

Tasking the Mind: Understanding ‘Unstood’ in Cowper’s ‘Yardley Oak’

Michael Davies, University of Liverpool

One man alone, the Father of us all,
Drew not his life from woman; never gazed,
With mute unconsciousness of what he saw,
On all around him; learned not by degrees,
Nor owed articulation to his ear;
But, moulded by his Maker into Man
At once, unstood intelligent, survey’d
All creatures, with precision understood
Their purport, uses, properties, assign’d
To each his name significant, and, fill’d
With Love and Wisdom, render’d back to heav’n
In praise harmonious the first air he drew.
(‘Yardley Oak’, ll. 167-78)

These lines are taken from Cowper’s ‘Yardley Oak’ (written around 1791-92), as they appear in the Longman Annotated Texts edition of *The Task and Selected Other Poems* (ed. James Sambrook (1994), p. 312). At this point, almost at the end of the poem, Cowper confirms the Miltonic genealogy of his ‘fragment’ by turning the poetic focus away from the decaying oak and upon the once-perfect state of humanity, as represented by Adam (‘the Father of us all’), before mortal decay and corruption (exemplified by the tree itself) had entered the world. This turn of subject in the poem is far from unexpected. As a poem which focuses upon the circularity of time and its ever-repeating patterns of growth and degradation, Cowper naturally returns full-circle, at the end, to a reference given at the beginning of the poem, where the aged oak’s ‘thickest shades’ are imagined as having once provided ‘refuge’ for a fallen Adam who, ‘after taste / Of fruit proscrib’d’, had ‘fled’ (ll. 15-16). Just as the poet reads the tree as a ‘clock of History’ (46) via the circular testimony of its trunk (144-51), so too does the poem seek to measure the scope of time itself as it unwinds through the encircling frame of its references to the Fall.

While the echoes of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* are clear to hear in such an invocation (hardly startling given Cowper’s lifelong love of the poet, and the fact that he would both work on an edition of *Paradise Lost* and translate Milton’s Latin poems around this time), what I would like to draw attention to in the fragment of Cowper’s fragment (quoted above) is a particularly Miltonic phrase: that of the description of the first-created Adam as ‘unstood intelligent’ (173). These words do indeed ‘task’ the reader’s mind, for they present something of a linguistic puzzle difficult to unlock or resolve. What does (or can) this description of the unfallen Adam, as ‘unstood intelligent’, mean?

The problem lies, of course, with the term ‘unstood’, which immediately conjures a series of associations all of which could have an equally distinct (and far from mutually exclusive) significance. On one level, we might explain Cowper’s use of the unusual term ‘unstood’ (a word not listed in the *Oxford English Dictionary*) as a poetic neologism referring to Adam’s first creation: as ‘unstood’, perhaps we are meant to imagine Adam in a state of repose – just created, he is not yet standing but lying down, and therefore ‘unstood’ (though this fits ill with the fact that Adam is evidently naming the animals in Eden at this moment,

unless he is doing so – rather unconventionally – while reclining). On another, and darker, level of significance, though, the word could also be performing a clever rhetorical trick (in a way Milton would have approved) in prefiguring the final fate of the as-yet-unfallen Adam. As he is manifestly ‘unstood’ even before having tasted ‘Of fruit proscib’d’, the word seems to pre-empt the Fall through a lexical prescience. It is almost as if Adam’s propensity to fall from grace is signalled by Cowper as always-already part of his nature, from first creation onwards. Adam is ‘unstood’, then, before he has even stood up – that is, Adam (even in his newly created state of perfection) seems to have within him a preordained weakness: in being ‘unstood’, Cowper’s Adam is somehow predestined to fall, having faltered, it seems, before the Fall has even occurred. Thus, the verbal instability of the word ‘unstood’ mirrors the ultimate unstableness of Adam himself in his Paradisal state.

That Cowper might introduce such a complex poetic conundrum into his poem is not surprising. The difficulty of ‘unstood’ is certainly of a piece with a poem which throughout ‘verges on cryptic solipsism’, as Vincent Newey has insightfully noted (Cowper’s Poetry: A Critical Study and Reassessment (1982), p. 44). Moreover, we might see a specific Miltonic allusion being conjured by Cowper here, beyond the more general debt ‘Yardley Oak’ owes to the former poet. In Milton’s *Paradise Regained*, for example, the climax of the poem rests entirely upon the terms apparently echoed by Cowper in ‘Yardley Oak’ – those of ‘stood’ and ‘fell’. In tempting Christ to throw himself from ‘the highest pinnacle’ or else ‘stand’, and thus prove himself the Son of God, Milton depicts his Jesus triumphing through an inseparable unification of Scripture, word, and action: ‘Tempt not the Lord thy God, he [Jesus] said and stood’, Milton writes, ‘But Satan smitten with amazement fell’ (ll. 560-61). Satan’s fall is signalled, however, by a stumbling grammar which crumbles the rhetoric upon which he had so securely rested: ‘amidst his pride / Fell when he stood to see his victor fall’ (570- 711). Just as Milton’s lines suggest triumph and confusion equally in the way Jesus ‘said and stood’ and in the way his tempter ‘Fell when he stood to see his victor fall’ (a line which embodies the grammatical pandemonium and astonishment into which Satan is flung), so too does ‘unstood intelligent’ achieve a similarly dizzying effect. The confusion of this phrase foreshadows, one could say, the postlapsarian disjuncture of ‘words’ and ‘things’, ‘signifiers’ and ‘signifieds’, the monism of Adamic language being fractured by the Fall. The perfection of Adam’s unfallen discourse is exemplified, moreover, in his prophetic naming of the animals in Paradise (which is precisely where Cowper finds him in ‘Yardley Oak’).

Such a reading of the term ‘unstood’ could be taken further too. It is tempting, for instance, to see in this word a hidden pun upon the word ‘stud’, which (as a verb) had the early modern meaning (as the OED tells us) of: ‘to supply with studs or upright timbers; to build with studs’. The fact that Adam is ‘unstood’ could suggest a covert reference to him finally being ‘unstudded’ – that is, without the supporting ‘timber’ to keep him ‘upright’ and, ultimately, from falling (with an obvious relevance to the decaying ‘timber’ of the ‘Yardley Oak’ itself). One might be able to go on interpreting and re-interpreting Cowper’s ‘unstood’ in this kind of a way ad infinitum: such is the power of this phrase (to borrow another of Cowper’s phrases) to breed ‘delight’ from ‘agitation’.

But there is a singular and unavoidable problem with all of this. Unfortunately for me (and also for my colleagues at the University of Leicester, whose minds I task’d with this agitating phrase for some time), the term ‘unstood’ can be explained in a much more sublunary way, and without the kind of interpretative ‘agitation’ so far outlined. For the simple fact is that the word ‘unstood’ is, in James Sambrook’s recent edition, a typing error. The line should read (as it is given, for example, in the Oxford edition of *The Poems of William Cowper*, edited by John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, vol. III (1995), p. 83) not ‘unstood’ but, much more simply, ‘upstood intelligent’. Indeed, according to Baird and

Ryskamp's careful textual notation, Cowper once had the words 'with look intelligent' here (and changed them to 'upstood intelligent') – but there is no 'unstood'.

Such knowledge, of course, underscores a useful lesson about the possibilities of literary interpretation, even when (as in this case) one is working from a text which is, it would seem, 'erroneous oft'. How easy it is for the enthusiastic reader to be wrong-footed by a wrong word, and to have one's reading of 'Yardley Oak' subsequently warp and splinter. But what such a reading indicates (even if it is a 'misreading') is, nevertheless, something of the enduring power of Cowper's 'Yardley Oak' to 'task the mind' in any case. Vincent Newey has commented that central to this poem lies a 'sense of dissolution' with which 'comes withdrawal' for the poet, but that with 'withdrawal' also comes 'a lively and productive exercise of the mind' (43). This is, quite evidently, the case not only for Cowper but for his reader too – and especially his 'erroneous' one.