alarming reference to Isaiah 42:7, Cowper praises Cotton elsewhere in *Adelphi* not only for 'his skill as a physician', but also for 'his well known humanity and sweetness of temper' (p. 32). Certainly, Cotton seems to have had a profound effect on Cowper's thinking about mental health. A few years before meeting him, Cowper wrote of solitude as an affliction

<sup>9</sup> John Milton, 'Il Penseroso', l. 12, *Complete Shorter Poems*, ed. John Carey (Harlow, 2007), 145.

<sup>10</sup> James King, *William Cowper: A Biography* (Durham, NC, 1986), 52, 56-7.

<sup>11</sup> William Cowper, *Adelphi*, in *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, ed. James King and Charles Ryskamp, 5 vols (Oxford, 1979-86), vol. 1, 33.

(‘Doom’d, as I am, in solitude to waste / The present moments, and regret the past’),<sup>12</sup> but in 1767 he closed *Adelphi* with an account of his ‘sweet’ ‘solitude’ (p. 44) in Huntingdon and a hymn on ‘Retirement’ (p. 48). The religious aspects of Cowper’s withdrawal will be discussed further in Chapter Four. First, it is necessary to understand the shift which Cotton produced in Cowper’s thinking about his health, by persuading him that his life in London had contributed to his illness, and that the best remedy was to withdraw.

It is not possible to piece together all of the details of Cowper’s treatment at ‘The College’. Cotton’s institution was a private one and as such did not have to keep any records until the passing of the Act for Regulating Private Madhouses (1774).<sup>13</sup> In *Adelphi*, Cowper recalled that he had to be closely watched after a suicide attempt, later employing the servant, Sam Roberts, who had ‘waited on me with so much patience and gentleness that I could not bear to leave him behind’ (p. 42). However, he suggests that the most valuable part of Cotton’s treatment was the ‘sweet communion I had with him concerning the things of our salvation’, and stayed on with him for ‘near twelve months after my recovery’ to continue these discussions (p. 40). It was through Cotton’s influence, as well as that of his own cousin, Martin Madan, that Cowper found his evangelical faith while staying at The College. In addition to being a physician, Cotton was also a poet and nonconformist preacher. Although he did not leave behind much medical writing, his literary and religious works reveal a lot about his attitudes to medicine. In particular, they suggest that he regarded Cowper’s mental distress as a product of contemporary models of sociability, particularly that described by Shaftesbury in his *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711).

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<sup>12</sup> William Cowper, ‘Doom’d, as I am, in solitude to waste’, ll. 1-2, *Poems*, vol. 1, 62. ll. 1-2.

<sup>13</sup> Roy Porter, *Madmen: A Social History of Madhouses, Mad-Doctors, and Lunatics* (Stroud, 2004), 157.

Barred from entering the British universities by his religious beliefs, Cotton was educated at Leyden by the pre-eminent physician Herman Boerhaave.<sup>14</sup> Fortuitously, many of the medical books that he owned survive in the Foyle Special Collections Library at King's College, London. Their titles confirm his particular interest in what would now be termed psychiatry. They include John Purcell's *Treatise of Vapours and Hysterick Fits* (1707), George Cheyne's *Natural Method of Cureing the Diseases of the Body and the Disorders of the Mind* (1742), and Robert Whytt's *Observations on the Nature, Causes and Cure of those Disorders which have Commonly Been Called Nervous, Hypochondriac or Hysterick* (1765). Cotton's books show that he continued to read the latest research into 'nervous disorders' as he practised. Whytt's book, for example, was published the year that Cowper left 'The College', but Cotton annotated his copy and valued it enough to insert a bookplate, which was not a habit with him.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Cotton's books suggest the extent of his innovations in treating nervous diseases, particularly through devising an early form of the 'moral therapy' that is usually supposed to have emerged at the York Retreat after 1796.<sup>16</sup> Allan Ingram and Stuart Sim claim that '[i]t is difficult to overstate the significance of The Retreat',<sup>17</sup> an institution for the treatment of Quaker patients founded by William Tuke. They observe that eighteenth-century psychiatry slowly moves to an understanding and a therapy that can be seen as following in the wake of both literary culture and nonconformist religion. In medicine, the real flowering of compassion, or at least of humane treatment and of taking the disturbed seriously as individuals, deserving our attention as much as Hamlet or Don Quixote, comes as late as 1796.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Richard A. Hunter and Jean B. Wood, 'Nathaniel Cotton, M.D.: Poet, Physician and Psychiatrist', *King's College Hospital Gazette*, 36:2 (Summer 1957), 121.

<sup>15</sup> King's College School of Medicine and Dentistry [KCSMD] Historical Collection at the Foyle Special Collections Library, King's College, London, Robert Whytt, *Observations on the Nature, Causes, and Cure of those Disorders which Have Been Commonly Called Nervous, Hypochondriac, or Hysterick* (Edinburgh, 1765).

<sup>16</sup> Porter, *Madmen: A Social History*, 15.

<sup>17</sup> Allan Ingram and Stuart Sim, 'Introduction: Depression before Depression', in Allan Ingram, Stuart Sim, Clark Lawlor, Richard Terry, John Baker, and Leigh Wetherall-Dickson, *Melancholy Experience in Literature of the Long Eighteenth Century: Before Depression, 1660-1800* (Basingstoke and New York, 2011), 1-24, 16.

<sup>18</sup> Ingram and Sim, 'Introduction', 16.

Yet, as a poet and nonconformist divine, Cotton was already moving in this direction when he treated Cowper in the 1760s, developing significantly beyond the recommendations of the doctors whose works he had read.

George Cheyne, for example, took a mechanical view of the nervous system and claimed that he ‘could never find a *natural* or *philosophical* Cause’ for nervous diseases except for an ‘*Obstruction, Excinction, Relaxation, or Malformation* of the proper Organs (which are commonly reckon’d the *Nerves*, or their *Membranes*)’.<sup>19</sup> As a result, he recommends ‘frequent *Evacuations* of all kinds, Vomits especially, with a *low Diet*, and then bracing by *Vegetables, Astringents* or *Cold Baths*’,<sup>20</sup> most of which had been common treatments since the previous century. Whytt challenges this mechanical view of the nervous system, positing an intangible ‘sympathy’ between the mind and body and arguing that ‘all sympathy must be referred to the brain itself and spinal marrow, the source of all the nerves’.<sup>21</sup> This fact clearly interested Cotton, prompting him to note in the margin: ‘Sympathy not depending upon the communication or connexion of the nerves’.<sup>22</sup> In spite of moving the focus of mental illness towards the mind, however, Whytt recommended many of the same treatments as Cheyne,<sup>23</sup> though he noted in conclusion that when melancholy arises from ‘distress of the mind, nothing has done more service than agreeable company, daily exercise ... and a variety of amusements’.<sup>24</sup> Before 1765, however, Cotton had begun to conclude that the best cure for nervous disorders like melancholy—in addition to those listed by Whytt—was reclusion.

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<sup>19</sup> KCSMD, Foyle Special Collections Library, King’s College, London, George Cheyne, *The Natural Method of Cureing the Diseases of the Body and the Disorders of the Mind Depending on the Body* (London, 1742), 78.

<sup>20</sup> Cheyne, *Natural Method*, 90.

<sup>21</sup> Whytt, *Observations*, 50.

<sup>22</sup> KCSMD, Whytt, *Observations*, 50.

<sup>23</sup> Whytt, *Observations*, 517-18.

<sup>24</sup> Whytt, *Observations*, 520.

In 'Health', the third of his *Visions in Verse, for the Entertainment and Instruction of Younger Minds* (1751), Cotton described a 'humble Cottage thatch'd with straw' and claimed that: 'To HEALTH a Cottage is a Throne'.<sup>25</sup> Reading beyond the conventional hyperbole of Cotton's 'Throne' metaphor, it becomes clear that the kind of health he is discussing relates specifically to the mind: 'Hail, thou sweet, calm, unenvied Seat! / I said, and bless'd the fair Retreat: / Here wou'd I pass my remnant Days, / Unknown to Censure, or to Praise; / Forget the World, and be forgot, / As *Pope* describes his Vestal's Lot'.<sup>26</sup> Cotton alters the original couplet in *Pope's* 'Eloisa to Abelard', which reads 'How happy is the blameless Vestal's lot? / The world forgetting, by the world forgot'.<sup>27</sup> Rather than being expelled from society and forgotten 'by the world', Cotton describes Eloisa as choosing to 'Forget the World, and be forgot'. He presents her withdrawal as a choice, not a punishment, and figures her as a version of the 'pensive nun' in Milton's 'Il Penseroso', who voluntarily enters a devotional form of reclusion. Cotton's understanding of the social causes of nervous diseases arguably has more in common with Burton's views in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* than it does with those of the medical practitioners of his day. The reclusion which he recommends in his *Visions in Verse* can be seen as a cure for the kind of Honest Melancholy which Burton described in the persona of Democritus Junior.

In the lines quoted above, Cotton centres his discussion of health on the antonyms 'Censure' and 'Praise', a choice which reveals his interest in the effects of social pressures on the mind. The participle adjectives 'Unknown' and 'forgot' evince a drive towards anonymity and a desire to avoid the kind of social criticism that proliferated in eighteenth-century periodicals. As discussed in the Introduction, the Earl of Shaftesbury famously

<sup>25</sup> Nathaniel Cotton, *Visions in Verse, for the Entertainment and Instruction of Younger Minds* (London, 1751), 34.

<sup>26</sup> Cotton, *Visions in Verse*, 34.

<sup>27</sup> Alexander Pope, 'Eloisa to Abelard', ll. 207-8, *The Poems of Alexander Pope: A One-Volume Edition of the Twickenham Text*, ed. John Butt (London and New York, 2005), 257.

argued in his *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711) that polite society depends upon its citizens ‘knowing well how to expose any Infirmity or Vice’ in one another.<sup>28</sup> Shaftesbury lauded the fact that ‘[n]ever was there in our Nation a time known, when Folly and Extravagance of every kind was more sharply inspected, or more wittily ridicul’d’.<sup>29</sup> In his poem ‘Health’, Cotton can be seen to write against what Jon Mee has termed Shaftesbury’s ‘discourse of regulation’.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, much of Cotton’s work seems to offer a critique of such social regulation by highlighting the impact that ‘ridicule’ has on the health and happiness of the individual. The first of the *Visions in Verse* is entitled ‘Slander’, a theme to which Cotton returned in the posthumously published piece ‘Detraction, A Vision’. In this work, he moves straight to the paradox inherent in Shaftesbury’s notion of regulation, discussing the prevalence of what he terms ‘backbiters’ and lamenting: ‘it is a pity a well-regulated society cannot more effectually curb this impious licentiousness of those sons of darkness’.<sup>31</sup> As Cowper had done in *The Connoisseur*, Cotton criticised Shaftesbury’s model of sociability, pointing out that Shaftesbury’s social regulators are themselves unregulated: each citizen becomes a despot of taste and decency. A complex political argument thus lay behind his view, expressed in ‘Health’, that the individual mind is better situated on the fringes of society, beyond the brunt of social regulation.

As in his poetry, Cotton remained above all a physician in his religious writings. The five of his sermons that his son printed after his death show him thinking through the relation between his faith and his medical practice. In the sermon on Psalm 19:12, for example, he once again took up the subject of the individual’s relation to society. Cotton

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<sup>28</sup> Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, 3 vols (London, 1737-8), vol. 1, 9.

<sup>29</sup> Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks*, vol. 1, 9.

<sup>30</sup> Jon Mee, *Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation: Poetics and the Policing of Culture in the Romantic Period* (Oxford, 2003), 38-42.

<sup>31</sup> Nathaniel Cotton, *Various Pieces in Verse and Prose. By the Late Nathaniel Cotton, M.D. Many of which were Never before Published*, ed. Nathaniel Cotton, Jr, 2 vols (London, 1791), vol. 2, 132-3.

discusses self-knowledge, claiming that it ‘is absolutely necessary both to our comfort in this world, and to our everlasting happiness in the next’.<sup>32</sup> To attain it, however, one must move away from society:

When we withdraw ourselves from the world, that great theatre of business and care on the one hand, and of diversion and dissipation on the other; when we shut the door of our closets, call home our straggling thoughts, and consider ourselves as in the more immediate presence of Almighty God, THEN commences self-inspection, which discovers our wants and our weakness, our manifold sins and wickedness, and the necessity of repentance and remission.<sup>33</sup>

Here, Cotton taps into what was first a Stoic, then a Christian tradition of withdrawing from society in order to heal the spirit through ‘self-inspection’. Burton, too, wrote about the healing effects of reclusion in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, declaring that ‘[o]ur love in spiritual things is too *defective, in worldly things too excessive*’.<sup>34</sup> Wordsworth was to argue much the same in 1802, when he claimed that ‘The world is too much with us; late and soon, / Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers’.<sup>35</sup> For Burton, excessive involvement in worldly concerns was one of the prime causes of melancholy. He asserted that ‘for these defects, we involve our selves into a multitude of errours, we swerve from this true love and worship of God: which is a cause unto us of unspeakable miseries; running into both extrems, we become fools, madmen, without sense’.<sup>36</sup> Cotton held very similar views to Burton about the social causes of melancholy and was almost certainly influenced by him. In turn, Cowper’s twelve months of daily conversation with Cotton during his time at ‘The College’ helped to shape his own thinking about the palliative effects of reclusion, and led him to develop one of the central themes of his verse.

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<sup>32</sup> Cotton, *Various Pieces*, vol. 2, 58.

<sup>33</sup> Cotton, *Various Pieces*, vol. 2, 71-2.

<sup>34</sup> Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, III:iv:1:1, 386.

<sup>35</sup> William Wordsworth, ‘The world is too much with us; late and soon’, ll. 1-2, *Poems, in Two Volumes, and Other Poems, 1800-1807*, ed. Jared Curtis (Ithaca and New York, 1983), 150.

<sup>36</sup> Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, III:iv:1:1, 386.

*Pathological Selfhood: Cowper's confessional personae*

Throughout his writing, Cowper developed the idea that individuals need to seek reclusion as a remedy for the kind of Honest Melancholy described by Burton. Though Cowper did not refer to Burton in his letters, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* appears to provide a source for Cowper's claim in Book Three of *The Task* that: 'I was a stricken deer that left the herd / Long since; with many an arrow deep infixt / My panting side was charged when I withdrew / To seek a tranquil death in distant shade' (III, 108-11). Baird and Ryskamp imply that the stricken deer had become a stock image by the eighteenth century, with precedents in Virgil, Spenser, and Shakespeare.<sup>37</sup> However, they do not mention a passage in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, which offers a closer parallel. In Part One, Section Three, Burton argues that those suffering from melancholy are forever

vexing themselves, disquieted in mind, with restless, unquiet thoughts, discontent, either for their own, other mens, or publick affairs . . . They can hardly be pleased, or eased, though in other mens opinion most happy, go, tarry, run, ride,—*post equitem sedet atra cura* ['close behind the rider sits black care']: they cannot avoid this feral plague, let them come in what company they will, *haerat lateri laethalis arundo* ['the deadly arrow in his side is fixed'], as to a Deer that is struck, whether he run, go, rest, with the herd, or alone, this grief remains.<sup>38</sup>

In this passage, the stricken deer becomes an emblem of those who suffer Honest Melancholy. Whether they remain 'with the herd', or withdraw from it like Cowper, they continue to suffer melancholy as a result of investing too much emotional energy in 'their own, other mens, or publick affairs'. The figure of Honest Melancholy which pervades Cowper's later writing and shapes his arguments for reclusion might well have originated with Burton. Cowper developed these arguments over a number of years, as he processed his spiritual crises and began to consider their social as well as religious causes.

<sup>37</sup> Cowper, *Poems*, vol. 2, 363-4n.

<sup>38</sup> Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, I:iii:1:2, 113. Translations in square brackets come from Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Holbrook Jackson (New York, 2001), I:389; I have used this edition for all subsequent translations in square brackets from Burton.

Cowper's early writing is remarkable for its development of a self-conscious speaking voice, constantly reflecting on its relation to other humans and to God, and concluding itself inadequate. As a result, self-awareness becomes a painful experience which drives the speakers of successive poems towards reclusion. Following Cotton's example, Cowper argues that this form of pathological selfhood was partly caused by Shaftesbury's model of ridicule. In addition, he reflects upon Locke's concept of selfhood as a unique and completely private burden, imagining the emotional consequences that this view might have for the individual. In *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding* (1690), Locke asserted that:

In this *personal identity* is founded all the Right and Justice of Reward and Punishment; Happiness and Misery, being that, for which every one is concerned for *himself*, not mattering what becomes of any Substance, not joined to, or affected with that consciousness.<sup>39</sup>

As Alan Ingram argues, 'Locke develops the view that as individuals we are responsible for our own identities ... It is all that we are that makes us mad, and all that we have been'.<sup>40</sup> David Fairer notes that this organic model of personal identity can also have more positive implications: 'Lockean identity resides neither in the material body alone nor in an immortal soul, but in successive confirmations of a persisting life. It is part of the vital processes of the human *organization*'.<sup>41</sup> As I shall argue in Chapter Four, the idea that people can organize and re-organise their identities through their experiences is what underlies Cowper's and Wordsworth's arguments about the moral effects of reclusion in nature. During his spiritual crises, however, Cowper experienced the negative consequences of Locke's model of selfhood, particularly its resemblance to Calvinism, in which the 'Right and Justice of Reward and Punishment' once again originates in a model of '*personal identity*', this time known only to God.

<sup>39</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding*, II, xxvii, 18 (London, 1700), 188.

<sup>40</sup> Allan Ingram, *The Madhouse of Language: Writing and Reading Madness in the Eighteenth Century* (London and New York, 1991), 10.

<sup>41</sup> David Fairer, *Organising Poetry: The Coleridge Circle, 1790-1798* (Oxford, 2009), 34.

In his *Institutio Christianae religionis* (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1536), Calvin premised his theology on a rigid model of predestination, in which humans are not all ‘created to like estate: but to some [the ‘elect’] eternall life, and to some [the ‘reprobate’] eternall damnation is fore-appointed’.<sup>42</sup> Calvin argued that Christians could never be certain about which of these states awaited them. Assurance can only be found through faith, the ‘stedfast and assured knowledge of Gods kindnes toward vs ... sealed in our hearts by the holy Ghost’ (3:2:7). Faith thus has a circular nature: when a person senses God’s mercy, this strengthens their hope of salvation; as soon as they doubt, this compounds their sense of damnation. Calvin was well aware of this fact and described how ‘the hart of man ... wauereth with perpetuall doubting’ (3:2:7). This very doubting, however, he regarded as evidence of reprobation, claiming that: ‘Faith is not contented with a doubtfull and rowling opinion ... but requireth a full and fixed assuredness, such as men are wont to haue of things found by experience and prooued’ (3:2:15). In Calvin’s theology, the presence of doubt in the heart suggests that a person is not truly elect, and confirms his assertion that ‘the reprobate are sometime mooued with the same feeling that the elect are’ (2:3:11). Throughout the second half of his life, Cowper feared that this was his situation. Unfortunately, the Calvinist faith which he found while residing Nathaniel Cotton ended up playing into his fears of being scrutinised by a hostile audience: instead of experiencing rejection by a human audience, as in Shaftesbury’s *Characteristicks*, Cowper now faced this prospect with God.

The pathologically self-aware voice that Cowper developed in his poetry also emerged in his prose conversion narrative, *Adelphi*, written c.1767. Critics have disagreed about whether *Adelphi* obeys or contravenes the generic conventions of the conversion

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<sup>42</sup> Jean Calvin, Book 3, Chapter 21, Section 5 (3:21:5), *The Institution of the Christian Religion*, trans. Thomas Norton (London, 1611), 451.

narrative.<sup>43</sup> My own view is that Cowper's narrative foregrounds its own uniqueness. Composed at the same time as Rousseau's *Confessions* (though before that work was published), Cowper's narrative is also confessional and describes the same alienated experience of sociability. In Book Twelve of the *Confessions*, Rousseau imagined that a plot had secretly been raised against him by society:

Shame and misfortune seem of themselves to fall upon me ... the authors of my ruin have the inconceivable art of rendering the public, unknown to itself, or without perceiving the effects of it, accomplice in their conspiracy.<sup>44</sup>

Three years before Rousseau wrote this passage, Cowper manifested a similar experience of selfhood. *Adelphi* abounds with motifs of singularity and is structured around a series of visions and epiphanies, which emphasise the experience of selfhood as a unique and private burden. Cowper witnesses a sheep being 'seized' from the 'flock' by a sheepdog and carried 'directly down to me' 'to the very edge of the cliff' (p. 12); he imagines a piece in a newspaper to be 'a libel or satire written upon me' (p. 20); he becomes convinced that when Jesus cursed the barren fig tree in Luke 13:6-9 'He had me in His eye and pointed that curse directly at me' (p. 26); he believes that 'the voice of my conscience was loud enough for everybody to hear it' (p. 27); and he has a vision of a bolt of lightning falling 'six or seven times' 'as if in the very act of transfixing an enemy' (p. 36). As a Calvinist, Cowper was responsible for arranging these disparate incidents into a coherent story leading up to his conversion and ultimate salvation. However, what actually unites them is Cowper's sense of alienation from a hostile society, and the distress he suffers in the absence of community.

*Adelphi* describes what Jean-Luc Nancy calls the 'laceration of the singular being',<sup>45</sup> which occurs when the individual is exposed to the judgment of a community that

<sup>43</sup> See D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2005), 276; and Felicity A. Nussbaum, 'Private Subjects in William Cowper's "Memoir"', *The Age of Johnson*, 1 (1987) 307-26, 312.

<sup>44</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions of J. J. Rousseau, Citizen of Geneva. Part the Second*, trans. Anon., 3 vols (London, 1790), vol. 2, 249.

has lost its respect individual differences and become a 'being *of* togetherness'.<sup>46</sup> The judging eyes of London society remain constantly in the background, as Cowper recounts his 'incapacity to execute a business of so public a nature' as his appointment in the House of Lords, and claims that any 'public exhibition' of himself is 'mortal poison' (pp. 14-15). Here, he echoes Mr Spectator's claim (discussed in the Introduction) that 'the greatest Pain I can suffer, is the being talked to, and being stared at'.<sup>47</sup> Cowper goes further than Addison, however, by figuring social judgments as a toxin that has entered his body. His personality threatens to break down under the inspection of society at large, and even under his own gaze as he attempts to impose a Calvinist narrative on his life. From a theological perspective, the failure to impose this narrative signals to Cowper that he is reprobate. Throughout the text, he fears that his autobiography will not conform to the conventional pattern of spiritual rebellion leading to salvation, signalling that he is singularly damned. The epigraph he chose comes from Isaiah 42:16: 'I will make darkness light before them, and crooked things straight' (KJV). Cowper arguably interpreted this as God's promise to make a coherent narrative out of the lives of the elect. The fact that he then failed to find a unifying vision for his life suggested to him that he was excluded from God's promise. *Adelphi* expresses the pathological selfhood which individuals experience in the absence of community with each other and with God.

The history of Cowper's text adds another layer to this reading of *Adelphi*—and of the experience it describes—as a product of social expectations. No holograph remains, and King and Ryskamp took their copy text from Maria F. Cowper's transcription of John Newton's copy into her mother's Commonplace Book in 1772. Judith Madan's Commonplace Book is currently held in the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, and

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<sup>45</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney (Minneapolis and Oxford, 1991), 28.

<sup>46</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, xxxix.

<sup>47</sup> *The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond, 5 vols (Oxford, 1987), No. 1, vol. 1, 5-6.

my examination of it suggests that the textual history of *Adelphi* may be more complex than has previously been assumed. In their textual note, King and Ryskamp included the remark ‘some perhaps in Judith Madan’s hand’.<sup>48</sup> Further examination reveals that this shared process of transcription introduced significant instability into the text, with Judith Madan taking control of and possibly even revising it. In the manuscript, the handwriting changes after page ‘12a’, where a bifolium numbered ‘12b’ has been pasted in. This bifolium comes at the point in the narrative where Cowper describes ‘two remarkable deliverances which the Lord vouchsafed me’ from a gunshot and a falling brick (p. 10). Madan describes similar deliverances experienced by her son, Frederic, and remarks: ‘I leave this Record of Gods Mercys to him &c / O that our Hearts may be fill’d with ye Sense, & our / Mouths with the acknowledg:<sup>t</sup> of them!’.<sup>49</sup> This insertion suggests three things: firstly, that Madan considered herself a co-author of Cowper’s narrative; secondly, that she read it from a strictly evangelical point of view (as shown by her underlining); and thirdly, that she thought Cowper’s text stood in need of paratexts to help it conform to the genre of the conversion narrative.

These points have important ramifications when it comes to analysing the shared process of transcription hinted at by King and Ryskamp. Upon analysing the handwriting of Judith Madan’s Commonplace Book, it seems that Madan took over the process of transcribing Cowper’s narrative from her daughter on at least two occasions: firstly on pp. 29-31 of the manuscript where Cowper explains why his father once advocated the idea of suicide (from the phrase ‘though at this time, I believe, the true motive of his conduct was’, *Adelphi*, p. 18, to the phrase ‘But Satan was impatient of delay’, *Adelphi*, p. 19);<sup>50</sup> and secondly on pp. 34-5 of the manuscript where Cowper describes how providence kept him from committing suicide (from the phrase ‘It would be strange should I omit to

<sup>48</sup> Cowper, *Letters*, vol. 1, xxvi.

<sup>49</sup> Judith Madan, MS. Eng. misc. d. 636, Madan Family Papers, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, 12b.

<sup>50</sup> Here, ‘*Adelphi*’ continues to refer to the version printed by King and Ryskamp in Cowper, *Letters*, vol. 1.

observe here how I was continually hurried away from such places as were most favourable to my design', *Adelphi*, p. 20, to the phrase 'never to return to it', *Adelphi*, p. 21).<sup>51</sup> Madan thus transcribed several long paragraphs, comprising some of the most confessional material in Cowper's narrative. There is no certainty that Madan altered what Cowper wrote, but her interventions suggest that she deemed this material unsuitable for her daughter to transcribe. They highlight the fact that *Adelphi* was circulated within a small group of evangelical readers who exercised a close control over it. Even on a textual level, then, Cowper's account of his madness had to conform to a set of social and narrative expectations about what constituted a conversion. Throughout *Adelphi*, it becomes clear that Cowper's subject (like Rousseau's) is the individual consciousness which suffers melancholy as a result of social constraints. Conrad Brunström has argued that, in this respect, Cowper emerges 'as a Foucauldian rather than a Calvinist subject, a victim not of archaic superstition but of modernity and "enlightenment"'.<sup>52</sup> Though I agree that Cowper, in anticipating Rousseau's *Confessions*, records a modern experience of selfhood, I believe that his Calvinist faith necessarily forms part of what Brunström terms 'modernity and "enlightenment"'.

Having begun to consider the social and religious causes of melancholy in *Adelphi*, Cowper continued to do so in the *Olney Hymns* (1779), which he wrote in collaboration with John Newton. In part, Cowper's hymns follow *Adelphi* in giving a personal account of Religious Melancholy as described by Robert Burton. *The Anatomy of Melancholy* culminates with an argument against 'Despair', which addresses precisely the fear of reprobation that Cowper experienced. Recognising the spiritual implications of Calvin's thought, Burton describes the predicament of those who fear reprobation:

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<sup>51</sup> Judith Madan's hand is less evenly sloped than Maria Cowper's and gives itself away by the presence of various contractions (for example, 'y<sup>e</sup>', 'y<sup>t</sup>', 'w<sup>ch</sup>', and 'w<sup>th</sup>') which Maria Cowper does not use, as well as by the fact that Judith Madan always crosses and joins up her 't's, whereas Maria Cowper tends to do neither.

<sup>52</sup> Conrad Brunström, *William Cowper: Religion, Satire, Society* (Lewisburg, PA, 2004), 16.

[T]he more they puzzle themselves, as a Bird in a Net, the more they are intangled and precipitated into this preposterous gulf: *Many are called, but few are chosen*, Mat. 20. 16. and 22. 14. with such-like places of Scripture mis-interpreted, strike them with horror, they doubt presently whether they be of this number or no: Gods eternal decree of predestination, absolute reprobation, and such fatal tables they form to their own ruine, and impinge upon this rock of despair.<sup>53</sup>

Burton counsels against such thoughts, arguing that ‘to feel in our selves the want of grace, and to be grieved for it, is grace it self’.<sup>54</sup> As if written in response to *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, Cowper’s contributions to *Olney Hymns* record a believer’s struggle between these two positions. They also gesture outwards towards the social, as well as religious, causes of melancholy. In doing so, they document a tension in Cowper’s thought during the 1770s: the lack of community in a competitive society drove Cowper, following Burton and Cotton’s advice, to seek reclusion, but this reclusion prompted the meditation upon God’s grace which induced another form of melancholy. Cowper’s fears of social rejection thus metamorphosed into the more frightening fear of rejection by God.

Central to Cowper’s hymns, as to all of his writing, is the sense of longing for community with God and with his fellow humans. On Cotton’s advice, Cowper withdrew from London society in order to cure his melancholy, partly by searching for a more charitable, less competitive model of human interaction. His hymns record this search, and his concurrent struggle with Calvin’s model of selfhood as a private burden. ‘Retirement’ (Hymn 47), which Cowper appended to the text of *Adelphi* along with ‘Behold I Make All Things New’ (Hymn 46), begins:

Far from the World, O Lord I flee,  
From strife, and tumult far,  
From scenes, where Satan wages still  
His most successful war.

The calm retreat, the silent shade,  
With prayer, and praise agree;  
And seem, by thy sweet bounty made,

<sup>53</sup> Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, III:iv:2:6, 428.

<sup>54</sup> Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, III:iv:2:6, 427.

For those, who follow Thee.

There, if thy Spirit touch the Soul,  
And grace her mean abode;  
O with what peace, and joy, and love,  
She communes with her God!

There, like the Nightingale she pours  
Her solitary lays;  
Nor asks a witness of her song,  
Nor thirsts for human praise. (ll. 1-16)

Although this hymn is entitled ‘Retirement’, Cowper assigns a central role to the verb ‘communes’. The speaker of this hymn withdraws from human society in order to avoid the ‘thirs[t] for human praise’ which characterises the competitive models of sociability propounded by Addison, Steele, and Shaftesbury. Yet he withdraws in search not of solitude, but of greater community with God. Cowper’s opening lines echo Cotton’s claim that when people ‘withdraw [them]selves from the world’ they enter ‘the more immediate presence of Almighty God’, and that this is a remedy for the Honest Melancholy caused by the ‘strife’ and ‘tumult’ of modern society.<sup>55</sup> Burton argued similarly that a great deal of human suffering is caused by the fact that ‘[w]e love the world too much; God too little; our neighbour not at all, or for our own ends’.<sup>56</sup> By communing with God in retirement, Cowper seeks to find a route back to loving his neighbours not for his ‘own ends’, but out of a more genuine dedication to community. In not asking for a ‘witness’ to his song or for ‘human praise’, he corrects the situation described by Burton in which ‘[t]he chief thing we respect is our commodity: and what we do, is for fear of worldly punishment, for vain-glory, praise of men, fashion, and such by-respects, not for Gods sake’.<sup>57</sup>

As always, Cowper suggests that this state of communion with God is tentative. The lines ‘There, if thy Spirit touch the Soul, / And grace her mean abode’ are deliberately conditional, with the stress falling on the ‘if’. If God’s grace is withdrawn, Cowper

<sup>55</sup> Cotton, *Various Pieces*, vol. 2, 71-2.

<sup>56</sup> Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, III:iv:1:1, 386.

<sup>57</sup> Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, III:iv:1:1, 386.

implies, the prospect of community will be revoked and the individual will lose all sense of ‘peace, and joy, and love’. The threat of abandonment which runs as a contradictory subtext throughout ‘Retirement’ becomes more prominent in Cowper’s other hymns, reaching its height in ‘Looking Upwards in a Storm’ (Hymn 39). This hymn typifies the process whereby Cowper’s lexical and syntactic choices imply the speaker’s rejection by God and undermine the ostensive faith which he professes:

GOD of my life, to thee I call,  
 Afflicted at thy feet I fall;  
 When the great water-floods prevail,  
 Leave not my trembling heart to fail!

Friend of the friendless, and the faint!  
 Where should I lodge my deep complaint?  
 Where but with thee, whose open door  
 Invites the helpless and the poor!

Did ever mourner plead with thee,  
 And thou refuse that mourner’s plea?  
 Does not the word still fix’d remain,  
 That none shall seek thy face in vain?

...

Poor tho’ I am, despis’d, forgot,  
 Yet GOD, My GOD, forgets me not;  
 And he is safe and must succeed,  
 For whom the LORD vouchsafes to plead. (ll. 1-24)

Once again, the speaker’s ‘deep complaint’ is a social one, originating in the fact that he feels ‘Poor’, ‘despis’d’, and ‘forgot’ in society. As in ‘Retirement’, communion with God remedies the defects of a society in which people love their neighbours not at all, or for their own ends. In this hymn, however, the availability of communion with God is much less certain, as suggested by the fact that the speaker seeks somewhere to ‘lodge’ his complaint, rather than welcoming God’s ‘grace’ into his own ‘abode’. As discussed in Chapter Four, Calvin followed 1 Timothy 6:16 in claiming that ‘the face of God ... is vnto vs like a maze ... vnlesse we be by the line of the word guided into it’ (1:6:3). Cowper

questions whether the ‘word’ is still functioning as a guide in the lines: ‘Does not the word still fix’d remain, / That none shall seek thy face in vain?’. Throughout the hymn, Cowper’s rhetorical questions cease to be rhetorical, beginning to sound more like demands in which the speaker presses God to confirm his salvation.

The fear of reprobation which runs as a subtext through *Olney Hymns* later manifested itself in Cowper’s poem ‘Hatred and vengeance, my eternal portion’. Baird and Ryskamp conclude that Cowper probably wrote this poem in 1774 during his second spiritual crisis.<sup>58</sup> It expresses the dread of reprobation which Cowper conceived after the famous dream of 24 January 1773, in which a voice spoke the words ‘*Actum est de te, periisti*’ [‘It is all up with you, you have perished’].<sup>59</sup> The poem suggests further continuities between Cowper’s social anxieties and his fear of reprobation, suggesting that he internalised these anxieties, putting the rejection he feared from society into the mouth of God. Perhaps following Isaac Watt’s example in ‘The Day of Judgment’, Cowper composed his poem in Sapphics, folding the reasoning behind his fears of damnation into this difficult form. The poem closely resembles Burton’s description of how Christians adapt ‘Gods eternal decree of predestination, absolute reprobation, and such fatal tables ... to their own ruine, and impinge upon [the] rock of despair’.<sup>60</sup>

Hatred and vengeance, my eternal portion,  
 Scar[c]e can endure delay of execution:—  
 Wait, with impatient readiness, to seize my  
     Soul in a moment.  
 Damn’d below Judas; more abhorr’d than he was,  
 Who, for a few pence, sold his holy master.  
 Twice betray’d, Jesus me, the last delinquent,  
     Deems the profanest.  
 Man disavows, and Deity disowns me.  
 Hell might afford my miseries a shelter;  
 Therefore hell keeps her everhungry mouths all  
     Bolted against me.  
 Hard lot! Encompass’d with a thousand dangers,

<sup>58</sup> Cowper, *Poems*, vol. 1, 489.

<sup>59</sup> See Cowper, *Poems*, vol. 1, xx.

<sup>60</sup> Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, III:iv:2:6, 428.

Weary, faint, trembling with a thousand terrors,  
 Fall'n, and if vanquish'd, to receive a sentence  
     Worse than Abiram's:  
 Him, the vindictive rod of angry justice  
 Sent, quick and howling, to the centre headlong;  
 I, fed with judgments, in a fleshly tomb, am  
     Buried above ground. (ll. 1-20)

This poem marks the pathological culmination of Shaftesbury's model of social regulation and of Calvin's theology of personal salvation: 'Man disavows, and Deity disowns me'. Cowper's Sapphics are overwhelmed with predicates, as the speaking subject is judged and compelled to judge himself from so many angles that he sometimes disappears altogether. The first two lines of the second stanza, for example, contain two comparative predicates ('Damn'd below Judas; more abhorr'd than he was') and a relative clause ('Who, for a few pence, sold his holy master'), but no grammatical subject. In the second stanza, Cowper inverts the syntax to position the judged object directly after the judging subject ('Jesus me'), heightening the sense of the speaker's powerlessness. Yet despite this powerlessness, the speaker displays a great deal of sensibility and a tortured self-awareness: Cowper uses epithets like 'Weary, faint, trembling with a thousand terrors' to reveal the emotional consequences of Locke's claim that in '*personal identity* is founded all the Right and Justice of Reward and Punishment; Happiness and Misery, being that, for which every one is concerned for *himself*'.<sup>61</sup> Three of the four short Adonic lines contain judgments and punishments ('Deems the profanest', 'Bolted against me', 'Buried above ground'), and Cowper only makes the speaker the grammatical subject of the poem once, in order to articulate his final punishment: 'I, fed with judgments, in a fleshly tomb, am / Buried above ground'. In this way, the poem offers an indictment of the emotional effects of a judgemental society, explaining why individuals might withdraw in order to seek alternative models of community in reclusion.

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<sup>61</sup> Locke, *Essay*, II, xxvii, 18, 188.

Cowper developed this argument further in ‘Retirement’, the last of the ‘Moral Satires’ composed for *Poems* (1782). This poem includes a vignette of a melancholy patient, which remains daringly autobiographical despite purporting to offer an archetype. Cowper figures melancholy as a form of social disenfranchisement, suggesting that the only way to cure it is to withdraw from a hostile society into a supportive community. He begins the description with an apostrophe to William Heberden, the famous London doctor whom he had consulted unsuccessfully before visiting Cotton:

Virtuous and faithful HEBERDEN! whose skill  
 Attempts no task it cannot well fulfill,  
 Gives melancholy up to nature’s care,  
 And sends the patient into purer air.  
 Look where he comes—in this embower’d alcove,  
 Stand close conceal’d, and see a statue move:  
 Lips busy, and eyes fixt, foot falling slow,  
 Arms hanging idly down, hands clasp’d below,  
 Interpret to the marking eye, distress,  
 Such as its symptoms can alone express.  
 That tongue is silent now, that silent tongue  
 Could argue once, could jest or join the song,  
 Could give advice, could censure or commend,  
 Or charm the sorrows of a drooping friend.  
 Renounced alike its office and its sport,  
 Its brisker and its graver strains fall short,  
 Both fail beneath a fever’s secret sway,  
 And like a summer-brook are past away. (ll. 279-96)

These lines resemble William Heberden’s account of melancholy, which he calls ‘Hypochondria’ in men and ‘Hysteria’ in women, in his *Commentaries on the History and Cure of Diseases* (composed 1782). Heberden described how in those who suffer melancholy ‘the mind and animal powers are indeed oppressed, and cannot exert themselves, but their abilities are all entire’.<sup>62</sup> Like Cowper, he recounted having seen people ‘being turned almost into statues, unaffected by occasions of joy or grief’.<sup>63</sup> The image of the ‘statue’ also recalls *Twelfth Night*, where Viola confesses her love for Orsino

<sup>62</sup> William Heberden, *Commentaries on the History and Cure of Diseases* (New York, 1962), Chapter 49, 231.

<sup>63</sup> Heberden, *Commentaries*, Chapter 49, 227.

by describing her ‘sister’: ‘She sat like Patience on a monument, / Smiling at grief. Was not this love indeed?’<sup>64</sup> Cowper hints that his melancholy, too, is caused by unrequited love, in his case for the community. He enlists the reader’s sympathy for the ‘patient’ by echoing Hamlet’s words on Yorick: ‘Alas, poor Yorick. I knew him, Horatio—a fellow of infinite jest ... Where be your gibes now, your gambols, your songs?’.<sup>65</sup> Like Yorick, Cowper’s ‘patient’ can no longer ‘argue’, ‘jest’, ‘join the song’, ‘give advice’, ‘censure’, or ‘commend’. These are all forms of verbal communication which were regulated by Shaftesbury’s model of sociability. The phrase ‘Lips busy’ suggests that the ‘patient’ is still trying to communicate, but that his peers have lost the benefits of his communication by censoring him too harshly. Cowper’s portrait of melancholy is radically social, analysing the patient’s suffering as a pathological product of conversable society.

As *Poems* (1782) was going to press, Cowper reiterated his criticisms about the effects of society on the mind in his poem ‘The Flattening-Mill’. This poem uses the process of manufacturing gold leaf as a conceit to describe the action of social pressures on the mind. Cowper details how the metal is ‘tortur’d and squeez’d’ (l. 5) between two large cylinders in order to produce ‘a glittering show’ (l. 6), a phrase which criticises the superficiality of commercial society. Implicitly, he figures society as ‘an engine of utmost mechanical strength’ (l. 4) which exerts a crushing force on the mind. This force, he suggests, acts with particular severity upon anyone, like himself, who criticises the social structure in writing:

Alas for the Poet! who dares undertake  
To urge reformation of national ill—  
His head and his heart are both likely to ache  
With the double employment of mallet and mill.

If he wish to instruct he must learn to delight,  
Smooth, ductile, and even his Fancy must flow,

<sup>64</sup> William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, II.iv.114-15, ed. Keir Elam (London, 2008), 235.

<sup>65</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet*, V.i.182-9, *Hamlet: The Texts of 1603 and 1623*, ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London, 2007), 770.

Must tinkle and glitter like gold to the sight,  
And catch in its progress a sensible glow.

After all he must beat it as thin and as fine  
As the leaf that enfolds what an invalid swallows,  
For Truth is unwelcome, however divine,  
And unless you adorn it, a Nausea follows. (ll. 13-24)

Burton's description of Honest Melancholy hovers behind these lines. The phrase 'national ill' recalls his claim that 'Kingdoms, Provinces, and politick bodies are likewise sensible and subject to this disease'.<sup>66</sup> It also evokes George Cheyne's famous argument in *The English Malady* (1733) that nervous diseases are caused by 'Luxury': 'Invention is rack'd, to furnish the Materials of our Food the most Delicate and Savoury possible ... which must necessarily sharpen, impoison, corrupt, and putrify their natural Juices and Substances'.<sup>67</sup> Cowper echoes this argument earlier in the poem when he points out the irony that, when produced, the gold leaf 'is of service in sickness or pain / To cover a pill from a delicate palate' (ll. 11-12). Gold leaf is thus manufactured to ease the 'delicate palate' in the process of curing illnesses which society itself has helped to cause.

Metaphorically, each person's mind is 'tortur'd and squeez'd' in order to meet the artificial 'Train of Wants, Fears, Hopes, and Wishes' which commercial society brings into being.<sup>68</sup>

In 'The Flattering-Mill', Cowper clearly articulates his view that nervous diseases are caused by society: they result from the process in which the demands of sociability and economic competition hammer people's minds into uniformity. As in 'Hatred and vengeance, my eternal portion', Cowper uses an unusual metre (this time trochaics) to emphasise the artificial constraints which society imposes upon the mind. In this case, the resulting tone is predominantly comic, yet 'The Flattering-Mill' also recalls the letter to John Newton (discussed in the previous chapter) in which Cowper complained about the need to

<sup>66</sup> Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, 27.

<sup>67</sup> George Cheyne, *The English Malady: Or, A Treatise of Nervous Diseases of All Kinds* (London and Bath, 1733), Part I, Chapter VI, 49-50.

<sup>68</sup> John Brown, *An Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times* (London, 1757), 174.

be ‘jocular’ in order to please his readers: ‘when I am jocular I do violence to myself, and am therefore pleased with your telling them in a civil way, that I play the fool to amuse them, not because I am one myself, but because I have a foolish world to deal with’.<sup>69</sup> The line ‘His head and his heart are both likely to ache’ evokes an image of the poet suffering Honest Melancholy as a result of his attempt to reform society. Newton developed this image in his ‘Preface’ to *Poems* (1782, first printed in the fifth edition, 1793), claiming that Cowper was spurred to write by ‘an indignant grief excited by the profligacy of the age’.<sup>70</sup> He described Cowper’s spiritual crisis and his subsequent conversion, adding that:

When he saw the *busy* and the *gay* world in its true light, he left it with as little reluctance as a prisoner, when called to liberty, leaves his dungeon. Not that he became a Cynic or an Ascetic—A heart filled with love to God, will assuredly breathe benevolence to men. But the turn of his temper inclining him to rural life, he indulged it, and the providence of God evidently preparing his way and marking out his retreat, he retired into the country.<sup>71</sup>

‘The Flating-Mill’ thus engages with the same concerns as Newton’s ‘Preface’ to argue that individuals should seek reclusion in order to remedy Honest Melancholy and to discover a healthier model of community. Like Cowper in ‘Hymn 47’, Newton argues that ‘[a] heart filled with love to God, will assuredly breathe benevolence to men’: having healed itself, the reclusive mind will become the starting-point for a new community.

Cowper gave his most influential account of the social causes of Honest Melancholy in *The Task* (1785). In the ‘Advertisement’ to this work, he described how the poem originated when Lady Austen persuaded him to write a poem in blank verse ‘and gave him the SOFA for a subject’.<sup>72</sup> The poem’s final title reflects this original ‘task’, but it also answers Burton’s claim that the melancholy patient must seek ‘voluntarily to impose some task upon himself’.<sup>73</sup> Following this recommendation, Lady Austen proposed the idea of writing *The Task* in order to distract Cowper from his melancholy. Cowper later

<sup>69</sup> Cowper, 22 October 1781, *Letters*, vol. 1, 534-5.

<sup>70</sup> John Newton, ‘Preface’, in Cowper, *Poems*, vol. 1, 569.

<sup>71</sup> Newton, ‘Preface’, 568.

<sup>72</sup> William Cowper, ‘Advertisement’ to *The Task*, in *Poems*, vol. 2, 113.

<sup>73</sup> Burton *Anatomy of Melancholy*, II:ii:4, 178.

acknowledged this when he wrote to Lady Hesketh, explaining that: ‘*In the year when I wrote the Task ... I was very often most supremely unhappy, and am under God indebted in good part to that work for not having been much worse*’.<sup>74</sup> The complex distinction between passive solitude and active retirement which runs throughout *The Task* reflects Burton’s final instruction to his reader: ‘observe this short precept, give not way to solitariness and idleness, *Be not solitary, be not idle*’.<sup>75</sup> Cowper composed *The Task* as a remedy for his own melancholy, describing how he had withdrawn from society in order to preserve the spirit of community in reclusion.

In the process, he wrote a powerful work of cultural criticism, explaining how the principles of social regulation and competitive self-interest inflict psychological harm on the individual. At several points in the poem, the speaker breaks out of the narrative to describe his own Honest Melancholy. This happens, for example, at the beginning of Book Two, when the speaker exclaims:

Oh for a lodge in some vast wilderness,  
Some boundless contiguity of shade,  
Where rumour of oppression and deceit,  
Of unsuccessful or successful war,  
Might never reach me more! My ear is pained,  
My soul is sick with every day’s report  
Of wrong and outrage with which earth is filled.  
There is no flesh in man’s obdurate heart,  
It does not feel for man. (II, 1-9).

Cowper’s arguments for reclusion as a political response to the events of the American Revolutionary and Second Anglo-Mysore Wars will be discussed in the next chapter. For now, it is important to note the similarity between these lines and Burton’s letter from ‘Democritus Junior to the Reader’: ‘Is not this *Mundus furiosus*, a mad world ... are not these mad men ... which leave so frequent battels, as perpetual memorials of their madness

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<sup>74</sup> Cowper, 16 January 1786, *Letters*, vol. 2, 456.

<sup>75</sup> Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, III:iv:2:6, 434.

to all succeeding ages?'.<sup>76</sup> Like Democritus Junior, the speaker of *The Task* suffers from Honest Melancholy, feeling himself inclined to 'weep with *Heraclitus*, or rather howl, roar, and tear his hair in commiseration' with his fellow citizens.<sup>77</sup> The phrase 'boundless contiguity of shade' captures this sense of 'commiseration', since the speaker retreats from the painful effects of society but wants to remain in touch with it. Later in Book Two, Cowper includes an apostrophe to England, claiming that: 'To shake thy senate ... was never meant my task; / But I can feel thy fortunes, and partake / Thy joys and sorrows with as true a heart / As any thund'rer there' (II, 216-21). In Book Three, he addresses London similarly, claiming that 'I can laugh / And I can weep, can hope, and can despond, / Feel wrath and pity when I think on thee!' (III, 840-2). Throughout the poem, the speaker's Honest Melancholy is exacerbated by continually trying to sympathise with and correct an inhumane society, which, as in 'The Flattening-Mill', does not want to be corrected.

*The Task* includes a famous depiction of melancholy in Cowper's vignette of 'craz'd' Kate. This vignette appears in Book One following Cowper's criticism of urban entertainments. He describes the 'sullen sadness' and 'immeasurable woe' that are induced in city dwellers by 'the constant revolution stale / And tasteless, of the same repeated joys' (I, 457-63). He proceeds to give an account of Kate, who had previously taken part in this consumer economy by working as a 'serving maid' (I, 537) and wearing a 'cloak of satin trimm'd / With lace' and a 'hat with splendid ribband bound' (I, 535-6). Cowper describes how Kate was abruptly ejected from this system by the death of her husband, who 'went to sea' (presumably to provide an income) 'and died' (I, 538). This tragedy precipitated Kate out of all systems of social and economic exchange because, as Cowper suggests, the economy makes no room for grief:

She heard the doleful tidings of his death,

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<sup>76</sup> Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, 19.

<sup>77</sup> Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, 19.

And never smil'd again. And now she roams  
 The dreary waste; there spends the livelong day,  
 And there, unless when charity forbids,  
 The livelong night. A tatter'd apron hides,  
 Worn as a cloak, and hardly hides a gown  
 More tatter'd still; and both but ill conceal  
 A bosom heaved with never-ceasing sighs.  
 She begs an idle pin of all she meets,  
 And hoards them in her sleeve; but needful food,  
 Though press'd with hunger oft, or comelier cloaths,  
 Though pinch'd with cold, asks never.—Kate is craz'd. (I, 545-56)

The pin became famous in 1776 as Adam Smith's case study for the efficiency of the division of labour in *The Wealth of Nations*. Smith demonstrated the productivity of the system in which the 'business of making a pin ... is divided into about eighteen distinct operations, which in some manufactories are all performed by distinct hands'.<sup>78</sup> In one sense, Smith argued, this leads to greater interdependence, since if all the workers had 'wrought separately and independently ... they certainly could not each of them have made twenty, perhaps not one pin in a day'.<sup>79</sup> Yet in this model human relationships are reduced to purely economic interactions. Kate's gesture of begging pins from those she meets thus represents an attempt to rebuild an earlier system of personal, charitable interaction that the new economics threatens to destroy. There is, in fact, logic behind the gesture, as Kate indicates that what she needs, more so even than 'needful food' or 'comelier cloaths', is the kind of human interaction and fellowship that the competition of the free market replaces. In his book *Romantic Moods*, Thomas Pfau has documented 'the romantics' attempts to trace political, economic, and spiritual history back to its manifestation as emotional experience'.<sup>80</sup> Kate's madness certainly serves as an emotional manifestation of economic experience, as Cowper suggests that her grief has been aggravated into Honest Melancholy by the lack of community in her time of need.

<sup>78</sup> Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 2 vols (London, 1776), Book I, Chapter I, vol. 1, 6.

<sup>79</sup> Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, Book I, Chapter I, vol. 1, 7.

<sup>80</sup> Thomas Pfau, *Romantic Moods: Paranoia, Trauma, and Melancholy, 1790-1840* (Baltimore, 2005), 2.

In Book Three of *The Task*, Cowper presented himself as an archetype of Honest Melancholy by comparing himself to a ‘stricken deer’ (III, 108). The similarity of this passage to Burton’s description of a melancholy patient as ‘a Deer that is struck’ has already been noted.<sup>81</sup> Cowper, however, develops Burton’s analysis of the social causes of Honest Melancholy still further. The passage in Book Three of *The Task* follows Cowper’s announcement that he intends to change the poem’s direction to pursue a new style of didactic poetry. Specifically, he claims that ‘pulpits fail’ (III, 21), and renounces any attempt to ‘Crack the satiric thong’ (III, 26) on the grounds that he is too little ‘conversant with men or manners’ (III, 24). The phrase ‘men or manners’ once again recalls Shaftesbury’s *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, and the argument that the members of a polite society should regulate one another through ridicule. Cowper’s claim not to be ‘conversant’ signals a wilful inability to participate in this model of sociability. He suggests that since consumerism has monopolised social spaces with a conversation in which public opinion determines the relative worth of each individual, the only option left to those who disagree with this process is to withdraw into nature. Having described his evangelical conversion and retreat as a ‘stricken deer’, he claims that:

Since then, with few associates, in remote  
And silent woods I wander, far from those  
My former partners of the peopled scene,  
With few associates, and not wishing more.  
Here much I ruminates, as much I may,  
With other views of men and manners now  
Than once, and others of a life to come.  
I see that all are wand’ers, gone astray  
Each in his own delusions; they are lost  
In chace of fancied happiness, still wooed  
And never won. (III, 117-27)

Cowper seeks to distance himself from the ‘peopled scene’ because he rejects the ‘views of men and manners’ held by his society. Throughout his writing, he explores the

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<sup>81</sup> Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, I:iii:1:2, 113.

emotional consequences of encouraging the public to censure each individual in the way that Shaftesbury describes. He analyses how Locke's description of 'self' as 'that, for which every one is concerned for *himself*, not mattering what becomes of any Substance, not joined to, or affected with that consciousness' gives rise to the experience of pathological selfhood which he suffered acutely in 1763-5 and again in 1773-4.<sup>82</sup> His poetic voice is the voice of one who suffered emotional breakdown in the social and economic marketplace. By figuring himself as an Honest Melancholic, forced to withdraw from society in search of stronger forms of community in reclusion, he mounted a powerful critique of the psychological harm caused by a society structured around self-interest and economic competition.

*'Having two natures in me': Wordsworth's melancholy exiles*

Wordsworth inherited Cowper's model of Honest Melancholy as a form of social protest and developed it in his own writing. Throughout his career, he increasingly figured the poet as one driven from society in search of community. Wordsworth was encouraged along this route not only by his own reading of Cowper, but also by the fact that Coleridge too read Cowper and began to figure himself as another victim of Honest Melancholy, as discussed below. Duncan Wu notes that the Wordsworths owned a copy of the sixth edition of Cowper's *Poems* (published in 1794-5).<sup>83</sup> Since editions from the fifth onwards included Newton's 'Preface', Wordsworth would also have been familiar with Newton's account of how Cowper suffered 'an indignant grief excited by the profligacy of the age' and decided to retire into the country on the grounds that 'A heart filled with love to God,

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<sup>82</sup> Locke, *Essay*, II, xxvii, 18 (London, 1700), 188.

<sup>83</sup> Duncan Wu, *Wordsworth's Reading 1800-1815* (Cambridge, 1996), 65.

will assuredly breathe benevolence to men'.<sup>84</sup> Not only Cowper's poetry, but also the biographies of him which appeared before and after his death, helped to shape Wordsworth's own image of the poet as an involuntary exile from a hostile society.

Wordsworth's double bereavement in childhood and his experiences in France during the Revolution gave him many reasons to write about melancholy. Some of these emerged in the early version of *Salisbury Plain*, which draws on Cowper's depictions of Honest Melancholy in *The Task*. Stephen Gill recounts how, in 1793, Wordsworth was 'tormented by his impotent hostility to his own country's policies, by his responsibility to Annette [Vallon] and their child, by lack of direction and of financial independence'.<sup>85</sup> In writing *Salisbury Plain*, Wordsworth built on the eighteenth-century tradition of protest poetry, including Charlotte Smith's poem *The Emigrants* (1793) which appeared with a dedication to Cowper, and which Wordsworth read between May 1793 and May 1794.<sup>86</sup> Chiefly, however, he drew on Cowper's poetic accounts of how socio-economic conditions impact on the individual mind. The 'mighty gulf of separation' that the Female Vagrant experiences when forced to sail to America in search of work divides her not only from her 'perfect mind', but also from all communion with humanity.<sup>87</sup> As in Cowper's description of 'craz'd' Kate, economic pressures cause the disintegration of the Female Vagrant's identity ('Oh dreadful price of being! to resign / All that is dear in being', ll. 307-8) and render her unfit and unwilling to participate in human society: 'For me, farthest from earthly port to roam / Was best; my only wish to shun where man might come' (ll. 377-8).

In the poem's framing narrative, Wordsworth establishes the tension between the demands of society and the needs of the individual in terms that resemble Cowper's. His account of the process by which 'Refinement's genial influence calls / The soft affections

<sup>84</sup> John Newton, 'Preface', in Cowper, *Poems*, vol. 1, 568-9.

<sup>85</sup> Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth: A Life* (Oxford, 1989), 153.

<sup>86</sup> Duncan Wu, *Wordsworth's Reading 1770-1799* (Cambridge, 1993), 128.

<sup>87</sup> William Wordsworth, *Salisbury Plain*, ll. 370, 379, in *The Salisbury Plain Poems of William Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill (Ithaca and Hassocks, 1975), 33.

from their wintry sleep' (ll. 28-9) parallels that given by Cowper in *The Task*, where he refers to the 'sensibility of pain with which / Refinement is endued' (IV, 358-9). Though not necessarily a deliberate allusion, this similarity indicates that Cowper and Wordsworth each subscribed to Rousseau's view that 'the Savage lives within himself, whereas the Citizen, constantly beside himself, knows only how to live in the Opinion of others'.<sup>88</sup> Beyond this, both poets share George Cheyne's belief that modern luxury heightens the sensitivity of the nervous system to the point where 'the *Nerves* and their *Fibres*, are evidently relax'd and broken'.<sup>89</sup> Wordsworth can be seen to echo this argument when he claims that the effect of competition in commercial society is to 'bow the kindly spirits down / And break the springs of joy' (ll. 19-20), as individuals reflect on the lives of 'those who on the couch of Affluence rest' (l. 23). The phrase 'couch of Affluence' echoes Cowper's account of the progress of society through the evolution of 'The Sofa' in Book One of *The Task*. A few lines later, Wordsworth echoes another of Cowper's dominant motifs when he claims that 'men in various vessels roam the deep / Of social life' (ll. 32-3). Cowper had used the motif of social shipwreck in his 1782 poem 'Hope', which begins by comparing 'human life' to 'A painful passage o'er a restless flood' (ll. 1-3). Similarly, in 'Retirement' he had used this image to describe those who enter the marketplace: 'The waves o'ertake them in their serious play, / And every hour sweeps multitudes away; / They shriek and sink, survivors start and weep, / Pursue their sport, and follow to the deep' (ll. 157-60). Like Cowper, Wordsworth suggests that people's minds are wrecked by the oceanic forces of competition between individuals in society.

Wordsworth does not specify why the male protagonist of *Salisbury Plain* 'withered young in sorrow's deadly blight' (l. 405). Yet he repeatedly drops hints that both the protagonists and the narrator of the poem suffer from a version of Honest Melancholy

<sup>88</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse upon the Origin and Foundation of the Inequality among Mankind*, trans. William Kenrick (London, 1761), 180.

<sup>89</sup> Cheyne, *The English Malady* (London, 1733), 14.

as described by Cowper. Throughout the poem, Wordsworth's characters long for a spirit of community which has disappeared in the course of a generation. The Female Vagrant describes how her father was uprooted from his community by market forces, asking: "Can I forget that miserable hour / When from the last hill-top my sire surveyed ... the steeple-tower / That on his marriage-day sweet music made?" (ll. 262-4). Here, Wordsworth echoes Cowper's description, in Book Six of *The Task*, of the sound of church bells as an emblem of the community. Cowper argues that 'Some chord in unison with what we hear / Is touched within us, and the heart replies' to the 'music of ... village bells' (VI, 4-6). Sharing the same set of mental associations with the sounds of the bells, and with the sight of the steeple, helps the villagers to feel attached not only to their community, but also to each other. Wordsworth describes the collapse of this nostalgic model of community when the Female Vagrant complains that "homeless near a thousand homes I stood, / And near a thousand tables pined and wanted food" (ll. 386-7). The figure of polyptoton ("homeless ... homes") suggests that the lack of community is even more galling in society than when one is alone:

Nor only is the walk of private life  
 Unblessed by Justice and the kindly train  
 Of Peace and Truth, while Injury and Strife,  
 Outrage and deadly Hate usurp their reign;  
 From the pale line to either frozen main  
 The nations, though at home in bonds they drink  
 The dregs of wretchedness, for empire strain,  
 And crushed by their own fetters helpless sink,  
 Move their galled limbs in fear and eye each silent link. (ll. 442-50)

The image of competing nations 'crushed by their own fetters' recalls the passage later in Book Two of *The Task* where Cowper describes how those living in cities have become snared in unfulfilling habits of consumption and sociability: 'tis a fearful spectacle to see / So many maniacs dancing in their chains. They gaze upon the links that hold them fast / With eyes of anguish, execrate their lot, / Then shake them in despair, and dance again'

(662-6). Wordsworth echoes the line ‘They gaze upon the links that hold them fast’ in his own phrase ‘eye each silent link’. However, he magnifies the image to demonstrate that nations, as well as individuals, have become trapped in an economic competition which harms individual competitors without offering any collective benefit. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith argued that ‘Society may subsist among different men, as among different merchants, from a sense of its utility, without any mutual love or affection’.<sup>90</sup> Wordsworth, like Cowper, figures himself as suffering Honest Melancholy at the thought that the emotional and supportive ‘bonds’ of community have been replaced by the economic and imprisoning ‘bonds’ of commercial society.

Duncan Wu suggests that Wordsworth read Burton’s account of Honest Melancholy for himself from ‘1810 onwards’, noting that ‘Lamb’s copy (borrowed by C) was left at Allan Bank in 1810 and passed into Rydal Mount’.<sup>91</sup> However, there are echoes of *The Anatomy of Melancholy* in Wordsworth’s works long before he began describing the Solitary’s ‘Despondency’ in *The Excursion*. Wu notes that ‘[i]t is not known when W acquired his own copy (8<sup>th</sup> edn, 1676)’,<sup>92</sup> but I would suggest that Wordsworth at least had access to a copy of Burton’s work as he was writing the *Lyrical Ballads*. In particular, the poem ‘Lines Left upon a Seat in a Yew-Tree’ provides an aetiology of Honest Melancholy which is very reminiscent of Burton’s. This poem describes the despondency of another solitary man, based on the character of William Braithwaite, and explains its social origins:

He was one who own’d  
 No common soul. In youth, by genius nurs’d,  
 And big with lofty views, he to the world  
 Went forth, pure in his heart, against the taint  
 Of dissolute tongues, ’gainst jealousy, and hate,  
 And scorn, against all enemies prepared,  
 All but neglect: and so, his spirit damped  
 At once, with rash disdain he turned away,  
 And with the food of pride sustained his soul

<sup>90</sup> Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (London, 1759), Part II, Section II, Chapter III, 189.

<sup>91</sup> Wu, *Wordsworth’s Reading 1800-1815*, 38.

<sup>92</sup> Wu, *Wordsworth’s Reading 1800-1815*, 38.

In solitude.<sup>93</sup>

As in Cowper's poetry, the man's fears focus on a censorious public: 'the taint / Of dissolute tongues', 'jealousy', 'hate', and 'scorn' (ll. 15-17) are almost synonymous, registering one overriding concern. What actually afflicts him, however, is 'neglect' (l. 18): he develops Honest Melancholy as a result of being overlooked by society.

Wordsworth's description of how the man 'On visionary views would fancy feed, / Till his eye streamed with tears' (ll. 41-2) recalls Heberden's description of melancholy as 'a sort of waking dream' in which '[t]ears flow from the eyes without grief'.<sup>94</sup> His reference to the 'food of pride', however, seems to derive from Burton. In Part One, Section Two of *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, Burton explained that Honest Melancholy could originate in '*Philautia, or Self-love, Vain-glory, Praise, Honour, Immoderate applause, Pride, over-much Joy, &c.*'.<sup>95</sup> Burton argued that, in the case of 'Pride', 'the main engin which batters us, is from others, we are meerly passive in this business: from a company of Parasites and flatterers, that with immoderate praise, and bombast Epithetes ... clap [a man] quite out of his wits'.<sup>96</sup> This, Wordsworth, suggests, is what happened to William Braithwaite. Like Cowper, he locates the origins of melancholy in society's attitudes towards the individual, arguing that through constant praise and blame society encourages individuals to build up notions of self-esteem which it then immediately checks and thwarts. Burton argues that in this manner society 'fattens men, erects and dejects them in an instant ... makes them fat and lean, as frost doth Conies [rabbits]'.<sup>97</sup>

Wordsworth's poem counsels against the negative kind of solitude which Burton described in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. Burton argued that many individuals withdraw

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<sup>93</sup> William Wordsworth, 'Lines left upon a seat in a Yew-Tree which stands new the Lake of Esthwaite', ll. 12-21, in *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems, 1797-1800*, ed. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca and London, 1992), 48-9.

<sup>94</sup> Heberden, *Commentaries*, Chapter 49, 224-6.

<sup>95</sup> Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, I:ii:3:14, 73.

<sup>96</sup> Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, I:ii:3:14, 75.

<sup>97</sup> Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, I:ii:3:14, 75.

from society in response to social rejection, but that in doing so they remain proud and thus do not possess the spirit of community. He wrote that:

Another kind of mad men there is ... such as contemn all praise and glory ... a company of *Cynicks*, such as are Monks, Hermites, Anachorites [*sic.*], that contemn the world, contemn themselves, contemn all titles, honours, offices: and yet in that contempt, are more proud than any man living whatsoever. They are proud in humility; proud in that they are not proud; *sæpe homo de vanæ gloriæ contemptu, vanius gloriatur* [a man can be most boastful in expressing his contempt of fame].<sup>98</sup>

The solitary man in ‘Lines Left upon a Yew-Tree Seat’ closely resembles this portrait of the *Cynick*, and at several points Wordsworth’s language seems to echo Burton’s. Most notably, Wordsworth shares Burton’s interpretation of ‘contempt’ as a form of pride: ‘he, who feels contempt / For any living thing, hath faculties / Which he has never used’ (ll. 48-50). Wordsworth also echoes Burton’s belief that pride can mask itself with ‘humility’ when he states that ‘pride, / Howe’er disguised in its own majesty, / Is littleness’ (ll. 46-48). Burton proceeds to counsel against the love of fame by arguing that, even if a man is famous in his city, ‘what’s a City to a Kingdom, a Kingdom to *Europe*, *Europe* to the world, the world it self that must have an end, if compared to the least visible Star in the Firmament?’.<sup>99</sup> Wordsworth makes a similar argument in the concluding lines of his poem: ‘The man, whose eye / Is ever on himself, doth look on one, / The least of nature’s works, one who might move / The wise man to that scorn which wisdom holds / Unlawful, ever’ (ll. 51-5). Like Cowper, Wordsworth follows Burton in arguing that it is wise for individuals to withdraw from a hostile society, but that they must do so in a spirit of community, and must never allow their reclusion to shade into solitude.

Wordsworth’s emphasis on the solitary man’s failure to contribute to society reflects both his own and Coleridge’s anxieties about their vocations in 1797. Coleridge had recently ‘withdrawn from active politics’ to Nether Stowey, ‘convinced that in

<sup>98</sup> Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, I:ii:3:14, 75.

<sup>99</sup> Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, I:ii:3:14, 74.

retirement he could, through study, reflection, and writing, be of more use to mankind'.<sup>100</sup> Yet when Wordsworth went to visit him in March 1797, he found him in the depths of depression. Soon afterwards, Coleridge wrote to Joseph Cottle that: 'On the Saturday, the Sunday, and the ten days after my arrival at Stowey I felt a depression too dreadful to be described ... I am not the man I have been—and I think never shall. A sort of calm hopelessness diffuses itself over my heart'.<sup>101</sup> It seems possible that Coleridge considered himself to be the primary addressee of Wordsworth's 'Yew-Tree Lines'. Critics have taken the inscription of Coleridge's name next to the poem's concluding lines in one copy of the *Lyrical Ballads* to mean that Coleridge might have composed them,<sup>102</sup> but whoever made this annotation might equally have regarded Coleridge their addressee. Wordsworth's fear in the poem is that he, and particularly Coleridge, will follow the pattern of the solitary man. The exclamation 'O, be wiser thou! / Instructed that true knowledge leads to love' (ll. 54-5) might be self-admonitory, but it might also have spoken to Coleridge as Wordsworth found him at Nether Stowey. In July 1797, Coleridge wrote to Southey that: 'I am as much a Pangloss as ever—only less *contemptuous*, than I used to be, when I argue how unwise it is to feel contempt for any thing'.<sup>103</sup> Critics have treated this remark as evidence that Coleridge helped to write the conclusion to the 'Yew-Tree Lines', but it might equally reveal that he felt personally chastised by Wordsworth's poem. In 1797, Wordsworth suspected that both he and Coleridge were at risk of succumbing to Honest Melancholy induced, in part, by the public rejection of their ideas. Their support for the French Revolution culminated, that summer, in the government agent James Walsh being sent to spy on them at Nether Stowey.<sup>104</sup> In his 'Yew-Tree Lines', Wordsworth offered Coleridge

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<sup>100</sup> Gill, *William Wordsworth*, 119.

<sup>101</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, early April 1797, *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols (Oxford, 1956-81), vol. 1, 319-20.

<sup>102</sup> See Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, 342.

<sup>103</sup> Coleridge, c.17 July 1797, *Letters*, vol. 1, 334.

<sup>104</sup> Gill, *William Wordsworth*, 126-8.

a version of Burton's advice at the end of *The Anatomy of Melancholy*: by all means withdraw from society out of a commitment to community, but 'Be not solitary, be not idle'.<sup>105</sup>

The following year, Wordsworth offered another portrait of Honest Melancholy in his description of Margaret in *The Ruined Cottage*. As with the Female Vagrant in *Salisbury Plain*, Margaret's suffering has economic origins, when food shortages force her husband to turn soldier and break apart her family. In representing her, Wordsworth attempts to describe the symptoms of melancholy with medical precision. He remarks that 'evermore / Her eye-lids drooped, her eyes were downward cast ... Her voice was low, / Her body was subdued ... she sighed, / But yet no motion of the breast was seen, / No heaving of the heart'.<sup>106</sup> These details correspond to William Heberden's observation that women melancholics 'are more apt to have their faculties and passions benumbed, being turned almost into statues, unaffected by occasions of joy or grief'.<sup>107</sup> Yet as he wrote these lines Wordsworth was aware that Coleridge, too, was beginning to show symptoms of melancholy. In his writing, Coleridge figured himself as a melancholic through a series of allusions to Cowper. The most striking of these occurs in 'Frost at Midnight', a poem whose optimism is undercut by Coleridge's allusion to the passage in Book Four of *The Task* where Cowper gazes at the fire while the 'frost' is 'Raging abroad' (IV, 308-9).

Mary Jacobus has argued that the 'random reflections of Cowper's fire-gazing' form the basis of Coleridge's poem, in which the 'familiar themes of loss and renewal are subsumed into a new concern with the power of the mind to link past, present, and future in organic relationship'.<sup>108</sup> Contextualising Cowper's work, however, suggests that his

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<sup>105</sup> Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, III:iv:2:6, 434.

<sup>106</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Ruined Cottage*, MS. B, ll. 415-24, in *The Ruined Cottage and The Pedlar*, ed. James Butler (Ithaca, 1989), 66.

<sup>107</sup> Heberden, *Commentaries*, Chapter 49, 227.

<sup>108</sup> Mary Jacobus, *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads (1798)* (Oxford, 1976), 121, 118.

‘reflections’ are not ‘random’: they offer a portrait of Honest Melancholy. Burton argued that one of the prime causes of melancholy was ‘the force of the imagination’:

If the Imagination be very apprehensive, intent, and violent, it sends a great store of spirits to, or from the heart, and makes a deeper impression and greater tumult ... The other parts cannot perform their functions, having the spirits drawn from them by vehement passion, but fail in sense and motion, so we look upon a thing, and see it not; hear, and observe not; which otherwise would much affect us, had we been free.<sup>109</sup>

Cowper signals the melancholic aspect of his reverie strongly in the lines that introduce it. He describes himself sitting in ‘a gloom’, suggests that his mind is ‘indisposed’ to regular thinking, claims that he lacks the ‘mercurial powers’ to hold off a ‘stupor’, and finds that he is ‘Soothed with a waking dream’ (IV, 278-87). Furthermore, he indicates the proximity of his reverie to madness by suggesting that it is the product of ‘fancy, ludicrous and wild’ (IV, 286). He then describes how he sits before the fire, ‘myself creating what I saw’ (IV, 290), depicting his reverie as a symptom of Honest Melancholy:

Nor less amused have I quiescent watched  
The sooty films that play upon the bars  
Pendulous, and foreboding, in the view  
Of superstition, prophesying still,  
Though still deceived, some stranger’s near approach. (IV, 291-5).

As Jacobus noted, Coleridge came close to paralleling Cowper’s exact language when he deployed a similar image of ‘sooty films’ in ‘Frost at Midnight’:

the thin blue flame  
Lies on my low burnt fire, and quivers not;  
Only that film, which fluttered on the grate,  
Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing.  
Methinks, its motion in this hush of nature  
Gives it dim sympathies with me who live,  
Making it a companionable form,  
Whose puny flaps and freaks the idling Spirit  
By its own moods interprets, every where  
Echo or mirror seeking of itself,  
And makes a toy of Thought.<sup>110</sup>

<sup>109</sup> Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, I:ii:3:2, 55.

<sup>110</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ‘Frost at Midnight’, ll. 13-23, in *Poetical Works I*, ed. J. C. C. Mays, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, gen. ed. Kathleen Coburn (Princeton, 1969-2002), vol. 16:I, part 1, 454.

Like Burton, Coleridge's doctor Thomas Beddoes held the force of the imagination responsible for causing melancholy. In his work *Hygëia* (1802-3), he wrote that: 'It very generally holds *that in insanity the ideas are vivified, or that they are exalted to the force of impressions*'.<sup>111</sup> Coleridge follows Cowper in describing himself as experiencing a melancholy kind of 'insanity' when he sits in front of the fire. The account of how his 'idling Spirit' interprets everything 'by its own moods' echoes Burton's claim that the melancholy patient has a habit of 'appropriating' all things 'to his own person'.<sup>112</sup> The participle 'fluttered', when applied to Coleridge's 'Spirit', also belongs to a medical register. Discussing the '*DISUNION or WEAKENING of TRAINS*' of association that afflicts melancholy patients, Beddoes wrote that the 'expression that a *person is fluttered*, means neither more nor less than that his thoughts and actions do not proceed with their usual regularity'.<sup>113</sup> Coleridge was alert to the moments in Cowper's writing when Cowper depicted himself as a victim of Honest Melancholy. He echoed these passages in his own poetry, using what Lucy Newlyn called the 'language of allusion' to convince Wordsworth that his spirits had been depressed by empathising too much with the sufferings of his country.<sup>114</sup>

Coleridge confirmed that his melancholy had a social basis in 'Fears in Solitude'. In this poem, he echoed Cowper's portrait of Honest Melancholy at the beginning of Book Two of *The Task*, by exclaiming: 'My God! it is a melancholy thing / For such a man, who would full fain preserve / His soul in calmness, yet perforce must feel / For all his human brethren' (ll. 29-32). Like Cowper, Coleridge implies that his 'soul is sick with every day's report / Of wrong and outrage with which earth is filled' (*The Task*, II, 6-7). Yet where Cowper longs for 'a lodge in some vast wilderness' (II, 1), Coleridge implies that even his

<sup>111</sup> Thomas Beddoes, *Hygëia: or Essays Moral and Medical, on the Causes Affecting the Personal State of our Middling and Affluent Classes*, 3 vols (Bristol, 1802-3), vol. 3, 'Essay X', 48.

<sup>112</sup> Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, 10.

<sup>113</sup> Beddoes, *Hygëia*, vol. 3, 'Essay IX', 184.

<sup>114</sup> Lucy Newlyn, *Coleridge, Wordsworth, and the Language of Allusion* (Oxford, 1986), viii.

retreat has been invaded by the French Revolutionary Wars: ‘It weighs upon the heart, that he must think / What uproar and what strife may now be stirring / This way or that o’er these silent hills’ (ll. 33-5). Following Cowper, Coleridge suggests that his melancholy has been exacerbated by investing too much emotional energy in the political fortunes and injustices of his country. The melancholy search for reclusion comes to represent not a depoliticised mind, but of one that is over-politicised, invested in human suffering to the point of illness. Beddoes encouraged this explanation of Honest Melancholy as a product of society. In *Hygeia*, he wrote that:

During grand political crises, when society is subverted from its foundations, insanity often takes this turn. The suddenness and magnitude of the events kindle the imagination. A total change of fortune irritates the feelings of those, who are plunged into the abyss of adversity. Grinding injustice draws forth all their indignation. No prospect of redress by ordinary means opening, they ponder upon extreme deliverances, till they are lost in the labyrinth of their own thoughts.<sup>115</sup>

Coleridge enacts a similar process in ‘Fears in Solitude’, stating that he ‘*must* think’ (my emphasis) and following the French soldiers ‘This way or that o’er these silent hills’.

Throughout his poetry, he follows Beddoes in explaining his melancholy as a product of what Beddoes called ‘the inconsiderate usages of the world’.<sup>116</sup> Neil Vickers comments that ‘[t]he answer, in Beddoes’ view, was for society to reject the mode of life which commercial society held up as the ideal’.<sup>117</sup> Beddoes thus helped to cement Coleridge’s belief that he was suffering from Honest Melancholy and that the remedy was to withdraw from society.

By the time he wrote ‘Resolution and Independence’ in 1802, Wordsworth was fully aware that Coleridge had diagnosed himself with Honest Melancholy. In this poem, Wordsworth did the same, describing himself experiencing a melancholy reverie like Cowper in *The Task* and Coleridge in ‘Frost at Midnight’. He recounts how, as he

<sup>115</sup> Beddoes, *Hygeia*, vol. 3, ‘Essay X’, 75.

<sup>116</sup> Beddoes, *Hygeia*, vol. 1, ‘Essay I’, 70.

<sup>117</sup> Neil Vickers, *Coleridge and the Doctors, 1795-1806* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 40.

wandered across the moor, ‘My old remembrances went from me wholly; / And all the ways of men, so vain and melancholy’ (ll. 20-1). Despite this attempt to dismiss his fears for society, Wordsworth describes how ‘fears, and fancies, thick upon me came; / Dim sadness, and blind thoughts I knew not nor could name’ (ll. 27-8). Wordsworth echoes Beddoes’s account of how, in a state of melancholy, ‘*ideas are vivified, or ... they are exalted to the force of impressions*’.<sup>118</sup> Initially, Wordsworth depicts himself attempting to stave off these symptoms: the phrase ‘knew not’ suggests a deliberate attempt to forget, while ‘nor could name’ signals the fact that the speaker lacks the strength to name his condition. However, he soon thinks of ‘Chatterton’ (l. 43) and Burns (l. 45) and is forced to admit that: ‘We Poets in our youth begin in gladness; / But thereof comes in the end despondency and madness’ (ll. 48-9). Like Cowper in ‘The Flattering-Mill’, Wordsworth suggests that Honest Melancholy is the predicament of all those who attempt to remedy the injustices of society.

Although the speaker of the poem twice fails to sympathise with the Leech-gatherer, this is because he, too, is suffering from a form of melancholy. Wordsworth describes the speaker succumbing to a melancholy reverie in the lines: ‘The Old Man still stood talking by my side; / But now his voice to me was like a stream / Scarce heard; nor word from word could I divide; / And the whole Body of the man did seem / Like one whom I had met with in a dream’ (ll. 113-17). These lines illustrate Burton’s claim that in a state of melancholy ‘we look upon a thing, and see it not; hear, and observe not; which otherwise would much affect us, had we been free’.<sup>119</sup> Wordsworth goes on to describe how the speaker’s ‘former thoughts return’d: the fear that kills; / The hope that is unwilling to be fed’ (ll. 120-1). These thoughts demonstrate the severity of speaker’s depression. As the Leech-gatherer renews his speech, Wordsworth relates how ‘In my mind’s eye I

<sup>118</sup> Beddoes, *Hygeia*, vol. 3, ‘Essay X’, 48.

<sup>119</sup> Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, I:ii:3:2, 55.

seem'd to see him pace / About the weary moors continually, / Wandering about alone and silently' (ll. 136-8). In these lines, 'Wandering' becomes a symptom of nervous illness as it does for Margaret in *The Ruined Cottage*. Beddoes identified 'incessant restlessness, like that of the wandering Jew' as a symptom of melancholy.<sup>120</sup> By internalising the Leech-gatherer's movements in his 'mind's eye', Wordsworth confirms that he identifies with the Leech-gatherer's melancholy plight, and demonstrates Beddoes's proposition that those who are afflicted by Honest Melancholy during a political crisis become 'lost in the labyrinth of their own thoughts.'<sup>121</sup> The Leech-gatherer thus becomes an emblem not only of 'mighty Poets in their misery dead' (l. 123), but also for Wordsworth and Coleridge, suffering Honest Melancholy as a result of the failure of the French Revolution. This personal identification explains why Wordsworth defended the poem so forcefully in his letter to Sara Hutchinson:

I cannot conceive a figure more impressive than that of an old Man like this ... travelling alone among the mountains and all lonely places, carrying with him his own fortitude, and the necessities which an unjust state of society has entailed upon him.<sup>122</sup>

Wordsworth emphasises his subjective response to the figure of the Leech-gatherer, suggesting that he meant the poem to comment on the 'unjust state of society' in a way which he had hoped Sara Hutchinson would recognise. Following Cowper, he claims that anyone who fights against this 'unjust state of society' is liable to suffer Honest Melancholy, and be driven to search for a better model of community in reclusion.

During the 1800s, Wordsworth witnessed Coleridge giving way to his melancholy. Neil Vickers argues that '[a]fter the autumn of 1803, Coleridge was increasingly convinced that his stomach complaints were *psychically* caused'.<sup>123</sup> Before this, however, Coleridge wrote to his brother George that there was 'something originally

<sup>120</sup> Beddoes, *Hygeia*, vol. 3, 'Essay IX', 37.

<sup>121</sup> Beddoes, *Hygeia*, vol. 3, 'Essay X', 75.

<sup>122</sup> Wordsworth, 14 June 1802, *Letters*, vol. 1, 366-7.

<sup>123</sup> Vickers, *Coleridge and the Doctors*, 99.

amiss in the constitution of all our family ... we all, I think, carry much passion, [& a] deep interest, into the business of Life'.<sup>124</sup> Coleridge blamed this 'deep interest' in the 'business of Life' for causing his 'hypochondria' (Beddoes's name for melancholy).<sup>125</sup> Dorothy Wordsworth's entries in her *Grasmere Journal* record how she and William became increasingly concerned for Coleridge's health during the winter of 1801/2: 'We opened C's letter ... It was a sad melancholy letter & prevented us all from sleeping' (6 December 1801); 'Coleridge's were very melancholy letters ... We were made very unhappy' (21 December 1801); 'A heart-rending letter from Coleridge—we were as sad as we could be' (29 January 1802); 'William ... had a bad head ache owing to his having been disturbed the night before with reading C's letter' (30 April 1802).<sup>126</sup> Upon Coleridge's departure for Malta in 1804, William wrote to Sotheby, claiming: 'I doubt not ... that you sympathize deeply with me in the melancholy occasion which calls such a Man from his friends and country.'<sup>127</sup> A few weeks later, Wordsworth implored Coleridge to send him his notes for *The Recluse*, adding: 'I cannot say what a load it would be to me, should I survive you and you die without this memorial left behind.'<sup>128</sup> Perceiving that Coleridge had been driven from British society by the symptoms of Honest Melancholy, Wordsworth figured *The Recluse* partly as a 'memorial' to his friend, suggesting that the poem will act as a testament to the model of community which Coleridge made himself ill trying to preserve.

At the same time as witnessing Coleridge's melancholy, Wordsworth also read about Cowper's. In 1803-4, William Hayley published the three volumes of his *Life, and Posthumous Writings, of William Cowper, Esqr.* In this work, Hayley presented the public

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<sup>124</sup> Coleridge, 1 July 1802, *Letters*, vol. 2, 805.

<sup>125</sup> Coleridge, 1 July 1802, *Letters*, vol. 2, 805.

<sup>126</sup> Dorothy Wordsworth, *The Grasmere Journal*, in *The Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*, ed. Pamela Woof (Oxford, 2002), 45, 50, 59, 93.

<sup>127</sup> Wordsworth, 12 March 1804, *Letters*, vol. 1, 456.

<sup>128</sup> Wordsworth, 29 March 1804, *Letters*, vol. 1, 464.

with the history of Cowper's melancholy and published the late poems (most notably 'The Cast-away') in which Cowper had been most open about his suffering. Throughout, Hayley maintained that Cowper had worsened his melancholy by straining his nerves for the sake of his community and his God. He argued that:

if the charitable and religious zeal of the Poet led him into any excesses of devotion, injurious to the extreme delicacy of his nervous system, he is only the more entitled to admiration and to pity. Indeed his genius, his virtues, and his misfortunes were calculated to excite those tender and temperate passions in their purest state, and to the highest degree. It may be questioned if any mortal could be more sincerely beloved and revered than Cowper was by those, who were best acquainted with his private hours.<sup>129</sup>

Having portrayed Cowper as sacrificing his health for his country, Hayley proceeded to describe his final spiritual crisis. He characterises Cowper's decline as a 'national misfortune',<sup>130</sup> before reprinting the text of 'The Cast-away', which Cowper composed in 1799 while living in Norfolk. In this poem, Cowper returned to the themes of social and spiritual shipwreck, likening himself to the drowned sailor in George Anson's work *A Voyage Round the World*: 'We perish'd, each, alone; / But I, beneath a rougher sea, / And whelm'd in deeper gulphs than he' (ll. 64-6). Duncan Wu notes that Wordsworth read Hayley's biography of Cowper 'by 24 Sept. 1804, and frequently thereafter'.<sup>131</sup> In doing so, he responded to Hayley's portrait of Cowper as a poet who had suffered emotional breakdown in an unsympathetic society and had died trying to correct it. Wordsworth went on to develop the image of Honest Melancholy in his own poetry, arguing that those who remained committed to the principle of community had to withdraw from economic and social competition for the sake of their health.

In the 'Ode ('There was a Time')', Wordsworth acted as a physician both to Coleridge and to himself. The poem's second half responds not only to Coleridge's 'Dejection: An Ode' as many critics have noted, but also to the earlier poems in which

<sup>129</sup> William Hayley, *The Life, and Posthumous Writings, of William Cowper, Esqr.*, 3 vols (London, 1803-4), vol. 1, 88.

<sup>130</sup> Hayley, *Life*, vol. 2, 206.

<sup>131</sup> Wu, *Wordsworth's Reading 1800-1815*, 66.

Coleridge used allusions to Cowper to communicate his melancholy. In particular, Wordsworth takes Coleridge back to 'Frost at Midnight' and the image from *The Task* of staring at the fire:

O joy! that in our embers  
Is something that doth live,  
That nature yet remembers  
What was so fugitive!  
The thought of our past years in me doth breed  
Perpetual benedictions: not indeed  
For that which is most worthy to be blest;  
Delight and liberty, the simple creed  
Of Childhood, whether fluttering or at rest,  
With new-born hope for ever in his breast. (ll. 132-41)

With the image of the 'embers', Wordsworth echoes Coleridge's description of how he watched the 'fluttering stranger' (l. 26) in 'Frost at Midnight'. Without referring back to 'Frost at Midnight', the subordinate clause 'whether fluttering or at rest' floats loose in the grammar of Wordsworth's stanza. However, it makes sense as an allusion to the 'fluttering stranger' (l. 26) of the flame in 'Frost at Midnight', the 'sole unquiet thing' (l. 16) which Coleridge made a 'companionable form' (l. 19) to his 'idling Spirit' (l. 20). Seen this way, the phrase 'whether fluttering or at rest' serves to counsel Coleridge that in order to remedy his melancholy, he must withdraw from society and focus, as Burton had argued, on correcting the situation in which '[w]e love the world too much; God too little; our neighbour not at all, or for our own ends'.<sup>132</sup>

Like Cowper, Wordsworth argues that the lack of community which occasions Honest Melancholy is best cured by withdrawing from a competitive society and finding new models of community in retirement. He asserts that introspection is key to this process:

for those first affections,  
Those shadowy recollections,  
Which, be they what they may,

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<sup>132</sup> Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, III:iv:1:1, 386.

Are yet the fountain light of all our day,  
 Are yet a master light of all our seeing;  
       Uphold us, cherish us, and make  
 Our noisy years seem moments in the being  
 Of the eternal Silence: truths that wake,  
       To perish never. (ll. 151-9)

Here, Wordsworth follows the logic of the ‘spots of time’ passage in the *Two-Part Prelude*, describing how the individual mind can palliate its melancholy even in the absence of a supportive community. It is tempting to read the allusion in the lines ‘make / Our noisy years seem moments in the being / Of the eternal Silence’ as Wordsworth’s tacit recognition and repudiation of Coleridge’s allusions to Cowper. The lines have long been noted as an allusion to the poem ‘Address to Silence’ published in the *Weekly Entertainer* for 6 March 1797, a panegyric to silence which features the lines:

Eternity of calmness is thy joy;  
 Immensity of space is thine abode;  
 The rolling planets own thy sacred power;  
 Our little years are moments of thy life;  
 Our little world is lost amid thy spheres.<sup>133</sup>

Though unattributed, the poem is initialled ‘W. C.’, which is how Cowper often signed his name in his letters. Added to this, the theme of retirement also sounds like Cowper: ‘I must leave you, and with silence stray / To the deep forest, or the deeper grave, / Where neither winds nor waves disturb repose’ (ll. 58-60). Though not certain, it is intriguing to suppose that Cowper wrote these lines from Norfolk, where he spent his last days. If so, Cowper figures himself as a melancholy exile from society, suggesting that even in the depths of his *Honest Melancholy* he still longs to reconnect with the community: ‘Yet, silence! Let me once review the haunts / Of men. Once more let me enjoy the scene / Of social hearts; and view sweet friendship’s smiles, / Ere I be seen no more! Then have thy sway, / Silence!’ (ll. 61-5). These lines echo Cowper’s ‘Verses, Supposed to be Written by Alexander Selkirk, During his Solitary Abode on the Island of Juan Fernandez’, in which

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<sup>133</sup> ‘W. C.’, ‘Address to Silence’, ll. 47-51, *The Weekly Entertainer*, 6 March 1797, 199-200.

Selkirk exclaimed: ‘Society, friendship, and love, / Divinely bestow’d upon man, / Oh had I the wings of a dove, / How soon wou’d I taste you again!’ (ll. 17-20). Whether or not it represents a new poem by Cowper, the ‘Address to Silence’ develops an image of the poet as a melancholy exile from society, who longs to return in the spirit of community. By echoing it in the ‘Ode (“There was a time”)', Wordsworth cast both himself and Coleridge in the same role.

In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth continued this pattern by figuring himself and Coleridge as a pair of melancholic exiles from an unjust society. Most notably, Wordsworth does this in Book Ten, in the passage where he describes his reaction to the news that Britain had gone to war with France in February 1793. He claims that there was

no cure for those  
Whose souls were sick with pain of what would be  
Hereafter brought in charge against mankind;  
Most melancholy at that time, O Friend!  
Were my day thoughts, my dreams were miserable;  
Through months, through years, long after the last beat  
Of those atrocities (I speak bare truth,  
As if to thee alone in private talk)  
I scarcely had one night of quiet sleep,  
Such ghastly visions had I of despair  
And tyranny and implements of death,  
And long orations which in dreams I pleaded  
Before unjust Tribunals, with a voice  
Labouring, a brain confounded, and a sense  
Of treachery and desertion in the place  
The holiest that I knew of, my own soul.<sup>134</sup>

The echo of Book Two of *The Task* (‘My ear is pain’d / My soul is sick’, II, 5-6) in the phrase ‘souls were sick’ has already been noted. Wordsworth elaborates Cowper’s image of himself as a victim of Honest Melancholy in order to describe his own response to French Revolutionary Wars. He also builds on the confessional voice of Cowper’s poetry, for example the ‘stricken deer’ passage, claiming to speak to Coleridge as he would to a

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<sup>134</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, X, 365-80, ed. Mark L. Reed, 2 vols (Ithaca and London, 1991), vol. 1, 277.

doctor, 'As if to thee alone in private talk'. In his description of the dreams in which he 'pleaded / Before unjust Tribunals, with a voice / Labouring, a brain confounded', Wordsworth echoes Beddoes's account of those who suffer Honest Melancholy during 'grand political crises', especially his claim that: 'No prospect of redress by ordinary means opening, they ponder upon extreme deliverances, till they are lost in the labyrinth of their own thoughts'.<sup>135</sup> On several occasions in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth figures himself in these terms. More frequently, however, he applies this image to Coleridge, describing him as a version of Cowper's 'Cast-away'.

Critics have generally agreed that Coleridge was the friend in Book Five of *The Prelude* who told Wordsworth a version of the dream about an Arab burying a Stone and a Shell (V, 78-109).<sup>136</sup> Whether or not this is true, it seems likely that the identification was strengthened when Wordsworth left for Malta in 1804. At this time, Wordsworth found it helpful to think of Coleridge as the 'Semi-Quixote' (V, 142) 'Wandering upon [his] quest' (V, 148) to rescue science and poetry from the impending destruction of society. Guinn Batten has discussed the 'melancholic' nature of this dream,<sup>137</sup> though he does not dwell on the importance of Don Quixote as an eighteenth-century 'archetype of the melancholy man'.<sup>138</sup> Alan Ingram and Stuart Sim encapsulate the role that the Don plays in Wordsworth's account of the dream when they write that:

for eighteenth-century readers Don Quixote was the exemplification of error, yet one that brought out not so much mockery or censure but rather the poignancy of human endeavour engaged in the furtherance of a hopeless cause, and striving not to know it.<sup>139</sup>

In *The Prelude*, the 'hopeless cause' is the preservation of the 'two Books' (V, 103) of science and poetry, the one that 'wedded man to man by purest bond / Of nature' (V, 105-

<sup>135</sup> Beddoes, *Hygeia*, vol. 3, 'Essay X', 75.

<sup>136</sup> See Guinn Batten, *The Orphaned Imagination: Melancholy and Commodity Culture in English Romanticism* (Durham, NC and London, 1998), 185.

<sup>137</sup> Batten, *The Orphaned Imagination*, 186.

<sup>138</sup> Ingram and Sim, 'Introduction', 10.

<sup>139</sup> Ingram and Sim, 'Introduction', 10.

6), and the other that 'was / A joy, a consolation and a hope' (V, 109). Wordsworth figures the 'Semi-Quixote' as an individual who attempts to rescue these books, with the lessons about community which they contain, from the imminent destruction of society. He writes of the 'Bard and Sage' as 'Twin labourers and heirs of the same hopes' (V, 41-3), perhaps anticipating the later image of himself and Coleridge as 'joint-labourers in the work ... Of [man's] redemption' (XIII, 439-41). Coleridge, however, appears more committed to the Quixotically 'hopeless cause' of redeeming society at his own expense. Wordsworth claims that 'I saw him riding o'er the Desert Sands, / With the fleet waters of the drowning world / In chace of him' (V, 136-8) and then describes how:

Full often, taking from the world of sleep  
 This Arab Phantom, which my Friend beheld,  
 This Semi-Quixote, I to him have given  
 A substance, fancied him a living man,  
 A gentle Dweller in the Desert, craz'd  
 By love and feeling and internal thought,  
 Protracted among endless solitudes;  
 Have shap'd him, in the oppression of his brain,  
 Wandering upon this quest, and thus equipp'd.  
 And I have scarcely pitied him; have felt  
 A reverence for a Being thus employ'd;  
 And thought that in the blind and awful lair  
 Of such a madness reason did lie couch'd. (V, 140-52)

When Wordsworth wrote these lines, he created another emblem of Honest Melancholy, like the Leech-gatherer 'pac[ing] / About the weary moors continually' (ll. 136-7). At the time, he did not identify him with any particular 'living man', but in 1804 he conflated this 'Semi-Quixote' with Coleridge. As Coleridge set sail for Malta, carrying a book of Wordsworth's poems, he came to embody the figure of the 'Semi-Quixote' 'craz'd / By love and feeling and internal thought'.

The final lines quoted above recall Hayley's description of Cowper: 'if the charitable and religious zeal of the Poet led him into any excesses of devotion, injurious to the extreme delicacy of his nervous system, he is only the more entitled to admiration and

to pity'.<sup>140</sup> Wordsworth, however, refuses to 'pity' this Coleridgean figure, and expresses only 'reverence'. Coleridge, he suggests, has assumed the mantle of the melancholy poet sacrificing his health for the sake of 'the adamantine holds of truth, / By reason built, or passion' (V, 38-9). The 'reason' that 'lie[s] couch'd' in the 'madness' of his Honest Melancholy, Wordsworth argues, is the 'love and feeling and internal thought' which underlie the spirit of community. Wordsworth argues that Coleridge, like the Leech-gatherer, has been forced to wander by 'the necessities which an unjust state of society has entailed upon him'.<sup>141</sup> Throughout *The Prelude*, he figures Coleridge as a victim of what, in Book Two, he called 'these times of fear, / This melancholy waste of hopes o'erthrown' (II, 448-9). At the same time, Wordsworth recognises that he, too, has the potential for Honest Melancholy: in Book Ten, he admits to 'Having two natures in me, joy the one / The other melancholy' (X, 868-9). Lucy Newlyn has argued that there are also 'two Coleridges in *The Prelude*: one mythological beyond recognition, and needed by Wordsworth to support the values of his past; the other more flawed and human, but used by him merely as a foil'.<sup>142</sup> This 'foil', however, is what saves Wordsworth from succumbing to his own Honest Melancholy. He describes the time, after Britain went to war with France, when he was 'Sick, wearied out with contrarities' and 'Yielded up moral questions in despair' (X, 899-900). At this point, he claims that Coleridge 'didst lend a living help / To regulate my Soul' (X, 906-7). Coleridge becomes an emblem of the poet as a melancholy exile, meaning that Wordsworth can draw a ring around his own suffering:

To me the grief confined that Thou art gone  
From this last spot of earth where Freedom now  
Stands single in her only sanctuary;  
A lonely wanderer, art gone, by pain  
Compelled and sickness, at this latter day,

<sup>140</sup> Hayley, *Life*, vol. 1, 88.

<sup>141</sup> Wordsworth, 14 June 1802, *Letters*, vol. 1, 367.

<sup>142</sup> Newlyn, *Coleridge, Wordsworth, and the Language of Allusion*, 166.

This heavy time of change for all mankind. (X, 980-5)

The figure of Coleridge as a ‘lonely wanderer ... by pain / Compelled and sickness’ comes to epitomise the psychological effects the French Revolutionary Wars, ‘This heavy time of change for all mankind’. Coleridge becomes the paragon of the sympathetic man described by Democritus Junior who, for the sake of his people, would ‘alter his tone, and weep with *Heraclitus*, or rather howl, roar, and tear his hair in commiseration’.<sup>143</sup> At the end of Book Ten, however, Wordsworth hints that he, too, may become a melancholy exile from British society as a result of his sympathy with Coleridge. He describes himself having to ‘soothe / The pensive moments by this calm fire side, / And find a thousand fancied images / That cheer the thoughts of those I love, and mine’ (X, 1027-30). In this passage, Wordsworth depicts himself succumbing to the melancholy reverie described by Cowper in *The Task* and Coleridge in ‘Frost at Midnight’. For all the consolation that Wordsworth finds in nature, *The Prelude* deserves to be read on one level as an indictment of British society for having rejected Coleridge’s political ideals during the French Revolution and colluded to destroy his health.

In the absence of Coleridge’s notes for *The Recluse*, Wordsworth began to direct his efforts towards *The Excursion*. Departing from the story of Margaret in *The Ruined Cottage*, he set out to describe the experience of the Solitary, whose decline into Honest Melancholy parallels Coleridge’s experiences during the 1800s. The subsequent books which Wordsworth composed for *The Excursion* seek to remedy this melancholy and to explain how individuals can avoid following William Braithwaite’s descent into passive solitude as recorded in the ‘Yew-Tree Lines’. In the passage from *Home at Grasmere* which he published as ‘The Prospectus’ to *The Recluse*, Wordsworth committed himself to describing ‘melancholy Fear subdued by Faith’ and ‘the individual Mind that keeps her

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<sup>143</sup> Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, 19.

own / Inviolable retirement, subject there / To Conscience only'.<sup>144</sup> *The Excursion* proceeds to develop these themes by demonstrating how individuals can subdue their 'melancholy Fear' and govern their minds according to 'Conscience', even in the absence of the supportive moral framework of society. From the example of Coleridge, Wordsworth realised that the pattern of Honest Melancholy would continue to debilitate those, like Cowper, who had invested too much emotional energy in combating self-interest in corrupt societies. By writing a series of dialogues which functioned as a talking cure for the Solitary, Wordsworth attempted to remedy not only Coleridge's melancholy, but also his own. The character of the Solitary, like the figure of Coleridge in *The Prelude*, serves as an important refutation of the idea that Wordsworth disengages from politics after the French Revolution. The Solitary's despondency derives in many ways from Coleridge's and resembles it in having a multitude of causes more complex than a simple renunciation of society following the failure of the French Revolution. Wordsworth is careful to demonstrate that the Solitary withdraws from society three times: firstly, after the death of his wife and children (III, 645-88); secondly, following the failure of the French Revolution (III, 776-838); and thirdly, following his disappointment at the state of society in America (III, 910-64). In this sense, he suffers three different forms of melancholy, each of which Wordsworth tries to anatomise and, hopefully, to cure.

In May 1809, Wordsworth wrote to Thomas Poole that Coleridge 'neither will nor can execute anything of important benefit either to himself his family or mankind'.<sup>145</sup> On 12 April 1810, Dorothy seconded her brother's fears, claiming: 'We have no hope of him—none that he will ever do anything more than he has already done'.<sup>146</sup> William assigns this outcome, employing the medical terminology of Erasmus Darwin, to the fact

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<sup>144</sup> William Wordsworth, 'The Prospectus', ll. 15-21, in *The Excursion*, ed. Sally Bushell, James A. Butler, and Michael C. Jaye, with the assistance of David García (Ithaca and London, 2007), 39.

<sup>145</sup> Wordsworth, c.30 May 1809, *Letters*, vol. 2, 352.

<sup>146</sup> Dorothy Wordsworth, 12 April 1810, *Letters*, vol. 2, 399.

that Coleridge ‘has no voluntary power of mind whatsoever’.<sup>147</sup> In his work *Zoonomia; or, The Laws of Organic Life* (1794-6), Darwin had argued that the state of melancholy prevents not only action, but also what he called ‘voluntarity’ or ‘volition’.<sup>148</sup> He wrote that:

volition begins at the central part of [the sensorium], and proceeds to the extremities; and that sensation begins at the extremities and proceeds to the central parts ... these two sensorial faculties cannot be strongly exerted at the same time; for when we exert our volition strongly, we do not attend to pleasure or pain; and conversely, when we are strongly affected with the sensation of pleasure or pain, we use no volition.<sup>149</sup>

In claiming that Coleridge had ‘no voluntary power of mind’, Wordsworth recognises that he has been prevented from investing energy in public affairs by his melancholy. Likewise, the Wanderer relates how, in the Solitary’s case, ‘An uncomplaining apathy displaced / [His] anguish; and, indifferent to delight, / To aim and purpose, he consumed his days, / To private interest dead, and public care’ (II, 218-21). By presenting himself with this problem in *The Excursion*, Wordsworth was searching for a solution to the melancholy which had driven Coleridge not only to withdraw from, but also to renounce society. In 1799, Coleridge instructed Wordsworth to compose ‘a poem, in blank verse, addressed to those, who in consequence of the complete failure of the French Revolution, have thrown up all hopes of the amelioration of mankind’.<sup>150</sup> What Wordsworth wrote instead was a poem about how the man who had commissioned this poem could end up himself falling into a kind of solipsistic despair.

As *The Excursion* continues, Wordsworth signals further parallels between Coleridge’s sufferings and those of the Solitary. The Solitary undertakes ‘a wandering course of discontent / In foreign Lands’ (II, 321-2) and appears ‘inwardly oppressed / With malady—in part, I fear, provoked / By weariness of life’ (II, 322-4). Here, the second

<sup>147</sup> Wordsworth, c.30 May 1809, *Letters*, vol. 2, 352.

<sup>148</sup> Erasmus Darwin, *Zoonomia; or, The Laws of Organic Life*, 2 vols (London, 1794-6), vol. 1, 32.

<sup>149</sup> Darwin, *Zoonomia*, vol. 1, 57.

<sup>150</sup> Coleridge, c.10 September 1799, *Letters*, vol. 1, 527.

observation signals Wordsworth's conviction that Coleridge's illness was mental in origin, rather than physical. The Solitary resolves to 'live and die / Forgotten,—at safe distance from a "world / Not moving to his mind"' (II, 330-2). The quotation in these lines comes from George Dyer's collection *Poems* (1802), which aptly includes a poem entitled 'Democritus Junior'.<sup>151</sup> Wordsworth alludes, however, to Dyer's poem 'On the Death of Gilbert Wakefield', which ends with the lines: 'When man, quite wearied with a world, perhaps, / Not moving to his mind, a foolish world, / Seeks inward stillness, and lies quiet down' (ll. 118-20). This allusion ennobles the Solitary and places him in his French Revolution context, by comparing him to the writer and divine Gilbert Wakefield, who was imprisoned for publishing *A Reply to Some Parts of the Bishop Llandaff's Address to the People of Great Britain* (1798) and died in 1801.<sup>152</sup> Besides his support for the Revolution, Wakefield had further affinities with Coleridge, being both a fellow Unitarian and fellow student of Jesus College, Cambridge, whose political pamphlets had inspired Coleridge early in his career. By referring to his poem, Wordsworth suggests that the Solitary—and, by implication, Coleridge—has also suffered from the Pitt Government's response to the French Revolution, being driven to 'See[k] inward stillness' as a remedy for the ills of a corrupt society.

Book Three of *The Excursion* is entitled 'Despondency' and provides the centrepiece of Wordsworth's argument about Honest Melancholy. Having read and re-read Burton from '1810 onwards',<sup>153</sup> Wordsworth responded to his description of how socially committed individuals end up falling ill as a result of 'vexing themselves, disquieted in mind, with restless, unquiet thoughts, discontent, either for their own, other mens, or publick affairs'.<sup>154</sup> Stephen Gill argues that the Solitary 'embodies the dark potentialities

<sup>151</sup> George Dyer, 'Democritus Junior', in *Poems*, 2 vols (London, 1802), vol. 2, 43-7.

<sup>152</sup> See Olivia Smith, *The Politics of Language, 1791-1819* (Oxford, 1984), 204-5.

<sup>153</sup> Wu, *Wordsworth's Reading 1800-1815*, 38.

<sup>154</sup> Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, I:iii:1:2, 113.

of [Wordsworth's] own life'.<sup>155</sup> In Book Three, Wordsworth also presents the Solitary as a version of Coleridge and of Cowper, forced to withdraw from society as a 'stricken deer'.

The Solitary claims:

Ye have heard  
 What evidence I seek, and vainly seek;  
 What from my Fellow-beings I require,  
 And cannot find; what I myself have lost,  
 Nor can regain; how languidly I look  
 Upon this visible fabric of the World,  
 May be divined—perhaps it hath been said:—  
 But spare your pity, if there be in me  
 Aught that deserves respect: for I exist—  
 Within myself—not comfortless.—The tenor  
 Which my life holds, he readily may conceive  
 Whoe'er hath stood to watch a mountain Brook  
 In some still passage of its course, and seen,  
 Within the depths of its capacious breast,  
 Inverted trees, and rocks, and azure sky;  
 And, on its glassy surface, specks of foam,  
 And conglobulated bubbles undissolved,  
 Numerous as stars; that, by their onward lapse,  
 Betray to sight the motion of the stream,  
 Else imperceptible. (III, 965-84)

The 'evidence' which the Solitary seeks from his 'Fellow-beings' is no other than the evidence of community. Earlier on, he describes his former commitment to community in the lines: 'If busy men / In sober conclave met, to weave a web / Of amity, whose living threads should stretch / beyond the seas, and to the farthest pole, / There did I sit, assisting' (III, 753-7). Once again referring to the Pitt government's response to the French Revolution, which had led to the imprisonment of Wakefield, the Solitary describes how the 'moral interests' of 'civil Action' gave way to 'a Power, / Formal, and odious, and contemptible' (III, 831-4). As a result of being denied the community which he sought with his 'Fellow-beings', the Solitary succumbed to a form of 'Honest Melancholy', which led him, like Coleridge, to lose the power of 'volition' and to look 'languidly' upon the world.

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<sup>155</sup> Gill, *William Wordsworth*, 282.

In the subsequent books of *The Excursion*, Wordsworth attempts to counsel those who have been worn down in this way from sympathising with their fellow citizens and have stopped trying to reform society. Yet even the lines quoted above, which emphasise the extent of the Solitary's disenchantment, hold out the means of his return to society. The Solitary forbids his interlocutors from pitying him, arguing that he is 'not comfortless'. In the image of his life as a 'mountain Brook', Wordsworth offers the same remedy for Honest Melancholy which Cotton had advised for Cowper: 'When we withdraw ourselves from the world, that great theatre of business and care on the one hand, and of diversion and dissipation on the other ... THEN commences self-inspection'.<sup>156</sup> The solution, Wordsworth suggests, is for melancholy individuals to withdraw from society and cure themselves through introspection. In the lines quoted above, the 'capacious breast' of the brook stands metaphorically for the Solitary's own heart. Assuming a Stoic perspective, he watches the sorrowful and selfish passions cross his breast like the 'speaks of foam ... undissolved', but implicitly dissolving, on the surface of the water. As discussed in the next chapter, both Cowper and Wordsworth offered this model of withdrawal into nature for the sake of self-government as the best possible response to the violence of the American and French Revolutions.

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<sup>156</sup> Cotton, *Various Pieces*, vol. 2, 71-2.

### 3. *Political Reclusion*

#### *Men in the moon: eighteenth-century historiography*

In a letter to John Newton on 11 April 1784, Cowper claimed that '[i]t is hardly possible for a man to interest himself less than I do in what passes in the political world': 'though not a Native of the moon, I was not however made of the dust of this planet.'<sup>1</sup> He proceeds, however, to give a close analysis of George III's dismissal of the Fox-North Coalition and subsequent support for Pitt's East India Bill, concluding that Britain must soon 'say adieu ... to every hope of constitutional liberty for the Subject'.<sup>2</sup> Writing to Francis Wrangham on 27 February 1797, Wordsworth also figured himself as a 'Native of the moon', claiming that '[i]t is no disgrace to a man in the moon not to know what is doing here below'.<sup>3</sup> Like Cowper, Wordsworth goes on to give a detailed commentary on contemporary politics. His letter to Wrangham contains a paraphrase of the last forty lines of Juvenal's Eighth Satire, adapted to include references to British history and current affairs. After mentioning numerous Whig heroes (for example, John Pym and John Hampden, two prominent Parliamentarians during the Civil War), Wordsworth rounded on the Prince Regent in the lines:

Let grandeur tell thee whither now is flown  
The brightest jewel of a George's throne  
Blush Pride to see a farmer's wife produce  
The first of genuine kings, a king for use  
Let Bourbon spawn her scoundrels  
Be my joy the embryo Franklin in the printer's boy.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> William Cowper, 11 April 1784, *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, ed. James King and Charles Ryskamp, 5 vols (Oxford, 1979-86), vol. 2, 234.

<sup>2</sup> Cowper, 11 April 1784, *Letters*, vol. 2, 235.

<sup>3</sup> William Wordsworth, 27 February 1797, *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest De Selincourt, rev. Mary Moorman, Chester L. Shaver, and Alan G. Hill, second edition, 8 vols (Oxford, 1967-93), vol. 1, 177.

<sup>4</sup> Wordsworth, 27 February 1797, *Letters*, vol. 1, 176-7.

Like Cowper, Wordsworth playfully characterises himself as a ‘man in the moon’ and feigns a lack of interest in contemporary politics in order to express his underlying disapproval of those in charge. Implicitly, he draws a comparison between George III and the French house of ‘Bourbon’, accusing them both of spawning ‘scoundrels’. By using the ‘throne’ as a metonym for George III and referring to the Prince Regent as its ‘brightest jewel’, Wordsworth not only satirises the Prince Regent’s lavish lifestyle, but also implies that George himself is motivated more by power than the desire to govern well. Throughout his paraphrase of Juvenal, Wordsworth contemporises Juvenal’s suggestion that the virtues needed to govern are more often possessed by those leading secluded lives than by those who govern them. Both Cowper and Wordsworth adopted stances of withdrawal in order to distance themselves from Britain’s rulers, especially George III and William Pitt. Their respective letters to Newton and to Wrangham encapsulate the political aspect of Romantic reclusion which they developed in their poetry.

In their writing about reclusion, Cowper and Wordsworth each drew on their extensive reading of classical and modern discussions of citizenship. Their attitudes towards reclusion developed partly from the classical debate between the active versus the contemplative life. Aristotle proposed this choice in the *Politics*, asking ‘whether the life of citizenship and activity is desirable or rather a life released from all external affairs, for example some form of contemplative life’.<sup>5</sup> In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle blurred this distinction by declaring in favour of ‘the activity of contemplation’ (*energeia theōrētikē*),<sup>6</sup> but in the *Politics* he emphasised the need for action, arguing that the virtuous

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, VII, ii, 3 (1324a), trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA and London, 1972), 540-1: ‘πότερον ὁ πολιτικός καὶ πρακτικός βίος αἰρετός ἢ μᾶλλον ὁ πάντων τῶν ἐκτὸς ἀπολελυμένος, οἷον θεωρητικός τις’.

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, X, vii, 1 (1177a), trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA and London, 2003), 612-3: ‘ἐνέργεια ... θεωρητική’.

individual ‘must have not only virtue but also the power that will enable him to act’.

However, he added that

the active life is not necessarily active in relation to other men, as some people think, nor are only those processes of thought active that are pursued for the sake of the objects that result from action, but far more those speculations and thoughts that have their end in themselves and are pursued for their own sake.<sup>7</sup>

Aristotle rejects his earlier assumption that ‘good action’ (*eupraxia*) necessarily involves an attempt to intervene in politics by governing the actions of others. Instead, he argues that the contemplative life leads to this end more directly and more reliably, because it does not rely on manipulating the actions of others in order to reach it. This argument was refuted by Cicero in *De re publica*. Despite having been effectively exiled to Greece in 58BC, Cicero contended that ‘it is not enough to possess virtue, as if it were an art of some sort, unless you make use of it ... and its noblest use is the government of the State’.<sup>8</sup> He reintroduced Aristotle’s distinction between *theoria* and *praxis*, adjudicating firmly in favour of *praxis*. In his letters, Cowper focused on Cicero’s exile, declaring in 1757 that ‘[i]t was hard upon [Cicero] who did nothing to create him an Enemy, that he should find so few Friends; but it is the Lot of many others, and I hope as to myself, that the sort of men who professed themselves his Enemys, will everlastingly be mine’.<sup>9</sup> Viewing Cicero’s life in this way, Cowper regarded him less as an advocate for the active life than as a figure—like Milton—whose attempts to intervene in the state had exposed him to calumny and exile.

As discussed in the Introduction, Stoic writers like Seneca formed an important part of the classical tradition of retirement literature. In his essay *De otio* (‘On Leisure’),

<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, VII, iii, 5 (1325b), 550-1: ‘τὸν πρακτικὸν οὐκ ἀναγκαῖον εἶναι πρὸς ἑτέρους, καθάπερ οἴονται τινες, οὐδὲ τὰς διανοίας εἶναι μόνας ταύτας πρακτικάς, τὰς τῶν ἀποβαινόντων χάριν γιγνομένης ἐκ τοῦ πράττειν, ἀλλὰ πολὺ μᾶλλον τὰς αὐτοτελεῖς καὶ τὰς αὐτῶν ἕνεκεν θεωρίας καὶ διανοήσεις’.

<sup>8</sup> Cicero, *De re publica*, I, ii, 2, in *De re publica, De legibus*, trans. Clinton Walker Keyes (Cambridge, MA and London, 2000), 14-15: ‘Nec vero habere virtutem satis est quasi artem aliquam, nisi utare ... usus autem eius est maximus civitatus gubernatio’.

<sup>9</sup> Cowper, 16 June 1757, *Letters*, vol. 1, 79.

Seneca contradicted Cicero's argument for the active life, arguing: 'If the state is too corrupt to be helped, if it is wholly dominated by evils, the wise man will not struggle to no purpose, nor spend himself when nothing is to be gained'.<sup>10</sup> Seneca is believed to have written *De otio* around 62AD, after withdrawing from political life in opposition to Emperor Nero. He expanded his arguments for reclusion in the *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium*, a work which Cowper mentioned familiarly in his letters. Throughout the *Epistulae*, Seneca counselled his friend Lucilius to withdraw from society, arguing that '[v]irtue is just as great, even when it has retreated within itself and is shut in on all sides'.<sup>11</sup> Epistle CI, which Cowper quoted a letter to John Newton,<sup>12</sup> opens with the assertion that: 'Every day and every hour reveal to us what a nothing we are, and remind us with some fresh evidence that we have forgotten our weakness'.<sup>13</sup> Seneca emphasises the need for individuals to consider their own 'weakness' before attempting to intervene in the state. Like Cowper, Wordsworth responded enthusiastically to this theme in Seneca's writing, encouraging individuals to consider their own 'weakness' before intervening in the state, for example at the end of *The Convention of Cintra*. In the paraphrase of Juvenal mentioned above, he praises 'virtuous Seneca' and then follows Seneca's advice to Lucilius by adopting the stance of a 'man in the moon' in his letter to Wrangham. Recently, Adam Potkay has argued that during the 1800s Wordsworth developed 'a Stoic aesthetic' in response to the 'civic-minded Roman Stoicism of Cicero and Seneca and their modern heir, Shaftesbury'.<sup>14</sup> As discussed later in this chapter, I believe that this 'Stoic

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<sup>10</sup> Seneca, *De otio*, III, 3, in *Moral Essays*, trans. John W. Basore, 3 vols (London and Cambridge, MA: 1958), vol. 2, 186-7: 'Si res publica corruptior est quam ut adiuvari possit, si occupata est malis, non nitetur sapiens in supervacuum nec se nihil profuturus impendet'.

<sup>11</sup> Seneca, Epistle LXXIV, *Ad Lucilium epistulae morales*, trans. Richard M. Gummere, 3 vols (1953), vol. 2, 132-3. 'Aequae magna est, etiam si in se recessit undique exclusa. Nihilominus enim magni spiritus est et erecti, exactae prudentiae, indeclinabilis iustitiae.'

<sup>12</sup> Cowper, 26 October 1790, *Letters*, vol. 3, 425.

<sup>13</sup> Seneca, Epistle CI, *Ad Lucilium*, vol. 3, 158-9: 'Omnis dies, omnis hora quam nihil simus ostendit et aliquo argumento recentis admonet fragilitatis oblitus'.

<sup>14</sup> Adam Potkay, *Wordsworth's Ethics* (Baltimore, 2012), 149.

aesthetic' can be seen as an important part of the wider arguments for reclusion which Wordsworth adopted in response to the failure of the French Revolution.

Throughout their writing, Cowper and Wordsworth continued the classical debate between action and contemplation, as well as engaging with contemporary historians in order to develop political arguments for reclusion. These arguments can be read in relation to J. G. A. Pocock's thesis in *The Machiavellian Moment*. Pocock contended that a series of philosophers (most notably Machiavelli) attempted to revive the fallen Republic in the Italian states by developing the concept of 'civic humanism'. He defines this as the idea that the individual within society was 'committed to participation and action in a social structure which made such conduct by the individual possible'.<sup>15</sup> In other words, civic humanists believed that the health of a society depended on the willingness of its members to conduct themselves virtuously and to contribute their talents altruistically for the good of the whole. Pocock argues that this philosophy continued to influence the development of secular society until the American Revolution, which constituted the last public demonstration of civic humanist ideals. Though neither Cowper nor Wordsworth quite warrants the label 'civic humanist', Pocock's thesis captures each poet's sense that the value system to which he subscribed was giving way to the confusion which Cowper described in a letter to Joseph Hill: 'I cannot look upon the circumstances of this country, without being persuaded that I discern in them an embrangement and perplexity that I have never met with in the History of any other'.<sup>16</sup> Pocock defines the 'Machiavellian moment' of his book's title as the moment in which

the republic was seen as confronting its own temporal finitude, as attempting to remain morally and politically stable in a stream of irrational events conceived as essentially destructive of all systems of secular stability. In the language which had been developed

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<sup>15</sup> J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton and London, 1975), 56-7.

<sup>16</sup> William Cowper, 9 December 1781, *Letters*, vol. 1, 554-5. The noun 'embrangement' means 'entanglement, complication, confusion' and is not cited until 1826 (*OED*, EMBRANGLEMENT, *n.*).

for the purpose, this was spoken of as the confrontation of ‘virtue’ with ‘fortune’ and ‘corruption’.<sup>17</sup>

Drawing on Pocock’s thesis, Cowper’s and Wordsworth’s decisions to withdraw from society can be seen as a response to the Machiavellian moment. They concluded that ‘corruption’ had triumphed and that, with the overthrow of public virtue, the attempt to lead an active life in the service of society had become problematic. Pocock observes that, for the civic humanist, ‘virtue ... consisted in a partnership of ruling and being ruled with others who must be as morally autonomous as oneself’.<sup>18</sup> Cowper and Wordsworth suggested that the only conceivable response to the dereliction of one’s fellow citizens was to secede from political society and attempt, paradoxically, to uphold the value of altruism in isolation. In doing this, they revised classical models of reclusion, following Seneca’s instruction to consider those ‘who, shut out from public life, have withdrawn into privacy for the purpose of improving men’s existence and framing laws for the human race without incurring the displeasure of those in power’.<sup>19</sup>

In recent years, critics have begun to set aside the New Historicist hermeneutic of suspicion in order to explore the political motives behind Cowper’s and Wordsworth’s writing about reclusion. Kevis Goodman, for example, has analysed ‘Cowper’s habit ... of turning the contents of daily news into poetry, so that the newspapers streaming into Olney and the poems going out of it formed a two-way paper channel between that town and London’.<sup>20</sup> Reading *The Task* alongside Walter Benjamin’s essay on Baudelaire, she claims that ‘[a]t a level that differs quite sharply from all the overt statements for or against empire ... Cowper’s poetry is more interestingly and involuntarily “historical” for depicting the individual being confronted with modern mass media and finding himself

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<sup>17</sup> Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, viii.

<sup>18</sup> Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, 75.

<sup>19</sup> Seneca, Epistle XIV, *Ad Lucilium*, vol. 1, 93: ‘ad hos te Stoicos voco, qui a re publica exclusi secesserunt ad colendam vitam et humano generi iura condenda sine ulla potentioris offensa’.

<sup>20</sup> Kevis Goodman, *Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism: Poetry and the Mediation of History* (Cambridge, 2004), 71.

unable ‘to assimilate the data of the world around him’.<sup>21</sup> In a similar vein, David Simpson has argued that Wordsworth’s poetry is characterised by ‘concern’, a state in which individuals contemplate forms of suffering and injustice which they feel unable to remedy.

Simpson links this concern to Wordsworth’s proleptic sense of the process of ‘commodification’ described by Marx, arguing that his poetry

registers the presence of something sinister and invisible governing everyday life, something whose considerable powers cannot be readily apprehended or controlled: the dynamics of commodity form. We mistake Wordsworth’s distinctive historical intelligence by attributing his condition of arrested concern—his awareness of problems he seems to be unable to handle—to some sort of moral inadequacy.<sup>22</sup>

Yet Simpson later concedes that concern ‘enables us to avoid an obligation to act by invoking a mood of pending resolution’. He concludes that, ‘[f]or Wordsworth, “contemplation” has both an inward and outward sense: one contemplates something *in* the world and takes it into oneself as a way of withdrawing *from* the world’. Simpson thus resembles Goodman in arguing that Wordsworth, like Cowper, engages with history from a distance, in a way which is indirect, incomplete, and perhaps insufficient. By contrast, I wish to suggest that the project of Romantic reclusion constituted a more direct form of engagement with contemporary events. Cowper’s and Wordsworth’s reading of classical and modern historians in order to develop political arguments for reclusion proceeded directly from their experiences of the American, French, and Industrial Revolutions. Following thinkers from Aristotle onwards, they concluded that ‘active contemplation’ was the best means for citizens to remain virtuous in a corrupt—and corrupting—society. Throughout their works, they present withdrawal as the best course of action available to individuals confronting the Machiavellian moment.

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<sup>21</sup> Goodman, *Georgic Modernity*, 98-100.

<sup>22</sup> David Simpson, *Wordsworth, Commodification and Social Concern: The Poetics of Modernity* (Cambridge, 2009), 7.

*'His warfare is within': Cowper's response to the Machiavellian moment*

Cowper took a keen interest not only in history, but also in historiography. In his reading and writing he paid attention to how historical events were narrated, and to the writers' underlying assumptions about how societies change over time. On 31 January 1782, he complained in a letter to Joseph Hill that the nation 'is affected with every Symptom of decay, and is already sunk into a state of decrepitude. I am reading Mrs. McAulay's History.'<sup>23</sup> Catherine Macaulay published her *History of England from the Accession of James I to that of the Brunswick Line* in the years 1763-83 as a Whig response to the Tory narrative of Hume's *History of England* (1754-61). Cowper's decision to read it affirms the Whig principles which he inherited from his grandfather, Spencer Cowper (1670-1728).<sup>24</sup> In her 'Introduction', Macaulay claims that '[p]arty prejudice, and the more detestable principle of private interest, have painted the memoirs of past times in so false a light, that it is with difficulty that we can trace [their] features'.<sup>25</sup> In 1770, Macaulay had opposed her fellow Whig Edmund Burke by railing against

an army of placemen and pensioners, whose private interest is repugnant to the welfare of the public weal; septennial parliaments, in violation of the firmest principle in the constitution; and heavy taxes imposed for the advantage and emolument of individuals, a grievance never submitted to by any people, not essentially enslaved.<sup>26</sup>

In his letters, Cowper aligned himself with Macaulay's opposition to George III and his nominally Whig Prime Minister, Lord North. His claim that Britain is 'affected with every Symptom of decay' echoes Macaulay's views on the destructive effects of 'private interest'. In addition, it invokes the narrative of Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-88). Cowper gave this work a tepid reception because, like

<sup>23</sup> Cowper, 31 January 1782, *Letters*, vol. 2, 13.

<sup>24</sup> See Cowper, 22 February 1784, *Letters*, vol. 2, 217.

<sup>25</sup> Catherine Macaulay, *The History of England from the Accession of James I to that of the Brunswick Line*, 8 vols (London, 1763-83), vol. 1, ix.

<sup>26</sup> Catherine Macaulay, *Observations on a Pamphlet, Entitled, Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents*, third edition (London, 1770), 13-14.

many, he believed that Gibbon had ‘turned his back’ on ‘the flock of Christ’ by implying that the spread of Christianity had contributed to the downfall of Rome.<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, Gibbon’s account of the collapse of the Roman Empire lent an important precedent to Cowper’s predictions for Britain. In his poetry, Cowper drew on Macaulay’s and Gibbon’s explanations of why societies might break down, combining them with more Christian perspectives. Because of his faith, Cowper’s favourite historical work was John Newton’s *Review of Ecclesiastical History* (1770). On 13 June 1783, he wrote to Newton that ‘I have always regretted that your ecclesiastical History went no further ... the facts [are] incontestable, the grand Observation upon them all, irrefragable, and the Stile in my judgment, incomparably better than that of Robertson or Gibbon’.<sup>28</sup> Newton had argued that Earth is a theatre of ‘opposition ... between the spirit of the world and the spirit that is of God’.<sup>29</sup> Cowper drew on this view of the relationship between secular and divine history in much of his poetry.

From the outset of *Poems* (1782), Cowper distanced himself from the ideal of the active life. ‘Table Talk’, for example, engages with what Pocock called ‘the antithesis of “virtue” with “corruption”—or “virtue” with “commerce”’.<sup>30</sup> One of the most influential writers to adopt this position at the time was the clergyman John Brown, whose work *An Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times* was mentioned in Chapter One. Brown predicted the imminent ‘Disunion’ of British society, contending that the ‘present exorbitant Degree of Trade and Wealth’ had brought about a decline in virtue ‘together with a general Defect of *Principle*’:

So long as degenerate and unprincipled Manners can support themselves, they will be deaf to Reason, blind to Consequences, and obstinate in the *long* established Pursuit of *Gain* and *Pleasure*. In such Minds, the Idea of a Public has no Place; and therefore can never be

<sup>27</sup> Cowper, 6 October 1783, *Letters*, vol. 2, 168.

<sup>28</sup> Cowper, 13 June 1783, *Letters*, vol. 4, 142.

<sup>29</sup> John Newton, *A Review of Ecclesiastical History, So far as it Concerns the Progress, Declensions and Revivals of the Evangelical Doctrine and Practice* (London, 1770), 14, xi.

<sup>30</sup> Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, ix.

a Curb to private Gratification: Nor can such Minds be ever awakened from their fatal Dream, till either the Voice of an abused People rouse them into Fear; or the State itself totter, thro' the general Incapacity, Cowardice, and Disunion of those who should support it.<sup>31</sup>

Brown's work was highly influential when published, though its reputation waned soon after when Britain won a series of important victories in the Seven Years' War. Cowper, however, defended 'Th' inestimable estimate of Brown', claiming that 'Its error, if it err'd, was merely this—He thought the dying hour already come' (ll. 391-2).<sup>32</sup> Punning on the adjective 'inestimable', Cowper suggests that Brown was wrong to assign a date to the workings of Providence, but he accepts Brown's reading of British society and incorporates his language of 'principles' and 'corruption' into own writing: 'glory, built / On selfish principles, is shame and guilt; / The deeds that men admire as half divine, / Stark naught, because corrupt in their design (ll. 2-4). Throughout his work, Cowper responds to Brown's assessment of the imminent 'Disunion' of Great Britain and argues that the action required to avert this catastrophe is solitary contemplation.

Cowper develops this theme in 'Expostulation' by giving Gibbon's historical narrative of 'decline and fall' a Christian inflection. In this poem, he bases his authorial persona on Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, who lamented for Israel and exclaimed: 'Oh that I had in the wilderness a lodging place of wayfaring men; that I might leave my people, and go from them!' (9:2). Near the beginning of 'Expostulation', Cowper establishes his identification with the solitary prophet who interceded for his people through sorrow rather than action:

He saw his people slaves to ev'ry lust,  
Lewd, avaricious, arrogant, unjust,  
He heard the wheels of an avenging God  
Groan heavily along the distant road;  
Saw Babylon set wide her two-leav'd brass  
To let the military deluge pass;

<sup>31</sup> John Brown, *An Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times* (London, 1757), 181, 220-1.

<sup>32</sup> William Cowper, 'Table Talk', ll. 391-2, *The Poems of William Cowper*, ed. John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, 3 vols (Oxford, 1980-95), vol. 1, 252.

Jerusalem a prey, her glory soil'd,  
 Her princes captive, and her treasures spoil'd;  
 Wept till all Israel heard his bitter cry,  
 Stamp'd with his foot and smote upon his thigh;  
 But wept and stamp'd and smote his thigh in vain,  
 Pleasure is deaf when told of future pain,  
 And sounds prophetic are too rough to suit  
 Ears long accustom'd to the pleasing lute;  
 They scorn'd his inspiration and his theme,  
 Pronounc'd him frantic and his fears a dream. (ll. 55-70)

In its Biblical context, smiting one's thigh represents a personal act of repentance (Jeremiah 31:19) and it is this kind of personal reflection which Cowper admonishes his readers to perform. He continues to compare himself to Jeremiah in predicting that he will be 'scorn'd' for his expostulation. In the Bible, Jeremiah was punished for his prophecies by being betrayed by his brothers, put into the stocks, imprisoned by the king, threatened with death, and thrown into a dungeon (Jeremiah 12:6, 20:2, 37:18, 38:4, and 38:6). In predicting that his own poem will be met with 'scorn', Cowper responds both to the fate of his role model, and to Newton's *Review of Ecclesiastical History*, which claims that Christ forewarned his disciples to expect the like treatment; he sent them forth as lambs in the midst of wolves, and assured them that their attachment to him would draw on them the hatred of mankind, so far as even to deprive them of the rights of civil society, and the pleasures of relative life.<sup>33</sup>

Cowper's tone in his many addresses to the reader ('How shall a verse impress thee? by what name / Shall I adjure thee not to court thy shame?', ll. 645-5) draws on that of Jeremiah, who attempted to intercede for his people against adverse providence by counselling them to renounce self-interest. Like Newton, Cowper dismisses the actions of the 'Herodian',

the man, however denominated and dignified, who is governed by interest, as the others by pride, and vainly endeavours to reconcile the incompatible services of God and the world, Christ and Belial.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Newton, *Review*, vii-viii.

<sup>34</sup> Newton, *Review*, 46.

Against this view of human action as morally ambivalent, Cowper pursues the course of contemplation and expostulation which, he claims, will lead him to be isolated. The poem ends with a verse paragraph in which Cowper claims that 'My soul shall sigh in secret' (l. 722), presenting his reclusion, like Jeremiah's, as an act of sacrifice for his country.

'Expostulation' arguably offers Cowper's most Christian reading of history, though it still engages with secular models of history. For example, Cowper contradicts Gibbon's notorious assessment in Chapter Fifteen of the *Decline and Fall* that, in focusing on divine rather than earthly concerns and 'refus[ing] to take any active part in the civil administration or the military defence of the empire', the Christians in Rome were guilty of an 'indolent, or even criminal disregard to the public welfare'.<sup>35</sup> In 'Expostulation', Cowper develops the work, which he began in 'Table Talk', of presenting Christian retirement as a new model of the active life. Jeremiah's lamentations are not only a form of contemplation undertaken for the good of his people, but they also serve an active purpose, offering a homiletic model and interceding with God to beg his forgiveness for a corrupt society. Cowper tended to move away from such overtly evangelical readings of history in his subsequent poems, but he and Newton continued to believe that Britain was suffering an adverse providence because of its role in colonialism and slavery. As a result of this, they reasoned that a life of prayer and repentance was a life of active service for their country.

Cowper's changing attitudes towards empire and the role of providence in history are indicated by the revisions he made to the poem 'Heroism' as he prepared it for publication in *Poems* (1782). He originally wrote this poem in the 'Midsummer' of 1780, but set about revising it in December 1781.<sup>36</sup> At the beginning of the month he wrote to Joseph Johnson asking if 'Heroism' could be 'placed at the end' of the volume. He

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<sup>35</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 6 vols (London, 1783), Chapter 15, vol. 2, 326-7.

<sup>36</sup> Cowper, 21 December 1780, *Letters*, vol. 1, 424.

explained this move on the grounds that ‘we shall then begin and end with a compliment to the King—who (poor man) may at this time be glad of such a tribute’.<sup>37</sup> In the same letter, he enclosed the poem ‘Friendship’, referring to the latter as ‘the *allegro*’ in contrast to ‘Heroism’, which he terms ‘the *penseroso*’ of his collection.<sup>38</sup> Cowper’s characterisation of ‘Heroism’ as a melancholic, reflective poem in the Miltonic tradition belies his claim of ‘a compliment to the King’. The poem concludes with the exclamation ‘Oh place me in some heav’n-protected isle, / Where peace and equity and freedom smile’, equating this with ‘Britain’s isle, beneath a George’s reign’ (ll. 83-90). The indefinite article in the phrase ‘a George’s reign’ might have seemed ironic given that it was written shortly after the Gordon Riots, led by George Gordon. At the time, Cowper had written to Newton of ‘A Metropolis in flames, and a Nation in Ruins’.<sup>39</sup> By December 1781, his outlook had become considerably more pessimistic and he wrote to Joseph Hill, claiming:

I consider the loss of America as the ruin of England; were we less incumber’d than we are, at home, we could but ill afford it, but being crushed as we are under an enormous debt that the public credit can at no rate carry much longer, the consequence is sure.<sup>40</sup>

Cowper thus set about editing ‘Heroism’ at a time when his compliment to George III must inevitably have failed to ring true. The British had surrendered at the Siege of Yorktown on 19 October 1781, signalling the end of British rule in America. In this climate, it could no longer be argued that Britain was a land ‘Where peace and equity and freedom smile’; the heavy debts which George III was often blamed for accruing meant that ‘equity’ in particular was a major concern.

‘Heroism’ revolves around a conceit comparing the effects of monarchical rule to the eruption of Mount Etna on 18 May 1780: ‘What are ye monarchs, laurel’d heroes, say, / But Ætnas of the suffering world ye sway?’ (ll. 77-8). Cowper then establishes a

<sup>37</sup> Cowper, 4-17 December 1781, *Letters*, vol. 1, 553.

<sup>38</sup> Cowper, 4-17 December 1781, *Letters*, vol. 1, 553.

<sup>39</sup> Cowper, 12 June 1780, *Letters*, vol. 1, 351.

<sup>40</sup> Cowper, 9 December 1781, *Letters*, vol. 1, 555.

correlation between wealth and warfare in the lines ‘Increasing commerce and reviving art / Renew the quarrel on the conqu’rors part’ (ll. 73-4). In saying this, he follows Gibbon’s central argument that

the decline of Rome was the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness. Prosperity ripened the principle of decay; the causes of destruction multiplied with the extent of conquest; and as soon as time or accident had removed the artificial supports, the stupendous fabric yielded to the pressure of its own weight.<sup>41</sup>

Gibbon held prosperity and luxury partly responsible for the decay of Rome and argued that, like the volcanic eruptions in Cowper’s poem, cataclysms will continue to affect modern societies: ‘The balance of power will continue to fluctuate,’ he argues, ‘and the prosperity of our own, or the neighbouring kingdoms, may be alternately exalted or depressed’.<sup>42</sup> Cowper advanced a critique of George III’s imperial policy through several emendations which he made to the text of ‘Heroism’. In the apostrophe which begins ‘Ye monarchs’, he revised the lines ‘Behold in Ætna’s emblematic fires / The mischiefs that ambitious pride inspires’ by substituting the pronoun ‘your’ for the demonstrative ‘that’ (ll. 45-6).<sup>43</sup> He thus converted the couplet from a general warning into a personal accusation. Similarly, he revised the couplet describing the monarch’s involvement in foreign wars from ‘And Praises such as Fiends from Hell might Earn / With half your Pow’r, resound at your Return’ (*Poems*, vol. 1, 434) to ‘And echoing [*sic.*] praises such as fiends might earn, / And folly pays, resound at your return’ (ll. 61-2). Instead of paying a backhanded compliment to the monarch’s power, Cowper suggests that praises such as those which George III had earned for continuing the war in America were not only ‘echoing’ (and therefore hollow) but also paid by ‘folly’. Though subtle, Cowper’s revisions to the manuscript add up to a reading of history which heavily implicates George III in the predicament of his country. Far from being a compliment to George III, his

<sup>41</sup> Gibbon, *History of the Decline and Fall*, Chapter 38, vol. 6, 407-8.

<sup>42</sup> Gibbon, *History of the Decline and Fall*, Chapter 38, vol. 6, 411.

<sup>43</sup> Variant from manuscript *H*, Cowper’s record book of his poems, Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California (MS. HM 12588); see Cowper, *Poems*, vol. 1, 433.

exclamation ‘Oh place me in some heav’n-protected isle, / Where peace and equity and freedom smile’ (ll. 83-4) expresses a wish to withdraw from the dire current affairs of Great Britain and imitate the Ascetics, who, in Gibbon’s words, ‘fled from a profane and degenerate world, to perpetual solitude, or religious society’.<sup>44</sup>

Britain’s political situation worsened both internally and internationally between the appearance of *Poems* in 1782 and *The Task* in 1785. In March 1782, Lord North was forced to resign as Prime Minister following Britain’s defeat at the Siege of Yorktown. He was replaced by Lord Rockingham, who died in July and was in turn succeeded by the Earl of Shelburne. Shelburne’s failure to negotiate a peace with America meant that he too had to resign in April 1783, giving rise to the formation of the Fox-North Coalition. George III, however, ‘loathed the Coalition and took the first opportunity to destroy it’.<sup>45</sup> This came in the form of a Government Bill aimed at reforming the East India Company by handing its control to seven named commissioners. Upon its announcement, the King made it clear that ‘any peer who supported the Bill “would be considered by him as an enemy”’.<sup>46</sup> He used the Bill’s resulting defeat by the Lords on 17 December as an excuse to remove Fox and North and replace them with William Pitt. Cowper expressed his disapproval of Pitt in a letter to John Newton on 22 February 1784: ‘The Son of Lord Chatham seems to me to have abandoned his father’s principles. I admire neither his measures nor his temper’.<sup>47</sup> In the same letter, he criticised George III for intervening on Pitt’s behalf, accusing him of ‘Stuartism’.<sup>48</sup> As he would no doubt have been aware, the King’s handling of Fox’s East India Bill could be seen to violate the spirit of the first article of the 1689 Bill of Rights: ‘That the pretended power of suspending laws, or the execution of laws, by regal authority,

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<sup>44</sup> Gibbon, *History of the Decline and Fall*, Chapter 37, vol. 6, 239.

<sup>45</sup> Boyd Hilton, *A Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People? England 1783-1846* (Oxford, 2008), 40.

<sup>46</sup> Hilton, *A Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People?*, 40.

<sup>47</sup> Cowper, 22 February 1784, *Letters*, vol. 2, 214-15.

<sup>48</sup> Cowper, 22 February 1784, *Letters*, vol. 2, 215.

without consent of Parliament, is illegal.<sup>49</sup> Beyond this, Cowper disliked George's handling of the Bill because he regarded the reform of the East India Company as a matter of urgency. He detested the Company's involvement in the Second Anglo-Mysore War and accused its directors, led by Warren Hastings, of seeking their 'own emolument' over the 'happiness of 30 millions of mankind': 'That Government therefore is bound to interfere and to Unking these tyrants, is to me self-evident.'<sup>50</sup> With the phrase 'self-evident', Cowper echoes the American Declaration of Independence and implies that Britain should renounce its colonies in the east as it had done those in the west, even though he regarded American independence as a devastating blow to Britain's prospects: 'I am reconciled to the Peace—and despair of my Country.'<sup>51</sup> Cowper regarded the loss of the American colonies as further evidence that, as he put it, '[t]he Nation stands much in need of a political reform'.<sup>52</sup> Yet when Pitt introduced a new Bill for the East India Company, 'allowing the King rather than Parliament to appoint its members',<sup>53</sup> Cowper despaired of 'every hope of constitutional liberty for the Subject'.<sup>54</sup> He wrote to Joseph Hill that 'unless they bestow upon the private Gentleman of no property, a privilege of Voting, I stand no chance of ever being represented myself'.<sup>55</sup>

In this mood of despondency, Cowper became more committed to leading a life of reclusion. He remained convinced, however, that the corruption was concentrated at the top of British society, in its centres of power. In a letter to Mrs Newton, he complained about the dissolute lives of some politicians, adding: 'The exact contrast of such a picture

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<sup>49</sup> Julian Hoppitt, *A Land of Liberty? England 1689-1727* (Oxford, 2002), 24.

<sup>50</sup> Cowper, 3 January 1784, *Letters*, vol. 2, 195.

<sup>51</sup> Cowper, 4 March 1783, *Letters*, vol. 2, 111.

<sup>52</sup> Cowper, 30 March 1783, *Letters*, vol. 2, 118.

<sup>53</sup> Hilton, *A Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People?*, 56.

<sup>54</sup> Cowper, 11 April 1784, *Letters*, vol. 2, 234.

<sup>55</sup> Cowper, 22 January 1785, *Letters*, vol. 2, 321.

is to be found in many cottages at Olney'.<sup>56</sup> He proceeded to eulogise those who lived around him in his small lace-making town in Buckinghamshire:

They Love God, they trust him, they pray to him in secret, and though he means to reward them openly, the day of recompense is delay'd. In the mean time they suffer everything that infirmity and poverty can inflict on them ... It is no wonder that the World who are not in the secret, find themselves obliged, some of them to doubt a Providence, and others absolutely to deny it, when almost all the real virtue there is in it, is to be found living and dying in a state of neglected obscurity, and all the vices of others cannot exclude them from the privilege of worship and honor!<sup>57</sup>

It was with this belief in mind that Cowper composed *The Task* between September 1783 and October 1784. Beyond engaging with current affairs, Cowper's poem articulates a view of history in which individuals living in retirement become an important force in halting and reversing the decline of their society. Cowper offers the life of virtuous reclusion as a solution to the problem that Pocock defines as 'the Machiavellian moment'. Pocock argues that '[i]n embracing the civic ideal ... the humanist staked his future as a moral person on the political health of his city'.<sup>58</sup> Cowper subscribed to the belief that 'citizenship ... consisted in a relationship between one's own virtue and that of another'.<sup>59</sup> However, he believed that many of those who wielded power in his society were corrupt, and that the political health of his country was therefore in jeopardy. Facing what he deemed to be the imminent collapse of British society, he advocated the role which disenfranchised citizens could play in stopping the spread of corruption by withdrawing from its centres of power. Villagers like those celebrated in Gray's 'Elegy' replace statesmen as the principal actors in Cowper's account of history: by 'ke[eping] the noiseless tenor of their way' they work collectively to redeem their country in God's eyes.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Cowper, 23 November 1783, *Letters*, vol. 2, 93.

<sup>57</sup> Cowper, 23 November 1783, *Letters*, vol. 2, 93.

<sup>58</sup> Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, 75.

<sup>59</sup> Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, 74.

<sup>60</sup> Thomas Gray, 'Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard', l. 76, in *The Poems of Thomas Gray*, William Collins, Oliver Goldsmith, ed. Roger Lonsdale (London and Harlow, 1969), 131.

Cowper appears to have refined his narrative understanding of history in the process of writing *The Task*. The theme of history becomes prominent in Book Two, ‘The Time-Piece’, whose title Cowper explained on the basis that the book ‘is intended to strike the hour that gives notice of approaching judgment ... dealing pretty largely in the *signs* of the *times*’.<sup>61</sup> The ‘*signs* of the *times*’ to which he refers include a series of ‘Portentous’ natural events: hurricanes in Jamaica, earthquakes in Sicily, a meteor seen over the south of England, and fogs covering Europe, Africa, and the Ottoman Empire (II, 47-132). Cowper interprets these events as ‘frowning signals’ that ‘bespeak / Displeasure in his breast who smites the earth / Or heals it’ (II, 68-70). His interpretation of them focuses on the guilt that England bears for its continuing involvement in ‘human nature’s broadest, foulest blot’ (II, 22), the slave trade: ‘Tremble and be amazed at thine escape / Far guiltier England, lest he spare not thee’ (II, 159-60). Throughout the book, Cowper foregrounds Britain’s need for internal political reform, rather than discussing the country’s international affairs: he skirts over the on-going wars in America and India, for example, in the line ‘True, we have lost an empire—let it pass’ (II, 263). At this point, his assessment of Britain’s moral condition looks back to John Brown’s *Estimate of the*

*Manners and Principles of the Times:*

Now basket up the family of plagues  
That waste our vitals. Peculation, sale  
Of honor, perjury, corruption, frauds  
By forgery, subterfuge of law,  
By tricks and lies as num’rous and as keen  
As the necessities their authors feel;  
Then cast them closely bundled, ev’ry brat  
At the right door. Profusion is its sire. (II, 667-74)

Brown himself does not use the noun ‘Profusion’, but Cowper’s final claim resembles Brown’s belief that the ‘present exorbitant Degree of Trade and Wealth’ was the key to

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<sup>61</sup> Cowper, 11 December 1784, *Letters*, vol. 2, 309.

understanding why ‘the Principle of Honour is either lost, or totally corrupted’.<sup>62</sup> The metaphor of the ‘sire’ enables Cowper to reconcile his description of the offences as ‘num’rous’ and ‘keen’ with the fact that he wants to present them ‘closely bundled’. Grammatically, he feels his own ‘necessity’ to force an agreement between singular and plural in the lines ‘Then cast *them* closely bundled, ev’ry brat / At the right door. Profusion is *its* sire’ (my emphases). The syntax of these lines resists Cowper’s wish to assign all of his country’s wrongs, as Brown had, a single source. Cowper’s explanation of Britain’s moral decline becomes more nuanced as the poem continues, suggesting that his understanding of history was evolving as he wrote.

At the outset of Book Three, Cowper reviews the progress of his poem and questions its engagement with the moral condition of his country, asking: ‘What chance that I, to fame so little known, / Nor conversant with men or manners much, / Should speak to purpose, or with better hope / Crack the satiric thong?’ (III, 23-6). The adjective ‘conversant’ implies a problem with his attempt to argue for reform: in order to ‘speak to purpose’—to be understood by those he addresses—he must be ‘conversant’ with the ‘men and manners’ he is criticising, where ‘conversant’ suggests not only acquaintance, but also familiarity. The phrase ‘men and manners’, of course, recalls the title Shaftesbury’s *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711). As discussed in the Introduction and Chapter Two, Cowper wrote against Shaftesbury’s attempt to model the rules of sociability on ‘the Case of *Trade*’, for example his claim that: ‘Wit is its own Remedy. Liberty and Commerce bring it to its true standard’.<sup>63</sup> Rather than becoming ‘conversant’ with what he felt to be an inherently corrupt and corrupting model of sociability, Cowper instead chooses to set aside the political themes of Book Two and turn his attention to ‘Domestic happiness’ (III, 41). He describes how he ‘withdrew’ from

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<sup>62</sup> Brown, *Estimate*, 181, 61.

<sup>63</sup> Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, 3 vols (London: John Darby, 1711), vol. 1, 64.

society as a 'stricken deer' and proceeds to lament the folly of contemplating earthly themes at the expense of divine ones (III, 108-38). Tellingly, the first human activity that he labels vain is the writing of history: 'Some write a narrative of wars and feats / Of heroes little known, and call the rant / An history' (III, 139-41). The noun 'rant', coupled with the focus on 'wars and feats / Of heroes', is perhaps meant to evoke the party-political enthusiasm of historians like Hume and Macaulay, though it should be noted that Cowper comes to rely on Macaulay's Whig opposition narrative later in *The Task*. In the lines that follow, he rejects reductive accounts of history like his own in Book Two, criticising the way in which historians write about the individual:

They disentangle from the puzzled skein  
In which obscurity has wrapp'd them up,  
The threads of politic and shrewd design  
That ran through all his purposes, and charge  
His mind with meanings that he never had,  
Or having, kept conceal'd. (III, 145-50)

The 'threads' of motivation which Cowper happily 'bundled' together in Book Two are now presented as a 'puzzled skein'. The sense of 'embranglement and perplexity' which he wrote about in his letter to Joseph Hill begins to come through in his poetry. Cowper's solution to this problem in the rest of *The Task* is to twist together the various historical narratives with which he was familiar, combining Newton's providential history with Gibbon's theory of decline, the classical debate between action and contemplation, and Hume and Macaulay's party-political writing. The result is a much more textured view of history than the one offered in Book Two, and one which foregrounds the complexity of human beings as historical agents whose motives are wrapped in 'obscurity'.

Yet Cowper refuses to remain 'A silent witness of the headlong rage / And heedless folly by which thousands die' (III, 218-19). Instead, he emphasises the importance of withdrawing from society in order to maintain a sense of distance from human history and avoid being drawn into its 'headlong rage' oneself. 'Oh friendly to the

best pursuits of man,' he concludes, 'Friendly to thought, to virtue, and to peace, /

Domestic life in rural leisure pass'd' (III, 290-2):

Me, therefore, studious of laborious ease,  
 Not slothful; happy to deceive the time,  
 Not waste it; and aware that human life  
 Is but a loan to be repaid with use,  
 When he shall call his debtors to account  
 From whom are all our blessings; bus'ness finds  
 Ev'n here...  
 He that attends to his interior self,  
 That has a heart and keeps it; has a mind  
 That hungers, and supplies it; and who seeks  
 A social, not a dissipated life;  
 Has business; feels himself engag'd t'achieve  
 No unimportant, though a silent, task. (III, 361-78)

In these lines Cowper returns to the debate between the active and contemplative life, encapsulating his view that contemplation is a vital form of activity in the oxymoron 'laborious ease'. This echoes Aristotle's belief that 'speculations and thoughts that have their end in themselves' are 'far more' 'active' than the actions of a life lived 'in relation to other men'.<sup>64</sup> The individual who regulates his own 'heart' and 'mind' does not 'stak[e] his future as moral person on the political health of his city', and can thus remain virtuous even when his country becomes corrupt.<sup>65</sup> Thus, the 'labour' that Cowper describes is contemplative: to 'deceive the time' is to resist the temptations of earthly life by directing one's mind away from the corrupting influence of society. In October 1784, he expressed similar sentiments in a letter to William Unwin, claiming that:

You do not mistake me when you suppose that I have great respect for the virtue that flies temptation. It is that sort of prowess which the whole strain of Scripture calls upon us to manifest when assailed by sensual Evil. Interior mischiefs must be grappled with. There is no flight from *them*. But solicitations to sin that address themselves to our bodily senses, are, I believe, seldom conquer'd in any other way.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, VII, iii, 5 (1325b), 550-1, quoted above.

<sup>65</sup> Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, 75.

<sup>66</sup> Cowper, 20 October 1784, *Letters*, vol. 2, 288.

By withdrawing, the individual can avoid the kind of ‘sensual Evil’ described in Brown’s *Estimate*.<sup>67</sup> Such withdrawal, however, leaves ‘Interior mischiefs’ to be ‘grappled with’, and this work of constantly observing and improving one’s selfish impulses and attitude towards society accounts for Cowper’s belief that ‘He that attends to his interior self’ has ‘No unimportant, though a silent, task’. Cowper extends this claim by adding that the ‘just point’ of the human mind is ‘the service of mankind’ (III, 371). In reconciling this belief with his argument for retirement, he appears to echo the eighth of Seneca’s *Epistles*, which argues similarly: ‘Believe me, those who seem to be busied with nothing are busied with the greater tasks; they are dealing at the same time with things mortal and things immortal’.<sup>68</sup> Like Seneca, Cowper figures the contemplative individual as a mediator between human and divine concerns. By focusing on God and living virtuously, Cowper argues, reclusive individuals can set an example that will improve the ‘political health’ of their society and help to redeem it in God’s eyes.

Having withdrawn from the discussion of contemporary society in Book Three, Cowper returns to it in Books Four and Five. The latter contains some of the most overtly political verse in the poem, as Cowper embarks upon a critique of monarchy which escalates, through the next two Books, into a powerful call for his readers to withdraw from society. In Book Five, Cowper attacks the principles of monarchy in which ‘a man / Compounded and made up like other men / Of elements tumultuous ... Should be a despot absolute’ (V, 306-11). These lines portray monarchs as the antithesis of the contemplative individual described in Book Three: while the contemplative individual ‘attends to his interior self’ and regulates his conduct, the monarch, being ‘the only freeman of his land’, feels no compulsion to do so (V, 312). This criticism echoes Gibbon’s description of how in Rome, under the Caesars, ‘[t]he happiness of an hundred millions depended on the

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<sup>67</sup> Brown, *Estimate*, 220-1.

<sup>68</sup> Seneca, Epistle VIII, *Ad Lucilium*, vol. 1, 41: ‘Mihi crede, qui nihil agere videntur, maiora agunt; humana divinaque simul tractant.’

personal merit of one, or two, men, perhaps children, whose minds were corrupted by education, luxury, and despotic power'.<sup>69</sup> Cowper proceeds to offer a Whig critique of the monarchy (citing the familiar Whig heroes, 'our Hampdens and our Sidneys', V, 486) in which he argues that the king 'is ours, / T'administer, to guard, t'adorn the state, / But not to warp or change it' (V, 341-3). Throughout this passage he focuses his criticisms on Louis XVI, implying, like Hume, that since 1688 the British have 'enjoyed ... the most entire system of liberty, that ever was known amongst mankind'.<sup>70</sup> At this point, however, he abandons the contrast which has served to outline his Whig principles, and attacks the British political system in terms which resemble Catherine Macaulay's:

th'age of virtuous politics is past,  
 And we are deep in that of cold pretence.  
 Patriots are grown too shrewd to be sincere,  
 And we too wise to trust them. He that takes  
 Deep in his soft credulity the stamp  
 Design'd by loud declaimers on the part  
 Of liberty, themselves the slaves of lust,  
 Incurs derision for his easy faith  
 And lack of knowledge, and with cause enough:  
 For when was public virtue found  
 Where private was not? Can he love the whole  
 Who loves no part? He be a nation's friend  
 Who is, in truth, the friend of no man there? (V, 493-505)

Cowper signals his allegiance to Macaulay's Whig histories through his use of the phrase 'cold pretence'. The noun 'pretence' was a favourite of Macaulay's: she used it throughout her *History of England* to reveal the hypocrisy of monarchs and ministers, for example in her closing remark that she has 'endeavoured to direct the judgement of the public to the detection of those marked hypocrites, who, under the specious pretence of public good, had advanced their private interest and ambition on the ruin of all that is valuable to

<sup>69</sup> Gibbon, *History of the Decline and Fall*, Chapter 38, vol. 6, 414.

<sup>70</sup> David Hume, *The History of England, from The Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688*, 8 vols (London, 1770), vol. 8, 336-7.

man'.<sup>71</sup> With the adjective 'cold', Cowper implies that there is no longer any shame attached to such duplicity: hypocrites can act coolly, without blushing.

Cowper's wider argument about the corruption of British society also resembles that of Macaulay's continuation of *The History of England, from the Revolution to the Present Time* (1778). In this instalment, which carried her oppositional narrative closer to its true targets (George III and his government), Macaulay contended that the Whig principles of 1688 had become corrupted by politicians who 'were rather swayed by private interest, revenge, ambition, and other appetites, than guided by any sense of the public good'.<sup>72</sup> In order to ingratiate William III, she claims, they indulged him in his foreign wars and allowed him to rack up the national debt. Macaulay reasons that this necessarily produced a brood of usurers, brokers, and stock-jobbers, who preyed upon the vitals of their country; and from this fruitful source, venality overspread the land; corruption ... received the countenance of the whole legislature; and every individual began openly to buy and sell his interest in his country, without either the fear of shame or penalty.<sup>73</sup>

Macaulay documents the breakdown of the civic humanist ideal that individuals should act in the best interests of their society. Like Cowper, she regards this process of corruption as emanating from the highest ranks of society and then trickling down. In the lines quoted above, Cowper argues that the virtuous individual living in a corrupt society must learn to avoid being 'credul[ous]' of supposedly good public causes. He compares the politically credulous mind to an envelope sealed by another person. Such a mind, he implies, willingly 'takes / Deep' the 'stamp' of another because it is easier to seal one's mind with an external authority than to decide on the right course of action for oneself. He rejects the 'easy faith' of a mind that allows itself to be imprinted by mere speech ('by loud Declaimers'), arguing instead that the individual has a responsibility to resist such impressionability, and to pursue 'Virtue' in 'private' rather than adopting the 'easy faith'

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<sup>71</sup> Macaulay, *History of England from the Accession*, vol. 8, 339.

<sup>72</sup> Catherine Macaulay, *The History of England, from the Revolution to the Present Time* (Bath, 1778), 33.

<sup>73</sup> Macaulay, *History of England, from the Revolution*, 82-3.

of a 'public' cause. In this way, he inverts Pocock's claim that 'in acting upon his world through war and statecraft, the practitioner of civic virtue was acting on himself'.<sup>74</sup> For Cowper, the inverse was true: by acting on him- or herself, the 'practitioner of civic virtue' could be seen as 'acting upon his [or her] world'. In the final lines quoted above, he offers a list of synecdoches:

For when was *public* virtue found  
Where *private* was not? Can he love the *whole*  
Who loves no *part*? He be a *nation*'s friend  
Who is, in truth, the friend of no *man* there? (my emphases)

Through this series of oppositions, Cowper suggests that the individual stands as a synecdoche for the state. By regulating his or her own conduct, the retired individual can thus ensure that at least one part of British society avoids corruption. In the final pairing, Cowper asks 'Can he be strenuous in his country's cause, / Who slights the charities for whose dear sake / That country, if at all, must be beloved?' (V, 506-08). Continuing the list of synecdoches, Cowper implies that 'charities' stand as the 'part' in relation to the 'whole' 'country'. In a Christian inflection of the civic humanist ideal, he posits a model of nationhood in which society is understood as the cumulative effect of a vast number of charitable actions performed by individuals.

Later in Book Five, Cowper proposes a redefinition of history which takes into account the actions of private individuals. He begins by criticising contemporary historians for doing more to commemorate the lives of 'Patriots' than those of 'martyrs' (V, 704-32). In the case of military leaders, he argues, 'Th' historic muse, / Proud of the treasure, marches with it down / To latest times' (V, 707-9). The fact that the muse 'marches' suggests that history writing is both too militaristic in its focus too regimented in its arguments. Cowper criticises the narrow sense of national pride which made British historians view military leaders as the country's greatest 'treasure'. By contrast, he argues,

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<sup>74</sup> Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, 40.

‘fairer wreaths are due, though never paid, / To those who posted at the shrine of truth, / Have fall’n in her defence’ (V, 712-14). This argument is familiar from Macaulay’s *History of England*, which accuses the British people of ‘inattention to the most exalted of their benefactors’.<sup>75</sup> Whereas Macaulay applies this argument to political reformers, however, Cowper refers to the country’s spiritual leaders, who ‘lived unknown / Till persecution dragg’d them into fame / And chased them up to heaven’ (V, V, 724-6). He accuses ‘History’ of being ‘warm on meaner themes’ but ‘cold on this’, illustrating his point by including the footnote ‘See Hume’ (V, 729-32).<sup>76</sup> Cowper probably objected to the coolly pragmatic tone with which Hume handled the deaths of Protestants during Queen Mary’s reign. ‘Open the door to toleration,’ Hume claimed in his analysis, and the same man, who, in other circumstances would have braved flames and tortures, is engaged to change his religion from the smallest prospect of favour and advancement, or even from the frivolous hopes of becoming more fashionable in his principles.<sup>77</sup>

For Cowper, however, this was exactly how the country’s unacknowledged spiritual leaders differed from its famous generals and politicians: those ‘posted at the shrine of truth’ performed their service out of devotion, without hoping for earthly recognition. They therefore offered a passive, contemplative model of patriotism to contrast with the Cicero’s active life of politics and warfare.

Cowper developed this model of reclusive virtue further in Book Six of *The Task*, which culminates with a section summarised in ‘The Argument’ under the heading ‘The retired man vindicated from the charge of uselessness’.<sup>78</sup> He begins by extending the concept of contemplative patriotism from martyrs to all Christians, arguing that British society is too corrupt for Christians to play an active role in its government. In doing so, he draws on John Newton’s account of an ‘opposition ... between the spirit of the world and

<sup>75</sup> Macaulay, *History of England from the Accession*, vol. 1, viii.

<sup>76</sup> Cowper, *Poems*, vol. 2, 229n.

<sup>77</sup> Hume, *History of England*, vol. 4, 452-3.

<sup>78</sup> Cowper, *Poems*, vol. 2, 235.

the spirit that is of God'.<sup>79</sup> Cowper claims that in a 'gross and selfish' world the 'meek and modest truth' is forced 'To seek a refuge from the tongue of strife / In nooks obscure, far from the ways of men' (VI, 837-42). These lines echo Newton's claim that Jesus sent his disciples 'forth as lambs in the midst of wolves, and assured them that their attachment to him would draw on them the hatred of mankind'.<sup>80</sup> They also echo Book Seven of *Paradise Lost*, where Milton describes himself as being 'fallen on evil days ... and evil tongues; / In darkness, and with dangers compassed round, / And solitude.'<sup>81</sup> Cowper applies Milton's account of his isolation during the Restoration reprisals to all Christians, arguing that those who try to live virtuously are automatically excluded from a corrupt society. Yet he proceeds to praise 'the happy man, whose life ev'n now / Shows somewhat of that happier life to come' (VI, 906-7). He argues that 'The world o'erlooks him in her busy search / Of objects more illustrious', but concludes that 'more sublimely, he o'erlooks the world' (VI, 915-18). Cowper modifies the sense of the verb 'o'erlooks' in this chiasmic structure: in the first instance it connotes the world's failure to see the individual's worth, but in the second it connotes the individual's ability to comprehend the mixture of good and evil in the world at a glance. Cowper figures the retired individual as being blessed with a Stoic self-control and a 'sublime' power of historical vision, one which allows him to see his own position not only within the whole of secular history, but also within God's providential scheme:

Ask him indeed, what trophies he has rais'd,  
Or what achievements of immortal fame  
He purposes, and he shall answer—None.  
His warfare is within. There unfatigu'd  
His fervent spirit labours. There he fights,  
And there obtains fresh triumphs o'er himself,  
And never with'ring wreaths, compar'd with which  
The laurels that a Caesar reaps are weeds.  
Perhaps the self-approving haughty world,

<sup>79</sup> Newton, *Review*, xi.

<sup>80</sup> Newton, *Review*, vii-viii.

<sup>81</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, VII, 25-8, ed. Alastair Fowler (Harlow, 2007), 391.

That as she sweeps him with her whistling silks  
 Scarce deigns to notice him, or, if she see,  
 Deems him a cypher in the works of God,  
 Receives advantage from his noiseless hours,  
 Of which she little dreams. Perhaps she owes  
 Her sunshine and her rain, her blooming spring  
 And plenteous harvest, to the pray'r he makes,  
 When, Isaac like, the solitary saint  
 Walks forth to meditate at even tide,  
 And think on her, who thinks not for herself. (VI, 932-50)

These lines set out Cowper's final response to Gibbon's treatment of the Christianity in Chapter Fifteen of the *Decline and Fall*. Gibbon had framed his discussion of Christianity around the need to live an active life, arguing that the 'love of action'

often leads to anger, to ambition, and to revenge; but when it is guided by the sense of propriety and benevolence, it becomes the parent of every virtue; and if those virtues are accompanied with equal abilities, a family, a state, or an empire, may be indebted for their safety and prosperity to the undaunted courage of a single man.<sup>82</sup>

By contrast, Gibbon contended that the 'inactive disposition' of the early Christians was 'utterly incapable of procuring any happiness to the individual, or any public benefit to the world', and added that 'it was not in *this* world that the primitive Christians were desirous of making themselves either agreeable or useful'.<sup>83</sup> Cowper subverts this argument by painting his own portrait of the individual to whom the British people owe their 'safety and prosperity'. Cowper's hero is not a politician or a soldier, but a version of the retired individual from Book Three, who 'attends to his interior self' (III, 373). This contemplative patriot performs all of the functions of active life: he 'labours', engages in 'warfare', and wins 'laurels', but he does all of these things internally in the process of trying to live virtuously and win 'triumphs o'er himself'. Continuing the string of synecdoches from Book Five, the mind of the faithful Christian becomes a microcosm of a civic humanist republic, filled with all the virtues and charities that a healthy society should contain. Cowper's references to 'works of God' and 'immortal fame' are full of

<sup>82</sup> Gibbon, *History of the Decline and Fall*, Chapter 15, vol. 2, 320.

<sup>83</sup> Gibbon, *History of the Decline and Fall*, Chapter 15, vol. 2, 321.

irony, since the individual he describes is unique in playing an important role within both human and providential history. In his *Review*, Newton claimed that

The proper design and tendency of the religion of Jesus is, to wean the affections from the world, to mortify the dictates of self-love, and to teach us (by his example) to be gentle, forbearing, benevolent and disinterested.<sup>84</sup>

This is crucially different from Gibbon's description of Christians not being 'desirous of making themselves either agreeable or useful' in this world. Cowper's description of the individual who attempts to reform his or her own mind before intervening in public affairs bears far more resemblance to Gibbon's account of the Emperor Julian. According to Gibbon, Julian believed

that the man who presumes to reign, should aspire to the perfection of the divine nature; that he should purify his soul from her mortal and terrestrial part; that he should extinguish his appetites, enlighten his understanding, regulate his passions, and subdue the wild beast, which, according to the lively metaphor of Aristotle, seldom fails to ascend the throne of a despot.<sup>85</sup>

Gibbon claimed that Julian excelled as an Emperor because 'Philosophy had instructed [him] to compare the advantages of action and retirement'.<sup>86</sup> The retired hero of *The Task* does not exert any such authority over his society, but he does serve, like 'Isaac', as a willing sacrifice, renouncing worldly advancement in order to avoid corruption. Cowper shows that thinkers from Aristotle onwards have recommended the life of virtuous reclusion as one which combines the ideals of action and contemplation. He canonises his anonymous hero as a 'solitary saint' and bequeaths him to his readers as a model of how to live virtuously in a corrupt society. In the 1780s, when Britain's political situation seemed highly precarious, Cowper described an ideal citizen whose principles could survive the breakdown of society. He thus offered a fascinating prospect to Wordsworth in the wake of the French Revolution.

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<sup>84</sup> Newton, *Review*, 309.

<sup>85</sup> Gibbon, *History of the Decline and Fall*, Chapter 22, vol. 4, 38.

<sup>86</sup> Gibbon, *History of the Decline and Fall*, Chapter 22, vol. 4, 37.

*'Let us look to ourselves': lessons from the French Revolution*

Among the conclusions which Wordsworth drew from the failure of the French Revolution, two recur throughout the body of his work: firstly, contemplation needs to precede action; secondly, individuals must learn to govern themselves before attempting to govern others. These principles can be seen as early as 1794, in Wordsworth's correspondence with William Mathews about their planned periodical, *The Philanthropist*. Having declared his opposition to 'monarchical and aristocratical governments, however modified',<sup>87</sup> Wordsworth added that 'I recoil from the bare idea of a revolution':

I deplore the miserable situation of the French; and think we can only be guarded from the same scourge by the undaunted efforts of good men in propagating with unremitting activity those doctrines which long and severe meditation has taught them are essential to the welfare of mankind.<sup>88</sup>

Despite emphasising the need for 'unremitting activity', Wordsworth argues that such activity must follow 'long and severe meditation'. In this respect, he echoes Aristotle in calling for 'the activity of contemplation' (*energeia theōrētikē*) to precede and direct political action.<sup>89</sup> More than forty years later, Wordsworth expressed similar principles in his sonnet 'Blessed Statesman He, whose Mind's unselfish will', composed in 1838 and published among the 'Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty and Order' in 1845.<sup>90</sup> Still sensitive to the 'embranglement and perplexity' of history, Wordsworth wrote that the 'Blest Statesman' is one who possesses the 'skill / Of Prudence, disentangling good and ill / With patient care ... prompt to move, but firm to wait,— / Knowing, things rashly sought are rarely found' (ll. 4-10). Once again, contemplation must precede action and the

<sup>87</sup> Wordsworth, 8 June 1794, *Letters*, vol. 1, 123.

<sup>88</sup> Wordsworth, 8 June 1794, *Letters*, vol. 1, 124-5.

<sup>89</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, X, vii, 1 (1177a), 612-13.

<sup>90</sup> William Wordsworth, *Sonnet Series and Itinerary Poems, 1820-1845*, ed. Geoffrey Jackson (Ithaca and London, 2004), 899-900n.

‘Statesman’ must regulate his own mind with ‘patient care’ before attempting to govern others. Many critics have focused on what John Rieder has called Wordsworth’s ‘counterrevolutionary turn’, arguing that his growing interest in reclusion was part of ‘a widespread mid-1790s movement away from political activism’, which exploited ‘the problematic, but classically sanctioned, ethical status of rural retirement as opposed to civic participation’.<sup>91</sup> From the quotations above, it is clear that Wordsworth, like Cowper and many other writers before him, did not see a dichotomy between ‘rural retirement’ and ‘civic participation’. On the contrary, he believed that contemplative reclusion taught individuals to govern their selfish passions, and that it was therefore ‘essential to the welfare of mankind’ by forming good citizens and avoiding a repeat of the violence in France. Though it is certainly true that Wordsworth’s beliefs became more Tory and more Anglican as he grew older, it is important to note that the lessons he had drawn from France by 1794 continued to shape his writing for the rest of his life.

In response to the failure of the Revolution, Wordsworth developed a series of political arguments for reclusion which closely resemble Cowper’s arguments in *The Task*. Like Cowper, Wordsworth took a keen interest in historiography and read widely in order to refine and support his views on the need for individuals to withdraw from a corrupt society. The project of *The Recluse* which he announced in the ‘Preface’ to *The Excursion* (1814) was conceived quickly, as I hope to show, after the French invasion of Switzerland in March 1798. Yet Wordsworth’s extensive reading about the duties of citizenship helped him, like Cowper, to mount a case for reclusion as an ethical response to contemporary events. In his letter to Mathews, Wordsworth names ‘Milton, [Algernon] Sydney, [and] Machiavel’ among the political writers ‘distinguished for their exertions in the cause of

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<sup>91</sup> John Rieder, *Wordsworth’s Counterrevolutionary Turn: Community, Virtue, and Vision in the 1790s* (Newark and London, 1997), 19.

liberty'.<sup>92</sup> He thus displays his commitment to the republican writers of the English Civil War and to Machiavelli, whose republican and civic humanist ideals, especially in the *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio* (*Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livy*, 1531), Pocock has analysed in *The Machiavellian Moment*. Milton argued for the efficacy of contemplation throughout his prose works, for example in *The Reason of Church-Government* (1642), where he claimed that 'by how much the internal man is more excellent and noble than the external, by so much is his cure more exactly, more thoroughly, and more particularly to be perform'd'.<sup>93</sup> Although he dismissed 'fugitive and cloister'd vertue, unexercis'd & unbreath'd' in *Areopagitica* (1644), he went on immediately to argue that this 'vertue' is best improved through 'the *contemplation of evill*' (my emphasis).<sup>94</sup> Wordsworth was indebted to Milton and his fellow republicans for the view that reclusion was necessary to the moral development of good citizens. Another important Civil War source for this belief was James Harrington's work *The Commonwealth of Oceana* (1656). Duncan Wu notes that Wordsworth owned the first English edition of this work and that 'Milton, Sidney and Harrington were essential reading among the Girondins with whom [he] associated in France in 1791-2'.<sup>95</sup> More than twenty years later, Wordsworth continued to value these writers highly, singling out 'Machiavel ... Harrington, and lastly Milton, whose tractate of education never loses sight of the means of making man perfect, both for contemplation and action'.<sup>96</sup> Wordsworth finally announced the project of *The Recluse*, 'a philosophical Poem, containing views of Man, Nature, and Society ... having for its principal subject the sensations and opinions of a

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<sup>92</sup> Wordsworth, 8 June 1794, *Letters*, vol. 1, 125.

<sup>93</sup> John Milton, *The Reason of Church-Government*, in *Prose Works of John Milton*, gen. ed. Don M. Wolfe, 8 vols (New Haven and London, 1953-82), vol. 1, 837.

<sup>94</sup> John Milton, *Areopagitica*, in *Prose Works*, vol. 2, 515.

<sup>95</sup> Duncan Wu, *Wordsworth's Reading 1770-1799* (Cambridge, 1993), 72.

<sup>96</sup> Wordsworth, 11 June 1816, *Letters*, vol. 3, 323.

Poet living in retirement', in the 'Preface' to *The Excursion* (1814).<sup>97</sup> Yet this project deserves to be seen in the context not only of more than two decades of historical reading on Wordsworth's part, but also of the political case for reclusion which Cowper had mounted in *The Task*.

It seems likely that Wordsworth and Coleridge devised the project of *The Recluse* as a response to the French invasion of Switzerland on 5 March 1798. Following his return from France in 1792, Wordsworth had thought deeply about the relative merits of action and contemplation, concluding that revolutions would continue to fail until individuals learned to govern their selfish passions through 'long and severe meditation'.<sup>98</sup> Yet it seems that the French invasion of Switzerland was the event which prompted him and Coleridge to begin discussing *The Recluse* in earnest. Though it took place on 5 March 1798, the invasion was not reported in the British press for almost a fortnight.<sup>99</sup> However, news of France's intentions towards Switzerland hit the papers the next day (6 March) with the publication of a letter from Mengaud, the French Minister to the Swiss Cantons, dated 30 Pluvisoise (18 February). This piece, entitled 'The Minister of the French Republic to the People of Switzerland', appeared simultaneously in many of the major British periodicals, including *The Morning Chronicle* and the *Morning Post*, which Wordsworth and Coleridge 'read ... on a regular basis'.<sup>100</sup> Mengaud laid out France's intentions towards Switzerland in obvious terms, claiming that: 'the present proceedings have no other object than to overthrow a vicious and corrupt Government, and to substitute in its stead, one more conformable to that of the French and Cisalpine Republics'.<sup>101</sup>

Wordsworth wrote to James Tobin the same day announcing a poem, then unnamed, on

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<sup>97</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, ed. Sally Bushell, James A. Butler, and Michael C. Jaye, with the assistance of David Garcia, (Ithaca and London, 2007), 38.

<sup>98</sup> Wordsworth, 8 June 1794, *Letters*, vol. 1, 124-5.

<sup>99</sup> 'London. March 17', *The Morning Post and Gazetteer*, 9107 (17 March 1798), 2.

<sup>100</sup> Wu, *Wordsworth's Reading*, 105.

<sup>101</sup> 'The Minister of the French Republic to the People of Switzerland', *Morning Post*, 9097 (6 March 1798), 3.

‘Nature, Man, and Society’.<sup>102</sup> Five days later, he informed James Losh that he had ‘written 1300 lines of a poem which I hope to make of considerable utility; its title will be *The Recluse or views of Nature, Man, and Society*’.<sup>103</sup> Kenneth Johnston has argued that these lines comprise ‘The Ruined Cottage’, ‘The Old Cumberland Beggar’, ‘A Night Piece’, and the lines now known as ‘The Discharged Soldier’.<sup>104</sup> When considering why Wordsworth chose to unite these pieces as *The Recluse*, Johnston suggests that ‘[t]here is no mystery as to the largest part of the answer. It is Coleridge and philosophy’.<sup>105</sup> He adds that ‘a preference for a reclusive over a philanthropic hero would have been natural for Wordsworth in 1798 as a way of distancing himself from his earlier enthusiasms for revolutionary projects’.<sup>106</sup> In practice, however, it seems that *The Recluse* arose directly from the ‘embranglement and perplexity’ of history following the Revolution, as Wordsworth and Coleridge’s response to the French invasion of Switzerland.

Around 10 March 1798 (between Wordsworth’s letters to Tobin and Losh), Coleridge wrote the famous letter to his brother George in which he claimed to have ‘snapped [his] squeaking baby-trumpet of Sedition’.<sup>107</sup> It seems likely that this, too, was a response to the invasion of Switzerland, since Coleridge had mentioned *The Recluse* in a letter to Joseph Cottle on 7 March.<sup>108</sup> In his letter to George, Coleridge announced his intention to withdraw into reclusive contemplation, explaining this decision by quoting Wordsworth’s poetry alongside Cowper’s. The lines which he reproduces from *The Task* (V, 496-508) are the ones discussed in the previous section, where Cowper declares that those who are credulous about public causes deserve ‘derision for [their] easy faith’: ‘For

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<sup>102</sup> Wordsworth, 6 March 1798, *Letters*, vol. 1, 212.

<sup>103</sup> Wordsworth, 11 March 1798, *Letters*, vol. 1, 214.

<sup>104</sup> Kenneth R. Johnston, *Wordsworth and The Recluse* (New Haven and London, 1984), 5-6.

<sup>105</sup> Johnston, *Wordsworth and The Recluse*, 9.

<sup>106</sup> Johnston, *Wordsworth and The Recluse*, 13.

<sup>107</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, c. 10 March 1798, *Collected Letters*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols (Oxford, 1956-81), vol. 1, 397.

<sup>108</sup> Coleridge, 7 March 1798, *Letters*, vol. 1, 391.

when was public virtue found / Where private was not?' (V, 500-3). In his letter, Coleridge applies these criticisms to himself. He echoes Cowper's phrase 'loud Declaimers on the part / Of Liberty' in his own 'squeaking baby-trumpet of Seditious', figuring himself as having been like a child imitating pro-Revolution sentiments without understanding the consequences of what he said.<sup>109</sup> The 'one good consequence', he claims, 'which I expect from revolutions, is that Individuals will see the necessity of individual effort'.<sup>110</sup> Following Cowper, Coleridge resolves to 'bind down my mind' to 'long meditation' on the 'quantity & nature of the Evil'.<sup>111</sup> Here, Coleridge reflects the wider argument of Book Five of *The Task*, which predicts that political revolutions will continue to fail until individuals learn to regulate their own conduct before attempting to remodel the state.

Having quoted these lines from *The Task*, Coleridge proceeds to quote lines 1-18 of Wordsworth's 'reconciling addendum' to MS. B of *The Ruined Cottage*.<sup>112</sup> In doing so, he implies that Wordsworth has built upon Cowper's achievement in *The Task* to describe what this process of self-regulation might look like:

Not useless do I deem  
 These shadowy Sympathies with things that hold  
 An inarticulate Language: for the Man  
 Once taught to love such objects  
 ...  
 cannot chuse  
 But seek for objects of a kindred Love  
 In fellow-natures, & a kindred Joy.  
 Accordingly, he by degrees perceives  
 His feelings of aversion softened down,  
 A holy tenderness pervade his frame!<sup>113</sup>

Coleridge probably recognised that Wordsworth had adapted the line 'A holy tenderness pervade his frame' from Cowper's poem 'Table Talk'.<sup>114</sup> He reads Wordsworth as

<sup>109</sup> Coleridge, c.10 March 1798, *Letters*, vol. 1, 397.

<sup>110</sup> Coleridge, c. 10 March 1798, *Letters*, vol. 1, 395.

<sup>111</sup> Coleridge, c. 10 March 1798, *Letters*, vol. 1, 398.

<sup>112</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Ruined Cottage and The Pedlar*, ed. James Butler (Ithaca, New York, 1989), 261.

<sup>113</sup> Coleridge, c. 10 March 1798, *Letters*, vol. 1, 397-8.

developing Cowper's arguments for reclusion, implying that Wordsworth's nature philosophy complements Cowper's political arguments for withdrawal by explaining how reclusion can root out the selfish passions. Coleridge goes on to synthesise Cowper's and Wordsworth's arguments into a stance of morally self-regulative withdrawal into nature, claiming that:

I love fields & woods & mounta[ins] with almost a visionary fondness—and because I have found benevolence & quietness growing within me as that fondness [has] increased, therefore I should wish to be the means of implanting it in others—and to destroy the bad passions not by combating them, but by keeping them in inaction.<sup>115</sup>

The phrase 'not by combating them, but by keeping them in inaction' echoes the discussion of reclusion in Book Three of *The Task*, where Cowper argues that 'When fierce temptation seconded / By traitor appetite ... invades the throbbing breast, / To combat may be glorious, and success / Perhaps may crown us, but to fly is safe' (III, 685-8). Coleridge suggests that, between them, Cowper and Wordsworth have imagined the necessary political response to the failure of the French Revolution. As Wordsworth had begun to suggest in his letter to Mathews, individuals must withdraw from society and learn to regulate their passions through contemplation before attempting to intervene in the state.

Wordsworth's challenge in *The Recluse*, as articulated by Coleridge, was to advocate reclusion in nature as the best possible response to the failure of the French Revolution. Cowper had already confronted the paradox of writing about withdrawal as a form of political engagement in *The Task*. Yet, as discussed in the last section, he had initially resolved this paradox by celebrating 'Domestic happiness' as the 'nurse of virtue' (III, 41-8). For Coleridge, writing in 1799, this idea seems to have been too redolent of Burke's claim that 'to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle

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<sup>114</sup> Cf. 'A tender sympathy pervades the frame', 'Table Talk', l. 485, in Cowper, *Poems*, vol. 1, 254.

<sup>115</sup> Coleridge, c. 10 March 1798, *Letters*, vol. 1, 397.

(the germ as it were) of public affections'.<sup>116</sup> In a letter of circa 10 September, Coleridge tried to prevent Wordsworth from relying on arguments for domesticity by imploring him to write

a poem, in blank verse, addressed to those, who, in consequence of the complete failure of the French Revolution, have thrown up all hopes of the amelioration of mankind, and are sinking into an almost epicurean selfishness, disguising the same under the soft titles of domestic attachment and contempt for visionary *philosophes*.<sup>117</sup>

When Wordsworth received this letter, he was still busy writing and revising the 1798-9 version of *The Prelude*. Stephen Parrish suggested that the final lines of Part Two were composed in December 1799,<sup>118</sup> which is consistent with the fact that they echo the wording of Coleridge's letter. In the antepenultimate verse paragraph, Wordsworth claims that 'if in these times of fear ... when good men / On every side fall off we know not how / To selfishness disguised in gentle names / Of peace, and quiet, and domestic love ... the gift is yours, / Ye Mountains! thine, O Nature' (II, 478-92). Wordsworth's initial response to Coleridge's letter was to incorporate its argument (and, indeed, almost its very words) into the conclusion of the *Two-Part Prelude*. Yet these lines feel like an addendum, because in the history of composition this is exactly what they were. It becomes difficult to distinguish Wordsworth's desire to live 'content / With [his] own modest pleasures ... With God and Nature communing' (II, 474-6) from the 'gentle names' for 'peace, and quiet, and domestic love' which, following Coleridge, he presents as a mask for 'selfishness'. This problem arguably stems from Wordsworth's adoption of the language of Coleridge's letter, which contradicts the model of reclusion that both poets had previously praised in *The Task*. Coleridge's intervention against domesticity in 1799 can be read as bringing Wordsworth's work on the *Prelude* to a halt, necessitating him to

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<sup>116</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France, and on the Proceedings of Certain Societies in London Relative to that Event* (London, 1790), 68.

<sup>117</sup> Coleridge, c. 10 September 1799, *Letters*, vol. 1, 527.

<sup>118</sup> See his 'Introduction' in William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, 1798-1799*, ed. Stephen Parrish (Ithaca, 1988), 34.

articulate for himself how reclusion could provide an apt response to the events of recent history.

Following Coleridge's request, Wordsworth began to define a set of political arguments for reclusion in the 'Sonnets to Liberty', which he commenced in 1802 and published in *Poems, in Two Volumes* (1807). In these poems, Wordsworth built on the works of Civil War republicans like Milton, Sidney, and Harrington to articulate the character of a good citizen, one who could remain virtuous in a society wracked with corruption and warfare. In a letter to Lady Beaumont in 1807, Wordsworth claimed that the sonnets published in *Poems, in Two Volumes* 'collectively make a Poem on the subject of civil Liberty and national independence'.<sup>119</sup> Several critics have emphasised the 'national' character of these poems, though fewer have explored their commitment to 'civil Liberty'. Richard Gravil has drawn attention to the 'splicing of Commonwealthman and Warlike Patriot' in the 'Sonnets to Liberty'.<sup>120</sup> He complicates the idea that the poems are nationalistic, by arguing that 'Freedom in these sonnets is conspicuously *British*; rapine, avarice, and emasculation are *English*'.<sup>121</sup> Rather than being paeans to Englishness, the sonnets tap into the opposition arguments about national decay which Cowper had used in *The Task*. They present a series of heroes (including 'Sydney, Marvel, Harrington'<sup>122</sup> and Milton, but also Toussaint L'Ouverture, Gustavus IV of Sweden, and Viscount Dundee) who are united not by their various national identities, but by their moral independence and heroism. Throughout the 'Sonnets to Liberty', Wordsworth uses the republican writings of Milton, Sidney, and Harrington to articulate a model of citizenship in which virtuous individuals learn to govern themselves in private life before emerging, like the 'retired man' in *The Task*, as national heroes.

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<sup>119</sup> Wordsworth, 21 May 1807, *Letters*, vol. 2, 147.

<sup>120</sup> Richard Gravil, *Wordsworth's Bardic Vocation, 1787-1842* (Basingstoke, 2003), 226.

<sup>121</sup> Gravil, *Wordsworth's Bardic Vocation*, 226.

<sup>122</sup> William Wordsworth, 'Great Men have been among us', l. 3, in *Poems, in Two Volumes, and Other Poems, 1800-1807*, ed. Jared Curtis (Ithaca, 1983), 166.

This model of citizenship can be seen, for example, in Sonnet Thirteen ('Written in London, September, 1802'), where Wordsworth longs for 'Plain living and high thinking', and associates these with the 'homely beauty of the good old cause' (l. 11-12). Wordsworth cuts a path back from domesticity to political engagement by figuring Civil War republicanism as a set of 'household laws' (l. 14) to be followed by virtuous individuals in isolation from the state. The version of nationalism in these lines is itself 'homely' and folkloric, focussing not on what Wordsworth later called 'the pomp / Of Orders and Degrees',<sup>123</sup> but on the everyday experiences of ordinary people. He develops a romance of English republicanism, akin to the 'old / Romantic tale, by Milton left unsung' which he imagines in Book One of *The Prelude* (I, 180-1). This model of republican citizenship is underpinned in the 'Sonnets to Liberty' by frequent parallels with works by republican writers like Harrington, whose book *The Commonwealth of Oceana* (1656) Wordsworth owned,<sup>124</sup> and Sidney, to whose *Discourses Concerning Government* (1698) Wordsworth had alluded in his *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff*.<sup>125</sup> Harrington's ideas, for example, are prominent in Sonnet Four (I griev'd for Buonaparte'), in which Wordsworth claims that:

'Tis not in battles that from youth we train  
 The Governor who must be wise and good,  
 And temper with the sternness of the brain  
 Thoughts motherly, and meek as womanhood.  
 Wisdom doth live with children round her knees:  
 Books, leisure, perfect freedom, and the talk  
 Man holds with week-day man in the hourly walk  
 Of the mind's business: these are the degrees  
 By which true Sway doth mount; this is the stalk  
 True Power doth grow on; and her rights are these. (ll. 5-14)

Simon Bainbridge has argued that, in this sonnet, '[t]he language of Napoleonic command ... is applied, and redefined by the process of application, to the Wordsworthian

<sup>123</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, IX, 212-13, ed. Mark L. Reed, 2 vols (Ithaca and London, 1991), vol. 1, 237.

<sup>124</sup> Wu, *Wordsworth's Reading*, 72.

<sup>125</sup> Wu, *Wordsworth's Reading*, 126.

lifestyle'.<sup>126</sup> Certainly, it is true that 'Wordsworth as subject is active', while 'Napoleon, the paradigmatic man of action, as object is passive'.<sup>127</sup> Yet in calling for political leaders to 'temper' their passions, Wordsworth does more than advocate a 'Wordsworthian lifestyle'. In maintaining the need for quiet contemplation, he echoes Harrington's claim in *The Commonwealth of Oceana* that

The Principles of Governments are twofold, *Internal*, or the goods of the *Mind*; and *External*, or the goods of *Fortune*. The goods of the mind are natural or acquired virtues, as Wisdom, Prudence, Courage, &c. The goods of Fortune are Riches ... The Principles of Government then are in the goods of the *mind*, or in the goods of *fortune*. To the goods of the *mind* answers *Authority*; to the goods of *fortune*, *Power or Empire*.<sup>128</sup>

Using a system very like Harrington's, Wordsworth portrays Napoleon as the archetypal bad ruler, governing by '*fortune*' alone and thus suffering the instability that afflicts all tyrants. Wordsworth's notions of 'true Sway' and 'True Power' correspond to Harrington's concept of '*Authority*', a form of political influence which has been earned rather than seized. Like Harrington, Wordsworth describes 'true Sway' as being the natural outgrowth of a well-cultivated mind. Crucially, Wordsworth argues that the 'degrees' through which a person should rise on their way to power are internal rather than external: a matter of training the mind, rather than rising through the ranks of the army, as Napoleon had done.

In calling on political leaders to balance the demands of reason and passion, Wordsworth also responds to Harrington's claim that 'they that govern, should govern according to reason; if they govern according unto passion, they do that which they should not do'.<sup>129</sup> At this point in his argument, Harrington refers to the 'cycle of constitutions' ('*ankuklōsis politeiōn*') which Polybius developed from Plato in Book Six of his *Histories*. Polybius argued that there were six paired forms of government: monarchy and tyranny,

<sup>126</sup> Simon Bainbridge, *Napoleon and English Romanticism* (Cambridge, 1995), 87.

<sup>127</sup> Bainbridge, *Napoleon and English Romanticism*, 86.

<sup>128</sup> James Harrington, *The Commonwealth of Oceana* (London, 1656), 3.

<sup>129</sup> Harrington, *The Commonwealth of Oceana*, 3.

aristocracy and oligarchy, and democracy and ochlocracy (mob-rule or anarchy). He argued that each form would decay into the next, with anarchy eventually giving rise to a new monarchy, explaining this cycle on the basis that ‘each constitution has a vice engendered in it and inseparable from it’.<sup>130</sup> Harrington, however, took this argument further by declaring that ‘the corruption of Government by Passion’ is what drives the cycle of decay. In the lines ‘temper with the sternness of the brain / Thoughts motherly’, Wordsworth might be seen to respond to Harrington’s distinction between governing ‘according to reason’ and governing ‘according to passion’. This reading helps to explain what Willard Spiegelman characterised as ‘Wordsworth’s sometimes baffling attempts to accommodate action and repose, heroic achievement and meditative calm, singleness and commonalty’.<sup>131</sup> Wordsworth’s attempt to balance these seemingly conflicting demands derives from writers like Harrington, Sidney, and Milton, who praised ‘meditative calm’ as the highest ‘heroic achievement’, and emphasised the importance of ‘singleness’ to the welfare of the ‘commonalty’ (as Milton did, for example, with the figure of Abdiel in *Paradise Lost*: ‘Among the faithless, faithful only he’, V, 897). Building in particular on Harrington’s work, this sonnet assigns contemplation the most important role in forming a virtuous leader. A further effect is to make this model of government available to every citizen: as in *The Task*, the idea of self-restraint encourages not only would-be leaders, but all citizens to enter reclusion in order to learn to govern their own minds.

Wordsworth continued to develop this model of the self-governing citizen in his poem on the ‘Character of the Happy Warrior’, composed between December 1805 and January 1806. As in the sonnet ‘I griev’d for Buonaparte’, the content of the ‘Character of

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<sup>130</sup> Polybius, *The Histories*, VI.x.4, trans. W. R. Paton, rev. Frank W. Walbank and Christian Habicht, 6 vols (Cambridge, MA and London, 2011), vol. 3, 317: ‘τὸν αὐτὸν τρόπον καὶ τῶν πολιτειῶν συγγενῆται κατὰ φύσιν ἐκάστη καὶ παρέπεταί τις κακία’.

<sup>131</sup> Willard Spiegelman, *Wordsworth’s Heroes* (Berkeley and London, 1985), 18-19.

the Happy Warrior' draws on the works of republican writers like Harrington and Sidney.

Wordsworth argues that the Happy Warrior must be

More skilful in self-knowledge, even more pure,  
As tempted more; more able to endure,  
As more expos'd to suffering and distress;  
Thence, also, more alive to tenderness.  
'Tis he whose law is reason; who depends  
Upon that law as on the best of friends;  
Whence, in a state where men are tempted still  
To evil for a guard against worse ill,  
And what in quality or act is best  
Doth seldom on a right foundation rest,  
He fixes good on good alone, and owes  
To virtue every triumph that he knows:  
—Who, if he rise to station of command,  
Rises by open means; and there will stand  
On honourable terms, or else retire. (ll. 23-37)

These lines closely resemble Cowper's description, in Book Six of *The Task*, of the 'solitary saint' whose 'warfare is within': 'There he fights, / And there obtains fresh triumphs o'er himself' (VI, 935-48). Through the figure of plover which repeats the adjective 'more' ('more pure, / As tempted more'), Wordsworth follows Cowper in emphasising the need for continual internal effort. Harrington's emphasis on the need for government by 'reason' is still present, but in this poem Wordsworth also draws on Sidney's *Discourses Concerning Government* (1698) to outline a model of citizenship in which the right to govern depends solely upon virtue. Building on Aristotle's *Politics*, Sidney argued that 'a popular Government is the best for a People, who are naturally generous and warlike'.<sup>132</sup> In order to enjoy the freedoms of a commonwealth, therefore, every citizen has to become like Wordsworth's Happy Warrior. The lines quoted above follow Sidney's argument that:

[T]he various Talents that men possess, may by good discipline be rendered useful to the whole ... But every man bearing in his own breast Affections, Passions and Vices that are repugnant to this end, and no man owing any submission to his Neighbour; none will subject the correction or restriction of themselves to another, unless he also submit to the

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<sup>132</sup> Algernon Sidney, *Discourses Concerning Government* (London, 1698), 61.

same Rule ... Magistrates are Political Architects; and they only can perform the Work incumbent on them, who excel in Political Vertues.<sup>133</sup>

Wordsworth echoes these ideas in his claim that, in a society where people are ‘tempted still / To evil’ by the passions and vices which Sidney describes, the good citizen is one who ‘fixes on good alone, and owes / To virtue every triumph that he knows’. The task of the individual is to become ‘skilful in self-knowledge’ by analysing his or her motivations in isolation before attempting to intervene in the state. In his book *Wordsworth’s Heroes*, Spiegelman recognised the ‘Character of the Happy Warrior’ as ‘a typically Wordsworthian meditation on the relationship of heroism to ordinary life’.<sup>134</sup> As such, it embodies an important phase in the development of *The Recluse*, during which Wordsworth summoned political arguments for reclusion from the republican writers of the English Civil War. John Williams has argued that in trying to manage the ‘constant juxtaposition of active and passive principles’ in his poetry, ‘Wordsworth’s political sense remained tethered to certain fundamental tenets of a paternalistically conceived classical republic of “virtue”’.<sup>135</sup> Yet Spiegelman’s observation about the ‘heroism’ of ‘ordinary life’ complicates this argument: Wordsworth’s call for individuals to imitate the Happy Warrior is the opposite of paternalistic, since it requires each individual to govern him- or herself, rather than trusting any authority from above.

Wordsworth’s description of the Happy Warrior grew out of his work on *The Prelude*, in which he struggled to reconcile the demands of biography and history when writing about the French Revolution. In searching for a way to narrate these events as a story, Wordsworth aimed to re-engage those who ‘thrown up all hopes of the amelioration of mankind’,<sup>136</sup> by showing that Britain’s fate depended not only on its rulers, but also on

<sup>133</sup> Sidney, *Discourses Concerning Government*, 63-4.

<sup>134</sup> Spiegelman, *Wordsworth’s Heroes*, 4.

<sup>135</sup> John Williams, *Wordsworth: Romantic Poetry and Revolution Politics* (Manchester and New York, 1989), 40-1.

<sup>136</sup> Coleridge, c. 10 September 1799, *Letters*, vol. 1, 527.

the actions and thoughts of each of its citizens, conceived as versions of the Happy Warrior. In Book Eleven, Wordsworth presented himself as having experienced a personal crisis following the French Revolution, figuring this crisis retrospectively as a crisis of historiography. He posited a rift in historical consciousness, arguing that ‘future times would surely see / The man to come parted as by a gulph / From him who had been’ (XI, 58-60). Here, the Revolution becomes a version of the Machiavellian moment, in which society confronts a ‘stream of irrational events conceived as essentially destructive of all systems of secular stability’.<sup>137</sup> Echoing Cowper’s view that ‘th’age of virtuous politics is past’ (V, 493), Wordsworth declares that ‘Sage, Patriot, Lover, Hero’ fell away as it became clear that ‘their best virtues were not free from taint’ (XI, 64-5). He claims that ‘an emptiness / Fell on the Historian’s Page’ (XI, 90-1) and recalls how, in response, ‘[I] labour[ed] to cut off my heart / From all the sources of her former strength’ ‘like a Monk who hath forsworn the world’ (XI, 76-8). Wordsworth proceeds to describe how he converted this despondence into a positive stance of reclusion, akin to that which Cowper described in *The Task*. He did this, he claims, by reconceiving history as a tale or romance, in which the individual, far from being a remote spectator, has a part to play by remaining a virtuous citizen in isolation. In Book Nine, Wordsworth praised Michel Beaupuy for having resembled one of Harrington or Sidney’s citizen-heroes: ‘He thro’ the events / Of that great change wander’d in perfect faith, / As through a Book, an old Romance or Tale, / Of Fairy’ (IX, 305-7). Wordsworth implies that conceiving of history as a ‘Romance’ or ‘Tale’ is what helped Beaupuy to maintain his ‘perfect faith’ despite what he witnessed in France. The forms of the tale and romance, Wordsworth claims, ‘Transferr’d a courtesy which had no air / Of condescension’ to ‘the mean and the obscure / And all the homely in their homely works’ (IX, 314-17). Like Milton in Wordsworth’s sonnet ‘London, 1802’,

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<sup>137</sup> Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, viii.

Beaupuy proves that his 'heart / The lowliest duties on itself did lay' (ll. 13-14), making him a model of the republican citizen-hero. *The Prelude*, then, builds towards articulating its own vision of 'homely' heroism, elevating the role of a reclusive individual akin to the 'solitary saint' of *The Task* (VI, 948).

The definition of 'history' evolves throughout *The Prelude*, as Wordsworth first expresses his intention to tell 'A Poet's History' (IV, 71) and then repeatedly shortens the noun to 'story' (V, 193), before making history synonymous with 'ancient Story' in Book Nine (IX, 373). Wordsworth helps his readers to overcome the 'embrangement and perplexity' of history by encouraging them to identify with certain historical figures (like Beaupuy) as if they were heroes in a romance. Drawing on his own experiences of the Revolution, as well as on the writings of Milton, Sidney, and Harrington, he develops the ideal of a contemplative citizen-hero who resembles the 'retired man' of *The Task*. Simon Bainbridge has argued Wordsworth's reaction to the failure of the Revolution was to 'offer himself, actively, as the figure who would attempt to put the world to rights'.<sup>138</sup> Yet it might be fairer to say that *The Prelude* looks to its readers, encouraging them to become versions of the Happy Warrior or of Cowper's 'solitary saint'. In turn, this makes it possible to build on Stephen Gill's claim that *The Prelude* sets out to demonstrate that 'the retired life of the imagination is the truly creative life, not the secular world of academic competition or of revolutionary activism'.<sup>139</sup> This might be developed further, by arguing that the 'retired life of the imagination' becomes central not only to creativity, but also to original aims of 'revolutionary activism'.

Throughout *The Prelude*, Wordsworth sustains the argument that the fate of the nation depends upon the conduct of reclusive, meditative heroes like the 'retired man' of *The Task*. In Book Ten, he recalls 'How much the destiny of man had still / Hung upon

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<sup>138</sup> Bainbridge, *Napoleon and English Romanticism*, 85.

<sup>139</sup> Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth: A Life* (Oxford, 1989), 6.

single persons' (X, 137-8) during the French Revolution. He proceeds to emphasise how an individual like the reclusive hero of *The Task* might function as an autonomous citizen, claiming that 'a mind whose rest / Was where it ought to be, in self-restraint, / In circumspection and simplicity, / Fell rarely in entire discomfiture / Below its aim' (X, 151-5). Drawing on Sidney and Harrington, Wordsworth offers 'self-restraint', 'circumspection', and 'simplicity' as a triad of virtues that might prevent the virtuous mind from succumbing to corruption. Declaring, like Aristotle, in favour of 'the activity of contemplation' (*energeia theōrētikē*),<sup>140</sup> he asserts that the good citizen should be like the 'Philosophers of old, / Men who, to business of the world untrain'd, / Liv'd in the Shade' (X, 163-5). Later, he develops this idea by praising the individual who is capable of 'sovereignty within and peace at will, / Emotion which best foresight need not fear, / Most worthy then of trust when most intense' (XIII, 114-16). The comparatives of the 'Character of the Happy Warrior' ('more') here become superlatives ('most') as Wordsworth outlines the virtuous individual whom he believes is best placed to deal with the moral complexities of living through the Napoleonic Wars. *The Prelude* thus begins to fulfil Coleridge's expectations of *The Recluse*, as Wordsworth describes how reclusive individuals might 'be the means of implanting [benevolence & quietness] in others—& [help] to destroy the bad passions not by combating them, but by keeping them in inaction'.<sup>141</sup>

These themes emerge as early as Book One, when Wordsworth claims that he contemplated writing about how 'some unknown Man, / Unheard of in the Chronicles of Kings, / Suffer'd in silence for the love of truth' (I, 203-5). Here, Wordsworth echoes Book Six of *The Task*, where Cowper complains that history is warm on the theme of 'patriots', but cold on that of the 'martyrs' whose 'blood is shed / In confirmation of the

<sup>140</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, X, vii, 1 (1177a), 612-13.

<sup>141</sup> Coleridge, c. 10 March 1798, *Letters*, vol. 1, 397.

noblest claim, / Our claim to feed upon immortal truth' (V, 719-21). Citing Hume in a footnote, Cowper complains that such martyrs 'lived unknown / Till persecution dragg'd them into fame' and that history 'gives the glorious suff'ers little praise' (V, 724-32).

Wordsworth responds to this by proposing to describe

How that one Frenchman, through continued force  
Of meditation on the inhuman deeds  
Of the first Conquerors of the Indian Isles,  
Went single in his ministry across  
The Ocean...  
How Wallace fought for Scotland, left the name  
Of Wallace to be found like a wild flower,  
All over his dear Country, left the deeds  
Of Wallace, like a Family of Ghosts,  
To people the steep rocks and river banks,  
Her natural sanctuaries, with a local soul  
Of independence and stern liberty. (I, 206-20)

In Wordsworth's description of Dominique de Gourges (?1530-1593, a French nobleman who avenged Spanish cruelties against French Protestants in Florida), the phrase 'continued force / Of meditation' renders 'meditation' active, turning it into a physical 'force' in the world. Fiona Stafford has observed that Wordsworth's portrait of Wallace derives from John Stoddart's *Remarks on Local Scenery and Manners in Scotland* (1801).

In this work, Stoddart claimed that the figure of Wallace might offer a fit subject for the 'spirit-stirring enthusiasm, of the true epic':

From the materials afforded by record, and tradition, by the historian, and the poet, might be drawn a character, interesting every powerful sentiment in the human heart, exciting the sympathies of domestic affection, and public virtue.<sup>142</sup>

Stafford argues that 'what was important [to Wordsworth] was the idea of a hero so attached to his country that his name was now part of its living texture "like a wild flower," free for anyone who takes the trouble to look'.<sup>143</sup> Building on this, the metaphor of the 'wild flower' also enables Wordsworth to imply that virtue pollinates from one

<sup>142</sup> John Stoddart, *Remarks on Local Scenery and Manners in Scotland during the Years 1799 and 1800*, 2 vols (London, 1801), vol. 1, 164.

<sup>143</sup> Fiona Stafford, 'Inhabited Solitudes: Wordsworth in Scotland, 1803', in David Duff and Catherine Jones (eds), *Scotland, Ireland, and the Romantic Aesthetic* (Lewisburg, PA, 2007), 93-133, 103.

individual to another and spreads itself throughout the land. Like Wordsworth, Stoddart describes the epic as an inclusive genre which builds a sense of national identity by allowing cohesion between pairs of opposite terms: the ‘national’ and the ‘individual’, written ‘record’ and oral ‘tradition’, the facts of the ‘historian’ and the fictions of the ‘poet’, ‘domestic affection’ and ‘public virtue’. This idea of the epic resembles Cowper’s view of the individual as a synecdoche for the state: the individual comes to feel him- or herself to be a part of the national whole through sharing in a ‘spirit-stirring’ story. By making the noun ‘deeds’ the subject of the verb ‘To people’, Wordsworth similarly implies that the actions of individuals have the capacity to draw others into a community.

Wordsworth continues to develop this historical aesthetic in Book Eight, when he complains about ‘high-wrought modern narratives / Stript of their humanizing soul, the life / Of manners and familiar incidents’ (VIII, 774-6). In place of such narratives, Wordsworth argues that histories should become like tales or romances, including ‘a sense / Of what had been here done, and suffer’d here / Through ages, and was doing, suffering still’ (VIII, 781-3). The demonstrative adverb ‘here’ and the present participles ‘doing’ and ‘suffering’, though they do not refer to any specific time and place, suggest the need for specificity: in order to affect their readers, histories must refer to events, passions, and places with which they are familiar, rather than imposing a narrative of monarchs and empires from on high. Wordsworth suggests that each individual writes his or her own tale in national history through their connections to the land in which they dwell. He develops this theme further in Book Nine, when describing how he and his companions in Revolutionary France had constructed a republican history to contrast with ‘the miseries / Of royal Courts’ (IX, 352-3):

We summon’d up the honorable deeds  
Of ancient Story, thought of each bright spot  
That could be found in all recorded time,  
Of truth preserved, and error pass’d away,

Of single Spirits that catch the flame from Heaven  
 And how the multitude of men will feed  
 And fan each other. (IX, 372-8)

As in the description of Wallace, the ‘deeds’ of individuals provide plots for a series of Chaucerian tales which comprise a nation’s history. By collocating the noun ‘spot’ with the phrase ‘recorded time’, Wordsworth creates a national version of the famous ‘spots of time’ passage in Book Eleven (XI, 258). He links up the lives of a series of reclusive individuals to create the nation’s history, suggesting that this is constructed, like an individual’s biography, out of moments of heroic action or self-control (‘Of truth preserved, and error pass’d away’). These ‘bright spot[s]’ exist within a national consciousness, which functions much like the individual consciousness of Book Eleven, drawing strength from moments of ‘deepest feeling’ (XI, 271). However, the metaphor of virtue spreading like a fire, in which minds ‘feed’ and ‘fan’ each other, sounds dangerously redolent of the passion which caused the French ‘Terror’. Wordsworth describes his utopic vision of 1791-2 in language which calls attention to the possible flaws in this model of social cohesion.

In Book Twelve, Wordsworth sets out to remedy these difficulties by modifying his theory of how historical progress depends on the conduct of reclusive individuals. Extending Cowper’s complaint that ‘th’age of virtuous politics is past’ (V, 493), he objects to those ‘Who thrust themselves upon this passive world / As Rulers’ (XII, 71-2), arguing that ‘Even when public welfare is their aim’, they tend to corrupt society by basing their actions on ‘false philosophy’ (XII, 74-6). Wordsworth claims to have

brought to test  
 Of solid life and true result the Books  
 Of modern Statists, and thereby perceiv’d  
 The utter hollowness of what we name  
 The wealth of Nations, where alone that wealth  
 Is lodged, and how encreased, and having gain’d  
 A more judicious knowledge of what makes  
 The dignity of individual Man,

Of Man, no composition of the thought,  
 Abstraction, shadow, image, but the man  
 Of whom we read, the man whom we behold  
 With our own eyes; I could not but inquire,  
 Not with less interest than heretofore,  
 But greater, though in a spirit more subdued,  
 Why is this glorious Creature to be found  
 One only in ten thousand? (XII, 76-91)

Wordsworth sounds a cautionary note with the clause ‘though in a spirit more subdued’: he calls for self-restraint not only in political leaders, but also among those, like himself, who ‘summo[n] up the honorable deeds / Of ancient Story’ (IX, 372-3). The incendiary ‘Spirits’ whom he ‘summon’d up’ in Book Nine are now replaced by more homely heroes: ‘no composition of the thought ... but the man / Of whom we read, the man whom we behold / With our own eyes’. The participle ‘lodged’ suggests that ‘The wealth of Nations’ is a temporal and ephemeral quality, residing in the minds of citizens, which must be ‘encreased’ through education and preserved by self-government. Wordsworth rejects the model of society which Adam Smith famously advanced in his *Inquiry in the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), in which individuals primarily contribute to society not by sharing its values, but through their labour. His discussion of the ‘dignity of individual Man’ mounts a challenge to this model, using terms similar to those which Smith himself had employed in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). In this earlier work, Smith distinguished two classes of virtues: the ‘soft, the gentle and the amiable virtues’ and what Smith calls ‘the great, the awful and respectable, the virtues of self-denial, of self-government, of that command of the passions which subjects all the movements of our nature to what our own dignity and honour, and the propriety of our own conduct require’.<sup>144</sup> For Smith, the ‘dignity of individual Man’ resides in precisely in the ‘the great, the awful and respectable’ virtues of ‘self-government’ and the ‘command of the passions’ which Wordsworth recommends throughout *The Prelude*. Wordsworth

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<sup>144</sup> Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (London and Edinburgh, 1759), 41.

opposes the argument of *The Wealth of Nations* with Smith's own version of the civic humanist idea that the wealth of a nation comprises the collective virtue of its citizens, or, as Pocock puts it, 'the good of citizenship ... consist[s] in a relationship between one's own virtue and that of another'.<sup>145</sup>

Later in the Book Twelve, Wordsworth follows Cowper in making it his 'task' to celebrate the widespread virtue that historians and economists alike had overlooked, noting 'How oft high service is perform'd within / When all the external man is rude in shew' (XII, 226-7). In claiming this, Wordsworth echoes Milton's argument in *The Reason of Church-Government* that 'by how much the internal man is more excellent and noble than the external, by so much is his cure more exactly, more thoroughly, and more particularly to be perform'd'.<sup>146</sup> He claims like such individuals are

Not like a temple rich with pomp and gold  
But a mere mountain Chapel such as shields  
Its simple worshippers from sun and shower.  
Of these, said I, shall be my Song, of these  
If future years mature me for the task,  
Will I record the praises. (XII, 228-33)

Wordsworth figures the individual mind as a 'Chapel', building on Cowper's image of the 'solitary saint / Who walks forth to meditate at even tide' (VI, 984-9) and implying that the service of one's country should be contemplative, like the worship of God. Following Cowper, Wordsworth suggests that individuals should support their country by remaining virtuous: the need to live an active life becomes a matter of conscience, rather than direct political action. In Book Thirteen, he praises such self-governing minds as being 'truly from the Deity', arguing that they are the sources of 'sovereignty within and peace at will, / Emotion which best foresight need not fear, / Most worthy then of trust when most intense' (XIII, 106-16). The concept of 'sovereignty within' can be read as the successful

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<sup>145</sup> Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, 74.

<sup>146</sup> Milton, *Prose Works*, vol. 1, 837.

outcome of Cowper's 'warfare ... within' (VI, 935): a mind that can govern its own selfish motives and passions, thus becoming fit to govern and be governed within a civil society. Building on this, Wordsworth claims that 'Here must thou be, O Man! / Strength to thyself ... 'tis thine, / The prime and vital principle is thine / In the recesses of thy nature, far / From any reach of outward fellowship, / Else 'tis not thine at all.' (XIII, 188-97). This reclusive model of virtue remains active, but its activity 'the activity of contemplation' defined by Aristotle,<sup>147</sup> elaborated by Milton, Sidney, and Harrington, and celebrated by Cowper in *The Task*. It was only through such self-regulation, Wordsworth argued, that the 'mind of man' could become 'A thousand times more beautiful than the earth / On which he dwells, above this Frame of things / (Which 'mid all revolutions in the hopes / And fears of men doth still remain unchanged) / In beauty exalted, as it is itself / Of substance and of fabric more divine' (XIII, 446-51). In arguing this, *The Prelude* completed one of the major tasks of *The Recluse*, presenting contemplative reclusion as the means by which individuals could remain virtuous and continue to fight for their country in the wake of the French Revolution.

Wordsworth made what was arguably the most robust statement of his political commitment to reclusion in *The Convention of Cintra* (1809). He wrote this prose tract in response to the Convention negotiated between the British and French armies in Portugal between 23 and 30 August 1808. Napoleon had tried to annex Portugal the previous year, dispatching an army to travel to Portugal through Spain in October 1807.<sup>148</sup> The British generals Sir Harry Burrard and Sir Hew Dalrymple led an increasingly successful campaign against the French, but when the French diplomat Kellermann arrived to negotiate for peace on 23 August, they agreed to terms which proved very unfavourable not only to the British, but also to the Portuguese people. Though the French had been on

<sup>147</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, X, vii, 1 (1177a), 613.

<sup>148</sup> See the Editors' Introduction in William Wordsworth, *The Prose Works*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols (Oxford, 1974), vol. 1, 193.

the brink of defeat, the terms of the Convention stipulated that ‘the French army ... shall be transported to France with their arms and baggage, and the whole of their private property [which included loot], from which nothing shall be exempted’.<sup>149</sup> Wordsworth opened *The Convention of Cintra* by complaining that

The [British] army proved its prowess in the field; and what has been the result is attested, and long will be attested, by the downcast looks—the silence—the passionate exclamations—the sighs and shame of every man who is worthy to breathe the air or to look upon the green-fields of Liberty in this blessed and highly-favoured Island which we inhabit. (pp. 225-6)

Wordsworth uses the *Convention of Cintra* not only to criticise the conduct of the British generals, but also to articulate his mature feelings about the failure of the French Revolution and the principles which should unite a civil society. Subscribing to a civic humanist model, he argues, as in *The Prelude*, that ‘[i]n the moral virtues and qualities of passion which belong to a people must the ultimate salvation of a people be sought for’ (p. 235). Like Cowper, Wordsworth equates ‘moral virtues’ with ‘qualities of passion’: people cannot be safe from corruption, he argues, unless they undertake the meditative process of refining their selfish passions.

In writing *The Convention of Cintra*, Wordsworth claimed to have ‘been carried forward by a strong wish to be of use in raising and steadying the minds of my countrymen’ (p. 237). This sentiment relates *The Convention of Cintra* to the project of *The Recluse* as outlined in Coleridge’s letter from September 1799.<sup>150</sup> Arguably, Wordsworth saw *The Convention of Cintra* as an outlet for the political philosophy which he had been developing in earnest since 1802. In prose, he continued the work of *The Prelude*, developing the ideal of self-government from *The Task* by praising the fixed and habitual principle, which implies the absence of all selfish anticipations, whether of hope or fear, and the inward disavowal of any tribunal higher and more dreaded than the mind’s own judgment upon its own act. (p. 256).

<sup>149</sup> See the ‘Appendix’ in Wordsworth, *Prose Works*, vol. 1, 351.

<sup>150</sup> Coleridge, c. 10 September 1799, *Letters*, vol. 1, 527.

This passage conforms closely to Pocock's account of the Aristotelian polity, in which citizenship 'consisted in a partnership of ruling and being ruled with others who must be as morally autonomous as oneself'.<sup>151</sup> Wordsworth, however, describes the continual breakdown, since 1791, of the ideal which he has imagined, concluding: 'And now, mark the discord which will ever be found in the actions of men, where there is no inward harmony of reason or virtue to regulate the outward conduct' (p. 287). Though he names the Convention as the focus of his disappointment, it is more accurate to say that he uses this event to focus his political sentiments about the whole of the French Revolution.

Wordsworth's central argument becomes the argument for reclusion as he claims that '[i]t surely behoves those who are in authority ... to look to the state of their own minds' (p. 310). He returns to Harrington's assertion that the ability to govern with true 'Authority' depends on the 'goods of the mind' rather than the 'goods of *Fortune*',<sup>152</sup> claiming that 'there is an unconquerable tendency in all power, save that of knowledge acting by and through knowledge, to injure the mind of him who exercises that power' (p. 308). The reflexive syntax of the phrase 'knowledge acting by and through knowledge' captures the kind of internal reflection which Wordsworth is trying to advocate: it is not enough for a person to possess knowledge in order to govern well; they must constantly meditate on their own actions in the light of that knowledge if they are to avoid becoming corrupted by power.

Although *The Convention of Cintra* is an overtly political tract, Wordsworth advances to the point where he can claim that '[t]he things, with which we are primarily and mainly concerned, are inward passions; and not outward arrangements' (p. 320). Like Cowper, he asserts that social reform can only prove successful if it begins within the

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<sup>151</sup> Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, 75.

<sup>152</sup> Harrington, *The Commonwealth of Oceana*, 3.

minds of individuals, and that the political turmoil which continued to ravage Europe had been exacerbated by the fact that those in government were driven by corrupted reason and unregulated passions. Likewise, he turns the focus towards the duty of ordinary citizens when he observes that ‘a country may advance, for some time ... and still the Peasant or Artisan, their master, be a slave in Mind’ (pp. 325-6). Throughout *The Convention of Cintra*, Wordsworth impresses upon his readers that the mind must be ‘self-governed’—that this is the ‘first duty imposed by the faculty of reason’ (p. 327)—and that, in a country where the economy and labour conditions tend to the neglect of this duty, individuals must seize the time to analyse their received beliefs in private. In the concluding paragraphs, he draws the reader into an apostrophe, commenting:

But let us look to ourselves. Our offences are unexpiated: and, wanting light, we want strength. With reference to this guilt and to this deficiency, and to my own humble efforts towards removing both, I shall conclude with the words of a man of disciplined spirit, who withdrew from the too busy world—not out of indifference to its welfare, or to forget its concerns—but retired for wider compass of eye-sight, that he might comprehend and see in just proportions and relations; knowing that he, who hath not first made himself master of the horizon of his own mind, must look beyond it only to be deceived. (p. 342)

In this passage, Wordsworth presents his own version of the reclusive hero of *The Task*.

His praise for the ‘disciplined spirit’ and the individual who makes himself ‘master of the horizon of his own mind’ echoes Cowper’s celebration of the contemplative patriot who ‘attends to his interior self ... has a heart and keeps it; has a mind / That hungers, and supplies it’ (III, 373-5). The individual to whom Wordsworth refers is Petrarch, from whose prose tract *De Vita Solitaria* (*The Life of Solitude*) he proceeds to quote:

*Nam (ut coeptum exequar) totum hoc malum, seu nostrum proprium seu potius omnium gentium commune, IGNORANTIO FINIS facit. Nesciunt inconsulti homines quid agant: ideo quicquid agunt, mox ut coeperint, vergit in nauseam. Hinc ille discursus sine termino; hinc, medio calle, discordiae; et, ante exitum, DAMNATA PRINCIPIA; et expleti nihil.* (p. 342)

[For it is ignorance of our aim that produces all this evil, whether it is peculiar to ourselves or common to all people. The misguided know not what they do, therefore whatever they do turns to disgust as soon as they have begun it. For they do not do what demands doing but look for things to do and go hunting in the densest thickets occasions of perplexity and

trouble. Hence discussions without end, hence strife in the middle of the street, beginnings rejected before they mature, and nothing fully accomplished.]<sup>153</sup>

Wordsworth concludes *The Convention of Cintra* with a quotation which instructs not only Britain's moral and political leaders, but also its ordinary citizens, to follow the example which Petrarch set in *De Vita Solitaria*. Following Coleridge's hints in his letter to George, Wordsworth presents the reclusive life of reflection as the best possible response to the failure of the French Revolution. *The Convention of Cintra* thus deserves to be regarded as a key part of *The Recluse*. Returning to the Civil War literature which had such a great impact on his response to the French Revolution, Wordsworth concludes *The Convention of Cintra* by quoting from Milton's *History of Britain* the observation that revolutions of the past were unlikely to have succeeded 'unless men more than vulgar bred up in the knowledge of ancient and illustrious deeds, invincible against many and vain titles, impartial to friendships and relations, had conducted their affairs' (p. 343).

In their own ways, Cowper and Wordsworth both set about demonstrating that no political reform could be achieved without the emergence of an individual who was, in Milton's terms, 'invincible' to corruption. Though they adopted the stance of men in the moon, both poets engaged continually not only with current events, but also with attempts to record and explain these events in the form of written history. These attempts to encounter history head-on pose a challenge to Jerome McGann's argument that '[i]n moments of crisis the Romantic will turn to Nature or the creative Imagination as his places of last resort'.<sup>154</sup> It is true that Cowper and Wordsworth often turn towards nature and the imagination in their writing, but the hermeneutic of suspicion introduced by McGann and other New Historicists only leads so far in explaining the project of Romantic reclusion. Rather than being a 'last resort', nature and the imagination function as sources

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<sup>153</sup> Francis Petrarch, *The Life of Solitude*, Book One, Sixth Tractate, Chapters 3-4, trans. Jacob Zeitlin (Illinois, 1924), 177-8.

<sup>154</sup> Jerome McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago and London, 1983), 67-8.

of strength, allowing the poet to contemplate the ‘embrangement and perplexity’ of history without giving way to feelings of ‘fear’ and ‘selfishness’. Drawing on a tradition of writers and political theorists stretching back to Aristotle, Cowper and Wordsworth argued that any successful revolution would have to begin in the mind, with individuals learning to govern their passions.

#### 4. *Natural Reclusion*

*'Books in the running brooks': Morality from nature*

Having argued that withdrawing into nature would enable people to overcome their selfish passions, both Cowper and Wordsworth set out in their writing to explain why this was true. In order to do so, they tapped into the rich literary and religious tradition of natural theology. William Paley did not publish his book *Natural Theology; or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of The Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature* until 1802. However, Paley's work can be regarded as the culmination, rather than the inception, of this tradition. The phrase 'natural theology' dates back to the early seventeenth century,<sup>1</sup> though the idea that nature is a book capable of teaching morality is much older, and can be traced through the works of Augustine back to the Bible. Famously, Paley began his version of this argument by comparing the Earth to a watch found lying on a heath, claiming that once its 'mechanism' had been 'observed and understood ... the inference, we think, is inevitable; that the watch must have had a maker'.<sup>2</sup> He proceeded to explain the importance of a mind-set that 'regards the phaenomena of nature with a constant reference to a supreme intelligent Author': 'To have made this the ruling, the habitual sentiment of our minds, is to have laid the foundation of every thing which is religious. The world from thenceforth becomes a temple, and life itself one continued act of adoration'.<sup>3</sup> Cowper and Wordsworth developed complex versions of this position in their poetry, drawing on many literary, religious, and philosophical sources in order to do so.

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<sup>1</sup> *OED*, NATURAL THEOLOGY, *n*; first cited 1622.

<sup>2</sup> William Paley, *Natural Theology; or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of The Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature*, second edition (London, 1802), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Paley, *Natural Theology*, 576.

Before Paley, numerous writers had articulated less Christian versions of the idea that nature can teach morality. In *As You Like It*, for example, Duke Senior reconciles himself to having been exiled by Duke Frederick to the Forest of Arden, claiming: ‘Sweet are the uses of adversity ... And this our life, exempt from public haunt, / Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, / Sermons in stones, and good in everything.’<sup>4</sup> In similar terms, Rousseau described how he came to accept his banishment following the publication of *Émile* (1762). His book *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* [*The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*] appeared posthumously in 1782, and was translated into English the following year. In the ‘Seventh Walk’, Rousseau argued that, having been driven into solitude by a corrupt society, he learned to look on ‘the harmony of the three kingdoms’ [animal, vegetable, and mineral] as ‘the only sight in the world which does not tire both eyes and heart’:

The more sensible the soul of a contemplative man is, the more he abandons it to the extasies this harmony excites. A reverie soft and deep invades all his senses; he sinks with delightful ebriety into the immensity of that beautiful system.<sup>5</sup>

For both Cowper and Wordsworth, this was the crowning argument for reclusion. By withdrawing from society, they argued, people could reform their minds, becoming happier individuals and better citizens by rooting out their selfish passions. Not content simply to echo earlier views on this subject, both poets drew upon their wealth of reading in order to explain how, exactly, the natural world could have this educating effect on the mind. Using the model of associationism developed by John Locke and David Hartley, both poets attempted to describe the mental process by which nature helped to form the moral sense. Jonathan Bate has claimed that Romanticism ‘regards poetic language as a special kind of expression which may effect an imaginative reunification of mind and

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<sup>4</sup> William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, ed. Juliet Dusinberre (London, 2007), II.i.12-17, 190.

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, ‘Seventh Walk’, in *The Confessions of J. J. Rousseau: With the Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, trans. Anon, 2 vols (London, 1783), vol. 2, 242-3.

nature, though it has a melancholy awareness of the illusoriness of its own utopian vision'.<sup>6</sup> In explaining how reclusion serves to make people less selfish, Cowper and Wordsworth both managed to move beyond this 'melancholy awareness'. Far from being a 'utopian vision', they demonstrated that the 'reunification of mind and nature' was, as Wordsworth claimed in the 'Prospectus' to *The Recluse*, 'A simple produce of the common day'.<sup>7</sup>

*'Retired behind his own creation': Cowper's natural Calvinism*

Until his evangelical conversion in 1765, Cowper's poetry did not share the natural theologians' confident vision of God's presence in nature. In his early love poems (written about his cousin, Theodora, whom his uncle forbade him to marry in 1755),<sup>8</sup> Cowper inflects the landscape with feelings of separation and loss. The figure of 'Delia' becomes a ubiquitous absence, as every sight in the natural world reminds the speaker of his absent love: 'Every Object I survey, / Like my Delia trim and gay, / Cannot chace my Grief away'.<sup>9</sup> In these lines from 'Wherefore did I leave the fair', Cowper negates the natural theologians' vision, reading every facet of the landscape as a simile for the absent 'Delia'. The lover's pathetic fallacy was a familiar trope in eighteenth-century pastoral poetry, and dates back to Virgil and Theocritus. In Pope's *Pastorals*, for example, Strephon claims that 'All Nature mourns' until 'Delia smile[s]', then 'the Flow'rs begin to spring, / The Skies

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (London, 2000), 245.

<sup>7</sup> William Wordsworth, 'Prospectus', l. 69, in *The Excursion*, ed. Sally Bushell, James A. Butler, and Michael C. Jaye, with the assistance of David García, (Ithaca and London, 2007), 40.

<sup>8</sup> James King, *William Cowper: A Biography* (Durham, NC, 1986), 24.

<sup>9</sup> William Cowper, 'Wherefore did I leave the fair', ll. 9-11, *The Poems of William Cowper*, ed. John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, 3 vols (Oxford, 1980-95), vol. 1, 9.

to brighten, and the Birds to sing'.<sup>10</sup> However, Cowper takes this trope further when he asks: 'What is every Flow'r that Blows, / When alas! compar'd with her?' (ll. 17-18). He escalates the pastoral tradition of the lover's lament into a frightening vision of nature as a site of exile, where every sight compounds the speaker's sense of alienation.

A similar vision prevails in Cowper's early spiritual poetry, for example his blank verse paraphrase of 'Job Chapter Fourteenth' from late March 1752. In this chapter, Job conceives a terror of God and exclaims: 'O that thou wouldest hide me in the grave, that thou wouldest keep me secret, until thy wrath be past' (*KJV*, 14:13). In his paraphrase, Cowper elaborates Job's wish to retreat from God into a macabre place of exile in the natural world, begging to be hidden among those parts of the creation which are least under God's stewardship and thus least capable of revealing his wrathful face:

Hide me then  
 In some deep Cavern! Hide me where the Sun  
 Sends not his glorious Beams! but underneath  
 Night-shade, or Hemlock, or the pois'nous Leaf  
 Of Aconite, with pestilential Vapour fed,  
 Sprouts horrible; here hide me till thy Wrath  
 Be past, here let me dwell with thickest Night  
 Surrounded; Night more pleasing far than Day  
 Lowring with Wrath to come. (ll. 27-35)

In his work *Physico-Theology: Or, A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God, from His Works of Creation* (1713), the natural theologian William Derham cited 'subterraneous Caverns, Grotto's and Vulcano's' as objections against God's presence in nature.<sup>11</sup> He claimed that they are 'dreadful Scourges of the sinful Inhabitants thereof, and may serve them as Emblems, and Presages of Hell it self'.<sup>12</sup> Like Derham, Cowper posits a margin of the natural world which threatens to return to chaos, where God's sustaining influence does not reach, or where it is greatly diminished. In this half-created world, he

<sup>10</sup> Alexander Pope, 'Spring', ll. 69-72, *The Poems of Alexander Pope: A One-Volume Edition of the Twickenham Text*, ed. John Butt (London and New York, 2005), 127.

<sup>11</sup> William Derham, *Physico-Theology: Or, A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God, from His Works of Creation* (London, 1720), Book III, Chapter III, 67.

<sup>12</sup> Derham, *Physico-Theology*, Book III, Chapter III, 68.

hopes that he will be able to shelter from notice of the ‘Wrath to come’ and possibly even avoid judgment. Though extreme, the wish to hide oneself from God was a familiar trope in the Puritan tradition which Cowper inherited. For example, John Bunyan also turned to the story of Job to describe the flight from grace in his spiritual autobiography *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666). Before his conversion, Bunyan claimed:

the thoughts [*sic*] of Religion was very grievous to me ... so that when I have but seen some read in those books that concerned Christian piety, it would be as it were a prison to me. *Then I said unto God, Depart from me, for I desire not the knowledge of thy ways*, Job. 21. 14, 15.<sup>13</sup>

Cowper’s vision is darker, however, since even if the speaker repents, he cannot know whether God will show his face or choose to remain absent, prolonging the speaker’s ‘Banishment’ in the natural world. In his early poetry, Cowper inverted the vision of God’s presence in nature, figuring Delia as an omnipresent absence, and longing that God might be equally withdrawn.

Cowper’s descriptions of nature changed notably after his evangelical conversion. At the end of his conversion narrative, *Adelphi*, he describes how in June 1765 he began to commune with ‘my God in Christ Jesus’ and found that ‘[i]t was He who made my solitude sweet and the “wilderness to bloom and blossom as the rose”’.<sup>14</sup> With this reference to Isaiah (35:1), Cowper signals his newfound optimism about God’s agency in the natural world, an optimism which recurred in his poetry long after he lost such faith in his own salvation. He also reveals the influence of the Calvinist tradition which he had embraced while staying at Nathaniel Cotton’s ‘Collegium Insanorum’ in St Albans from 1763-5. Both Cotton and Cowper’s cousin Martin Madan, who ‘treated me with a truly Christian tenderness’ (p. 31), had directed Cowper’s reading towards the writings of Calvin and his evangelical followers during the period of his illness. In the poetry that he

<sup>13</sup> John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, ed. Roger Sharrock (Oxford, 1962), 7.

<sup>14</sup> William Cowper, *Adelphi*, in *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, ed. James King and Charles Ryskamp, 5 vols (Oxford, 1979-86), vol. 1, 44.

wrote after his recovery, there are strong traces not only of Calvin's eschatology, but also of what might be termed his natural theology. Building on Calvin's works, Cowper came to believe that individuals could learn morality by secluding themselves in the natural world and reading God's attributes from the landscape. The vision of nature as a place of exile always threatened to return, however, as Cowper feared that if he stopped being able to detect God's presence, it was a sign that God had withheld his grace, and abandoned him as a solitary reprobate.

The phrase natural theology originated after Calvin's death, possibly in Francis Bacon's work *The Advancement of Learning* (1605).<sup>15</sup> In this work, Bacon set out his programme to reform human knowledge through the study of the natural world, and to defend this study from what he saw as the superstition of the church. He claimed that:

*Divine Philosophy, or Naturall Theology* ... is that Knowledge or Rudiment of Knowledge concerning God, which may be obtained by the contemplation of his Creatures: which Knowledge may be truly tearmed Divine, in respect of the obiect; and Naturall in respect of the Light.<sup>16</sup>

In making this claim, Bacon built on the assertion which Augustine made in one of his sermons that: 'The very countenance of creation is a great book. Behold, examine, and read this book from top to bottom. God did not make letters of ink by which you might know Him. He placed before your very eyes all that He has made.'<sup>17</sup> Augustine, in turn, echoed Saint Paul's claim that 'the invisible things of [God] from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead' (Romans 1:20). Yet Paul, like Augustine and Bacon after him, emphasised that humans could only ever glean a limited knowledge of God from the natural world: 'For

<sup>15</sup> The first citation for this phrase in the *OED* is from 1622; *OED*, NATURAL THEOLOGY, n.

<sup>16</sup> Francis Bacon, *The Two Bookes of Sir Francis Bacon, of The Proficiencie and Advancement of Learning, Divine and Humane* (Oxford, 1633), 'The Second Booke', 133-4.

<sup>17</sup> Saint Augustine, Sermon 30, 'On Matthew 11:25-6', Mai 126, *Selected Sermons of St. Augustine*, trans. Quincy Howe, Jr. (London, 1967), 224. See 'Sermo LXVIII auct. (Mai 126)', Saint Augustine, *Sancti Aurelii Augustini Sermones in Matthaem*, ed. P.-P. Verbraken O.S.B. et al. (Turnhout: 2008), 443: 'Est quidam magnus liber ipsa species creaturae: superiorem et inferiorem contuere, attende, lege. Non Deus, unde eum cognosceres, de atramento litteras fecit: ante oculos tuos posuit haec ipsa quae fecit'.

now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.’ (1 Corinthians 13:12). Until the Last Judgment, it remains within God’s power to withdraw behind his works and hide his merciful face from the creation.

Though Bacon’s *Advancement of Learning* did not appear until forty-one years after Calvin’s death, Calvin had done much to develop the concept of natural theology. Russell Re Manning finds many passages in Calvin’s *Institutio Christianae religionis* (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1536) ‘that would not be out of place in Anglican natural theologies of the eighteenth century’.<sup>18</sup> Cowper was well acquainted with these passages and read them alongside later natural theological treatises, like Derham’s *Physico-Theology* (1713) and *Astro-Theology* (1715), both of which he recommended to William Unwin as being ‘very intelligible even to a child, & full of usefull Instruction’.<sup>19</sup> In his own writing, however, Cowper returned to the *Institutes* as the main source of his natural theological views. Calvin made his central claim about God’s presence in the natural world in Book 1, Chapter 5, where he wrote that:

God hath not onely planted in the minds of men [a] seede of religion ... but also hath so disclosed himselfe in the whole workmanship of the world, and daily so manifestly presenteth himselfe, that men cannot open their eies but they must needs behold him. His substance indeede is incomprehensible, so that his diuine maiestie far surmounteth all mens senses: but he hath in all his works grauen certaine markes of his glorie, and those so plaine and notably discernible, that the excuse of ignorance is taken away from men, be they neuer so grosse and dull witted.<sup>20</sup>

In the marginal gloss, Calvin refers his reader to Psalm 104. This Psalm not only praises God for his works of creation, but also describes the infinite ways in which he sustains the natural world. The verses to which Calvin alludes describe a God ‘Who coverest thyself with light as with a garment: who stretchest out the heavens like a curtain: Who layeth the

<sup>18</sup> Russell Re Manning, ‘Protestant Perspectives on Natural Theology’, in Re Manning (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology*, 197-212, 202.

<sup>19</sup> Cowper, 7 September *Letters*, vol. 1, 390.

<sup>20</sup> Jean Calvin, Book 1, Chapter 5, Section 1 (1:5:1), *The Institution of the Christian Religion*, trans. Thomas Norton (London, 1611), 8.

beams of his chambers in the waters: who maketh the clouds his chariot: who walketh upon the wings of the wind' (104:2-3). God's workmanship can be detected in the beauty and grandeur of nature; yet, as Calvin claims, his 'substance' remains 'incomprehensible' and he can only be perceived as acting behind the 'curtain' of the heavens. Nonetheless, the visible world becomes rich with infinite symbolism, as every natural object becomes capable of attesting to the power and benevolence of its creator.

In the *Olney Hymns* (1779), which Cowper composed between his recovery in 1764 and his descent into a further spiritual crisis in 1773, there are strong traces of Calvin's natural theology. Calvin argued that God oversaw every aspect of his creation, claiming that 'there falleth not a drop of raine but by the certaine commaundement of God' (1:16:5). Building on this idea, Cowper presented a vision of nature as being closely and immediately superintended by God, though he often expressed doubts about his own capacity to read God's presence in the landscape. In the *Institutes*, Calvin acknowledged that the human capacity to discern God's glory and mercy in his works was limited, since people's eyes are blinded by sin. 'Truely,' he writes,

this was the naturall order that the frame of the world should be a Schoole vnto vs to learne godlinesse, from whence might be made a passage for vs to eternall life and perfect felicitie: but since our falling away, whither soeuer we turne our eies, vpward and downward, the curse of God still presenteth it selfe vnto our sight, which while it possesseth and enwrappeth innocent creatures by our fault, must needes ouerwhelme our owne soules with desperation. (2:6:1)

As in Cowper's early poetry, God's omnipresence threatens to become a ubiquitous absence when the believer loses faith. Cowper's contributions to *Olney Hymns* continue to flicker between these optimistic and pessimistic visions. In moments of joy, he revels in the vision of natural theology, finding the world around him to be 'Schoole' in which to 'learne godlinesse'. In moments of fear, he looks 'vpward and downward' and sees only the 'curse of God' inscribed ubiquitously in the landscape. As Calvin suggests, this leads

him to question the sincerity of his faith, and to fear that the Holy Ghost might have deserted him.

‘Hymn 67’, ‘I will praise the Lord at all times’, engages directly with Calvin’s model of natural theology. This poem, positioned last among Cowper’s contributions to *Olney Hymns*, presents an idiosyncratic vision of the natural world in which it is not God, but Christ, who ‘so manifestly presenteth himselfe, that men cannot open their eies but they must needs behold him’ (1:5:1):

Winter has a joy for me,  
While the Saviour’s charms I read,  
Lowly, meek, from blemish free,  
In the snow-drop’s pensive head.

Spring returns, and brings along  
Life-invigorating suns:  
Hark! the turtle’s plaintive song,  
Seems to speak his dying groans!

Summer has a thousand charms,  
All expressive of his worth;  
’Tis his sun that lights and warms,  
His the air that cools the earth.

What! has autumn left to say  
Nothing, of a Saviour’s grace?  
Yes, the beams of milder day  
Tell me of his smiling face. (ll. 1-16)

In this poem, Cowper advances the model of natural Calvinism which he later developed in *The Task*. He follows Calvin’s instruction that ‘the rightest way and fittest order to seeke God’ is to ‘behold him in his workes, by which he maketh himselfe neere and familiar, and doth in a manner communicate himselfe vnto vs’ (1:5:2). Reading like a natural theologian, Cowper detects God’s presence in every part of the landscape, from the micro- to the macroscopic. By reading these prompts, he suggests, the individual secluded in the landscape can ‘communicate’ with God and learn to become more Christ-like: reclusion in nature thus provides a form of moral education. Characteristically, however,

Cowper doubts his ability to interpret God's language. Calvin wrote that by beholding 'this honourable stage of the heauen and earth ... we ought wisely to haue knowne God. But because we so ill profited therein, he calleth vs backe to the faith of Christ' (2:6:1).

Following this suggestion, Cowper searches for evidence not of God, but of the redemption offered by Christ, hearing his 'dying groanes' in the 'turtle's plaintive song' and likening the sunset to Christ's 'bleeding beauties, drawn / On the blushes of the skies' (ll. 19-20). For Cowper, the face of nature offers the possibility of redemption through Christ, rather than the certain presence of God's grace.

Neither Calvin nor any of the natural theologians offered a key to reading God's presence in the landscape. As always in Cowper's work, the natural world in 'Hymn 67' points beyond itself to something invisible. The landscape is emblematic of God's (or, in this case, Christ's) presence, but God himself remains hidden behind symbolism, leaving Cowper to doubt whether he is reading these symbols correctly. This doubt makes itself felt repeatedly in Cowper's earlier contributions to *Olney Hymns*, for example in 'Hymn 42', 'Mourning and Longing', which describes the bewildering sense of *not* finding God's presence in the landscape:

The Saviour hides his face!  
My spirit thirsts to prove  
Renew'd supplies of pard'ning grace,  
And never-fading love.

The favor'd souls who know  
What glories shine in him,  
Pant for his presence, as the roe  
Pants for the living stream!

What trifles tease me now!  
They swarm like summer flies,  
They cleave to ev'ry thing I do,  
And swim before my eyes. (ll. 1-12)

Following the publication of Robert Hooke's *Micrographia* in 1665, natural theologians often wrote about 'flies' as some of the most intricate of God's creations. Ralph Cudworth,

one of the Cambridge Platonists who helped to develop Calvin's model of natural theology, noted in his book *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678) that: 'Galen professed he could never enough admire that Artifice which was in the Leg of a Fly, (and yet he would have admired the Wisdom of Nature more, had he been but acquainted with the Use of Microscopes)'.<sup>21</sup> For Cowper, however, the swarm of flies comes to represent the meaninglessness of the sense impressions that 'swim before [his] eyes' when they are not ordered and explained by the presence of God. From being a fount of infinite symbolism, the natural world becomes a semiotic void, where 'trifles teaze' because, as Wordsworth later claimed in the 'Ode ("There was a time")', they 'speak of something that is gone'.<sup>22</sup>

As in Calvin's *Institutes*, the Saviour's face becomes a key for making sense out of the material world. The fact that Cowper's vision fails has worrying implications for his salvation, given Calvin's claim that people 'have no eyes to see the [shewes] of nature] thoroughly, vnlesse they be enlightened by the reualation of God through faith' (1:5:13). Calvin's marginal note to this passage refers the reader to the beginning of Hebrews Chapter Eleven, which states that 'faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen' (11:1). As discussed in Chapter Two, his paradox of 'evidence ... not seen' runs throughout Calvin's work and was a major source of distress for Cowper during his spiritual crises. According to Calvin, the

perfect definition of faith ... is a stedfast and assured knowledge of Gods kindness toward vs, which being grounded vpon the truth of the free promise in Christ, is both reueiled to our minds, and sealed in our hearts by the holy Ghost. (3:2:7)

Thomas Norton's orthography of 'reueiled' for 'revealed' perfectly shows the contingent position in which Calvin's definition of faith places the believer. As in Cowper's poetry,

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<sup>21</sup> Ralph Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe: First Part* (London, 1678), Book I, Chapter III, xxxvii, 147.

<sup>22</sup> William Wordsworth, 'Ode ("There was a time")', l. 53, in *Poems, in Two Volumes, and Other Poems, 1800-1807*, ed. Jared Curtis (Ithaca, New York, 1983), 272.

God can 'reveal' his face to the Christian, but he can also 're-veil' it. As soon as Cowper feels unable to go on seeing 'the evidence of things not seen', he is led to doubt not only the sincerity of his faith, but also whether or not the Holy Ghost is truly working in his heart. He conveys the urgency of this situation at the beginning of 'Hymn 42': 'The Saviour hides his face! / My spirit thirsts to prove / Renew'd supplies of pard'ning grace'. For Cowper, this matter impinged upon his salvation: even a momentary lapse in his ability to perceive God's invisible presence was enough to convince him that he was not, in fact, one of the elect, but one of the reprobate, who 'are sometime mooued with the same feeling that the elect are, so that in their owne iudgement they nothing differ from the elect' (2:3:11). Cowper's hymns are riddled with the tensions of Calvinist thought. They reveal the full force of Calvin's claim (derived from 1 Timothy 6:16) that 'the face of God ... is vnto vs like a maze ... vnlesse we be by the line of the word guided into it' (1:6:3). The 'word' plays a very important role in the *Institutes*: God thus hides his face not only behind the symbolism of the natural world, but also behind the printed letter of his revelation. For Cowper, this threatens to make the prospect of natural Calvinism an impossible one: he complains that God's withdrawal has 'left an Aching Void / The World can never fill'. Here, as he was to do in late poems like 'The Cast-away', he returns to the vision of a universal absence in nature that he first portrayed in 'Wherefore did I leave the fair'. Throughout Cowper's hymns, there is a sense that his reclusion might, at any time, collapse into a state of exile if God chooses to hide his face.

Cowper's contributions to *Olney Hymns* suggest that the fear of reprobation that plagued him during his spiritual crises was built into the structure of his Calvinist faith. As discussed in Chapter Two, the second of these crises began on 24 January 1773, when Cowper dreamt the words 'Actum est de te, periisti' ('It is all over with thee, thou hast

perished') in a dream.<sup>23</sup> Within the Calvinist scheme, this could mean nothing less than that he was reprobate and that God was refusing him any hope of salvation. Cowper's friends clearly read this dream, as in the Book of Job, as a trial permitted by God and executed by Satan. Later that year, Mary Unwin favoured this interpretation in a letter to Mrs Newton, where she claimed that: 'It is amazing how subtilly the cruel adversary has worked upon him ... A most Marvellous story will this Dear Child of God have to relate when by His Almighty power he is set at liberty.'<sup>24</sup> Cowper, however, did not waver in his reading of the dream as a warning. In 1785, he finally wrote about it in a letter to John Newton, when Newton was in mourning for his niece, Eliza Cuninghame:

It struck me that she was not born when I sunk into darkness, and that she is gone to heaven before I have emerged again. What a lot, said I to myself, is mine! whose helmet is fallen from my head and whose sword from my hand in the midst of the battle ... I have, I confess, my comfortable moments, but they are like the morning dew, so suddenly do they pass away and are gone. I had a dream 12 years ago, before the recollection of which, all consolation vanishes, and, as it seems to me, must always vanish.<sup>25</sup>

The source of Cowper's military imagery is the Pauline Epistle to the Ephesians. In Chapter Six, the author of the Epistle instructs his readers to '[p]ut on the whole armour of God' (6:11). He proceeds to list the allegorical items in this suit of armour, before giving the final instruction: 'And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God' (6:17). Cowper's image of himself as one whose 'helmet is fallen from my head and whose sword from my hand' thus implies that the Holy Spirit has departed from his heart and that his hope of salvation has been withdrawn. Tellingly, he does not mention the item of armour which the author of Ephesians numbers '[a]bove all': namely, 'the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked' (6:16). Following Calvin, Cowper believed that his faith had been proved fraudulent by the departure of God's grace. The simile comparing his 'comfortable moments' to 'the

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<sup>23</sup> Cowper, *Letters*, vol. 1, 259n.

<sup>24</sup> Mary Unwin, 7 October 1773, in Cowper, *Letters*, vol. 1, 260.

<sup>25</sup> Cowper, 16 October 1785, *Letters*, vol. 2, 385.

morning dew, so suddenly do they pass away and are gone' echoes the Book of Hosea, where the prophet exclaims: 'O Judah, what shall I do unto thee? for your goodness is as a morning cloud, and as the early dew it goeth away' (6:4). The same imagery recurs in 13:3 where it is applied directly to the Israelites, describing the fate that they will suffer for their apostasy. By echoing it, Cowper numbers himself among the apostates and implies that he expects the same punishment. At the same time, he signals the failure of the natural Calvinism that he began to develop in the *Olney Hymns*. There, he saw glimpses of God's grace in the natural world, but these too passed away 'like the morning dew', proving that such shows were not intended for him. Though Cowper had seen visions of God in nature, the fact that he could not sustain them suggested that he was reprobate and that he would forever be excluded from the mercy which once shone forth with such profusion from the landscape.

When Cowper resumed writing poetry after his crisis, his faith in the natural theological vision had been shaken. On 13 October 1780, he wrote a letter to John Newton in which he included his verses 'To Mr. Newton on his Return for Ramsgate'. Newton had written to Cowper two days previously, marvelling at the tranquillity of 'my old acquaintance the Sea'.<sup>26</sup> Cowper responded by likening Newton's experience of the sea, as Newton himself had done, to his expectations for the afterlife. In the poem, Cowper contrasts Newton's experience with his own, concluding: 'Your Sea of Troubles you have pass'd, / And found the peacefull Shore; / I Tempest-toss'd and wreck'd at last, / Come Home to Port no more' (ll. 13-16). Cowper's poetry famously abounds with images of shipwreck. No doubt his use of this imagery refers to the opening of 'Letter X' in Newton's *Authentic Narrative* (1764), where Newton wrote that

My connections with sea-affairs have often led me to think, that the varieties observable in Christian experience may be properly illustrated from the circumstances of a voyage.

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<sup>26</sup> Cowper, *Poems*, vol. 1, 499n.

Imagine to yourself a number of vessels, at different times, and from different places, bound to the same port ... perhaps no two of them would meet with the same distribution of winds and weather.<sup>27</sup>

Cowper rejects the claim that all Christian souls are ‘bound to the same port’ in the lines ‘I Tempest-toss’d and wreck’d at last, / Come Home to Port no more’. His allusion to Hamlet’s ‘Sea of Troubles’ glances forwards to the end of the famous soliloquy, where Hamlet asks who would be willing ‘To grunt and sweat under a weary life / But that the dread of something after death ... puzzles the will / And makes us rather bear those ills we have / Than fly to others that we know not of’.<sup>28</sup> For Cowper, the natural world was a place of shipwreck and trepidation, but it still seemed preferable to what awaited him in the afterlife. It is hard to square this prospect with his interest in natural theology, yet a little over a month before writing these lines, he had written to William Unwin recommending ‘Derham’s Physico and Astrotheology together with several others in the same Manner’.<sup>29</sup>

Having recommended these books to his friend, Cowper seems to have continued thinking about them. Derham enlarged his work from sixteen sermons which he delivered as the Boyle Lectures at St Mary-le-Bow-Church in 1711-12. In his address ‘To the R[ea]der’, he claims to have written them with Boyle’s conviction ‘that nothing tended more to cultivate true Religion and Piety in a Man’s Mind, than a thorough Skill in Philosophy’.<sup>30</sup> As a result, he sets about describing the ‘Terraqueous Globe’ with a natural philosopher’s eye for detail, proving that all components of the natural world—even its

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<sup>27</sup> John Newton, *An Authentic Narrative of some Remarkable and Interesting Particulars in the Life of \*\*\*\*\** (London, 1764), ‘Letter X’, 141-2.

<sup>28</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet*, III.i.59, 77-82, *Hamlet: The Texts of 1603 and 1623*, ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London, 2007), 258-9.

<sup>29</sup> Cowper, 7 September 1780, *Letters*, vol. 1, 390.

<sup>30</sup> Derham, ‘To the Raeder’ [*sic.*], *Physico-Theology*, A4<sup>1</sup>.

‘subterraneous Caverns, Grotto’s and Vulcano’s’<sup>31</sup>—bear the workmanship of a loving and omnipotent God:

Let us cast our Eyes here and there, let us ransack all the Globe, let us with the greatest Accuracy inspect every part thereof, search out the inmost Secrets of any of the Creatures; let us examine them with all our Gauges, measure them with our nicest Rules, pry into them with our Microscopes, and most exquisite Instruments ... still we find them to bear Testimony to their infinite Workman.<sup>32</sup>

From this starting point, Derham concludes that ‘God’s Works ought to excite us to Thankfulness’. In Book IX, Chapter V, he argues that ‘[i]t appears throughout the foregoing Survey, what Kindness GOD hath shewn to his Creatures in providing every Thing conducing to their Life, Prosperity, and Happiness’.<sup>33</sup> The creation, he asserts, has been ‘accoutered in the best Manner, and accommodated with every, even all the minutest Things that may minister to their Health, Happiness, Office, Occasions, and Business in the World’.<sup>34</sup> In May-June 1781, Cowper echoed this account of the creation in his poem ‘Hope’, published in 1782:

See nature gay as when she first began,  
 With smiles alluring her admirer, man,  
 She spreads the morning over eastern hills,  
 Earth glitters with the drops the night distils,  
 The sun obedient, at her call appears  
 To fling his glories o’er the robe she wears  
 ...  
 Ten thousand charms that only fools despise,  
 Or pride can look at with indiff’rent eyes,  
 All speak one language, all with one sweet voice  
 Cry to her universal realm, rejoice.  
 Man feels the spur of passions and desires,  
 And she gives largely more than he requires,  
 Not that, his hours devoted all to care,  
 Hollow-ey’d abstinence and lean despair,  
 The wretch may pine, while to his smell, taste, sight,  
 She holds a Paradise of rich delight,  
 But gently to rebuke his aukward fear,  
 To prove that what she gives, she gives sincere,  
 To banish hesitation, and proclaim

<sup>31</sup> Derham, *Physico-Theology*, Book III, Chapter III, 67.

<sup>32</sup> Derham, *Physico-Theology*, Book II, 37-8.

<sup>33</sup> Derham, *Physico-Theology*, Book XI, Chapter V, 432.

<sup>34</sup> Derham, *Physico-Theology*, Book XI, Chapter V, 433.

His happiness, her dear, her only aim. (ll. 39-64)

Cowper's personification of nature as one for whom humanity's 'happiness' is 'her dear, her only aim' resembles Derham's account in *Physico-Theology*. Like Derham, he suggests that the scientific investigation of nature will increase rather than undermine people's faith in God: there is no sense here that 'We murder to dissect'.<sup>35</sup> The noun 'distils' shows the scientific accuracy with which nature produces dew to water the earth, likening the water cycle to a set of scientific apparatus, while the adjective 'obedient', applied to the sun, implies the divine agency that controls the force of gravity.

Isaac Newton's work on gravity and optics played an important role in the development of natural theology. In his 'General Scholium' to the *Principia*, Newton claimed that '[t]his most beautiful System of the Sun, Planets and Comets, could only proceed from the counsel and dominion of an intelligent and powerful being'.<sup>36</sup> His account, however, placed God at a remove from his creation. Newton describes God as the 'παντοκράτωρ [*Pantocrator*] or *Universal Ruler*', claiming that '[t]his Being governs all things, not as the soul of the world, but as Lord over all'.<sup>37</sup> This sense of God's distance, which emphasises 'dominion' over nurturing support, often makes itself felt in Cowper's writing, as when he describes how the sun 'fling[s] his glories' over the earth. There is a sense of liberality and profusion in the verb 'fling', but there is equally a sense of distance and possible disdain. Given his spiritual predicament, Cowper's imagination was drawn to the Newtonian universe in which benevolent forces acted, but acted remotely.

In the rest of the lines quoted from 'Hope', Cowper amplifies Derham's description of a natural world whose components 'All speak one language', both declaring the power of their creator and ministering to humanity's 'passions and desires'. In the

<sup>35</sup> William Wordsworth, 'The Tables Turned', l. 28, in *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems, 1797-1800*, ed. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca and London, 1992), 109.

<sup>36</sup> Isaac Newton, 'General Scholium', in *The Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, trans. Andrew Motte, 2 vols (London, 1968), vol. 2, 388.

<sup>37</sup> Newton, *Mathematical Principles*, vol. 2, 389.

second respect, Derham and Cowper anticipate Wordsworth's 'high argument' about 'how exquisitely' 'The external World is fitted to the Mind'.<sup>38</sup> 'Man feels the spur of passions and desires,' Cowper wrote, 'And she gives largely more than he requires'. It could be objected that 'passions and desires' carry bodily connotations, and that 'Hope' does not develop the idea that the 'external World is fitted' to the *moral* needs of the mind. Cowper certainly did make this argument, in 'Hymn 67', for example, and again in Book Five of *The Task*. In 'Hope', however, his presentation of natural theology is coloured by the fact that he is writing in character. He assumes the persona of 'Lothario', 'Dangling his cane about, and taking snuff' (ll. 27-8), and gives his account of the natural world in response to the 'sage', who describes 'human life' as 'A painful passage o'er a restless flood' (ll. 1-3). 'Hope' stages a debate between Cowper's two opposing views of nature: alternatively, as a scene of exile and a testament to the benevolence of God. His critique of natural theology creeps into Lothario's lines, as Lothario describes how the 'Earth glitters' and the sun 'fling[s] his glories o'er the robe she wears' (ll. 42-4). Implicitly, Cowper suggests that there is an air of fashionable consumerism about Derham's view of nature being 'accoutered in the best Manner, and accommodated with every, even all the minutest Things that may minister to [our] Health, Happiness, Office, Occasions, and Business in the World'.<sup>39</sup> There is also a sense, familiar from 'Wherefore did I leave the fair', of nature as the scene of Tantalus's punishment. Lothario denies that nature is designed so that 'The wretch may pine, while to his smell, taste, sight, / She holds a Paradise of rich delight' (ll. 59-60), but Cowper is perhaps too eloquent in describing this form of torture. The sense of an unbridgeable proximity in these lines captures something of his Calvinist experience of searching for God in nature. It echoes the fears he expressed in poems like 'To Mr.

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<sup>38</sup> William Wordsworth, *Home at Grasmere*, MS. D, ll. 819-21, *Home at Grasmere*, ed. Beth Darlington (Ithaca and London, 1989), 105.

<sup>39</sup> Derham, *Physico-Theology*, Book XI, Chapter V, 433.

Newton on his Return for Ramsgate', and describes a God who is much more akin to Newton's remote *Pantocrator* than Calvin's 'neere and familiar' creator (1:5:2).

Despite his scepticism about natural theology, Cowper embraced its vision by the end of 'Hope', detecting 'God diffus'd through ev'ry part' of his creation and describing how 'Unconscious nature, all that he surveys, / Rocks, groves and streams must join him in his praise' (ll. 734-41). There is an echo of Psalm 148 here, also quoted by Derham: 'Praise ye the LORD ... Praise ye him, sun and moon: praise him, all ye stars of light. Praise him, ye heavens of heavens, and ye waters that be above the heavens. Let them praise the name of the LORD: for he commanded, and they were created' (Psalm 148:1-5). As Derham summarises, the rest of the Psalm extends this duty to 'the very Mountains and Hills, Trees, Beasts, and all Cattle, creeping Things, and flying Fowl' and, pre-eminently, to mankind.<sup>40</sup> Cowper's lines develop the Psalmist's vision beyond the need for praise, however, as their attribution of tongues to 'Rocks, groves and streams' recalls Duke Senior's account of his pastoral retreat in *As You Like It*: 'And this our life, exempt from public haunt, / Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, / Sermons in stones, and good in everything.'<sup>41</sup> Like the Duke, he accepts the natural theological argument that solitary experience in nature can teach morality.

In 'Charity', the next piece in *Poems* (1782), Cowper elaborates on this argument by explaining that reclusion in nature enables individuals to learn charitable habits of thought and to develop their moral sense. Like Calvin, he argues that the natural world has been designed to testify to God's presence, and to teach His moral law, provided that readers of the landscape are led by their knowledge of God's grace as revealed in the Bible:

For self to self, and God to man reveal'd,

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<sup>40</sup> Derham, *Physico-Theology*, Book XI, Chapter V, 433.

<sup>41</sup> William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, II.i.15-17, ed. Juliet Dusinberre (London, 2007), 190.

(Two themes to nature's eyes for ever seal'd)  
 Are taught by rays that fly with equal pace  
 From the same center of enlight'ning grace.  
 Here stay thy foot, how copious and how clear  
 Th' o'erflowing well of Charity springs here!  
 Hark! 'tis the music of a thousand rills,  
 Some through the groves, some down the sloping hills,  
 Winding a secret or an open course,  
 And all supplied from an eternal source.  
 The ties of nature do but feebly bind,  
 And commerce partially reclaims mankind,  
 Philosophy without his heav'nly guide,  
 May blow up self-conceit and nourish pride,  
 But while his province is the reas'ning part,  
 Has still a veil of midnight on his heart:  
 'Tis truth divine exhibited on earth,  
 Gives Charity her being and her birth. (ll. 361-78)

The second line quoted might sound like a denial of natural in favour of revealed theology. This is not the case, however, as Cowper follows Calvin in arguing that 'although it behooueth man earnestly to bend his eies to consider the workes of God ... yet principally ought hee to bend his eares to the word, that he may better profit thereby' (1:6:2). For both writers, listening to the word of God enables individuals to profit better from his works. Cowper reasons that contemplation of the natural world provides 'rich instruction, and a soul enlarged' (l. 322), but that without an emphasis on man's fallen state and the need for divine grace to restore him, it 'May blow up self-conceit and nourish pride'. Yet Cowper makes it clear that evidence of God's grace may be found in the natural world as well as in scripture. He figures this 'enlight'ning grace' in terms of 'rays that fly with equal pace / From the same center', perhaps borrowing his imagery from Newton's *Opticks* (1704). A few lines later, Cowper compares the operation of God's grace in nature to the irrigation provided by a 'thousand rills, / Some through the groves, some down the sloping hills, / Winding a secret or an open course'. He uses this stock pastoral imagery to suggest that God's grace—his willingness to love and provide for fallen humans—can be found in abundance in the landscape.

In *Poems* (1782), Cowper began to accept the natural theological argument that ‘truth divine’ is ‘exhibited on earth’. Following Calvin, he suggested that the ‘ties of nature’ (by which individuals recognise their indebtedness to the ecosystems and communities around them) go some way to instilling the virtue of charity, but do not suffice on their own. His claims that ‘commerce partially reclaims mankind’ and that ‘Philosophy without his heav’nly guide ... Has still a veil of midnight on his heart’ can be seen as responses to Adam Smith’s arguments in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *The Wealth of Nations*. In the former work, Smith acknowledged that ‘[a]ll the members of human society stand in need of each others assistance’, but he then qualified this position by claiming that:

Society may subsist among different men, as among different merchants, from a sense of its utility, without any mutual love or affection; and tho’ no one man in it should owe any obligation, or be bound in gratitude to any other, it may still be upheld by a mercenary exchange of good offices according to an agreed valuation.<sup>42</sup>

Cowper rejected this model of society in favour of a version of community which is closer to those of Raymond Williams and Jean-Luc Nancy discussed in the Introduction, particularly Nancy’s assertion that ‘the mode of existence and appropriation of a “self” ... is the mode of an exposition in common and to the in-common’.<sup>43</sup> Cowper’s claim that the truths of ‘self to self, and God to man’ must be ‘reveal’d’ implies two attitudes towards community: firstly, it equates self-knowledge and community, since both involve the revelation of ‘self to self’; secondly, it elevates the experience of community to the same status as scripture. Only through this divinely-mediated revelation of ‘self to self, and God to man’, Cowper suggests, can individuals overcome the arrogance which leads them to think of themselves as self-sufficient and having no need either to give or receive charity. Though Cowper emphasises the need for grace to supplement natural theology, he depicts

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<sup>42</sup> Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (London, 1759), Part II, Section II, Chapter III, 189.

<sup>43</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney (Minneapolis and Oxford, 1991), xxxvii.

a world in which the ecosystem works in opposition to 'commerce', teaching people to overcome the ties of self-interest on which Smith based his model of society.

Paradoxically, he argues, individuals must withdraw from society and seclude themselves in nature in order to learn the importance of community.

Despite Cowper's fears for his own salvation, his belief in the principles of natural theology grew during the 1780s. His most memorable account of them comes at the end of Book Five of *The Task*, where he turns to natural Calvinism in order to describe the 'Happy freedom of the man whom grace makes free' and 'His relish of the works of God'.<sup>44</sup> He begins by instructing the reader: 'Acquaint thyself with God if thou would'st taste / His works' (V, 779-80). Initially, this might sound like an inversion of Calvin's assertion that the 'rightest way and fittest order to seeke God' is 'to behold him in his workes, by which he maketh himselfe neere and familiar' (1:5:2). Yet, as has been discussed, Calvin defended both natural and revealed theology, claiming that without having faith in salvation through Christ people would be unable to recognise God in the landscape. What Cowper develops from Calvin's theology is the sense of relationship: 'Acquaint thyself with God' (my emphasis). He knew from personal experience that the experience in which God 'maketh himselfe neere and familiar' was an invaluable but highly contingent one. In his writing, the need to sustain this relationship becomes the desideratum of faith. He writes with all the passion of a natural theologian, but also with a sense of longing, about the 'mind that has been touch'd from heav'n, / And in the school of sacred wisdom taught / To read his wonders, in whose thought the world, / Fair as it is, existed 'ere it was' (V, 796-9). Later in the passage, Cowper describes how he beholds the natural world 'with animated hopes ... And many an aching wish' (V, 837-8). He moves briefly into the first person, but only does so within quotation marks, and then offers to

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<sup>44</sup> Cowper, 'Argument of the Fifth Book', *Poems*, vol. 2, 209.

exclude himself from the vision with a speech tag: ‘So reads he nature whom the lamp of truth / Illuminates’ (V, 845-6).

Cowper wished to write authoritatively, as one initiated in these mysteries, but he composed Book Five of *The Task* only a year before writing the letter to Newton in which he claimed to have ‘had a dream 12 years ago, before the recollection of which, all consolation vanishes’.<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless, he wrote feelingly of the elect who receive God’s grace and of how the ‘soul that sees him’

Discerns in all things...  
A ray of heav’nly light gilding all forms  
Terrestrial, in the vast and the minute  
The unambiguous footsteps of the God  
Who gives its lustre to an insect’s wing,  
And wheels his throne upon the rolling worlds.  
Much conversant with heav’n, she often holds  
With those fair ministers of light to man  
That fill the skies nightly with silent pomp,  
Sweet conference. (V, 808-18)

Cowper writes here like a true natural theologian, juxtaposing ‘the vast and the minute’ and finding evidence of God’s glory in everything. The image of the ‘insect’s wing’ recalls Hooke’s *Micrographia*, but it also echoes the lines in Cowper’s ‘Hymn 42’, where the swarm of ‘summer flies ... swim before [his] eyes’ (ll. 10-12), cutting him off from the vision of God. Though he refers to the ‘unambiguous footsteps of ... God’ in the landscape, his experiences in the previous three decades, and his reading of Calvin, challenged the idea that these footsteps were ‘unambiguous’. Cowper captures this sense of ‘evidence ... not seen’ in the image of ‘heav’nly light gilding all forms / Terrestrial’. The participle ‘gilding’ suggests only the subtlest of transformations, made even subtler by the fact that these objects are gilded with something as evanescent as ‘light’. Furthermore, the fact that this light is ‘heav’nly’ compounds the sense that it cannot be seen by

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<sup>45</sup> Cowper, 16 October 1785, *Letters*, vol. 2, 385.

everyone, and plunges those who cannot see it back into the dark, material landscape that Cowper described in his paraphrase of 'Job Chapter Fourteenth'.

In spite of these complexities, Cowper accepts the central natural theological argument that the experience of nature has a moralising effect on the mind. Vincent Newey has argued that 'Cowper insists ... on the links between heightened perceptual capacity and the state of grace, developing at length a statement that God is both the source and the end of a true appreciation of "delightful" scenes'.<sup>46</sup> In addition to closing this circle of appreciation, Cowper also suggests that God directs the contemplating mind outwards by instilling feelings of benevolence towards other beings. Later in Book Five, he includes an apostrophe to God, as revealed in scripture, praising 'Thy lamp, mysterious word! / Which whoso sees, no longer wanders lost / With intellects bemazed in endless doubt, / But runs the road of wisdom' (V, 846-9). These lines echo very closely the language of Calvin's claim that 'the face of God ... is vnto vs like a maze ... vnlesse we be by the line of the word guided into it' (1:6:3). Cowper follows Calvin in arguing that the face of God glimpsed through the natural world becomes a moral guide to those who would otherwise see only 'through a glass, darkly' (1 Corinthians 13:12). He articulates a vision in which morality becomes an affair, not of society, but of the individual's relation to the natural world. Following Calvin, Derham, and other natural theologians, he argues that the natural world teaches morality both by giving infinite examples of God's mercy and benevolence, and by instilling feelings of gratitude and love in the beholder. Continuing his apostrophe to God, he claims that 'Thou hast built ... Worlds that had never been had'st thou in strength / Been less, or less benevolent than strong. / They are thy witnesses, who speak thy pow'r / And goodness infinite' (V, 849-54). Calvin's central tenet that God 'hath in all his works grauen certaine markes of his glorie' (1:5:1) sounds out loudly in the later books

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<sup>46</sup> Vincent Newey, *Cowper's Poetry: A Critical Study and Reassessment* (Liverpool, 1982), 133.

of *The Task*. Cowper declares that ‘Love kindles as I gaze’ (V, 842) and goes on to describe a moment in which he perceives ‘A loud Hosanna sent from all thy works’ (V, 888):

In that blest moment, nature throwing wide  
Her veil opaque, discloses with a smile  
The author of her beauties, who retired  
Behind his own creation, works unseen  
By the impure, and hears his pow’r denied. (V, 891-5)

This image of God ‘retired / Behind his own creation’ finds its counterpart in Book One, Chapter Five of Calvin’s *Institutes*, where Calvin refers to the ‘ages of the world’ as ‘images of things inuisible’, and claims that ‘the inuisible godhead is indeede represented by such shewes’ (1:5:13). Cowper figures God as existing in a kind of seclusion, ‘retired / Behind his own creation’, offering the ultimate precedent for his own. His description of the ‘blest moment’ when ‘nature throw[s] wide / Her veil opaque’ looks forward to ‘Tintern Abbey’, and to Wordsworth’s account of the ‘serene and blessed mood’ in which ‘we are laid asleep / In body, and become a living soul: / While with an eye made quiet ... We see into the life of things’ (ll. 42-50). Both poets attempted to describe how individuals could derive the moral guidance they required by communing with the landscape around them. For Cowper, the Calvinist God was ‘the source and centre of all minds’ (V, 896); for Wordsworth this role was occupied first by nature itself and then, increasingly, by the God of Anglican Christianity. Despite these differences, both poets shared a vision in which the earth proliferates with moral meaning, with instruction for the passions and their regulation, with proof of benevolence and incitements to thoughts of love and gratitude. Through reclusion, both poets believed that humans could build up their moral sense from the landscape.

*The Task* contains some of Cowper’s most powerful arguments for reclusion.

Building on his reading of natural theology, he advocates a model in which individuals

withdraw into nature in order to learn the value of community. Through ‘Sweet conference’ with the natural world, he argues, people come to recognise their dependence on a benevolent ecosystem which could and should extend from the natural world into human society. These are among the passages for which he is best remembered, and which had the greatest impact on poets including Coleridge and Wordsworth. It is important to remember, however, that Cowper continued to think and write about reclusion until his death in 1800. Only a few of his later poems were published in his lifetime, but many of them appeared in William Hayley’s *Life, and Posthumous Writings, of William Cowper, Esqr.* (1803-4). From January 1794, when he entered his final spiritual crisis, the sense of nature as a scene of exile threatened to return. Yet even in the ‘Norfolk Manuscripts’, which he wrote while living under the care of his cousin, John Johnson, in 1799-1800, he held on to the idea that the natural world was a community ordained by God. Many of the poems in the Norfolk Manuscripts are translations of animal fables by John Gay and Vincent Bourne (into Latin and English respectively). In Cowper’s renderings of these poems, the natural theologians’ feelings of love and wonder occasioned by the world live on.

The same can be said of Cowper’s own fables, such as ‘The Needless Alarm: A Tale’, which he composed in 1789 and published in *The Speaker* in 1792. This poem begins with the understated diction and metre which we have come to associate with Wordsworth: ‘There is a field through which I often pass’ (l. 1). Its couplets quickly modulate, however, into the more boisterous rhythms of satire, as Cowper tells us that this field is ‘Reserv’d to solace many a neighb’ring ’Squire / That he may follow them through brake and briar, / Contusion hazarding of neck or spine, / Which rural gentlemen call sport divine’ (ll. 5-8). The poem continues in this serio-comic vein, until the following verse paragraph:

The man to solitude accustom'd long  
 Perceives in ev'ry thing that lives a tongue,  
 Not animals alone, but shrubs and trees  
 Have speech for Him and understood with ease;  
 After long drought when rains abundant fall  
 He hears the herbs and flow'rs rejoicing all,  
 Knows what the freshness of their hue implies,  
 How glad they catch the largess of the skies.  
 But with precision nicer still the mind  
 He scans of ev'ry loco-motive kind,  
 Birds of all feather, beasts of ev'ry name  
 That serve mankind or shun them, wild or tame,  
 The looks and gestures of their griefs and fears  
 Have, all, articulation in his ears,  
 He spells them true by intuition's light,  
 And needs no glossary to set him right. (ll. 55-70)

These lines offer a profound restatement of Cowper's commitment to natural reclusion, made more remarkable by the fact that he follows them with an epigrammatic couplet whose tone is wry and self-deprecating: 'This truth premised was needful as a text / To win due credence to what follows next' (ll. 71-2). The noun 'text', however, suggests a more serious reading in which Cowper offers the previous passage as the 'text' for a sermon. His account of how he 'Perceives in ev'ry thing that lives a tongue, / Not animals alone, but shrubs and trees' once again echoes Duke Senior's claim to 'Fin[d] tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, / Sermons in stones, and good in everything.'<sup>47</sup> Like the Duke, Cowper suggests that by living in solitude he has learned to be more sensitive to the needs of the beings around him. By withdrawing from a society founded on self-interest and competition, he argues, people learn to see their place in their environment, and to weigh up their own needs against the often conflicting needs of others.

This is the morality which Cowper claims to have learned from reclusion: a form of sensitivity so universally attuned that all of the beings around him 'Have speech for Him' and are 'understood with ease'. It is a version of the natural theologians' vision of God in the landscape, where every detail, even down to the most microscopic,

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<sup>47</sup> Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, II.i.15-17, 190.

communicates meaning and instils feelings of love and gratitude towards the creator. In the lines quoted above, Cowper extends this feeling of love out towards every element of the creation, foreshadowing George Eliot's description of how

If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence.<sup>48</sup>

With her last phrase, Eliot articulates this remarkable vision as a threat. For Cowper, however, it is a welcome counterpart to the 'roar' of the 'great Babel' that he described in Book Four of *The Task*: 'Tis pleasant through the loop-holes of retreat / To peep at such a world ... To hear the roar she sends through all her gates / At a safe distance, where the dying sound / Falls a soft murmur on th'uninjured ear' (IV, 88-93). Here, the 'roar' denotes not the quantity of information but its quality: it is the spirit-breaking roar of self-interest. By contrast, Cowper revels in the roar of nature: 'He hears the herbs and flow'rs rejoicing all, / Knows what the freshness of their hue implies, / How glad they catch the largess of the skies'. By stressing the verbs ('hears' and 'Knows') in the first feet of these lines, Cowper celebrates his new-found perceptivity. There is still a comic element in phrases like the 'loco-motive kind', but Cowper also claims to feel for nature in a selfless and totally un-utilitarian manner, understanding the needs of every species, whether they 'serve mankind or shun them'. In the final couplet ('He spells them true by intuition's light, / And needs no glossary to set him right') Cowper even ventures to suggest the primacy of the world over the word, of natural over revealed theology. Like his other fables, 'The Needless Alarm' delights in heteroglossia and becomes a means of expressing his continued faith in natural reclusion. The fact that he touches this faith so lightly into an otherwise comic poem suggests his confidence in the vision of nature which he had been developing over a lifetime.

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<sup>48</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. David Carroll (Oxford, 1986), Book II, Chapter xx, 189.

*'An active principle alive in all things': Wordsworth's natural reclusion*

When Wordsworth announced *The Recluse* to the general public in the 'Preface' to *The Excursion*, he described it as 'a philosophical Poem, containing views of Man, Nature, and Society ... having for its principal subject the sensations and opinions of a Poet living in retirement'.<sup>49</sup> The poem's title and its proposed contents remained largely unchanged from Wordsworth's letter to James Losh, where he announced confidently that 'its title will be *The Recluse or views of Nature, Man, and Society*'.<sup>50</sup> The political origins of this poem in Wordsworth and Coleridge's outrage at the French invasion of Switzerland were discussed in the previous chapter. What remains to be explored is Wordsworth's persistent belief that a poem about reclusion would be 'of considerable utility'.<sup>51</sup> How, one might ask, did Wordsworth believe that a poem about reclusion would speak to Britain's moral, political, and social needs during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars? There seems to be a contradiction in writing a poem addressed to 'Man' and 'Society' on the subject of reclusion. Similarly, there seems to be a tension in Wordsworth's decision to give 'Nature' pride of place over 'Man' and 'Society' in both of his early accounts of the poem's themes.

These difficulties, I believe, can be explained by Wordsworth's interest in natural theology and by his inheritance, partly from Cowper, of a model of natural reclusion in which individuals develop their moral sensibilities by withdrawing into nature. Richard E. Brantley has argued that 'the Evangelicals' spiritual reading of the book of nature directly

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<sup>49</sup> Wordsworth, 'Preface', *The Excursion*, 38.

<sup>50</sup> William Wordsworth, 11 March 1798, *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest De Selincourt, rev. Chester L. Shaver, Mary Moorman, and Alan G. Hill, 8 vols (Oxford, 1967-93), vol. 1, 214.

<sup>51</sup> Wordsworth, 11 March 1798, *Letters*, vol. 1, 214.

bears upon [Wordsworth's] most basic themes and methods'.<sup>52</sup> In order to explain the full extent of this influence, it is necessary to consider the ways in which Wordsworth built on Cowper's writing about reclusion, developing and partly secularising his explanation of how the landscape can teach morality. This natural theological vision formed the basis of *The Recluse* at its inception in 1798 and remained important to Wordsworth's work on it throughout his career. Over the years, Wordsworth's thinking about natural theology developed in several ways. First and foremost, he thought more about the psychological mechanisms by which sense impressions from the natural world could develop the moral sense. Stephen Prickett has downplayed Wordsworth's indebtedness to natural theologians like Ray, Derham, and Paley on the grounds that 'their arguments are totally lacking in development'.<sup>53</sup> Prickett's insight that Wordsworth explained the moral mechanism of natural theology far more intricately than his predecessors is important, though I hope to show that Wordsworth achieved this by drawing on other natural theological writers, including Hartley, Butler, and Cowper.

Wordsworth believed that the passions which had corrupted many supporters of the French Revolution, both in France and in Britain, could be reformed by solitary experience in the natural world. This belief remained constant throughout his later years, and formed the social basis of his interest in reclusion. Basil Willey long since traced the importance of natural theologians like Shaftesbury, Butler, and Hartley to Wordsworth's thought. Yet he concluded that 'the passion with which [Wordsworth and Coleridge] mingled themselves with landscape was derived ... primarily from the deflection into imaginative channels of their thwarted political ardours'.<sup>54</sup> By contrast, I believe that Wordsworth's interest in natural reclusion constitutes a progression, rather than a

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<sup>52</sup> Richard E. Brantley, *Wordsworth's "Natural Methodism"* (New Haven and London, 1975), 169.

<sup>53</sup> Stephen Prickett, *Romanticism and Religion: The Tradition of Coleridge and Wordsworth in the Victorian Church* (Cambridge, 1976), 84.

<sup>54</sup> Basil Willey, *The Eighteenth Century Background: Studies on the Idea of Nature in the Thought of the Period* (London, 1940), 256.

‘deflection’, of his revolutionary commitments. By returning to the kind of contextual work undertaken by Willey, but in the light of New Historicist and Ecocritical readings of Romantic poetry, I hope to reverse the argument that Wordsworth’s interest in reclusion was ‘a way of distancing himself from his earlier enthusiasms for revolutionary projects’.<sup>55</sup> Jonathan Bate famously refuted the New Historicist version of this argument on ecological grounds in the opening chapters of *Romantic Ecology*.<sup>56</sup> It seems equally important, however, to counter this position in its own terms, by historicising Wordsworth’s interest in reclusion. When one does so, it emerges that Wordsworth, like Cowper, envisioned natural reclusion as the first and most urgent step in a non-violent revolution.

Another respect in which Wordsworth’s thinking about natural theology changed over the years regards his gradual conversion to the Anglican Church. On this point, I concur with William Ulmer that the ‘entanglement of Romantic natural theology and Christian tradition’ in Wordsworth’s early works ‘places their religious outlook in [an] irreducibly metaphorical relation to institutional Christianity’.<sup>57</sup> In other words, Wordsworth initially adopted the language of natural theology without necessarily committing to a faith in the Christian God. This is the case, for example, in the opening lines of *Descriptive Sketches*, which set out a familiar vision of the natural world burgeoning with moral symbolism. Wordsworth claims that ‘Were there, below, a spot of holy ground / By Pain and her sad family unfound, / Sure, Nature’s GOD that spot to man had giv’n, / Where murmuring rivers join the song of ev’n’.<sup>58</sup> Here, ‘Nature’s GOD’ does not have to be the Christian God, but can become so if one chooses to hear the echo of Psalm 98, ‘O sing unto the LORD a new song’ (Psalm 98:1). In 1836, Wordsworth felt no

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<sup>55</sup> Kenneth R. Johnston, *Wordsworth and The Recluse* (New Haven and London, 1984), 13.

<sup>56</sup> Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (London and New York, 1991), 15-17.

<sup>57</sup> William A. Ulmer, *The Christian Wordsworth, 1798-1805* (Albany, 2001), 181.

<sup>58</sup> William Wordsworth, *Descriptive Sketches*, 1793 text, ll. 1-4, ed. Eric Birdsall with the assistance of Paul M. Zall (Ithaca and London, 1984), 38.

need to revise these lines, though he Christianised the penultimate verse paragraph of *Descriptive Sketches* with the apostrophe: ‘Great God! By whom the strifes of men are weighed / In an impartial balance, give thine aid / To the just cause’ (1836 version, ll. 669-71). In 1793, however, Wordsworth already professed the natural theologians’ belief that the landscape can teach morality:

But doubly pitying Nature loves to show’r  
Soft on his wounded heart her healing pow’r,  
Who plods o’er hills and vales his road forlorn,  
Wooing her varying charms from eve to morn.  
No sad vacuities his heart annoy,  
Blows not a Zephyr but it whispers joy;  
For him lost flowers their idle sweets exhale;  
He tastes the meanest note that swells the gale;  
...  
Moves there a cloud o’er mid-day’s flaming eye?  
Upward he looks—and calls it luxury;  
Kind Nature’s charities his steps attend,  
In every babbling brook he finds a friend,  
While chast’ning thoughts of sweetest use, bestow’d  
By Wisdom, moralize his pensive road. (ll. 13-30)

The model of reclusion that was later to underpin *The Recluse* is already present in this passage. Like Cowper in ‘The Needless Alarm’, Wordsworth suggests that the solitary individual exists in a state of community with the natural world. All of the moral qualities that one would normally associate with society are exercised and reinforced by the interactions between the individual and the landscape. Wordsworth’s phrase ‘Kind Nature’s charities’ invokes the benevolent creator posited by natural theologians, from Bacon onwards. Beyond this, it suggests that by closely observing the natural world, and reciprocating the way it ministers to human needs, individuals can learn to live charitably themselves.

The line ‘In every babbling brook he finds a friend’ looks back to Duke Senior’s claim to find ‘tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, / Sermons in stones, and good

in everything'.<sup>59</sup> Wordsworth interprets the profusion of the natural world in terms of 'sweets' and 'luxury', but he contrasts this with the belief that the experience of nature offers 'chast'ning thoughts of sweetest use' which can 'moralize [the] pensive road'. Already, there is a sense that morality is best learned away from society, in the more Edenic community of the natural world. Concluding *The Politics of Nature*, Nicholas Roe argued that 'in his poetry of 1798 Wordsworth addressed the nurturing relationship between "acts / Of kindness and of love" and the earth itself'.<sup>60</sup> I would extend this claim to encompass not only what Alan Bewell has called the 'governing intention' of *The Recluse*,<sup>61</sup> but almost the entirety of Wordsworth's career. In 1793, Wordsworth was already considering how 'chast'ning thoughts' are 'bestow'd / By Wisdom', an abstract personification which assumes the agency that Cowper and Calvin ascribe directly to God. In his early poetry, Wordsworth drew on the framework of natural theology, but implied that the natural world acts with a degree of autonomy from its creator: it is nature herself who ministers to human needs and 'loves to show'r / Soft on [man's] wounded heart her healing pow'r'. As in *The Task*, the individual must 'woo' nature's 'varying charms' by becoming an adept reader of natural symbolism. Like Cowper, Wordsworth suggests that this moral capacity is fostered by reclusion, and learnt by one 'Who plods o'er hills and vales his road forlorn'.

The lines quoted above echo the language of Joseph Butler's work *The Analogy of Religion Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature* (1736).

Wordsworth was examined on this text in his third year at Cambridge (December 1789).

Duncan Wu notes that 'it is far from certain that Wordsworth read all the books assigned'

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<sup>59</sup> Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, II.i.16-17, 190.

<sup>60</sup> Nicholas Roe, *The Politics of Nature: William Wordsworth and Some Contemporaries* (Basingstoke, 2002), 199.

<sup>61</sup> Alan Bewell, *Wordsworth and the Enlightenment: Nature, Man, and Society in the Experimental Poetry* (New Haven and London, 1989), 3.

for this examination,<sup>62</sup> but the evidence of *Descriptive Sketches* suggests that he was certainly familiar with Butler. Like many natural theologians, Butler set out to show that the system of nature was consistent with its having a benevolent and morally perfect creator. In the 'Introduction', he states his intention to argue by analogy between scripture and the natural world:

if there be an Analogy or Likeness between that System of Things and Dispensation of Providence, which Revelation informs us of, and that System of Things and Dispensation of Providence, which Experience together with Reason informs us of, *i.e.* the known Course of Nature; this is a Presumption, that they have both the same Author and Cause.<sup>63</sup>

Wordsworth sets up a similar analogy when he distinguishes between 'Nature' (l. 13) and 'Nature's GOD' (l. 3) in the opening lines of *Descriptive Sketches*. Unlike Butler, who 'ascribe[s] all moral Perfection to God',<sup>64</sup> Wordsworth ascribes much of this perfection to 'doubly pitying Nature' (l. 13). This phrase, which he deleted from the 1820 version of the poem,<sup>65</sup> sets up an implicit contrast between the natural world and its creator, suggesting that nature itself somehow surpasses its creator in benevolence, tending to human needs more directly and with more feeling.

Like Butler, Wordsworth finds 'a moral Institution of Government, in the Strictest Sense moral, *visibly* established and begun in nature'.<sup>66</sup> It is this 'moral Institution of Government' which enables Wordsworth's reclusion: when there is a divinely-sanctioned 'Government' established in the natural world, individuals can safely withdraw from corrupt human societies and yet still exist under the moral government of 'Nature's GOD'. This differs from the idea that Rousseau advanced in his *Discourse on The Origin ... of Inequality* (1755). For Rousseau, the state of nature was pre-moral: 'Savages are not bad,

<sup>62</sup> Duncan Wu, *Wordsworth's Reading 1770-1799* (Cambridge, 1993), 168.

<sup>63</sup> Joseph Butler, *The Analogy of Religion Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature* (London, 1765), vii.

<sup>64</sup> Butler, *Analogy of Religion*, xii.

<sup>65</sup> Wordsworth, *Descriptive Sketches*, 38n.

<sup>66</sup> Butler, *Analogy of Religion*, 79.

precisely because they don't know what it is to be good'.<sup>67</sup> He posited that the origin of morality was 'Pity ... a Virtue so much the more universal, and useful to Man, as it takes place in him of all manner of Reflection'.<sup>68</sup> Wordsworth might be seen to draw on this concept of pity in his description of 'doubly pitying Nature', but his concept of nature in *Descriptive Sketches* is closer to that of the natural theologians than to Rousseau's. Having grown up in society, he suggests, individuals can subsist on the margins and learn morality from the natural world, where every wind 'whispers joy' and every 'dear' sight inspires gratitude.

In *Descriptive Sketches*, Wordsworth was already working with a developed model of natural reclusion. Like Butler, however, he proceeded by analogy. His language is highly figurative, ascribing moral qualities to the natural world through stark metaphors: 'In every babbling brook he finds a friend'. Such metaphors do not yet explain the psychological mechanism by which the natural world acts on the mind. When revising *An Evening Walk* in 1794, Wordsworth began to tackle these problems in a new passage, asking: 'And are there souls whose languid powers unite / No interest to each rural sound or sight?'<sup>69</sup>

How different with those favoured souls, who, taught  
 By active Fancy or by patient Thought,  
 See common forms prolong the endless chain  
 Of Joy and grief, of pleasure and of pain.  
 With them the sense no trivial object knows;  
 Oft at its meanest touch their Spirit glows  
 And, proud beyond all limits to aspire,  
 Mounts through the fields of thought on wings of fire;  
 But sure with tenfold pleasure they behold  
 The powers of nature in each various mould;  
 If, like the sun, their [ ] love surrounds  
 The [ ] world to life's remotest bounds. (ll. 203-14)

<sup>67</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse upon the Origin and Foundation of the Inequality among Mankind*, trans. William Kenrick (London, 1761), 70.

<sup>68</sup> Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality*, 71.

<sup>69</sup> William Wordsworth, *An Evening Walk*, 'Expanded Version of 1794', ll. 197-8, ed. James Averill (Ithaca and London, 1984), 137.

Wordsworth's initial question ('are there souls whose languid powers unite / No interest to each rural sound or sight?') echoes the beginning of *The Task*, where Cowper muses that 'Nor rural sights alone, but rural sounds / Exhilarate the spirit, and restore / The tone of languid Nature' (I, 181-3). At this point, Cowper recalls standing on a hill overlooking the River Ouse and describes, as Wordsworth was to do in 'Tintern Abbey', how seeing a familiar landscape brings back all of the memories he associates with it. In 1794, Wordsworth was already familiar with the principle of associationism, but it seems significant that he draws on Cowper before describing how 'common forms prolong the endless chain / Of Joy and grief, of pleasure and of pain'.<sup>70</sup> The model of associationism that Wordsworth presents is partly mediated through Cowper's account, in Book Six of *The Task*, of how a familiar sense impression 'opens all the cells / Where mem'ry slept' (VI, 11-12):

the scene recurs,  
And with it all its pleasures and its pains.  
Such comprehensive views the spirit takes,  
That in a few short moments I retrace  
(As in a map the voyager his course)  
The windings of my way through many years. (VI, 13-18)

In this passage, Cowper draws on Locke's account of how sense impressions associate with one another to form ideas: 'one no sooner ... comes into the Understanding but its Associate appears with it; and if they are more than two which are thus united, the whole gang always inseparable shew themselves together'.<sup>71</sup> As in Book One of *The Task*, Cowper yokes this model of associationism to his own concept of reclusion. By immersing themselves in the landscape, Cowper suggests, individuals can take 'comprehensive views' of their own minds, rooting out their bad passions and replacing them with natural sense impressions that soothe and charm. Like a true natural theologian, Cowper claims that

<sup>70</sup> Duncan Wu comments that 'associationism can be found in W's poetry as early as *The Vale of Esthwaite* (1787)'. Wu, *Wordsworth's Reading 1770-1799*, 72.

<sup>71</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding*, II, xxxviii (London, 1700), 222.

nature 'lectures man / In heav'nly truth; evincing ... that there lives and works / A soul in all things, and that soul is God' (VI, 182-5). He suggests that individuals respond best to nature's teaching through introspection, when they withdraw from society and meditate on the natural world in private.

Butler's presence can also be detected in the passage quoted above from *An Evening Walk*, particularly in the phrases 'active Fancy' and 'patient Thought'. Like Cowper, Wordsworth believed that individuals needed to engage imaginatively in solitary reflection if nature's lessons were to take effect. This idea seems to have been confirmed for him by Butler, who claimed that:

There are Habits of Perception, and Habits of Action ... And in like manner as Habits belonging to the Body are produced by external Acts: so Habits of the Mind are produced by the Exertion of inward practical Principles, *i.e.* by carrying them into Act, or acting upon them; the Principles of Obedience, of Veracity, Justice, and Charity.<sup>72</sup>

In other words, people can act in one of two ways when the landscape triggers a chain of associations: they can either allow this to unfold passively, or they can exert what Wordsworth calls 'active Fancy', consciously reflecting on the impressions they are receiving from the landscape and trying to direct them towards moral ends. Butler favours the second approach, claiming that 'it must always be remembered, that real Endeavours to enforce good Impressions upon ourselves, are a species of virtuous Action'.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, he argues that 'thus a new Character, in several respects, may be formed; and many Habitudes of Life, not given by Nature, but which Nature directs us to acquire'.<sup>74</sup> Drawing on Butler, Wordsworth develops Cowper's idea that meditative reclusion in nature can reform a person's moral character. Through active reflection, he argues, individuals can reorganise the associations between their ideas, breaking selfish habits of thinking and

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<sup>72</sup> Butler, *Analogy of Religion*, 120-1.

<sup>73</sup> Butler, *Analogy of Religion*, 124.

<sup>74</sup> Butler, *Analogy of Religion*, 125.

building chains of charity: nature ‘directs’ this process, but the human will must assist with active ‘Endeavours’.

The connotations of endeavour are seeded through Wordsworth’s description of how ‘favoured souls’ respond to the natural world. At first, this process seems passive: the ‘Spirit glows’ with the ‘meanest touch’ of ‘sense’. After this, however, Wordsworth describes how the favoured soul, ‘proud beyond all limits to aspire, / Mounts through the fields of thought on wings of fire’ (ll. 209-10). The will directs the mind upward through ‘fields of thought’, associating sense impressions of the natural world into ever more complex ideas. All the while, the mind beholds ‘the powers of nature in each various mould’ (l. 212), recognising the ‘moral Institution of Government ... *visibly* established and begun in nature’.<sup>75</sup> It conforms to principles of love and charity so that, ‘like the sun, [its] [ ] love surrounds / The [ ] world to life’s remotest bounds’ (ll. 213-14).

Opposing the New Historicists, Karl Kroeber claimed that much Romantic writing aims ‘to articulate meaningful human relations within the conditions of a natural world in which transcendence is not at issue’.<sup>76</sup> Certainly, Wordsworth does not seek to transcend socio-political reality: what he offers is a model by which individuals can transcend their selfish passions and extend their sympathies ‘to life’s remotest bounds’. This, I believe, might account for Geoffrey Hartman’s sense that ‘Wordsworth thought nature itself led him beyond nature’.<sup>77</sup> The ‘movement of transcendence’ that Hartman termed the ‘*via naturaliter negativa*’ might be reinterpreted as originating in Wordsworth’s social commitments, rather than in ‘the idealizing power of imagination’:<sup>78</sup> building on the tenets of natural theology, Wordsworth uses nature to help him transcend not historical conditions, but his own selfish passions. As early as 1794, he was beginning to develop a

<sup>75</sup> Butler, *Analogy of Religion*, 79.

<sup>76</sup> Karl Kroeber, *Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of Mind* (New York, 1994), 38.

<sup>77</sup> Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Wordsworth’s Poetry 1787-1814* (New Haven and London, 1967), 33.

<sup>78</sup> Hartman, *Wordsworth’s Poetry*, 33.

complex psychological mechanism to describe how reclusion could help to remedy the selfish habits of thought that he saw as one of the primary failings of the French Revolution.

Many critics posit a degree of turmoil in Wordsworth's thinking about human psychology in the mid-1790s. David Bromwich, for example, argues that Wordsworth wrote *The Borderers* (1796-9) in 'a mood of crisis', as 'an intricate apology for views he would later picture himself as turning against at exactly the time he wrote it'.<sup>79</sup> As Bromwich observes, one of the central tensions in *The Borderers* is Wordsworth's response to 'Godwin's account of human action'.<sup>80</sup> In his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793), William Godwin had argued that 'Man, when he surrenders his reason, and becomes the partisan of implicit faith and passive obedience, is the most mischievous of all animals'.<sup>81</sup> Instead, he proposed that individuals should act in accordance with 'private judgement':

If there be any truth more unquestionable than the rest, it is, that every man is bound to the exertion of his faculties in the discovery of right, and to the carrying into effect all the right with which he is acquainted.<sup>82</sup>

It is easy to see how Godwin's account of the 'exertion of [one's] faculties in the discovery of right' spoke to Wordsworth's concepts of 'active Fancy' and 'patient Thought' (l. 204). Furthermore, Godwin's emphasis on 'carrying into effect all the right with which [one] is acquainted' invited Wordsworth to think about the difference between 'active' reflection and 'action' itself. Despite calling for action, Godwin recognised complexities in his

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<sup>79</sup> David Bromwich, *Disowned by Memory: Wordsworth's Poetry of the 1790s* (Chicago and London, 1998), 44.

<sup>80</sup> Bromwich, *Disowned by Memory*, 60.

<sup>81</sup> William Godwin, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, and its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness*, 2 vols (London, 1793), Book III, Chapter VI, vol. 1, 174.

<sup>82</sup> Godwin, *Enquiry*, Book II, Chapter VI, vol. 1, 128.

model of ‘private judgment’, acknowledging that to different minds ‘the same external action will admit of every possible shade of virtue or vice’.<sup>83</sup>

This is the idea which Wordsworth seized upon as the crux of *The Borderers*. In his introductory essay ‘On the Character of Rivers’, he posits a character who ‘goes into the world’, ‘is betrayed into a great crime’, and then ‘quits the world in disgust’:

In his retirement, he is impelled to examine the reasonableness of established opinions and the force of his mind exhausts itself in constant efforts to separate the elements of virtue and vice. It is his pleasure and his consolation to hunt out whatever is bad in actions usually esteemed virtuous and to detect the good in actions which the universal sense of mankind teaches us to reprobate.<sup>84</sup>

The kind of solitary reflection which Wordsworth had espoused in *An Evening Walk* here leads to amorality, as the character thinks himself into a private moral language in which every possible action can be justified. Wordsworth describes how, ‘supported by a habit of constant reflexion’, Rivers ends up corrupting, rather than reforming, the associations between his ideas.<sup>85</sup> In the play itself, the noun ‘action’ recurs as the topic of discussion.

According to Rivers,

Action is transitory, a step, a blow—  
The motion of a muscle—this way or that—  
'Tis done—and in the after vacancy  
We wonder at ourselves like men betray'd.  
Suffering is permanent, obscure and dark,  
And has the nature of infinity. (III.v.60-5)

One possible response to this claim would be to defer action infinitely in recognition of the ‘permanent’ nature of the suffering that actions can cause. This, I would suggest, was a response that Wordsworth briefly contemplated. Having witnessed the suffering caused in France by people, many of whom had since ‘wonder[ed] at [them]selves like men betray'd’, Wordsworth and many of his contemporaries asked whether reflection can ever truly be ready to pass into action.

<sup>83</sup> Godwin, *Enquiry*, Book II, Chapter VI, vol. 1, 131.

<sup>84</sup> William Wordsworth, ‘On the Character of Rivers’, *The Borderers*, ed. Robert Osborn (Ithaca and London, 1982), 62.

<sup>85</sup> Wordsworth, ‘On the Character of Rivers’, 65.

However, Wordsworth soon moves past this position in *The Borderers*. In Act Four, Rivers claims that, having been tricked into abandoning the captain of his ship ‘I had within me / A salient spring of energy, a fire / Of inextinguishable thought—I mounted / From action up to action with a mind / That never rested’ (IV.ii.118-22). This description recalls Wordsworth’s account, in *An Evening Walk*, of how the favoured soul ‘proud beyond all limits to aspire, / Mounts through the fields of thought on wings of fire’ (ll. 209-10). The difference is that Rivers and Mortimer lack the guiding influence of moral impulses from nature: their ‘fire’ is internal and unchecked. They thus ascend too far, becoming lost in groundless chains of association. In this respect, *The Borderers* anticipates Coleridge’s later attempt in a notebook entry ‘to explain ... the Origin of moral Evil from the *streamy* Nature of Association, which Thinking = Reason, curbs & rudders/how this comes to be so difficult’.<sup>86</sup> Coleridge offers ‘Thinking = Reason’ as a curb to the kind of proliferating associations which allow Rivers to justify every action. Wordsworth, on the other hand, implies that Godwinian reasoning, unchecked by moral impulses from the natural world, is precisely what leads to this amoral state. Like Butler, he believes that reasoning alone is insufficient, and that ‘Nature directs us to acquire’ moral ‘Habitudes of Life’.<sup>87</sup> By secluding themselves in the natural world, he argues, individuals receive impressions which ground their chains of association and prevent them from deviating from what Butler called the ‘moral Institution of Government, in the Strictest Sense moral, [which is] *visibly* established and begun in nature’.<sup>88</sup> Thus, when Mortimer descends into the dungeon to kill Herbert, what finally prevents him from doing so is a single sense impression that makes its way into this sensory void: ‘I cast my eyes upwards, and through a crevice in the roof I beheld a star twinkling over my head, and by

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<sup>86</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, 5 vols in 9 (London, 2002), vol. 1, 1770.

<sup>87</sup> Butler, *Analogy of Religion*, 125.

<sup>88</sup> Butler, *Analogy of Religion*, 79.

the living God, I could not do it' (II.iii.289-91). *The Borderers* may express a crisis in Wordsworth's thinking about the role of introspection in developing morality, but, if anything, writing it only strengthened his conviction in the principles of natural theology.

In July 1798, Wordsworth famously reaffirmed his faith in the morally educative effects of nature. Kenneth Johnston did not discuss 'Tintern Abbey' in relation to the 1,300 lines of poetry which he called 'The First *Recluse*' of 1797-8.<sup>89</sup> Nicolas Roe argued that 'Tintern Abbey' does belong to Wordsworth's masterwork, but he explained Wordsworth's interest in reclusion as a result of the fact that 'the "fraternal spirit" of reformed society had ceased to be a practical option by the middle of 1798'.<sup>90</sup> By contrast, I would argue that 'Tintern Abbey' develops the central political argument of *The Recluse* by showing that reclusion offers a real, non-violent route to precisely this kind of social reform and 'fraternal spirit'. Having witnessed the French Revolution, Wordsworth accepts that these ideals will never be reached through a violent revolution led by self-interested individuals. However, he claims that they remain achievable goals if individuals learn the habits of introspection and self-government which will give them the moral autonomy to overcome their selfish passions and remain true to the joint causes of liberty and community.

From the outset of 'Tintern Abbey', Wordsworth expresses a wish to withdraw from society in its current formation: 'Once again / Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs, / Which on a wild secluded scene impress / Thoughts of more deep seclusion' (ll. 4-7). The verb 'impress' connotes a sense of urgency, as if Wordsworth is physically impressing his 'Thoughts of more deep seclusion' on the landscape, making it answer a need. It also belongs to the language of associationism (as in the phrase 'sense impression'), suggesting that the interplay between mind and nature is reciprocal: the landscape is 'impressing' the

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<sup>89</sup> Johnston, *Wordsworth and the Recluse*, 5-6.

<sup>90</sup> Roe, *The Politics of Nature*, 83.

mind, as if physically moulding it into a new shape. When secluded in nature, Wordsworth suggests, the mind becomes more plastic and more perceptive than at any other time: new impressions flood the nerves with new vibrations, building up fresh chains of association; not only this, but selfish passions are capable of being broken down and reformed.

Wordsworth proceeds to articulate his belief in the virtue of natural reclusion, drawing heavily on *The Task* in order to do so. In her book *Tradition and Experiment in the Lyrical Ballads*, Mary Jacobus concludes that *The Task* was ‘undoubtedly the most important eighteenth-century influence’ on ‘Tintern Abbey’,<sup>91</sup> yet she also asserts that Cowper provided Wordsworth with ‘no revelation of feeling, no meditative insight’.<sup>92</sup> This claim has gone largely unchallenged since it was made in 1976, but I would argue that Cowper played a crucial role in helping Wordsworth to develop the concept of natural reclusion, the ‘meditative insight’ which underlies not only ‘Tintern Abbey’, but also the whole of *The Recluse*.

Jacobus observed the similarity between the opening of ‘Tintern Abbey’ and Cowper’s ‘walk in the country’ near the start of *The Task*.<sup>93</sup> Both poets recall standing in the landscape, looking out across a river valley with a female companion. In Cowper’s case, the river is the ‘Ouse, slow winding through a level plain’ (I, 163) and his companion is Mary Unwin. The Miltonic undertones of both poems are unmistakable, as Cowper and Wordsworth pick up from the closing lines of *Paradise Lost*: ‘The world was all before them, where to choose / Their place of rest, and providence their guide: / They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow, / Through Eden took their solitary way’.<sup>94</sup> Cowper and Wordsworth derive from Milton the idea of a ‘solitary’ couple searching for a home in a fallen world, basing their accounts of seclusion on this archetypal image of exile. What

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<sup>91</sup> Mary Jacobus, *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth’s Lyrical Ballads (1798)* (Oxford, 1976), 44.

<sup>92</sup> Jacobus, *Tradition and Experiment*, 51.

<sup>93</sup> Jacobus, *Tradition and Experiment*, 105.

<sup>94</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, XII, 646-9, ed. Alastair Fowler (Harlow, 2007), 678.

has gone largely unremarked, however, is the extent to which the Miltonic vista at the beginning of 'Tintern Abbey' is mediated through *The Task*. Though Milton originates the image of companionable solitude, it is Cowper who develops the idea that individuals must withdraw into nature in order to expiate for having fallen in society. In articulating his wish for 'seclusion' in 'Tintern Abbey', Wordsworth draws extensively on the arguments for natural reclusion which Cowper makes throughout *The Task*. Even the associationist model which he uses to explain *how* nature goes about reforming the mind has strong precedents in Cowper's poem.

As already discussed, Cowper uses the Lockean model of association to explain nature's effect on the mind in Book Six of *The Task*. Drawing on Locke's claim that 'one [idea] no sooner ... comes into the Understanding but its Associate appears with it',<sup>95</sup> Cowper describes how, when he receives a familiar impression, 'the scene recurs, / And with it all its pleasures and its pains ... I retrace / (As in a map the voyager his course) / The windings of my way through many years' (VI, 12-18). Wordsworth describes a similar process of retracing the 'windings of [his] way' in the windings of the Wye. For both poets, the act of revisiting a favourite place calls forth a host of associations and allows them, quite literally, to 'map' the development of their minds onto the landscape. The sight of a familiar scene overlaid with the thoughts that it evokes enables them to take 'comprehensive views' of their thoughts, surveying them as if from the viewing station in a picturesque painting. Beyond this, the natural world serves as a source of sense impressions which can be associated into new, charitable ideas. In Book Three of *The Task*, Cowper argues that nature offers 'Scenes form'd for contemplation, and to nurse / The growing seeds of wisdom; that suggest / By ev'ry pleasing image they present / Reflections such as meliorate the heart, / Compose the passions, and exalt the mind' (III,

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<sup>95</sup> Locke, *Essay*, II, xxxviii, 222.

301-5). Through the process of reflection, images of the natural world become associated into ideas that conform to the system of morality which, according to Joseph Butler, is ‘visibly established and begun in nature’.<sup>96</sup> Wordsworth echoes this account when he describes how he is ‘well pleased to recognize / In nature and the language of the sense, / The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse, / The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul / Of all my moral being’ (ll. 108-12). From the natural theological viewpoint, God communicates his moral law through scripture, but also through the ‘language of the sense’, through the intermediary of a natural world which ministers to human needs and thus inspires love and gratitude, as well as teaching us to respect the endlessly entangled needs of all created beings. In this way, reclusion in the natural world becomes the ‘anchor of [Wordsworth’s] purest thoughts’ and the ‘soul / Of all [his] moral being’. Wordsworth’s natural reclusion speaks to the model of ‘culture’ advanced by Raymond Williams.

Against the ‘dominative mood ... the theory and practice of man’s mastering and controlling his natural environment’, Williams wrote,

the idea of culture is necessary, as an idea of the tending of *natural* growth.... We have to live by our own attachments, but we can only live fully, in common, if we grant the attachments of others, and make it our common business to keep the channels of growth clear.<sup>97</sup>

Long before the establishment of Ecocriticism, Williams recognised that the social and environmental dimensions of community cannot be separated. Though applied to his own time, his remarks capture Wordsworth’s concern with natural reclusion as a means by which people can learn to ‘live fully, in common’.

In Book One of *The Task*, Cowper describes the effect that the sight of the River Ouse has on his mind, recalling ‘How oft upon yon eminence, our pace / Has slacken’d to a pause, and we have borne / The ruffling wind scarce conscious that it blew, / While

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<sup>96</sup> Butler, *Analogy of Religion*, 79.

<sup>97</sup> Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (London, 1958), 336-7.

admiration feeding at the eye, / And still unsated, dwelt upon the scene' (I, 154-8).

Grammatically, the 'eye' is an indirect object in this sentence: Cowper emphasises the fact that, in this 'blest moment', the 'eye' becomes passively receptive. Wordsworth expresses the same sentiment in 'Tintern Abbey', when he describes

that serene and blessed mood,  
In which the affections gently lead us on,  
Until ... we are laid asleep  
In body, and become a living soul:  
While with an eye made quiet by the power  
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,  
We see into the life of things. (ll. 42-9)

For Wordsworth, as for Cowper, the mind enters a state of passiveness as nature begins reforming its chains of association. Wordsworth echoes Cowper's use of the passive voice in the phrases 'an eye made quiet' and 'we are laid asleep'. He also offers a theologically muted version of Cowper's description of the 'blest moment, [when] nature throwing wide / Her veil opaque, discloses with a smile / The author of her beauties' (V, 891-3) in his own account of the 'serene and blessed mood / In which ... We see into the life of things'.

Despite the ostensive passiveness with which both Cowper and Wordsworth imbibe morality from the natural world, the process of reforming one's trains of association remains an active one. Wordsworth, especially, emphasises the fact that he has 'learned / To look on nature, not as in the hour / Of thoughtless youth, but hearing oftentimes / The still, sad music of humanity' (ll. 89-92), where the verb 'learned' connotes active concentration. In this respect, Wordsworth can be seen to echo David Hartley's argument that humans have a duty to regulate their impressions and associations:

It is of the utmost consequence to morality and religion, that the affections and passions should be analysed into their simple and compounding parts, by reversing the steps of associations which concur to form them. For thus we may learn how to cherish and improve good ones, check and root out such as are mischievous and immoral.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> David Hartley, *Observations on Man, 1791*, 2 vols (Poole and Washington, D.C., 1998), I:II:xiv, vol. 1, 81.

This is the process of introspective analysis which Cowper and Wordsworth undertake while looking out over their respective landscapes. Wordsworth recognises the complexity of this task when he describes how he has ‘owed’ to the Wye’s ‘forms of beauty’ ‘feelings ... Of unremembered pleasure; such, perhaps, / As may have had no trivial influence / On that best portion of a good man’s life; / His little, nameless, unremembered acts / Of kindness and of love’ (ll. 27-36). With the adjective ‘unremembered’, he suggests that it is not always possible to resolve charitable acts into the individual impressions that give rise to them. Nonetheless, he accepts Hartley’s proposal that ‘our passions and affections can be no more than aggregates of simple ideas united by association’,<sup>99</sup> claiming that his ‘acts / Of kindness and of love’ derive, ultimately, from the Wye’s ‘forms of beauty’. Hartley proposes a scale of ‘six classes of intellectual affections’, which passes from ‘sensation’ up through ‘imagination’, ‘ambition’, ‘self-interest’, ‘sympathy’, ‘theopathy’, and finally culminates in ‘the moral sense’.<sup>100</sup> The implication of this is that by regulating their sensations, individuals can develop and refine their ‘moral sense’. By secluding themselves in the landscape, away from the corrupting sense impressions of industrial society, they can educate themselves in morality: this is the process which Cowper and Wordsworth describe in *The Task* and ‘Tintern Abbey’.

Here, it is important to remember the distinction between reclusion and solitude. In their writing, both Cowper and Wordsworth are careful to show that the impetus behind their reclusion is social: by escaping the self-interest of contemporary society, they hope to enter into a more genuine form of community. Nowhere is this clearer than in the respective apostrophes to Mary and to Dorothy in *The Task* and ‘Tintern Abbey’. Despite the emphasis which Cowper and Wordsworth place on private introspection, neither of

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<sup>99</sup> Hartley, *Observations on Man*, III:III:lxxxix, vol. 1, 368.

<sup>100</sup> Hartley, *Observations on Man*, III:III:lxxxix, vol. 1, 368-9. ‘Theopathy’ is Hartley’s name for ‘all those pleasures and pains, which the contemplation of God, and his attributes, and of our relation to him, raises up in the minds of different persons’, IV:V:xcviii, vol. 1, 486.

them withdraws alone into the landscape. When describing how he has stood surveying the Ouse, Cowper refers to Mary Unwin ‘Whose arm this twentieth winter I perceive / Fast lock’d in mine’ (I, 145-6). The pressure of Mary’s arm secures him within a relationship which epitomises the ideal of a sympathetic community. Beyond this, it grounds him in the present moment and the natural world. When addressing Mary, he claims that:

Thou know’st my praise of nature most sincere,  
And that my raptures are not conjured up  
To serve occasions of poetic pomp,  
But genuine, and art partner of them all. (I, 150-3)

Cowper’s apostrophe echoes the first words which Adam speaks to Eve in *Paradise Lost*: ‘Sole partner and sole part of all these joys’ (IV, 411). He figures himself and Mary as being like Adam and Eve in an Earthly paradise, keeping each other faithful by remaining together. Where introspection fails to prove to him that his ‘praise of nature’ (and therefore of God) is ‘sincere’, Mary succeeds. Wordsworth arguably modelled his apostrophe to Dorothy on Cowper’s apostrophe to Mary, trying to dismiss his fear that his faith in nature is ‘but a vain belief’ (l. 51) by appealing to ‘the dear companion of [his] walks’ (I, 144):

For thou art with me, here, upon the banks  
Of this fair river; thou, my dearest Friend,  
My dear, dear Friend, and in thy voice I catch  
The language of my former heart, and read  
My former pleasures in the shooting lights  
Of thy wild eyes. (ll. 115-20)

I disagree with Frances Ferguson’s reading that, for Wordsworth, ‘the moment of remembering that Dorothy came with him is the unraveling of the imposition of solitude on the scene’.<sup>101</sup> If one reads ‘Tintern Abbey’ in terms of ‘seclusion’ (the word he uses) rather than ‘solitude’, Dorothy’s presence serves to secure his commitment to an ideal community, instead of ‘unraveling’ his commitment to solitude. Dorothy’s presence offers a similar reassurance to Mary’s arm: it secures Wordsworth in a relationship which

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<sup>101</sup> Frances Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individuation* (New York and London, 1992), 192.

represents the ideal of community and upholds him in his love of nature. Wordsworth's over-insistent repetition of Cowper's adjective 'dear', however, suggests a degree of urgency in his address. Whereas Mary's arm is 'Fast lock'd' in Cowper's, Wordsworth has no physical contact with Dorothy and their communication is sporadic: he has to 'catch' his reassurance from her 'voice' and 'read' it in the 'shooting lights' of her 'eyes'. There is, then, a sense that Wordsworth's experience of seclusion threatens to become one of solitude, but I would argue that this stems not from his wishes, but from his fears about British society in 1798. Four months after the French invasion of Switzerland, and with the prominent academic and theologian Gilbert Wakefield awaiting trial under Pitt's 'Two Acts',<sup>102</sup> Wordsworth describes himself as Milton does in Book Seven of *Paradise Lost*: 'fallen on evil days ... and evil tongues; / In darkness, and with dangers compassed round, / And solitude' (VII, 25-8; cf. 'Tintern Abbey', ll. 129-31). Despite this, I do not agree with John Rieder's claim that 'Tintern Abbey' 'is a purely poetic solution to political, social, and personal problems'.<sup>103</sup> Rather than describing what David Simpson calls Wordsworth's 'condition of arrested concern—his awareness of problems he seems to be unable to handle',<sup>104</sup> I believe that 'Tintern Abbey' outlines a very clear route for the direction of revolutionary energies. Like Cowper, Wordsworth believed that any political revolution needed to begin with individuals secluding themselves in the landscape, reforming their own passions, and redeeming themselves for having fallen in society.

Bolstered by his announcement of the themes of *The Recluse* in 'Tintern Abbey', Wordsworth composed a fragment in which he restated the model of natural reclusion that he had begun to develop in his early poems. He composed the lines beginning 'There is an

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<sup>102</sup> See Olivia Smith, *The Politics of Language, 1791-1819* (Oxford, 1984), 204-5.

<sup>103</sup> John Rieder, *Wordsworth's Counterrevolutionary Turn: Community, Virtue, and Vision in the 1790s* (Newark and London, 1997), 31.

<sup>104</sup> David Simpson, *Wordsworth, Commodification and Social Concern: The Poetics of Modernity* (Cambridge, 2009), 7.

active principle alive in all things' in Germany between October 1798 and April 1799.<sup>105</sup> In them, he draws on both Butler's *Analogy of Religion* and Hartley's *Observations on Man* to give his most precise account yet of how the landscape can teach sympathy. The lines begin with a muted statement of the natural theologians' belief that God is revealed through nature:

There is an active principle alive in all things:  
 In all things, in all natures, in the flowers  
 And in the trees, in every pebbly stone  
 That paves the brooks, the stationary rocks  
 The moving waters, and the invisible air.  
 All beings have their properties which spread  
 Beyond themselves, a power by which they make  
 Some other being conscious of their life;  
 Spirit that knows no insulated spot,  
 No chasm, no solitude,—from link to link  
 It circulates, the soul of all the worlds. (ll. 1-11)

There is no mention of God in these lines, but they are nonetheless rooted in the natural theological tradition through the concept of an 'active principle'. When this phrase appears in *The Excursion* (IX, 3), the Cornell editors propose that Wordsworth's most likely source for it was Shaftesbury's *Characteristicks*.<sup>106</sup> In the section of this work entitled 'The Moralists', Shaftesbury argues that if each human being is a 'self' by virtue of 'a principle which joins certain parts and which thinks and acts consonantly for the use and purpose of those parts', there must be a corresponding 'principle' uniting the whole of nature: 'Are there so many *particular* understanding active Principles every where? And is there Nothing, at last, which thinks, acts, or understands for *All*?'<sup>107</sup> Shaftesbury's conception of the 'active principle' finds echoes in Berkeley's idealist philosophy, in which God is the 'active principle, that supreme and wise spirit, *in whom we live, move, and have our*

<sup>105</sup> Wordsworth, 'Fragment ["There is an active principle alive in all things"]', *Lyrical Ballads*, 309n.

<sup>106</sup> Wordsworth, *Excursion*, 419n.

<sup>107</sup> Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, 'The Moralists, a Philosophical Rhapsody', Part III, Section I, *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, 3 vols (London, 1711), vol. 2, 357.

*being*'.<sup>108</sup> It also informs Coleridge's model of the 'one life within us and abroad', in which minds 'tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps / Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze, / At once the Soul of each, and God of All'.<sup>109</sup> Wordsworth arguably draws on these inflections of the 'active principle' in his lines from 1798-9, but he also goes beyond them. Here, it is worth remembering Jean-Luc Nancy's contention that '[t]he community that becomes *a single* thing ... yields its being-together to a being *of* togetherness'.<sup>110</sup> Nancy's claim that 'Community is made of what retreats from it'<sup>111</sup>—of singular beings in dialogue, rather than one common identity—helps to explain Wordsworth's belief that '*All beings* have their properties which spread / Beyond themselves, a power by which they make / Some other being conscious of their life' (my emphasis). Wordsworth draws on the totalising notions of the 'active principle' found in Shaftesbury and Berkeley, but his own conception differs markedly from Coleridge's 'one life': like Nancy, he roots his definition of community in the recognition that singular beings all have different aims which need to be respected.

In *The Analogy of Religion*, Joseph Butler uses the phrase 'active principle' in a distinct sense. Drawing on the associationist model of psychology, he uses it to refer to consciously cultivated habits of thought and action, arguing that:

*the Principle of Virtue, improved into an Habit ... will plainly be, in Proportion to the Strength of it, a Security against the Danger which finite Creatures are in, from the very Nature of Propension, or particular Affections.*<sup>112</sup>

Here, we may think back to 'Tintern Abbey' and the habits of association which Wordsworth attempts to build up actively from the Wye Valley. Butler argues that through such 'virtuous Self-government' the 'Danger of actually deviating from Right, may be

<sup>108</sup> George Berkeley, 'Of the Principles of Human Knowledge', Part I, Section LXVI, *The Works of George Berkeley, D. D.*, 2 vols (London and Dublin, 1784), vol. 1, 57.

<sup>109</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'The Eolian Harp', ll. 26, 46-8, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, gen. ed. Kathleen Coburn, 16 vols in 34 (Princeton, 1969-2002), vol. 16 I:1, 233-4.

<sup>110</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, xxxix.

<sup>111</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, xxxix.

<sup>112</sup> Butler, *Analogy of Religion*, 135.

almost infinitely lessened',<sup>113</sup> so that the mind assumes the kind of moral autonomy which Rivers and Mortimer signally lacked in *The Borderers*. The name which Butler gives to this process, by which the 'moral Principle' is 'raise[d] into an Habit', is 'the active Principle of Virtue'.<sup>114</sup> In other words, the 'active principle' is not only a name for the animating force in nature, but also for the habit, instilled in the human mind by contemplation of the natural world, which develops 'the moral sense' from 'sensation'.<sup>115</sup> Following the natural theologians' argument about the morally educative effects of nature, Wordsworth sees this 'active principle alive in all things: / In all things, in all natures, in the flowers / And in the trees, in every pebbly stone' (ll. 1-3). Through this breathless itemisation, he articulates the belief, which he shares with Cowper, that every sense impression from the natural world is capable of teaching selflessness and humility. His claim that 'All beings have ... a power by which they make / Some other being conscious of their life' resembles Cowper's claim, in 'The Needless Alarm', that 'The man to solitude accustom'd long / Perceives in ev'ry thing that lives a tongue' (ll. 55-6). This concept of the 'active principle' is both less hierarchical and more thoroughly ecological than that of the 'great chain of being':<sup>116</sup> Wordsworth claims that it 'circulates' 'from link to link', implying that no part of the natural world is subordinate to any other. By recognising their place in this circuit, individuals can learn to value the needs of every being around them. It is in this sense that the human mind becomes, in reclusion, a 'Spirit that knows no insulated spot, / No chasm, no solitude', entering a deeper form of community than that from which it has withdrawn.

Wordsworth expanded upon these ideas in MS. B of *Home at Grasmere*, composed in 1800-1. At this early stage in the composition of *The Recluse*, he began to

<sup>113</sup> Butler, *Analogy of Religion*, 138-9.

<sup>114</sup> Butler, *Analogy of Religion*, 140, 147.

<sup>115</sup> Hartley, *Observations on Man*, III:III:lxxxix, vol. 1, 368-9

<sup>116</sup> See Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, MA, 1936).

reintroduce the word ‘God’ into his poetry, bringing his account of natural reclusion closer to the works of natural theology from which it was derived. He claims that the setting of Grasmere Vale will provide him with ‘perpetual pleasure of the sense, / And for the Soul—I do not say too much, / Though much be said—an image for the soul, / A habit of Eternity and God’ (ll. 212-15). The phrase ‘A habit of Eternity and God’ suggests either a habit that comes from God, bestowed upon humans as a gift, or one that is itself God-like. In the second, stronger reading, Wordsworth’s claim about the ‘pleasure of sense’ leading to God resembles Hartley’s belief that the ‘pleasures and pains of sensation ... beget in us a moral sense’ which ‘carries us perpetually to the pure love of God, as our highest and ultimate perfection, our end, centre, and only resting-place, to which yet we can never attain’.<sup>117</sup> Wordsworth concurs with the idea that through the contemplation of nature the human mind can become more God-like. Yet whereas Hartley describes God as the mind’s ‘end’ and ‘centre’, and Cowper similarly argues that God is the ‘source and centre of all minds, / Their only point of rest’ (V, 896-7), for Wordsworth it is Grasmere Vale itself which becomes ‘A termination and a last retreat, / A Centre, come from wheresoe’er you will’ (ll. 167-8). Later on in *Home at Grasmere*, he describes how the valley fulfils the moral vision of the natural theologians:

Joy spreads and sorrow spreads; and this whole Vale,  
Home of untutored Shepherds as it is,  
Swarms with sensation, as with gleams of sunshine,  
Shadows or breezes, scents or sounds. Nor deem  
These feelings—though subservient more than ours  
To every day’s demand for daily bread,  
And borrowing more their spirit and their shape  
From self-respecting interests—deem them not  
Unworthy therefore and unhallowed. No,  
They lift the animal being, do themselves  
By nature’s kind and ever present aid  
Refine the selfishness from which they spring,  
Redeem by love the individual sense  
Of anxiousness with which they are combined. (ll. 664-77)

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<sup>117</sup> Hartley, *Observations on Man*, IV:VI:xcix, vol. 1, 497.

Wordsworth follows Hartley in describing how the sensations in Grasmere Vale give rise to the whole scale of ‘intellectual affections’, from ‘self-interest’ to ‘the moral sense’.<sup>118</sup>

Initially, he claims, the feelings that the shepherds derive from the landscape are ‘subserving more than ours / To every day’s demand for daily bread’ and ‘borro[w] more their spirit and their shape / From self-respecting interests’. However, with his deft reference to the Lord’s Prayer in the phrase ‘daily bread’, Wordsworth suggests that the shepherds’ responses to nature are already on course to becoming moral ones. The shepherds have an understandable ‘anxiousness’ about their own well-being, about finding food and shelter. This practical aspect of human life is what Wordsworth denotes by the phrase ‘animal being’. Yet he argues that in Grasmere Vale ‘nature’s kind and ever present aid’ helps to ‘lift’ the shepherds’ thoughts above their ‘animal being’ and to ‘Refine the selfishness from which they spring’. Surrounded by the morally-improving sensations of nature, Wordsworth describes how their ‘intellectual affections’ ascend—as Hartley predicted—from ‘self-interest’ towards ‘sympathy’ and ‘theopathy’. Following Hartley’s account of how individuals can ‘check and root out’ their immoral associations,<sup>119</sup>

Wordsworth suggests that the Grasmere landscape prompts the shepherds to uncouple their thoughts from self-interest, giving rise to the moral sense. Jonathan Bate has written that Wordsworth’s ‘faith in the moral of landscape remained the foundation’ for Ruskin to develop ‘a programme for education into ecological consciousness’.<sup>120</sup> Yet this ‘ecological consciousness’ was already realised in *Home at Grasmere*. Wordsworth developed more than a ‘faith in the moral of landscape’: his achievement was no less than to articulate a psychological mechanism by which the natural world was capable of extending people’s sympathies.

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<sup>118</sup> Hartley, *Observations on Man*, III:III:lxxxix, vol. 1, 368-9.

<sup>119</sup> Hartley, *Observations on Man*, I:II:xiv, vol. 1, 81.

<sup>120</sup> Bate, *Romantic Ecology*, 84.

Towards the end of *Home at Grasmere*, Wordsworth links his belief in natural theology firmly to the concept of reclusion. Whereas he had favoured the noun ‘seclusion’ in ‘Tintern Abbey’, he initially celebrates the ‘solitude’ of Grasmere Vale, exclaiming ‘This solitude is mine’ (l. 83). This exclamation, like the apostrophe ‘Embrace me then, ye Hills, and close me in’ (l. 129), suggests an anti-social desire to withdraw, which is not typical of Wordsworth’s writing, and which seems to accompany his sense of relief at finding a degree of financial independence in the spring of 1800. The theme of community remains, however, as Wordsworth figures himself and Dorothy, like Adam and Eve, as ‘A pair seceding from the common world’ (ll. 249; my emphasis). Later in the poem, this theme comes to the fore, as Wordsworth modulates his celebration of the valley away from solitude and towards reclusion, eventually rejecting the former word in the lines:

Then boldly say that solitude is not  
 Where these things are: he truly is alone,  
 He of the multitude, whose eyes are doomed  
 To hold a vacant commerce day by day  
 With that which he can neither know nor love—  
 Dead things, to him thrice dead—or worse than this,  
 With swarms of life, and worse than all, of men,  
 His fellow men, that are to him no more  
 Than to the Forest Hermit are the leaves  
 That hang aloft in myriads—nay, far less,  
 Far less for aught that comforts or defends  
 Or lulls or cheers. Society is here:  
 The true community, the noblest Frame  
 Of many into one incorporate. (ll. 807-20)

The phrase ‘many into one incorporate’ might at first sound like a reversion to the ‘one life’ and a model of a ‘community that becomes *a single thing*’.<sup>121</sup> Yet it would probably be fairer, here, to read the adjective ‘incorporate’ as meaning ‘admitted to fellowship with others’, rather than ‘[u]nited in one body’ (*OED*, INCORPORATE, *adj.*, 2.b. and 1.a.).

Raymond Williams wrote that:

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<sup>121</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, xxxix.

The idea of masses, and the techniques of observing certain aspects of mass-behaviour—selected aspects of a ‘public’ rather than the balance of an actual community—formed the natural ideology of those who sought to control the new system and to profit by it.<sup>122</sup>

Like Williams, Wordsworth rejects the idea of ‘masses’—of ‘swarms of life, and worse than all, of men’—in favour of what Williams calls ‘the balance of an actual community’.

With the phrase ‘vacant commerce’, Wordsworth pointedly rejects Adam Smith’s description, in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, of a community which ‘subsist[s] among different men, as among different merchants, from a sense of its utility, without any mutual love or affection ... upheld by a mercenary exchange of good offices according to an agreed valuation’.<sup>123</sup> Unlike Marx, who claims that commodities ‘aboun[d] in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties’, as if a table ‘were to begin dancing of its own free will’,<sup>124</sup> Wordsworth describes them bluntly as ‘Dead things ... thrice dead’. For him, ‘solitude’ consists in interacting with a ‘multitude’ of humans for economic gain, and in trading the endlessly meaningful natural world for objects whose values are founded only in use and exchange. In his description of commercial society, the natural theologians’ vision of a landscape that ‘Swarms with sensation’ gives way to a far bleaker vision of ‘swarms of life’. Whereas the sensations swarming in Grasmere Vale give rise to feelings of love and ultimately to the moral sense, Wordsworth suggests that the urban ‘swarms of life’ preclude these chains of association. Hartley’s scale of the ‘intellectual affections’ is broken, as the individuals in a commercial society become stuck at the level of ‘self-interest’, never learning to value the needs and aims of the beings around them.

At the end of the passage quoted above, Wordsworth reaffirms his faith in natural reclusion, claiming that the leaves in the forest do more to ‘comfort’, ‘defend’, ‘lull’, and ‘cheer’ the ‘Forest Hermit’ than do the ‘myriads’ of humans in the city. The simple sense

<sup>122</sup> Williams, *Culture and Society*, 312.

<sup>123</sup> Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Part II, Section II, Chapter III, 189.

<sup>124</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes, 3 vols (London, 1990), Book I, Part One, Chapter 1, Section 4, vol. 1, 163-4.

impressions of the natural world help the hermit to enter into the 'true community' which Wordsworth had begun to describe two years earlier in his fragment 'There is an active principle alive in all things'. Hartley describes how, in the natural world,

the profusion of beauties, uses, fitnesses, elegance in minute things, and magnificence in great ones, exceed all bounds of conception, surprise, and astonishment; new scenes, and those of unbounded extent, separately considered, ever presenting themselves to view, the more any one studies and contemplates the works of God.<sup>125</sup>

In the city, Wordsworth suggests, there is no such proliferation of pleasant sensations: all of this is lost because it is not looked for. As a result, the moral sense atrophies and relapses into self-interest. In *Home at Grasmere*, as in the rest of his work towards *The Recluse*, Wordsworth sets out to vindicate his claim that 'Society is here', showing that in order to build a 'true community' people first have to begin withdrawing themselves from the aims and interests of the commercial society within which they live. Building on Cowper's writing, he offers reclusion as a means to achieve the revolutionary aims of social reform and fraternal spirit, without the risk of repeating the violence that he had witnessed in France. If enough people secede from a corrupt society, Cowper and Wordsworth suggest, they will be able to realise the ideals of liberty and community without the need for violent confrontation.

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<sup>125</sup> Hartley, *Observations on Man*, IV:1:xciv, vol. 1, 421.

### *Conclusion*

Implicitly, the preceding chapters have argued for a return to the kind of cultural criticism developed by Raymond Williams in the 1960s and '70s. By interpreting what Cowper and Wordsworth wrote in the light of what they read, I set out to show that their poetry performs the critical function which Williams defined and pursued throughout his own work. In *Culture and Society*, Williams claimed that during the Romantic period the concept of culture emerged 'as the court of appeal in which real values were determined, usually in opposition to the "factitious" values thrown up by the market and similar operations of society'.<sup>1</sup> The project of Romantic reclusion formed part of this 'court of appeal' and was itself an attempt to develop a wide-ranging critique of the increasing commercialism and competition in Britain during the Age of Revolution. Both poets, I have argued, designated this project with a different name: for Cowper, it became increasingly synonymous (after Book One) with *The Task*; for Wordsworth, it was *The Recluse*.

In the Preface to *The Excursion*, Wordsworth famously declared that his 'minor Pieces' were like 'little Cells, Oratories, and sepulchral Recesses' in the 'Gothic church' of the *Recluse*.<sup>2</sup> Recently, Stephen Gill has traced the way in which Wordsworth developed this model in successive editions of his collected works after *Poems* (1815): 'The temporal relation of poem to poem was unimportant. What mattered was how each spoke to each and contributed to an evolving whole'.<sup>3</sup> This 'evolving whole', I would argue, was the project of Romantic reclusion which Wordsworth inherited from Cowper and which he planned to develop in *The Recluse*. In terms of its ambition and its scope, I would argue

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (London, 1958), 34.

<sup>2</sup> William Wordsworth, 'Preface', *The Excursion*, ed. Sally Bushell, James A. Butler, and Michael C. Jaye, with the assistance of David García, (Ithaca and London, 2007), 38.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Gill, *Wordsworth's Revisitings* (Oxford, 2011), 35.

that the work of cultural criticism which Cowper and Wordsworth undertook corresponds to what Williams termed a 'structure of feeling'. Williams wrote that 'structures of feeling can be defined as social experiences *in solution*, as distinct from other social semantic formations which have been *precipitated* and are more evidently and more immediately available'.<sup>4</sup> Through the chemical metaphor of '*in solution*' versus '*precipitated*', he suggested that the relationships between the ideas in a structure of feeling have not yet crystallised into verbal expressions: they have not yet been articulated in writing. The project of *The Recluse*, I would argue, fits this definition very closely.

Cowper and Wordsworth wrote about reclusion in order to criticise an emerging model of competitive individualism which they thought would undermine the sense of community in Britain. Yet they began doing so before the emergence of a specialised critical vocabulary to describe the social transformations they were witnessing. As Williams observed, structures of feeling exist 'at the very edge of semantic availability' and have 'many of the characteristics of a pre-formation, until specific articulations—new semantic figures—are discovered in material practice'.<sup>5</sup> Seen in this way, the incompleteness of *The Recluse* is wholly explicable, since Wordsworth was arguably attempting a work of cultural criticism which was not only 'at', but possibly beyond the 'edge of semantic availability'. Cowper and Wordsworth began to critique commercial society without possessing the critical terminology later developed by Marx and Engels. In *The Convention of Cintra*, Wordsworth began pushing towards a critique of economic relations when he observed that:

a country may advance, for some time, in this course with apparent profit ... and still the Peasant or Artisan, their master, be a slave in Mind; a slave rendered even more abject by the very tenure under which these possessions are held.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford and New York, 1977), 133-4.

<sup>5</sup> Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 134.

<sup>6</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Convention of Cintra*, in *The Prose Works*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols (Oxford, 1974), vol. 1, 225-6.

Yet it would be wrong to reduce the project of Romantic reclusion as a whole to these economic terms. Cowper's and Wordsworth's works belong to the sphere of culture conceived more broadly as a 'court of appeal' against the 'factitious' values of a marketised society. Rather than mounting a critique in specifically economic terms, they seek to uphold the principle of community in every aspect of human life.

Williams argued that the concept of community was central to the model of culture that arose in the eighteenth century. He wrote that throughout the development of this model '[t]he stress has fallen on the positive function of society, on the fact that the values of individual men are rooted in society, and on the need to think and feel in these common terms'.<sup>7</sup> Both Cowper and Wordsworth felt that the model of competitive self-interest was undermining this idea of community as a group of people caring for one another and for a shared set of values. By writing about reclusion, they aimed to show that individuals could withdraw from society into community, dissenting from social competition in order to uphold an alternative set of values. In *The Country and the City*, Williams argued that in *Felix Holt*:

A valuing society, the common condition of a knowable community, belongs ideally in the past ... But the real step that has been taken is withdrawal from any full response to an existing society. Value is in the past, as a general retrospective condition, and is in the present day only as a particular and private sensibility, the individual moral action.<sup>8</sup>

The case is different for Cowper and Wordsworth. As I have argued, the project of Romantic reclusion should not be accused of a 'withdrawal from any full response to an existing society'. Cowper and Wordsworth withdrew, but they did so in order to preserve what Williams called a 'valuing society' and a 'knowable community' not just in the past, but also in the present and for the future. As my historicist argument has shown, their works engaged closely with the developments in British society during their own lives.

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<sup>7</sup> Williams, *Culture and Society*, 328.

<sup>8</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London, 1985), 180.

Their stance of withdrawal did not signal despondence or a lack of interest in current affairs; rather, it provided both poets with the necessary distance from which to write as cultural critics.

Though the hermeneutic of suspicion introduced by Jerome McGann has proved valuable in opening up new interpretations of Romantic poetry, it has also risked silencing this vein of cultural criticism. By reading suspiciously, the New Historicists have tended to undermine the authority of poets like Wordsworth to speak as cultural critics. McGann's claim, for example, that Wordsworth 'made a solitude and he called it peace' diverts attention from *The Recluse* as an attempt to dissent from the individualist values of commercial society.<sup>9</sup> This thesis has historicised Cowper's and Wordsworth's writing about reclusion, not only as part of the tradition of political retirement literature, but also as a response to contemporary social conditions. By tracing the impacts of what Cowper and Wordsworth had read on what they wrote, I have recovered the years of thought which they devoted to the project of Romantic reclusion as a work of cultural criticism. Williams was right to argue that the Romantic idea of culture involved

an emphasis on the embodiment in art of certain human values, capacities, energies, which the development of society towards an industrial civilization was felt to be threatening or even destroying.<sup>10</sup>

The project of Romantic reclusion deserves to be read in these terms. For Cowper and Wordsworth, the stance of reclusion involved a rejection of the competitive values of industrial civilization in favour of the 'values, capacities, [and] energies' which go towards creating a community.

Cowper's and Wordsworth's arguments about the moral and emotional effects of economic competition on the community retain their relevance today. The social and economic forces which they criticised remain dominant, yet their criticism of these forces

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<sup>9</sup> Jerome McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago and London, 1983), 91.

<sup>10</sup> Williams, *Culture and Society*, 36.

has often been read not as dissent, but as an attempt to elide history. In his book *One-Dimensional Man*, Herbert Marcuse wrote presciently about what he called ‘the closing of the political universe’,<sup>11</sup> describing the tendency of advanced industrial society to nullify cultural criticism and to negate the functions of culture which Williams described. He predicted that art would increasingly be expected to affirm the ideology of the society in which it was produced and would cease to be valued for dissent, arguing that:

it is precisely this new consciousness, this “space within,” the space for the transcending historical practice, which is being barred by a society in which subjects as well as objects constitute instrumentalities in a whole that has its *raison d’être* in the accomplishments of its overpowering productivity. Its supreme promise is an ever-more-comfortable life for an ever-growing number of people who, in a strict sense, cannot imagine a qualitatively different universe of discourse and action.<sup>12</sup>

As evidence of the erosion of dissent, one might cite Helen Small’s recent recognition that even the most outspoken advocates of the critical function of the humanities today tend to ‘esche[w] the language of moralism’ and to demonstrate ‘a care not to be seen to assert that the activities of the humanities are necessarily ethically driven’.<sup>13</sup> For Cowper and Wordsworth, however, art was ethical, at least to the extent that it aimed to reform human interactions in the interests of community: the poet ‘is the rock of defence of human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying every where with him relationship and love’.<sup>14</sup> Cowper and Wordsworth both defended what Marcuse calls the “space within”, the space for the transcending historical practice’ not as a means of escape, but as a means of dissent. By reading Romantic reclusion as a work of cultural criticism, I have tried to reactivate this aspect of their writing.

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<sup>11</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (London, 1964), 19.

<sup>12</sup> Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 23.

<sup>13</sup> Helen Small, *The Value of the Humanities* (Oxford, 2013), 144-5.

<sup>14</sup> William Wordsworth, ‘Preface’, in *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems, 1797-1800*, ed. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca and London, 1992), 753.

At the end of *Culture and Society*, Williams argued that community was best conceived in terms of ‘active mutual responsibility’.<sup>15</sup> The project of Romantic reclusion, I would argue, was Cowper’s and Wordsworth’s attempt to realise this model of ‘active mutual responsibility’ in the midst of a competitive, commercial society. Both poets encouraged their readers to withdraw from British society in order to reject the ideology of economic competition, and adopt an alternative set of values rooted in the principle of community. Furthermore, they argued that reclusion offered a model of social and political reform which would avoid the violence they had witnessed during the American and French Revolutions. Even as a quietist reaction against such violence, their response would have made sense. However, I would argue that Cowper’s and Wordsworth’s thinking about reclusion was far more perceptive than this. In his book *The Fear of Freedom*, Erich Fromm explained that ‘*Destructiveness is the outcome of un-lived life*’:

Those individual and social conditions that make for suppression of life produce the passion for destruction that forms, so to speak, the reservoir from which the particular hostile tendencies—either against others or against oneself—are nourished.<sup>16</sup>

Having witnessed the situation described by Fromm, in which ‘Love, duty, conscience, patriotism have been and are being used as disguises to destroy others or oneself’,<sup>17</sup>

Cowper and Wordsworth sought to outline a way of living in which the destructive passions would be reduced, and a means of reforming society in which they would not be able to manifest. The final argument of this thesis is simply this: that they succeeded.

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<sup>15</sup> Williams, *Culture and Society*, 330-1.

<sup>16</sup> Erich Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom* (London, 1961), 158.

<sup>17</sup> Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom*, 154-5.

## ***Bibliography***

### *Note to Texts*

For standard authors like Shakespeare and Spenser, I have used modern scholarly editions of their works, because it is often not possible to establish which edition Cowper and Wordsworth were recalling. However, for the other texts which Cowper and Wordsworth read, and which I use to contextualise their writing about reclusion, I have tried to quote from the editions which they are known to have owned and read. This is especially important with works like Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* (1776-88) and Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782-9), which had only been partially published when Cowper wrote most of his poetry. Using the editions which Cowper and Wordsworth read helps to ensure that the echoes of these works which I find in their poetry are indeed true to what they read. In researching which editions to read, I have used information from the editors' notes in the editions of Cowper and Wordsworth's works and letters listed below. I have also drawn on the two volumes of *Wordsworth's Reading* by Duncan Wu. Where it has not be possible to ascertain which edition Cowper and Wordsworth consulted (e.g. with Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*), I have opted for the last edition published in the author's lifetime, on the grounds that this tended to form the basis for subsequent editions (whereas modern scholarly editions often take the first edition as their copy text).

Specifically with translations of works by authors like Rousseau (most of whose works were translated into English by William Kenrick), I sought to use the contemporary translations which Cowper and Wordsworth read. In the case of translations, it was important to use these editions, to make sure that any phrases which I cite as echoes do indeed appear in the translations which Cowper and Wordsworth read. The exceptions to this are Greek and Latin works, for which I have used the parallel text editions in the Loeb Classical Library series. My reasoning for this is that Cowper and Wordsworth often tended to read these works in the original, or had at least done so at school, so that in terms of precise language, it is the language of the original which tends to matter, not that of contemporary English translations. I have therefore opted to use the Loeb translation in the body text, and to quote the original Greek or Latin in a footnote. Lastly, in the case of works which Cowper and Wordsworth themselves translated—for example, Cowper's translations of Madame Guyon and Wordsworth's modernisations of Chaucer—I have referred to the source texts which they themselves consulted when analysing how they set about translating the language of the original.

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