

A Copy of Richard Bentley's Edition of *Paradise Lost* in William Hayley's Library c. 1802

BY MARK CROSBY

MARK CROSBY (crosbym@ksu.edu), FSA, is an associate professor in the Department of English at Kansas State University. He has published on Blake, Hayley, William Godwin, and Thomas Paine.

1 IN “William Blake’s Annotations to Milton’s *Paradise Lost*: New Evidence for Attribution,”¹ Lisa Sherlock refers to my unpublished research on William Hayley’s correspondence with Lady Harriet Hesketh that establishes the presence of a copy of Richard Bentley’s edition of *Paradise Lost* in Hayley’s upper library at Turret House in Felpham during part of Blake’s three-year residence on the Sussex coast. I offer this research as an addendum to my 2008 *Book Collector* article proposing that Blake consulted, and may have annotated, a copy of Bentley’s notorious edition.² While I was unable to identify the exact copy, I speculated that it may have been one containing numerous manuscript annotations in different hands, including two signed “WB.”

2 The evidence I offered in my 2008 article concerning the presence of a copy of Bentley can be summarized as follows. After the death of William Cowper in 1800, numerous items from his library at Weston Underwood in Buckinghamshire were transmitted to Hayley to serve two purposes: for Hayley to write a biography of Cowper and to edit Cowper’s commentaries on, and translations of, Milton’s Latin and Italian poems. The items included letters, various manuscripts relating to Cowper’s translations, numerous books—including an interleaved copy of Thomas Newton’s two-volume ninth edition of *Paradise Lost* (1790) containing Cowper’s incomplete manuscript commen-

tary—and a copy of Bentley’s edition of *Paradise Lost*. Shortly after Cowper’s death, William Barker catalogued the poet’s library at Weston Underwood; the catalogue includes a copy of Bentley.³ There is also a copy of Bentley’s *Paradise Lost* at Christ’s College, Cambridge, that contains marginal annotations by Cowper and his armorial bookplate.⁴ These annotations are generally confined to Bentley’s footnotes and include a satiric poem at the end of the preface attacking critics such as Bentley.⁵ In her article, Sherlock suggests that the copy of Bentley listed by Barker is the same copy now at Christ’s College. In what follows, I offer evidence that it was Ashley Cowper’s copy that was listed by Barker as being in William Cowper’s library in 1800.⁶

3 In the two editions of Cowper’s translations of Milton’s Latin and Italian poetry that Hayley edited, published in 1808 and 1810, he remarks that Cowper borrowed materials relating to Milton from friends, including a copy of Bentley’s edition:

When Cowper first thought of forming a commentary on Milton, he felt the want of a proper collection of books for that purpose: but he had several friends, who took a pleasure in the hope of supplying him with every thing he could require. One sent him that rarity of Italian literature, the Adamo of Andreini. Another a copy of Bentley’s Milton, containing many very severe censures, in manuscript, against the presumptuous editor, written probably when the book was published in 1732.⁷

3. Barker’s catalogue is reproduced in Geoffrey Keynes, “The Library of William Cowper,” *Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society* 3.1 (1959): 47–69. Bentley’s edition of *Paradise Lost* is listed as no. 23. The catalogue also records the seventh edition of *Paradise Lost* published by Newton in 1770 and the Boydell three-volume folio edition of Milton’s works published between 1794 and 1797, which includes the first six books of *Paradise Lost* in the first volume, along with Hayley’s *Life of Milton*. See Keynes, especially pp. 53 and 61.

4. Christ’s College Library, shelfmark EE.2.8. This is probably the copy recorded in Joseph Mayer’s sale catalogue as “formerly belonging to Cowper.” See *Catalogue of Books, Manuscripts, Deeds and Autograph Letters, the Property of the Late Joseph Mayer, Esq. F.S.A of Liverpool* (Sotheby, Wilkinson, and Hodge, 19 July 1887), lot 275.

5. In a letter to the Revd. John Newton of 10 May 1780, Cowper satirizes Bentley’s editorial practices; see Hayley, *The Life, and Posthumous Writings, of William Cowper, Esqr.*, vol. 3 (Printed by J. Seagrave, Chichester, for J. Johnson, London, 1804) 24. For a discussion of Cowper’s attitude to Bentley, see also Hayley’s preface to *Latin and Italian Poems of Milton Translated into English Verse ... by the Late William Cowper* (Printed by J. Seagrave, Chichester, for J. Johnson and R. H. Evans, London, 1808) xix–xxi.

6. Ashley Cowper (1709–88) was William Cowper’s uncle and the father of Theodora Jane Cowper and Lady Harriet Hesketh.

7. Hayley’s comment appears on pp. xviii–xix of his preface to *Latin and Italian Poems of Milton* (1808), which is reprinted as an appendix to *Paradise Lost and Regained, with the Latin and Other Poems, of John Milton* (London: H. Washbourne, 1810) 4: 379–94 (on 387–88).

1. Lisa Sherlock, “William Blake’s Annotations to Milton’s *Paradise Lost*: New Evidence for Attribution,” *Blake* 57.2 (fall 2023): 17 pars.

2. Mark Crosby, “William Blake’s Annotations to Milton’s *Paradise Lost*,” *Book Collector* 57.4 (winter 2008): 513–46.

Hayley's description of this copy as "containing many very severe censures, in manuscript, against the presumptuous editor" indicates familiarity with it and suggests that it was sent to Felpham along with Cowper's other Milton materials. His dating of the "severe censures" to 1732 also suggests that this is a different copy from the one with Cowper's marginal annotations and bookplate, now at Christ's College. As no copy of Bentley's edition of *Paradise Lost* was listed in the sale of Hayley's library in 1821, I speculated in my 2008 article that the extensively annotated copy that Hayley had consulted after Cowper's death remained in Hayley's possession and later passed to Joseph Mayer.⁸

- 4 A hitherto unpublished letter from Hayley concerning his biography of Cowper, among other things, establishes that he had a copy of Bentley in his library during Blake's residence in Felpham. The letter is addressed to Cowper's cousin, Lady Harriet Hesketh, and is dated 10 January 1802. Hayley updates Hesketh on arrangements for printing the biography in Chichester, expresses his belief in the primacy of epigrams as the appropriate literary form for memorialization, and discusses their seemingly competing plans to memorialize Cowper. It appears that these plans at one stage consisted of a monument designed and sculpted by John Flaxman, bearing an epigram by Hayley. Toward the end of the letter Hayley alludes to Blake, who was working on the engravings to illustrate the biography, by comparing the patience required of a biographer to that of an engraver. There are also multiple references to a copy of Bentley's edition of *Paradise Lost* that was previously in Cowper's library at Weston Underwood.
- 5 The letter is one of a series between Hayley and Lady Hesketh written between the end of 1801 and the beginning of 1802, for the most part concerned with Hayley's biography of Cowper and its illustrations. It contains references to Hesketh's older sister, Theodora Jane Cowper; their father and Cowper's uncle, the late Ashley Cowper; and Cowper's cousin, John Johnson (affectionately referred to by both Cowper and Hayley as Johnny). Hayley also refers to himself by his favored moniker, "Hermit."

As you lecture the good trembling Johnny, so unmercifully my dear Lady, you must be lectur'd yrself by the old Hermit, & I hope you have also the Grace to tremble in yr turn.

He did right to bring me the Milton, as I directed, for the commands of a Biographer at work ought to be paramount above all others, concerning M.S., that may, or may not be of use to Him. — I knew well, that the verse

8. In light of the evidence presented here, I now believe that the copy in the Mayer sale is the copy currently at Christ's College, Cambridge. See note 4.

& prose, inserted in that copy of Milton, were not written by our dear Bard, but by yr amiable Father; but having inserted the Epitaph on yr father, I wish'd to speak of him in a manner that might please his own gentle spirit, his nephew's, & his daughters. — I am sure the feeling Theodora will forgive me for thus ordering the Book to take a circuitous road to her, for I never meant to detain it from her for any considerable time, but herself to revise the copy I had of yr father's admirable epigram on the absurd & pedantic Editor of that Milton — a copy taken by my attendant at Weston, with the permission of the dear Bard!

Having begun to lecture you, Heaven only knows when I may cease lecturing you; so I hope to continue to tremble, with a becoming degree of awful submission.

Poets living & departed have acute Feelings — you would not allow me, & some true Friends of the dear deceased to raise such a monument to Him at Dereham, as we knew He would approve — NO! You insisted on doing this yrself — yet, my dear Lady — two years almost has this dear dol [*sic*] of ours rested in the Earth, — & all Norfolk (as Johnny tells me) is wondering, why no monument appears to Cowper — What, I think, you should have done (if you wish'd to stop us) was, to order immediately from the artist, that our dear Bard particularly esteem'd (^{Flaxman}) an uncostly but graceful little monument, for which I had provided you with an Epitaph, that I thought you once approv'd, & that I am sure the dear Bard Himself, could he speak from the stone, would not speak against, as a few of his most sympathetic friends have approv'd it highly. — But you strangely think of putting on his Tombstone not an epitaph, but rather a motto — for any passage taken from his works (exquisitely fit as his verses are for most purposes) must yet appear rather like a Motto for a Book, that [*sic*] a proper Inscription for a Tombstone, & spectators, who survey such a Motto, may naturally exclaim, "What! did Cowper leave no Friends attentive enough to his ashes, to supply them with an appropriate Epitaph?" — There! have I not follow'd yr example in lecturing the good Johnny? & lectur'd you also unmercifully? — In Truth, I have told you what I, & a few more of yr Friends (not so bold as the Hermit in uttering their Thoughts) really think, but having done so, my dear Lady, as you are a woman, & a dear one — dear, in expressibly dear, to our angelic friend, & not a little so to his affectionate Biographer, you shall have your own way in this little monumental affair, without further reproof: you shall raise any sort of tablet you like, & burn my Epitaph into the bargain, if you please, & on this Topic I will lecture you no more; so be as eccentric as you will, you have my plenary & affectionate Indulgence.

And now, my dear Lady, having been a little rough with you (not according to my custom) I will be all Gentleness & Good humour, & tell you several things, that I believe you will be pleas'd to hear.

First my reproof to the little man of St Paul's bought me a sort of penitential-submissive letter, as in truth all the persons, I take the trouble to reprove, ought to perceive, that my reproofs are dictated by a spirit of Justice & kind-

ness. — He allows, that I ought not to be oppos'd in regard to printing in the Country — — & my firmness in resolving to do so, will, I trust, render my ingenuous & intelligent country printer peculiarly alert to guard against all unnecessary delays as much as possible; — yet to print so extensive a work, must be a business of labour & time. — Thank Heaven! I may consider my own arduous office in great measure accomplish'd & if I should follow the dear Bard tomorrow to a better world, there is such a memorial of Him now ready for the press, as I am confident his own affectionate spirit would applaud me for having prepar'd. — To criticize me all the good or bad critics, that like the occupation, my Heart tells me, I have his angelic approbation; & so (to borrow & alter a little a verse from a certain beloved poet of yr acquaintance)

“Love shall be satisfied nor heed the Rest” —

Thanks for yr pleasant History of Mr Owen! — I hope he is a son or Grandson of a most worthy Dr. Owen,^{who} was (as I have heard my mother say) a favourite Friend of my Fathers; but of whom I know not even whether He was single or married, being myself only a chit of two years, when my Father died — To shew you how alert I have render'd the good Johnny in yr service, he is at this moment copying the poem you wish to see & coy as it is, will send it you completely transcrib'd by the post of this day. — I am very confident that when you & Mr Owen have read the poem together, you will think exactly as I do on the propriety of it being reprinted in the appendix to his Life. — but tell me soon if you think, as I must insert some mention of it in that case in an early part of the biography —

When you want to teach any of yr Friends Patience my dear Lady, persuade them to be either a biographer or an Engraver — & if they do not acquire the virtue in those two instructive occupations, you may safely tell them they have no talents for it—

Adieu! — I have a million of things to dispatch, before the good Johnny departs, & He is to depart on Tuesday, for He is eager to rejoin his Flock, like a good Pastor as He is, & I, like a considerate Hermit, as I am, have promis'd not to detain him here a single day beyond the Time, that I really require his assistance in imparting to me the particulars, that it is my duty to collect from his faithful lips. —

Adieu — love us both as we really deserve yr love! — accept our untied benedictions! & believe me ever cordially tho now very hastily

yr sincere
& affectionate
Hermit

Jan 10 1802⁹

9. The transcription is taken from Hayley's autograph copy of the letter in the Firestone Library, Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University (Hannay Collection, box 5, f. 19). Hayley's comparison of life-writing and engraving not only suggests his admiration for Blake's skill and temperament, but also may have been a subtle attempt to assuage any concerns that Hesketh entertained about the illustrations. See also G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) 109fn.

6 Hayley's letter tells us that the copy of Milton that he had asked Johnson to bring to Felpham was intended for Theodora Jane Cowper, to whom it would be sent on at some point.¹⁰ It further reveals that “the verse & prose, inserted in that copy . . . , were not written by our dear Bard, but by yr amiable Father”—that is, not written by William Cowper, but by his uncle, the late Ashley Cowper. Hayley's use of “inserted” could mean manuscript text written directly on the leaves of the book or on separate sheets of paper placed loosely or interleaved in the volume. He also uses “inserted” in connection with adding William Cowper's manuscript epigram on his uncle to the biography, which indicates that, for Hayley in this context, the verb denotes supplementing the main text with additional text. He explains that the presence of the epigram is one of the reasons that he needed to consult this copy, because he wanted to add a sentence in the biography “to speak of him [Ashley Cowper] in a manner that might please his own gentle spirit, his nephew's, & his daughters.”¹¹

7 He also states that he wants Theodora Jane Cowper to revise an epigram that her father, Ashley Cowper, had written on “the absurd & pedantic Editor of that Milton,” a transcript of which had been “taken by my attendant at Weston, with the permission of the dear Bard!” This makes clear that the copy of Milton that Hayley had requested and was consulting in early January 1802 was hitherto in the library of William Cowper (“the dear Bard”) at Weston Underwood and was the edition of *Paradise Lost* by Bentley (“the absurd & pedantic Editor”). As he observes, most of its annotations were written by Ashley Cowper, which indicates that this is not the copy containing William Cowper's marginal notes that is now at Christ's College. Rather, it is highly probable that it is the copy listed by William Barker shortly after Cowper's death as being part of the poet's library.¹² This copy, it appears, had originally belonged to Ashley Cowper before making its way to his nephew.

10. In her responses dated 17, 23, and 28 January 1802, Hesketh does not mention the edition of Milton that he had borrowed. Instead, she attempts to soothe his anxiety about the Dereham memorial (Princeton University Library, Hannay Collection, box 5, f. 59).

11. “Lines Composed for a Memorial of Ashley Cowper, Esqr. Immediately after His Death, by His Nephew William of Weston” appear in the second volume of Hayley's biography of Cowper, with the following description: “The person whom these Verses commemorate, was himself an elegant Poet, and Father of the Lady [Harriet Hesketh], to whom so many of Cowper's Letters are addressed in the preceding collection” (Hayley, *The Life, and Posthumous Writings, of William Cowper, Esqr.*, vol. 2 [1803] 228).

12. In his edition of Barker's catalogue, Keynes includes information regarding bookplates and signatures. The copy of Bentley is not described as having William Cowper's bookplate. On the other hand, the copy of Bentley at Christ's College does contain his armorial book-

- 8 Hayley's description of the copy as containing manuscript "verse & prose" by Ashley Cowper, including an "epigram on the absurd & pedantic Editor of that Milton," seems to anticipate his statement in the 1808 preface to the *Latin and Italian Poems of Milton* about the copy of Bentley's edition of *Paradise Lost* "containing many very severe censures, in manuscript, against the presumptuous editor." Yet it is likely that Hayley is referring to a different copy in the 1808 preface. As we have seen, he planned to return the copy with Ashley Cowper's annotations to Theodora Jane Cowper. There is no record of a copy of Bentley in the sale of Hayley's library, which suggests that he kept his word and at some point after 10 January 1802 sent this copy to her, probably via Johnson. Furthermore, Ashley Cowper's single "epigram on the absurd & pedantic Editor" doesn't accord with Hayley's 1808 description of a copy with "many very severe censures."
- 9 The evidence may be summarized as follows: for his biography of William Cowper and to edit Cowper's translations of Milton's poems, Hayley borrowed two copies of Bentley's edition of *Paradise Lost*. One, with manuscript "verse & prose" by Ashley Cowper and an epigram on his uncle by William Cowper, was brought from Weston Underwood to Felpham by John Johnson and was present in Hayley's Turret House in early 1802, according to the previously unpublished letter to Lady Hesketh of 10 January. This is almost certainly the copy that was listed by William Barker as being in William Cowper's library in 1800; it is not the copy with William Cowper's annotations and bookplate at Christ's College, Cambridge. The other copy that Hayley consulted is described in his preface to the *Latin and Italian Poems of Milton* (1808) as "containing many very severe censures, in manuscript, against the presumptuous editor, written probably when the book was published in 1732." His description and speculative dating distinguish this copy from both Ashley Cowper's copy that was present in Hayley's library in January 1802 and the Christ's College copy with William Cowper's marginal annotations and bookplate. The copy of Bentley's edition with the two "WB" annotations also contains numerous annotations in another hand, many of which attack Bentley's editorial heavy-handedness, but none that corresponds with Ashley Cowper's hand.

plate. This further suggests that the copy recorded by Barker is not the same as the one at Christ's College. See Keynes, "The Library of William Cowper" 53.

The Backwell Bookplate

- 10 The identification of the William Backwell bookplate in the copy containing the "WB" annotations presents an opportunity to compare handwriting samples from the Backwell family with those two annotations.¹³ There are three William Backwells who should be considered. The first is a London banker, who had two relations of the same name. As summarized by Sherlock, William (and his brother Barnabus) were clerks in the banking firm of Messrs. Child and Co. around 1720 before being made partners in 1740. In 1756, the Backwell brothers established their own banking house, Devaynes and Co., and in 1765 William was appointed high sheriff of Buckinghamshire for a period of twelve months.¹⁴
- 11 In 1775, Barnabus Backwell's son Tyringham Backwell inherited Tyringham Manor in Buckinghamshire, but died two years later without an heir. The manor then passed to his sister—the niece of William Backwell the London banker—Elizabeth Tyringham Backwell, who married William Mackworth Praed in 1778. In a letter of 1 May 1786, William Cowper notes: "A Mr. Praed lives at a seat called Tyringham, which is also about five miles hence; but I never saw, save once, when I saw him jump over a rail at Weston."¹⁵ By 17 November 1787, he appears to have met "Mrs Praed ... and her sister, Miss Backwell."¹⁶ Writing to Lady Hesketh on 30 June 1793, Cowper refers to Praed as "our" neighbor and compliments his landscaping endeavors: "After there [*sic*] laudable example I too am working wonders here, but on a smaller scale."¹⁷ I have been unable to find any evidence directly connecting William Backwell, the London banker and one-time owner of the copy of Bentley containing the two "WB" annotations, to Cowper. But both Caldecot Manor (William Backwell's residence) and, as Cowper notes in his letter of May 1786, Tyringham Manor (Elizabeth and Jane Backwell's residence) were about five miles from Cowper's home in Weston Underwood.¹⁸ Were these Backwells among the "several friends, who took a pleasure in the hope of supplying" Cowper with

13. The bookplate is listed in *Ellis's Catalogue of British and American Book-Plates* (London, 1907) 11. It can also be consulted in the Luis Marino Pérez Collection, John Rylands Research Institute and Library, University of Manchester.

14. See Frederick George Hilton Price, *A Handbook of London Bankers* (London, 1876) 48 and the *London Gazette* (10-13 November 1764).

15. *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, ed. James King and Charles Ryskamp, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979-86) 2: 533.

16. King and Ryskamp 3: 55. Miss Backwell is Jane Backwell (d. 1795).

17. King and Ryskamp 4: 361. Praed had commissioned the architect John Soane and the landscape gardener John Haverfield to refurbish his property at Tyringham.

18. See Sherlock pars. 2 and 3.

materials relating to Milton, including an extensively annotated copy of Bentley's edition of *Paradise Lost*?

- 12 As a previous owner of the copy with the two "WB" annotations, William Backwell appears the most immediate candidate for their authorship, but an analysis of his handwriting, including his signature, suggests a different hand to the hand responsible for the annotations.¹⁹ The angle of his hand is consistently the standard 55 degrees from horizontal for roundhand, whereas the annotator is about 45 degrees. Backwell is also a free capitalizer, and the annotator is an underliner. The "WB" who penned the annotations doesn't appear to be the William Backwell of the bookplate.
- 13 After Backwell's death in 1770, one of the junior bankers at Devaynes and Co., William Harwood, was granted the name and the coat of arms of Backwell by an act of parliament.²⁰ It is possible that Harwood was Backwell's illegitimate son. Harwood's hand, however, is very similar to Backwell senior's (perhaps a case of imitation). Harwood had a son, also called William. This William Backwell, a captain in His Majesty's Corps of Royal Engineers, was born in 1772 and died in 1808, at the beginning of the British involvement in the Peninsular War. While Captain Backwell's signature slopes 45 degrees from the horizontal, just as the "WB" annotations do, the letter formations—such as the lowercase a, l, w, and k—differ, suggesting that he is also not responsible for the annotations.
- 14 The evidence put forward here, along with the identification of the Backwell bookplate by Anthony Pincott of the Bookplate Society, indicates that the copy of Bentley's edition of *Paradise Lost* with the two "WB" annotations is not the copy that Hayley, in his letter to Lady Hesketh of 10 January 1802, describes as formerly being in Cowper's library at Weston Underwood and presently in his library at Felpham. The copy with the "WB" annotations originally belonged to William Backwell, a London banker, whose Buckinghamshire home at Caldecot Manor was within five miles of Weston Underwood. Furthermore, Backwell's niece Elizabeth lived nearby and knew Cowper. The handwriting and signature samples of three generations of William Backwells do not correspond to the hand responsible for these annotations. According to Hayley, Cowper's borrowings from "several friends" included a copy of Bentley's edition "containing many very severe censures." Was Hayley describing the copy once owned by Cowper's

neighbor William Backwell, containing the two "WB" annotations and almost eighty annotations by a different hand critical of Bentley's editorial changes to Milton's verse?

19. For a comparison of the hand of this William Backwell, see Sherlock illus. 5.

20. 10 George III, c. 15. See the National Archives, HL/PO/PB/1/1770/10G3n35.