PART II.—REVIEWS.

The Life of William Cowper. By THOMAS WRIGHT, Principal of Cowper School, Olney. T. Fisher Unwin, 1892.

(*Concluded from p. 86.*)

Cowper describes his subsequent symptoms thus:

A frequent flashing, like that of fire before my eyes, and an excessive pressure upon the brain, made me apprehensive of apoplexy, an event which I thought the more probable, as an extravasation in that part seemed likely enough to happen in so violent a struggle.* (Southey's "Cowper," vol. i., p. 132.)

A physician was sent for, who assured Cowper that there was no danger of apoplexy, and wisely advised him to retire into the country. Unfortunately, however, he remained in his chambers in solitude, brooding over his religious condition. He arrived at the conclusion that "there never was so abandoned a wretch; so great a sinner." (*Loc. cit.*) Whatever book he took up he found some passage in it which condemned him, whether it was Beaumont and Fletcher, Tillotson's Sermons, or the Bible. "Everything preached to *me*, and everything preached the curse of the law." (*Op. cit.*, p. 133.)

If he walked out of doors he thought the people stared and laughed at him. He fancied the voice of his conscience was loud enough for everyone to hear it. One day he bought a ballad someone was singing in the street, because he thought it was written on himself. His dreams terrified him; he fancied he was guilty of the unpardonable sin. He repeated the Creed, to prove whether he had faith or not; when he came to the second clause he had no memory whatever of the first. In endeavouring to recall it, "I perceived," he writes, "a sensation in my brain like a tremulous vibration in all the fibres of it." This experience threw him into an agony, and on making a third attempt he entirely failed as before. He gave himself up to despair; a sense of burning in his heart was regarded by him as an earnest of future punishment. He passed through great religious exercises and painful doubts. He incidentally mentions that he usually slept three hours at night, waking often in terrible distress.

* We have in most instances made use of the original letters of Cowper, contained in his admirable "Life" by Southey.

https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.40.169.254 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Satan plied me close with horrible visions, and more horrible voices. My ears rang with the sound of torments, that seemed to awake me. . . . A numbness seized upon the extremities of my body, and life seemed to retreat before it; my hands and feet became cold and stiff; a cold sweat stood upon my forehead; my heart seemed at every pulse to beat its last, and my soul to cling to my lips, as if on the very brink of departure. No convicted criminal ever feared death more, or was more assured of dying. (*Op. cit.*, p. 139.)

Cowper had a very kind brother, who called upon him at this juncture, and the distemper of mind which he said he had so ardently desired, actually seized him. He walked up and down the room in horrible dismay, expecting the earth to swallow him up. He himself must describe what followed:—

A strange and horrible darkness fell upon me. If it were possible that a heavy blow could light on the brain, without touching the skull, such was the sensation I felt. I clapped my hand to my forehead and cried aloud, through the pain it gave me. At every stroke my thoughts and expressions became more wild and indistinct; all that remained clear was the sense of sin and the expectation of punishment. These kept undisturbed possession all through my illness, without interruption or abatement. (*Op. cit.*, p. 140.)

His brother at once recognized his mental derangement, and it was agreed that he should be conveyed to a private asylum * at St. Alban's, of which Dr. Cotton was the proprietor. This was in December, 1763. Cowper says of him that he was chosen not only for his skill as a physician, but for his well-known humanity and sweetness of temper. Dr. Cotton, it appears, was a man of literary tastes. He had written visions in verse, which were very popular, and after his death his prose and poetry were published in two volumes. Dr. Anderson's "Collection of the British Poets" contains his poems. Southey foretold that his stanzas, "The Fireside," would retain a place in popular selections. This author describes him as "An amiable, mild, good man, verging at that time on old age. Cowper regarded it as a providential circumstance that,

Instead of being delivered into the hands of one of the London physicians (who were so much nearer, that I wonder

* We have visited St. Albans and identified the spot formerly occupied by Dr. Cotton's asylum. It is divided into several small tenements, but it is not difficult to picture the building when Cowper was an inmate.

I was not) I was carried to Doctor Cotton. I was not only treated by him with the greatest tenderness while I was ill, and attended with the utmost diligence, but when my reason was restored to me, and I had so much need of a religious friend to converse with, to whom I could open my mind on the subject without reserve, I could hardly have found a fitter person for the purpose. My eagerness and anxiety to settle my opinions upon that long-neglected point made it necessary that, while my mind was yet weak and my spirits uncertain, I should have some assistance. The doctor was as ready to administer relief to me in this article likewise, and as well qualified to do it, as in that which was more immediately his province. How many physicians would have thought this an irregular appetite and a symptom of remaining madness! But if it were so, my friend was as mad as myself, and it was well for me that he was so. (*Op. cit.*, p. 150.)

Cowper recovered after a residence of 18 months, and went to reside near his brother at Huntingdon, his friends subscribing a sufficient sum to enable him to live in a small way in his retirement. The life at Huntingdon was a happy one; it was marked by great religious fervour and by his introduction to the Unwins, whose name, as well as that of Lady Hesketh, is inseparably connected with the history of the unhappy poet. He became an inmate of the family in November, 1765. His letters, which are always interesting, whether from their liveliness or from the self-analysis to which he was morbidly prone, have become universal favourites, that is to say, with all who know anything about Cowper, and are certainly not likely to be forgotten, even in the present fastidious and critical age. The correspondence with Lady Hesketh ceased in January, 1767. About this time he wrote:—

I am a living man, and I can never reflect that I am so without recollecting at the same time that I have infinite cause of thanksgiving and joy; this makes every place delightful to me, where I can have leisure to meditate upon those mercies by which I live, and indulge a vein of gratitude to that gracious God who has snatched me like a brand out of the burning. (*Op. cit.*, p. 189.)

Reference must here be made to the Rev. John Newton, as he is supposed to have exercised a depressing influence upon Cowper. Formerly a captain of a Liverpool slave ship, he entirely changed his mode of life, and before long became a clergyman in the Church of England. At the period of Cowper's life at which we have arrived, Newton was curate of Olney, in Buckinghamshire. Mr. Unwin had been thrown

from his horse and killed. It was therefore determined, on the advice of Mr. Newton, with whom the family at Huntingdon became acquainted, to remove to Olney. There can be no doubt that there was much more emotional religion in the services at Olney than at Huntingdon. Mr. Greatheed, in a funeral sermon on Cowper, says :—

"I have heard him say that when he expected to take the lead in your social worship, his mind was always greatly agitated for some hours preceding,"

and although it is added that his trepidation subsided, it must have been a very undesirable and exhausting frame of mind, for which he was totally unfitted. Well might Lady Hesketh fear the consequences and add, "I think it could not be either proper or wholesome." (*Op. cit.*, p. 208.)

Cowper's brother died in 1770, an event which exerted an unfavourable influence upon him. The depression of spirits returned.

In 1772 Cowper became engaged to Mrs. Unwin,* and they intended to marry early in the following year. Mrs. Unwin's age was 48; Cowper's 41. The prospect, however, was blighted in consequence of symptoms of mental derangement recurring in Cowper. Newton, writing on June 7, to his wife, informed her that he was "in the depths as much as ever." In October he was thought to be better, but unhappily he became more and more dejected. Although the symptoms of insanity were so clearly marked, he himself regarded the recurrence of his malady as dating from the 24th of January, 1773. "I plunged," he writes, "into a melancholy that made me almost an infant." The attack was so sudden and serious that Mr. Newton, who resided at the Vicarage, Olney, was called up at four o'clock in the morning to go to his house.

Cowper's description of his mental condition, written long afterwards (January 16, 1786), is very graphic :—

I was suddenly reduced from my wonted rate of understanding to an almost childish imbecility. I did not, indeed, lose my senses, but I lost the power to exercise them. I could return a rational answer, even to difficult questions, but a question was necessary, or I never spoke at all. This state of my mind was accompanied with misapprehension of things and persons that made me a very untractable patient. I believed that everybody hated me, and that Mrs Unwin hated me most of all, and was convinced that my

* Southey appears to have been mistaken in his opinion that they were not engaged. (See "Cowper's Life," Southey, Vol. i., p. 239.)

food was poisoned, together with ten thousand megrims of the same stamp. (Wright, p. 209.)

It was in February, 1773, that a circumstance occurred, overlooked, Mr. Wright tells us, by all preceding biographers. He had a dream, from the effects of which he never completely recovered. Twelve years afterwards (October 16, 1785) he writes:—

> I had a dream twelve years ago, before the recollection of which all consolation vanishes, and, it seems to me, must always vanish. But I neither trouble you with my dream, nor with any comments upon it, for, if it were possible, I should do well to forget that, the remembrance of which is incompatible with my comfort. (Wright, p. 206.)

In January, 1773, he was quite insane. He objected to cross Mr. Newton's threshold; he was induced, however, not only to pay him a visit, but to stay all night, and curiously enough he became his guest for months. Mr. Newton went to St. Alban's to obtain Dr. Cotton's opinion as to what should be done. In accordance with the medical fashion of the day he recommended venesection and to take some medicine. Bled he was, to what extent is not stated. It is recorded that —

> Medicines greatly strengthened his body; but their repeated use seemed at length to have an inconvenient effect upon his spirits. He said they made him worse, and for several days, when the hour for taking them returned, it put him in an agony. Upon his earnest and urgent entreaties he has left them off for a season, and has been better since, I mean more quiet and composed. (*Op. cit.*, p. 251.)

Dr. Cotton, on being again consulted, approved of the discontinuance of the medicine. The poet once more became suicidal, and made an attempt on his life in October, 1773. He believed himself doomed to everlasting perdition. Then came amendment; he was seen to smile while he was feeding the chickens; he had not smiled for more than sixteen months. He returned to his proper residence at the Unwins. It was, however, at least two years before he resumed correspondence with his friends. A few months afterwards he returned to his literary interests and pursuits. After twelve years' friendship, Cowper's friend Newton left Olney, which he naturally felt acutely. However, he was engaged before long in versification, and it is a most happy circumstance that so much of his time was spent in this way.

In cases of insanity it not unfrequently happens that the dreams of a patient present an entirely different complexion from the mental condition of the day. With Cowper, his sleeping hours were the happiest. His dreams were "gracious and comfortable," but when he awoke his distress returned. In one instance, however, his sleeping and waking states were equally miserable. "I have been lately," he writes, "more dejected and more distressed than usual, more harassed by dreams in the night, and more deeply poisoned by them in the following day."

Everyone knows the strange, but not unusual, mixture in Cowper's character of humour and melancholy, the contrast reaching its climax in "John Gilpin" and the "Castaway." Writing to Newton, he expresses his surprise that a sportive thought should ever knock at the door of his intellect, and even gain admittance. He compares it to a harlequin intruding himself into the gloomy chamber where a corpse is deposited.

> His antic gesticulations would be unseasonable at any rate, but more especially so if they should distort the features of the mournful attendants with laughter. But the mind, long wearied with the sameness of a dull dreary prospect, would gladly fix its eyes on anything that may make a little variety in its contemplations, though it was but a kitten playing with her tail. (*Op. cit.*, p. 281.)

There is some acuteness in the distinction drawn by Sir Egerton Brydges, between a melancholy which is black and diseased, and a grave and rich contemplativeness, from the former of which Cowper suffered; the very opposite of a smiling, colloquial, good-natured humour. Cowper found that to be "merry by force" more effectually dispersed his melancholy than anything else. "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." (*Op. cit.*, ii., p. 39.)

In 1732 (November) it is pleasant to find him writing in such a cheerful strain as this:—

> If my health 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 everything that wears the face of business. I lead the life I always wished for, and, the single circumstance of dependence excepted, I have no

want left broad enough for another wish to stand upon. (*Op. cit.*, ii., p. 36.)

It would be tedious to quote the many passages in the poet's letters describing his mental sufferings, and more or less resembling the following, written to Mr. Bull:—

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. (*Op. cit.*, ii., p. 66.)

And again:—

Nature revives again, but a soul once slain lives no more. . . . The latter end of next month will complete a period of 11 years in which I have spoke no other language.

Southey thus writes:—

It is consolatory to believe that during the long stage of his malady Cowper was rarely so miserable as he represented himself to be. 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. . . . 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. (*Op. cit.*, ii., p. 70.)

In 1787 Cowper's mental disorder returned. Referring to it after his recovery, he says that it could not have been of a worse kind than it was. The sight of anyone, always excepting Mrs. Unwin, was insupportable. He relates how he suddenly emerged from this unhappy state. Had his father or brother returned from the dead, their company could have afforded him no pleasure; but he could report that his health and spirits were considerably improved, and he once more mixed with his neighbours. He complained, however, of his head, and that he was subject to giddiness and pain; "maladies very unfavourable to poetic employment." He took a preparation of bark regularly, and he hoped that by its help he might possibly find himself "qualified to resume the translation of Homer." Cowper did not escape the lancet—once, at least, by Dr. Cotton's orders.

I was blooded, but to no purpose; for the whole complaint was owing to relaxation. But the apothecary recommended phlebotomy in order to ascertain that matter, wisely suggesting that if I found no relief from bleeding, it would be a sufficient proof that weakness must necessarily be the cause. It is well when the head is chargeable with no weakness but what may be cured by an astringent. . . . I have a perpetual din in my head, and though I am not deaf, hear nothing aright, neither my own voice nor that of others. (*Op. cit.*, ii., p. 277.)

At this time, when resuming his correspondence with Mr. Newton, he confesses that for 13 years he did not believe in his identity, but that now he no longer doubts it.

Auditory hallucinations were a marked feature at one period of Cowper's malady. Voices were heard, especially on waking in the morning, and sometimes in the night itself. His friend Mr. Johnson not unnaturally thought that if he could convey encouraging words to him by means of a tube, near the bed's head, the patient would imagine the words to be as supernatural as the "voices" he so frequently heard when in bed. Some years later he tried this experiment. It, however, failed to produce a favourable impression, although Cowper did not detect the deception. (*Op. cit.*, iii., p. 196.)

In one letter he states that the following words were very audibly spoken to him in the moment of waking: "*Sacrum est quod dixi.*" And in another he writes:—

I awoke this morning with these words relating to my work, loudly and distinctly spoken: "Apply assistance in my case, indigent and necessitous." And about three mornings since with these: "It will not be by common and ordinary means." It seems better, therefore, that I should wait till it shall please God to set my wheels in motion than make another beginning only to be obliterated like the two former. I have also heard these words on the same subject:—"Meantime raise an expectation and desire of it among the people." My experiences this week have been for the most part dreadful in the extreme, and to such a degree, in one instance, that poor Mrs. Unwin has been almost as much in an agony as myself. (*Op. cit.*, iii., p. 117.)

He regarded the year 1792 as the most melancholy he had ever known, but with the new year he wrote with more cheerfulness, but still hearing voices—

This morning I am in rather a more cheerful frame of mind than usual, having had two notices of a more comfortable cast than the generality of mine. I awoke, saying, "I shall perish,"

which was immediately answered by a vision of a wine glass, and these words: "A whole glass."* Soon after I heard these:—"I see in this case just occasion of pity." (*Op. cit.*, iii., p. 121.)

Writing in February of this year, he thus expresses himself:—

From four this morning till after seven I lay meditating terrors, such terrors as no language can express, and as no heart, I am sure, but mine ever knew. My very finger-ends tingled with it, as indeed they often do; I then slept and dreamed a long dream, in which I told Mrs. Unwin, with many tears, that my salvation is impossible. I recapitulated, in the most impassioned accent and manner, the unexampled severity of God's dealings with me in the course of the last twenty years, especially in the year 1773, and, again, in 1786, and concluded all with observing that I *must* infallibly perish, and that the Scriptures, which speak of the insufficiency of man to save himself, can never be understood *unless* I perish.

I then made a sudden transition in my dream to one of the public streets in London, where I was met by a dray; the fore-horse of the team came full against me, and in anger I damned the drayman for it. (*Op. cit.*, iii., p. 130.)

A few days afterwards he informed his correspondent that he awoke distinctly hearing the following words:—

Charles the Second, though he was or wished to be accounted a man of fine taste and an admirer of the arts, never saw or expressed a wish to see the man whom he would have found alone superior to all the race of man. (*Op. cit.*, iii., p. 131.)

Cowper found no comfort in these revelations. It is true that in a few weeks he relates that a temporary suspension of terror was audibly announced to him, and that with one or two exceptions it had been fulfilled. Soon the depression returned, however, and this was announced to him thus, "I

* Alluding to the well-known story of Mrs. Honeywood, a lady who had almost twenty years lain sick of a consumption through melancholy, Fox, the martyrologist, visited her and assured her that she would recover and live to a great age. "At which words the sick gentlewoman, a little moved, and earnestly beholding Master Fox, 'As well might you have said,' quoth she, 'that if I should throw this glass against the wall I might believe it would not break to pieces.' And, holding a glass in her hand, out of which she had newly drank, she threw it forth; neither did the glass, first by chance lighting on a little chest standing by the bed-side, and afterward falling upon the ground, either break or crack in any place about it. And the event fell out accordingly. For the gentlewoman, being then threescore years of age, lived afterwards for all example of felicity seldom seen in the offspring of any family; being able, before the ninetieth year of her age (for she lived longer), to reckon three hundred and three score of her children's children and grandchildren." The "consumption" was evidently not of the lungs, but a combination of hysteria and melancholy.

have got my old wakings again." And he adds that if they continued he would be completely unable to write anything.

In the winter, he adds, I expected to be crushed before spring, and now I expect to be crushed before winter. I were better never to have been born than to live such a life of terrible expectation. . . . I believe myself the only instance of a man to whom God will promise everything and perform nothing. . . . I have already told you that I heard a word in the year '86, which has been a stone of stumbling to me ever since. It was this, "I will promise you anything." (*Op. cit.*, iii., p. 136.)

He describes to Lady Hesketh how his head "is fatigued by breakfast time, that three days out of four I am utterly incapable of sitting down to my desk again for any purpose whatever." (*Op. cit.*, iii., p. 138.) It must be borne in mind that he was up by six o'clock every morning and fagged till about 11 before he took his breakfast.

In August (1793) he writes :—

I dreamed about four nights ago that, walking I do not know where, I suddenly found my thoughts drawn towards God when I looked upwards and exclaimed, "I love Thee even now more than many who see Thee daily." This morning I had partly in Latin and partly in Greek, *Qui adversus σεθεν stant, nihili erunt.* (*Op. cit.*, iii., p. 148.)

In the next letter he says that the day hardly ever comes to him in which he does not utter a wish that he had never been born, while the night had become so habitually a season of dread to him that he never lay down on his bed with comfort, and he adds :—

I cannot ever hope on that subject, after twenty years' experience that, in my case, to go to sleep is to throw myself into the mouth of my enemy.

He writes that for some time he had taken laudanum and found a little relief from it; also James's powders, from which also he found some relief.

Mrs. Unwin's illness exercised a very depressing effect on the poet's mind, and the well-known pathetic lines addressed to her were written about this period.

Hayley might well write of his friend Cowper :—

It was a spectacle that might awaken compassion in the sternest of human characters, to see the health, the comfort, and the little fortune of a man so distinguished by intellectual endowments and by moral excellence perishing most deplorably. . . . Imagination can hardly devise any human condition more truly affecting than

the state of the poet at this period. His generous and faithful guardian, Mrs. Unwin, who had preserved him through seasons of the severest calamity, was now, with her faculties and fortune impaired, sinking fast into second childhood. The distress of heart that he felt in beholding the cruel change in a companion, so justly dear to him, conspiring with his constitutional melancholy, was gradually undermining the exquisite faculties of his mind. (*Op. cit.*, iii., p. 159.)

Willis—cleric and doctor—was consulted in Cowper's case.

"Whether even his skill," writes Lady Hesketh, "would be able to restore this unhappy man, at this distance, I cannot at present say, but earnestly hope it may, as I fear Mrs. Unwin will not consent to his removal there, though from the little I saw of the house, and the manner in which the patients are treated, as well as the liberty they seem to enjoy, I am convinced it would be the very best place he could be in, and the one in which he would be most likely to be restored—the rather, as it would separate him from one who, partly from the attention she requires, and partly from imbecility of mind, occasioned by her bodily infirmities, is certainly the worst companion he can have at present." (*Op. cit.*, iii., p. 169.)

It must be added that Willis's prescriptions were not attended by benefit, in consequence of which he visited the patient. Southey states that he recommended change of air, scene, and circumstances as more likely to benefit the patient than any mode of treatment.

Nothing, however, was done, and a pitiable account of his state of health is given by Lady Hesketh:—

It grieves me to say he is very bad indeed, scarce eats anything, is worn to a shadow, and has totally given up all his little avocations, such as netting, putting maps together, playing with the solitary board, etc., with which we contrived to while away the winter more tolerably than I had any reason to expect. He now does nothing but walk *incessantly* backwards and forwards, either in his study or his bedchamber. He really does not, sometimes, sit down for more than half-an-hour the whole day except at meal times, when, as I have before said, he takes hardly anything. He has left off bathing his feet, will take no laudanum, and lives in a constant state of terror that is dreadful to behold! He is now come to expect daily, and even hourly, that he shall be carried away;—and kept in his room from the time breakfast was over till four o'clock on Sunday last, in spite of repeated messages from Madame, because he was afraid somebody would take possession of his bed, and prevent him lying down on it any more! (*Op. cit.*, iii., p. 174.)

Lady Hesketh reports having written to Willis informing him how rapidly his malady had increased within a few weeks. She expresses her opinion that he had no chance either for health or life except by passing some time under his care.

Cowper left Weston for Norfolk, and is said to have had a presentiment that he should not return. Mr. Johnson had undertaken his removal to the village of North Tuddenham, and occupied a parsonage, at that time unoccupied, and in August he was taken to a small place (Mundsley), on the coast, in the hope that the sea air would revive his spirits, and, in fact, he records having experienced pleasure of a certain kind from the sight and sound of the ocean, "which have often composed my thoughts into a melancholy, not unpleasing, or without its use." (*Op. cit.*, iii., p. 185.)

From Mundsley Cowper writes to Lady Hesketh that he is as hopeless as ever, and expresses himself in these graphic terms:—

> The most forlorn of beings, I tread a shore under the burthen of infinite despair, that I once trod all cheerfulness and joy. I view every vessel that approaches the coast with an eye of jealousy and fear, lest it arrive with a commission to seize me. (Vol. iii., p. 185.)

It is worth noting that at this time, although so intensely depressed, he would take a moonlight stroll on the very edge of the cliff, without availing himself of the opportunity to commit suicide. He wrote that although it would perhaps have been the best for him to be dashed to pieces, he shrank from the precipice; waiting, he adds, to be dashed in pieces by other means.

The poet took long walks with his friend and kinsman Mr. Johnson, one day fifteen miles, and took some interest in the objects around him. Although he emaciated, he retained not a little muscular strength. But any gleam of sunshine was always followed by despair, and in a few days he writes to Lady Hesketh:—

> What a lot is mine! Why was existence given to a creature that might possibly, and would probably, become wretched in the degree that I have been so, and whom misery, such as mine, was almost sure to overwhelm in a moment? But the question is vain. I existed by a decree from which there was no appeal, and on terms the most tremendous, because unknown to, and even unexpected by me; difficult to be complied with had they been foreknown, and unforeknown, impracticable. (*Op. cit.*, iii., p. 192.)

It was in October, 1795, that Cowper removed with Mr. Johnson to Dunham Lodge, near Swaffham, in the same county. Here he read some novels, especially Richardson's, with considerable pleasure, although he asserted that he lost every other sentence through the inevitable wanderings of his mind, and in a letter written January, 1796, he pours forth his "unexampled misery incurred in a moment," in the customary exclamation :—

> Oh, wretch!—to whom death and life are alike impossible! Most miserable at present in this, that being thus miserable I have my senses continued to me, only that I may look forward to the worst. (*Op. cit.*, iii., p. 195.)

He also refers to his auditory hallucinations, and to his delusion that he should never die, but be speedily carried away to some place of torment.

His misery and constant apprehension that something dreadful would happen did not, however, preclude his taking some interest in Gilbert Wakefield's edition of Pope's "Homer," which Mr. Johnson put in his way, and he revised his own translation in consequence, until a journey, undertaken with a view to benefit his health, led him to discontinue the work—an unfortunate circumstance.

The scene now changes to East Dereham, his next Norfolk home, and the residence of Mr. Johnson, Cowper exclaiming, "Wretch that I am to wander alone in chase of false delight." This was at the end of October, 1796, and on the 17th of December Mrs. Unwin died. The poet affirmed that she was still living, and would undergo the horrors of suffocation in the grave, and all on his account. On seeing her remains, however, he flung himself to the other side of the room with a passionate expression of feeling—the first that he had uttered or that had been perceived in him since the last return of his malady at Weston; but the effect for the time was what his kinsman had desired. He became wonderfully calm; as soon as they got downstairs he asked for a glass of wine, and from that time he never mentioned her name nor spoke of her again. (*Op. cit.*, iii., p. 206.)

Not long afterwards Hayley, the constant friend of Cowper, threw out a suggestion in the hope of producing a beneficial effect on the poet's mind. The plan is thus described in a letter from Lord Thurlow to Lord Kenyon (Nov. 22nd, 1797) :—

> Cowper's distemper persuades him that he is unmeritable and

unacceptable to God. This persuasion, Hayley thinks, might be refuted by the testimony of pious men to the service which his works have done to religion and morals. He has, therefore, set on foot a canvass to obtain the *testimonia insignium virorum* to these services, by which means he very reasonably hopes to obtain the signatures of the King, Bishops, the Judges, and other great and religious men who may happen to be found within the same vortex; . . . *laudare a laudatis viris* must give him pleasure, if his disease will admit of it, and if the effect of it in removing the malady may be doubted, the experiment seems harmless at least and charitable. (*Op. cit.*, iii., p. 213.)

The experiment was tried, but altogether failed.

Mr. Johnson, fortunately, succeeded in inducing him to continue the revisal of his "Homer," Cowper saying, plaintively, "I may as well do this, for I can do nothing else." "This work," Mr. Johnson records, "seemed to extend his breathing, which was at other times short, to a depth of respiration more compatible with ease." Although, however, his melancholy was not in appearance so intense, and although he was able to listen to Gibbon's works, he writes of himself as a wretch who can derive no gratification from a view of nature, and adds, "In one day, in one moment I should rather have said, she became a universal *blank* to me, and, though from a different cause, yet with an effect as difficult to remove as blindness itself." (*Op. cit.*, iii., p. 219.)

It was on the 8th of March, 1799, that he finished his revisal of "Homer." On the 20th of the same month he composed the beautiful but melancholy lines called "The Castaway," his last original poem.

It was not long before symptoms of dropsy appeared, and he was attended by a physician. He became very weak, and was unable to go downstairs. When asked by Dr. Lubbock, from Norwich, how he felt, his reply was, "Feel! I feel unutterable despair." All Mr. Johnson's efforts to administer religious consolation were resented, and he was earnestly entreated to desist. The last words he uttered were, when a lady offered him a cordial, "What can it signify?" On the next day, April 25th, 1800, he became unconscious, and shortly afterwards William Cowper expired, aged 69.

So ended his miserable earthly existence.

Cowper was buried in Dereham Church, where a monument was erected to his memory.

Summarizing the history of Cowper's malady, there was first an hereditary tendency to insanity, and the insane

diathesis was well marked in early life. When of age he suffered from an attack of mental depression for nearly a year. At 32 he attempted suicide and laboured under auditory hallucinations. He was placed in a private asylum, and although he recovered in eight months he remained there voluntarily for a year afterwards. When he was 42 years of age his third attack occurred. A terrible dream decided his fate; he believed he was forsaken of God, and, with a few short intervals, he remained profoundly melancholy till his death, in 1800, a period of 27 years and three months.

In what does the interest of Cowper's case really lie? Chiefly in this—the persistence for so many years of a systematized delusion which does not appear to have weakened his mental faculties, and which allowed of his composing from time to time some of the most poetical productions of his Muse. Further, the interest of his psychological history is increased by this delusion having become, by a dream, absolutely and indelibly fixed.

Our object in this review has been to put together a connected psychological history of the life of a poet whose productive power was for years so grievously paralyzed by mental disease. What he might have produced, had his mental health been preserved, will never be known.

To the religious world the case of Cowper, so humble and so child-like, has presented a riddle which has perplexed it and baffled the efforts of the theological mind to solve the problem of so much misery in life, and a death unrelieved by a single gleam of sunshine. That he was the victim of a dreadful creed is true, but it is only by recognizing the lamentable effect of brain disease upon the highest, no less than the lowest, mental functions, and the noblest aspirations of which man is capable, that any satisfactory solution of the puzzle can be found. We cannot emphasize the importance of insisting upon this more forcibly than by citing a passage from the Journal of one who was familiar with the insane, but who seems, in the italicised words, to have strangely misunderstood Cowper's mental condition. Under date August 20th, 1845, Lord Shaftesbury writes:—

> Have been reading, in snatched moments of leisure, "Life of Cowper." What a wonderful story! He was, when he attempted his life, thoroughly mad; *he was never so at any other time.* Yet his symptoms were such as would have been sufficient for any mad-doctor to shut him up, and far too serious to permit any Commissioner to let him out, and, doubtless, both would be justified. The experiment

https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.40.169.254 Published online by Cambridge University Press

proved that Cowper might safely be trusted, but an experiment it was, the responsibility of which not one man in three generations would consent or ought to incur. We should, however, take warning by his example, and not let people be in such a hurry to set down all delusions (especially religious delusions) as involving danger either to a man's self or to the public. There are, I suspect, not a few persons confined whom it would be just as perplexing, and yet just as safe, to release as the Poet Cowper. ("Life," by Edwin Hodder, Vol. ii., p. 113.)

Shaftesbury on Cowper! With this significant passage we close our review, and commend Mr. Wright's work to the readers of the Journal.

A Treatise on Nervous and Mental Diseases, for Students and Practitioners of Medicine. By LANDON CARTER GRAY, M.D. With one hundred and sixty-eight illustrations. London: H. K. Lewis, 136, Gower Street. 1893.

With the increasing publication of monographs on various branches of medicine, the compilation of a treatise on nervous and mental diseases, or on any other class of diseases, must become more and more tedious and difficult, readers becoming more and more critical. But, without being too exacting, one may still be disappointed with Dr. Carter Gray's work, and after careful perusal we can but award it lukewarm praise. As we shall have occasion to show, it is of decidedly unequal merit—some of the chapters, with the author, we take it, at his best, leave nothing to be desired; but in others we find but scant descriptions, and there are important omissions—omissions which we cannot (after reading the author's preface) qualify as non-essential.

The theme of the book is rigidly therapeutical, the author tells us, and, as a rule, the articles on treatment are good. We do not know on what evidence reliance is placed for this sweeping generalization: "It is yet certain that Europeans in investigating disease regard the patient simply as its vehicle, whilst Americans go one step further and deem the cure all-essential." We may appeal to the numerous suggestions which have been made of late for the treatment of various diseases by Europeans—that of myxœdema by thyroid extract (not mentioned by the author, although the preface bears the date November, 1892), the experiments of Brown-Séquard with animal extracts, etc., etc., and the