



CRITICISM

VOLUME

90

**Poetry Criticism, Vol. 90**

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## Preface

**P**oetry Criticism (PC) presents significant criticism of the world's greatest poets and provides supplementary biographical and bibliographical material to guide the interested reader to a greater understanding of the genre and its creators. Although major poets and literary movements are covered in such Gale Literary Criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (CLC), *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC), *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism* (NCLC), *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800* (LC), and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism* (CMLC), PC offers more focused attention on poetry than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries on writers in these Gale series. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous excerpts and supplementary material provided by PC supply them with the vital information needed to write a term paper on poetic technique, to examine a poet's most prominent themes, or to lead a poetry discussion group.

### Scope of the Series

PC is designed to serve as an introduction to major poets of all eras and nationalities. Since these authors have inspired a great deal of relevant critical material, PC is necessarily selective, and the editors have chosen the most important published criticism to aid readers and students in their research. Each author entry presents a historical survey of the critical response to that author's work. The length of an entry is intended to reflect the amount of critical attention the author has received from critics writing in English and from foreign critics in translation. Every attempt has been made to identify and include the most significant essays on each author's work. In order to provide these important critical pieces, the editors sometimes reprint essays that have appeared elsewhere in Gale's Literary Criticism Series. Such duplication, however, never exceeds twenty percent of a PC volume.

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Each PC entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author's actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical introduction. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by the title of the work and its date of publication.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, the editors have provided original foreign-language publication information and have selected what are considered the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.

- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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Linkin, Harriet Kramer. "The Language of Speakers in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*." *Romanticism Past and Present* 10, no. 2 (summer 1986): 5-24. Reprinted in *Poetry Criticism*. Vol. 63, edited by Michelle Lee, 79-88. Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005.

Glen, Heather. "Blake's Criticism of Moral Thinking in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*." In *Interpreting Blake*, edited by Michael Phillips, 32-69. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978. Reprinted in *Poetry Criticism*. Vol. 63, edited by Michelle Lee, 34-51. Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005.

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# Abraham Cowley

## 1618-1667

English poet, essayist, and playwright.

### INTRODUCTION

Cowley was one of the most respected authors of his time, famous for his verse, prose, translations of classical poetry, and his service to the Royalist cause in England. His early poetry—playful, witty love lyrics—was influenced by the styles of Edmund Spenser, Ben Jonson, and John Donne, but his later works attest to his interest in politics, history, and science. Cowley's *Davideis* (1656), an unfinished epic celebrating King David, is the first biblical epic in English and influenced the style and themes of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Cowley's work as a translator of such classical poets as Pindar, Horace, and Anacreon also broke new ground by introducing the method of free translation (rather than literal, word-by-word translation) as a valid and respected technique that influenced such later poets as Thomas Gray, William Wordsworth, and Percy Bysshe Shelley. After he retired to the country in his later years, Cowley indulged his interest in nature, agriculture, and botany. The poems he wrote on those subjects are now thought to be among his best work.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Cowley was born in London several months after the death of his father, a stationer. His widowed mother raised seven children by herself, and though the family was not impoverished, opportunities for Cowley's education were necessarily limited. He enrolled at the Westminster School, a charity prep school, around 1628; an excellent student and already a prolific writer, Cowley was elected a King's Scholar. He entered Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1636, graduated in 1639, and was admitted as Minor Fellow there in 1640. When he came to Trinity as a student, Cowley was already a published author (his *Poeticall Blossomes* was published in 1633) and he continued to write prodigiously, composing many of his most popular short poems, as well as beginning his epic, *Davideis*. He also formed several close friendships, notably with fellow poet Richard Crashaw and with Henry Jermyn, a prominent courtier and later Earl of St. Albans. With political tensions already mounting between the Royalists and the Puritans in England, Cowley, a conservative and a

Royalist, left Cambridge, which had become a bastion of Puritanism. He relocated to Oxford, the headquarters of King Charles I, around 1642 or 1643 and became more and more involved with Royalist politics.

When the Civil War began in earnest, Cowley left England in 1644, settling in Paris, where Queen Henrietta Maria had established a court in exile. As secretary to Jermyn, Cowley served the Queen by writing letters in code and making frequent trips to Holland, Flanders, Scotland, and the Channel Islands; some modern biographers assert that he essentially acted as a spy for the Royalist cause. When he returned to England in 1655, Cowley was arrested for anti-Puritan activities by Oliver Cromwell's agents. He was released after serving several months in prison, where he also did much writing. After the Restoration, Cowley was disappointed to find that his loyalty to the King and Queen did not bring him more material reward; he was allowed to return to his post at Trinity College and received some land from Queen Henrietta Maria for services rendered to the court in exile. Now under the patronage of the Earl of St. Albans, Cowley began to study medicine, receiving a "doctor of physic" degree from Oxford in 1657. Always interested in the ideas of Roger Bacon and his New Philosophy of experimental science, in 1656 Cowley also became one of the founding members of the Royal Society, the oldest scientific society in Britain and one of the oldest in Europe. Suffering from ill health, Cowley retired from his London life in 1663 and moved to Barn Elms, Surrey, but continued to write and correspond with friends; he also took up the study of botany. He moved to Chertsey in 1665 and died there in 1667. Cowley is buried in Westminster Abbey in London, near the graves of Geoffrey Chaucer and Edmund Spenser.

### MAJOR WORKS

Cowley's first poetry collection, *Poeticall Blossomes*, was published when he was fifteen years old and includes elegies and occasional poetry influenced by Spenser, as well as two plays. Critics have praised some of the individual pieces for their lyrical language, wit, and elegiac tone. Cowley came to prominence with *The Mistressse* (1647), a series of love poems believed to have been composed between 1636 and 1646. The work became extremely popular with readers and was reprinted many times, with a number of the poems

turned into popular songs in the seventeenth century. The poems reflect contemporary literary fashion and are characterized by Cowley's use of word play, paradox, hyperbole, and extended conceits in the style of Donne. Commentators have noted, however, that the poems read more like an exercise in wit than the fruits of genuine amorous experience. The pieces in *The Mistress* are reprinted in *Miscellanies*, published in the *Poems* of 1656, which also include some of Cowley's best known pieces ("Of Wit," "On the Death of Mr. William Hervey," and "On the Death of Mr. Crashaw"), as well as his Pindaric odes (including "To the Royal Society," "The Muse" and "To Mr. Hobbes"), the long poem *The Civil War*, and the *Davideis*. In these odes, as well as in his Preface to the 1656 edition, Cowley focused on the function of poetry and on the complementary relationship between poetry and philosophy. Begun during his Trinity College days, the *Davideis* was planned as an epic in twelve books celebrating the life of the Old Testament's David from the beginning of his life to his becoming King of Hebron, but Cowley abandoned the project after book four. The first sacred epic in English, written eleven years before Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the *Davideis* shows Cowley's admiration for Virgil's works and is composed in heroic rhymed couplets with an added Alexandrine. Also begun during his college years but not published until 1656, *The Civil War*, influenced by Lucan's *Pharsalia*, expresses Cowley's support for the Royalist cause, elaborates on the rightness of the monarchy, and predicts (mistakenly) the victoriousness of the King's forces. *Verses, Lately Written upon Several Occasions*, the last of Cowley's works to be published in his lifetime, came out in 1663. In these versatile poems, admired for their classical yet colloquial style, Cowley pays homage to Horace and Virgil and looks back over his own career, meditating on his conflicting desires for poetic fame, political engagement, and solitude. Written late in his life, when he had finally attained the solitude he sought, the *Librii Plantarum* (1668), published the year after his death in *The Works of Mr. Abraham Cowley*, attests to Cowley's interest in and vast knowledge of botany and also constitutes an extended exposition of his thoughts on man's relationship to nature. Also included in that posthumous edition are Cowley's short essays—each one followed by a poem or translation—written in the style of Michel de Montaigne and celebrating the joys of rural life in a clear, engaging style.

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

L. C. Martin (see Further Reading) has called Cowley "one of the most active and original minds of a century." While Cowley was admired, honored, and emulated during his own time, seventy years after his death Alexander Pope, in his "Epistle to Augustus," was able legitimately to pose the question "Who now reads Cow-

ley?" Celebrated as a brilliant poet and satirist by such successors as Milton, John Dryden, and Samuel Johnson, Cowley and his works were mostly neglected until the reissuing of his works in the nineteenth century that again brought him before readers and critics. The English Romantic poets admired his lyrical elegies and translations of the classics, and scholars trace a clear line of influence from Cowley's odes to the great nineteenth-century odes of Wordsworth, Shelley, and John Keats. Many critics also regard Cowley as a poet whose works bridge the metaphysical and Augustan styles over the span of his career. Noting the breadth of Cowley's intellectual interests, critic Mary Elizabeth Green has written on Cowley's ode "To the Royal Society," while Achsah Guibbory has discussed Cowley's admiration for and incorporation of Roger Bacon's ideas in his poetry. Michael Austin points out that Cowley and Thomas Hobbes met while Cowley was in Europe, and that Cowley honored Hobbes not only in his ode to him, but also in imbuing the *Davideis* with his belief in the sacredness of the idea of the social contract. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the *Davideis* has been the subject of more critical interest than any of Cowley's other works. Ted-Larry Pebworth has examined how Cowley links matters of emotion and intellect in his depiction of the friendship between David and Jonathan, while D. M. Rosenberg has explored how Cowley's personal ideology is woven into the epic, noting that his "heroic narrative reflects contemporary Royalist propaganda." Austin approaches the epic via Cowley's expression in it of Hobbes's notion of the social contract between citizen and government. Timothy Dykstal, Philip Edward Phillips, Stephen Guy-Bray, and Sue Starke all analyze Cowley's problems and successes in attempting to write a Christian epic based on a classical—and therefore pagan—model. Dykstal, for example, asserts that the *Davideis* falters because of Cowley's hesitance to "assert classical (and pagan) ideals against the values of his often-conflicting Christian rationalism," while Guy-Bray suggests that a classical reference enabled Cowley to present an element of homoeroticism in the epic. Though his poetry is not so admired as it once was, Cowley remains an especially interesting subject in studies of the development of the English epic.

## PRINCIPAL WORKS

### Poetry

*Poeticall Blossomes* 1633 [enlarged as *Sylva*, 1636]  
*The Mistress* 1647  
*Poems* 1656

*Poemata Latina*. 6 vols. 1662-1668  
*Verses, Lately Written upon Several Occasions* (essays and poetry) 1663  
*The Works of Mr. Abraham Cowley* (prose and poetry) 1668  
*The Poetical Works of Abraham Cowley*. 4 vols. 1777  
*The Complete Works in Verse and Prose of Abraham Cowley*. 2 vols. (prose and poetry) 1881  
*Selected Poetry and Prose* 1970  
*Selected Poems* 1994

### Other Major Works

*The Guardian* (play) 1641; [revised as *Cutter of Coleman Street*, 1658]  
*A Discourse by Way of Vision, Concerning the Government of Oliver Cromwell* (essay) 1661  
*A Proposition for the Advancement of Experimental Philosophy* (essay) 1661  
*The Collected Works of Abraham Cowley* 1989- (2 vols. published to date)

## CRITICISM

### Arthur H. Nethercot (essay date 1931)

SOURCE: Nethercot, Arthur H. "'The Muse's Hannibal'" and "Love's Columbus." In *Abraham Cowley: The Muse's Hannibal*, pp. 35-54; 90-111. New York: Russell & Russell, 1931.

[In the following excerpt, Nethercot discusses Cowley's activities and writings during his years at Trinity College as well as during his career as secretary to Baron Jermyn and Queen Henrietta Maria at the outset of the Civil War.]

#### 'THE MUSE'S HANNIBAL'

For seven or eight years, . . . Cowley remained . . . [in preparatory school]—yet not contentedly so, in spite of his poetical success. For here he was, a great fellow of seventeen, still in a preparatory school when the average age of admission to the university was but fourteen or fifteen.<sup>1</sup> Although at twelve or less he had probably been as mature as the ordinary college entrant, he had been forced to stick ignobly at Westminster for a long period which must have seemed a mere tedious marking of time.

Whatever the reason for this delay, whether it was the financial condition of his widowed mother forced to provide for the other members of a large family or

whether it was some educational technicality or deficiency, the boy chafed under the yoke. His impatience, indeed, tempered though it was with an attempt to be philosophical, finally broke its bounds and displayed itself to public view, as friend after friend was 'sped away' to Cambridge or Oxford. The final poem in *Sylva*, entitled '**An Answer to an Invitation to Cambridge**' and addressed to 'Nichols, my better self', is plain indication of Cowley's frame of mind. In it, he pleaded with Nichols, who had gone up as a Trinity scholar a year ahead of him,<sup>2</sup> not to tempt him with a description of the pleasures of Cambridge or he might commit the 'schoolboy's sin' of truancy. The taste of Ovid had grown insipid on his palate when he thought of the 'dainties of philosophy' awaiting him at the university, and he loathed the 'crambo' of school when he let himself reflect on 'logic's diverse cheer'. He begged Nichols not to tantalize him with the beauties of the Cam, for fear that the last vestige of pleasure in London's 'chief holiday', when even the dungboats were repainted and, gay with flags, bore the merrymaking 'cits' out upon the troubled Thames, would be destroyed. 'Why do I stay, then?' he inquired ruefully.

. . . I would meet  
 Thee there, but plummets hang upon my feet:  
 'Tis my chief wish to live with thee,  
 But not till I deserve thy company.  
 Till then we'll scorn to let that toy,  
 Some forty miles, divide our hearts.  
 Write to me, and I shall enjoy,  
 Friendship and wit, thy better parts.  
 Though envious Fortune larger hindrance brings,  
 We easily see each other: *Love hath wings*.

A new event, moreover, was to convince Cowley that 'envious Fortune' had marked him for her own. In the spring of 1636 he determined to announce himself a candidate for a university scholarship. According to the terms of Elizabeth's charter to Westminster School, three scholars were to be elected annually from the group of Queen's or King's Scholars to go up to Christ Church, Oxford, and three to Trinity College, Cambridge; and this number was later increased, in spite of the fact that sometimes the colleges did not have vacancies for these new members.<sup>3</sup> For some unexplained reason, Cowley seems to have preferred Trinity to Christ Church, although a Trinity scholarship was worth only about half as much as one at Christ Church—and surely this must have been an item of consideration to a boy in none too affluent circumstances. Nevertheless, he went to Osbaldeston and declared his purpose—one of which the head master must surely have approved.

The second Monday in Easter term arrived, and with it the electors. The Dean of Christ Church, accompanied by one of his masters, came down to London from Oxford; the Master of Trinity, bringing with him one of his own sharpest examiners, was driven in from

Cambridge; and all four immediately went into consultation with Osbaldeston, Bishop Williams as Dean of the School, and one of the latter's prebendaries. The dormitories and halls were scrubbed and shining, for on Monday all the former Scholars were traditionally invited to a banquet and on Tuesday the electors made their annual tour of inspection. But the excitement of the School in general could have been nothing in comparison with that of the two classes of candidates, the 'minor' and the 'major'—those who desired to go, respectively, to St. Peter's College within their own school or to one of the universities.

'Challenge', or the examination of the 'College' candidates in grammar, humane letters, and composition, elicited relatively little attention in view of the greater honours at stake. Nervous as Cowley was, however, and wondering about the impression he had made on the electors, he seemingly still had sufficient control of his head to live up to his reputation as a wit in the epigram contest at the banquet on the first night. With the given quotation from Ovid, 'Nullis amor est medicabilis herbis', tradition has it that he arose and delivered the following quatrain:

Sol Daphnis sees, and seeing her admires,  
Which adds new flames to his celestial fires.  
Had any remedy for love been known,  
The god of physic, sure, had cured his own.<sup>4</sup>

On Tuesday the electors visited the school, and the boys recited their declamations, composed for the occasion by the head master. Finally the names of the fortunate candidates were read—the boys who, on the morrow, would deliver their declamations 'up school' before all the students and faculty and would immediately thereafter be 'sped away' to the universities. But, when the list was announced, Abraham Cowley's name was not on it.

The cause of his failure is perhaps not too obscure to be found. Cowley himself has given the clue to it in his admission that he would never get the rules of grammar (classical Latin grammar, of course) by heart. As Sargeant has pointed out, both Westminster and Trinity were at this time very strict in this matter. As a result, the electors chose George Younger, William Croyden, Charles Bernard de Berg, and Thomas Yardley, but failed Abraham Cowley.<sup>5</sup> The record reads simply: 'A. Cowley was a candidate for Cambridge, but not elected'.<sup>6</sup> The boy, however, though apparently bearing no resentment, had his revenge; for none of the other four ever made any figure in either the academic or the larger world,<sup>7</sup> whereas Cowley soon became one of the graduates of whom both Westminster and Trinity were most proud.

Disappointed, even despondent, as he must have been for the moment, he was nevertheless not to be permanently abandoned by the Fortune whom he had just

slandered as 'envious'. Perhaps at this critical juncture one of those ubiquitous friends with whom he was always so well provided intervened. If so, the most likely guess is Sir Kenelm Digby, the brilliant and erratic young man whose exploits as student, 'scientist', lover, privateer, and courtier had excited both England and the Continent.<sup>8</sup> Digby had by this date already 'discovered' his famous 'powder of sympathy', which was attested on good authority to cure wounds if merely brought into contact with any substance which had once touched them; the death of his beautiful and 'seeming virtuous' wife and the subsequent autopsy had made him the subject of considerable suspicious gossip when it was found that her brain was peculiarly small and when his explanation that he had been plying her with doses of 'viper wine' to increase her beauty had been heard; and he had recently provoked the remonstrance of Laud by reverting, while on a visit to France, to the Roman Catholicism of his family. Yet he was a popular and spectacular figure, as proved by many tributes and dedications, one of which was by Abraham Cowley. For when Cowley published his "**Love's Riddle**," the manuscript of which he carried with him when he went up to Cambridge in spite of his failure of election, he addressed it 'To the truly worthy, and noble, Sir Kenelm Digby, Knight', with promises of 'future service' which seem to indicate the presence of a debt to be repaid. And after all, what is more probable than that Digby, called by his Oxford tutor, the mathematician Allen, the 'Mirandula' or infant prodigy of his age, should have heard of Cowley, an infant prodigy fifteen years younger, and have spoken a few words in his favour to the proper people? Furthermore, Aubrey has recorded that Digby was ever 'very kind' to the younger man.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, if Digby's influence was exerted in this particular instance, it must have been applied indirectly, as the result of an earlier acquaintance, since the older man seems to have been in France just at this moment.

Or perhaps Cowley had simply made a better impression on the Master of Trinity than he had realized. Dr. Comber may have decided that he could not fairly elect the boy as a Trinity Scholar on the terms of the Westminster competition, but he may have perceived that such gifts as Cowley's did not belong in the ordinary category, and that it would be a stupid piece of pedantry to overlook them. At any rate, the records of Trinity College for March 30, 1636, read as follows: 'It is ordered by the Master and Seniors the 30th of March, 1636, that Abraham Cowley was chosen into a dry chorister's place in reversion, and that the College shall allow him the benefit thereof till it fall, or that he be chosen Scholar at the election of Scholars next following'.<sup>10</sup>

Thus from one of 'Anthony's pigs' Cowley became a 'dry chorister'—a mysterious rating which Aldis Wright has conjectured to mean a chorister who, paradoxically,

did not sing. Such an appointment and such unusual favours as are suggested in the above-quoted record would indicate that a strong influence of some sort was at work in Cowley's behalf. Naturally enough, he did not reject his opportunity; and on April 21, 1636, under the name of 'Abraham Cooley', he donned the purple gown of the Trinity undergraduate and began his university career, having been assigned to the tutorship of Mr. Caesar Williamson.<sup>11</sup>

Life in its externals was not very different from what it had been before.<sup>12</sup> The chapel bell still rang at five, and matins was said, followed by a short homily by one of the Fellows. These exercises set the tone for the whole day. As for studies, the old quadriennium was still in force, consisting chiefly of work in Latin and Greek; rhetoric; a little arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy; and logic and metaphysics. These subjects were pursued under the direction of a tutor and also by attendance on the college and university lectures—though at this time the halls of the latter speakers were very meagrely populated. One of the main educational features of the day, however, was the 'disputation', in which the older students, much in the medieval manner, still measured their wits in logic combat with their own colleagues or with rivals from other colleges. In such exhibitions, however, Cowley could not have shone as brilliantly as in his private studies, for he was always recognized as a rather poor speaker—in spite of Sprat's insistence that his 'exercitia scholastica' were 'Romano foro et Cicero-nis auribus digna'.<sup>13</sup>

Even though theology was not officially part of the curriculum, the atmosphere of the whole university was predominantly religious—nor was it therefore different from that in which Cowley had always moved. It was no oversight which had omitted doctrinal teaching from the course, but rather a fear of arousing to a dangerous pitch those combined religious and political feelings which were already undermining the foundations of the long-established order. Trinity, though thoroughly loyal to Church and King, was nevertheless in the midst of an open rebellion against the type of ritualism being propagated by Laud and his party. The year after Cowley's entrance, indeed, charges were brought against the school, of which the following were a part: '... they sit or kneel at prayers, every man in a several posture as he pleases; at the name of Jesus, few will bow; and when the Creed is repeated many of the boys, by some man's direction, turn to the west door'.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, students often made up their own extemporaneous prayers, disregarding those to be found in the Book of Common Prayer.

The whole atmosphere was a familiar one to Cowley, coming as he had done from Westminster School. It was a sort of compromise between the extremes of the Puritans and of the Catholic party within the Church of

England. And when in 1637 Bishop Williams, leader of the opposition against Laud, was sent to the Tower to remain 'on the King's pleasure', and when in 1639 Osbaldeston saved his ears, Cowley was probably among the many Trinitarians who sympathized with their stand as exponents of Protestantism. At bottom, indeed, he had many Puritan tendencies, but his heart, as usual, belied his mind, and he remained faithful to the old order.

As a student, Cowley quickly showed his masters that they had made no mistake in creating a place for him and in aiding in his support. His mother, or one of his friends, probably made shift to find what was still lacking in the £20 to £40 a year necessary to meet the expenses of the average student. On June 14, 1637, however, the College redeemed its promise, for the records read: 'Cowley chosen and admitted Scholar by the King's letters dispensatory'.<sup>15</sup> This is the first direct evidence of Charles's possible interest in Cowley's case, but it was an interest which was destined to endure.

The attitude of Cowley's new comrades toward him during the first year or two of his course can only be surmised. Very likely some of them were inclined to be vaguely hostile toward him at the start, as boys are likely to be toward one who has been harbingered with such a reputation as his had been. On the other hand, many of his old schoolmates were awaiting him at Trinity, among whom Nichols was undoubtedly one of the first to kiss his cheek. Among the masters was Robert Crane, who had just been made tutor of his college, after having been elected from Westminster in 1632.<sup>16</sup> Even Cowley's room mate after he had received his scholarship was a Westminster boy several years his senior—Robert Creswell. Creswell had been monitor at the old school while Cowley was there, and had then come up to Cambridge along with Crane and had received his B.A. in 1636. He was also a poet of some local repute. The special privilege of living alone with a young man like this, instead of with two or three ordinary students as was usually the custom, was granted only to boys holding scholarships, and was unquestionably appreciated by one of Cowley's temperament.<sup>17</sup>

Cowley made many new friends, too—and one of these is of peculiar interest.

In 1637 the third edition of *Poetical Blossoms* was printed by Henry Seile, who was certainly still congratulating himself on his acumen in having dared to issue the first of Cowley's youthful works. This new edition was very likely the occasion of the poem which commemorates the early stages of one of the most touching of literary friendships, and which at the same time reveals a friendly envy of Cowley's accomplishments

not at all unlike the one suggested by Milton's birthday sonnet. When Cowley had entered Trinity as a 'dry chorister', Richard Crashaw had just left Pembroke Hall for Peterhouse.<sup>18</sup> Like Cowley he had attended a semi-charity school, the Charterhouse, and had then gone on to Pembroke, where he obtained his degree in 1634. Leisurely enough, perhaps being delayed somewhat by his fervent interest in Nicholas Ferrar and the quietist group at Little Gidding, he proceeded towards his M.A., and in 1637 was elected to a fellowship at Peterhouse. Perhaps he was even ordained about this time, since a letter of Queen Henrietta Maria refers to him as having been a minister in England; certainly he held some official ecclesiastical position in Little St. Mary's Church, temporary chapel of Peterhouse. Yet even a senior student such as he, was eager to seek the acquaintance of the famous Cowley and to pay tribute to his genius.

There is a poem in Crashaw's *The Delights of the Muses* with the title: 'Upon Two Green Apricocks Sent to Cowley by Sir Crashaw'. With the delicate implication that the scarce ripe fruit represented his own achievements in comparison with those of his 'sweet friend', Crashaw wrote such lines as these:

Fain would I chide their slowness, but in their  
Defects I draw mine own dull character—

and these:

. . . Oh, had my wishes  
And the dear merits of your Muse their due,  
The year had found some fruit early as you—  
Ripe as those rich composures Time computes  
Blossoms, but our blest taste confesses fruits.

The friendship of the two, drawn together by their similarly shy and contemplative natures, dated from this initial memorial and continued uninterrupted by all the turmoils and hatreds of the time until Crashaw's premature death a dozen years later.

The intimacy of their relationship is also attested by another poem, or rather pair of poems, in the same volume by Crashaw, published in 1646, though undoubtedly this particular work was written earlier. Cowley's contribution first appeared separately in his volume, *The Mistress*, in the following year. Apparently in one of their conversations the two youths had fallen into an argument on hope and its value. Cowley, in a cynical or at least a contrary mood, had constituted himself the attacker, and Crashaw had championed the cause of this 'virtue'. As a result, they wrote a poem, in alternate stanzas, in which Cowley tried to show that 'Tis Hope is the most hopeless thing of all' and Crashaw, with happy enthusiasm, refuted each argument and added an extra stanza of triumph at the end. In *The Delights of the Muses* the composite poem was entitled 'On Hope,

by Way of Question and Answer, between A. Cowley and R. Crashaw'. In the meantime, however, Cowley himself had written a rather ironic defence of the 'virtue' and called it 'For Hope', which he later printed with its companion piece, 'Against Hope'. These two poems furnish one of the best examples of what may be called their author's epithetic style, in which his imaginative sense and his power of comparison are found in their full stature.

But Cowley's affection for Crashaw, and even for his older friends such as Nichols, was nothing in the light of a new friendship which he formed at Trinity. Among the students of Pembroke was a certain William Hervey of Ickworth, Suffolk, who had entered college on April 5, 1636, at the age of seventeen.<sup>19</sup> Hervey came of a good family, his mother being Susan Jermyn, daughter of Sir Robert Jermyn; he was also first cousin to Henry Jermyn, later Earl of St. Albans. Young Hervey was therefore provided with those things of which Cowley at this period of his life was inclined to lament the lack—position and money. But in this case the difference between their situations formed no barrier. They met each other, and from then on, if Cowley may be believed, were inseparable as Damon and Pythias, or Pylades and Orestes. Next to his brothers and sisters Hervey loved Cowley best, and Cowley loved his friend's family as if it were his own—and even more perhaps, since he never mentions his own directly in his writings.

Hervey was a lad of serious disposition, and yet no prig. As Cowley described him, he had 'all the light of youth, of the fire none'.<sup>20</sup> The discipline of the university suited his temper as well as Cowley's, and the two knew better what to do with their time than to spend it 'in toys, in lusts, or wine'. The taverns, boxing-matches, skittle-playings, dancings, bear-baitings, cock-fights, fairs, dice, and cards, which were expressly stipulated against in the statutes had no attraction for the pair, although if the diaries of young Puritans like Simon D'Ewes may be believed, the average undergraduate much preferred such forbidden pleasures, and worse, to going about with his tutor and conversing with him in Latin, Greek, or Hebrew as the rules demanded.

In the daytime, when Cowley and Hervey could get permission to go outside the college walls, they might be seen roaming the tranquil fields about Cambridge together, much as Milton and his friends had done before them. Not a tree or a bird in the neighbourhood but was familiar to them, as they lay in the shade of the one and listened to the trillings of the other, or read and conversed together. And at night they many times talked down the stars, in

. . . search of deep philosophy,  
Wit, eloquence, and poetry.

It was this intercourse, seemingly, this knowledge that a sympathetic friend and trustworthy critic awaited his every need, that stimulated Cowley to fresh flights of poetry.

To him my Muse made haste with every strain  
Whilst it was new, and warm yet from the brain.

Various occasional poems in Latin and English, such as were printed in the Cambridge *Συνῳδία* of 1637 and *Voces Votivae* of 1640, probably had their first auditor in Hervey. But he was also present in some of Cowley's best known and most typical verses, as well as in these ephemera. The ode, 'Of Wit', for instance, which even Johnson confessed to be 'almost without a rival'<sup>21</sup> and which Alexander Pope was not above pilfering from,<sup>22</sup> was obviously written first for Hervey's eye. This poem, which is an intellectual and critical analysis of, perhaps, what wit is not rather than what it is, opens with this couplet:

Tell me, O tell, what kind of thing is Wit,  
Thou who Master art of it.

Whom could the final stanza fit but Hervey?

But Love, that moulds one man up out of two,  
Makes me forget and injure you.  
I took you for myself, sure, when I thought  
That you in anything were to be taught.  
Correct my error with thy pen:  
And if any ask me then,  
What thing right wit and height of genius is,  
I'll only show your lines, and say, 'Tis this'.

That Cowley actually considered his friend to possess such wit and judgement as here described, his later ode to Hervey is clear proof.

'The Motto', with its famous opening lines, must also have passed under Hervey's eye:

What shall I do to be forever known,  
And make the age to come my own?  
I shall like beasts or common people die  
Unless you write my elegy.

It was in this poem that Cowley confessed his ambition to become 'the Muse's Hannibal'. Knowing too well that he had neither birth nor wealth to help him, he realized that his fortune must be struck from himself alone.

Yet I must on; what sound is't strikes mine ear?  
Sure, I Fame's trumpet hear.  
It sounds like the Last Trumpet, for it can  
Raise up the buried man.  
Unpassed Alps stop me, but I'll cut through all,  
And march, the Muse's Hannibal.

Yes, he would be the Muse's Hannibal, and conquer the Alps of verse which had never before been scaled. For the sake of the Muse and the elegy Fame might write,

he promised to renounce honours, wealth, estate, love, and all that might prevent him from taking a place among Aristotle, Cicero, and Virgil, the greatest writers of the past. Nor could a faithful Achates such as Hervey have failed to applaud the grandeur of the resolution and to encourage the youthful votary.

These two poems are probably to be referred to the years 1637 or 1638, if an important principle concerning Cowley's method of preparing manuscripts for publication be admitted: the *Miscellanies* particularly, and probably the *Occasional Verses* as well as the *Pindarics*, are arranged chronologically, perhaps having been taken directly from some bound copy-book. At any rate, every poem which, from internal or external evidence, can be dated exactly, falls into its proper order in the printed volumes, and if this be a fact, the conclusion is strongly presumptive that the intervening, undatable poems also occupy the places where they belong according to time of composition.

Cowley was now living in a deeply religious, even pious, atmosphere. The people to whom he most looked up, the masters and heads of schools he had attended, were in orders. The many virtues of his friend Hervey were swayed by 'Religion, Queen of Virtues'. Crashaw, still an Anglican, though growing more and more dissatisfied with the established Church, had strong Catholic as well as mystical tendencies. What more natural then, than that Cowley, avid for fame as he had admitted himself to be in his private poems, should decide that the noblest path to his desire lay in the direction of religious poetry? His mistake, if mistake it was, never was recognized by his contemporaries—and perhaps never by himself, though some signs exist that he later came to mistrust his earlier judgement.

Religious poetry was, patently, no new thing in England. Herbert's *The Temple* had been published in 1633, and Cowley seems to refer to it indirectly in the opening of his next work. Yet Cowley had expressed his ambition to be the 'Muse's Hannibal'. How could he do so and yet be of service to religion? There was one way. The religious epic had not yet been attempted in English—a fact to which he called attention in the notes to his new poem. In France, 'divine' du Bartas had written his *Semaines* at the end of the last century, and Joshua Sylvester had gained himself great fame and credit by translating these ponderous works on the Creation into English. In Italy, Marino more recently had published his *La Strage degli Innocenti*, which was so to attract Crashaw by both its Christian material and its 'conceited' style that he was to translate its first book as 'The Suspicion of Herod' in 1646. Perhaps even at the time when Cowley's imposing idea came over him, Crashaw had begun his work, and may even have talked it over with his friend. For as McBryde has pointed out,<sup>23</sup> there are some indications of a knowledge of

Crashaw's translation in the epic which Cowley began about the year 1638, though he did not publish it until almost twenty years afterward. Sprat clearly intends to indicate that Cowley's epic had its inception in this period, for he says that at Cambridge, 'before the twentieth year of his age, he laid the design of divers of his most masculine works, that he finished long after'.<sup>24</sup> And even more specifically he adds, 'His *Davideis* was wholly written in so young an age . . . that he had finished the greatest part of it while he was yet a young student at Cambridge.' The first part of this statement, however, must be regarded a bit sceptically, as will be seen later.

The *Davideis* is a poem which was lavishly overpraised in its own day, and lavishly overridiculed by the heavy-handed Dr. Johnson later.<sup>25</sup> Cowley must have commenced his composition with a great deal of enthusiasm, and even went so far as to compile one book in both English and Latin. And why should he not be enthusiastic, knowing that he was striking out a new trail in English poetry and being convinced that he was simultaneously doing religion a service? He planned to immortalize all of the troubles of David in a heroic poem of twelve books, 'after the pattern of our master, Virgil' (whom he always worshipped), and to conclude 'with that most poetical and excellent elegy of David's on the death of Saul and Jonathan'.<sup>26</sup> This argument he would embellish with all his wit and learning, and furnish it with a set of notes which would allow him to explain his theories about the epic and about versification, as well as equip it with a battery of marginal glosses to give his authorities for the events and ideas in the story. It was, in short, to be a sober, a noble, a truly heroic piece of work, in which the author would no longer appear as a sprout, or even a sapling, but as a full grown and sturdy tree, ready to take its place in the sacred grove of Apollo—for Cowley himself was not overly worried by any mixture of classical and Hebrew mythologies.

But, as usual, he made his mistake. His exuberance and his knowledge of the national fondness for striking and richly embellished writing led him into a series of excesses for which even Sprat later felt himself called upon to apologize, or at least explain. The high seriousness of Milton is not absent from the poem in many passages, such as the description of the love of David and Jonathan for one another, or the vision of the Annunciation. But even the latter scene Cowley is unable to leave without the insertion of a jarring conceit:

Heaven contained virgins oft, and will do more;  
Never did virgin contain heaven before.

Nevertheless, Dryden rather than Johnson was right in calling attention to the hyperboles in the poem instead of to the more figurative conceits, for it is exaggeration

such as the following portrait of Satan which frequently topples over into absurdity:

Thrice did he knock his iron teeth, thrice howl,  
And into frowns his wrathful forehead roll.  
His eyes dart forth red flames, which scare the night,  
And with worse fires the trembling ghosts affright.

No one who has read the descriptions of Envy, Fancy, and their attendants in the first and second books can cavil at Pope for ridiculing them and their kind—derived originally from Virgil though they were—in the *Rape of the Lock*.

Similarly, though science was no regular part of the university curriculum, Cowley was unable to repulse the temptation to show his acquaintance with the latest scientific, or pseudo-scientific, theories. To such lines—dealing with the origins of winds, of fountains, of thunder, and of comets; with the effect of gravity on falling bodies; and with the location of hell—he called attention in the commentary of his notes. Yet though he deemed thunder 'an exhalation hot and dry, shut up in a cold and moist cloud, out of which striving to get forth, it kindles itself by the agitation, and then violently breaks it', he refused to accede to 'the old senseless opinion that the heavens were divided into several orbs or spheres, and that a particular Intelligence or Angel was assigned to each of them to turn it round (like a mill-horse, as Scaliger said) to all eternity'.

However, like Milton, Cowley specifically confessed that he was not above using an idea or belief for a poetical purpose which he would not accept as an attested fact. Perhaps it is not necessary to trace Milton's practice in this respect to the *Davideis*, though it cannot be doubted that this is the poem which made Cowley one of the former's three favourite poets. But many other ideas and specific passages in *Paradise Lost*—such as the digression on the fatal qualities of gold, the sonorous use of proper names, the description of the division of labour in building Pandemonium, and the picture of Satan and his staff, 'Which Nature meant some tall ship's mast to be' (in Cowley's phrase)—undoubtedly were suggested by Cowley's epic; so many, indeed, that the vast difference in the success of the two poems is more than ever to be marvelled at.

In another way than his mere choice of material, however, Cowley must be given credit as an innovator, an experimenter—that is, in his versification.<sup>27</sup> The selection of heroic couplets for a poem of this length and nature becomes of more moment when it is recalled that he made his decision at least as early as 1638, about four years before Denham's *Cooper's Hill* was published. Yet though practically all of the couplets are of the closed type, Cowley's tendency, as always, was to counteract the natural resulting rigidity by various

devices which would allow the more flexible effect desirable in narrative verse. Accordingly, he inserted many Alexandrines, especially in passages where the sense would be illustrated and emphasized by such a slow and dragging line. Conversely, he frequently cut off a line or a speech with an abrupt hemistich. He made the elision, marked by an apostrophe, a common feature. Not one of the least bold of his innovations, in his own opinion, was the interpolation of lyric measures in the midst of an epic, in the form of songs—a practice which the ultra-classic Rymer later considered one of the objectionable features in an otherwise fine and almost truly classical poem.<sup>28</sup> Cowley's rhyming, finally, with its acknowledged influence upon Dryden's prosody<sup>29</sup> and with Milton's reaction against it in adopting blank verse, contrary to 'the use of some famous modern poets',<sup>30</sup> becomes of more importance when it is noted that he had based it on a consciously evolved set of principles, which, together with his discussion of the faults and virtues of former traditions in epic technique, he continually kept before his reader by means of his notes. These matters were probably among the ones which he and his faithful friend Hervey discussed as they strolled along the banks of the Cam or lay indolently under the fences or trees in the fields near by—indeed, in one note he recalls how he had debated a certain moot question with 'a friend of mine', who sounds much like Hervey.<sup>31</sup>

On the whole, however, the *Davideis* must be relegated to the number of ambitious failures in English poetry. Seemingly the author's own interest waned as he went along. Although the third book contains the attractive description of Saul's two daughters, Merab and Michol, which William Cullen Bryant for some reason thought that Scott used in his characterization of Minna and Brenda Troil in *The Pirate*,<sup>32</sup> the narrative skill of the poem constantly decreases and involves itself in digressions and retrospects. Cowley probably wrote for a couple of years with all the great zeal of which he was capable, and then laid his manuscript aside. He took it up again later, to be sure, and finally published it, but his project of twelve books 'after the pattern of our master, Virgil', was never more than a third realized.

Why did Cowley tire of this, the first of the great works which were to make him 'the Muse's Hannibal'? Was it because, subconsciously perhaps, he missed the opportunity to write more passages such as the following one in the second book—passages which let him pour out his real nature in the place of the artificialities which he seemed to feel were demanded of one who wished to shine in the poetic firmament of his age? For this is the undercurrent which runs, almost unnoticed, through all of his earlier verse:

Fair angels passed by next in seemly bands,  
All gilt, with gilded baskets in their hands.

Some as they went the blue-eyed violets strew,  
Some spotless lilies in loose order threw.  
Some did the way with full-blown roses spread,  
Their smell divine, and colour strangely red—  
Not such as our dull gardens proudly wear,  
Whom weathers taint, and winds' rude kisses tear.  
Such, I believe, was the first rose's hue,  
Which, at God's word, in beauteous Eden grew—  
Queen of the flowers, which made that orchard gay,  
The morning blushes of the Spring's new day.

\* \* \*

#### LOVE'S COLUMBUS

For two years ('per biennium', says Sprat's Latin life) Cowley remained at Oxford, trying to study, trying to write, but continually being led farther and farther astray by the court life into which he had been thrown. At first he did not resist too much. He had always worshipped the royal family, and now he was associating with it on more and more intimate terms. He was dazzled by finding dukes and earls and knights as his daily companions, and he saw how men of humble birth might become favourites and rise to positions of honour and importance. What more natural than that his ambition should be stirred in a new direction, especially since the old now seemed to be blocked? Henry Bennet, for instance, another Westminster boy, had become secretary to Lord Digby in 1643 and was now acting as a private messenger between the Queen and Lord Ormonde in Ireland. Jermyn himself, of good (though not high) birth, had risen with phenomenal speed after having attracted the attention of the Queen while in his early twenties. Although only a scholar and a poet, Cowley knew that he possessed abilities as great as theirs; and through John Hervey he had already gained the confidence of Baron Jermyn.

Abraham Cowley became the secretary of Baron Jermyn, and, consequently, of Queen Henrietta Maria.<sup>33</sup> This seemed to be the only road open to him, and after all, under the circumstances, only a very strong-minded man with a clear view of his own destiny would have been justified in refusing. Cowley's character, however, was not of this type.

The exact date of his accepting the position cannot be set. Henrietta Maria left England for the last time on April 3, 1644, never to see her husband again. She had been a good wife to him, after the assassination of the elder Buckingham had removed this barrier between them, although she had been hated by the people for her Catholicism. He had been a good husband to her, according to royal standards, and she had borne him three sons and three daughters, as well as three other children who died in their infancy. He had not objected to her fondness for Jermyn, and she had not objected to his occasional frivolities; in fact, their unalloyed affec-