

Ash before Oak by Jeremy Cooper
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A Journal Review

9 October

I buy *Ash before Oak* at the recommendation of a friend. He reads nearly everything that I recommend to him, so it is only fitting that I take up his in turn. The book comes bound in Fitzcarraldo's signature royal blue, with French flaps, beautiful paper, and near-perfect typesetting. At about a half-thousand pages in length, it is an object of soothing weight and texture.

Ash before Oak will apparently be composed of journal entries, observing in typical English fashion the birds, trees, and grasses of the area surrounding the narrator's cottage in Somerset, where he has moved to live alone after decades spent in London. Additional commentary relates the history of the building and the land, with some drama provided by a couple of wily mice who wreak havoc inside the narrator's carefully apportioned rooms. Most entries are only a few lines. I sit down after dinner to read, but I quit after six pages, tired after a lonely day.

11 October

"It is an ordinary robin, I this evening identified, which sings each evening on the same high branch of the black Italian poplar beside the kennels.

Accept the solitude, I tell myself, if that's how things currently must be. It's enough this moment to enjoy the sight of the candle-like blooms on the weeping bird cherry tree, released this year by my cuttings and clearings to flourish near the bench."

There is no reason to believe that the narrator is not Cooper himself, that this work does not represent Cooper's own journal entries, apart from the jacket's description of the book as "a novel in the form of a fictional journal." Occasional black and white photographs attest to the striking beauty of the location, like in the work of W. G. Sebald or the New York Editions of Henry James. Indeed, it is a note about Sebald's death that reveals this journal's timeline: if the entries are truly chronological (only the month and day are printed, no year), then the journal begins *in situ* on December 24, 2000, without explanation of why the narrator has come to this cottage or how long he has been there already. I flip through to the end, counting: the journal ends on April 8, 2004. Forty months.

12 October

In the morning I walk over a long bridge that spans a river and a sprawl of iron railroads, thinking about the writing and publishing of journals. Thoreau wrote voluminous journals, carefully extracting a miniscule number of sentences for publication as *Walden*. James wrote less frequent, but startlingly opaque journals on his travels, eventually transforming them into the bulk of *The American Scene* and his late critical prefaces. Hawthorne wrote some of the warmest, loveliest journal entries in American letters about his life on a small farm near Lenox, where he was deeply happy, and where he drew on his past life to write the two works he completed on the farm: *The House of the Seven Gables* and *The Blithedale Romance*. He never put these particular happy journals into his fiction.

We read journals for the solace they provide, their beauty of expression, and the close proximity of a solitude like our own. Does it matter if they are published as fiction? They provide relief.

Later in the day, I look over my own journal entries, composed almost without exception as responses to fresh waves of dread. The emotion there can be shocking, unbecoming of the person I see myself as. Cooper's emotion, like Sebald's, is deep and restrained. There is none of that tearful cruelty unleashed by T. H. White on his goshawk, through the long nights reddened by whiskey, in that other cottage to the east, in the center of that country.

13 October

There is an illusion of peace in this book. The regular entries and lists of plant species soothe or calm a mind benumbed by anxiety. I write another letter to a friend I have been unable to get on the phone for months. I am alone rather a lot these days.

14 October

I put *Ash before Oak* down to read Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*. Another man writing in reclusion, not of the flora and fauna but of the strange transubstantiations of mind that take place at remove from the world. "It takes generations of life in the cities to drive that nostalgia for country ways from the heart. I will never live it down, nor do I want to. I am corrupted to the bone with the beauty of this forsaken world."

The line between breakdown and recovery gets blurred. How many writers, poets, artists have moved out into the country at the urge of a private burning? Whether drunks at the edge of death like Malcolm Lowry and Raymond Carver, or ascetic poets like Jack Gilbert, or merely lifelong hermits like J. M. Coetzee and Gerald Murnane, they do all seem to have one thing in common: they are men. Cooper: “a relief that there’s no woman around.”

Who is to begrudge this fantasy?

16 October

There is a woman now, in the book. Beth is twenty years younger and shares her tea and bed and cottage with the narrator. She has no dialogue or perspective.

Typical journal entries are short and usually spaced two or three days apart, suggesting the existence of a great deal of bedrock material that we cannot or are not allowed to see. “Central things unsaid, these words sanitised, a travesty. I . . . I can’t . . . I can’t say it.” Paragraphs end more frequently with words of despair.

I take a break with a Christine Schutt short story called “Do You Think I Am Who I Will Be?”

17 October

Cooper’s sentences often omit the subject “I” from their beginnings. For instance: “Don’t know what it is that I lack” or “Must accept that there’s no ‘getting better’”. Pronouncements of self-knowledge become more like commands, words of discipline, and soon it becomes possible to trace the word “you” in the subject’s absence. “[You] Must accept that there’s no ‘getting better’”. It becomes possible for the reader to step in.

“Must build jetties, bridges across which to journey back and forth, wrapped in oilskins and sou’wester against the storms, head erect, eyes bright in the mild moonlight.”

18 October

I am reading on a bench in the park when a woman sits down next to me and begins video chatting. Her friend is upset over a recent breakup and won’t get out of bed. In response, the woman next to me keeps up a constant stream of encouragement, telling her friend over and over

again not to think about the guy, that he is a piece of shit, that she is so much better off, that men are awful, and come on, we'll have a fun time in the city, we'll hit the shops and get mimosas, I'm calling you an Uber, I'm calling you an Uber right now, if you're not out of bed in the next minute you won't have time to shower, so get out of bed, we're going to have a good time.

Across from us, not moments ago, what I had taken for a simple networking or mentoring session between two men in suits was altered when one of them began sobbing. He was devastatingly unsure about what to do with his life. His colleague, or peer, looked on kindly, looking as though he wished he could do more.

The emotion is rising. Nearly every day now contains the word "despair." Some journal entries come to resemble mine. It is hard when an author gets too close to you, as you feel the differences cut.

19 October

Something happens. A gap in the entries of approximately six weeks. Suicide—cutting—comes to mind.

21 October

The book has changed. I no longer care about the writing. That the immediate and most heartfelt syntax for this author is such a stilted one, that repeated anxious clichés abound, that Cooper has an annoying habit of ending entries with a contraction repeated and undone ("We'll see, we will see"), none of this matters. What to call it—verisimilitude, sprezzatura? From Cooper: "Ugghh! The temptation to wrap it up in fancy words!" It doesn't matter that this work is called fiction, that Cooper could have made some or even all of it up and, at the very least, surely edited these entries in the fifteen years' time since they were written, or at the bare minimum selected a beginning and end. It doesn't matter, because it is real now. This is who Cooper is. He reveals little, but that is nothing, that is like me, there are men out there who read and write and lunge after solitude only to slam into depression and this is exactly what their writing looks like, I know.

From the middle, the book rests open beautifully.

22 October

An author's ability to control the ebb and flow of narrative time is a clear enough truth, but it has never seemed cruel to me until now. My sharp flip of a single, beautiful, manila page—three sentences read in a gulp—is equivalent to a full day of this narrator's torment and unrest. I find serious artistic attempts to record daily life terribly boring, for instance, Christa Wolf's *Ein Tag im Jahr 1960-2000*, referenced by Cooper in this book, or any number of video or performance artists aiming to capture *everything*, in some limited fashion, for what can such projects demonstrate beyond a simple ambiguity between art and form-of-life? A moment of beauty, if it occurs, reveals to me only an urge to flee that narrow form. But Cooper's journal entries succeed because they have no imposed regularity, either of form or content. Cycles of nature, yes, and of certain behaviors, but otherwise, no, not even Christmas receives an entry each year.

Today I learn that electroshock therapy is still practiced. I cannot imagine the terror of receiving with full warning and understanding an electrically induced seizure. I have never read of the "successful" ECT patient, the one who comes to love himself again through electricity, and it is unclear if the treatment had any ameliorative effect for the narrator.

23 October

Certain things, if you cannot tell someone about them, do not feel as though they really happened. Journaling can help, but does it move you forward? Or does it just make you think differently, more slowly?

"I remember Angela Carter argued in her collection of essays *Nothing Sacred* that you can't call yourself a writer unless you somehow publish your words, as the point of all art is the wish to communicate, that it should be called something other than art if you write only for yourself to read. If you do not at least aim to publish you are not a writer, Carter said.

I agree with her.

Which means, I suppose, that these pages are 'something else'.

What?"

24 October

The narrator does not read very much, which seems odd to me. Maybe reading is not a source of hope and solace for him. I recall cracking in the dim light of a power outage the old spine of Simone Weil's *Waiting for God*, holding it close to the candlelight.

But books can distract, as opposed to writing something that feels direct. “Writing just anything may keep me alive.”

26 October

Things are getting better. I am reading faster now, as the temperature drops outside, and my mind is lifted. Proper nouns begin to fill the pages: names of artists, places, the material possessions of an author who worked for years at Sotheby’s and describes with an unassuming pleasure his art, furniture, jars, tiles, his Spoils of Poynton. Longer journal entries narrate trips to Paris and New Zealand in the distracting tone of something no longer quite as relatable, something to do with friends and famous people. It is closer to autobiography, I think. I read quickly, critical apparatus flung off the shoulders.

27 October

“Wind and rain beat against the prow of my study jutting into the lane, so hard that water seeps beneath the closed window. I stand to look out down the curved line of the lane and am content to see the blackthorn beginning to push into white flower, in many more places than past years, a response to my careful clearings.”

Today I could see the country where I used to live. It’s still far away, but it’s been a long time since it’s even been in view, and now things are bigger, peaks higher day-to-day. It’s not easy to write about.

An entry of a single sentence: “I can do distance; not too good at close.”

28 October

The narrator gets well, or better. He has regained his previous interests. Consequently, I seem to like him less. Is it because his life is moving once again outside of literature? The book began with the naming of trees and plants, but it ends with the naming of material possessions, artworks and ephemera given to or acquired by the narrator from “youthful British artists before the world had heard of them” (Damien Hirst, Gary Hume, etc.). Journal entries are given over to reminiscence and the stratification of the narrator’s cultural prestige, which includes school days at Harrow, invitations to the Royal Palaces in Amman, and triumphs at Sotheby’s of the sort that

only the most Anglophilic collector might appreciate. It is honest, which tugs at the question of whether or not it qualifies the pain that came before.

This much is intentional, at least: to continue the journal entries past a time of suffering. The emotion that trickled out sharp and bitter in the months of despair has by the end receded, leaving the land dry again. Of what value is the writing that remains? Is it the simple trick of turning back on the lights and seeing the person who has been speaking to you all this time? Or is the intention to make us doubt the worth of what we have read? The writing is not all that good, after all. The content is not new or especially thrilling. Only after we walk to the heart of the narrator's despair does the book seem to glow, momentarily, and change; only then do we feel beholden to these entries as signs of life continuing.

We are interested in recovery, to an extent, but too much stability and our interest wanes. Recounting a lunch he once had with T. S. Eliot, at which Eliot announced his intention to remarry, an old professor of mine said: "There goes the poetry." No one cares much about the writing Malcolm Lowry did after he left Mexico in *Hear Us O Lord from Heaven Thy Dwelling Place*. The allure of despair is hardly shocking, as most good books achieve an intensity in one part that makes their other parts appear faded and grey, but *Ash before Oak* just feels so close to a real life, with so little to interfere, that it pushes this question to the forefront: do we really want to be better? Wouldn't we rather push off to that place in the country, the one we are always reading about, where meaning enters in and where we are called to fight?

One thing the narrator never mentions is his scars. Of all the discussion in this book about writing being an urge to communicate, and the differences between publishing and journaling, it seems odd that scars don't come up, because scars communicate in a flash more than writing ever can. When writing fails, as happens so often, a cut can speak with a sheer intensity unmatched by any amount of talk or thought. A cut will stay when you have moved on. Traumas deep and unending may be veiled, prevented from showing the faintest glimmer—we learn almost nothing, for instance, of the source of the narrator's hatred for his parents—but scars on the wrist signify. When another person sees them, you cannot help imagining their thoughts. Everything unsaid. Only by communicating—by publishing—might it be possible to change the form of your appearance to the world.

29 October

The book ends. I begin revising what I have written.

