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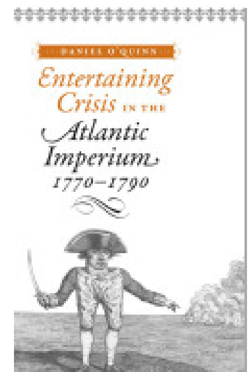
Coda: “In praise of the oak, its advantage and prosperity”



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Coda

"In praise of the oak, its advantage and prosperity"

Chapter 1 opened with a performance in which military men dressed as druids sang "in praise of the oak, its advantage and prosperity." Such a panegyric to the oak is not unusual in the context of wartime writing in England in the eighteenth century. In both Pope and Whitehead, British oaks have a global reach either through their transformation into warships in the case of "Windsor Forest" or through a certain political extension in Whitehead.[1] Here is Whitehead writing as Laureate on the eve of the American war:

Beyond the vast Atlantic tide
Extend your healing influence wide,
    Where millions claim your care:
Inspire each just, each filial thought,
And let the nations round be taught
    The British oak is there.

Tho' vaguely wild its branches spread,
And rear almost an alien head
    Wide-waving o'er the plain,
Let still, unspoil'd by foreign earth,
And conscious of its nobler birth,
The untainted trunk remain.[2]

But this figure of the spreading branches of the British oak—here extending across the Atlantic itself—is simply not possible after the fall of Yorktown in 1781. The loss of the American colonies imposed a certain restraint in this emblematic figure. But this spatial restraint is supplemented by a renewed investment

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in the oak's capacity to represent historical continuity: spatial extension gave way to temporal reach.

A similar combination of restraint and overdetermination can be found in what is perhaps the most significant mobilization of the oak metaphor in the late eighteenth century. I am referring of course to Burke's use of the oak to signify the British constitution in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*: "Because half-a-dozen grasshoppers under a fern make the field ring with their importunate chink, whilst thousands of great cattle, reposed beneath the shadow of the British oak, chew the cud and are silent, pray do not imagine that those who make the noise are the only inhabitants of the field; that of course they are many in number; or that, after all, they are other than the little shrivelled, meagre, hopping, though loud and troublesome insects of the hour."[3] As a figure for the nation or constitution, the important feature of this oak is the capacity of its branches to give shade, but the animalization of British subjects—whether they be revolutionary grasshoppers or loyal cattle—not only privileges the silence of the cows but also renders the entire political arrangement quite compact. The oak's protection is nativist; there is none of the extensibility that played such a key role in Pope or Whitehead. This marks a significant curtailment of the diffusion of British liberty beyond the shores of the British Isles. And we need to recognize that this constitutes a recalibration of imperial governance as much as it does a rejection of Whig suggestions at the time that Burke was writing the *Reflections* that the revolution in France had the potential to diffuse English models of liberty into the heart of Europe. Burke's supplementation of the oak figure with that of the cattle is aimed at ensuring that the oak does not become confused with a younger liberty tree.

It is for this reason that Burke's figure sacrifices extensibility to duration by intertwining the life cycle of the tree with the bonds of the family:

> Our political system is placed in a just correspondence and symmetry with the order of the world, and with the mode of existence decreed to a permanent body composed of transitory parts; wherein, by the disposition of a stupendous wisdom, moulding together the great mysterious incorporation of the human race, the whole, at one time, is never old, or middle aged, or young, but in a condition of unchangeable constancy, moves on through the varied tenour of perpetual decay, fall, renovation and progression. Thus, by preserving the method of nature in the conduct of the state, in what we improve we are never wholly new; in what we retain we are never wholly obsolete. . . . In this choice of inheritance we have given our

> frame of polity the image of a relation in blood; binding up the constitution of our country with our dearest domestic affections.[4]

This is a confusing passage precisely because the image of "a relation in blood" does not sit well with "the varied tenour of perpetual decay, fall, renovation and progression." Burke wants the constitution to be both an "incorporation of the human race" and something that shelters the polity of Britain. This strange hybridization of blood and oak, human and tree, through its very overdetermination, performs a rhetorical intensification that separates him from his predecessors. By collapsing the distinction between humans and plants, Burke has opened the door for a racial interpretation of the constitution: "In this choice of inheritance we have given our frame of polity the image of a relation in blood." And this racialization of governance lays claim to historical constancy by aligning itself with the durability at the heart of the oak figure. The tension between the symbolics of blood nascent in Burke's analogy between family and constitution, on the one hand, and the more subtle invocation of the tree, on the other, not only signals the struggle to redefine the oak figure for a new imperial era but also opens the door for—and perhaps even demands—a reevaluation of the relationship between extension and duration in the notion of British liberty.[5] Could we not argue that Burke's reactivation of the oak metaphor is the trigger that allows for a series of rememorative utterances that seek to address the imperial wound of 1781? We know that at least one poet responded to the *Reflections* in precisely this way and that his poetic meditation on the figure had a profound impact on Wordsworth, Coleridge, Clare, and others.[6] William Cowper's "Yardley Oak," which was written in response to Burke's text, explicitly addresses the reevaluation of extension and durability in the oak metaphor and, in so doing, recalibrates imperial and national relations in quite remarkable ways.

We need to go back to the global war of the early 1780s in order to move forward. In early December 1781, less than two months after Cornwallis's surrender at Yorktown, William Cowper sent an imaginary "sociable conversation" to his friend Joseph Hill in which Cowper articulated his thoughts on the American war. After stating that he knew of no one up to the task of leading Britain out of the conflict, Cowper offered the following summary of the state of the empire:

> If we pursue the war, it is because we are desperate; it is plunging and sinking year after year in still greater depths of calamity. If we relinquish it, the remedy is equally desperate, and would prove, I believe, in the end no remedy at all. Either way we are undone—perseverance will only enfeeble us more, we cannot recover the Colonies by arms. If we discontinue

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> the attempt, in that case we fling away voluntarily, what in the other we strive ineffectually to regain, and whether we adopt the one measure or the other, are equally undone. For I consider the loss of America as the ruin of England; were we less encumbered than we are, at home, we could but ill afford it, but being crushed as we are under an enormous debt that the public credit can at no rate carry much longer, the consequence is sure. Thus it appears to me that we are squeezed to death between the two sides of that sort of alternative, which is commonly called a cleft stick, the most threat'ning and portentous condition in which the interests of any country can possibly be found.[7]

Of the myriad statements of imperial doom from this period, Cowper's remark stands out because the metaphor of the cleft stick captures the predicament of imperial subjectivity at this moment so vividly. To be cleft is to be split or divided to a certain depth, but the expression *a cleft stick* uses the notion of bifurcation to figure the two horns of a dilemma: as the *Oxford English Dictionary* states, it indicates "a position in which advance and retreat are alike impossible." For Cowper, the nation and, by extension, the imperial subject are entangled to the point of being unable to move. Disentangling the imperial subject from this painful, static, almost abject, position involves a phantasmatic reconfiguration of the political beyond the limits of specific policies and actions. In short, the predicament seems to call forth a new kind of political and poetic utterance perhaps best embodied by *The Task*, which was composed in the immediate aftermath of the war.

For Cowper and others, the reverses of the early 1780s, both in America and in other colonial locales, raised the simultaneous possibility that British culture may die and yet live on in a ghostly form elsewhere. Throughout this book I have attempted to show how the complex temporality of this ghosting procedure and the figural attempts to keep it under control permeated the performance cultures of the metropole during this period. In the final two chapters, I have given examples of how postwar culture mobilized the anxieties of the war years to construct new imperial fantasies. In this coda, I wish to return to Cowper as a kind of emblematic figure for cultural change, only this time I am not looking at *The Task* but rather at a lesser known poem, "Yardley Oak," which addresses the changes wrought on the oak figure in the age of revolution and which sums up much of what I have been trying to elucidate in the preceding chapters.

The political dilemma presented in Cowper's 1781 letter presupposes a strong sense of the integration of colony and metropole. For Cowper, the loss of Amer-

ica implies the ruin of England; his thoughts on the nondistinction of England and America emerge frequently in his letters but nowhere more explicitly than in the following missive to John Newton: "I consider England and America as once one country. They were so in respect of interest, intercourse, and affinity. A great earthquake has made a partition, and now the Atlantic Ocean flows between them. He that can drain that Ocean, and shove the two shores together so as to make them aptly coincide and meet each other in every part, can unite them again; but this is the work for Omnipotence, and nothing less than Omnipotence can heal the breach between us" (1:569–70).

What is strange about this account of the American war is that it forgets that the Atlantic Ocean has always separated the colonies from the British Isles. Cowper here imagines a prerevolutionary state that negates the very material structure of the globe. In this fantasy it is contiguity that matters most: the shores must "aptly coincide." It is a figure of an organic whole rent asunder, which in some ideal future state could be sutured together again by none other than God himself. God's role here is important because elsewhere in both the poems and the letters from this period, Cowper emphasizes that this fatal wound—here it is naturalized as an earthquake—is inflicted by Providence because England is a "sinfull Nation" (2:104). Like many other commentators at this juncture, Cowper felt that England had been hollowed out from within and held aristocratic dissipation and political corruption to be the undoing of both the empire and the nation. But, as in the cleft-stick passage, agency has been fully wrested from politicians and citizens and is transferred to a divine nonhuman process. Failed military and state policy not only are subsumed into a narrative of irrevocable decline and fall but also are corrected in a field where men have little or no active role to play.

Roughly ten years after Cowper's appraisal of the end of the American war, he found himself again contemplating the destruction of the nation, only this time he deploys a cultural rather than a natural trope for disintegration:

> I am entirely of your mind respecting this conflagration by which all Europe suffers at present, and is likely to suffer for a long time to come. The same mistake seems to have prevailed as in the American business. We then flattered ourselves that the colonies would prove an easy conquest, and when all the neighbour nations arm'd themselves against France, we imagined I believe that she too would be presently vanquish'd. But we begin already to be undeceived, and God only knows to what a degree we may find we have erred, at the conclusion. Such however is the state of

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> things all around us, as reminds me continually of the Psalmist's expression—*He shall break them in pieces like a potter's vessel,* and I rather wish than hope in some of my melancholy moods that England herself may escape a fracture. (4:426)

As a figure, the broken sherds of the nation implied by his allusion to Psalm 2:9 is more coherent than his strange cancellation of the Atlantic in his 1784 letter, but it still argues that God will break that which man has made, because Britain has set itself against God.

This same sense of providential retribution suffuses "Yardley Oak," but it is played out not only with more rhetorical force but also with more historical specificity:

> Survivor sole, and hardly such, of all
> That once lived here thy brethen, at my birth
> (Since which I number threescore winters past)
> A shatter'd vet'ran, hollow-trunk'd perhaps
> As now, and with excoriate forks deform,
> Relicts of Ages![8]

Cowper's address does two things. First, it establishes a relation of intimacy between this last surviving oak and the aged speaker. This is achieved by constructing the effect of physical proximity between speaker and oak: the poem's descriptive specificity is one of the poem's most prominent rhetorical strategies. And this effect of intimacy is intensified almost immediately by the syntactical ambiguity introduced by the parenthetical phrase in line 3. Cowper's sudden specification of the speaker's age suspends the syntax at the end of line 2 and thus allows "A shatter'd vet'ran" in line 4 to figure not only for the oak but also for the speaker. This figural ambiguity sets up the possibility for complex identifications between the speaker and the tree, which will have important political ramifications as the poem unfolds. At this point, it is enough to recognize that this establishes the potential for precisely the same collapse between the body of the subject and the arborial figure for governance that animated Burke's overdetermined deployment of the oak in the *Reflections*. As we will see, Cowper does not allow that collapse to occur.

But this is not all that is achieved here. The metaphorical comparison between the oak tree and "the shatter'd vet'ran" also activates the memory of past war—and not the triumphalism following the Seven Years' War, but rather the sense of loss characteristic of Cowper's remarks on the American war. I believe

that this phrase evokes the wounded veteran of the American war and this oak is shattered like the potter's vessel alluded to in Cowper's 1793 letter. The full connotations of this metaphor are not activated until seventy lines later, but it is the central enigma of the poem. In what sense is the tree shattered, and in what way is it a veteran?

These questions are temporarily supplanted by an explicit statement of the desire to venerate the tree, which concludes the first verse paragraph:

> . . . Could a mind imbued
> With truth from heav'n created thing adore,
> I might with rev'rence kneel and worship Thee.
> It seems Idolatry with some excuse
> When our forefather Druids in their oaks
> Imagin'd sanctity. The Conscience yet
> Unpurified by an authentic act
> Of amnesty, the meed of blood divine,
> Loved not the light, but gloomy into gloom
> Of thickest shades, like Adam after taste
> Of fruit proscribed, as to a refuge, fled. (6–16)

This is a rather startling turn because it suggests that veneration of the oak is not only a form of pagan idolatry but also akin to Adam's attempt to hide from God's view after consciously breaking God's explicit proscription.

The allusion to book 9 of *Paradise Lost* is deeply significant because the "thickest shades" referred to here are not offered by oak trees. Adam expresses the desire to be "Obscured where highest woods impenetrable / To star or sunlight spread their umbrage broad" (9.1086–87) and ultimately chooses the banyan tree:

> So counselled he and both together went
> Into the thickest wood, there soon they chose
> The fig-tree: not that kind for fruit renowned
> But such as at this day to Indians known
> In Malabar or Deccan spreads her arms
> Branching so broad and long that in the ground
> the bended twigs take root and daughters grow
> About the mother tree, a pillared shade
> High overarched and echoing walks between.
> There oft the Indian herdsman shunning heat

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Shelters in cool and tends his pasturing herds
At loopholes cut through thickest shade. (9.1099–1110)

As Balachandra Rajan has argued, the evocation of the banyan tree from Milton speaks directly to the question of shelter.[9] Adam chooses the tree because it provides shade or, in Cowper's phrase, "gloom." To venerate the oak for its shelter is to misrecognize it as the banyan, and the spiritual cost is, in Cowper's eyes, catastrophic: it is further evidence of the nation's alienation from God. In this context, the verb "might" in line 8 of "Yardley Oak" becomes crucial, for it signifies temptation and the speaker's resistance to it. The speaker might have worshiped the tree, except for his belief that to do so would be to be attempting to hide from one's responsibility before God. Furthermore, in shunning the "loopholes cut through thickest shade" (9.1110), the speaker is abandoning the famous "loop-holes of retreat" that afforded the speaker of book 4 of *The Task* respite, through the distancing effect of remediation, from the violence of imperial war.[10] In that sense, this poem involves a progression toward a performance of historical reckoning.

When we recognize that the capacity to provide shade is precisely the feature of the figure that is so appealing to Burke, then I think the full import of Cowper's intervention becomes clear. For Cowper, the loss of the American colonies and the predicted failure of the war with France amount to symptomatic signs of God's displeasure with the corruption of British liberty, at both a national and an imperial level. What is remarkable here is that Cowper's opening verse paragraph activates the entire historical predicament with such iconic specificity: the shattered oak, the banyan tree, the sense of a nation deformed and hollowed out from the inside. But, most importantly, their collocation suggests that all of these connotations are comparable to one another and to the speaker himself. This collocation implies that these figures, like India and Britain, are bound up in a global historical dynamic.

As the poem unfolds, the two primary elements of the oak figure—extension and duration—are scrutinized historically; and by this I mean that their figural potential is tested against the historical moment of 1791. Cowper's evaluation of this moment in Britain's history is dire, and the poem is suffused with a sense of past or passing glory. As one might expect, Cowper plays out the "mutability in all / That we account most durable below" (70–71) and traces "thy growth / From almost nullity into a state / Of matchless grandeur, and declension thence / Slow into such magnificent decay" (87–90). The pun on "state" bolsters the direct assertion that Britain is in a condition of irrevocable, but nonetheless magisterial, decline.

But Cowper's description of the tree focuses our attention on the tree's boughs and on the hollowing out of its trunk:

> Time made thee what thou wast, King of the woods.
> And Time hath made thee what thou art, a cave
> For owls to roost in. Once thy spreading boughs
> O'erhung the champain, and the num'rous flock
> That grazed it stood beneath that ample cope
> Uncrowded, yet safe-shelter'd from the storm.
> No flock frequents thee now; thou has outlived
> Thy popularity, and art become
> (Unless verse rescue thee awhile) a thing
> Forgotten as the foliage of thy youth. (50–59)

I want to look at the fate of the boughs and trunk in turn, because the loss of the former has an extraordinary effect on the latter, and because it is in the destruction of these elements that the reader gets a sense of precisely how and why this tree is a "shatter'd vet'ran."

After declaring the tree's "magnificent decay," the speaker brings the tree within the orbit of human affairs:

> At thy firmest age
> Thou hadst within thy bole solid contents
> That might have ribb'd the sides or plank'd the deck
> Of some flagg'd Admiral, and tortuous arms,
> The shipwright's darling treasure, didst present
> To the four quarter'd winds, robust and bold,
> Warp'd into tough knee-timber, many a load.
> But the axe spared thee; in those thriftier days
> Oaks fell not, hewn by thousands, to supply
> The bottomless demands of contest waged
> For senatorial honours. (93–103)

It is hard not to think of Pope's "Windsor Forest" here, especially because Cowper's presentation of the oak's potential use in the construction of warships and merchant vessels tallies so well with Pope's double understanding—both military and commercial—of the rush of oaken timber around the globe. The oak addressed in this poem's opening line is a "sole survivor" not because it has been the object of symbolic veneration, but rather because its "brethren" have become the material basis for imperial wars that Cowper clearly signals have more to do

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with the hubris of politicians than the benefit of the state. Again Cowper is reiterating his frequently stated reservations about the failure of corrupt politicians to recognize the true interests of the nation. As the passage unfolds, it becomes clear that man destroyed the forest for ill-advised war, and now it is only a matter for Time to finish the task by "disjoining" atom by atom this "shatter'd vet'ran" (103–8) .

But nestled within this fairly explicit critique is a very subtle gesture. Imperial war is evoked by the pun on "tortuous arms," but by focusing the reader's attention on a fairly arcane element of shipbuilding—knee timber—Cowper consigns the "arms" figure to the notes only to activate it in a surprisingly brutal fashion in the next verse paragraph. At the most explicit comparison between the oak and the state, the speaker suddenly discloses that the tree affords no shelter because it has no limbs:

So stands a Kingdom whose foundations yet
Fail not, in virtue and wisdom lay'd,
Though all the superstructure by the tooth
Pulverized of venality, a shell
Stands now, and semblance only of itself.
Thine arms have left thee. Winds have rent them off
Long since, and rovers of the forest wild
With bow and shaft, have burnt them. Some have left
A splinter'd stump bleach'd to a snowy white,
And some memorial none where once they grew. (120–29)

The suspension of the tree's lack of limbs until this point is extremely shocking because it disjoins this particular tree from the usual political connotations of the emblematic oak figure. And yet the figure of the tree's arms reveals itself to be exceedingly complex. If we understand arms to signify the martial capacity of Georgian England, particularly its naval strength, then the poem recognizes that the diffusion of liberty that was so integral to early theories of empire relies on the felling of oaks such as the one being addressed by the speaker. But the corruption of ministers, and the implicit sinfulness of the nation, have generated a situation where "Thine arms have left thee" in both senses of the word. After the loss of the American war, one can no longer simply assume that Britain can protect its imperial holdings through force of arms, nor can one assume that the symbolic shelter afforded by the boughs of the constitution will protect the citizenry. The implication is that both the military and what Burke described as the frame of the polity have been "pulverized by venality." So the

reader is presented with a particularly dangerous situation where the diffusion of liberty through empire—here figured by the propagation of ships from oaks—has undercut one of its fundamental principles—the notion that the state through its laws will, like the oak, shelter the people. It is the same organic loop that allowed Cowper to understand the loss of America as equivalent to the loss of England.

With the loss of its arms, the tree's capacity to represent shelter has been permanently compromised. From this figural dismemberment comes a different possibility for metaphor. This tree becomes notable not for its arms but for its screaming mouth:

> Embowell'd now, and of thy ancient self
> Possessing nought but the scoop'd rind that seems
> An huge throat calling to the clouds for drink
> Which it would give in riv'lets to thy root,
> Thou temptest none, but rather much forbidd'st
> The feller's toil, which thou could'st ill requite.
> Yet is thy root sincere, sound as the rock,
> A quarry of stout spurs and knotted fangs
> Which crook'd into a thousand whimsies, clasp
> The stubborn soil, and hold thee still erect. (110–19)

This oak tree tempts no one because it offers no shade and provides no suitable timber for arms. With the capacity to subdue enemies and to provide shelter for the polity shorn away, the tree becomes a remarkable figure for the poet. It becomes a mouth calling for sustenance from the sky so that it can sustain the only thing worth sustaining—its roots.

It is in this sense that the tree is a "shatter'd vet'ran" and why the syntactical ambiguity that allows the phrase to also refer to the speaker in the opening verse paragraph is so important. Cowper is laying the groundwork for a different kind of relationship between patriotic poet and national figure. There is an analogy between tree and speaker here, but it does not conform to Burke's "philosophical analogy" between constitution and blood. The analogy does not rest on the capacity for autogeneration nascent in Burke's naturalization of the constitution but rather on the capacity for mediating between sky and soil that Cowper aligns not only with expressivity but also with patriotic Christian humility. This mediating function in the face of physical, spiritual, and national decline is the ultimate task of the poet in the time of national and imperial crisis, when the oak can no longer protect anyone owing to ill usage.

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It is in this light that the poem's truncated ending—the poem remained incomplete—gains its resonance. At the very moment that the speaker declares that the tree is bereft of arms and un-memorialized, he also insists that the tree endures:

> Yet life still lingers in thee, and puts forth
> Proof not contemptible of what she can
> Even where Death predominates. The Spring
> Thee finds not less alive to her sweet force
> Than yonder upstarts of the neighbour wood
> So much thy juniors, who their birth received
> Half a millenium since the date of thine. (130–36)

The question that remains is what is to be done with this "sweet force" in the face of decrepitude. What is the dismembered tree/nation/poet to do? The "yonder upstarts of the neighbour wood" are presented as signs of the future. The fact that the poem does not specify their species is, I think, important because "upstarts" may be referring to the revolutionaries of a neighbouring nation—especially at the time when this poem was composed.

But whether Cowper is referring to France or to new patriots in Britain is not crucial. What follows in both the canceled and the retained versions of the poem is an explicit adoption of a pedagogical stance. Because the "shatter'd vet'ran" can no longer speak, its double, the oracular poet, must perform:

> But since, although well-qualified by age
> To teach, no spirit dwells in thee, seated here
> On thy distorted root, with hearers none
> Or prompter save the scene, I will perform
> Myself, the oracle, and will discourse
> In my own ear such matter as I may. (137–42)

The way "Myself" is stranded at the beginning of line 141 is for me one of the differential marks through which we could define Romanticism, for it is here that an entire political narrative, an entire political symbolics, is suddenly transformed into an example of what not to do. History's dismemberment of the oak has allowed the poet to suddenly and boldly speak to and for the figure in what is described as a theatrical space. But he does so while "seated here / On thy distorted root." He does not become the tree, but rather contends with disfiguration. It is in this light that the poem's obsession with the contorted structures of the ruined tree, its distorted roots and tortuous arms, is so important. The figure

has been disfigured, and that spectacle demands a performance where private desire and public discourse intersect in a profound engagement with the past. In retrospect, could we not simply state that Cowper's sense of dismemberment, traceable to the global crisis that would reconfigure the Atlantic imperium and reorient the entire project of empire, has called forth the performance of Romanticism? That the poem sputters out at this point without fully articulating this prophecy is apt, not only because the September massacres would so radically call into question the hope expressed for the "Spring" but also because Cowper had cleared the ground, or allowed future readers such as Wordsworth and Clare to see how the ground was cleared for their future utterances.

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