

William Cowper and William Mason: Poetry, Politics and the Nonsense Club

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Cowper and the Nonsense Club

In June 1786, William Cowper wrote a letter to his old friend Joseph Hill. In it he expressed his pleasure at having recently heard from another friend of their youth, the first communication received from him for several decades. 'Such notices from friends are always pleasant,' he wrote. 'They refresh the memory of early days, and make me young again.' ¹

The friend to whom Cowper referred was George Colman, who like Cowper himself had attended Westminster School. Like Cowper, Colman had been destined for the law. Neither young man would follow the profession. Colman became a successful playwright and theatre manager; Cowper suffered severe mental breakdown and ended his life as England's most famous poet. Their lives would diverge. But what had cemented their youthful friendship, once school was left behind, was their membership of the Nonsense Club.

In his letter to Hill, Cowper wrote that 'the noble Institution of the Nonsense Club will be forgotten when we are gone who composed it.' This 'Institution' was, as Cowper had written to William Unwin the year before, 'a Club of seven Westminster men to which I belonged, who dined together every Thursday.' ²

The exact identities of all the Club's members are still unclear. Cowper, Colman, Robert Lloyd and Bonnell Thornton were certainly members. It is thought that Chase Price and Charles Churchill may have been others, though in the mid-seventeen-fifties, when the Club was founded, Churchill was a country clergyman, living at a distance from the city. He moved to London in 1758. Whether he was a regular member of the Club or not, Churchill, once the head boy at Westminster, had strong connections to it. A playboy and a rake, he would become the drinking companion of Robert Lloyd, who at the age of thirty-three was to die penniless in a debtor's prison. Joseph Hill himself, though not an old Westminster, attended meetings of the Club and contributed to its literary inventions, though how far he was involved is uncertain.

The Nonsense Club was a convivial literary club. Its members were young men about town, old Westminster scholars already accustomed to the vibrant social scene that London offered. Cowper made clear his own enjoyment of London society, and his youthful pride in being part of it, in a letter to Chase Price, written about 1754: 'Dancing all last Night; In bed one half of the Day and Shooting the other half.' ³ It is a picture of insouciant pleasure greatly at odds with the tormented outpourings of the poet of later years.

Bonnell Thornton, like Cowper and Colman, had been expected to follow a professional career, in his case medicine. Family expectations were disappointed: Thornton had a private income, which allowed him to follow his first love, a life in writing. In 1754, he and Colman began the publication of a magazine, *The Connoisseur*, which purported to be written by 'Mr. Town [...] Critic, and Censor-General.' It ran for two years, and provided Cowper with an opportunity to be published himself. His first essay for *The Connoisseur*, published in March 1756, poked gentle fun at 'Billy Suckling', the callow youth who, quite unfit for sophisticated life in the metropolis, is still tied to his anxious mother's apron strings:

The delicate BILLY SUCKLING is the contempt of the men, the jest of the women, and the darling of his mamma...she is the only woman, that he does not look on with indifference... I

have known him sit with his mamma's white handkerchief round his neck through a whole visit, to guard him from the wind of that *ugly door*, or that *terrible chink in the wainscot*.⁴ Cowper wrote a further four essays in light comic vein for *The Connoisseur*: the last, on modes of conversation – which cannot be looked for among fashionable people, Cowper writes, as there 'it is almost annihilated by universal card-playing' – appeared in September 1756.⁵ The most strikingly amusing of his contributions to the magazines edited by his Nonsense Club friends, however, appeared in the *St. James's Magazine*, which was published by Thornton and Robert Lloyd between 1762 and 1763. This was Cowper's *Dissertation on the Modern Ode*, a humorous commentary on a contemporary poetic style that Cowper and his friends considered laughably unpoetic.

The members of the Nonsense Club, in spite of its chosen name, may have been devoted to pleasure, but they took poetry seriously. They wrote to each other constantly in verse with, in Lance Berelsen's words, 'a love of spontaneity, and an extreme consciousness of self.'⁶ Words must be set down as they suggested themselves, immediately on the page, thoughts and feelings expressed without revision. Charles Churchill, who would become England's best known satirist in the last half of the eighteenth century, declared himself to be such a poet in the second book of his satire *Gotham*:

Nothing of Books, and little known of men,

When the mad fit comes on, I seize the pen,

Rough as they run, the rapid thoughts set down,

Rough as they run, discharge them on the Town. (ll. 71-74)⁷

The uncompromising, vigorous force of Churchill's satire and his unconcern with the opinions of others, earned him the soubriquets of the Bear and the Bruiser. His satire, of course, was directed at the public, to whom he presented himself as a plain, honest versifier casting needed light on the iniquities of the times. The verse written by other members of the Club to each other, though gentler and more intimate in tone, was no less immediate and honest. Cowper's own 'Epistle to Robert Lloyd Esq.' not only included compliments on Lloyd's own verse, but also revealed a personal reason for taking up his pen, a habit that would continue through his writerly life. He 'presume[s] to address the Muse':

...to divert a fierce banditti,

(Sworn foes to everything that's witty),

That, with a black infernal train,

Make cruel inroads in my brain,

And daily threaten to drive thence

My little garrison of sense:

The fierce banditti which I mean,

Are gloomy thoughts led on by spleen.

Then there's another reason yet,

Which is, that I may fairly quit

The debt which justly became due
The moment that I heard from you:
And you might grumble, crony mine,
If paid in any other coin. (ll. 12-26)

Literary effort was the valued currency of communication between the members of the Club. And in writing to his friend, Cowper was not afraid to be open about the 'fierce banditti' of depression and anxiety that already oppressed him. The manner in which he renders these lines, however, also demonstrates the wit and lightness of touch that would, much later, make 'The Ballad of John Gilpin' so popular with readers.

In his poem, Cowper compares the 'easy jingle' of the early eighteenth-century poet Matthew Prior to Lloyd's own poetry:

Matthew (says Fame) with endless pains
Smoothed and refined the meanest strains,
Nor suffered one ill-chosen rhyme
To escape him at the idlest time. (ll. 73-6)

This approach to poetry, Cowper goes on, is suspect:

Sure so much labour, so much toil,
Bespeak at least a stubborn soil.

Theirs be the laurel-wreath decreed,

Who both write well and write full speed. (ll. 81-84)

These lines seem a comical comment, as if dashing off a verse or two requires no poetic integrity at all, but the final couplet of Cowper's poem indicates his view of Lloyd's real worth as a poet: his friend 'Nor needs his genuine ore refine/ 'Tis ready polished from the mine.' (ll. 89-90)⁸

The Club and Poetic Criticism

The members of the Nonsense Club both laughed at and disliked, as Cowper's comment on Prior shows, what they saw as poetry in chains: its purveyors apparently bound by rules, writing not with inspired spontaneity, but with the kind of laborious effort that negated their claims to be true poets. Two poets who were particular targets for these critics were Thomas Gray and his friend William Mason. The two men had formed what would become a lifelong friendship when Mason was a Cambridge undergraduate and Gray, who became his mentor as well as his friend, was a Fellow of Peterhouse. Gray had published his 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard' in 1751; in 1757 his two odes, 'The Bard' and 'On the Progress of

Poesy', followed it into print. By the late 1750s Mason had published a number of poems, including several odes, and written two tragedies, *Elfrida* and *Caractacus*.

For the Nonsense Club members, Gray and Mason perfectly exemplified the inadequacies of modern poets. In 1760, Colman and Lloyd published *Two Odes*. The first, 'To Obscurity', was a parody of the two odes Gray had published in 1757; the second, 'To Oblivion', parodied Mason's 'Ode to Memory'. In their parodies, they mocked what they saw as the outmoded, even archaic, devices used by the labouring ode-writers of the day. In addition, Gray had laid himself open to accusations of poetic arrogance: he had prefixed his two 1757 odes with a motto translated from the Greek poet Pindar, 'vocal to the intelligent alone'. 'The Progress of Poesy', which contained unexplained references to the poets of the past, including Shakespeare and Milton, particularly caused 'misunderstanding and confusion', which Colman and Lloyd seized on with delight:

Daughter of Chaos and old Night,

Cimmerian Muse, all hail!

That wrapt in never-twinkling gloom canst write,

And shadowest meaning with thy dusky veil!

are the opening lines of 'Ode to Obscurity'.⁹ The initial address to the 'Daughter of Chaos' echoes the beginning of Mason's 'Ode to Memory' – 'Mother of Wisdom!' – which is followed in the second stanza by 'Hail, Memory, hail!'¹⁰ In his *Dissertation on the Modern Ode*, published three years later, Cowper instructs the poets who wish to write odes according to 'true mechanical principles' in the art of this kind of poetic appeal: 'Whether the poet addresses himself to 'Mirth or Melancholy', or any abstract quality, he should take care that he 'breaks out in a fine enthusiasm, with an Oh, or Hail! Or some such [...] expression.'¹¹ 'Daughter of Chaos and old Night' is a reference to Alexander Pope's 'Daughter of Chaos and eternal Night', the goddess 'Dulness', in his satire *The Dunciad*; the Cimmerian caves, in classical mythology, were sunk in gloomy darkness.¹² Colman and Lloyd are poking fun not only at Gray's poetic obfuscations, the 'dusky veil' he draws over meaning, but also at his, and Mason's, frequent classical allusions, sometimes themselves obscure.

The compound epithet 'never-twinkling' is a mischievous reversal of Gray's use of 'many-twinkling' in 'The Progress of Poesy'.¹³ The shorter poems of Milton, himself a user of the compound epithet, had enjoyed a renaissance amongst readers in the middle of the century: in view of this, the advice of the *Dissertation* would be to 'Take Milton, read his shorter poems [...] wherever you meet with an epithet, more especially if it be a compound one, put it in your notebook.' To the parodists, the use of compound epithets could also be seen to result from the modern fashion of 'sensibility' and the virtues of lonely contemplation in gloomy settings. 'A Tower', Cowper wrote, tongue firmly in cheek, will be of 'an insignificant appearance that is not moss-grown as well as cloud-capt.'¹⁴ The 'Ode to Memory' contains a 'moss-grown cave', Gray's 'Elegy' an 'ivy-mantled tower'.¹⁵

In the first stanza of 'Ode to Oblivion', the parodists include their own 'hoar and moss-grown cell' where the 'Parent of Ease! Oblivion old/delightest still to dwell'. And in the first stanza of 'Ode to Obscurity', they make very clear whose poetry they are mocking: 'Heard ye the din of Modern Rhimers' bray?/ It was cool M—n: or warm G—y/ Involv'd in tenfold smoke'.

For Churchill the satirist, Mason and Gray failed in the poetic mission not only because of their perceived pusillanimous verse – as I, Churchill asks in a reference to the 'Elegy', to 'Along the Church-way path complain with Gray?' – but also because of what he saw as their

unwillingness to challenge authority as he did. In his poem *The Author*, published in 1763, he articulates the imagined attitude of such feeble-minded poets:

‘All sacred is the name and power of kings,

All States and Statesmen are those mighty Things

Which, howsoe’er they out of course may roll,

Were never meant for Poets to control.’¹⁶

Churchill uncompromisingly dismissed Mason and Gray as poets, and what he saw as their lukewarm offerings to the Muse. Colman’s and Lloyd’s parodies playfully criticised the perceived obscurity and artificial poetic devices in Gray’s two odes and Mason’s ‘Ode to Memory’. Cowper’s *Dissertation* pointed with fine comic verve at the bad habits of modern ode writers who, armed with a number of such poetic devices, could treat an ode as a mechanical entity to be produced on any topic, with apparent lack of attention to ‘the warm emotions of the feeling heart’.¹⁷

Cowper’s criticisms and Colman’s and Lloyd’s odes, though well received, were less than fair. Their composition had been prompted by genuine concerns about poetry itself, but there was a more personal reason for their dismissive attitude to Mason and Gray, made evident in a letter Cowper wrote to Joseph Hill in 1777: ‘I was prejudiced; (Gray) did not belong to our Thursday Society, and was an Eaton man, which lower’d him prodigiously in our Esteem.’¹⁸ The writer of *The Elegy* had, unfortunately for him, attended the wrong school. And William Mason, no Eton man himself, was condemned along with his friend and mentor.

Mason, the ‘Antients’ and ‘Pindaricks’

Amongst the criticisms Cowper levelled at ode writers in the *Dissertation* was their neglect of the ‘Antients’, those ‘hum-drum old fellows’, who had been a source of poetic inspiration, style and wisdom to succeeding generations of writers.¹⁹ These remarks showed how little he really knew, or in fact remembered, of William Mason’s work and poetic ambition. Eleven years before the *Dissertation* was published, Cowper had written to Chase Price about ‘an admirable thing [...] just published by Mason of Cambridge [...] He calls it *Elfrida*, a Dramatick Poem. It is written upon the Greek plan.’ Having read it, Cowper had ‘recommended it to 2 or 3 who may be called sound and staunch Judges of all works of genius.’²⁰

With due regard for the ‘Antients’ Mason, setting the action of his drama in ancient Britain, had made a decision to structure it according to the Greek unities: the action must take place in one setting over the period of a day. The full title of the piece was ‘*Elfrida*; written on the model of the ancient Greek tragedy.’ In a series of letters, which were prefixed to the drama in its published editions, he explained his reasoning. The story of the drama is one of doomed love, that of the heroine *Elfrida* and the king’s henchman *Athelwold*, who is sent by the king to report on *Elfrida*’s reputed beauty. *Athelwold*, finding her as beautiful as report says, falls in love with her and she with him. The king, who had wanted her for his queen, discovers the pair. *Athelwold* is killed, and *Elfrida* takes the veil. It was a story to appeal to modern, feeling sensibilities. In his first letter Mason makes clear that his intention had been to tell a story in which ‘affections’ would be raised ‘rather from the impulse of common humanity, than the distresses of royalty and the fate of kingdoms’ – though a king in this drama can certainly be seen as distressed and distressing others – and in doing so ‘to pursue the antient method, so far as it is probable a Greek poet, were he alive, would do now, in order to adapt himself to

the genius of our times, and the character of our Tragedy.’ The simplicity and style of classical structure were to be put to use in the service of modern sensibilities. In his second letter, Mason points out that Milton’s tragedy *Samson Agonistes* had itself been written on the Greek model: in spite of Mason’s admiration for Milton, he felt that the great poet’s play failed to appeal to his own age because it was not adapted to ‘the general taste’.²¹

Mason’s desire to bring the ancient writers before the eighteenth-century public was not confined to drama. Commenting in his second letter on the effect upon the imagination of ‘the Lyric Muse’, he writes that ‘Few men have a strength of imagination capable of pursuing the flights of Pindar’.²² In spite of his awareness of such a lack, it was the inspiration of Pindar that was to lead, *pace* Cowper, to Mason’s composition of perhaps his most accomplished and acclaimed ode.

Pindar, who wrote in the fifth century BC, was best known to eighteenth-century poets for his *epinikia*, the odes he composed and declaimed in honour of the victors at the Greek Games. Though these were events concerned with physical prowess, they were also of great religious importance, requiring a poet of high skill and moral authority to match their significance. Later classical commentators referred to Pindar’s odes as ‘rivers of eloquence’; he wrote with ‘stately and grand rhythms’; his clauses were not ‘slaves to a necessary order, but ones that are noble, brilliant and free’, showing ‘frequent disregard for normal sequence’.²³

Pindar’s poetry was rediscovered at the Renaissance. Milton greatly admired him, and the seventeenth-century poet Abraham Cowley, amongst others, translated some of his odes. ‘Pindaricks’, original or in translation, became a popular literary medium. The problem was that in writing such poems, these poets felt that in view of Pindar’s perceived technique, they themselves had no need to be ‘slaves to a necessary order’, but could concentrate on writing what in their judgement was ‘noble, brilliant and free’, with a general disregard for any kind of regular structure. What Cowper had to say, in the middle of the following century, about poets’ casual attitude to ode-writing, certainly applied to these creators of Pindaric verse.

Pindar’s odes, however, with their ‘stately and grand rhythms’, were in fact very carefully structured, the results of ‘a complex, highly developed, and conscious art’ poorly understood, or not understood at all, by English practitioners.²⁴ Almost all Pindar’s odes were written in a varying number of triads. The first two stanzas of each triad, the strophe and antistrophe, were equal in number and length of lines, and in metrical pattern. The last stanza, the epode, had a different number of lines from the first two, as well as a different length of line and metrical pattern. Where an ode contained more than one triad, each epode corresponded in metre, line length and line number, just as each strophe and antistrophe corresponded similarly with the others. It is thought that in ancient Greece, when triadic lyric poetry was performed by a chorus, the strophe was sung as the chorus danced in one direction, and the antistrophe as it reversed its movement. The epode was a stationary completion of the poem. Cowper had complained in his *Dissertation* that modern odists were in the habit of varying line lengths disproportionately, ‘pairing them together like a dwarf walking by the side of a giant’, but the Pindaric method encouraged such variation in the service of the verse, as long as it was structurally controlled. Indeed, such a variation in the poetic form helped to drive and energise the work.²⁵

In 1706 the playwright William Congreve, who had studied Pindar’s poetry seriously, and discovered how carefully it was constructed, wrote that for him, not one true Pindaric ode had been produced in English. What did exist, to his obvious irritation, were numerous ‘rambling and grating Papers of Verses, pretending to be Copies of his Works’.²⁶ Congreve’s criticisms resulted, for some poets, in a change of approach to the Pindaric ode. In the mid-1740s, William Collins and Mark Akenside both produced odes which show evidence of attention to

Congreve's strictures: several of the odes published by Collins in 1746, for example his 'Ode to Mercy' and 'Ode to Liberty', were in sections marked as strophe, antistrophe and epode. Rather than following true Pindaric structure, Collins was in fact creating his own version of it: 'Ode to Mercy' consists of a single strophe and antistrophe only; 'Ode to Liberty' has a strophe followed immediately by an epode, then an antistrophe followed by a further epode. The poet was experimenting with Greek form, but rejecting the authentic Pindaric model.²⁷

In contrast, two odes in Akenside's collection of 1745, 'On Leaving Holland' and 'On Lyric Poetry', conform to the model exactly. They were written in triads, strophe and antistrophe following the same rhythmic and metric pattern, while the epodes structurally matched each other. The problem with these odes, however, is their dull, unvaried line length and the absence of any sense of the excitement, drama and inspiration which were essential elements of Pindaric verse. The initial stanza, or strophe, of 'On Leaving Holland' is a complaint about the poet's uninspired sojourn at Leyden's university: the 'maternal fogs' that he refers to in the final line seem to have settled, in a most un-Pindaric spirit, on his plodding lines:

Adieu to Leyden's lonely bound,
The Belgian muse's sober seat;
Where shedding frugal gifts around
On all the fav'rites at her feet,
She feeds the body's bulky frame
For passive, persevering toils;
And lest, for some ambitious aim
The daring mind should scorn her homely spoils
She breathes maternal fogs to damp its restless flame.²⁸

The 'true Pindarist'

We do not know if Mason had read Congreve's comments, or what his influences were in this respect, but in 1747 he produced an ode that not only adhered strictly to Pindaric structure but also, unlike Akenside's attempts, contained the lines of varying metrical interest that were essential for an ode to have any claim to follow the Pindaric model.

Mason had gone down from St John's, Cambridge, in 1746; in the following year, unexpectedly, he was nominated for a vacant Fellowship at Pembroke. His Pindaric ode, 'On Expecting to Return to Cambridge', was the result. In it, he expressed his longing to return to 'fair Learning's spiry seats', where poetry first 'my soul enchain'd', and to the social pleasures arising from converse with like souls, 'The mental music of accordant breasts.'²⁹ The prospect of a Fellowship came to nothing, and the ode itself remained unpublished until 1797, the year of Mason's death. His adoption of the true Pindaric form in the ode, however, his conformation to strictly regulated strophe, antistrophe and epode, all containing lines of varying length, have led critics to see him as leading the vanguard of a true Pindaric renewal. John Draper wrote that 'In point of (Pindaric) structure [...] Mason may be said to have been

ahead of his time [...] of true Pindarists he stands at the beginning of a mid-century revival.’

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Mason was born and brought up in Hull, where his father was the vicar of Holy Trinity Church, and where he attended the local grammar school. Though the chief burden of his ode is the poet’s pleasure at contemplating a return to academic life, the first stanza, or strophe, describes and celebrates the lively commercial scene he will leave behind:

While Commerce, riding on thy refluent tide,
Impetuous Humber! wafts her stores
From Belgian and Norwegian shores
And spreads her countless sails from side to side;
While from yon crowded strand
Thy genuine sons the pinnacle light unmoor,
Break the white surge with many a sparkling oar,
To pilot the rich freight o’er each insidious sand...³¹

The language of this initial stanza creates, as Akenside failed to do, a sense of excitement, of mobile plenitude. ‘Commerce [...] spreads her countless sails from side to side’; the oarsmen ‘break the white surge with many a sparkling oar’; the river itself is energetically ‘Impetuous’. The sense of movement and purpose is reinforced by the variation in line length. Length of line, too, is matched by the poet to the events and scenes of the stanza. The ‘countless sails’ of the fourth line, following two shorter lines of four beats, spread themselves within a line of five beats. The subsequent line shrinks again to three beats, its length echoing the cluttered sense of the ‘crowded strand’ where the ‘pinnacle light’ is moored. The excitement Mason communicates, in this initial stanza, through choice of language and sympathetic line variation, can be seen as a manifestation of the kind of poetic buoyancy for which Pindar himself was noted.

When Cowper wrote his *Dissertation* in the early 1760s, he was likely to have seen the book of Mason’s odes published in 1756. Among them was another Pindaric ode, ‘On the Fate of Tyranny’: it was published many times subsequently, frequently in Robert Dodsley’s famous *Collection*.³² Mason was no rough and ready purveyor of satire in the manner of Churchill. He was, however, in spite of Churchill’s implied criticism, a staunch and vocal Whig, constantly concerned with the importance of the constitutional contract, genuine partnership between people and king, as a bulwark against tyranny. In addition, he was very ready to express his political views in verse. His long didactic poem *The English Garden* is not only a practical gardening guide, which was used as such by gardening friends and acquaintances, but also a political statement, in which all that is forced and rigid in garden design and practice becomes a metaphor for tyranny. For

Each plant that springs

Holds, like the people of a free-born state,
Its right fair franchised; rooted to a spot

It yet has claims to air; from lib'ral heaven

It yet has claim to sunshine, and to showers:

Air, showers and sunshine are its liberty.

(Book 3, ll. 179-184)

And he laments the damage done by insensitive gardeners, resulting in sidelong walls

Of shaven yew; the holly's prickly arms

Trimm'd into high arcades; the tonsile box

Wove, in mosaic made of many a curl,

Around the figur'd carpet of the lawn... (Book 1, ll. 397-401)

All are 'hideous wounds' given to nature by mastering mankind, as a tyrant restricts and oppresses a people.³³

Mason took for the theme of his ode, 'The Fate of Tyranny', the verses from the Book of Isaiah which describe the downfall of Babylon, its tyrant king, and the release of the Jews from bondage. In writing *Elfrida*, he had looked back to ancient Greece for dramatic form. For his ode on tyranny he looked back not only to Pindar, but also to the ancient Hebrew writings revered by the eighteenth century as sublime, for their divine provenance and elevated language. At the beginning of the century the immoderately tempered critic John Dennis had opined that of all poetry 'the ode is the most degenerated'. Poetry's purpose was to improve moral behaviour. To this end, the reader should be exposed to sublime language and noble action, in order that his own passions should be moved. What, then, in Dennis' view, could be more appropriate for the reader than to profit from the awakening of passions moved by 'The Wrath and Vengeance of an angry God?'³⁴ In his ode, Mason used Pindaric form to tell an ancient Hebrew story, in which a vengeful Creator destroys a godless tyrant and sets His people free. In 1688, the story of Babylon's downfall had found an echo in Britain's Glorious Revolution against the threat of despotism under the Catholic king James the Second. The moral message of Mason's poem for his own times concerns the deserved end of overweening, centralised power.

The metric structure of the ode indicates the poet's willingness to experiment with form, in order best to suit it to the tenor of his text. The ode is divided into three triads. Each strophe and antistrophe consists of eight lines of varied and matching length; the fifteen-line epodes are composed of varying lines and agree structurally.

The second stanza – the first antistrophe – articulates the response of 'Nature' to the tyrant's longed-for destruction:

He falls; and earth again is free,

Hark! at the call of Liberty

All Nature lifts the choral song.

The fir-trees, on the mountain's head

Rejoice through all the pomp of shade;

The lordly cedars nod on sacred Lebanon:

Tyrant! they cry, since thy fell force is broke,

Our proud heads pierce the skies, nor fear the woodman's stroke.

Action and injunction within the poem are evoked, with dramatic brevity, in lines such as that which begins this stanza. 'He falls' – the accent itself appropriately falling on the second word – could hardly describe more briefly the deserved end of an oppressive tyrant, now reduced simply to 'He': the rest of the short line ends on the emphasised 'free', the word central to the poem's theme. The stanza's final line, in contrast, is a long six-beat line, in which Lebanon's 'lordly cedars' express joy at their release from suffering. Carefully, Mason has matched generosity of line length here to the message of the stanza, so that 'Nature' expands, becomes itself, at the tyrant's demise: the trees raise themselves skywards once more.

In the epode of the second triad the poet himself, in the role of chorus to events, describes the tyrant's history and end:

Is this the man, whose nod

Made the earth tremble, whose terrific rod

Levell'd her loftiest cities? Where he trod,

Famine pursued, and frown'd;

Till Nature groaning round,

Saw her rich realms transform'd to deserts dry;

While at his crowded prison's gate,

Grasping the keys of fate,

Stood stern Captivity.

Vain man! Behold thy righteous doom;

Behold each neighb'ring monarch's tomb;

The trophied arch, the breathing bust,

The laurel shades their sacred dust:

While thou, vile outcast, on this hostile plain,

Moulders't a vulgar corse, among the vulgar slain. 35

The epode's short lines enable an intense distillation into personification of 'Famine' and 'stern Captivity', the horrors of the despot's reign. The last two lines again expand to describe the tyrant's present state, his corpse cast unceremoniously beyond Babylon's destroyed city walls. Stripped of power, this is the tyrant's final reality. Again, in this ode,

Mason demonstrated a capacity not only to follow the Pindaric model, but also to invest his poem with the poetic energy that was the *sine qua non* for any professed imitator.

Mason the Whig

We can, in addition, sense in the voice of the writer his own passionate response to the downfall of all tyrants, represented here by the Babylonian oppressor. Mason, who became an Anglican priest, had been brought up by a clergyman father who was also a Whig. At an early age he had been introduced to the works of the seventeenth-century Whig philosopher John Locke. 'No government', Locke had written, 'can have a right to obedience from a people who have not freely consented to it.'³⁶ The reference in his epode to 'neighb'ring' monarchs, their 'sacred dust' honoured by 'trophied arch' and 'breathing bust', indicates Mason's belief that kings could certainly exist, and had their uses, as long as they were kept in check. In September 1761, in his role as royal chaplain, only days before the coronation of the young king George the Third, he would preach a sermon at St James's, before king and court, which in the guise of religious exposition articulated such a view.

Mason took for his text part of verse iii. 17, from the Second Epistle to the Corinthians: 'Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.' True Christianity, he claimed, can only flourish in a country where there is political freedom. Indeed, the two are interdependent: 'If, by the Spirit of the Lord, we understand the influence of true Religion, and by liberty, the advantages of Civil Freedom, the text will import to us a most important general truth [...] that a land of liberty is the only one favourable to the true cultivation of (the) religious principle.' In support of his theme, and at the same time flattering his hearers, not least the king, he quoted from Montesquieu's *L'Esprit des Lois*, a book whose message would contribute to the birth of the French Revolution: 'There is a nation on the globe', Montesquieu had written, 'the very fundamental object of whose constitution is political freedom.' Many of the Reverend Mason's audience would have read Montesquieu's book, which had been published in English in 1750, and would immediately understand to which nation he referred: 'They will instinctively perceive [...] that it is not far from every one of them.' We are not the unfortunate French, Mason implies, oppressed by an uncaring monarchy, but a country where political enlightenment flourishes, with a new king who will surely know his place. His sermon concludes with a reference to the king himself, who in being crowned will also be affirming his loyalty to the constitution: 'Our gracious Sovereign is about to confirm to us these our natural rights by the sanction of a solemn oath taken upon the Gospels of Christ.' In other words, George, he is saying, if you appear to renege on the power-sharing promise of 1688, you will offend not only your countrymen, but God Himself.³⁷

Mason was no 'Bear' or 'Bruiser' in the style of the pugnacious and self-advertising Churchill. He was, however, more modestly, consistently prepared to express and animate his political stance through his writing. The themes and images of his verse, and the manner of their exposition, make frequent reference to his political view. And in his sermon before the coronation of the new king, he was able to accomplish what Churchill, himself an ordained priest, could never have done. Seizing his moment, he produced a sermon that was, in truth, a spiritually directed political broadcast. In view of Mason's royal audience, it was a bold act.

Churchill and his Nonsense Club cronies had publicly criticised the poetry of Mason and his friend Gray. Cowper's attitude to the verse of the old Westminster head boy, however, would prove to be equivocal. In a letter to William Unwin, possibly written in March 1780, he referred to the 'natural unforced Effusions of Genius' of 'Churchill, the great Churchill', who

‘deserved the name of Poet.’³⁸ A few months later, in January 1781, Cowper began writing his series of moral essays, of which *Table Talk* was one. In this poem, he makes a different kind of reference to Churchill and his approach to verse-making:
Surly and slovenly, and bold and coarse,

Too proud for art, and trusting in mere force,

Spendthrift alike of money and of wit,

Always at speed, and never drawing bit. (ll. 682-685)³⁹

For Cowper, his old friend’s natural gifts had been corrupted by his careless attachment to a playboy’s life. Having deserted his wife, become a member of the Hell Fire Club, eloped with a girl half his age, and allied himself with the notorious and politically ambitious rake John Wilkes, he had to resign from the ministry. It is unsurprising that in his verse Cowper, the anxious Christian, should shake his head at the perceived waste of Churchill’s poetic talents.

Something more is suggested here, however. Many years before, Cowper had asserted that ‘Theirs be the laurel-wreath decreed/ Who both write well and write full speed.’ Now the last of these methods, claimed by Churchill as authentication of his poetic sincerity, has become instead, for Cowper, inadequate, ‘slovenly’, created by ‘mere force’ and ‘always at speed.’ We have seen that in later years he confessed that much of the prejudice against the poet Gray felt by the youthful members of the Nonsense Club sprang, trivially, from his attendance at the wrong school. Cowper’s own poetic efforts over time had shown him the impossibility of constantly writing ‘at full speed’. In 1784 he would begin his translation of that most revered of ‘Antients’, Homer. It would take him six years to complete. Long ago, he had admired Mason’s *Elfrida*, with its creative dependence upon Cowper’s admired ‘Antients’. The success of ‘The Fate of Tyranny’ was demonstrated in its frequent re-publications. That it was thought well of is evident from a reference to Mason by Thomas Nevile, who referred to its author in his own *Imitations of Horace*, published in 1758: ‘Mason, who writes not with low sons of rhyme/ But on Pindaric pinions soars sublime’ (ll. 9-10).⁴⁰ Might Cowper look differently now at the poet who had ambitiously revived, with effort and to acclaim, the form and style of Pindar?

Cowper, Mason, and the idea of freedom

Mason was a committed Whig, whose politics informed his verse. His belief about what was required of a monarch was echoed by Cowper himself in lines from the poem in which he had criticised Churchill’s approach to writing poetry. ‘Man made for kings! Those optics are but dim/ That tell you so – say, rather they for him’, Cowper writes in *Table Talk* (ll. 55-56). More than this, religion, as Mason claimed in his sermon at St James’s, can only live where men are free:

Freedom has a thousand charms to show

That slaves, howe’er contented, never know.

The mind attains, beneath her happy reign,

The growth that nature meant she should attain...

Religion, richest favour of the skies,
Stands most reveal'd before the freeman's eyes...
The soul, emancipated, unoppress'd,
Free to prove all things and hold fast the best...
Religion, virtue, truth, whate'er we call

A blessing – freedom is the pledge of all. (ll. 260-287) ⁴¹

Cowper's belief that 'freedom is the pledge of all' explains his sympathy with the aims of the Yorkshire Association, a Whig-led movement for parliamentary reform set up late in 1779, and in which Mason was actively involved. It was created in protest at what was seen as monarchical interference in parliamentary affairs, the favouring of placemen sympathetic to the king, and general waste of public money. Mason, whose rectory was at Aston in Yorkshire, whole-heartedly involved himself in the cause, regularly making speeches and charring meetings. There were high hopes that reform might be achieved, but in the end very little changed. At some distance from Yorkshire, and assessing the situation from his armchair, Cowper was very much aware of the existence of the organisation and the justice of its aims, criticising, in a letter written early in 1780, 'The undue Extension of the Influence of the Crown, the [...] Displacing of Men obnoxious to the Court, [...] the Waste of Public Money.'⁴² He took, however, as W.B. Hutchings has pointed out, a balanced view. He understood the need for protest, this particular 'attack upon excessive executive power', but feared public disorder as a result. 'Freedom' for Cowper, as Hutchings writes, was the necessary foundation for a civilised society, as long as it was 'guarded by wholesome laws responsibly applied.'⁴³ He need not have been concerned: the Whig gentry who made up the Association were far more inclined to robust speech than to riot.

There was a particular aspect of freedom, however, to which both poets would address themselves publicly, through speech and the pen. Both abhorred slavery, and publicised its iniquities. Cowper articulated its ugliness and brutality in poems such as 'The Negro's Complaint', and his moral satire 'Charity'. Mason, through his activities in the Yorkshire Association, became the associate and friend of William Wilberforce, the great advocate of abolition. In 1788, the year in which Cowper published 'The Negro's Complaint', he preached a sermon in York Minster for which he took the text 'For we also are his offspring' (Acts xvii. 28). In it, he refers his audience to that 'horrible [...] opinion, which, resting itself on argument that can go no deeper than the very [...] tincture of the skin, has led many, who yet call themselves Christians, to treat beings of the same divine origin with themselves, even worse than [...] they treat the beasts that perish.'⁴⁴

Mason articulated his abhorrence not only as a preacher, but also as a poet. In the same year that he preached his sermon he wrote an ode, 'November the Fifth, 1788', commemorating the centenary of the arrival in Britain of the Protestant William and Mary, and the departure of the threat of Catholic oppression under James the Second. In his ode, Mason celebrated the return of 'freedom' to Britain, but he also questioned its meaning in an enlightened society:

May then that nation hope to claim
The glory of the Christian name

That loads fraternal tribes with bondage worse than death?

Tell them, they vainly grace, with festive joy

The day that freed them from Oppression's rod,

At Slavery's mart who barter and who buy

The image of their God. ⁴⁵

As in his sermon at St James's, freedom and Christianity were presented as inseparable. How can either flourish where the savage hypocrisy of the slave trade degrades national life? Mason asks the question that Cowper, in all his poetic comment on slavery, is also putting: can this be called a civilised Christian nation, where freedom itself is corrupted?

As a member of the Nonsense Club, Cowper had enjoyed the fellowship of other youthful writers, his old school friends, sharing their dedication to the value of unforced verse. With them, he wittily condemned in print the poets, such as Mason and Gray, whose arduous poetic labours, in their view, destroyed the true spirit of poetry. Consideration of the legacy of the classical writers which Cowper felt was missing from the work of modern odists was, however, a central concern for Mason, as he showed in his writing. The pusillanimous attitude to politics attributed to him by Cowper's literary colleague Churchill was also unfounded. From childhood, Mason had absorbed the Lockean belief in the duty owed by a monarch to his subjects, a view shared, as his poetry shows, by Cowper himself. And he was moved enough not only to make use of a sermon to instruct a new king in his political obligation, but to actively involve himself in the attempts of the Yorkshire Association to control monarchical power. In spite of Cowper's youthful dismissal of Mason, the two men were not only to share a political outlook and a hatred of slavery and those who dealt in it, but also a willingness to publicise their views in their poetry. And time and experience would eventually convince Cowper of the inevitability of poetic effort, the impossibility of always writing 'at full speed'.

Mason, a sociable and committed priest, died at his rectory in Aston, Yorkshire, in 1797; Cowper, the victim of imagined religious persecution, died in Norfolk three years later. They were very different, as poets and men. If, later in their lives, they had met, how much might they have found to say to each other, long after the Nonsense Club had ceased to exist?

Notes

¹ 9 June 1786, *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, vol. II, eds. James King and Charles Ryskamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 563.

² 30 April 1785, *op. cit.*, p. 346.

³ c. 1754, *op. cit.*, vol. 1 (1979), p. 74.

⁴ *The Connoisseur*, no. 111 (11 March 1756), *op. cit.*, vol. V (1986), p. 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 138 (16 September 1756), *op. cit.*, p. 24.

⁶ Lance Berelson, *The Nonsense Club* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 119.

⁷ Robert Anderson, *The Works of the British Poets*, vol. X (1795), p. 454 (books.google.co.uk).

⁸ *Poetical Works of William Cowper*, ed. H.S. Milford, 3rd edn (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), pp. 266-8.

- 9 *The Poems of Thomas Gray, William Collins and Oliver Goldsmith*, ed. Roger Lonsdale (London: Longmans, 1969), p. 158; ‘Ode to Obscurity’ and ‘Ode to Oblivion’ can be accessed on <http://spenserians.cath.vt.edu>
- 10 *The Works of William Mason*, vol. 1 (London, 1811), pp. 19-20.
- 11 King and Ryskamp, op. cit., vol. V, pp. 36, 35.
- 12 *The Dunciad in Four Books* (1743), Book One, l. 12 in *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt (1963), (London: Routledge, repr. 1992), p. 721.
- 13 l. 35, in Roger Lonsdale, p. 166
- 14 King and Ryskamp, op. cit., p. 38.
- 15 Mason, vol. 1, p. 21; ‘Elegy’, l. 9 in Lonsdale, p. 119.
- 16 *The Author*, Book One, pp. 6-7 ([http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/Eighteenth-Century Collections Online](http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/Eighteenth-Century_Collections_Online)).
- 17 Op. cit., p. 36.
- 18 20 April 1777, op.cit., vol. 1, p. 268.
- 19 Op. cit., vol. V, p. 33.
- 20 1 April 1752, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 183.
- 21 Mason, vol. II, pp. 177-8, 182.
- 22 Ibid., p. 182.
- 23 *Quintilian*, in *Pindar*, ed. William Race, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p.1; *Dionysius of Halikarnassos: de Compositione* 22 in Race, pp. 25-6.
- 24 Robert Shafer, *The English Ode to 1660: An Essay in Literary History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1918), p. 155.
- 25 Op. cit., p. 36.
- 26 William Congreve, *A pindarique ode, humbly offer'd to the Queen (...) To which is prefix'd, a discourse on the pindarique ode* (London, 1706). (Eighteenth-Century Collections Online).
- 27 Lonsdale, pp. 437, 441.
- 28 Mark Akenside, *Odes on Several Subjects* (London, 1745), p. 39 (Eighteenth-Century Collections Online).
- 29 Mason, vol. 1, pp. 31-2.
- 30 John Draper, *William Mason: A Study in Eighteenth-Century Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 1924), p. 149.
- 31 Mason., vol. 1, p. 30.
- 32 Robert Dodsley’s *A collection of Poems by Several Hands* was published in three volumes in 1748: by 1758 it had grown to six volumes. Dodsley wished ‘to preserve to the public those poetical performances, which seemed to merit a longer remembrance than what would (...) be secured to them by the Manner wherein they were originally published’.
- 33 Mason, vol.1, pp. 268, 225-6.
- 34 John Dennis, *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry (1704)* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 20, 68-9.
- 35 Mason, vol.1, pp. 46, 48.
- 36 Mark Goldie, *John Locke: Two Treatises of Government (1689)* (London: J.M. Dent, 1993), p. 213.
- 37 Mason, vol. IV, pp. 30-40.
- 38 March 1780?, op. cit., vol.1, p. 319.
- 39 Milford, p. 15.
- 40 Thomas Nevile, *Imitations of Horace*, p. 93 (Eighteenth-Century Collections Online).
- 41 Milford, pp. 6-7.
- 42 Letter to William Unwin, 13 February 1780, op.cit., vol. 1, p. 314.

⁴³ W.B. Hutchings, 'William Cowper and 1789', in *The Yearbook of English Studies*, vol. 19, The French Revolution in English Literature and Art Special Number (1989), 71-93, pp. 75, 80.

⁴⁴ Mason, vol. IV, p. 180.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 77.