led by it, and treats me with neglect, I am his humble servant, and shall never be at a loss to render him an equivalent. I am, however, most angry with the manager. He has published a book since he received mine, and has not vouchsafed to send it me; a requital which good manners, not to say the remembrance of former friendship, ought to have suggested. I will not however belie my knowledge of mankind so much as to seem surprised at treatment which I had abundant reason to expect. To these men with whom I was once intimate, and for many years, I am no longer necessary, no longer convenient, or in any respect an object. They think of me as of the man in the moon; and whether I have a lantern, a dog, and a faggot, or whether I have neither of those desirable accommodations, is to them a matter of perfect indifference. Upon that point we are agreed, our indifference is mutual: and were I to publish again, which is not impossible, I should give them a proof of it."

As a giver of good counsel, Cowper said he wished to please all; but as an author he flattered himself that he was perfectly indifferent to the judgement of all, except the few who were really judicious. He had pleased those persons whom he was most desirous of pleasing; Mrs. Unwin, who saw the poems in their progress; Mr. Newton, by whom they were criticised on the way to the press; and Mr. Unwin, with whom he corresponded as with a friend and brother. Nothing, since the publication of the volume, he said, had given him so much pleasure as his favourable opinion. "The circumstance, however, in your letter, which pleased me most, was, that you wrote in high spirits, and though you said much, suppressed more, lest you should hurt my delicacy. My delicacy is obliged to you; but you observe it is not so squeamish but that after it has feasted upon praise expressed, it can find a comfortable dessert in the contemplation of praise implied. I now feel as if I should be glad to begin another volume; but from the will to the power is a step too wide for me to take at present; and the season of the year brings with it so many avocations into the garden, where I am my own factotum, that I have little or no leisure for the quill." An unfavourable account of his book, in the Critical Review, somewhat dejected him, though he considered that those reviewers could not read.

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22 March 18, 1782.

25 Nov. 24, 1783.
without prejudice, a volume replete with opinions and doctrines contrary to their own. But without prejudice on the score of opinions, and without individual ill will, or the envious disposition which not unfrequently produces the same effect, a dull critic or a pert one is generally ready enough to condemn what he wants heart to feel, or understanding to appreciate. This review of Cowper's first volume, is one of those defunct criticisms which deserve to be disinterred and gibbeted for the sake of example.

"These poems are written, as we learn from the title-page, by Mr. Cowper, of the Inner Temple, who seems to be a man of a sober and religious turn of mind, with a benevolent heart, and a serious wish to inculcate the precepts of morality; he is not, however, possessed of any superior abilities, or power of genius, requisite to so arduous an undertaking; his verses are in general weak and languid, and have neither novelty, spirit, or animation to recommend them; that mediocrity, so severely condemned by Horace, Non Dii non homines, &c. pervades the whole; and whilst the author avoids every thing that is ridiculous or contemptible, he, at the same time, never rises to any thing that we can commend or admire. He says what is incontrovertible, and what has already been said over and over, with much gravity, but says nothing new, sprightly, or entertaining; travelling on a plain, level, flat road, with great composure, almost through the whole long and tedious volume, which is little better than a dull sermon, in very indifferent verse, on Truth, the Progress of Error, Charity, and some other grave subjects. If this author had followed the advice given by Caraccioli, and which he has chosen for one of the mottoes prefixed to these poems, he would have clothed his indisputable truths in some becoming disguise, and rendered his work much more agreeable. In its present shape we cannot compliment him on its shape or beauty; for, as this bard himself sweetly sings,—

The clear harangue, and cold as it is clear,
Falls soporific on the listless ear."

27 Critical Review, April, 1782. The reviewer then quotes fifty lines from Hope, and observes upon them, "All this is very true; but there needs no ghost, nor author, nor poet, to tell us what we knew before, unless he could tell it us in a new and better manner." Some of his expressions are noticed as being "coarse, vulgar, and unpoetical;" he is said not
“He that misses his end,” says Dr. Johnson, “will never be as much pleased as he that attains it, even when he can impute no part of his failure to himself.” Cowper, however, was more than compensated for this transient mortification, when one of his friends, who had sent the book to Dr. Franklin (then in France), transmitted to him the letter which he had received in return 28. “The relish,” said Franklin, “for reading of poetry had long since left me; but there is something here so new in the manner, so easy and yet so correct in the language, so clear in the expression, yet concise, and so just in the sentiment, that I have read the whole with great pleasure, and some of the pieces more than once.” “We may now,” said Cowper, “treat the critics as the Archbishop of Toledo treated Gil Blas, when he found fault with one of his sermons. His grace gave him a kick, and said, ‘Begone for a jackanapes! and furnish yourself with a better taste, if you know where to find it.’”

In that vein of natural pleasantry which characterises his letters, and especially those to Mr. Unwin, he says to that friend, “Before I had published, I said to myself—you and I, Mr. Cowper, will not concern ourselves much about what the critics may say of our book! But having once sent my wits for a venture, I soon became anxious about the issue, and found that I could not be satisfied with a warm place in my own good graces, unless my friends were pleased with me as much as I pleased myself. Meeting with their approbation, I began to feel the workings of ambition. It is well, said I, that my friends are pleased, but friends are sometimes partial, and mine, I have reason to think, are not altogether free from bias. Me-thinks I should like to hear a stranger or two speak well of me. I was presently gratified by the approbation of the London Magazine, and the Gentleman’s, particularly by that of the former, and by the plaudit of Dr. Franklin. By the way, magazines are publications we have but little respect for, till we ourselves are chronicled in them, and then they assume an importance in our esteem which before we could not allow to have succeeded in his “attempt to be lively, facetious, and satirical, any more than in the serious and pathetic;” and the sapient critic concludes by saying, that, “after dragging through Mr. Cowper’s long moral lectures, his lighter pieces, such as the Lily and the Rose, and the Nightingale and the Glow-worm, afford some relief, as best adapted to his genius.”

28 May 27.
them. But the Monthly Review, the most formidable of all my judges, is still behind. What will that critical Rhadamanthus say, when my shivering genius shall appear before him? Still he keeps me in hot water, and I must wait another month for his award. Alas! when I wish for a favourable sentence from that quarter (to confess a weakness that I should not confess to all), I feel myself not a little influenced by a tender regard to my reputation here, even among my neighbours at Olney. Here are watchmakers, who themselves are wits, and who at present, perhaps, think me one. Here is a carpenter and a baker, and not to mention others, here is your idol Mr. Teedon, whose smile is fame. All these read the Monthly Review, and all these will set me down for a dunce if those terrible critics should show them the example. But, Oh! wherever else I am accounted dull, dear Mr. Griffiths, let me pass for a genius at Olney!"

Johnson wished Mr. Unwin to review his friend’s book in this journal which, by its undisputed authority, was to mark him for honour or dishonour at Olney; and not at Olney alone, but among all that class of readers who received their opinions upon current literature, once a month, ready made. Cowper seconded the solicitation. "Doubt not," said he, "your abilities for the task which Johnson would recommend to you. The reviewers are such fiery Socinians, that they have less charity for a man of my avowed principles, than a Portugueze for a Jew. They may possibly find here and there something to commend, but will undoubtedly reprobate the doctrines, pronounce me a methodist, and, by so doing, probably check the sale of the volume, if not suppress it. Wherein consists your difficulty? Your private judgement once made public, and the world made acquainted with what you think and what you feel while you read me by the fireside, the business is done; I am reviewed, and my book forwarded in its progress by a judicious recommendation. In return, write a book, and I will be your reviewer; thus we may hold up each other in public admiration, and turn our friendship to good account. But, seriously, I think you perfectly qualified for the undertaking; and if you have no other objection to it than what arises from self-distrust, am persuaded you need only make the experiment to confirm yourself."

25 June 12. 30 April 1, 1782
If Mr. Unwin consented, he kept his own secret. The reviewal, when it appeared, was so judicious, that it might be suspected to be his, if it were not likely that he would have enlarged more upon the merits of a friend whom he loved so dearly. The little that was said was singularly appropriate. "What Pope," it begins, "has remarked of women, may, by a very applicable parody, be said of the general run of modern poets:—

Most poets have no character at all; being, for the chief part, only echoes of those who have sung before them. For while not only their sentiments and diction are borrowed, but their very modes of thinking as well as versification are copied from the said models, discrimination of character must of course be scarcely perceptible. Confining themselves like packhorses to the same beaten track and uniformity of pace, and like them, too, having their bells from the same shop, they go jingling along in uninterrupted unison with each other. This, however, is not the case with Mr. Cowper; he is a poet sui generis; for as his notes are peculiar to himself, he classes not with any known species of bards that have preceded him; his style of composition, as well as his modes of thinking, are entirely his own. The ideas with which his mind seems to have been either endowed by nature, or to have been enriched by learning and reflection, as they lie in no regular order, so are they promiscuously brought forth as they accidentally present themselves. Mr. Cowper's predominant turn of mind, though serious and devotional, is at the same time droll humorous and sarcastic. Hence, his very religion has a smile that is arch, and his sallies of humour an air that is religious; and yet, motley as is the mixture, it is so contrived as to be neither ridiculous nor disgusting. His versification is almost as singular as the materials upon which it is employed. Anxious only to give each image its due prominence and relief, he has wasted no unnecessary attention on grace or embellishment; his language, therefore, though neither strikingly humorous nor elegant, is plain, forcible, and expressive."

A fair extract from "Retirement" was then produced as "a specimen of this singular writer's manner;" and this was followed by the passage from "Hope" concerning the Green-
land. Missionaries, as not only marking, it was said, the bias of the writer's mind, but showing also that he can, when he chooses, be elegant and poetical." This was all.

This was fair and discriminating praise, but it was scanty. It saved the author's credit with his neighbours, but was not the sort of commendation by which the sale of the book was likely to be promoted. Cowper said the Monthly Reviewer had satisfied him well enough; and as this was said to Mr. Unwin, it would be proof enough that he was not the critic, even if the meagreness of the article had not shown that it came from one who took no interest in the success of the volume. In a letter written about this time to the same friend, he says, "You tell me you have been asked if I am intent upon another volume? I reply: Not at present; not being convinced that I have met with sufficient encouragement. I account myself happy in having pleased a few, but am not rich enough to despise the many. I do not know what sort of a market my commodity has found: but if a slack one, I must beware how I make a second attempt. My bookseller will not be willing to incur a certain loss; and I can as little afford it."

Month after month elapsed; his friends praised his poems to him, and reported the praise of others, but there came no tidings of the sale. "My dear William," he says to Unwin, "I feel myself sensibly obliged by the interest you take in the success of my productions. Your feelings upon the subject are such as I should have myself, had I an opportunity of calling Johnson aside to make the inquiry you propose. But I am pretty well prepared for the worst, and so long as I have the opinion of a few capable judges in my favour, and am thereby convinced that I have neither disgraced myself nor my subject, shall not feel myself disposed to any extreme anxiety about the sale. To aim with success at the spiritual good of mankind, and to become popular by writing upon scriptural subjects were an unreasonable ambition, even for a poet, to entertain in days like these. Verse may have many charms, but has none powerful enough to conquer the aversion of a...

31 The selection of this passage leads me to suppose that it may have been written by Mr. Latrobe; he was known both to Mr. Newton and Dr. Johnson, and is likely to have been the person to whom the publisher "recommended the book and the business." 32 Nov. 18, 1781.
dissipated age to such instruction. Ask the question, therefore, boldly, and be not mortified even though he should shake his head and drop his chin; for it is no more than we have reason to expect. We will lay the fault upon the vice of the times, and we will acquit the poet."  

But it had become necessary for him to employ himself in composition. In a letter written three years after this time, he says, "When I was writing my first volume, and was but just beginning to emerge from a state of melancholy that had continued some years (from which, by the way, I do not account myself even now delivered), Mrs. Unwin insisted on my relinquishing the pen, apprehending consequences injurious to my health. When ladies insist, you know there is an end of the business; obedience on our part becomes necessary; I accordingly obeyed; but having lost my fiddle, I became pensive and unhappy; she therefore restored it to me, convinced of its utility; and from that day to this, I have never ceased to scrape." It had thus been proved by experience, that exercise of mind as well as body was indispensably requisite for his well-being; and experience had also shown how important it was that the subjects upon which he employed himself should not produce in him any degree of passionate excitement.

When Mr. Unwin wrote to Cowper that his wife had been moved both to smiles and tears by his poetry, Cowper replied, "I should do myself much wrong were I to omit mentioning the great complacency with which I read this account. If she had Aristotle by heart, I should not esteem her judgement so highly, were she defective in point of feeling, as I do, and must esteem it, knowing her to have such feelings as Aristotle could not communicate, and as half the readers in the world are destitute of. This it is that makes me set so high a price upon your mother's opinion. She is a critic by nature and not by rule, and has a perception of what is good or bad in composition, that I never knew deceive her; insomuch that when two sorts of expression have pleaded equally for the precedence in my own esteem, and I have referred, as in such cases I always did, the decision of the point to her, I never knew her at a loss for a just one."  

33 Aug. 4, 1783.  
34 To Lady Hesketh, Dec. 15, 1785.  
35 March 18, 1782.
Were I to say that a poet finds his best advisers among his female friends, it would be speaking from my own experience, and the greatest poet of the age would confirm it by his. But never was any poet more indebted to such friends than Cowper. Had it not been for Mrs. Unwin, he would probably never have appeared in his own person as an author; had it not been for Lady Austen, he would never have been a popular one. The most fortunate incident in his literary life was that which introduced him to this lady. She had now disposed of the lease of her house in London, and had taken up her abode in the vicarage. The door which Mr. Newton had opened from his garden into his friend’s again became in use; “and so captivating,” says Hayley, “was her society both to Cowper and to Mrs. Unwin, that these intimate neighbours might be almost said to make one family, as it became their custom to dine always together, alternately, in the houses of the two ladies.”

His letters were now not only expressive of content, but of enjoyment: “I am glad,” he says to Mr. Hill, “your health is such that you have nothing more to complain of than may be expected on the down-hill side of life. If mine is better than yours, it is to be attributed, I suppose, principally, to the constant enjoyment of country air and retirement,—the most perfect regularity in matters of eating, drinking, and sleeping,—and a happy emancipation from every thing that wears the face of business. I lead the life I always wished for; and the single circumstance of dependence excepted (which, between ourselves, is very contrary to my predominant humour and disposition), have no want left broad enough for another wish to stand upon.” Another letter describes the way in which his evenings were spent at this time.

MY DEAR FRIEND,

TO JOSEPH HILL, ESQ.

Dec. 7, 1782.

At seven o’clock this evening, being the seventh of December, I imagine I see you in your box at the coffee-house. No doubt the waiter, as ingenious and adroit as his predecessors were before him, raises the tea-pot to the ceiling with his right hand, while in his left the tea-cup descending almost to the floor, receives a limpid stream,—limpid in its descent, but no

36 Nov. 11.
sooner has it reached its destination than frothing and foaming to the view, it becomes a roaring syllabub. This is the nineteenth winter since I saw you in this situation; and if nineteen more pass over me before I die, I shall still remember a circumstance we have often laughed at.

How different is the complexion of your evenings and mine! yours, spent amid the ceaseless hum that proceeds from the inside of fifty noisy and busy periwigs, mine, by a domestic fireside, in a retreat as silent as retirement can make it; where no noise is made but what we make for our own amusement. For instance, here are two rusties, and your humble servant in company. One of the ladies has been playing on the harpsichord, while I, with the other, have been playing at battledore and shuttlecock. A little dog, in the mean time, howling under the chair of the former, performed, in the vocal way, to admiration. This entertainment over, I began my letter, and having nothing more important to communicate, have given you an account of it. I know you love dearly to be idle, when you can find an opportunity to be so; but such opportunities are rare with you, I thought it possible that a short description of the idleness I enjoy might give you pleasure. The happiness we cannot call our own, we yet seem to possess, while we sympathize with our friends who can.

"From a scene of the most uninterrupted retirement," he says to Mr. Unwin, "we have passed at once into a state of constant engagement. Not that our society is much multiplied; the addition of an individual has made all this difference. Lady Austen and we pass our days alternately at each other's chateau. In the morning I walk with one or other of the ladies, and in the afternoon wind thread. Thus did Hercules, and thus probably did Samson, and thus do I; and were both those heroes living, I should not fear to challenge them to a trial of skill in that business, or doubt to beat them both. As to killing lions and other amusements of that kind, with which they were so delighted, I should be their humble servant and beg to be excused."

For a while Lady Austen's conversation had as happy an effect upon the melancholy spirit of Cowper as the harp of David upon Saul. Whenever the cloud seemed to be coming

37 Jan. 19. 1783.
over him, her sprightly powers were exerted to dispel it. One afternoon, when he appeared more than usually depressed, she told him the story of John Gilpin, which had been told to her in her childhood, and which, in her relation, tickled his fancy as much as it has that of thousands and tens of thousands since, in his. The next morning he said to her that he had been kept awake during the greater part of the night by thinking of the story and laughing at it, and that he had turned it into a ballad. The ballad was sent to Mr. Unwin, who said, in reply, that it had made him laugh tears. "As to the famous horseman," Cowper replied, "he and his feats are an inexhaustible source of merriment. At least we find him so; and seldom meet without refreshing ourselves with the recollection of them. You are perfectly at liberty to deal with them as you please. Auctore tanta anonymo, imprimitur; and when printed, send me a copy." It was sent accordingly to the Public Advertiser. "I little thought," said Cowper, "when I was writing the history of John Gilpin, that he would appear in print; I intended to laugh and to make two or three others laugh, of whom you were one. But now all the world laugh, at least if they have the same relish for a tale ridiculous in itself, and quaintly told as we have. Well, they do not always laugh so innocently, and at so small an expense,—for in a world like this, abounding with subjects for satire, and with satirical wits to mark them, a laugh that hurts nobody has at least the grace of novelty to recommend it. Swift's darling motto was, Vive la bagatelle; a good wish for a philosopher of his complexion, the greater part of whose wisdom, whencesoever it came, most certainly came not from above. La bagatelle has no enemy in me, though it has neither so warm a friend nor so able a one, as it had in him. If I trifle, and merely trifle, it is because I am reduced to it by necessity; a melancholy that nothing else so effectually disperses, engages me sometimes in the arduous task of being merry by force. And, strange, as it may seem, the most ludicrous lines I ever wrote have been written in the saddest mood, and but for that saddest mood, perhaps, had never been written at all."

Gilpin did not immediately become glorious, and Cowper, satisfied with amusing himself and his friend, little anticipated

38 Hayley, i. 312. 39 Oct. 1782. 40 This manuscript, in Cowper's beautiful hand, is one of the treasures with which I have been entrusted. 41 Nov. 4.
what a race of popularity the famous horseman was to run. The 
ballad was a species of poetry of which he had ever been fond, 
and to which, he said, more than to any other he should have 
addicted himself, if graver matters had not called him another 
way. His only tragic piece of this kind is the Dirge for the 
Royal George, and he was beholden to Lady Austen, if not for 
this subject also, for the occasion which induced him to choose 
it. It was composed to suit an air which she frequently played 
on the harpsichord; and he thought it a disadvantage that the 
air obliged him to write in Alexandrines, a measure which he 
supposed could suit no ear but a French one. In this he was 
mistaken; and though he intended nothing more than that 
the subject and the words should be sufficiently accommodated 
to the music, he pleased himself, and has pleased, and will 
please, all to whom it has or hereafter shall be recited or sung.

Another, and it is one of the playfulest and most characte-
ristic of his pieces, was in like manner composed to be set 
and sung by the Sister Anne of those halcyon days. No other 
woman was ever made the subject of two poems so different, 
and each so original and perfect in its kind, as the Mary of 
this ballad.

THE DISTRESSED TRAVELLERS;

OR,

LABOUR IN VAIN. 42.

An excellent New Song, to a Tune never sung before.

1.
I sing of a journey to Clifton,
We would have perform’d if we could,
Without cart or barrow to lift on
Poor Mary and me through the mud.
Slee sla sliding,
Stuck in the mud,
O it is pretty to wade through a flood!

2.
So away we went, slipping and sliding,
Hop, hop, a la mode de deux frogs.
’Tis near as good walking as riding,
When ladies are dress’d in their clogs.

42 This poem, which was published in the Monthly Magazine for Janu-
yary, 1808, has been overlooked in every edition of Cowper’s poems from 
that time.
Wheels, no doubt,
Go briskly about,
But they clatter and rattle, and make such a rout.

3.

She.

Well! now I protest it is charming;
How finely the weather improves!—
That cloud, though, is rather alarming
How slowly and stately it moves!

He.

Pshaw! never mind;
'Tis not in the wind;
We are travelling south, and shall leave it behind.

4.

She.

I am glad we are come for an airing,
For folks may be pounded and penn'd,
Until they grow rusty, not caring
To stir half a mile to an end.

He.

The longer we stay,
The longer we may;
It's a folly to think about weather or way.

5.

She.

But now I begin to be frightened:
If I fall, what a way I should roll!
I am glad that the bridge was indicted.—
Stop! stop! I am sunk in a hole!

He.

Nay, never care!
'Tis a common affair;
You'll not be the last that will set a foot there.

6.

She.

Let me breathe now a little, and ponder
On what it were better to do,
That terrible lane, I see yonder.
I think we shall never get through!

He.

So think I;
But, by the bye,
We never shall know, if we never should try.
THE DISTRESSED TRAVELLERS.

7.

She.

But should we get there, how shall we get home?
What a terrible deal of bad road we have past!
Slipping and sliding; and if we should come
To a difficult stile, I am ruined at last.
Oh this lane!
Now it is plain
That struggling and striving is labour in vain.

8.

He.

Stick fast there, while I go and look.

She

Don't go away, for fear I should fall!

He.

I have examined it every nook,
And what you have here is a sample of all.
Come, wheel round;
The dirt we have found,
Would be an estate at a farthing a pound.

9.

Now, Sister Anne, the guitar you must take;
Set it, and sing it, and make it a song.
I have varied the verse for variety sake,
And cut it off short, because it was long.
'Tis hobbling and lame,
Which critics won't blame,
For the sense and the sound, they say, should be the same.

Lady Austen has the honour also of having suggested at this time to Cowper the subject of that work which made him the most popular poet of his age, and raised him to a rank in English poetry from which no revolution of taste can detrude him. She had often urged him to try his powers in blank verse: at last he promised to comply with her request, if she would give him a subject. "Oh," she replied, "you can never be in want of a subject; you can write upon any;—write upon this Sofa!" The answer was made with a wo-

43 The Elbow Chair, a Rhapsody, by the Rev. E. Cooper, of Droitwyche, Worcestershire, was published in 1765. The coincidence of the nominal subject of the two poems, and of the manner in which both poets treated it, and of their names also, is very remarkable. I know the one poem only by the account of it in the Monthly Review for October, 1765. "We never," says the Reviewer, "met with a more rhapsodical rhapsody than
man's readiness, and the capabilities of such a theme were apprehended by Cowper with a poet's quickness of perception.

The Task was begun early in the summer of 1783. He never mentioned it to Mr. Unwin till it was finished, and ready for the press. The same silence was observed towards Mr. Newton, who visited Olney in the August of that year, for the second time after his removal. Mr. Newton, in writing from that place, says nothing more of him than that he and Mrs. Unwin were pretty well; but the visit had an unfavourable effect upon Cowper, and the next letter to his friend describes the painful influence which his presence had upon the latent disease.

TO THE REV. JOHN NEWTON.

MY DEAR FRIEND, Sept. 8, 1783.

I have been lately more dejected and more distressed than usual; more harassed by dreams in the night, and more deeply poisoned by them in the following day. I know not what is portended by an alteration for the worse, after eleven years of misery; but firmly believe that it is not designed as the introduction of a change for the better. You know not what I suffered while you were here, nor was there any need you should. Your friendship for me would have made you in some degree a partaker of my woes; and your share in them would have been increased by your inability to help me. Perhaps, indeed, they took a keener edge from the consideration of your presence. The friend of my heart, the person with whom I had formerly taken sweet counsel, no longer useful to me as a minister, no longer pleasant to me as a Christian, was a spectacle that must necessarily add the bitterness of mortification to the sadness of despair. I now see a long winter before me, and am to get through it as I can. I this of an honest Welsh parson, in praise of his own country: seated in his Elbow Chair, smoking his pipe, and ruminating on love and liberty and rural prospects, on the marriage act, on angling, on churchyards, on hunting, on patriotism, and on the Scotch favourite.” The poem is in blank verse, and the specimen which the reviewer has selected will be found in the supplementary notes.

"August 3, he writes to Mr. Bull, “The Sofa is ended, but not finished—a paradox which your natural acumen, sharpened by habits of logical attention, will enable you to reconcile in a moment. Do not imagine, however, that I lounge over it; on the contrary, I find it severe exercise to mould and fashion it to my mind.”
know the ground, before I tread upon it. It is hollow; it is agitated; it suffers shocks in every direction; it is like the soil of Calabria—all whirlpool and undulation. But I must reel through it; at least, if I be not swallowed up by the way.

Yours, W. C.

Cowper had given Mr. Newton before his arrival a hint concerning the divisions in his former flock. "Because we have nobody," said he, "to preach the gospel at Olney, Mr. —— waits only for a barn, at present occupied by a strolling company; and the moment they quit it he begins. He is disposed to think the dissatisfied of all denominations may possibly be united under his standard, and that the great work of forming a more extensive and more established interest is reserved for him." Mr. Newton's successor in the cure had previously been his convert from opinions verging close upon the cold region of Socinianism, to a belief in the articles of the church of England, and in the Calvinistic sense wherein Mr. Newton understood them. He afterwards became a distinguished writer among persons of the same persuasion; but he had neither the genius nor the winning manners of his predecessor. Mr. Newton says of him, on this visit, "he is faithful, diligent, and exemplary, but rather of a hurrying spirit. I think if he had more of my phlegmatic temper, he would make his way better at Olney. He had some ill impressions of the people, and many of them had strong prejudices against him, before they came together. Thus the beginning was not comfortable, and when things are thus, there is usually a too little and a too much on both sides. There are, however, some who love and prize him much; but he is not so generally acceptable as he would wish. Being curate of Weston, though he preaches twice on a Sunday at Olney, yet as three sermons have long been the custom of the town, the people go once to the Dissenters, some of whom spare no pains to set them against both Mr. Scott and the Church."

After his return home, he says, "I was very cordially received at Olney; the heats and animosities which prevailed when I was there last, seem in a good measure subsided. There are, however, many who have left the Church, and hear among the Dissenters; but I hope they have not left the Lord.

45 Feb. 8, 1783. 46 To Mr. Thornton, 23 Aug. 1785.
Mr. Scott has some, and some of the best, who are affectionately attached to him. Mr. Scott is a good and upright man, and a good preacher, but different ministers have different ways. He met with great prejudices, and some very improper treatment, upon his first coming to Olney. He found several professors who had more leaves than fruit, more talk than grace; his spirit was rather hurt by what he saw amiss, and by what he felt. By what I can learn from those who love him best, he is very faithful and zealous in reproving what is wrong; but an unfavourable impression he has received, that the people at large do not like him, gives a sort of edge to his preaching which is not so well suited to conciliate them. The best of the Olney people are an afflicted people, and have been led through great inward conflicts and spiritual distresses, and for want of some experience of the like kind, he cannot so well hit their cases, nor sympathise with them so tenderly as might be wished. He has the best intentions, but his natural temper is rather positive, than gentle and yielding. I was, perhaps, faulty in the other extreme; but they had been so long used to me, that a different mode of treatment does not so well suit them. But still he is an excellent man, he serves the Lord with a single eye, and I hope his difficulties abate, and his usefulness is upon the increase. I trust time, observation, and experience, will under the Lord's gracious teaching, daily soften and ripen his spirit."

Another fire which took place this winter in this poor town, convinced that the restraints both of law and gospel were grievously needed at Olney. Cowper describes the alarm, the confusion, and the consequences in his own inimitable style.

TO THE REV. JOHN NEWTON.

MY DEAR FRIEND, Nov. 3, 1783.

My time is short, and my opportunity not the most favourable. My letter will consequently be short likewise, and perhaps not very intelligible. I find it no very easy matter to bring my mind into that degree of composure, which is necessary to the arrangement either of words or matter. You will naturally expect to receive some account of this confusion that I describe, some reason given for it.—On Saturday night, at eleven o'clock, when I had not been in bed five minutes,

47 Hoxton, Sept. 8, 1783.
I was alarmed by a cry of fire, announced by two or three shrill screams upon our staircase. Our servants, who were going to bed, saw it from their windows, and in appearance so near, that they thought our house in danger. I immediately rose, and putting by the curtain, saw sheets of fire rising above the ridge of Mr. Palmer's house, opposite to ours. The deception was such, that I had no doubt it had begun with him, but soon found that it was rather farther off. In fact, it was at three places;—in the out-houses belonging to George Griggs, Lucy and Abigail Tyrrel. Having broke out in three different parts, it is supposed to have been maliciously kindled. A tar-barrel and a quantity of tallow made a most tremendous blaze, and the buildings it had seized upon being all thatched, the appearance became every moment more formidable. Providentially, the night was perfectly calm; so calm that candles without lanterns, of which there were multitudes in the street, burnt as steadily as in a house. By four in the morning it was so far reduced, that all danger seemed to be over; but the confusion it had occasioned was almost infinite. Every man who supposed his dwelling-house in jeopardy, emptied it as fast as he could, and conveyed his moveables to the house of some neighbour, supposed to be more secure. Ours, in the space of two hours, was so filled with all sorts of lumber, that we had not even room for a chair by the fireside. George Griggs is the principal sufferer. He gave eighteen guineas, or nearly that sum, to a woman whom, in his hurry, he mistook for his wife; but the supposed wife walked off with the money, and he will probably never recover it. He has likewise lost forty pounds' worth of wool. London never exhibited a scene of greater depredation, drunkenness, and riot. Every thing was stolen that could be got at, and every drop of liquor drunk that was not guarded. Only one thief has yet been detected; a woman of the name of J——, who was stopped by young Handscomb with an apron full of plunder. He was forced to strike her down, before he could wrest it from her. Could you visit the place, you would see a most striking proof of a Providence interposing to stop the progress of the flames. They had almost reached, that is to say, within six yards of Daniel Raban's wood-pile, in which were fifty-pounds' worth of faggots and furze; and exactly there they were extinguished; otherwise, especially if a breath of air had happened to
move, all that side of the town must probably have been consumed. After all this dreadful conflagration, we find nothing burnt but the out-houses; and the dwellings to which they belonged have suffered only the damage of being unroofed on that side next the fire. No lives were lost, nor any limbs broken. Mrs. Unwin, whose spirits served her while the hubbub lasted, and the day after, begins to feel the effect of it now. But I hope she will be relieved from it soon, being better this evening than I expected. As for me, I am impregnable to all such assaults. I have nothing; however, but this subject in my mind, and it is in vain that I invite any other into it. Having, therefore, exhausted this, I finish, assuring you of our united love, and hoping to find myself in a frame of mind more suited to my employment when I write next.

Yours, my dear friend,

W. C.

TO THE REV. JOHN NEWTON.

MY DEAR FRIEND,

Nov. 17, 1783.

The country around is much alarmed with apprehensions of fire. Two have happened, since that of Olney. One at Hitchin, where the damage is said to amount to eleven thousand pounds; and another, at a place not far from Hitchin, of which I have not learned the name. Letters have been dropped at Bedford, threatening to burn the town; and the inhabitants have been so intimidated, as to have placed a guard in many parts of it, several nights past. Since our conflagration here, we have sent two women and a boy to the justice, for depredation; S—— R——, for stealing a piece of beef, which, in her excuse, she said she intended to take care of. This lady, whom you well remember, escaped for want of evidence; not that evidence was indeed wanting, but our men of Gotham judged it unnecessary to send it. With her went the woman I mentioned before, who, it seems, has made some sort of profession, but upon this occasion allowed herself a latitude of conduct rather inconsistent with it, having filled her apron with wearing-apparel, which she likewise intended to take care of. She would have gone to the county gaol, had William Raban, the baker’s son, who prosecuted, insisted upon it; but he goodnaturedly, though I think weakly, interposed in her favour, and begged her off. The young gentleman who accompanied these fair ones, is the junior son of Molly Boswell. He
had stolen some iron work, the property of Griggs, the butcher. Being convicted, he was ordered to be whipped, which operation he underwent at the cart's tail, from the stone-house to the high arch, and back again. He seemed to show great fortitude, but it was all an imposition upon the public. The beadle, who performed it, had filled his left hand with red ochre, through which, after every stroke, he drew the lash of his whip, leaving the appearance of a wound upon the skin, but in reality not hurting him at all. This being perceived by Mr. Constable II——, who followed the beadle, he applied his cane, without any such management or precaution, to the shoulders of the too merciful executioner. The scene immediately became more interesting. The beadle could by no means be prevailed upon to strike hard, which provoked the constable to strike harder; and this double flogging continued, till a lass of Silver-end, pitying the pitiful beadle thus suffering under the hands of the pitiless constable, joined the procession, and placing herself immediately behind the latter, seized him by his capillary club, and pulling him backwards by the same, slapped his face with a most Amazonian fury. This concatenation of events has taken up more of my paper than I intended it should, but I could not forbear to inform you how the beadle thrashed the thief, the constable the beadle, and the lady the constable, and how the thief was the only person concerned who suffered nothing. Mr. Teedon has been here, and is gone again. He came to thank me for some left-off clothes. In answer to our inquiries after his health, he replied that he had a slow fever, which made him take all possible care not to inflame his blood. I admitted his prudence, but in his particular instance, could not very clearly discern the need of it. Pump water will not heat him much; and, to speak a little in his own style, more inebriating fluids are to him, I fancy, not very attainable. He brought us news, the truth of which, however, I do not vouch for, that the town of Bedford was actually on fire yesterday, and the flames not extinguished when the bearer of the tidings left it.

The poor at Olney were miserably poor, and where miserable poverty exists, depravity is as often the consequence as the cause. More than twenty years after this time, the average earnings of women at the lace-pillow was estimated at nearly six shillings a week; in a few extreme cases they had amounted
to eight or nine, but the expense of thread amounted to an eighth of the gross value of the lace. From such wages it was scarcely possible, under the most favourable circumstances, to make any provision against evil days; and the employment is an unhealthy one,—as any sedentary employment must be wherein human beings are occupied in summer from six or seven in the morning till dusk, and in winter from daylight till ten or eleven at night. A cry against slavery was raised in Cowper's days; his voice was heard in it; in our own days it has prevailed, and brought about a consummation which was devoutly to be wished; though it were to be wished also, that the emancipation had been graduated and the negroes better prepared for it. A cry has now been raised against that manufacturing system which in our own country extorts from what is called free labour more than slavish toil: it has gone up to heaven; and no spirit of prophecy is required to foresee, that, unless timely and effectual remedies can be applied, it must, in its inevitable consequences, draw vengeance down.

Cowper's heart was as compassionate as it was gentle. He could not see distress without endeavouring to relieve it. "We do what we can," he writes to Mr. Unwin; "but that can is little. You have rich friends, are eloquent on all occasions, and know how to be pathetic on a proper one. The winter will be severely felt at Olney by many whose sobriety, industry, and honesty recommend them to charitable notice: and we think we could tell such persons as Mr. Bouvierie, or Mr. Smith, half a dozen tales of distress that would find their way into hearts as feeling as theirs. You will do as you see good; and we, in the mean time, shall remain convinced that you will do your best. Lady Austen will no doubt do something, for she has great sensibility and compassion."

The application was successful. In his next letter, Cowper says, "My dear William, on the part of the poor, and on our part, be pleased to make acknowledgements, such as the occasion calls for, to our beneficent friend, Mr. Smith. I call him ours because, having experienced his kindness to myself in a former instance, and in the present his disinterested readiness to succour the distressed, my ambition will be satisfied with nothing less. He may depend upon the strictest

48 Nov. 4, 1782.

49 Afterwards Lord Carrington.
secrecy; no creature shall hear him mentioned either now or hereafter, as the person from whom we have received this bounty. But when I speak of him, or hear him spoken of by others, which sometimes happens, I shall not forget what is due to so rare a character. I wish, and your mother wishes it too, that he could sometimes take us in his way to Nottingham; he will find us happy to receive a person whom we must needs account it an honour to know. We shall exercise our best discretion in the disposal of the money; but in this town, where the Gospel has been preached so many years, where the people have been favoured so long with laborious and conscientious ministers, it is not an easy thing to find those who make no profession of religion at all and are yet proper objects of charity. The profane, are so profane, so drunken, dissolute, and in every respect worthless, that to make them partakers of his bounty would be to abuse it. We promise, however, that none shall touch it but such as are miserably poor, yet at the same time industrious and honest, two characters frequently united here, where the most watchful and unremitting labour will hardly procure them bread. We make none but the cheapest laces, and the price of them is fallen almost to nothing. Thanks are due to yourself likewise, and are hereby accordingly rendered, for waving your claim in behalf of your own parishioners. You are always with them, and they are always, at least some of them, the better for your residence among them. Olney is a populous place, inhabited chiefly by the half-starved and the ragged of the earth, and it is not possible for our small party and small ability, to extend their operations so far as to be much felt among such numbers. Accept, therefore, your share of their gratitude, and be convinced that when they pray for a blessing upon those who have relieved their wants, He that answers that prayer, and when he answers it, will remember his servant at Stoc—'

Fifty years have cancelled the obligation of silence which was then imposed, and the good which was done in secret may and ought to be proclaimed now upon the house top. The disposal of Mr. Smith's bounty led to some interchange of letters between him and Cowper. "We corresponded," says the latter, "as long as the occasion required, and then ceased. Charmed with his good sense, politeness, and liber—
ality to the poor, I was indeed ambitious of continuing a correspondence with him, and told him so. Perhaps I had done more prudently had I never proposed it. But warm hearts are not famous for wisdom, and mine was too warm to be very considerate on such an occasion. I have not heard from him since, and have long given up all expectation of it. I know he is too busy a man to have leisure for me, and I ought to have recollected it sooner. He found time to do much good, and to employ us as his agents in doing it, and that might have satisfied me. Though laid under the strictest injunctions of secrecy, both by him, and by you on his behalf, I consider myself as under no obligation to conceal from you the remittances he made. Only, in my turn, I beg leave to request secrecy on your part, because, intimate as you are with him, and highly as he values you, I cannot yet be sure that the communication would please him, his delicacies on this subject being as singular as his benevolence. He sent forty pounds, twenty at a time. Olney has not had such a friend as this many a day; nor has there been an instance at any time, of a few families so effectually relieved, or so completely encouraged to the pursuit of that honest industry, by which their debts being paid, and the parents and children comfortably clothed, they are now enabled to maintain themselves. Their labour was almost in vain before; but now it answers; it earns them bread, and all their other wants are plentifully supplied."

Notwithstanding the character of the population, and the situation of his house, which was neither pleasant nor convenient, Cowper was strongly attached to the spot. "The very stones in the garden wall," said he, "are my intimate acquaintance. I should miss almost the minutest object, and be disagreeably affected by its removal: and am persuaded that were it possible I could leave this incommmodious nook for a twelvemonth, I should return to it again with rapture, and be transported with the sight of objects which to all the world beside would be at least indifferent; some of them, perhaps, such as the ragged thatch and the tottering walls of the neighbouring cottages, disgusting." He had not acknowledged, and perhaps had not felt, a want of society till he became acquainted with Lady Austen; then, indeed, he enjoyed it cor-

50 July 27, 1783.
dially. But this enjoyment was ere long disturbed, and both Lady Austen and Mrs. Unwin appear to me to have been wronged by the causes assigned for its disturbance. Lady Austen has been represented as having entertained a hope of marrying Cowper, and Mrs. Unwin as so jealous on that account, that he found it necessary, in consideration of his earlier friend, to break off all connection with the latter one.

That there had ever been an engagement of marriage between Cowper and Mrs. Unwin, has already been contradicted. If any such engagement had been formed, there were no prudential considerations (as has been alleged) to prevent it. They lived together upon their joint incomes, and marriage would have made no difference in their expenditure. Mrs. Unwin was forty-three at the time of her husband's death; hers was a maternal friendship for one who stood in need of maternal care, and as such Cowper regarded it. She was now threescore, and as little likely to be jealous of being supplanted in his affections, as Lady Austen was to form the design of marrying a man in Cowper's peculiar circumstances, which circumstances she was well acquainted with.

They, however, who, in justice to Lady Austen, reject the notion of any matrimonial project on her part, still impute jealousy to Mrs. Unwin,—jealousy of the ascendancy acquired over Cowper by one who being possessed of great wit and vivacity, both enlivened his spirits and stimulated his genius. Mr. Scott is reported to have said upon the subject, "Who can be surprised that two women should be continually in the society of one man, and quarrel sooner or later with each other?" It was not long before two women were continually in the society of this very man, and never quarrelled with each other; and Mrs. Unwin, who was one, is thus spoken of by the other: "She is very far from grave; on the contrary she is cheerful and gay, and laughs de bon cœur upon the smallest provocation. Amidst all the little puritanical words, which fall from her de tems en tems, she seems to have by nature a great fund of gaiety:—great indeed must it have been, not to have been totally overcome by the close confinement in which she has lived, and the anxiety she must have undergone for one whom she certainly loves as well as one human being can love another. I will not say she idolizes him, because that she would think wrong; but she certainly seems to possess
the truest regard and affection for this excellent creature, and, as I before said, has, in the most literal sense of those words, no will, or shadow of inclination, but what is his. My account of Mrs. Unwin may seem, perhaps, to you, on comparing my letters, contradictory; but when you consider that I began to write at the moment, and at the first moment that I saw her, you will not wonder. Her character develops itself by degrees; and though I might lead you to suppose her grave and melancholy, she is not so by any means. When she speaks upon grave subjects, she does express herself with a puritanical tone, and in puritanical expressions, but on all other subjects she seems to have a great disposition to cheerfulness and mirth; and indeed, had she not, she could not have gone through all she has. I must say too, that she seems to be very well read in the English poets, as appears by several little quotations, which she makes from time to time, and has a true taste for what is excellent in that way. There is something truly affectionate and sincere in her manner. No one can express more heartily than she does, her joy to have me at Olney; and as this must be for his sake, it is an additional proof of her regard and esteem for him.

Mrs. Unwin's faculties were at this time unimpaired; there was no want of cheerfulness or vivacity in her: and she, too, had enlivened the spirits of Cowper, and animated his genius. The causes which broke up their intimacy with Lady Austen, were the same which had formerly suspended it. The fact was thus announced in a letter to Mr. Unwin: "You are going to Bristol. A lady, not long since our very near neighbour, is probably there; she was there very lately. If you should chance to fall into her company, remember, if you please, that we found the connexion, on some accounts, an inconvenient one; that we do not wish to renew it; and conduct yourself accordingly. A character with which we spend all our time should be made on purpose for us: too much, or too little of any single ingredient spoils all. In the instance in question, the dissimili-

51 On this extract from a letter of Lady Hesketh's, Mr. Croft observes, that that lady, "having lived much in the world, and amongst the highest circles, was fully competent to discover the characters of others; and it may, therefore, be concluded, that the pleasing description she gave of Mrs. Unwin was a true one; and that her faults would not have escaped the notice of one so well acquainted with human nature."
tude was too great not to be felt continually, and consequently made our intercourse unpleasant. We have reason, however, to believe that she has given up all thoughts of a return to Olney."

The circumstances which rendered this intimacy irksome, and finally dissolved it, Cowper afterwards stated in a letter to Lady Hesketh, wherein, to explain what interruptions had delayed him in the progress of the Task, he thus gives an account of the rise and termination of this memorable friendship.

"There came a lady into this country, by name and title, Lady Austen, the widow of the late Sir Robert Austen. At first she lived with her sister, about a mile from Olney; but in a few weeks took lodgings at the vicarage here. Between the vicarage and the back of our house are interposed our garden, an orchard, and the garden belonging to the vicarage. She had lived much in France, was very sensible, and had infinite vivacity. She took a great liking to us, and we to her. She had been used to a great deal of company; and we, fearing that she would find such a transition into silent retirement irksome, contrived to give her our agreeable company often. Becoming continually more and more intimate, a practice obtained at length of our dining with each other alternately, every day, Sundays excepted. In order to facilitate our communication, we made doors in the two garden walls above said, by which means we considerably shortened the way from one house to the other; and could meet when we pleased, without entering the town at all; a measure the rather expedient, because the town is abominably dirty, and she kept no carriage. On her first settlement in our neighbourhood, I made it my own particular business, (for at that time I was not employed in writing, having published my first volume, and not begun my second,) to pay my devoirs to her ladyship every morning at eleven. Customs very soon become laws. I began the Task; for she was the lady who gave me the Sofa for a subject. Being once engaged in the work, I began to feel the inconvenience of my morning attendance. We had seldom breakfasted ourselves till

52 July 12, 1784. 53 Hayley (i. 306) says that Mr. Newton opened this communication when he occupied the parsonage; and Lady Austen had the advantage of it. I followed his statement, not recollecting what is said here. Probably Hayley has made no mistake, and Cowper means that it had been re-opened after having long been disused. Minute accuracy was unimportant, and he was writing as succinctly as he could.
ten; and the intervening hour was all the time that I could find in the whole day for writing: and occasionally it would happen that the half of that hour was all that I could secure for the purpose. But there was no remedy. Long usage had made that which at first was optional, a point of good manners, and consequently of necessity, and I was forced to neglect the Task, to attend upon the Muse who had inspired the subject. But she had ill health\textsuperscript{54}, and before I had quite finished the work was obliged to repair to Bristol. Thus, as I told you, my dear, the cause of the many interruptions that I mentioned, was removed, and now, except the Bull that I spoke of, we have seldom any company at all. After all that I have said upon this matter, you will not completely understand me, perhaps, unless I account for the remainder of the day. I will add, therefore, that having

\textsuperscript{54} Lady Austen died while Hayley's Life of Cowper was in the press. If she had lived to peruse it, she would probably have corrected some of the mistakes upon this subject, into which he had fallen. It appears by the extracts which are now before the reader, (and they are not partial extracts, but comprise the whole that is said concerning it,) that the same causes which led to an interruption of her friendship with Cowper, finally dissolved it. Love was out of the question in her case, jealousy equally so in Mrs. Unwin's; and though Cowper had "fallen in friendship" with her at first sight, and addressed complimentary verses to her, these from a man advanced some way on the road from fifty to threescore, were not likely to be mistaken by a woman who knew the world, and was, moreover, well acquainted with his peculiar circumstances.

Mr. Knox says, in his correspondence with the late excellent Bishop Jebb*, that he had a severer idea of Lady Austen than he should wish to put into writing for publication, and that he almost suspected she was a very artful woman. When I find myself differing in opinion from Mr. Knox, I distrust my own judgment. But in this instance it appears that his correspondent thought he had judged harshly, and I do not see what object an artful woman could possibly have had in view.

It may be said that Hayley makes jealousy the cause of the separation, and represents Lady Austen as having hoped that Cowper would marry her, and that he derived his information from Lady Austen herself. To this I reply, that the latter part of the statement is merely what Hayley inferred from the former, and the former may thus be explained. Lady Austen expected attentions which it became inconvenient and irksome to pay,—or, perhaps, in Cowper's morbid state of sensitiveness, he fancied that she expected them. He is not likely to have stated this so explicitly in his letter to her, as he did to Mr. Unwin and Lady Hesketh. Lady Austen herself may never have suspected it; and by imputing jealousy to Mrs. Unwin, she accounted to herself and to Hayley for what must otherwise have appeared unaccountable to her.

* Vol. i. p. 276.
paid my morning visit, I walked; returning from my walk, I
dressed: we then met and dined, and parted not till between
ten and eleven at night."

The Bull, thus playfully mentioned, was the person to whose
benevolent attention Mr. Newton had consigned him, on his re-
moval from Olney. *Carissime Taurorum* Cowper sometimes ad-
dressed him in his letters. He was indeed a man after his own
heart. "You are not acquainted with him," he says to Mr.
Unwin, "perhaps it is as well for you that you are not. You
would regret still more than you do, that there are so many
miles interposed between us. He spends part of the day with
us to-morrow. A dissenter, but a liberal one; a man of letters
and of genius; a master of a fine imagination, or rather not
master of it,—an imagination, which, when he finds himself in
the company he loves, and can confide in, runs away with him
into such fields of speculation, as amuse and enliven every other
imagination that has the happiness to be of the party; at other
times he has a tender and delicate sort of melancholy in his dis-
position, not less agreeable in its way. No men are better qual-
ified for companions in such a world as this, than men of such
a temperament. Every scene of life has two sides, a dark and a
bright one, and the mind that has an equal mixture of melan-
choly and vivacity is best of all qualified for the contemplation
of either. He can be lively without levity, and pensive without
decision. Such a man is Mr. Bull. But—he smokes tobacco—
nothing is perfect!—

*Nihil est ab omni
Parte beatum."

Before Cowper began the Task, Mr. Bull put into his hands
Madame Guyon's poetical works, and requested him to trans-
late a few of them, "partly," he says, "to amuse a solitary
hour, partly to keep in exercise the genius of this incomparable
man." A month's leisure was devoted to them, and they were
presented to Mr. Bull to make what use of them he pleased. This
friend sometime afterwards suggested that they should be print-
ed, Cowper undertook to revise them for this purpose, but va-
rious circumstances prevented him from ever carrying the inten-
tion into effect. Mr. Bull probably thought that the strain of her

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55 Jan. 16, 1786. 56 He seems to have contemplated this at first, by
the dedication to his friend, which was sent with the manuscript.
poetry would rather soothe his mind than agitate it, and induce a sane state of religious feeling. But perhaps the passages on which Cowper brooded most were those that he could apply, when taken apart from the context, to his own imaginary condition.

My claim to life, though sought with earnest care,
No light within me, or without me shows;
Once I had faith; but now in self-despair
Find my chief cordial, and my best repose.

My soul is a forgotten thing; she sinks,
Sinks and is lost, without a wish to rise;
Feels an indifference she abhors, and thinks
Her name erased for ever from the skies.  

Cowper, however, explained to Mr. Newton how it was that he could treat upon subjects in verse, which he trembled to approach in prose. "There is a difference," said he. "The search after poetical expression, the rhyme, and the numbers, are all affairs of some difficulty; they arrive, indeed, but are not to be attained without study, and engross, perhaps, a larger share of the attention than the subject itself. Persons fond of music will sometimes find pleasure in the tune, when the words afford them none."

From the letter wherein he told Mr. Bull that these translations were finished, it appears that his friend had reasoned with him upon his case; and the answer expresses a miserable assurance of utter desertion. "Both your advice," he says, "and your manner of giving it, are gentle and friendly and like yourself. I thank you for them, and do not refuse your counsel because it is not good, or because I dislike it, but because it is not for me. There is not a man upon earth that might not be the better for it, myself only excepted. Prove to me

57 The extreme freedom of the translation seems to show that he intended a self-application here;

Si vous me demandez ce que je crois de moi,
Je n'en connais aucune chose:
Jadis je vivais par la foi,
C'est dans le rien que je repose.

Un neant malheureux, qui ne demande pas
Qu'on lui fasse changer de place;
Et qui n'attend jamais de grace.

58 March 19, 1784.
that I have a right to pray, and I will pray without ceasing; yea, and pray, too, even in "the belly of this hell," compared with which Jonah's was a palace,—a temple of the living God! But let me add, there is no encouragement in the scripture so comprehensive as to include my case, nor any consolation so effectual as to reach it. I do not relate it to you, because you could not believe it; you would agree with me if you could. And yet the sin by which I am excluded from the privileges I once enjoyed, you would account no sin; you would tell me that it was a duty. This is strange;—you will think me mad;—but I am not mad, most noble Festus! I am only in despair; and those powers of mind which I possess, are only permitted to me for my amusement at some times, and to acuminate and enhance my misery at others. I have not even asked a blessing upon my food these ten years, nor do I expect that I shall ever ask it again.—Yet, I love you, and such as you, and determine to enjoy your friendship while I can;—it will not be long; we must soon part for ever."

He seldom touched upon this string in his letters to any one except Mr. Newton. "I am well in body," he says to him, "but with a mind that would wear out a frame of adamant; yet upon my frame, which is not very robust, its effects are not discernible. Mrs. Unwin is in health!"—"We think of you often, and one of us prays for you; the other will, when he can pray for himself!" Writing in the second week of January, he entered at once upon this dismal strain.

TO THE REV. JOHN NEWTON.

MY DEAR FRIEND, Jan. 13, 1784.

The new year is already old in my account. I am not, indeed, sufficiently second-sighted to be able to boast by anticipation an acquaintance with the events of it yet unborn, but rest convinced that, be they what they may, not one of them comes a messenger of good to me. If even death itself should be of the number, he is no friend of mine. It is an alleviation of the woes even of an unenlightened man, that he can wish for death, and indulge a hope, at least, that in death he shall find deliverance. But, loaded as my life is with despair, I have no such comfort as would result from a supposed probability of better things to come, were it once ended. For,

more unhappy than the traveller with whom I set out, pass through what difficulties I may, through whatever dangers and afflictions, I am not a whit the nearer home, unless a dungeon may be called so. This is no very agreeable theme; but in so great a dearth of subjects to write upon, and especially impressed as I am at this moment with a sense of my own condition, I could choose no other. The weather is an exact emblem of my mind in its present state. A thick fog envelopes everything, and at the same time it freezes intensely. You will tell me that this cold gloom will be succeeded by a cheerful spring, and endeavour to encourage me to hope for a spiritual change resembling it;—but it will be lost labour. Nature revives again; but a soul once slain lives no more. The hedge that has been apparently dead, is not so; it will burst into leaf and blossom at the appointed time; but no such time is appointed for the stake that stands in it. It is as dead as it seems, and will prove itself no dissembler. The latter end of next month will complete a period of eleven years in which I have spoke no other language. It is a long time for a man, whose eyes were once opened, to spend in darkness; long enough to make despair an inveterate habit; and such it is in me. My friends, I know, expect that I shall see yet again. They think it necessary to the existence of divine truth, that he who once had possession of it should never finally lose it. I admit the solidity of this reasoning in every case but my own. And why not in my own? For causes which to them it appears madness to allege, but which rest upon my mind with a weight of inmoveable conviction. If I am recoverable, why am I thus? why crippled and made useless in the church, just at that time of life, when, my judgement and experience being matured, I might be most useful? why cashiered and turned out of service, till, according to the course of nature, there is not life enough left in me to make amends for the years I have lost; till there is no reasonable hope left that the fruit can ever pay the expense of the fallow? I forestall the answer:—God’s ways are mysterious, and he giveth no account of his matters:—an answer that would serve my purpose as well as theirs that use it. There is a mystery in my destruction, and in time it shall be explained. Yours, W. C.

Mr. Newton, for the purpose of discouraging this strain,
said to him, that as he conversed upon other subjects than despair, he might write upon others. "Indeed, my friend," Cowper replied, "I am a man of very little conversation upon any subject. From that of despair I abstain as much as possible, for the sake of my company; but I will venture to say that it is never out of my mind one minute in the whole day. I do not mean to say that I am never cheerful. I am often so: always indeed when my nights have been undisturbed for a season. But the effect of such continual listening to the language of a heart hopeless and deserted, is, that I can never give much more than half my attention to what is started by others, and very rarely start any thing myself. My silence, however, and my absence of mind make me sometimes as entertaining as if I had wit. They furnish an occasion for friendly and good natured raillery; they raise a laugh, and I partake of it."3

It is consolatory to believe that during this long stage of his malady, Cowper was rarely so miserable as he represented himself to be when speaking of his own case. That no one ought to be pronounced happy before the last scene is over, has been said of old in prose and in verse, and the common feeling of mankind accords with the saying; for our retrospect of any individual's history is coloured by the fortune of his latter days, as a drama takes its character from the catastrophe. A melancholy sentiment will always for this reason prevail when Cowper is thought of. But though his disease of mind settled at last into the deepest shade, and ended in the very blackness of darkness, it is not less certain that before it reached that point, it allowed him many years of moral and intellectual enjoyment. They who have had most opportunity of observing and studying madness in all its mysterious forms, and in all its stages, know that the same degree of mental suffering is not produced by imaginary causes of distress as by real ones. Violent emotions, and outbreaks of ungovernable anger are at times easily excited, but not anguish of mind, not that abiding grief which eats into the heart. The distress, even when the patient retains, like Cowper, the full use of reason upon all other points, is in this respect like that of a dream,—a dream, indeed, from which the sufferer can neither wake, nor be awa-

62 March 19, 1784.
kened; but it pierces no deeper, and there seems to be the same dim consciousness of its unreality. After the recurrence of his disease in 1773, his friends appear to have acted judiciously towards him. So long as Mr. Newton resided at Olney, Mrs. Unwin would act implicitly under his advice, and after his departure her own good sense led her to pursue the same quiet, expectant course. Whether they had perceived or not that Cowper's constitution could not bear devotional excitement was of little consequence while he fancied himself inhibited from all exercises of devotion; and to have reasoned with him upon the single point on which his reason was deranged, would have been to act unreasonably themselves. Argument to a mind thus diseased is of no more avail than food to a sick stomach incapable of retaining it. When Mr. Newton touched on the subject in his letters, it was like feeling his pulse from time to time, and always in a way to encourage an expectation of recovery. Mrs. Unwin, meantime, contented herself with a patient hope, and it is evident that Cowper had some comfort in knowing this hope was confidently and constantly maintained. This comfort he had during those years, when at the worst; and it gained strength as his manner of life became more social.

No man had been more accustomed than he was to that kind of society which brings the intellectual powers into full play. So many youths of distinguished talent were never at any other time contemporaries at Westminster, as in Cowper's days; and when he was removed from that daily and hourly intercourse with his peers to a solicitor's office, it was his fortune there to find in a fellow clerk, one who was not inferior to the ablest of them. Thurlow, whom Sir Egerton Brydges calls "the surly, sarcastic, contradictory, old ruler of the courts," had not then contracted any of the callousness of professional and political life. He was in those days as much disposed to sportiveness as Cowper himself, and brought to it those ready talents, and that force of mind which afterwards

These remarks are not merely speculative. They are the result of observation, in the case of an old friend, whose intellectual powers were of a very high order, and the type of whose malady at that time very much resembled Cowper's. He resembled him also in this respect, that when in company with persons who were not informed of his condition, no one could descry in him the slightest appearance of a deranged mind.
commanded the respect of Dr. Johnson. "It is when you come close to a man in conversation," said that great conversationist, "that you discover what his real abilities are; to make a speech in a public assembly is a knack. I honour Thurlow, sir; Thurlow is a fine fellow; he fairly puts his mind to yours." And on another occasion he said, "I would prepare myself for no man in England but Lord Thurlow. When I am to meet with him, I should wish to know a day before." And when Cowper left the office, and became master of his own time, no where could he have found more lively companions than the members of his own club and their associates. It was after having been "enlivened by the witty sallies of Thornton, Wilkes, Churchill, and Lloyd," that Boswell, who had passed the morning with them, "boldly,"—in his own words, "repaired to Dr. Johnson's chambers, for his first visit, and found the giant in his den."

Yet Cowper, who, during so many years, had mixed with such companions on equal terms, and till a time of life in which habits take so strong a hold that they are not easily cast off, had great capabilities for solitude. He could have been contented in a hermitage, if his mind had been delivered from the one illusion that oppressed it. There was an activity in his disposition, like that of a happy child, who having no playmate, is left to devise amusement for itself. As soon as he began to recover, his first care had been to seek employment, and this he found in carpentering, in cage-making, in gardening, and in drawing, till he discovered "that writing, and especially poetry, was the best remedy for that distress from which he sought to escape!" Many persons have brought on insanity by indulging in habits which excite its predisposing causes, and after temporary recoveries have induced a fresh access by the same imprudence; but Cowper's admirable self-management during the intervals which it pleased Providence to vouchsafe, is not the least remarkable point in his extraordinary case.

Yet though he could bear shade and retirement, he felt that it was good for him to be sometimes in the sunshine of society; and well understood the value of those aids to cheerfulness which come to us from without, or from a distance. "You do well," said he to Unwin, "to make your letters merry ones, though not very merry yourself, and that both for my sake and
your own; for your own sake, because it sometimes happens that by assuming an air of cheerfulness, we become cheerful in reality; and for mine, because I have always more need of a laugh than a cry, being somewhat disposed to melancholy by natural temperament as well as by other causes. It was one of the felicitous incidents of his life that the loss of Lady Austen's society was in some degree immediately supplied by a new acquaintance, which in no long time improved into familiarity, and then ripened into friendship. The Throckmortons had a mansion at Weston. Hitherto Cowper had had no intercourse with the family during the many years that he had resided at Olney; but he had been favoured with a key of their pleasure grounds; and when a new possessor, whom he remembered a boy, came, on the death of an elder brother, to reside there with his wife, he sent a complimentary card and requested a continuance of the privilege he had enjoyed by the favour of his mother, that lady, on the change of possessors, going to finish her days at Bath. The request was readily granted, and nothing more passed between them for about two years. But even as the lion is proverbially said to be not so fierce as his picture, so a shy man is seldom so shy as his neighbours suppose him to be, when he has once obtained a character for shyness. Deterred by that character from seeking the acquaintance of one whom, in other respects, he already knew how to appreciate, Mr. Throckmorton made no advances till an opportunity offered, in which it might have appeared discourteous not to notice him. Balloons were then the wonder of the day; all the country was invited to see one ascend from Weston, and a special invitation came to Cowper and Mrs. Unwin.

The very feeling in which shyness originates, makes the individual more sensible of any civilities that have an air of sincerity and kindness. "Our reception," says Cowper, "was flattering to a great degree, insomuch that more notice seemed to be taken of us than we could possibly have expected, indeed rather more than any of the other guests; they even

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64 May 8, 1784. 65 Sir Robert Throckmorton, the head of the family, then in his eighty-fourth year, resided in Oxfordshire. Though a Romanist, he had "done great things to preserve and restore Buckland (his parish) church."—Nichols's Literary Anecdotes, vol. iii. p. 700.

Cowper's friend succeeded to the baronetcy in 1791.
seemed anxious to recommend themselves to our regards. We drank chocolate, and were asked to dine, but were engaged.""

"It is not possible to conceive a more engaging and agreeable character than the gentleman’s, or a more consummate assemblage of all that is called good-nature, complaisance, and innocent cheerfulness than is to be seen in the lady. They have lately received many gross affronts from the people of the place, on account of their religion. We thought it therefore the more necessary to treat them with respect."—"A day or two after, Mrs. Unwin and I walked that way, and were overtaken in a shower. I found a tree, that I thought would shelter us both, a large elm, in a grove that fronts the mansion. Mrs. T. observed us, and running towards us in the rain, insisted on our walking in. He was gone out. We sat chatting with her till the weather cleared up, and then at her instance took a walk with her in the garden. The garden is almost their only walk, and is certainly their only retreat, in which they are not liable to interruption. She offered us a key of it in a manner that made it impossible not to accept it, and said she would send us one: a few days afterwards, in the cool of the evening, we walked that way again. We saw them going toward the house and exchanged bows and curtesies at a distance, but did not join them. In a few minutes, when we had passed the house, and had almost reached the gate that opens out of the park into the adjoining field, I heard the iron gate belonging to the court-yard ring, and saw Mr. T. advancing hastily toward us; we made equal haste to meet him, he presented to us the key, which I told him I esteemed a singular favour, and after a few such speeches as are made on such occasions, we parted. This happened about a week ago. I concluded nothing less, than that all this civility and attention was designed, on their part, as a prelude to a nearer acquaintance; but here at present the matter rests. I should like exceedingly to be on an easy footing there, to give a morning call now and then, and to receive one, but nothing more. For though he is one of the most agreeable men I ever saw, I could not wish to visit him in any other way; neither our house, furniture, servants, or income, being such as qualify us to make entertainments; neither would I on any account be introduced to the neighbouring gentry."

66 To Mr. Unwin. 67 To Mr. Newton, May 10, 1784.
The intercourse, however, proceeded farther than Cowper anticipated. He soon found himself a favourite visitor at Weston Hall, and for that reason was a frequent one. Incidents connected with the family led him to compose several of those minor pieces that give so much pleasure in the little circles for which they are designed, and on which the reputation of such a writer stamps a value when they are made current in the world of literature. In the easy intercourse of growing intimacy, Mr. and Mrs. Throckmorton became Mr. and Mrs. Frog, and by that inevitable name have obtained a more lasting remembrance in Cowper's letters than could have been conferred on them by a ducal title.

CHAPTER XI.

COWPER AT OLNEY. JOHN GILPIN RENDERED POPULAR BY HENDERSON’S RECITATION. PUBLICATION OF THE TASK. RENEWAL OF INTERCOURSE WITH LADY HESKETH.

The Task meantime was finished, . . that monument which, though not loftier than the pyramids, will more surely perpetuate its author's name, than those eldest of human works have handed down the history of their founders. It was transcribed in the autumn of 1781, and sent to Mr. Unwin for his perusal. "I know," said Cowper, "you will lose no time in reading it; but I must beg you likewise to lose none in con-signing it to Johnson, that if he chooses to print it, it may go to the press immediately; if not, that it may be offered directly to your friend Longman, or any other. Not that I doubt Johnson's acceptance of it, for he will find it more ad captum populi than the former."

Unwin's opinion of the work relieved Cowper from some anxiety, and gave him "a good deal of positive pleasure." "I have faith in your judgement," said he, "and an implicit confidence in the sincerity of your approbation. The writing of so long a poem is a serious business, and the author must know little of his own heart who does not in some degree suspect himself of partiality to his own production: and who is he that would not be mortified by the discovery that he had written five thousand lines in vain? If, when you make the offer of my book to Johnson, he should stroke his chin, and

1 Sept. 11, 1784.
THE TASK. 271

look up to the ceiling and cry—'Humph!'—anticipate him
(I beseech you) at once, by saying—'that you know I should
be sorry that he should undertake for me to his own disadvant-
age, or that my volume should be in any degree pressed upon
him. I make him the offer merely because I think he would have
reason to complain of me, if I did not.'—But that punctilio once
satisfied, it is a matter of indifference to me what publisher sends
me forth. If Longman should have difficulties, which is the
more probable, as I understand from you, that he does not in
these cases see with his own eyes, but will consult a brother
poet, take no pains to conquer them. The idea of being
hawked about, and especially of your being the hawker, is in-
supportable. Nichols (I have heard) is the most learned
printer of the present day. He may be a man of taste as well
as learning; and I suppose that you would not want a gentle-
man usher to introduce you. He prints the Gentleman's Ma-
gazine, and may serve us if the others should decline; if not,
give yourself no farther trouble about the matter. I may pos-
sibly envy authors who can afford to publish at their own ex-
 pense, and in that case should write no more. But the morti-
fication would not break my heart."

The first offer, however, was accepted. "I am glad for your
sake," says Cowper to his friend, "that you succeeded in the
first instance, and that the first trouble proved the last. Will-
ing, too, to consider Johnson's readiness to accept a second
volume of mine as an argument that at least he was no loser
by the former, I collect from it some reasonable hope that the
volume in question may not wrong him neither. My imagi-
nation tells me (for I know you interest yourself in the success
of my productions) that your heart fluttered when you ap-
proached his door, and that it felt itself discharged of a bur-
then when you came out again."

And now, when the poem was in Johnson's hands, he men-
tioned it to Mr. Newton; not having done so sooner, he said,
because almost to the last he had been doubtful whether he
should ever bring it to a conclusion, working often in such
distress of mind, as, while it spurred him to the work, at the
same time threatened to disqualify him for it. To Mr. Unwin
he said, "Mr. Newton will be surprised and, perhaps, not
pleased; but I think he cannot complain, for he keeps his own

2 Oct. 20, 1784.
3 Nov. 1, 1784.
authorly secrets without participating them with me. I do not think myself in the least injured by his reserve; neither should I, if he were to publish a whole library without favouring me with any previous notice of his intentions. In these cases it is no violation of the laws of friendship not to communicate, though there must be a friendship where the communication is made. But many reasons may concur in disposing a writer to keep his work secret, and none of them injurious to his friends. The influence of one I have felt myself, for which none of them would blame me—I mean the desire of surprising agreeably. And if I have denied myself this pleasure in your instance, it was only to give myself a greater, by eradicating from your mind any little weeds of suspicion that might still remain in it, that any man living is dearer to me than yourself. Had not this consideration forced up the lid of my strong box like a lever, it would have kept its contents with an invisible closeness to the last; and the first news that either you or any of my friends would have heard of the Task, they would have received from the public papers. But you know now, that neither as a poet, nor as a man, do I give to any man a precedence in my estimation at your expense."

The jealousy, here foreseen, was felt and expressed. "The moment Mr. Newton knew," says Cowper, "(and I took care that he should learn it first from me) that I had communicated to you what I had concealed from him, and that you were my authorship's go-between with Johnson on this occasion, he sent me a most friendly letter indeed, but one in every line of which I could hear the soft murmurs of something like mortification, that could not be entirely suppressed. It contained nothing, however, that you yourself would have blamed, or that I had not every reason to consider as evidence of his regard to me. He concluded the subject with desiring to know something of my plan, to be favoured with an extract by way of specimen, or (which he should like better still) with wishing me to order Johnson to send him a proof as fast as they were printed off. Determining not to accede to this last request, for many reasons (but especially because I would no more show my poem piece-meal, than I would my house if I had one; the merits of the structure in either case, being equally liable to suffer by such a partial view of it), I have endeavoured to compromise the

Oct. 30.
difference between us, and to satisfy him without disgracing myself. The proof sheets I have absolutely, though civilly refused: but I have sent him a copy of the arguments of each book, more dilated and circumstantial than those inserted in the work; and to these I have added an extract as he desired; selecting, as most suited to his taste—The view of the restoration of all things—which you recollect to have seen near the end of the last book. I hold it necessary to tell you this, lest, if you should call upon him, he should startle you by discovering a degree of information upon the subject which you could not otherwise know how to reconcile or to account for.""

Mr. Newton appears to have objected to the blank verse in which the Task was written, and to the title of the poem, and to have intimated no favourable expectation of its success. Cowper answered all his objections without deferring to any; and with regard to its fortune with the public, he said, "At any rate, though as little apt to be sanguine as most men, and more prone to fear and despond than to overrate my own productions, I am persuaded that I shall not forfeit any thing by this volume that I gained by the last." To Mr. Unwin he says, "I have had a letter from Mr. Newton that did not please me and returned an answer to it that possibly may not have pleased him. We shall come together again soon, I suppose, upon as amicable terms as usual; but at present he is in a state of mortification. He would have been pleased had the book passed out of his hands into yours, or even out of yours into his, so that he had previously had opportunity to advise a measure which I pursued without his recommendation, and had seen the poems in manuscript. But my design was to pay you a whole compliment, and I have done it. If he says more on the subject, I shall speak freely, and perhaps please him less than I have done already.""

While the Task was in the press, John Gilpin was gaining a wide reputation for its then unknown author. This lively story in its newspaper form, came into the hands of Mr. Richard Sharp, well known afterwards in the literary and higher circles of society for his conversational talents, and recently by a volume of Essays and Poems, the careful compositions of his middle age, which he published at the close of a long life. Mr. Sharp was intimately acquainted with Hen-

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5 Nov. 29, 1784. 6 Dec. 18, 1784.
derson, the great actor of those days, and the only one who has resembled Garrick in versatility of power; his Falstaff, his Benedict, and his Mr. Bayes having been not less finished performances than his Shylock, his Hamlet, and his King John. Henderson was at that time delivering public recitations at Freemason’s Hall: “it was my lucky chance,” says Mr. Sharp, “to make him acquainted with John Gilpin, and to propose his reading it. Yet, to be honest, I must own that I did not anticipate the prodigious effect of that story, when the public attention was directed to it.”

These readings were given in conjunction with Sheridan, son of Swift’s immortalized friend, and father of Brinsley Sheridan. The terms of admission were thought high, nevertheless the experiment succeeded, and though it continued only during the Lent of one year, the profits amounted to eight hundred pounds. The room was crowded upon every performance, and this success was attributed much more to John Gilpin than to the serious part of the recitations. Henderson was unrivalled as a reader, and for this reason, that he had neither studied nor formed for himself any system of elocution. He was once addressed, when he descended from the desk, by a person who wriggled up to him, “Pray, who did teach you to read, Mr. Henderson?” “My mother, sir!” was his reply. One who was present at one of these recitations says, that when John Gilpin was delivered, “the whole audience chuckled; and Mrs. Siddons, who sate next to me, lifted her unequalled

* My last communication with Mr. Sharp was upon this subject. Our intercourse, which was thus closed by a communication relating to the literary history of Cowper, commenced nearly forty years before, upon a morning visit to Cowper’s publisher, then in the Rules of the King’s Bench, under sentence of imprisonment, for having published a pamphlet by Gilbert Wakefield, which had been pronounced a seditious libel. From the commencement of my residence at Keswick (1803) till the close of the war, Mr. Sharp continued his custom of making an annual journey to the Lakes. He was expected here as regularly as the season, and his society was one of the pleasures which the season brought with it.

In his last note to me, he says: “I rejoice that you have undertaken Cowper’s Life. The painful facts are so well known, that you must fairly tell the whole story of his derangement. His poetical character will afford you a choice opportunity of giving your sentiments on the nature of the art, and the value of his departure from the French school, which had exclusive possession of our literature till Percy’s Reliques appeared.”

* For this anecdote I am beholden to an anonymous correspondent, who at the age of eighty-five appears to retain his memory and his cheerfulness in an extraordinary degree.
dramatic hands, and clapped as heartily as she herself used to be applauded in the same manner." But the effect was not confined to the overflowing audiences at Freemason's Hall. The ballad, which had then become the town talk, was reprinted from the newspaper, wherein it had lain three years dormant. Gilpin, passing at full stretch by the Bell at Edmonton, was to be seen in all print shops. One printseller sold six thousand. What had succeeded so well in London was repeated with inferior ability, but with equal success, on provincial stages, and the ballad became in the highest degree\textsuperscript{9} popular before the author's name was known.

The first person who communicated to Cowper the intelligence that "the famous horseman" was affording as much amusement to the public as he had formerly given to the little circles at Olney and Stock, seems to have been Mr. Newton. It called forth the following reply.

TO THE REV. JOHN NEWTON.

MY DEAR FRIEND, 

April 22, 1785.

WHEN I received your account of the great celebrity of John Gilpin, I felt myself both flattered and grieved. Being man, and having in my composition all the ingredients of which other men are made, and vanity among the rest, it pleased me to reflect that I was on a sudden become so famous, and that all the world was busy inquiring after me: but the next moment, recollecting my former self, and that thirteen years ago, as harmless as John's history is, I should not then

\textsuperscript{9} I know not whether any writer has disparaged it, except Henderson's biographer, Mr. John Ireland, who says, with especial reference to John Gilpin, that his friend "raised into reputation some things which seemed to have been gathered to the dull of ancient days; and but for such a renewal, had probably been still covered with the cloak of oblivion."

Some notice, however, this ballad had certainly obtained, before Henderson brought it into vogue. The readings at Freemason's Hall were in 1785, and in the preceding October, Cowper, when writing to Unwin respecting the intended publication of his second volume, says, "I have not been without thoughts of adding John Gilpin at the tail of all. He has made a good deal of noise in the world; and perhaps it may not be amiss to show, that though I write generally with a serious intention, I know how to be occasionally merry. The Critical Reviewers charged me with an attempt at humour. John having been more celebrated upon the score of humour than most pieces that have appeared in modern days, may serve to exonerate me from the imputation."
have written it, my spirits sank, and I was ashamed of my success. Your letter was followed the next post by one from Mr. Unwin. You tell me that I am rivalled by Mrs. Bellamy; and he, that I have a competitor for fame, not less formidable, in the Learned Pig. Alas! what is an author’s popularity worth, in a world that can suffer a prostitute on one side, and a pig on the other, to eclipse his brightest glories? I am therefore sufficiently humbled by these considerations; and unless I should hereafter be ordained to engross the public attention by means more magnificent than a song, am persuaded that I shall suffer no real detriment by their applause. I have produced many things, under the influence of despair, which hope would not have permitted to spring. But if the soil of that melancholy, in which I have walked so long, has thrown up here and there an unprofitable fungus, it is well, at least, that it is not chargeable with having brought forth poison. Like you, I see, or think I can see, that Gilpin may have his use. Causes, in appearance trivial, produce often the most beneficial consequences; and perhaps my volumes may now travel to a distance, which, if they had not been ushered into the world by that notable horseman, they would never have reached. Our temper differs somewhat from that of the ancient Jews. They would neither dance nor weep. We indeed weep not, if a man mourn unto us; but I must needs say, that, if he pipe, we seem disposed to dance with the greatest alacrity.

Yours, W. C.

In a subsequent letter to Mr. Newton, he says, “I should blame nobody, not even my intimate friends, and those who have the most favourable opinion of me, were they to charge the publication of John Gilpin, at the end of so much solemn and serious truth, to the score of the author’s vanity: and to suspect that, however sober I may be upon proper occasions, I have yet that itch of popularity that would not suffer me to sink my title to a jest that had been so successful. But the case is not such. When I sent the copy of the Task to Johnson, I desired, indeed, Mr. Unwin to ask him the question, whether or not he would choose to make it a part of the volume? This I did merely with a view to promote the sale of it. Johnson answered, “By all means.” Some months afterward, he enclosed a note to me in one of my packets, in
which he expressed a change of mind, alleging, that to print John Gilpin would only be to print what had been hackneyed in every magazine, in every shop, and at the corner of every street. I answered, that I desired to be entirely governed by his opinion; and that if he chose to waive it, I should be better pleased with the omission. Nothing more passed between us upon the subject, and I concluded that I should never have the immortal honour of being generally known as the author of John Gilpin. In the last packet, however, down came John, very fairly printed, and equipped for public appearance. The business having taken this turn, I concluded that Johnson had adopted my original thought, that it might prove advantageous to the sale; and as he had had the trouble and expense of printing it, I corrected the copy, and let it pass."

A little impatience Cowper felt at the tardiness of his publisher's proceedings: "that evil report of his indolence," said he, "reaches me from everybody that knows him, and is so general, that had I a work, or the publication of one in hand, the expense of which I intended to take the hazard of upon myself; I should be very much afraid to employ him. He who will neglect himself, cannot well be expected to attend to the interests of another." After an interval of some weeks, he says, "I know not what Johnson is about, neither do I now inquire. It will be a month to-morrow since I returned him the last proof. He might, I suppose, have published by this time, without hurrying himself into a fever, or breaking his neck through the violence of his despatch: but having never seen the book advertised, I conclude that he has not. Had the Parliament risen at the usual time, he would have been just too late; and though it sits longer than usual, or is likely to do so, I should not wonder if he were too late at last. Dr. Johnson laughs at Savage for charging the still-birth of a

10 To Mr. Newton, May, 1785. 11 Cowper's memory deceived him here. Johnson does not laugh at Savage; he says that he "easily reconciled himself to mankind, without imputing any defect to his work, by observing that his poem was unluckily published two days after the prorogation of the Parliament, and by consequence at a time when all those who could be expected to regard it were in the hurry of preparing for their departure, or engaged in taking leave of others, upon their dismission from public affairs."

There is no laugh at Savage here: the subject of the poem being "Public
poem of his upon the bookseller’s delay; yet when Dr. Johnson had a poem of his own to publish, no man ever discovered more anxiety to meet the market. But I have taken thought about it, till I am grown weary of the subject; and at last have placed myself much at my ease upon the cushion of this one resolution, that if ever I have dealings hereafter with my present manager, we will proceed upon other terms.”

Cowper had not been discouraged by the reception of his first volume. He told Johnson that he “should watch its success, and determine by the event whether to resume his occupation as an author, or drop it for ever.” But to pass the press had been to pass the Rubicon: though no triumph had been obtained by the passage, he took his stand after it as an author. One hope, indeed, which was dearer to him than any dream of being “for ever known,” had been disappointed, the hope of recalling himself to the friendly remembrance of his old familiar friends. He has said himself that he “was covetous, if ever man was, of living in the remembrance of absentees whom he highly valued and esteemed.” But neither Thurlow nor Colman had “thought it worth while” to thank him for his book; and the latter, though he published one himself after it had been sent him, did not “account it necessary to return the compliment.” When the Task appeared, Cowper allowed himself, therefore, “to be a little pleased with an opportunity of showing them that he resented their treatment, and sent the book to neither.” But they were no common men; on his part at least it had been no common friendship, and it may evidently be seen that while resenting even angrily their neglect, he loved them both. His anger passed away with the expression of it; the mournful sentiment remained; and he seems to have thought, like Dr. Johnson when he sent his Dictionary into the world, that most of those whom he had once wished to please were lost to him, and in like manner to have dismissed his work “with frigid

Spirit with regard to Public Works,” the persons whom he might have expected to regard it were those whom the prorogation dispersed. I know not what instance of anxiety in Johnson Cowper alludes to,—most likely it was upon the publication of Irene; the sale of a play generally ends with its novelty, and any delay in publishing after the first night’s representation is especially injurious to a short-lived piece. 13 June 29, 1780. 13 Oct. 1, 1781. 14 To Mr. Unwin, Aug. 27, 1785. 16 To Mr. Newton, July 9, 1785.
tranquillity," as if in his gloom of solitude he had little to fear or hope from censure or from praise. That feeling, darkened by his own distempered melancholy, possessed him when he wrote thus to Mr. Newton:

MY DEAR FRIEND, August 6, 1785.

I found your account of what you experienced in your state of maiden authorship very entertaining, because very natural. I suppose that no man ever made his first sally from the press without a conviction that all eyes and ears would be engaged to attend him; at least, without a thousand anxieties lest they should not. But, however arduous and interesting such an enterprise may be in the first instance, it seems to me that our feelings on the occasion soon become obtuse. I can answer, at least, for one. Mine are by no means what they were when I published my first volume. I am even so indifferent to the matter, that I can truly assert myself guiltless of the very idea of my book sometimes whole days together. God knows that my mind having been occupied more than twelve years in the contemplation of the most distressing subjects, the world, and its opinion of what I write, is become as unimportant to me as the whistling of a bird in a bush. Despair made amusement necessary, and I found poetry the most agreeable amusement. Had I not endeavoured to perform my best, it would not have amused me at all. The mere blotting of so much paper would have been but indifferent sport. God gave me grace also to wish that I might not write in vain. Accordingly, I have mingled much truth with much trifle; and such truths as deserved, at least, to be clad as well and as handsomely as I could clothe them. If the world approve me not, so much the worse for them, but not for me. I have only endeavoured to serve them, and the loss will be their own. And as to their commendations, if I should chance to win them, I feel myself equally invulnerable there. The view that I have had of myself, for many years, has been so truly humiliating, that I think the praises of all mankind could not hurt me. God knows that I speak my present sense of the matter at least most truly, when I say, that the admiration of creatures like myself seems to me a weapon the least dangerous that my worst enemy could employ against me. I am fortified against it by such solidity of real self-abasement, that I deceive myself
most egregiously if I do not heartily despise it. Praise be-
doneth to God; and I seem to myself to covet it no more
than I covet divine honours. Could I assuredly hope that God
would at last deliver me, I should have reason to thank him
for all that I have suffered, were it only for the sake of this
single fruit of my affliction,—that it has taught me how much
more contemptible I am in myself than I ever before suspected,
and has reduced my former share of self-knowledge (of which
at that time I had a tolerable good opinion) to a mere nullity,
in comparison with what I have acquired since. Self is a sub-
ject of inscrutable misery and mischief, and can never be
studied to so much advantage as in the dark: for as the bright
beams of the sun seem to impart a beauty to the foulest ob-
jects, and can make even a dunghill smile, so the light of
God's countenance, vouchsafed to a fallen creature, so sweetens
him and softens him for the time, that he seems, both to others
and to himself, to have nothing savage or sordid about him.
But the heart is a nest of serpents, and will be such while it
continues to beat. If God cover the mouth of that nest with
his hand, they are hush and snug; but if he withdraw his
hand, the whole family lift up their heads and hiss, and are
as active and venomous as ever. This I always professed to
believe from the time that I had embraced the truth, but never
knew it as I know it now. To what end I have been made
to know it as I do, whether for the benefit of others or for
my own, or for both, or for neither, will appear hereafter.

The first encouragement which he received was from his old
schoolfellow Lord Dartmouth, to whom he had sent the volume.
He had read only a part of it; of that part, however, says
Cowper, he expresses himself in terms with which my author-
ship has abundant cause to be satisfied, and adds that the spe-
cimen has made him impatient for the whole. He had ordered
a copy also to Mr. Bacon, the sculptor, who being a friend of
Mr. Newton's, and an admirer of his first volume, had made
himself known to Cowper by sending him a print of Lord
Chatham's monument. The poet had been greatly pleased
with it: "I have most of the monuments in the Abbey by
heart," he says, "but I recollect none that ever gave me so
much pleasure:" and while this impression was yet warm, he
introduced the artist and his work into the Task. Mr. Bacon's reply is one of the few letters to Cowper which have escaped destruction.

After thanking him for the present, he says, "I should not have room in my paper for observations on the different places that struck me; this might serve for an excuse, as well as another equally true, that indeed I feared I might sink in your opinion, with respect to my taste. There is a disadvantage attending a reputation somewhat higher than one's deserts, that it puts one upon the stretch, and sometimes upon shifts, to support it. But indeed it is nothing more than the truth when I say, that I am heartily glad your book was written, not only on my own account, but because I trust the best interests of mankind will be promoted by it. There are many that will not read a professedly religious book: the name of a clergyman to a treatise makes them cry out 'priestcraft,' and shut the book immediately. The peculiar phraseology of Christians excites in such persons the idea of Methodism, which includes in it those of enthusiasm and nonsense; so that a bar is raised at the very threshold, which usually prevents their entrance entirely. A writer on whom God has bestowed superior talents, commands their respect and attention; he will meet them on their own ground; he touches the springs of human nature, and sets them about what they so seldom do,—a thinking. This is a great point gained, for we are lost for want of consideration; and while they are detained by the liveliness and strength of the imagery, the beauty of the language and melody of the verse, who knows but the sentiment may enter into the soul? We pretend not to change the heart, but He who can, has made the use of probable means our duty; and having this single eye, we can never en-

16 Bacon there
Gives more than female beauty to a stonc,
And Chatham's eloquence to marble lips.—Book i.

17 July 18, 1785.

18 Perhaps Mr. Bacon remembered the first stanza in Herbert's Church Porch:
Thou whose sweet youth and early hopes enhance
Thy rate and price, and mark thee for a treasure;
Hearken unto a verser, who may chânce
Rhyme thee to good, and make a bait of pleasure.
A verse may find him who a sermon flies,
And turn delight into a sacrifice.
tirely miss our aim. 'If the son of peace be there, our peace shall rest upon them; otherwise it shall return to us again.'

"My dear sir, it is in vain my saying I have often wished to see you in London; if we can believe a poet, you are too much attached to sylvan scenes to venture into the suffocating air I am forced to breathe. In truth, I was obliged to remember it was the language of poetry, for I had in imagination packed up my alls, and reared my cottage in the midst of some fertile valley, on the border of some scarce-penetrable wood. I dreamed that there the weary might be at rest; but awakening, I recollected that I should carry that of which sometimes I think I am most weary, along with me. Alas, it is only in the grave that this wicked heart will cease from troubling!

"Well, I humbly hope that you and I are both placed by the Divine Hand, not only as we shall answer his great design, (for that all creatures must do,) but as our present situations shall best advance our final felicity. Our present happiness depends upon such an extensive concurrence of circumstances, as makes it absolutely beyond the calculation of mortals; but when we consider ourselves as in a state of discipline for another mode of existence, the question is involved in twofold darkness.

"I have rambled so much as to have left myself scarce room to thank you for the kind partiality with which you have mentioned my name in your book. What you said, I was very near believing, for I wished it true; and I could almost forgive myself for being pleased with it. If I am censured, I will throw it upon the verse: perhaps I should blush to have as much said of me in prose. Indeed it was so well said, it is most likely to be fiction, which, according to Waller, the Muses most delight in.

"You will easily perceive I have wrote what comes uppermost. I confide in your candour, and to the feelings of my heart, which cannot have dictated any thing incompatible with that sincere respect and esteem with which I am, dear sir,

Your obliged and obedient servant, J. BACON.

In this letter Mr. Bacon touched upon one of those causes

19 This letter is one of the valuable communications for which the Editor and the public are obliged to Mr. Upcott.
to which the immediate popularity that the publication of the Task obtained for its author may be ascribed. The most impassioned and imaginative of our devotional writers has pronounced a severe but well-founded condemnation upon the generality of our books of devotion, saying, that they are, in a large degree, the occasion of that great indvation which prevails among nominal Christians. They administer as physic that which never can be willingly taken nor well assimilated unless it be received as food. But never were intellectual delight, and moral instruction, and religious feeling more happily blended than in this poem: never was any purpose more effectually accomplished than that which Cowper proposed to himself in composing it; and the hope which Mr. Bacon expressed was speedily fulfilled.

Undoubtedly John Gilpin led the way to this popularity. Those who remember the effect of Henderson’s recitation have attested this: and if Johnson had persisted in his first intention of excluding that ballad from the volume, because it had already been printed in so many forms and dispersed everywhere through town and country, he would have committed a greater mistake than when he suppressed Mr. Newton’s preface. Upon second thoughts he not only admitted it, but specified it in the title page and in the advertisement. Cowper was fully sensible of the service it had rendered him. He says to Mr. Newton, “I know no more than you what kind of a market my book has found; but this I believe, that had not Henderson died, and had it been worth my while to have given him a hundred pounds to have read it in public, it would have been more popular than it is.”

The first volume had sold so slowly that it was not thought prudent to publish the Task and its appendants as a second; but the first, with a complete list of its contents, was advertised at the end of the book; and of the many who were induced to read the Task because it was written by the author of John Gilpin, not a few were led to inquire for the previous volume because it was by the author of the Task. In the second edition, which was called for in the ensuing year, the two volumes were connected as first and second, and in the numerous editions that have succeeded each other they have never been disunited.

20 Dec. 10, 1785.
Before Cowper could know how the public received his Task, he had the satisfaction of finding that it had passed the more formidable ordeal of his neighbours, and that he was "allowed to be a genius at Olney." "Mr. Teedon," says he, writing to Mr. Unwin "has just left us. He has read my book, and as if fearful that I had overlooked some of them myself, has pointed out to me all its beauties. I do assure you the man has a very acute discernment, and a taste that I have no fault to find with. I hope that you are of the same opinion." Mr. Bacon's letters, and one from Mr. Barham, he mentioned as being very flattering; "such," said he, "as might make a lean poet plump, and an humble poet proud; but being myself neither lean nor humble, I know of no other effect they had than that they pleased me; and I communicate the intelligence to you not without an assured hope that you will be pleased also." Thanking the same friend a little while afterwards for some facetious engravings of John Gilpin, he says, "a serious poem is like a swan, it flies heavily, and never far; but a jest has the wings of a swallow that never tire, and that carry it into every nook and corner. I am perfectly a stranger, however, to the reception that my volume meets with, and I believe in respect of my nonchalance upon that subject, if authors could but copy so fair an example, am a most exemplary character. I must tell you nevertheless, that although the laurels that I gain at Olney will never minister much to my pride, I have acquired some. The Reverend Mr. Scott is my admirer, and thinks my second volume superior to my first. It ought to be so. If we do not improve by practice, then nothing can mend us; and a man has no more cause to be mortified at being told that he has excelled himself, than the elephant had, whose praise it was that he was the greatest elephant in the world, himself excepted." Public opinion however was pronounced upon this volume so speedily that it became popular before the reviews gave their concurrent sentence in its favour. And before Cowper was apprized of its reception it had the happy effect of renewing his correspondence with his relations. It has been said that they neglected him for many years till the Task came out, and that they were then glad to take him up again. Glad to resume the intercourse undoubtedly they were, and proud also, as well they might be. But the neglect had not been ex-

21 July 27, 1785.  
22 Aug. 27, 1785.
clusively on their side; it was reciprocal, easily accountable on both sides; and when accounted for, it is easily to be excused.

In a letter to Mr. Unwin, written at this time, Cowper says, "I have had more comfort, far more comfort, in the connexions that I have formed within the last twenty years, than in the more numerous ones that I had before. Memorandum, the latter are almost all Unwins, or Unwinisms."

In this same letter it was that he said he was "covetous, if ever man was, of living in the remembrance of absentees whom he highly valued and esteemed." It has been seen that he endeavoured, and without success, to recall himself to Thurlow's remembrance and to Colman's; but it does not appear that he made any similar advances towards his relations, dearly as he loved his uncle Ashley, highly as he respected his cousin the General, and much as he was beholden to both. On either part there seems to have existed an uncomfortable feeling. Cowper, though his annual allowance from them had been regularly received, believed at this time that the general had withdrawn his part of it; and he remembered that the last letters from his uncle were in a tone of gentle reproof and prudent admonishment to which he had not thought proper to defer. He supposed that they could regard him only as an unfortunate kinsman, who having disappointed the fair hopes and expectations of his family, had become a burthen upon them,—an object of their compassion, but no longer of their love. They, no doubt on their part, inferred from the strain of his latest communications, and from his conduct, that his malady had only assumed a milder form, and that one effect of it had been to alienate him from all those whom he looked upon as unregenerate. That he did not send them his first volume must have strengthened them in this opinion; and if they looked into it (as they were likely to do) under an impression of this kind, they would perceive there much that tended to confirm it, and might therefore disregard other parts in which his original and happy character appeared through the cloud. That character manifested itself fully in his second publication; and it was not because Cowper was becoming famous, but because he seemed to have become himself again, that the intercourse between him and his relations was now reopened by the dearest of them, Lady Hesketh.

Aug. 27. 23 See p. 125.
They who remembered Lady Hesketh in her prime, spoke of her as a "brilliant beauty, who attracted all eyes on her at Ranelagh". No portrait of her has, as yet, been discovered; and it is even more to be regretted that her correspondence with her sister, which might have thrown much light upon some of the most interesting parts of Cowper's history, has not been preserved, and that her letters to Cowper himself have shared the same fate. I cannot but repeat here that, though there is often cause to censure the want of discretion and of delicacy with which posthumous papers have been published, there is more reason to condemn the rashness, or the carelessness and the folly with which they have been destroyed. They whose researches have been among such documents know how imperfect the information is that can be gathered from a one-sided correspondence. Even with regard to individual character it sometimes happens that more may be learnt from the way in which those who are well acquainted with an eminent person wrote to him, than from any thing which transpires in his own letters.

In the best sense of the words, however, no woman can be better known than Lady Hesketh. She had looked upon her cousin almost as a brother, in childhood and in youth, and many years of absence and intermittent intercourse had in no degree diminished her regard for him. On both sides the latent feeling needed only a touch to call it forth. She had now been seven years a widow; and during the first years of her widowhood, after her return to England, she had been much engaged "with a variety of mournful duties." The last letter that she had received from him was in a strain of that melancholy pietism which casts a gloom over every thing, and which seems at once to chill the intellect and wither the affections. But now she saw that he could once more indulge a playful temper, and sport upon light subjects as he had been wont to do in former days; and after reading John Gilpin her heart told her that a letter from the cousin with whom he used "to giggle and make giggles" would be received and answered with as much warmth and sincerity as it was written with.

How perfectly this expectation was answered, will be seen in his reply.

25 Letter from Sir Egerton Brydges. 26 P. 130.
MY DEAR COUSIN,

Oct. 12, 1785.

It is no new thing with you to give pleasure; but I will venture to say, that you do not often give more than you gave me this morning. When I came down to breakfast, and found upon the table a letter franked by my uncle, and when opening that frank I found that it contained a letter from you, I said within myself—"This is just as it should be. We are all grown young again, and the days that I thought I should see no more are actually returned." You perceive, therefore, that you judged well when you conjectured, that a line from you would not be disagreeable to me. It could not be otherwise than, as in fact it proved, a most agreeable surprise, for I can truly boast of an affection for you, that neither years, nor interrupted intercourse, have at all abated. I need only recollect how much I valued you once, and with how much cause, immediately to feel a revival of the same value: if that can be said to revive, which at the most has only been dormant for want of employment, but I slander it when I say that it has slept. A thousand times have I recollected a thousand scenes, in which our two selves have formed the whole of the drama, with the greatest pleasure; at times, too, when I had no reason to suppose that I should ever hear from you again. I have laughed with you at the Arabian Nights Entertainment, which afforded us, as you well know, a fund of merriment that deserves never to be forgot. I have walked with you to Netley Abbey, and have scrambled with you over hedges in every direction, and many other feats we have performed together, upon the field of my remembrance, and all within these few years. Should I say within this twelvemonth, I should not transgress the truth. The hours that I have spent with you were among the pleasantest of my former days, and are therefore chronicled in my mind so deeply, as to feel no erasure. Neither do I forget my poor friend, Sir Thomas. I should remember him, indeed, at any rate, on account of his personal kindness to myself; but the last testimony that he gave of his regard for you endears him to me still more. With his uncommon understanding (for with many peculiarities he had more sense than any of his acquaintance), and with his generous sensibilities, it was hardly possible that he should not distinguish you as he has done. As it was the last, so it was the best proof
that he could give, of a judgment that never deceived him, when he would allow himself leisure to consult it.

You say that you have often heard of me: that puzzles me. I cannot imagine from what quarter, but it is no matter. I must tell you, however, my cousin, that your information has been a little defective. That I am happy in my situation is true; I live, and have lived these twenty years, with Mrs. Unwin, to whose affectionate care of me, during the far greater part of that time, it is, under Providence, owing that I live at all. But I do not account myself happy in having been for thirteen of those years in a state of mind that has made all that care and attention necessary; an attention, and a care, that have injured her health, and which, had she not been uncommonly supported, must have brought her to the grave. But I will pass to another subject; it would be cruel to particularize only to give pain, neither would I by any means give a sable line to the first letter of a correspondence so unexpectedly renewed.

I am delighted with what you tell me of my uncle's good health. To enjoy any measure of cheerfulness at so late a day is much; but to have that late day enlivened with the vivacity of youth, is much more, and in these postdiluvian times a rarity indeed. Happy, for the most part, are parents who have daughters. Daughters are not apt to outlive their natural affections, which a son has generally survived, even before his boyish years are expired. I rejoice particularly in my uncle's felicity, who has three female descendants from his little person, who leave him nothing to wish for upon that head.

My dear cousin, dejection of spirits, which, I suppose, may have prevented many a man from becoming an author, made me one. I find constant employment necessary, and therefore take care to be constantly employed. Manual occupations do not engage the mind sufficiently, as I know by experience, having tried many. But composition, especially of verse, absorbs it wholly. I write, therefore, generally, three hours in the morning, and in an evening I transcribe. I read also, but less than I write, for I must have bodily exercise, and therefore never pass a day without it.

You ask me where I have been this summer. I answer at Olney. Should you ask me where I spent the last seventeen summers, I should still answer, at Olney. Ay, and the winters also;
I have seldom left it, and except when I attended my brother in his last illness, never I believe a fortnight together.

Adieu, my beloved cousin, I shall not always be thus nimble in reply, but shall always have great pleasure in answering you when I can. Yours, my dear friend and cousin, W. C.

In her second letter Lady Hesketh inquired into the state of his income, apprehending that it must needs be a straitened one, and offering him such assistance as she was able to afford. He replied thus:

TO LADY HESKETH.

MY DEAREST COUSIN, Olney, Nov. 9, 1785.

Whose last most affectionate letter has run in my head ever since I received it, and which I now sit down to answer two days sooner than the post will serve me; I thank you for it, and with a warmth for which I am sure you will give me credit, though I do not spend many words in describing it. I do not seek new friends, not being altogether sure that I should find them, but have unspeakable pleasure in being still beloved by an old one. I hope that now our correspondence has suffered its last interruption, and that we shall go down together to the grave, chatting and chirping as merrily as such a scene of things as this will permit.

I am happy that my poems have pleased you. My volume has afforded me no such pleasure at any time, either while I was writing it, or since its publication, as I have derived from yours and my uncle's opinion of it. I make certain allowances for partiality, and for that peculiar quickness of taste, with which you both relish what you like, and after all drawbacks upon those accounts duly made, find myself rich in the measure of your approbation that still remains. But above all, I honour John Gilpin, since it was he who first encouraged you to write. I made him on purpose to laugh at, and he served his purpose well; but I am now in debt to him for a more valuable acquisition than all the laughter in the world amounts to, the recovery of my intercourse with you, which is to me inestimable. My benevolent and generous cousin, when I was once asked if I wanted any thing, and given delicately to understand that the inquirer was ready to supply all my occasions, I thankfully and civilly, but positively, declined the favour. I neither suf-

s. c.—l.
fer, nor have suffered, any such inconveniences as I had not much rather endure than come under obligations of that sort to a person comparatively with yourself a stranger to me. But to you I answer otherwise. I know you thoroughly, and the liberality of your disposition, and have that consummate confidence in the sincerity of your wish to serve me, that delivers me from all awkward constraint, and from all fear of trespassing by acceptance. To you, therefore, I reply, yes. Whencever, and whatsoever, and in what manner-soever you please; and add moreover, that my affection for the giver is such as will increase to me tenfold the satisfaction that I shall have in receiving. It is necessary, however, that I should let you a little into the state of my finances, that you may not suppose them more narrowly circumscribed than they are. Since Mrs. Unwin and I have lived at Olney, we have had but one purse, although during the whole of that time, till lately, her income was nearly double mine. Her revenues indeed are now in some measure reduced, and do not much exceed my own; the worst consequence of this is, that we are forced to deny ourselves some things which hitherto we have been better able to afford, but they are such things as neither life, nor the well-being of life, depend upon. My own income has been better than it is, but when it was best, it would not have enabled me to live as my connexions demanded that I should, had it not been combined with a better than itself, at least at this end of the kingdom. Of this I had full proof during three months that I spent in lodgings at Huntingdon, in which time by the help of good management, and a clear notion of economical matters, I contrived to spend the income of a twelvemonth. Now, my beloved cousin, you are in possession of the whole case as it stands. Strain no points to your own inconvenience or hurt, for there is no need of it, but indulge yourself in communicating (no matter what) that you can spare without missing it, since by so doing you will be sure to add to the comforts of my life one of the sweetest that I can enjoy—a token and proof of your affection.

I cannot believe but that I should know you, notwithstanding all that time may have done: there is not a feature of your face, could I meet it upon the road, by itself, that I should not instantly recollect. I should say, that is my cousin's nose, or those are her lips and her chin, and no woman
upon earth can claim them but herself. As for me, I am a very smart youth of my years; I am not indeed grown grey so much as I am grown bald. No matter: there was more hair in the world than ever had the honour to belong to me; accordingly having found just enough to curl a little at my ears, and to intermix with a little of my own, that still hangs behind, I appear, if you see me in an afternoon, to have a very decent head-dress, not easily distinguished from my natural growth, which being worn with a small bag, and a black riband about my neck, continues to me the charms of my youth, even on the verge of age. Away with the fear of writing too often!

W. C.

P. S.—That the view I give you of myself may be complete, I add the two following items—that I am in debt to nobody, and that I grow fat.

The happiest state of Cowper’s life commenced when the intercourse with this beloved cousin was thus renewed. He compared himself, in the effect produced upon him, to the traveller described in Pope’s Messiah 24, who, as he passes through a sandy desert, starts at the sudden and unexpected sound of a waterfall. And the same volume which was the occasion of restoring to him this blessing, at once placed him at the head of the poets of his age.

CHAPTER XII.

SKETCHES OF THE PROGRESS OF ENGLISH POETRY FROM CHAUCER TO COWPER.

When Dr. Burney, the elder, visited Ferney, in his travels, Voltaire inquired of him what poets we then had in England? and was answered, “We have Mason and Gray.” “They write but little,” he replied, “and you seem to have no one who lords it over the rest like Dryden, Pope, and Swift.” “I told him,” says Burney, “it was perhaps one of the inconveniences of periodical journals, however well executed, that they often silenced modest men of genius, while impudent

24 The swain in barren deserts with surprise
Sees lilies spring, and sudden verdure rise,
And starts amidst the thirsty wilds to hear
New falls of water murmuring in his ear.
blockheads were impenetrable, and unable to feel the critic's scourge; that Mr. Gray and Mr. Mason had both been illiberally treated by mechanical critics, even in newspapers; and that modesty and love of quiet seemed in these gentlemen to have got the better even of their love of fame."

Voltaire, who lorded it himself over the literature of his own country, was but superficially acquainted with that of any other. Dryden may rather be said to have at one time deserved the supremacy, than ever by general consent to have possessed it; and it was not by his poetry that Swift attained the high station which he must ever hold among English writers. Pope was our first and only dictator. In specifying Gray and Mason as the most eminent of the then living poets, Dr. Burney spake the just opinion of his contemporaries; but in ascribing so much power to periodical criticism, he was wrong both in the general remark, and in the particular application. Such criticism may do, and has done, much in assisting to corrupt the public taste; but the fear of it never withheld any poet from publishing; nor has its most determined enmity ever succeeded in crushing a poem that deserved to live, nor for any length of time in preventing it from making its way.

When that visit was paid at Ferney, by a good man to the apostle of licentiousness and impiety, Gray was planning and preparing for great works both in prose and verse; and Mason, in the enjoyment of fair preferment properly bestowed, was amusing himself with anonymous satires, and proceeding leisurely with his didactic and later dramatic works. Before Cowper appeared in the field Gray was dead, and Mason seemed to have retired from it. At any time the Task must have been successful, but at no time could the circumstances have been more favourable for its reception. For the revival of that true English taste, which this poem mainly contributed to promote, had already been begun.

The revolution in our fine literature, which took place upon the Restoration, was as great as the political revolutions which preceded, and in their consequences produced it. There is no other example of so sudden a degradation, nor any of so great a one except where it has coincided with the decay and downfall of a state. It was most apparent in the drama, a high

1 Present State of Music in France and Italy, 1771.
department wherein the English had far excelled all modern nations. The last of that school of dramatists, to whom, far inferior as all, and especially the latter ones, were to their mighty master, no other language has produced any that are either like, or comparable, lived to see a French school introduced in the country of Shakespeare; rhymed tragedies became the fashion of the age; and, which, is the worst system of depravation, men of great and indubitable genius took the lead in this and other perversions of the national taste. The blank verse of our old plays is so perfectly in accord with the genius of our language, and so excellently adapted to its purpose, that no greater proof of degenerated taste has ever been given than in this attempt to supersede it by a fashion imported from France, with the French accompaniments of frippery, tinsel, and false sentiment.

During the great rebellion, when the theatres were closed and plays were contraband, such portions of old stock pieces as were most likely to please the populace were exhibited under the appellation of Drolls, in taverns, in booths at fairs, or on mountebank stages. Yet it was not so derogatory to Shakespeare that the humours of Bottom the Weaver should thus be vulgarized, as that his noblest works should be accommodated to the temper of the times, not alone by authors who, whatever reputation they enjoyed, were butchers at the best, but by men who, when they committed this sacrilege, could not but be conscious that it was sacrilege they were committing. Shadwell boasted that he had made Timon of Athens into a play; the execution was worthy of the attempt, and the attempt was worthy of Shadwell, whose bust in Westminster Abbey ought to have been cast either in lead or in brass, or in an emblematic amalgama of the two metals. Nahum Tate, who of all my predecessors must have ranked lowest of the

2 "When the publique theatres were shut up, and the actors forbidden to present us with any of their tragedies because we had enough of that in earnest, and comedies, because the vices of the age were too lively and smartly represented, then all that we could divert ourselves with were these humours, and pieces of plays, which passing under the name of a merry conceited fellow, called Bottom the Weaver, Simpleton the Smith, John Swabbler, or some such title, were only allowed us, and that but by stealth, and under pretence of rope-dancing, or the like." Francis Kirkman's Preface to the Wits, or Sport upon Sport, being a curious collection of several Drolls and Farces, &c. 1673.
laureates,—if he had not succeeded Shadwell,—adapted Coriolanus, Richard the Second, and King Lear to his own notions of dramatic propriety. Shadwell could not degrade himself, for nothing could degrade him; and poor Nahum, whom Dryden invited to assist him in his Absalom and Achitophel, and who was one of the duumvirate appointed to "fit the Psalms to the tunes used in churches," may be excused for fancying that he could fit Shakespeare's tragedies to the stage. But how can we explain or excuse the obliquity of taste and obtuseness of feeling in Dryden, and in Davenant (a poet of a higher grade) when they joined in interpolating the Tempest with their own base inventions?

The change which took place in the drama was in all respects for the worse; in other kinds of poetry it was not at first so entirely bad; yet there was a rapid decline. Imagination and fancy had already been displaced by conceit and wit; and these in their turn were lowered, till at length the poverty of thought was upon a level with the meagreness of expression. Here Dryden, though the chief of those who debased the drama, is the great and almost the only exception, for Cowley and Butler, as well as Milton, belong to the preceding generation.

It was at one time a received opinion, and Johnson gave it the sanction of his great authority, that Waller and Denham began to refine our versification, and that Dryden perfected it. Before the time of Dryden, he says there was "no poetical diction, no system of words at once refined from the grossness of domestic use, and free from the harshness of terms appropriated to particular arts." "The new versification, as it was called, may be considered," he says, "as owing its establishment to Dryden, from whose time it is apparent that English poetry has had no tendency to relapse to its former savageness." "The veneration with which his name is pronounced by every cultivator of English literature, is paid to him, as he refined the language, improved the sentiments, and tuned the numbers of English poetry." "To him we owe the improvement, perhaps the completion of our metre, and much of the correctness of our sentiments." But there was no subject of which Johnson, if he knew any thing, knew so little as of our early poetry. The poets before the Restoration were to him what the world before the flood is to historians. He has, however, incidentally observed, that the Elizabethan poets "had attained
an art of modulation which was afterwards neglected or forgotten.

Our versification, which was exceedingly complicated in the first ages of our poetry, appears to have been of home growth. We neither inherited nor borrowed anything from the Welsh, whose system of metre is more intricate than that of any other people. From our Saxon ancestors a scheme of alliterative verse was retained, which became obsolete almost as soon as Piers Ploughman's Visions (one of the most remarkable works in the language) had been composed in it. The extravagant fashion of the Scalds, who strung mythological metaphors into a sort of language which was one continued riddle, had no imitators here; nor has it had any parallel in European literature, except in the short-lived style which Gongora introduced among the Spaniards. But with what care the vernacular poetry was cultivated as an art may be seen in the Metrical Romances, in many of which the stanzas are very graceful, and in others not less curiously elaborate. The first reformation which it underwent was to free it from some gratuitous difficulties, and divest it of the cumbrous ornaments with which it had been overloaded. Chaucer, who is deservedly accounted the Father of English Poetry, effected this. The line of English poets begins with him, as that of English kings with William the Conqueror; and if the change introduced by him was not so great, his title is better. Kings there were before the conquest, and of great and glorious memory too; but the poets before Chaucer are like the heroes before Agamemnon; even of those whose works have escaped oblivion, the names of most have perished.

Father Chaucer, throwing off all trammels, simplified our verse. Nature had given him the ear and the eye and the imagination of a poet; and his diction was such as that of all great poets has ever been, and ever will be, in all countries,—neither cramped by pedantic rules, nor vitiated by prevailing fashions, nor raised on stilts, nor drooping for want of strength, but rising and falling with the subject, and always suited to it.

The seven-lined stanza of his Troilus and Cresside was

3 Sydney seems to have considered this as his greatest poem. "Chaucer," he says, "undoubtedly did excellently in his Troilus and Cresside, of whom truly I know not whether to marvel more, either that he in that misty time could see so clearly, or that we in this clear age go so stumblingly after him."—Defence of Poesy.
adopted from the Provenceal poets. I know not whether he had any example of the ten-syllable couplet in the poets of France, Provence, and Italy, but the Hermit of Hampole, Richard Rolle, who perhaps himself followed others, had shown him the way in this. That the one form of verse was, in his judgement, as well fitted for grave and lofty subjects as the other, is certain, for in such subjects he has employed them both: but it appears that the couplet took its character in common opinion from his lighter pieces, and was supposed to be adapted for nothing better. And while the "Troilus verse," as King James called it, obtained the dignified title of Rhythm Royal, the strain in which the knight related his tale of Palamon and Arcite, and in which "the story of Cambuscan bold" had been pitched, was degraded in public estimation, and distinguished by the contemptuous term of riding rhymes.

It is a disputed question whether Chaucer's verses be rhythmical or metrical. I believe them to have been written rhyth-

4 "His metre heroical of Troilus and Cresseid is very grave and stately, keeping the staff of seven and the verse of ten: his other verses of the Canterbury Tales be but riding rhyme, nevertheless very well becoming the matter of that pleasant pilgrimage, in which every man's part is played with much decency."—Puttenham, Art of English Poesy, p. 50.

5 "I had forgotten a notable kind of rhyme called riding rhyme, and that is such as our master and father, Chaucer, used in his Canterbury Tales, and in divers other delectable and light enterprises. As this riding rhyme serveth most aptly to write a merry tale, so rhythm royal is fittest for a grave discourse."—Gascogne's Instructeur, p. 12.

Rithme royal is the seven-lined stanza of Troilus and Cresseid. Gascoigne describes it as "a verse of ten syllables, and seven such verses make a staff, whereof the first and third lines do answer, across, in like termination and rhyme; the second, fourth, and fifth do likewise answer each other in terminations; and the two last do combine and shut up the sentence: this hath been called rithme royal, and surely it is a royal kind of verse, serving best for grave discourses."—ib. p. 10.

James I., in his Reulis and cautelis to be observit and eschewit in Scottis Poesie, says this stanza is called Troilus verse, and that it is to be used "for tragical materis, complaintis, or testamentis."

5 Perhaps Shakespeare alludes to this appellation when he describes a still more familiar kind of measure, as the "right butterwoman's rate to market." Sermo pedestris is an expression analogous to riding rhyme.

James I. speaks of the ten syllable couplet as an inferior strain, not to be compared with any kind of stanza,—"ryme," he calls it, "quhilk servis onely for lang historeis, and zit are nocht verse." For this opinion, which was earnestly impugned by my old schoolfellow, James Boswell the younger, and in which I am supported by Farmer and Dr. Nott
mically, upon the same principle on which Coleridge composed his beautiful fragment of Christabel,—that the number of beats, or accentuated syllables in every line should be the same, although the number of syllables themselves might vary. Verse so composed will often be strictly metrical; and because Chaucer's is frequently so, the argument has been raised that it is always so if it be read properly, according to the intention of the author. But to suppose that it was written as iambic verse, and that the lines were lengthened or shortened to the required measure by sometimes pronouncing a final syllable, and sometimes letting it remain mute, according to the occasion, is supposing that Chaucer took greater liberties with the common pronunciation, (which must always be uniform,) and relied more on the judgement of the reader, than one who so perfectly understood the character of his mother tongue, and was so well acquainted with the ordinary capacities of men, can be supposed to have done, without impeachment of his sagacity. Be this as it may, it is no slight proof of that sagacity, that he should have pitched the key and determined the length of verse, which after so many experiments and the lapse of nearly five centuries have been found to accord best with the genius of the language; and that his "riding rhyme," under the more dignified denomination of the "heroic couplet," should be the (who I think has fully established it), there is the explicit testimony of George Gascoigne, in his Instruction concerning the making of verse in English. He says, "commonly now-a-days in English rhymes (for I dare not call them English verses), we use none other order but a foot of two syllables, whereof the first is depressed or made short, and the second is elevated or made long; and that sound or scanning continueth throughout the verse. We have used in times past other kinds of metres.—Also our father Chaucer hath used the same liberty in feet and measures that the Latinists do use; and whatsoever do peruse and well consider his works, he shall find that although his lines are not always of one self same number of syllables, yet being read by one that hath understanding, the longest verse, and that which hath most syllables in it, will fall to the ear correspondent with that which hath fewest syllables in it; and likewise that which hath in it fewest syllables shall be found yet to consist of words that have such natural sound as may seem equal in length to a verse which hath many more syllables of lighter accents. And surely I can lament that we are fallen into such a plain and simple measure of writing, that there is none other foot used but one; whereby our poems may justly be called rhythms, and, cannot by any right challenge the name of verse. But since it is so, let us take the good as we find it."—pp. 5, 6.
measure which Dryden and Pope and their followers have preferred to all others for grave and lofty subjects.

The "ornate style," which is the worst fashion that has ever been introduced into English verse, began in Chaucer's time, and he adopted it to some of his smaller and later pieces; perhaps as an experiment towards the improvement of a language then in a state in which experiments might allowably be tried,. perhaps to gratify some of his friends who admired the new mode: but unless his faculties were impaired by age, of which there is no proof or indication, it is not possible that he could have approved of it himself. His language was what he had learnt in the country, in the city, and in the court; . what every one could understand, and every one could feel; it was the language of passion and of real life, and therefore the language of poetry: the ornate style was the language of the cloister; . it was what any "Latiner" could be taught to write mechanically, without the slightest apprehension that anything more than versification was required to constitute poetry, and even without ear for that. It was equally pedantic and antipoetical. For more than a century our poetry was overlaid with it. The age after Chaucer was in many respects darker than that which preceded it; his name, however, was held in reverence, and succeeding poets were instructed to look to him as their exemplar, even by those who departed from him most widely in their own practice.

The ornate fashion was suppressed with the monasteries, in which it originated; and a new impulse was given to this branch of literature when Surrey introduced into it the forms as well as the character of Italian poetry. The same thing was done at the same time in Spain by Garcilaso de la Vega, and with the same success, each poet having produced a permanent effect upon the literature of his country. Sir Thomas Wyatt's name is associated with Surrey's in this reformation, and that of Boscan with Garcilaso's. The change in England was greater than in Spain, because metrical versification was here substituted for rhythmical: to Surrey it is that the honour of this improvement must be ascribed; and as Boscan introduced the verso suelto into Spanish, Surrey, with better fortune, gave in English the first example of blank verse. It is uncertain whether he derived it from the Italian or the Spa-
nish, or, which is quite as likely, whether the experiment was the result of his own conception: but in no other language has it succeeded so well as in ours, to which, indeed, it is so excellently adapted, that it might peculiarly be denominated the English metre: in no other could Shakespeare and Milton have found adequate expression for their thoughts.

In those languages wherein any of the earliest specimens of their poetry have been preserved, the verses seem generally to have been short; because, being composed when writing was either unknown or little used, and also being orally transmitted, they were in the first instance more easily endited, and in the second more readily remembered. While the art continued in a rude state, lengthening the line was no improvement; for if four feet were extended to five, it was generally done by the insertion of some useless epithet... and if to a greater length, the verse was then divided by a pause, regularly recurring in the same place. From Chaucer’s time the line of five feet (whether in couplets or in stanzas) has been the most approved measure, and from Surrey’s, the iambic the most approved movement, in all subjects of great pith and moment. In the succeeding age there were many and important exceptions to the use of the measure; to that of the movement few or none. The line of fourteen syllables, (which being divided at its usual resting place, is no other than the common ballad metre) was used in the translations of the Æneid and the Metamorphoses: but it is remarkable that Chapman, who employed it in his version of the Iliad, should have rendered the Odyssey in couplets. Most of the numerous historical poems were in stanzas, the octave being generally preferred. Drayton, who had written his Barons’ Wars in the Troilus metre, changed it for this when he republished the work, saying that Ariosto’s stanza was of all others the most complete and best proportioned; for it “both holds the tune clear through to the base of the column, (which is the couplet at the foot,) and closeth not but with a full satisfaction to the ear for so long

7 In the letter to Sir Robert Howard, prefatory to Dryden’s Annus Mirabilis, “the old translation of Homer by Chapman,” is said to be written “in Alexandrine, or verses of six feet,” the heroic metre of the French. This is one instance of Dryden’s inaccuracy when he touches upon the history of his own art: and it is the more remarkable, because Chapman, having translated the Iliad and Odyssey in two different measures, used the Alexandrine in neither.
detention." Drayton wrote well in every metre which he attempted: but what he thus says of the Italian stanza may be more truly said of the English one invented by Spenser, and used by him in one of the noblest works of human genius. And he committed a great error when he fixed upon the Alexandrine as the measure in which to write his Polyolbion; for of all measures it is that which, in our language, admits the least variety.

Neither the diction of Chaucer, nor of Surrey, . the father and the reformer of our poetry, . could, have been more perfect than it was. It will not be supposed that because Surrey is thus named with Chaucer, he is placed in the same rank with him; for Chaucer stands in the first rank, with Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton; and in variety of power Shakespeare is his only peer. We know not what Surrey might have been; but little as he found leisure for composing during an active life, and that life shortened by one of those legal murders which have left an ineffaceable stain upon the memory of Henry VIII., his writings form an epoch in the history of English poetry. Where a true poetical feeling exists, even though in an inferior degree, the diction will always be that of truth and nature: and it is always otherwise with imitators, and where inclination has been mistaken for power. Corruption of language, therefore, and ephemeral styles are introduced by inferior writers; and in this respect, the course of literature, like that of ecclesiastical history, is marked by a succession of heresies, which have prevailed for a time, and then passed away. When the far-fetched words of the monastic style were banished from our versification, alliteration was brought into use, not as the principle upon which the verse was constructed, but as its chief and indispensable ornament.

After noting that we missed "the right use of the material point of poetry," Sydney says, "now for the outside of it, which is words, or (as I may term it) diction, it is even well worse, so is that honey-flowing matron eloquence appareled, or rather disguised in a courtezan-like painted affectation; one time with so far-fetched words that many seem monsters, but most seem strangers to any poor Englishman; another time with coursing of a letter, as if they were bound to follow the method of a dictionary."

—Defence of Poesy.

Puttenham says, it is "nothing commendable" when a "maker takes too much delight to fill his verse with words beginning all with a letter, as an English rhymer that said
This abuse of what is only ornamental when sparingly and appropriately introduced, became ridiculous, and was laughed out of fashion; but, as in religious sects, they who avoided one error ran into an opposite extreme. A loose and careless versification was sometimes adopted, that the writer might escape the affectation of a stiff and elaborate one; and while men of genius wasted their powers in fantastic conceits, substituting wit for feeling, others, who were not inferior in ability, and of better judgement, though the error into which they fell was quite as great, lowered the pitch of their poetry to a prosaic strain, as if there had been no medium between a creeping and a stilted style.

Nevertheless, more poems that are worthy of preservation were produced, in the course of half a century, than in any former or any subsequent age of English literature. It was not till toward the latter part of Elizabeth's reign that the noblest productions appeared, and poetry recovered that estimation, which according to the most illustrious of its patrons, it had lost. Sydney complains that, from almost the highest estimation of learning, it had fallen to be the laughing stock of children; "that an art which was embraced," he said, "in all other places, and patronized and practised by the great, should find a hard return only in England, was what he thought the very earth lamented, and therefore decked the soil with fewer laurels than it was accustomed." "It necessarily followed," he said, "that base men with servile wits undertook it, who thought it enough if they could be rewarded of the printer." This complaint shows that if poetry had not then obtained that patronage among the great, of which Sydney himself set the example to his contemporaries, it already possessed the more effectual patronage of the public, and had become a

The deadly drops of dark disdain
Do daily drench my due deserts.
Many of our English makers use it too much, yet we confess it doth not ill, but prettily, become the metre, if ye pass not two or three words in one verse, and use it not very much; as he that said by way of epithet,

The smoaky sighs, the trickling tears;
and such like: for such composition makes the metre run away smoother, and passeth from the lips with more facility by iteration of a letter than by alteration, which alteration of a letter requires an exchange of ministry and office in the lips, teeth, or palate, and so doth not the iteration."
marketable article. Poets swarmed in this country, as they did in France and Spain, and a little earlier in Italy, and in Holland a little later. And in our literature, as in our language, we took something from other countries, while they seem to have derived nothing from us.

But the poetry of every nation (more than any other branch of its literature) is coloured by the national character, as the wine of different soils has its raciness. That of the Italians, in that age, was graceful, delicate, fanciful, sometimes imagi, native and sublime. With the Spaniards it was stately, solemn, and fantastic, often more full of sound than meaning yet frequently, both in its grave and in its humorous strains, worthy of a noble people. With the French it was extravagant and empty; and, in the worst acceptation of the word, licentious, beyond that of any other nation, except at one time the Italians; but in Italy the abomination was checked, while in France it continued in full vogue from generation to generation, till it produced a corruption and dissolution of manners, of which, happily for human nature, no other example has been known in the civilised world. In Holland, it seemed consecrated to patriotism and the household gods; the Dutch may be proud of their poets with as good cause as of their painters, their scholars, their seamen, their struggle against the Spaniards, and their country, in which art has achieved greater triumphs, and well directed industry has produced more general comfort, than in any other part of Christendom.

Some advantage over the southern nations we derive from our language; with a little practice it would not be difficult for any one who possesses a talent for versifying to compose in it extemporaneous verses of no higher standard than those of the Improvisatore, but it would never be so easy. The northern tongues afford no such facilities as the southern for this kind of display, in which if any man of genius were to waste his powers, he would infallibly injure them. More difficulty requires more care, and where that difficulty arises not

9 Webbe says, in the preface to his Discourse of English poetry (1586), "Among the innumerable sorts of English books, and infinite fardles of printed pamphlets, wherewith this country is pestered, all shops stuffed, and every study furnished, the greatest part, I think, in any one kind, are such as are either mere poetical, or which tend in some respect (as either in matter or form) to poetry."
from any preposterous fashion, or unreasonable rules, but from the character of the language, it tends to improve the artist. In the Italian, and it is the same case in the Spanish and Portugeze, it is easy to versify, and an octave stanza is soon filled with melodious words; translate it into the same metre, and it will frequently not be possible in our briefer speech and more compressed vocabulary to fill the stave, without dilating the meaning, or adding to it. With us, too, something more than the mere collocation of words is required to distinguish verse from prose, even when the words themselves are in no degree appropriated to poetry. It is not enough that the ear should be satisfied; something must be addressed to the feelings, the fancy, or the imagination, or something presented to the understanding. That this should be required belongs to the genius of the language and to the national character, differing in this respect from those of the southern nations, and more especially from the French. Of course it must happen that poets will often deceive themselves, and that the public will often be for a while deceived, and false reputations raised. Many pieces have obtained great applause, and some to this day retain it, which could no more endure the test of just criticism, than a bubble can bear the touch.

"There are three ways," Dr. Johnson said, "in which writing may be unnatural; . . by being bombastic, and above nature; . . affected, and beside it, fringing events with ornaments which nature did not afford; . . or weak, and below nature. Neither of the first could please long. The third might, indeed, please a good while, or at least please many, because imbecility, and consequently a love of imbecility, might be found in many." The bombastic immediately invites ridicule, and soon yields to it: . . the last personage upon the stage who spake in the vein of King Cambyses and Tamberlain was Ancient Pistol. The affected style lasts longer; and for the same reason as the feeble. That style of poetry belongs to it which Johnson has called the metaphysical; the designation is not fortunate, but so much respect is due to Johnson, that it would be unbecoming to substitute, even if it were easy to propose, one which might be unexceptionable.

10 Boswell's Johnson (edition 1835), vol. ix. 309. It is one of the observations recorded by Mr. Windham, who recorded of Johnson nothing but what was worth recording.
Whether this style spread like a contagion from Italy to Spain and England, or whether it originated in the intellectual temperature of the age, and thus became endemic in the three countries, may be questioned. It was most out of place when applied to devotional poetry, upon which every species of false taste seems, at different times, to have fastened. Amatory poems were on the whole improved by it, because it required something more than the common places which were the stock in trade of all mere versifiers. Cowley squandered upon this fashion powers which might have won for him the lasting fame to which he aspired. Butler alone perceived its proper application, and he, in consequence, produced a poem which, in spite of the subject, can never become obsolete while wit and wisdom are understood. With the true tact of genius he adapted his verse to his materials, and creating thus a manner of his own, derived an advantage from one of the causes which had concurred to deteriorate our versification.

Many persons possess a musical ear who have no voice for singing, but a good voice is seldom found where there is not also an ear which is capable of directing it. The case is different in poetry; the poetical feeling sometimes exists, and in a high degree, without the talent for versifying; but the talent very commonly, without a spark of the feeling. Both Donne and Ben Jonson, the two authors by whom the metaphysical poetry was brought into vogue, were rugged versifiers. It was not, however, altogether owing to the influence of their example that the poems of this class were very generally characterised by a rough and careless versification. Their authority, indeed, afforded a sanction, of which inferior writers would willingly avail themselves; but the fact resulted from the nature of such poetry. The poet found difficulty enough in rendering his far-fetched and elaborate conceits intelligible; and cramp thoughts formed for themselves cramp expressions and disjointed verse.

There was another incidental cause, less obvious, but not less certain in its effect. An attempt had been made to introduce the Latin metres into English poetry; not upon a principle of adaptation (which has since so perfectly succeeded

11 Donne passed some years in Italy and in Spain; he therefore may be supposed to have contracted the fashion in those countries, having "returned into England perfect in their languages."—Izaak Walton.
among the Germans), but in strict conformance to the rules of Latin prosody; and as those rules frequently reversed the common pronunciation, the attempt was necessarily unsuccess-
ful. Yet earnest endeavours were made for bringing it into use, by men of great ability and great influence; and though it never obtained any degree of public acceptance, yet spec-
mens enough of it were published to have the effect of vilifying the art. For in this new versification nothing could be too bald and beggarly in expression, nothing too harsh in con-
struction, nothing too inharmonious, provided it were forced into the prescribed form of verse; and the license which the metrifiers took in this respect, infected other poets, though not in an equal degree.

The resemblance between fashions in literature and heresies in religion, holds good in several points; most of them, in both cases, as they passed away, left something behind them; but there is this difference, that the Romish church generally incorporated some of the errors and corruptions which it had opposed, while in literature nothing was ever retained except the little that was good. This resemblance also may be ob-
served, that as many sects have originated in regarding some isolated point of doctrine, distorting it, mistaking its relations, and exaggerating its importance, so fashions in fine literature have been devised with the intent of supplying some real or supposed defect; and in both cases the spirit of antagonism has generally given rise to an opposite error. Thus, in the same age when Drayton produced his elaborate but monotonous poem, and the “silver-tongued” Sylvester poured forth his full and mellifluous couplets with a sonorous volubility which has rarely been equalled or approached, Browne, and Sandys, and May composed in rhyme with the freedom of blank verse, but without the force; Wither’s pedestrian strain was only to be distinguished from prose by its rhymes; and Chamber-
laire, though his Pharounidia was pitched in a higher key, rhymed upon any word, however insignificant, that came in his way. All these were men of great poetical talent, some of them, indeed, of undoubted genius, capable of seducing others by their example. But in the same age, just as heresies have had the effect of causing true doctrines to be more strictly defined, Sir John Davies and Sir William Davenant, avoiding equally the opposite faults of too artificial and too careless a
style, wrote in numbers which, for precision, and clearness, and felicity, and strength, have never been surpassed.

That Sir John Denham began a reformation in our verse, is one of the most groundless assertions that ever obtained belief in literature. More thought and more skill had been exercised before his time in the construction of English metre, than he ever bestowed upon the subject, and by men of far greater attainments and far higher powers. To improve, indeed, either upon the versification or the diction of our great writers, was impossible; it was impossible to exceed them in the knowledge or in the practice of their art, but it was easy to avoid the more obvious faults of inferior authors; and in this he succeeded, just so far, as not to be included in

The mob of gentlemen who wrote with ease;

nor consigned to oblivion with the "Persons of Quality" who contributed their vapid, effusions to the miscellanies of those days. His proper place is among those of his contemporaries and successors who called themselves Wits, and have since been entitled Poets by the courtesy of England. And as Denham has no claim to the praise which has been awarded him on this ground, Waller, to whom a larger portion has been assigned, deserves it little more. No one who, in attempting to write poetry, considered it as any thing more than an amusement for leisure hours, has ever derived improvement in the art from the writings of either.

Dryden has indeed delivered a contrary opinion in favour of both these minor poets. But Dryden was not well read in his own art; and moreover, he often allowed his critical judgement to be biassed by motives of temporary convenience. His enemies wronged him when they asserted that he had been influenced by no better motives in declaring himself a convert to the Romish church. That corrupt church, whose system is the greatest work of human wisdom and human wickedness, ever has found, and ever will find, converts among those who requires narcotics either for the understanding or the conscience. I know not that Dryden ever regarded the licentiousness of his dramatic works as a sin to be repented of; nor does it appear in his writings that a state of doubt upon the most momeritous subjects occasioned in him any of that uncasiness, and of those aspirations after the blessings of full
faith, which are so strongly indicated in the works of his friend Davenant. His conversion appears to have been less an affair of the feelings than of the intellect, and that intellect not a comprehensive one. In his age, as in ours, the foundations on which alone the peace of individuals, as well as the security of states can rest, had been shaken. He saw the evils of fanaticism, and of religious factions at home; and he had not seen abroad the abominations consequent upon and inseparably connected with a system of established imposture. By inclination he was a sceptic, by habit a conformist, professing obedience to authority as a sure and safe principle whereon to rest. But he was willing to make a merit of this obedience, and saved the pride of his philosophy by pleading that, as he believed the fundamental mysteries of revealed religion, he was bound in consequence to believe also all that the Romish church had superadded. The very weakness of the argument is proof of his sincerity; for in matters of criticism, when he was reasoning against his own better judgement, that sort of ability which makes the worse appear the better reason, was never wanting in him. He was too skilful and too sagacious ever to have advanced what was palpably fallacious, unless he had imposed upon himself by it.

But Dryden is not entitled to the same credit for sincerity in the opinions which he delivered upon poetry. He seems to have been the first eminent author in this country who prac-

12 "Being naturally inclined," he says, "to scepticism in philosophy, I have no reason to impose my opinions in a subject which is above it; but whatever they are, I submit them with all reverence to my mother church, accounting them no farther mine, than as they are authorised, or at least uncondemned by her."

This was said in the preface to his Religio Laici, while he was yet a member of the Church of England.

13 To take up half on trust, and half to try,
Name it not faith, but bungling bigotry,
Both knave and fool the merchant we may call,
To pay great sums and to compound the small:
For who would break with Heaven, and would not break for all?

_Hind and Panther._

This argument comes to the vulgar saying, "In for a penny, in for a pound," which holds good only of risks and expenses rashly or inevitably incurred. If so base a metaphor may be allowed upon such a subject, the real state of the case is explained by saying, we pay the penny because it is a just debt, but we refuse to be swindled out of the pound.
tised literature as a profession, and regarding it exclusively as such, gave up his mind to temporary subjects, and contented himself with obtaining immediate profit by the easiest means. Adulation was so common in his days, that probably he never thought himself degraded by using it; and one who offered this kind of incense without scruple, would not hesitate, among the ways of flattery, to adopt the opinions of those whom he wished to propitiate, however repugnant to his own better judgement. After telling the Marquis of Newcastle that the piece which he then dedicated to him "pretended to be nothing more than a foil to his lordship's composition;" and calling that truly noble personage, in all other respects, "the most noble poet of his age and nation;" no wonder can be felt when he asserts that his contemporaries might "justly claim precedence of Shakespeare in heroic plays," that "Shakespeare's whole style is so packed with figurative expressions, that it is as affected as it is obscure," that "well placing of words, for the sweetness of pronunciation, was not known till Mr. Waller introduced it," and that Sir John Denham's poem upon Cooper's Hill "is and ever will be, for majesty of style, the exact standard of good writing!"

When Dryden was a boy, he was more delighted with the bombastic passages in Sylvester's Du Bartas, than with Spenser. When he commenced his career as a poet, which was not at an early age, he took Davenant for his model, and composed his Annum Mirabilis in quatrains, "judging them," he said, "more noble and of greater dignity, both for the sound and number, than any other verse in use amongst us." At that time he envied the advantages which the ancients enjoyed in not being tied to the slavery of any rhyme, and regretted that the moderns were "constrained in the close of that one syllable, which often confines and more often corrupts the sense of all the rest. But in this necessity of our rhymes," said he, "I have always found the couplet verse most easy,—for there the work is soonest at an end, every two lines concluding the labour of the poet; but in quatrains he is to carry it farther on; and not only so, but to bear along in his head the troublesome sense of four lines together. For those who write correctly in this kind must needs acknowledge that the last line of the stanza is to be considered in the composition of the first."
Perhaps this passage may disclose the reason why Dryden employed the couplet in his translations, and when he contracted with Jacob Tonson to furnish verses by the thousand. He could have chosen no other measure for his modernized versions of Chaucer; but the same course of reflection which, after he had written his defence of rhymed tragedies, led him in his later years to acknowledge his error, might have induced him to cast his English Virgil in a different mould, if facility and expedition had not been with him the chief consideration. In that measure, however, he wrote not with ease only, but with a freedom and vigour which entitle him to all the praise that he has received as a great master in his art. The superiority of the couplet to all other measures was completely established in public opinion by his example and authority; and the versifiers of the succeeding age (for poets there were none), looked to Dryden as their model with as much deference as their predecessors in the generations between Chaucer and Surrey, had looked to the great father of English poetry.

But when Johnson asserts that before the time of Dryden "the happy combinations of words which distinguish poetry from prose had been rarely attempted," and that "there was no poetical diction, no system of words at once refined from the grossness of domestic use, and free from the harshness of terms appropriated to particular arts,"—Dryden himself never advanced a more inconsiderate assertion. "From his time," says Johnson, "English poetry has had no tendency to relapse to its former savageness." That it should fall back to the rudeness of an unsettled and rude speech, was impossible; time had polished the language, and the Bible and the liturgy had fixed it; the tendency to degenerate was in another way. Justly as Johnson condemned the metaphysical poets, he saw how superior they were to those who were trained up in the school of Dryden. "To write on their plan," he has truly said, "it was at least necessary to read and think. No man could be born a metaphysical poet, nor assume the

14 The same kind of reformation has been thus described in France, I know not by what author: Un mélange de termes familiers et nobles défigurerait tous les ouvrages sériques. C'est Boileau qui le premier enseigna l'art de parler toujours convenablement. But Dryden agreed neither in opinion nor in practice with Voltaire's maxim, that plus la poésie est devenue difficile plus elle est belle; a maxim quite worthy of a French critic.
dignity of a writer by descriptions copied from descriptions, by imitations borrowed from imitations, by traditional imagery, and hereditary similes, by readiness of rhyme and volubility of syllables."

Johnson has also said, that the veneration with which Dryden’s name is pronounced by every cultivator of English literature, is paid to him for having improved the sentiments of English poetry. When he bestowed this unmerited praise, he must have forgotten Milton; and Milton, indeed, as a poet, belonged so little to his age, that he may easily have been overlooked in Johnson’s estimate; but he overlooked, at the same time, every other poet who had treated any serious subject with any sense of the dignity of his calling. One effect of the Restoration had been to lower the standard of poetry, and in this respect Dryden did nothing toward raising it. Too little ambitious of true fame, and too needy ever to have leisure for attempting to execute any great and worthy design which he may have conceived, he contented himself with subjects of temporary interest, and was beholden, perhaps, for his popularity, as much to the subjects as to the ability with which they were treated. What he called the legislative style of his poetry, being addressed to the judicious, could, if it found fit audience, find but few; but when he seasoned it with political satire, then, indeed, numbers who were incapable of appreciating in any degree its literary excellence, were delighted to see their own opinions triumphantly asserted. The Religio Laici might deter common readers by its very title, as if it were intended only for the learned; the Hind and Panther fell upon what to him were "evil days." But Mac Flecknoe was the talk of coffee-houses and of all literary circles; and Absalom and Achitophel had a greater sale in the country than any work which was at that time remembered.

15 "The expressions of a poem designed purely for instruction ought to be plain and natural, and yet majestic; for here the poet is presumed to be a kind of lawgiver, and those three qualities which I have named are proper to the legislative style. The florid, elevated, and figurative way is for the passions; for love and hatred, fear and anger, are begotten in the soul by showing their objects out of their true proportion, either greater than the life or less; but instruction is to be given by showing them what they naturally are. A man is to be cheated into passion, but to be reasoned into truth."—Preface to Religio Laici.

16 Johnson’s father, who was "an old bookseller in the country, told him he had not known it equalled by any thing except Sacheverel’s trial."
"The fury of a civil war, and power, for twenty years togeth-er, abandoned to a barbarous race of men, enemies of all good learning, had buried the muses," Dryden said, "under the ruins of monarchy; yet," he adds, "with the restoration of our happiness, we see revived poesy lifting up its head, and already shaking off the rubbish which lay so heavy on it." Alas! the only poetry which lifted up its head, was that which was heard in meetings where

Flowing cups went freely round,
With no allaying Thames 17;

and it had been well if there it had been only such as might allowably and blamelessly be addressed to

Careless heads with roses crown'd,
And hearts with loyal flames 17;

but the corruption of manners which ensued upon the Reforma-tion, when profligacy succeeded to puritanism in natural course, was felt immediately in this branch of literature. It led, as it ever must lead, to a corruption of taste. Inflated tragedies, comedies so grossly indecent that, if it were possible for them now to be brought upon the stage, they would be driven off with hootings of execration, lewd tales in verse, songs, epi-grams, and satires, in which ribaldry or malignity served for condiment; occasional verses, the best of which deserved to be remembered no longer than while the occasion which called them forth was recent;—for such poetry, fit and large audience might be found, but for anything better, the public, or as it was then called, the Town, had neither inclination nor capacity. The age from Dryden to Pope is the worst age of English poetry.

Dryden himself lowered its tone, even while he improved the style of versification. He never aimed at any high mark. His good sense prevented him from over-valuing himself, and aspi-ring to become eminent either as a sublime or a pathetic poet. When he wrote for popular applause, he thought of the public with the Romish priests, populus vult decipi et decipietur; he knew that, on the stage, bombast might pass for poetry, as tinsel served for gold; and confessing that there were passages in his tragedies which called vengeance upon him for their extra-

17 Lovelace.
vagance, and which he repented of among his sins, he said, "All I can say for those passages is, that I knew they were bad enough to please, even when I wrote them." In satire, on the contrary, he felt his strength; and in that legislative or didactic strain wherein he excelled all predecessors in his own language, he has not been excelled by any who have followed him. In this he addressed himself exclusively to the understanding; there was nothing for the imagination, nothing for the feelings. But there was no mannerism in his style that could be aped, no mechanism that could be discovered and imitated, no artifices that could be copied, and not many of those expressions and turns of phrase which they who mistake memory for invention might add to their stock of common places. His ease, and vigour, and perspicuity were not attainable by imitative talents. Prior was the only one of his immediate successors who equalled him with ease; but when Prior in his greatest work attempted to improve upon Dryden's versification, the attempt would have been more successful if it had been less evidently elaborate.

Pope carefully studied both these poets, and perhaps did not disdain to study and profit by the only respectable poem of Sir Richard Blackmore. Blackmore's Creation is in its diction and its numbers so unlike his miserable epics, that it seems like the work of another mind. The four epics are among the most worthless that ever were composed, though Molyneux, in his admiration of them, thought that "all our poets, except Milton, were mere ballad-makers in comparison with him," and Locke agreed in this opinion with his friend; though Tom Browne said, that "if he had stopped his hand at Prince Arthur, he had gone off with some applause;" and though Watts called them excellent, and praised the author for the happy example which he had given in all the shining colours of profuse and florid diction. Notwithstanding these eulogies, they deserved to sink in oblivion, and must irretrievably have sunk, if they had not more unfortunately been consigned to remembrance by Dryden and Pope. But Addison has said of his philosophical poem, that it is to be looked upon as one of the most useful and noble productions in our English verse; and Johnson, who has properly included it in his Collection of the Poets, says of it, "it wants neither harmony of numbers, accuracy of

18 Epistle Dedicatory to the Spanish Fryar.
thought, nor elegance of diction.—To reason in verse is allowed to be difficult, but Blackmore not only reasons in verse, but very often reasons poetically, and finds the art of uniting ornament with strength, and ease with closeness. This,” says Johnson, “was that which Pope might have condescended to learn from him, when he needed it so much in his Moral Essays.” If Pope condescended to learn any thing from Blackmore, which I am inclined to think he did, he should in gratitude, as well as in justice, have bestowed on him a redeeming verse in the Dunciad; he was as well entituled to it as Aaron Hill.

The age of Pope was the golden age of poets—but it was the pinchbeck age of poetry. They flourished in the sunshine of public and private patronage; the art meantime was debased, and it continued to be so as long as Pope continued lord of the ascendant. More injury was not done to the taste of his countrymen by Marino in Italy, nor by Gongora in Spain, than by Pope in England. The mischief was effected not by his satirical and moral pieces, for these entitle him to the highest place among poets of his class; it was by his Homer. There have been other versions as unfaithful; but none were ever so well executed in as bad a style; and no other work in the language so greatly vitiated the diction of English poetry. Common readers (and the majority must always be such) will always be taken by glittering faults, as larks are caught by bits of looking-glass; and in this meretricious translation, the passages that were most unlike the original, which were most untrue to nature, and therefore most false in taste, were precisely those which were most applauded, and on which critic after critic dwelt with one cuckoo note of admiration. They who found

19 Zachary Grey, the editor of Hudibras, thought that in his time (1744) poetry had arrived at the summit of perfection, and that the reason there-of was the munificent regard which in this nation had been shown towards it. “If,” said he, “we lament the neglected poets of former ages, we can in this congratulately double the number who now flourish, or have flourished in the midst of fame and veneration. For poor Homer, we can boast of his admirable translator; for Spenser, we can name his last editor, the late Mr. Hughes, (who enjoyed a beneficial place under the Lords Chancellors Cowper and Macclesfield;) and his son Philips, (see the Guardian, No. 32,)” —(Ambrose, to wit) The late Mr. Addison, Sir Richard Steele, and Mr. Congreve may compensate for a Dryden and an Otway; and for Mr. Butler we can refer to the late Mr. Prior and Dean Swift.”

Zachary Grey was a good editor,—but he had odd notions of compensation, and of poetry.
nothing imitable in Dryden, could imitate this. The art of poetry, or rather the art of versification, which was now the same thing, was "made easy to the meanest capacity."

It was said of Blackmore's verses that if they "rhymed and rattled, all was well." In the fashion which was now established as a standard, the lines rhymed more exactly, and rattled more; and to question that standard was accounted a heresy in criticism. The point of perfection had been reached. Bishop Hurd said, "that Pope had shut the door against poetry, as Addison had by his Drummer against comedy." Without disparaging the Drummer it may be truly said that we have later comedies which are quite as good; and if Pope shut the door, Cowper opened it.

Before Cowper's time there were several who found admittance through the wicket. And it is a noticeable fact, that of all the poets in the intermediate half-century, not one who attained to any distinction, which he has since held, or is likely to hold, was of the school of Pope. That school has produced versifiers in abundance, but no poet. No man of genius, nor even of original talents acknowledged his supremacy, while his authority was paramount with the public, and its blind guides. But it is not less remarkable, that among the poets of that interval, whose works have lived and deserved to live, there were none who produced such an effect upon their contemporaries or successors, that their influence can be perceived in the literature of the age, none from whom young minds received an impulse strong enough to bias in the slightest degree their future course. Except Pope himself, there is no one whose name is so generally known in other countries as the author of the Night Thoughts, and Pope is known only by name where that work has been rendered popular by translation. Yet though the strain of this poem is stamped with the strongest mannerism, and both the matter and the manner are of a kind to affect the reader powerfully and deeply, Blair's Grave is the only poem I can call to mind which has been composed in imitation of it. Milton has had many imitators, the best of whom have borne no happier resemblance to him than a monumental effigy bears

20 Cradock's Recollections, vol. iv. p. 199. 21 One of the greatest poets of this century, says Beattie, the late and much-lamented Mr. Gray of Cambridge, modestly declared to me, that if there was in his own numbers any thing that deserved approbation, he had learned it all from Dryden.