

MARCUS WOOD  
SLAVERY, EMPATHY  
AND PORNOGRAPHY

OXFORD

# Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography

*In memory of my father*

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

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## Introduction

Remnants of the old atrocity subsist, but they are converted into ingenious shifts in scenery, a sort of ‘English Garden’ effect, to give the required air of naturalness, pathos and hope.

(John Ashbery, *Three Poems*)

‘I did not lift a hand to stop him from effacing the past’

(Walter Abish, ‘The English Garden’, *In the Future Perfect*)

The difficulty lies with reading itself. We hardly know what it is when it takes place under our nose, much less what it was two centuries ago when readers inhabited a different mental universe . . . Inner appropriation—the ultimate stage in the communication circuit that linked authors and publishers with booksellers and readers—may remain beyond the range of research.<sup>1</sup>

(Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-sellers*)

### Where Does the Cultural Inheritance of Slavery Begin or End in England?

To answer the question it is possible to begin at a beginning, but that does not necessarily make things any more straightforward. Here is, arguably, the first written account of the conception of the first English slaving voyage: ‘Master John Haukins being amongst other particulars assured that Negroes were very good marchandise in Hispaniola, and that store of negroes might easily be had upon the coast of guinea, resolved with himselfe to make triall thereof.’ This then leads straight into the first English account of the gathering of a slave cargo, of the middle passage, and of the sale of the slaves: ‘he [Hawkins] passed to . . . Tagarin, where he stayed some good time, and got into his possession, partly by the sworde, and partly by other meanes, to the number of 300 Negroes at least, besides other merchandises which that country yeeldeth. With this praye hee sayled over the Ocean sea unto the Iland of Hispaniola . . . and there he had reasonable utterance of his English commodities as also some part of his

<sup>1</sup> Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (London: Harper Collins, 1996), 85.

Negros'.<sup>2</sup> There really is not much to it, there is a profitable new line of business because of the expansion of slave plantations in the Spanish Caribbean and the extinction of the native inhabitants. Hawkins kidnaps and acquires through bargain, and extortion, over three hundred black people. He moves them over an ocean and sells them. The vocabulary for rendering blacks as things to be traded, not as people, is confidently in place. Blacks are 'merchandise', but more particularly they are worth a certain amount in a well-defined market place: they are 'good merchandise in Hispaniola'. There is also, already, a linguistic ability to disguise theft and murder, activities that would be criminal on mainland England, as something very different. Hawkins does not steal the blacks but somehow they 'got into his possession', and possession here is ten-tenths of the law. Moreover Hawkins's multiple acts of violent abduction are presented as the activities of a proud conqueror who seizes 'praye', 'that which is taken in war, or by pillage or violence' (*OED* 1a) or even a proud beast, 'praye' also meaning 'an animal hunted or killed by carnivorous animals' (*OED* 2a). He reaches Hispaniola and the slaves are traded along with other 'commodities' for new commodities. He returns to England with these, and the triangular trade is set up. In the account of this first voyage, Africa is simply a storehouse of merchandise, including slaves. This writing is untroubled by the feeling that slavery needs to be defended at any level, or that the blacks who are taken need to be differentiated from the other trade goods which Hawkins gets 'into his possession'. This account is stark, utilitarian, there is no interest in describing Africa or its inhabitants outside a trade dynamic. A pure economic vision could hardly be more economically expressed. And so England's cultural testimony to the Atlantic slave trade opens with this uncluttered account of a trade experiment. The writing in its hard-edged certainty involves a completely different descriptive language from the sophistries of eighteenth-century pro-slavery discourse, or the ultimately solipsistic constructions of abolition rhetoric.<sup>3</sup>

Hawkins's second and third voyages differ markedly from the first and are far more expansive. The second voyage contains detailed accounts of exchanges with the Africans. It is premised on one crucial assumption that will not alter. Blacks are completely different from whites, a different kind of animal, they live in a strange place, and they appear alongside the rest of the flora and fauna. To take one stark example, the trusting ignorance of the seabirds and the ignorance of blacks are seen by the chronicler of Hawkins's voyage as equally wonderful phenomena:

<sup>2</sup> Richard Hakluyt, *Voyages in Eight Volumes* (London and New York: Everyman, 1962), vii. 5.

<sup>3</sup> The first voyage is generally written off by Hakluyt scholars: 'the account of the first voyage is no more than a historian's précis of events and is not reprinted here', Richard David (ed.), *Hakluyt's Voyages: A Selection* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1981), 359.

halfe of our boates were laden with young and old fowle, who not being used to the sight of men, flew so about us that we stroke them down with poles . . . the Sapias . . . with their bows and arrows shot terribly . . . Whereupon we discharged certain harquebuzes to them againe, but the ignorant people wayed it not, because they knewe not the danger thereof: but used a merveilous crying in their fight, with leaping and turning their tayles, that it was most strange to see, and gave us great pleasure to beholde them. At the last, one being hurt with a harquebuz upon the thigh, looked upon his wound and wist not how it came.<sup>4</sup>

These sailors stroke/strike sea birds down with poles, and they shoot blacks down with harquebuzes, both forms of prey are equally delightful to behold in the process of their destruction.

Hawkins can afford this odd combination of detachment and delight when viewing the Africans because his mind is not really on them. The major focus in all three voyages is not the relatively easy process of procuring or transporting the slaves, but the extreme difficulties of trading them in a Caribbean market closed down by Spanish monopoly. Hawkins's voyages are primarily imperial martyrologies, in which English traders are the victims of Spanish greed and treachery. This sets a vital precedent in slavery literatures: from the first European accounts of slavery operate a stringently self-reflexive dynamics of suffering. The accounts of Hawkins's slaving voyages end not with the suffering of the slave, but the suffering of Hawkins. His suffering is mythologized in spectacular terms, via allusion to that bastion of Protestant martyrology, John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments*. Hawkins, as economic victim of Spanish slave trading policy, is a true Protestant martyr: 'If all the miseries and troublesome affaires of this sorowfull voyage whould be perfectly and throughly written, there should neede a painefull man with his pen, and as great a time as he had that wrote the lives and deathes of the Martyrs.'<sup>5</sup> This last move is perhaps the most crucial one in terms of the legacy which Hawkins provided for the white mythologies of slavery. As we shall see, the impact of martyrology on the ways in which both pro-slavery and abolition authors constructed themselves is immense. The mythologization of Hawkins's three 'Voyages' by Hakluyt set out much of the contested ground for future slavery writing. Slavery is a battleground for economic arguments on empire and trade. Slavery is a phenomenon that forces interaction with, and the consequent cultural construction of, Africa and Africans. But first and foremost slavery is an experience which brings terrible hardships upon the slave owner and slave trader, hardships which explicitly turn him into a martyr. Only then can the black slave be truly looked down upon.

<sup>4</sup> Hakluyt, *Voyages*, vii. 12–13.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 62.

## Slavery and Reinvention, Feeding off the Raw Materials, and the Shiftiness of the Slavery Archive

Hawkins's voyages might constitute the beginning of the narrativization of the English slave trade, but they are not a stable phenomenon. These texts are typical of the cultural inheritance of slavery in that those people who write about slavery for professional reasons go to the textual inheritance of slavery with a purpose. We feed off these words, ingest them, digest them, transform them, and not necessarily for the better. The more widely demanded a text *is*, the more promiscuously it is used and taken, over a prolonged period. The more available a text becomes, the more it is forced open to processes of reinvention, forced imaginative impregnation, rebirth, which cannot be controlled. One of the central concerns of this book is the violent instability of the slavery archive. White intellectuals have not only always made what they wanted out of the written record of Atlantic slavery, but they have taken and mistaken the past, and remade it the way they desired it to appear. The results of such intellectual liberty, or libertinage, in the areas of slavery literatures, remains, through a bitter paradox of sexual metaphor, and the bitter irony of sexual reproduction, the inevitable creation of yet more virgin territory.

In July 1930 J. A. H. Johnston, MA, D.Sc., Headmaster of Highgate School, founded by Sir Roger Cholmelen in 1565, presented the schoolboy G. G. Bernard with the Prize for Mathematics, Division L (ii) A. The prize was a beautifully bound blue morocco and full gilt copy of *English Seamen in the Sixteenth Century*. The book consists of the texts of lectures delivered by Carlyle's disciple and literary executor James Anthony Froude to the students of Oxford University in the Easter Terms of 1893 and 1894. It was by far the most popular of Froude's many very popular books on empire, and it remained a best-seller for fifty years. One lecture is titled 'John Hawkins and the African Slave Trade' and provides an account of the beginning of English involvement in the Atlantic slave trade which draws heavily on, yet utterly transforms, the earlier accounts of the origins of slavery.<sup>6</sup> Froude is a propagandist looking down from what seemed then the indomitably healthy heights of the flourishing British Empire. There is, however, in Froude's vision, one rotten extremity to this otherwise healthy form, namely the ex-slave colonies of the Caribbean.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> James Anthony Froude, *English Seamen in the Eighteenth Century* (London: George Harrap, 1925), 36–62.

<sup>7</sup> Froude, now almost forgotten outside Carlyle studies, was an extremely influential figure in terms of the way he moved between literature and imperial propaganda in the last three decades of the nineteenth century. He travelled extensively in the British colonies, and in the 1880s became a figure of some influence, via Lord Carnarvon, in Government circles. He disgraced himself in a semi-official capacity in South Africa by telling the South African farmers at a public dinner that they did not have the guts to go out and shoot the natives; he travelled to Australia, a trip which resulted in the publica-

Froude's late-Victorian translation of the first English slaving voyages tells us a lot about one set of rules for imaginatively reconstructing England's slaving history. These rules seem to have leapfrogged everything that was supposed to have happened from 1780 to 1850, in terms of how English people thought about slavery and empire. The account does not begin with Hawkins at all but with the mythic infamy of Spanish colonialism. The Spanish *Black Legend* is fully displayed as Froude presents Elizabethan England beset on all sides by Philip the Second of Spain and the Inquisition.<sup>8</sup> English sailors are burned *en masse* at the stake, or starved in the Spanish slave galleys because of their Protestantism. At the same time the Spanish are wiping out the noble savages who inhabit South America and the Caribbean. In Froude's world of proto-imperial British maritime piracy, 'the old work' against Spain takes many forms. Foremost among them are John Hawkins's activities as a slaver. Slavery, like piracy, is carefully set out in a trade context where it is a measured expedient for damaging a Spanish monopoly. Slavery is, however, displayed in a moral context where Spanish Papist depravity is better than African Heathen barbarity, but where English colonialism is better still, indeed an ideal. Froude is also writing at a time when Britain was at the height of its imperial power, yet when the memory of the slave trade still existed as a 'stain' on the empire which had only been eradicated by the concomitantly 'glorious' activities of British abolition. Froude is consequently involved in an elaborate defence of the trade.<sup>9</sup>

The argument basically boils down to the assertion that when Hawkins did what he did what are now seen, at least from a UN perspective, as the normal rules of human ethics did not apply, certainly not to black Africans. From Froude's perspective it is the historian's job to explain how and why this was the case. Froude's defence opens with an act of imaginative relocation. He places Hawkins in the Canary Islands at the moment when he is contemplating entering the slave trade. The islanders have told him about the need for black labour in the Spanish West Indies. It is at this point that Froude addresses the audience: 'We know to what the slave-trade grew. We have all learnt to repent of the share which England had in it, and to abhor every one whose hands were stained by contact with so accursed a business. *All that may be taken for granted*; but we must look at the matter as it would have been represented at the Canaries to Hawkins himself.'<sup>10</sup> History, for Froude, is straightforward, the

tion of *Oceana*; or, *England and Her Colonies* (1886); he also went to the Caribbean, which resulted in the frenzied negrophobia of *The English in the West Indies* (1888). The latter brought Froude under heavy fire for his pro-slavery Carlyleanisms. The most hard hitting and amusing among many published ripostes was N. Darnell Davis, *Mr. Froude's Negrophobia; or, Don Quixote as a Cook's Tourist* (Demerara: Argosy Press, 1888).

<sup>8</sup> For the Spanish 'Black Legend', see pp. 76–8, 144, 208–12 below.

<sup>9</sup> See pp. 83, 177–80, 299–301 below.

<sup>10</sup> Froude, *English Seamen*, 46.



history of slavery and abolition as it affected England is especially so: ‘*all that [English monopoly of the Atlantic slave trade] may be taken for granted.*’ That wonderful adjectival compound, ‘taken for granted’, meaning according to the *OED* ‘involving unproved assumptions’ is emphatically disinterested, and testifies to a supreme self-confidence over the issue of slavery and denial. For Froude slavery and abolition from the seventeenth century onwards is not very important, its history is understood and the price has been paid: all *that* has been, and to a large extent still is, ‘taken for granted’. What interests Froude is his own process of imaginative immersion in the origins of the Atlantic trade. He offers a sort of time travel, slavery ‘the matter’ must be looked at through the eyes of Hawkins. Yet Froude does not directly attempt to enter Hawkins’s consciousness. His immediate move in the lecture is to pass out into an account of mass European imperial genocide that incorporates sixteenth-century Spanish activity in the Americas and nineteenth-century English activity in Oceania:

The Carib races whom the Spaniards found in Cuba and San Domingo had withered before them as if struck by a blight. Many died under the lash of the Spanish overseers; many, perhaps the most, from mysterious causes which have made the presence of civilisation so fatal to the Red Indian, the Australian, and the Maori. It is with men as it is with animals. The races which consent to be domesticated prosper and multiply. Those which cannot live without freedom pine like caged eagles or disappear like the buffaloes of the prairies.<sup>11</sup>

The similes are effortlessly agricultural. ‘The Carib races’ are not unique and irreplaceable civilizations wiped out by a combination of European epidemics and brutality, but are much more like potatoes: they ‘wither . . . as if struck by a blight’. Finally, however, the scale and rapidity of death is a mystery. Indigenous populations die from ‘mysterious causes’ in the ‘presence of civilisation’. There is no genocide in Froude’s colonial world, but a process whereby wildness simply goes under when placed suddenly in the presence of European ‘civilisation’. It is at this point that Froude points out the route any non-European must follow for survival. Despite the flowery language he is saying it is only those ‘races’ which embrace European slavery, or ‘consent to be domesticated’ that can hope to ‘prosper and multiply.’ This leaves the reader with two sets of non-Europeans. First, there exists a dead set of indigenous ‘races’ who represent a magnificent, untamable but doomed wildness: the Caribs, Aborigines, and Maoris die ‘like caged eagles’ or ‘like the buffaloes of the prairies’. Secondly, there exists the population of Africa, who have no wild spirit of freedom and who can be ‘domesticated’. Froude, writing just after the

<sup>11</sup> Froude, *English Seamen*, 46–7.

completion of the infamous scramble for Africa, is emphatic on this point: 'On the continent of Africa were another race, savage in their natural state, which would domesticate like sheep or oxen, and learnt and improved in the white man's company.'<sup>12</sup> In Froude's vision Hawkins's inauguration of the slave trade lies beside the nineteenth-century carve-up of the African continent; both are seamlessly united as civilizing opportunities for the African. The eighteenth-century slave trade, and the abolition movement which it generated, drop out of sight; they just fall into the void between Froude's vision of Elizabethan and Victorian imperial ambition. Slavery and the English cultural imagination is a very relative affair.

In 1972 the great Caribbean novelist and intellectual of the Diaspora George Lamming produced *Natives of My Person*, one of the most complicated extended fables ever to meditate on the effects which Atlantic slavery had on the minds of the slavers, men and women. Hawkins is there again, lying behind Lamming's accounts of his fictional pirates of 'Limescale' (England), who go out on an illegal slaving voyage in the late sixteenth century. One of Lamming's characters is a carpenter, and his 'journal' brings back Hawkins's great flocks of birds hanging on the slave ship, but suddenly they have become terrifying, an extension of the deathly white mist which, in Lamming's vision, envelops the ships off the coast: 'The fog that put us out of sight for eleven days was truly fearful, and then the great wave of fowl striking like a hurricane over the decks came near as any tempest to burying the ship alive; for their numbers with such a vast proportion of wing and body did put a wonderful terror in every heart.'<sup>13</sup> It is as if Lamming resents the unfazability of Hawkins's narratives, nothing frightens these Elizabethan sailors, nothing distracts them from the business in hand. Lamming's sailors are very different, full of querulousness and superstition bordering on hysteria. They are comprehensible, sympathetic, 'modern' in a way that Hawkins's sailors can never be. Lamming takes up many details from Hawkins and recasts them, elaborating, drawing out their potential in different directions. Hawkins's account of the unfortunate fearlessness of the blacks before gunfire is developed into a new scenario:

They were standing on a hill some twenty in number, upright and powerful in body but with surprising harmony in every limb . . . at first they didn't understand what damage our shot could inflict, seeing that ammunition was still foreign to their ways, since bows and arrows be the only known weapons they take to war. I was amazed to see them dance at the first shot of fire, believing our arms intend some kind of greeting, until a shot found mark and tore a hole in the chest of the man who was coming forward. The rest were still laughing and shouting like they would put some

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 47.

<sup>13</sup> George Lamming, *Natives of My Person* (London: Picador, [1972] 1974), 106.

spell of jubilation on our men, until they realised their leader would not stand up for the great quantity of blood which his insides did expel . . . It took such calamity to make them understand it was the work of our shot which did blast them to bits, and then they make up the hill swift as hare, with our shot hard in pursuit.<sup>14</sup>

This is about four times longer than Hawkins's original account, and in psychological terms again more familiar, a *terra cognita* for the modern mind. But Lamming, in his passionate desire to enter the mentality of his colonizers, to try to somehow unpack their vision of the act of enslavement, pays a price, and sacrifices the strangeness of the original. Lamming's colonizers are ironically in some ways less receptive, less emotionally demanding, than their textual sources. They do not share the ability to move, in seconds, from extreme delight (at the 'tayles' of the naked dancing blacks), to violence (the shooting), to sympathetic observation (contemplation of a victim who 'looked upon his wound and wist not where it came'). They do not share that final open and deeply sad vision of the silent African looking at the magical wound in his body, and somehow hanging before us as proleptic metaphor for the entire history of European contact with Africa. This anonymous man has an elegiac quality which Lamming's victim, for all the increase of blood and guts, does not. So where do Lamming and Froude stand in relation to the texts they used or abused, and where do any of these texts stand in relation to some three hundred Africans who really did exist as England's initial slave contraband, forced upon a reluctant Spanish Caribbean market? Out of all these translations and re-translations there is finally no way of telling.<sup>15</sup> What is certain however is that within the Rastafarian culture of Jamaica Hawkins is still present, but in yet another form. For Bob Marley he is a violent criminal, whose myth the children of Jamaica must still negotiate. Marley puts it this way: 'They teach the youth about the pirate Hawkins, / And they say he was a very great man, . . . / So you can't blame the youths, / You can't fool the youths, of today'.<sup>16</sup>

I began the book with Hawkins and some texts his voyages generated in order to indicate the fluidity of the testimonial limits of slavery. There is almost no limit to what this book could have been about, what it might have included, and how it might have operated methodologically. The chronology is fairly self-explanatory. The book begins at the point when the Atlantic slave trade, and

<sup>14</sup> Lamming, *Natives of My Person*, 109.

<sup>15</sup> For a further fictional recasting of Hawkins's narratives, see Eduardo Galeano, *Genesis, Memory of Fire Part 1*, trans. Cedric Belfrage (London: Methuen, 1986), 138–9.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Nesta Marley, 'You can't blame the youth', *Talkin' Blues* (Tuff Gong: [Island Records, 1973]), track one.

arguments for its abolition, first became publishing phenomena of international significance. It ends at the point at which American and English abolition merged. In terms of a benchmark the merger occurred over the publication of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and led into a transatlantic propaganda that was homogenized and constituted a coherent missionary and imperialist form. Abolition as a propaganda movement justified white expansion into Africa, and the simultaneous demonization of the ex-slave colonies in the Caribbean.

In the late 1780s and early 1790s writers and publishers from an extraordinary variety of backgrounds and contexts mass-produced work in every available publishing form. An attempt even to survey these literatures and art works from their cultural tip to their base would have required a volume twice the length of this one. New editions and databases are now being produced which will soon have fulfilled the role of making virtually all primary materials of significance readily available in libraries and as electronic text. I was not interested in producing a survey, or an annotated bibliography, or in producing what would appear to be a coherent history, or narrative, of cultural responses to slavery. Indulging in the pretense of coherence is a dangerous folly where slavery is concerned. Hugh Thomas's *The Slave Trade* is a monument to the dangers of attempting to impose the normalizing structures of bourgeois narrative history upon a phenomenon which is essentially resistant to the demands of commercial publishing. As Michael Dash warns us, 'writing about reality is no longer an innocent activity' especially when New World colonization and slavery is the subject.<sup>17</sup>

The experience of the slaves is, in a very real sense, lost to the conventional resources of historical reconstruction. The evidence, and the historiography, and even the mythography, of slavery is consequently very one-sided, and comes out of a series of white records. When black authors decide to go back into the history of slavery, they still usually find themselves dependent on white sources, white propagandas, white journalisms, white theory as a starting point.<sup>18</sup> This was even true of the first slave narrative: Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* drew heavily on pre-existent American and European literatures to describe the Africa of his infancy and early childhood.<sup>19</sup> Why couldn't, or why didn't, Equiano pretend to remember what it had 'really' been like in Africa?

<sup>17</sup> Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade: The History of the Atlantic Slave Trade 1440-1870* (London: Picador, 1997). J. Michael Dash, *The Other America: Caribbean Literature in a New World Context* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 1998), 22.

<sup>18</sup> The reclamation and subversion of this white artistic inheritance in the context of American black literatures and thought is of course the central theme of Henri Louis Gates, Jr, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). This book consequently remains a landmark study.

<sup>19</sup> Keith Sandiford, *Measuring the Moment: Strategies of Protest in Eighteenth-Century Afro-English Writing* (London: Associated University Presses, 1988), 122-33.

Did he want to make his readers feel at home before he led them on into the unfathomable ironies of the rest of his terrible and beautiful book? The results of taking up the slavery archive are hugely varied. Toni Morrison managed to develop *Beloved* out of a genuine case of slave mother infanticide. A real woman, Margaret Garner, did kill her child; there were judgemental reports in the press. Out of a few facts and a hysterical popular rhetoric Morrison forged a new mythographic world for getting at, and getting back at, submerged or even missing histories. Caryl Phillips, in *Cambridge* and parts of *Crossing the River*, used the white narratives and documents of slavery in a rather more direct manner, quoting so extensively from the originals as to be finally reabsorbed into the sources he ‘uses’. Phillips’s work raises big questions about what can be done with these white texts that claim to tell us about how slavery worked, what it meant, what it did, and how we should respond to it. Unlike Morrison’s art of transformation Phillips’s art can rearrange but not re-create. He can pick-and-mix, and re-orchestrate, and make his own pastiche, yet these sources squat on the writing like a milky incubus. Phillips’s postmodern paralysis might be a canny form of defeatism. Maybe his solution is finally the most honest, admitting that certain areas of traumatic history cannot be granted a new or living history. No matter how hard you try to muck around with them you cannot develop art out of them, their self-sufficiency as testimony will have to fill in for the current imaginative bankruptcy. But there is a danger here already of focusing on the problems of remembering slavery as if it is a dilemma restricted to black authors. I wrote this book from the conviction that the inheritance of slavery was, and still is, a dilemma for everyone in England.

*Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography* is not centrally concerned with the texts produced by slaves and ex-slaves in England in the 1780–1865 period. Certainly these works contributed centrally to the English cultural memory of slavery, and continue to do so. I have decided not to produce detailed readings of the main black English authors of the period, because the works of Phyllis Wheatley, Ottobah Cugoana, Ignatius Sancho, Olaudah Equiano, and Robert Wedderburn have been, and continue to be, read in responsible and innovative theoretical ways.<sup>20</sup> What still has not happened is an equally sophisticated interrogation of the workings of the white slavery archive. Consequently, *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography* takes up the most influential of the white

<sup>20</sup> The ground-breaking work in this area was Sandiford, *Measuring the Moment*; this has been followed up by a host of rereadings. Two of the most important recent contributions are Helen Thomas, *Romanticism and Slave Narratives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) and Srinivas Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans Colonialism and Agency, 1688–1804* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999). The most delicate analysis of Equiano’s negotiations with eighteenth-century approaches to Africans and race is Roxann Wheeler, *The Complexion of Race Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 260–87.

texts about slavery, and tries to pull them apart a bit, to see if their intimate structures, their internal aesthetic and ethical mechanisms, can now tell us anything new. As a result, I am not comfortable with this book, with what it describes, or with how it is written. But given the subject I *am* now comfortable with the inevitability of discomfort. In truth the subject demands more than discomfort; perhaps it demands the maintenance of a perpetual state of shock, the shock of knowing that you will never know what you want to say about slavery, or what the right way of saying it might be.

I have another reason for not wanting to write about black authors. This book takes the works of canonic eighteenth- and nineteenth-century white authors which claimed, when written, to account for slavery. The impulse to look at these works, curiously, quizzically, and to ask with some scepticism what kind of 'truth' they hold, is partly motivated by an enormous and historically contingent theoretical imbalance. The literature generated in England and North America around the slavery debates is vast, its full extent still not known. Yet within the emergent history and theory of slavery studies one type of text has been singled out as possessing a uniquely troubled relation to 'historical truth'. Writings by ex-slaves, and above all the slave narratives, from their first appearance were created and read against a perpetual backdrop of white suspicion, patronization, and possessive fantasy. Elaborate prefatory apparatuses, and indexes hung about these works, from the *Poems* of Phyllis Wheatley and the *Interesting Narrative* of Equiano in the mid- and late eighteenth century, to the great slave narratives pouring off English and American presses by the mid-nineteenth. During the last thirty years there has been an accelerating avalanche of theoretical work focused around the narratives. Much of this work teases out the subtle manner in which slave narratives negotiate and subvert white literary languages.<sup>21</sup> Yet almost all work on slave narratives is still working around the question of the relation of ex-slave writing to an ideal of 'Historical truth'. Somehow the writings of canonic Romantic poets, or of Harriet Martineau, or the Divine John Newton, or the social prophets Carlyle and Ruskin, when they come to narrativize and fictionalize slavery, are not subjected to an equivalent searching. The same questions about intentionality, control, subversion, and cultural gamesmanship have not been asked, and that is one reason why this book has been written.

This book began to form in my head as I worked on *Blind Memory*, which was an attempt to uncover, and in some cases to unlock, the meanings which

<sup>21</sup> The most important and comprehensive study of the relation of truth to rhetorical strategy in slave narrative remains William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760–1865* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988). For my own take on the relation of slave narrative to truth, see Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America 1780–1865* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 99–134.

had lain dormant within the visual imagery generated around the Atlantic slavery systems in England, America, and Brazil, over more or less the same period that *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography* covers. The rise and developments of the abolition literatures appeared to coincide with the simultaneous appearance and growth of three other cultural phenomena that shared with abolition a wide publishing base and great popular appeal. The first was Evangelicalism as a movement of social and moral reform, the second Pornography as an organized leisure industry, and the third the development of a cult of Sensibility, or Sentiment, which bled out through the arts and into 'polite' social thought and behaviour. The more I looked into the work of several central texts, and indeed the publishing careers of several key figures in this period, the more I became convinced that the links between these three phenomena and the issue of slavery were profound, complicated, and lasting. Having written this book it is now my belief, as I begin to suggest in the speculative concluding section, that many late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century cultural forms come out of slavery. Is it too much to see bondage, body art, sado-masochism, mystical religious cults, the constructions of black male and female sexuality by whites as having evolved, more or less directly, out of the submerged and devious reaction of successive Western societies to the inheritances of Atlantic slavery?

### ‘The fear is in the word’: Advantages and Disadvantages of Fantasizing Slave Trauma

Disguise thyself as thou wilt, still *slavery!* said I—still thou art a bitter draught;  
(Sterne, *Sentimental Journey*)

*Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography* traces a variety of delusions, fictions, and obsessions which are recurrent in English writings about slavery during the period 1780–1850. This period also encompasses the two great periods of English abolition propaganda: the first directed from the late 1780s until 1807, at the abolition of the English slave trade. The second from 1808 until 1833 is directed at slave emancipation in the English sugar colonies. The book also addresses continuing debates on race and slavery within Britain now directed primarily against North America, although Brazil and Cuba are also important. The book does not deal adequately with the texts generated around the English apprentice system in the 1830s after outright slavery had supposedly been abolished in the English Caribbean. This is an area in urgent need of research.

Consequently, the book covers a very great variety of materials and authors. The materials include: novels, poetry (lyrics, sonnets, ballads, songs, epics),

drama, political pamphlets, travel books, autobiographies of many different sorts, periodical journalism, essays, official government publications, children's books, graphic satire, and a variety of non-satiric print publications. The authors include all the canonic Romantic poets with the exception of Byron, and many once popular but now forgotten abolition bards. There are extended discussions of several seminal nineteenth-century novelists including Austen, Charlotte Brontë, and Dickens. Major texts of pro-slavery are considered, as are writings on slavery by three great proto-socialist theoreticians, Cobbett, Ruskin, and Carlyle. These writers were also vocal and influential racists, each with their own passionate, persuasive pro-slavery positions.

Surveying this material, and my constructions of it, the following question might need answering: why write a book which so obsessively claims to uncover the masochism, paranoia, self-delusion, hypocrisy, anxiety, anger, terror, guilt, horror, and envy which lie, frequently disguised, within English attempts to respond to the legacy of Atlantic slavery? The answer is that these things remain covert. They need to be written about, cut out from the cultural fat in which they have been embedded and hidden for so long. St Augustine confidently pronounced that 'it is better to suffer iniquity than to perform it'. Yet Augustine thought in a relatively clean definitional space where the literature of empathy, and the thought of Sade had not confused the distinction between persecuted and persecutor, tormentor and tormented. In the imaginations of Laurence Sterne, Wordsworth, Blake, or Captain John Stedman, it is possible simultaneously to suffer and to inflict the violence which causes the suffering. Such a seemingly impossible duality is achieved by setting up parallel fantasies in which the role of victim and victimizer are both played out by the same nar-rational persona.

The basis of feeling for the slave within the promiscuous emotional dynamics of sentimental empathy is deeply searched in Sterne's treatment of the caged starling in *A Sentimental Journey*. This dense and contradictory response to the problem of fictionalizing the experience of slavery brings together many of the central concerns of *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography*. Sterne's inspired meditation indicates yet again that the cultural memory of slavery within England may have no limits. Above all Sterne uncovers the appropriative, and experientially levelling, drive underpinning the desire to 'feel for the slave', to feel 'pity for poor Africans'.<sup>22</sup>

The three chapters of *A Sentimental Journey* entitled 'The Passport', 'The Captive', and 'The Starling' show Sterne interrogating the concepts of Slavery and Liberty, in what is ultimately a cyclical articulation of the essentially

<sup>22</sup> One of Cowper's satiric slavery poems carries the title 'Pity for the Poor Africans', William Cowper, *The Poems of William Cowper*, ed. John Baird and Charles Ryskamp, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980-95), iii. 26.



solipsistic base of Sentimentalism. Sterne begins by meditating upon freedom in the context of a universal symbol of tyrannical incarceration, the Bastille. He introduces the idea of being locked up in the Bastille in order to inaugurate a discussion of the connection between language and fear: 'And as for the Bastille! the terror is in the word'.<sup>23</sup> This insight leads Sterne to take apart and relocate this terrible word, to bring it back into the language of common sense from the language of terror. Taking the terror out of the word constitutes not so much a process of deconstruction as one of linguistic re-domestication: 'Bastille is but another word for tower—and tower is but another word for a house you can't get out of. . . the Bastille is not an evil to be despised—but strip it of its towers—fill up the fosse—unbarricade the doors—call it simply a confinement, and suppose 'tis some tyrant of a distemper—and not of a man which holds you in it—the evil vanishes'.<sup>24</sup>

But the evil does not vanish, for having reached this complacent conclusion Sterne then introduces the starling in order to refute the idea that the physical withdrawal of all liberty can be 'borne without complaint'. Sterne hears 'a voice which I took to be of a child'. In fact it is a caged starling, repeating over and over again the words 'I can't get out'. Sterne attempts, but fails, to set the bird at liberty. Walking on, he then meditates upon the bird's plight, and the distance which exists between the emotional shock the bird causes him to feel and his recent thoughts upon liberty in the context of the Bastille:

I vow I never had my affections more tenderly awakened; nor do I remember an incident in my life, where the dissipated spirits, to which reason had been a bubble, were so suddenly call'd home. Mechanical as the notes were, yet so true in tune to nature were they chanted, that in one moment they overthrew all my systematic reasonings upon the Bastille; and I heavily walk'd up stairs, unsaying every word I had said going down them.

Disguise thyself as thou wilt, still *slavery!* said I—still thou art a bitter draught; and though thousands in all ages have been made to drink of thee thou art no less bitter on that account.<sup>25</sup>

Sterne, in terms of imaginative, and subsequently physical, possession, will not let the bird go, and in this playfully perverse world, the bird will not let go of him either:

The bird in his cage pursued me into my room; I sat down close to my table, and leaning my head upon my hand, I began to figure to myself the miseries of confinement. I was in a right frame of mind for it so I gave full scope to my imagination.

<sup>23</sup> Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy by Mr. Yorick* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, [1768] 1968), 71.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 71.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 71–2. For a construction of this passage and Sterne generally as representative of a flatly voyeuristic sentimentalism, see Srinivas Aravamudan (ed.), *Slavery Abolition and Emancipation: Writings in the British Romantic Period*, vi. *Fiction* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1999), 1–7.

I was going to begin with the millions of my fellow creatures born to no inheritance but slavery; but finding, however affecting the picture was, that I could not bring it near me, and that the multitude of sad groups in it did but distract me.—

—I took a single captive, and having first shut him up in his dungeon, then look'd through the twilight of his grated door to take his picture.<sup>26</sup>

In this bizarre passage Sterne uncovers the psychodynamics which operate when slavery and literary sentimentality are conjoined. One incidence of responding to suffering captivity, in the form of a bird, incites Sterne to attempt a series of fantasies revolving around human enslavement. The bird has become a universal symbol of slavery. Consequently, Sterne begins by attempting a suitably inclusive fantasy, where he pictures 'the millions of my fellow creatures born to no inheritance but slavery'. Yet this universalizing picture is inadequate, because it resists empathetic possession, or as Sterne explains 'however affecting the picture was, I could not bring it near me'. In fact far from providing a focus for sentimental projection this panoramic view of suffering is a distraction from feeling, from emotion: 'the multitude of sad groups in it [the picture of slavery] did but distract me.'

Although Sterne is never explicit about the colour of these imagined victims the passage relates in complicated ways to Sterne's earlier dealings with a real African slave. Sterne had in fact received a formal request in a letter from the ex-slave, Ignatius Sancho, to turn his creative powers upon the task of imagining the suffering of the New World slave. The climax to the letter runs:

I think you will forgive me;—I am sure you will applaud me for intreating you to give one half hours attention to slavery, as it is this day practised in our West Indies.—That subject, handled in your own striking manner, would ease the Yoke (perhaps) of many—but if only of one—Gracious God!—what a feast to a benevolent heart!—and, sure I am, you are an epicurean in acts of charity.—You, who are universally read, and as universally admired—you could not fail—Dear Sir, think in me you behold the uplifted hands of thousands of my brother Moors.—Grief (you pathetically observe) is eloquent;—figure to yourself their attitudes; hear their supplicating addresses!—Alas! You cannot refuse.—Humanity must comply.<sup>27</sup>

Here a black ex-slave mimics the language of Sterneian sentiment in order to try to persuade Sterne to write a pathetic piece focused upon the suffering of the West Indian slave. Cannibalistic metaphor creeps in as Sancho imagines the effect of the piece of writing in terms of a feast of love, 'charity', for the figure of Sterne's sentimental narrator. He further entreats Sterne to see in the single black figure of Sancho an emblem of 'the uplifted hands of thousands of my

<sup>26</sup> Sterne, *Sentimental Journey*, 72–3.

<sup>27</sup> Ignatius Sancho, *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, An African*, ed. Vincent Carretta (London: Penguin, [1782] 1998), 74.

brother Moors' and instructs 'figure to yourself their attitudes'. In Sterne's well-known reply to this letter he alludes to the fact that he has just finished writing about a black woman in a passage which is to be included in *Tristram Shandy*.<sup>28</sup> The passage in question, however, the sixth chapter of the ninth volume, does not present the suffering of the slave, but presents an ex-slave in the guise of a woman of 'feeling'. Sterne inserts a little sentimental vignette: 'a poor negro girl, with a bunch of white feathers slightly tied to the end of a long cane, flapping away flies—not killing them.—'Tis a pretty picture! Said my uncle Toby—she had suffered persecution and learn't mercy.' That this woman has a tragic past is made evident, but Sterne does not go into it. Corporal Trim tells us that 'there are circumstances in the story of that poor friendless slut that would melt a heart of stone'. These tales are never told, the 'Moorish girl' and 'poor friendless slut' is passed over and the sufferings of slavery written out of *Tristram Shandy*.<sup>29</sup> When in *A Sentimental Journey* Sterne finally got round to honouring the task charged upon him by Sancho, he moves in reverse order, from the general picture to the individual. The writing that results is a very long way from the sentimental tableaux of black suffering which Sancho had in mind.

Sterne turns from universal suffering to individual suffering and in doing so makes things a good deal more personal. Rather than deal in a generalized picture of enslavement, Sterne plays the role of enslaver and takes a single slave victim to fantasize around. In a peculiar phrase he tells us, 'I took a single captive', who he then shuts up and contemplates as an object of suffering. Sterne goes into an imaginative world where he can visualize every detail of his invented victim's ordeal. Yet he plays with the personal history of this ideal slave purely in terms of the effect which various elements of the fantasy will have upon the production of what might be seen as Sterne's Sentimental 'highs'. For example, imagining the personal circumstances of the victim Sterne provides him with children, and meditating on the suffering of the children takes the narrator to a professed degree of feeling which is unbearable: 'But here my heart began to bleed—and I was forced to go on with another part of the portrait.' There is a sort of auto-erotics of empathy at work here. Sterne's narrator pursues painful fantasies up to the point where his 'heart bleeds'; at this point he backs off and takes a new narrative tack, only for the process to start all over again. He can come back to, and 'enjoy' the suffering of his fantasy slave at any time, and in any way he likes. This act of imaginative possession exists in a troubled relation to the manner in which a real slave-owner can use the slave's body at any time, in any way. Having 'felt' for the slave's children, Sterne moves back

<sup>28</sup> *Letters of Laurence Sterne*, ed. Lewis Perry Curtis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), 282–3.

<sup>29</sup> Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy Gentleman*, 3 vols. (Gainesville: Florida University Press, [1760–7] 1978), ii. 747–9.

to focus on the physical minutiae of his victim: 'I heard his chains upon his legs, as he turn'd his body to lay his little stick upon the bundle—He gave a deep sigh—I saw the iron enter into his soul—I burst into tears—I could not sustain the picture of confinement which my fancy had drawn.'<sup>30</sup>

At a certain point the self-induced picture of suffering becomes so intense as to annihilate itself, the violent emotion Sterne feels wipes out the fantasy that caused it, 'I could not sustain the picture of confinement my fancy had drawn.' In this strange writing Sterne moves between the naturalism with which he conjures up his fantastic victim, and the mysticism with which he describes the emotion generated by the fantasy. Sterne's persona is pathologically confused; he creates the fantasy by playing the role of enslaver, yet at a certain point superimposes the emotions of the victim onto the voyeuristic persona of the oppressor. This movement out from authorial tormentor to tormented victim is climactically enacted in the short phrases: 'He gave a deep sigh—I saw the iron enter into his soul—I burst into tears.' The first and last of these staccato sentences are transparently clear, and express cause and effect: the sigh of the victim brings about the tears of the sympathizer. Yet the sentence in the middle exists in a completely different register. What does it mean to say 'I saw the iron enter into his soul'? How do you see into the suffering soul of a creature you have yourself imagined? Sterne appears to be attempting to describe something historically unrecoverable, the 'real' emotional experience of the slave victim. Sterne is reaching out for a language with which to describe that element within the fantasy of suffering which brings on the emotional crisis. The language he adopts comes from the Scriptures. In Psalm 105 Joseph's bitter experience of enslavement in Egypt, having been sold into slavery by his brothers, is described through the phrase, 'and the iron entered into his soul'. In this obscure phrase it appears as if the iron of Joseph's shackles has transmuted into a mystical substance, binding and torturing his very soul. Sterne, through sheer power of empathetic projection, re-enacts this bizarre inverse alchemy, where the soul is turned into the iron of the shackles which bind the body.

Yet at this crucial point where Sterne claims to have entered the soul of the slave, he then quite literally runs away from his own creation: 'I startled up from my chair, and calling la Fleur, I bid him bespeak me a *remise*.' This attempt to escape the imagined horrors of slavery by simply jumping up out of his chair, into a coach and four and riding away, is doomed to failure. As Yorick tries to enact a physical escape from the memory of slavery, his mind returns to the captive starling. Sterne goes on to give an account of the bird's life in the form of a miniature parody of a slave narrative. In a deliberately unemotional, and

<sup>30</sup> Sterne, *Sentimental Journey*, 73.

slightly laconic life history of the bird, Sterne tells how it is caught by the groom of an English aristocrat (the first act of enslavement) and taken to France in a cage. It is then given to an innkeeper, before Yorick's servant La Fleur purchases him with a bottle of wine. Yorick then takes the bird back to England where it is transferred, in its cage, from owner to owner, beginning at the top of the social tree, and ending up far down it. The bird is really sold down the river, and the person who sets in motion this terrible catalogue of exchange is none other than Sterne himself: 'Telling the story of him [the starling] to Lord A—Lord A begg'd the bird of me—in a week Lord A gave him to Lord B—Lord B made a present of him to Lord C—and Lord C's gentleman sold him to Lord D for a shilling—Lord D gave him to Lord E—and so on—half round the Alphabet—from that rank he pass'd in to the lower house, and pass'd the hands of as many commoners.'<sup>31</sup>

Sterne is profoundly ironic at his own expense. For all the fantasies of the suffering slave which the bird set off in the previous chapter, the bird, as property, is treated by Yorick with brutal and darkly humorous indifference. Sterne, in this complicated piece of writing, reveals that the dangers of playing sentimentally with the suffering of the slave are immense and uncontrollable. Sterne ends up with a terrible act of counterbalance: the economic state of slavery gives the slave body over to the owner as a material property, while the empathetic fantasy which attempts to reconfigure the suffering of the slave gives the memory of slavery over to the sentimentalist as aesthetic property. This disturbing equation justifies the form and content of *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography*, more or less. When slavery is the subject, the processes of culturation and colonization work very closely together.<sup>32</sup>

### Art, Slavery, and the Slave Trade: Whose to Blame, *More or Less*

Slavery is still excluded from many discursive contexts where it should hold centre stage. This introduction concludes by taking up two more or less contemporary examples which might help to explain why this book takes the form it does, and why it needed to be written. The first relates to the fictionalizations of Stephen Lawrence's murder in the English media. The McPherson report stated categorically that the Metropolitan Police Force was 'institutionally racist', and that every other major English institution, whether law, education, or of course the military, was institutionally racist as well. An IT fanfaronade

<sup>31</sup> Sterne, *Sentimental Journey*, 74–5.

<sup>32</sup> For the inseparable etymological functionings of 'culture' and 'colonization', Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 45–62.

greeted the release of the report with hurried attempts to define ‘institutional racism’. For all the brief descent into media-fuelled guilt and soul searching, there was absolutely no interest in, or knowledge of, a historical perspective for the *Lawrence* case which came out of slavery. For me that is one horrifying fact. The *Lawrence* case became a feeding frenzy, and Stephen Lawrence was made into a contemporary icon, a space for thinking about the ferocious nihilism of a set of unreconstructed white racist youths, who, as the surveillance tapes showed, had taken Enoch Powell at his word.<sup>33</sup> Almost beyond any power to control it, Stephen Lawrence’s murder was made into a virtual reality billboard. The ridiculous bundle of contradictions, evasions, effacements, distortions, false scents, and finally straightforward lies, which had marked the response of London’s Metropolitan Police to the murder, was traced and blazoned. Stephen himself disappeared in a mist of tabloid self-righteousness. As the complicit and complacent failure of the Met. to think about Stephen Lawrence as a human being was spotlighted, there was no mention of the fact that the historical explanation of this failure might lie in slavery. Almost six years after the event, the official inquiry into the murder was published.

One text stands out from the media explosion that greeted the release of the McPherson report: the statement Doreen Lawrence made on 24 February 1999. Doreen Lawrence stated: ‘my son was stabbed and left to bleed to death on the night of 22 April 1993 while Police officers looked on. They treated the affair as a gang war and from that moment on acted in a manner that can only be described as white masters during slavery.’ Only one newspaper gave a relatively full and unedited quotation of the whole of Doreen Lawrence’s statement; that was *The Guardian*. The headline to the article read ‘The Police were like white slave masters’, and only two other papers quoted the part of the statement relating to slavery. The concern with the inheritance of slavery generated no further debate in the media, and this fact gets down to the nitty-gritty. The significance of Doreen Lawrence’s observation lies in the fact that she sees a complete divide over relative human values which dictates how the police will respond to white and black victims of violent street crime. This divide evolves directly out of the social and economic dynamics that operated within, and in her view have remained the legacy of, the Atlantic slave systems. Black people, black bodies, had no legal status within the codes that authorized slavery. Slaves had an economic value, a property value; the lives of black slaves were not protected by the law.

Doreen Lawrence sees the fallout from slavery to lie behind institutional approaches to black civil rights in England today. Well, is this a ridiculous

<sup>33</sup> *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Appendixes, Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for the Home Secretary by Command of Her Majesty, March 1999* (London: The Stationery Office Ltd, 1999), Appendix 10, and see pp. 374–5 below.

claim? No, it is not. Not if it is recongnized that one major aspect of the traumatic inheritance of slavery lies in the long-term damage which the systematic repression of the memory of slavery has effected in white institutions, and exerted on white creativity, in Europe and the Americas. This book is really about the dangers of misremembering slavery. Slavery as a cultural inheritance needed to be, and was, disguised in the most extraordinarily elaborate, and effective ways; it had to be. The alternative was, and is, simply too much for us to bear.

Here is the second example. *The Guardian* in May 2001 carried an article entitled ‘Britain Accused over Slave Trade’.<sup>34</sup> The article was headed, inevitably, with that icon of controlled white empowerment and black dehumanization, the *Plan of the Slave Ship Brookes*.<sup>35</sup> The text stated that in January 2001 a meeting of African nations drew up a statement which they wanted the ‘international community’ to assent to at the forthcoming United Nations International Conference on Racism. One key paragraph, which European ex-slaving nations really did not like, ran: ‘The slave trade is a unique tragedy in the history of humanity, particularly against Africans—a crime against humanity which is unparalleled, not only in its abhorrent barbaric feature but also in terms of its enormous magnitude, its institutionalised nature, its trans-national dimensions and especially its negation of the essence of the human nature of the victims.’ No one who has even an elementary knowledge of the conduct of the trade by any of the leading European nations can sensibly have any objection to any part of this statement. Yet the director-general of South Africa’s foreign ministry stated that Britain was at the forefront of opposition to the introduction of this paragraph into the conference, backed up by other Europeans nations which dominated the Atlantic slave trade, most notably Spain and Portugal. The argument of British officials is frightening, but useful and wholly typical. It does not relate to the meaning of these words, or to the idea that they summarize a ‘truthful’ verdict. The argument is set up in terms of the temporal contingency of law, in other words it relates to the idea that human rights, human crimes, and human suffering are historically relative phenomena. In the language of English officialdom: ‘We are not trying to devalue what happened. No one is doubting the barbarism of the slave trade. But the legal analysis is that you can’t apply it retrospectively and it must be tested against the legal standards of the time. Customary international law at the time did not oppose slavery.’ What an amazing argument; if such ‘legal analysis’ is applied to Central Europe during the Holocaust what happens?

<sup>34</sup> *The Guardian*, 21 May 2001, 2.

<sup>35</sup> For the cultural dominance of this icon in England and America, see Wood, *Blind Memory*, 17–36.

According to the ‘customary international law’ adopted by countries which participated in the ‘final solution’, there was no crime. The Jewish Holocaust might now be seen as a crime against humanity but according to the complicit legal systems which processed Jews in Germany, France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Denmark, the whole of Eastern Europe, Russia, and so on, it cannot be deemed a crime. The very fact that so many countries, under Nazi instruction, instituted the policy means, according to the British logic cited above, that it cannot, in terms of a customary ‘legal analysis’, be constituted *post facto* as a crime against humanity. Of course it is preposterous, morally stupid, ethically disastrous, to argue in this manner; but denial has a long, ingenious, and endemic tradition within English culture when it comes to Atlantic slavery. The forms of this denial and cultural disguise are the subject of this book. European slaving nations, with England at the commercial and cultural vanguard, have never been able to see Atlantic slavery for what it was. It is a tragic fact that it takes South Africa to pull us up short on this one. This book is built on the premiss that the ‘true’ history of slavery is irrecoverable, and perhaps more pertinently that it has in part been made irrecoverable, with great care, by some very great writers.

The facts of the slave trade and Atlantic slavery are there, *more or less*, firmly established. That the Atlantic slave trade happened is not now denied outside some of the repulsive fictions of extreme white supremacy. Yet where does that leave European culture? Historians, and especially economic historians, will continue their number wars, trying to come up with tables cataloguing the death rates, longevity of slaves, patterns of disease, trade patterns, and so on. *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography* avoids pseudo-forensic attempts to prove whether slaves ate, *more or less*, wore, *more or less*, were sold down the river, *more or less*, made music, art, or artefacts, *more or less*, were tortured, *more or less*, were rebellious, *more or less*, or were allowed to love, *more or less*. This book is not about slavery, *more or less*, it is about trying to see why the cultural fictions of denial and envy which were developed around slavery by white Europeans, and which persist, happened. It is consequently not about black slave lives and black slave suffering, but about white fantasies of black lives and suffering. That is, after all, *more or less*, the cultural memory of English slavery.





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## Slavery, Testimony, Propaganda: John Newton, William Cowper, and Compulsive Confession

I consider myself bound in conscience to bear my testimony at least, and to wash my hands from the guilt which, if persisted in now that things have been so thoroughly investigated and brought to light, will, I think, constitute a national sin of a scarlet and crimson dye.

(John Newton, of his slaving career)

Excuses generate the very guilt they exonerate, though always in excess or by default . . . No excuse can ever hope to catch up with such a proliferation of guilt. On the other hand, any guilt . . . can always be dismissed as the gratuitous product of . . . a radical fiction: there can never be enough guilt around to match the text-machine's infinite power to excuse.

(Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading*)

I must repeat—we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses. This is an uncomfortable notion, of which I have become conscious little by little . . . We survivors are not only an exiguous but also an anomalous minority: we are those who by our prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom.

(Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*)

### 'Amazing Grace' and Newton's Current Currency

John Newton is one of the most terrifying personalities of the second half of the eighteenth century. Still lionized by Christian publishers as one of *the* proudest examples of a converted sinner, he published several autobiographical accounts of his life and has been the subject of a steady flow of biographies ever

since.<sup>1</sup> At least ten have been published in the last two decades, four of them designed for a juvenile market.<sup>2</sup> Newton is currently reincarnated within the celebratory rhetoric of the British Tourist Board, his bewigged and jewelily face appearing on the display boards, and interspersed among the images and narratives, of the 'Cowper and Newton Museum Home of Olney's Heritage'. Newton is also part of virtual reality and constitutes the centrepiece of the Museum's sturdily designed web site, where his image shares pride of place alongside a silhouette profile of one of William Cowper's leaping hares.<sup>3</sup> Newton remains a prime late eighteenth-century exemplar of the sinner saved, the 'white slave' and libertine who found his Evangelical Father. The biographies construct him as an ideal paradox, a slave-trading sadist who also wrote several of the most powerful and profoundly loved examples of Evangelical hymnology. Newton was a poet and preacher who composed the words for what is still the most widely adapted and best-known hymn ever written in the Christian world. Newton and the compound 'Amazing Grace' are inseparable in the popular accounts of his life and work. This lyric, born out of a sense of God's graciousness in forgiving Newton's sins, has been grafted onto him like a 'virtual' Siamese twin, and is projected across the World Wide Web in countless and continually proliferating sites. 'Amazing Grace' constitutes a *chimera* which has encrusted itself onto a body of work which has now dissolved and been forgotten.

'Amazing Grace' has a life of its own and has entered that strange area of aesthetic economy where its power to be transformed in and out of global musical, and general cultural contexts defies the assimilative abilities of analysis.<sup>4</sup> 'Amazing Grace' is to popular music and the World Wide Web now, what *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was to the nineteenth-century leisure industries.<sup>5</sup> Both creations came out of Atlantic slavery, yet are promiscuously re-created, and remain in a state of powerlessness to control the terms of their continuing reinvention. It is *amazing* how many soul, gospel, rock, and pop cover versions the hymn has generated. Aretha Franklin provides the benchmark for gospel renditions; her

<sup>1</sup> By far the best book on Newton's life, thought, and cultural milieu is D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the English Evangelical Tradition between the Conversions of Wesley and Wilberforce* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996). The book ends before Newton's mainstream involvement in the abolition movement; consequently Hindmarsh does not discuss the relation of slavery to Newton's thought and writing in any detail.

<sup>2</sup> Versions designed for adolescents are Bernard Martin, *John Newton and the Slave Trade* (London: Eyre, 1965); Kate Montagnon, *Changing Course: The Story of John Newton* (London: Scripture Union, 1986); Catherine Swift, *John Newton* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1991). Among other recent accounts for the popular market, Brian H. Edwards *Through Many Dangers: The Story of John Newton* (Welwyn, Hertfordshire: Eurobooks, 1975) and John Pollock, *Amazing Grace: John Newton's Story* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1981) are the most lurid.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.cowperandnewtonmuseum.org>

<sup>4</sup> The best scholarly discussion of the hymn and its cultural context is Hindmarsh, *Newton*, 275–80.

<sup>5</sup> For the marketing of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, see Wood, *Blind Memory*, 143–50, 173–214.

magisterial farewell album to straight gospel was simply entitled 'Amazing Grace' and is constructed around a showpiece rendition of the hymn. On the web Elvis's rendition dominates the popular versions. One Polish site prints a version of all lyrics for 'Laska Zadziwiająca', as the title translates, and if you click on the Elvis icon you even get a Polish Elvis impersonator giving an acoustic rendition of the King's rearranged version of the lyrics.<sup>6</sup> Newton, in his charismatic mode, would have approved. Newton might not have been so happy to see the version of his hymn which appears in 'The Pagan Library', written by one Verna Knapp, a witch and worshipper of the Earth Goddess:

Amazing grace, how sweet the Earth  
that bore a witch like me!  
I once was burned, now I survive,  
was hung and now I sing . . .

Amazing earth, enduring life,  
from death into rebirth  
Tis [*sic*] earth I am, and earth I love  
and earth I'll always be<sup>7</sup>

Many versions which leave the words intact still push Newton's original to the limit. Bryan Ferry's woeful rendition in the 1994 *Taxi* album is the nadir, a creation without, indeed *against*, Grace, both in spiritual and aesthetic terms. Houses, boats, horses, dogs, toys, dolls, musical boxes, avant-garde abstract paintings have all been named 'Amazing Grace', and that list is the tip of the iceberg. Dozens of web sites use the hymn as the basis for musical instruction for instruments ranging from the Bagpipes to the 'Native American Flute'.<sup>8</sup> The compound is used and reused to provide newspaper headlines to describe such diverse creatures as Jack Niklaus, the veteran golfer who still plays with 'amazing-grace', and the deputy PM John Prescott, Roy Hattersley heading a recent *Guardian* column 'Prescott's Amazing Grace' because Prescott maintained a dignified silence in the midst of cruel attacks on his wife's figure and hairstyle in the tabloid press.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> wysiwyg://54/http://www.kki.pl/elvisa/lyrics12.htm

<sup>7</sup> http://www.paganlibrary.com/music\_poetry/amazing\_grace.php

<sup>8</sup> wysiwyg://www.stellarflutes.com/flutefingerchart.htm; http://www.edcen.ehhs.cmich.edu/~dhavlena/bp-text.htm

<sup>9</sup> http://www.glauce.com/pages/paintings/p4\_amazing\_grace.htm; http://www.dollsales.com/musicboxes/Heavenly/483117.htm; http://www.canoe.ca/SlamGolf00Masters/aprg\_nic.html; http://www.luxuryyachts.net/boatlist/amazinggrace.htm; http://www.guardian.co.uk/Columnists/Column/0,5673,256146,00.html; wysiwyg://17http://www.babycenter.com/general/6470.html; http://www.jt30page/songs/grace.html; http://www.brfwitness.org/Bread/amazgrac.htm

There are hundreds of web sites devoted to reprinting and discussing the hymn proper. What is significant here is that slavery is not ignored, indeed it is foregrounded in these accounts. Yet it is an easy and sanitized narrative which results. Most of the accounts reiterate the standard versions of Newton's biography, and invariably unite his name with the Amazing Grace formula: 'Amazing Grace the story of John Newton "Come and hear, all ye that fear God, and I will declare what he hath done for my soul."'; 'John Newton, Servant of Slaves, Discovers Amazing Grace!'; 'Amazing Grace, the Story of a Man, the Story of a Hymn'; 'Noteworthy Ministries: The Story behind Amazing Grace'; 'Amazing Grace John Newton's Greatest Hymn'; 'Amazing Grace: The Benefits of Affliction'.<sup>10</sup> Several things emerge from these popular accounts. The first is the extent to which Newton still remains culturally intact, albeit in vulgarized form, as an eighteenth-century Evangelical icon. David Brion Davis sums up Evangelicalism in the context of abolition as a movement which 'emphasised man's burden of personal responsibility, dramatised the dangers of moral complacency, and magnified the rewards for an authentic change of heart'. He then goes on to explain why Newton became the inevitable star of establishment abolitionism, summarizing: 'Newton's decision to denounce slavery as a crime and to confess his former depravity became a model, for his pious admirers, of authentic sanctification.'<sup>11</sup> It appears that for popular North American and English audiences nothing has changed: an acknowledgement of Newton's experience as a slave captain is the necessary prologue to a celebratory narrative of redemption which wipes that experience out. Yet the enormities of what Newton did in the trade, and his lifelong obsession with examining this aspect of his past, are a lot more complicated than the current combined weight of his reinvention might suggest. The hagiographies of his contemporaries were circulated and recirculated in various widely available forms from the 1820s, and have continued intact until they have been absorbed into the inconceivably popular culture of the web. The centre of gravity in this particular Newtonian mythology is Redemption. The normalization of Newton's activities as a slaver has also never constituted a problem. Cowper's latest biographer, for example, writes of Newton that: 'even if he had died in the belief that slavery were a divinely ordained institution, there would still be no cause for surprise or scorn. Slavery was in his day the biggest vested interest in England, the whole fortunes of Liverpool and Bristol were based upon it; and many of the sincerest religious

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/Pointe/4495/biography.html>; <http://www.gospelcom.net/chi/GLIMPSEF/Glimpses/glimps028.shtml>; <http://www.umanitoba.ca/cm/v014/no2/amazinggrace.html>; <http://www.geocities.com/Heartlan...nte/4495/library10affliction.html>; <http://home.flash.net/~gaylon/jnewton.html>

<sup>11</sup> David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution 1770–1823* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), 47–8.

people, clerical and lay, were financially implicated in this human traffic.<sup>12</sup> In the end such an approach, setting Newton against his even more brutish and mercenary contemporaries, swings back to the redemptive hook which is essentialized within that sinister compound 'Amazing Grace'. Given the world he lived in, and the things he did, it might be reasonable to celebrate Newton as exceptional in his spiritual awakening. The big problem with looking at Newton now is the difficulty, perhaps impossibility, of getting beyond the 'Amazing Grace' mythology. It may, however, be possible to begin exploring some other versions of Newton.

The archive Newton left behind is a good deal more important than his popular image might indicate. His writings constitute a very special resource for considering the traumatic inheritance of transatlantic slavery now. The traces of his memory, the narratives he set up around what he did, demand serious attention, because they open the way for a reinterrogation of many aspects of the historical legacy, and agency, of Atlantic slavery. His writings provide a set of blueprints for thinking through how eighteenth-century Evangelical Christianity provided England and America with a set of structures for dealing with sin, guilt, shame, and evil within the context of imperial and industrial expansion. While working in the slave trade, Newton did terrible things. In the early part of his life, shortly after his conversion to Christianity, Newton made four voyages, one as mate, three as captain, of slave ships. He succinctly reported in his journal the multiple tortures of adults and children. He personally ordered and supervised the thumb-screwing of four small boys.<sup>13</sup> He then spent the rest of his life examining and re-examining his sin within the context of an enthusiastic redemptive theology which was an applied form of Calvinism. The body of writing that resulted is not easy to understand, but might be seen as a set of tools with which to lay bare the disguises that surround the damage which slavery inflicted upon the ethical consciousness of Britain and the Americas.

### The Biographical Myth

Newton forged his own myth, up to and even beyond the grave. He knew exactly what he wanted written on his gravestone. This was the official abbreviated version of his life:

JOHN NEWTON  
CLERK

<sup>12</sup> Gilbert Thomas, *William Cowper and the Eighteenth Century* (London: Ivor Nicholson, 1935), 197.

<sup>13</sup> See pp. 60–1 below.

ONCE AN INFIDEL AND LIBERTINE  
 A SERVANT OF SLAVES IN AFRICA,  
 WAS  
 BY THE RICH MERCY OF OUR LORD AND SAVIOUR  
 JESUS CHRIST,  
 PRESERVED, RESTORED, PARDONED,  
 AND APPOINTED TO PREACH THE FAITH  
 HE HAD LONG LABOURED TO DESTROY

Slavery is mentioned once, and it is mentioned so that Newton may set himself out as the slave of African slaves, the lowest of the low. His sins are set out as libertinage and infidelity, sins of pleasure and of disbelief, not abuses of human rights committed in the slave trade. His life is an illustration of Divine Grace, his sins justified by his redemption. But the facts of his life, and the obsessive reworking of his relation to his activities as a slaver, provide some very different narrative possibilities.

The bare facts of Newton's life are as follows.<sup>14</sup> Born in 1725, his mother died when he was 7, and his father, a commander in the merchant navy, apparently cold and practical, sent him to school and then, when Newton was 11, started taking him on voyages with him. At the age of 18, he was impressed onto a British warship, and although promoted to midshipman, deserted, was captured, flogged, and reduced to the ranks, and at his own request exchanged to a slaving boat in 1745. He ended up on the coast of Sierra Leone and, although officially the servant to, became the virtual slave of, a white slave factor in the Plantane islands, whose black African wife persecuted and brutalized Newton over a period of months. To the delight of his nineteenth-century biographers an eighteenth-century white man from Kent could hardly have fallen lower than to become the enslaved torture object of a black African woman. This became a central element in the fascination of his legend, and Newton emerged in the early biographies not simply as a slave captain, but also as 'the white slave'. Newton survived the experience and then worked in degraded but less appalling circumstances for another trader on the slave coast, before being rescued by a friend of his father's in 1748. Up to this point Newton remembers himself as a godless and totally debauched character, but sailing home on 10 March 1748 he underwent a conversion experience of Constantian violence.

<sup>14</sup> For a fine summary of the standard biographies and for a bibliography of biographical materials including early journal articles, see Hindmarsh, *Newton*, 2–3, 340–8; for the different historiographical constructions of Newton, 4–5. See also Helen Thomas, *Romanticism and Slave Narratives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 60–70, for an account which places the *Authentic Narrative* in the context of spiritual autobiography.

He returned to England, married his childhood sweetheart Mary Catlett and at this point entered the slave trade. In 1748–9 he undertook a voyage as mate on a slaver to learn the ins and outs of the trade. Then from 1750 to 1753 he made three voyages as captain of slave vessels. During this period Newton kept a journal of his voyages for the ship's owners, a document in which he set down the day to day business events on his ship.<sup>15</sup> At the same time that he was keeping the journal, Newton was also composing long and emotionally highly complex love letters to Mary Catlett, which she kept and which were subsequently published.<sup>16</sup>

In 1754 a convulsive fit convinced him to retire from the Guinea trade on grounds of ill health. He had already contracted severe illnesses as a result of his extended trips up and down the slave coast while he bartered to fill his ships with slave cargo and other goods. Possessing an intimate knowledge of the dangers of slaving and the limited lifespan of those who worked in the 'Guinea trade', Newton decided on a career change. He determined on the Church and, with the combination of business acumen and common sense, which had characterized his slaving activities, he set about networking with the most prominent Evangelicals of the day. During the first half of the 1750s Newton was also struggling to define his faith and increasingly turned towards Calvinism under the influence of David Jennings and then Alexander Clunie. Yet it was finally a form of Calvinistic Methodism that he embraced. George Whitefield moved to Liverpool and through discipleship to him Newton made friendships with figures who included Wesley, William Grimshaw, and Henry Venn. Newton decided to try to make it within the theological mainstream and attempted to enter the Church of England, applying to the Archbishop of York in 1758. At this point Newton's influence and connections were insufficient and he was refused. However he soon gained an introduction to Lord Dartmouth, a young, fervent, wealthy, and very influential Evangelical nobleman. Through Dartmouth's intercession with the Bishops of Chester and Lincoln in 1764 he was ordained first a deacon, and then a priest. With these powerful backers he moved directly to the curacy of Olney, which was in Dartmouth's gift, and Dartmouth immediately built a beautiful new vicarage for him. In the same year he published the first of his autobiographical books, the *Authentic Narrative*, which immediately became an Evangelical classic. A recent biographer has termed it a 'kind of curriculum vitae', and it certainly did Newton's career no

<sup>15</sup> The journal remained in obscurity until it was published as *The Journal of a Slave Trader, John Newton 1750–54*, ed. with intro. Bernard Martin and Mark Spurrell (London: Epworth Press, 1962).

<sup>16</sup> *The Works of the Rev. John Newton, Late Rector of the United Parishes of St. Mary Woolnoth and St. Mary Woolchurch Haw, London. In six volumes* (London, 1808), *Letters to a Wife. Written during Three Voyages to Africa. From 1750 to 1754*, v. 300–80.



harm.<sup>17</sup> The book remained a nineteenth-century best-seller and set out, in Newton's special language of celebratory humility, what were to remain the standard elements of this sensational conversion narrative.<sup>18</sup>

While at Olney, Newton consolidated his position within the Church and developed an international literary career. He came to exert a charismatic power over his parishioners who included the mentally unstable but brilliant proto-romantic poet William Cowper. Cowper and Newton became creatively inseparable, and worked together on a hymn collection. The resulting *Olney Hymns* was one of the most influential and formally beautiful collections of hymns in English. The volume emerged as the first great lyric collaboration of the eighteenth century, and as a collection suggests intriguing parallels with the *Lyrical Ballads*. Yet the friendship with Cowper was relatively short-lived, and Newton was also having problems with his Olney congregation. Newton's enthusiastic prayer meetings with their unremitting emphasis on the eternal triangle of sin, punishment, and ecstatic redemption had got out of control, leading to a series of antinomian orgies in November of 1779. Newton's attempts to control the licentiousness infuriated his congregation, members of which he had subsequently to bribe to protect his house. He left for London under something of a cloud having accepted the benefice of St Mary Woolnoth in 1780, as a gift from John Thornton. Once in London, with only Romaine as a performative competitor, Newton became a preaching celebrity.

Newton was soon in great demand, the glamour of trauma which was attached to him was a marketable commodity, of which the Capital demanded a share. At this point Newton moved in the establishment mainstream, and became one of the most influential preachers and spiritual guides in London until his death in 1807, the year the slave trade was abolished. The explosion of the abolition movement in the period 1788–94 provided a new, and international, stage for Newton to analyse and expose his experiences in the slave trade and his rebirth as a man of God. A series of massively successful pamphlet publications resulted, the most popular being *Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade*. The pamphlet combined hard-nosed practical descriptions of the mechanics of the slave trade with religious reflection, moral declamation, and emotional exhibitionism. The work remained a linchpin of anti-slave trade publicity and was successful on both sides of the Atlantic. Newton remained one of the most desirable spiritual guides in London, and acted as personal religious instructor to several influential Evangelicals in the Capital including the Clapham sect abolitionists William Wilberforce and Hannah More.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Hindmarsh, *Newton*, 46–7.

<sup>18</sup> For publishing details, *ibid.* 15–16.

<sup>19</sup> The Standard accounts of Newton's life outside his autobiographical writings are G. E. Sargent, *The White Slave; A Life of John Newton* (London, 1848); Robert Bickersteth, *A Memoir of the Rev. John Newton* (London, 1865); Josiah Bull, *John Newton of Olney and St. Mary Woolnoth* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1868); John Callis, *John Newton, Sailor, Preacher, Pastor, Poet* (London, 1908).

Throughout his career Newton was astute at marketing his spiritual advice to his contemporaries in printed form.

Sermons and letters formed the basis of a formidable series of publications popular in England and America for over two centuries. He was a prolific and extempore performer of sermons. Sermon literature was, however, commonly worked up and rewritten and Newton's sermons appeared in various popular printed forms before being brought out in nineteenth-century collected editions after his death. Collections of his letters of spiritual advice to various ladies and gentlemen gained wide circulation during his life, and remained standard works in the nineteenth century, *Cardiphonia* remaining the most popular.

### ‘[L]a Biographie, c’est l’imbecilité’, Giles Deleuze

The biographies go through these facts fleshing out the ‘crimes’ of Newton’s early youth up to his initial conversion, treating the slaving voyages in terms of the way they demonstrated Newton’s comparative piety and industry, and elaborating on his subsequent devotion. His violent conversion and obsession with the power of Grace in the context of human sin made him a central paradigm of repentant piety not only for late eighteenth-century Evangelicalism, but for popular Victorian didactic religious literature. As the evidence of the Web discussed above indicates, the interpretative structures are still resolutely in place and dictate the theoretical construction of his writings. What his biographers do not do is unfold Newton’s obsessive concern to find ways of living with, while never laying to rest, the memory of his experience as a slaver. Newton’s engagement with this memorial inheritance was constant, but as manifested in his writings, frequently indirect.

Newton was a man with a mission, the celebration of his own salvation, through the description of his own sin. There has rarely been such a solipsistic consciousness. In the ‘introductory observations’ to his *Authentic Narrative*, Newton sets himself out as the last in a long line of celebrated sinners, beginning with Saul and St Paul and ending with Colonel Gardiner. Newton while at sea had repeatedly wept over the *Life of Colonel Gardiner*, the libertine who became the soldier of Christ.<sup>20</sup> From this perspective Newton is very pleased with his sin and what it has done for him. He tells us he is one of those exceptional sinners who God selects:

in order to shew the exceeding riches of his grace, and the greatness of his mighty power: he suffers the natural rebellion and wickedness of their hearts to have full

<sup>20</sup> Newton, *Works*, i. 5–7. For Newton’s obsessive reading of Philip Doddridge’s, *Some Remarkable Passages in the Life of Colonel James Gardiner* (London, 1747) and its influence on the *Authentic Narrative*, see Hindmarsh, *Newton*, 27–9.

scope; while sinners of less note are cut off with little warning, these are spared though sinning with a high hand, and as it were studying their own destruction. At length when all that knew them are perhaps expecting to hear that they are made signal instances of Divine Vengeance, the Lord (whose thoughts are high above ours, as the heavens are higher than the earth) is pleased to pluck them as brands out of the fire, and then make them monuments of his Mercy.<sup>21</sup>

So Newton can have his cake and eat it: the more he has sinned, the bigger the monument he can subsequently create to God's powers of forgiveness. His experiences within the slave systems were completely central to this celebratory process, the experiences of the slaves were not. One paradox within his works, closely related to this enthusiastic mission, has particularly powerful resonance in the early twentieth century. The inheritance of the Second World War has required artists and intellectuals to evolve new ways of thinking about how human evil records itself. The Holocaust suddenly threw into doubt, not least for artists, the relations between what people think, what people do, and then the texts and speech they are capable of generating around what they have said and done.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, we live within a cultural environment with different ways of thinking about evil from those of Newton's. Searching out those differences, seeing exactly how far we have come, or should it be *fallen*, might provide one way of understanding why slavery happened and what its inheritance might mean now.

The first step is to isolate what might be termed Newton's paradox. This paradox exists around the fact that the period when he was captain of a slave ship happened, on an entirely voluntary basis, after the period of his initial conversion to Christianity, but before his emergence as an Evangelical divine.<sup>23</sup> Newton's writing during this period reveals him to be using Christianity to justify his slaving activity and to enable behaviour which now emerges not just as 'un-Christian' but as evil by any general moral standards of humanism. Maybe the problem is ours not Newton's because we no longer have a coherent (albeit ultimately morally chaotic) theory of sin. When he was a slave captain, he was also a convinced Christian, neither he nor the society he worked in saw any anomaly in such a union. Yet it is crucial to recognize that although abolition in the late eighteenth century shifted public consciousness

<sup>21</sup> Newton, *Works*, i. 7–8.

<sup>22</sup> There is a substantial literature—representative and challenging books are: *Writing the Holocaust*, ed. Berel Lang (London: Holmes and Meier, 1988); Geoffrey Hartman (ed.), *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994); Kali Tal, *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992); James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

<sup>23</sup> For attacks on Newton's religious hypocrisy in this context, see Hindmarsh, *Newton*, p. viii.

(from a casual acceptance of slavery as an economic necessity to a violent disapproval of the slave trade as an abuse of human rights) abolition did not shift the theory of sin, the conception of sin. Indeed abolition required the sin of the slave trade to justify itself, and Newton provides a central proof of this perverse dictum. The argument I am advancing here is not a sophistic or normalizing one. I am not suggesting that great works which are directed at uncovering trauma or social abuse need the abuses to exist—that without the Holocaust Primo Levi or Charlotte Delbow would have had nothing to write about. The argument which will be elaborated is specific to certain redemptive structures of religious thought which are isolated in late eighteenth-century historical contexts. Both the structure and the content of these ways of looking at suffering and evil are now fundamentally alien to English and American thought. What do we do with that?

### Secular and Evangelical Testimony of Atrocity

‘Aujourd’hui, je ne suis pas sûre que ce que j’ai écrit soit vrai. Je suis sûre que c’est véridique’ [Today I am not sure that that which I wrote is true. I am sure that it occurred/is real]

(Charlotte Delbow, *Auschwitz and After*)

Wilberforce said that he was never in Newton’s company half an hour without hearing Newton speak about slavery and lament

(Bernard Martin, *John Newton and the Slave Trade*)

Newton wrote several times, and in several ways, of his involvement with the slave trade; he presented it, and re-presented it frequently. But his witnessing and confession occurs primarily in the context of a theological theory of sin in which the crimes he committed in the slave trade may not be separated from the sins he committed at other periods of his life, both before and after this experience. On a day to day basis, all his sins, although in different degrees, made Christ’s wounds bleed. This particular strand of religious thought provided a structure for evaluating all evil actions and consequently had the effect of normalizing atrocity, of bringing atrocity within the theologico-moral pale. A universalizing approach to the effects of sin could be used to justify acts of cruelty or inhumanity which occurred within the context of the slave trade. Acts which an idealizing moral philosophy might place beyond the limits of rational comprehension or conventional morality could, within the Newtonian system, be aligned with ‘normal’ activity. As the confessional writings of agonized Evangelicals including John Howard and William Wilberforce demonstrate,

this is a mental world where drinking one glass of claret too many is a little sin within a structure where having intercourse with a prostitute is a bigger sin, and torturing a slave to death is an even bigger one.<sup>24</sup> But it is a world where it is quite logical and even legitimate to work out how many glasses of claret equate to the death of a slave in terms of personal culpability. In this world of infinite degree it is not simply that each sin has a value, there is also a narrative element to sin. One thing leads to another, and sin, because of the possibility of Grace, can emerge as a spiritual opportunity.

To understand what now appears the puzzling basis of the Newtonian approach to sin, violence, and cruelty, a quick comparison with his contemporary William Hogarth is useful. For Hogarth, like Newton, sin is a matter of degree; the visual *locus classicus* for articulating the practical stages of degeneration which an addiction to the infliction of pain can achieve is the *Four Stages of Cruelty*. Yet these four prints emphasize how the comparison with Newton draws up short: Hogarth's great chart of violence managed an effective moral lecture on good behaviour precisely because it managed to cut out the perverse linkage of sin and redemption which obsessed Newton. Hogarth's depraved anti-hero ends up being gutted and dismembered by a group of doctors because he murders the woman he cohabits with. As far as the story has a religious sting in its tail it relates to the folkloric belief, which was still prevalent in the late eighteenth century, that you will appear before God on the day of judgement in the state in which you were interred. Consequently, the secular dismemberment, the ruination of a body through medical dissection, enacts a direct spiritual warning.

Newton's sinners exist in a more frightening world which evades such sane absolutism, a world where the more you sin, and then suffer in repenting your sin, the greater Christ's joy at your redemption. There is a straightforward equation between love and sin: the more you have sinned, the greater becomes your capacity for redemption. In this sense the more slaves Newton abused in his past, the greater his capacity to feel joy at Christ's forgiveness for these sins, and the greater his authority to articulate the power of Grace. Newton had a capacity for redemption which others could only dream about.

Newton's definition of sin could be so general as at times to appear casuistical, even his love for his wife was periodically construed as idolatrous, because in its intensity it rivalled his love for God. Newton's activities and work after he became a clergyman in the Church of England suggest a figure driven on by a compulsion to investigate sin according to a framework which is ultimately

<sup>24</sup> Robert Isaac Wilberforce and Samuel Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce*, 5 vols. (London, 1838), i. 13–40; Martin, *Newton*, 78–9.

comparative. He seeks to set one sin beside another, in a constructive context where all sin, great and small, constitutes an assault upon Christ's sacrifice and love. Newton set up not merely a theological 'great chain of sinning' but a sociology of sin. His sins as a slaver appear in company not only with his other sins of debauchery, lechery, pride, but in company with the sins of the world. Newton thinks in a mental environment where sin and salvation are mutually dependent on each other. They justify and exist through each other, they are locked in a levelling conflict, what might be seen as a theological anticipation of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic. When Newton wrote: 'Salvation! what a glorious plan, / How suited to our need! / The grace that raises fallen man / Is wonderful indeed!' he meant exactly what he said.<sup>25</sup> All mankind, past and present, until the day of judgement, were on an equal footing as sinners; human kind requires sin in order to be saved. Newton as one of the chief of sinners could provide more light than the ordinary sinner. He was privileged through sin, he understood sin, he was, for Wilberforce, and Hannah More and those who flocked to him for guidance, an Evangelical witch-doctor of sin. He had done and seen abominable things, that were beyond imagination and beyond description, yet he spent large parts of his life trying to bear witness to them. It is in this light, or darkness, that his weirdly celebratory approach to sin can, in terms of its theology, be read.

This is one way of explaining Newton and testimony, yet what may finally make Newton's writings uniquely valuable to us now, in post-Holocaust Europe, is that he seems to have access to some sixth sense which reveals the world of moral chaos underlying the theological system he embraced. Maybe he decided to embrace that system precisely because it gave glimpses into such oblivion, the moral grey area which allows you to torture a child as an act sanctioned by your God.

### The Limits of Testimony: 'Wer zeugt für den Zeugen' (who bears witness for the witness), Paul Celan

The testimony of slavery opens up in those spaces, not where no one spoke but where someone else spoke for them. The crime here is not to silence the victims but to try to acquire their voices, to efface them through compulsive re-inscription. That is why Newton's *Journal*, kept when he was a slave captain, is so much cleaner a text, than the mountains of words which followed. The *Journal* does not try to explain what was done. In this sense it expresses

<sup>25</sup> *Olney Hymns*, 85; Newton, *Works*, iii. 656.

absolute power in formal and intellectual terms; it is the voice that can say 'Hier ist kein warum' ('here there is no why', or 'here nothing has to be explained').<sup>26</sup> Newton the clergyman was a spiritual dung beetle rolling an ever-growing ball of testimony before him, catastrophically but almost comically trying to speak for the slave in terms of his own sin and suffering, while knowing somewhere that this is his worst crime. Maybe the point of this discussion is to try to explain that the dirtiest thing the Western imagination ever did, and it does it compulsively still, is to believe in the aesthetically healing powers of empathetic fiction. J. M. Coetzee's fiction suggests that confession is impossible in relation to some areas of human suffering.<sup>27</sup> The worse things get, the more blatant the trauma, the more powerfully Coetzee emphasizes there are no words to describe it. This is a most valuable lesson, which relates directly to the Western literatures of slavery. The echoes, the reflections, the refrain which runs through slave narrative by black or white is finally that slavery is a tale that cannot be told.

In *Foe* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Coetzee reiterates that the suffering of the other or another will always be out of bounds and beyond recovery. *Waiting for the Barbarians* is a parable about voyeurism, a supreme indictment of the desire to transform another's trauma into gossip, or worse, a mirror for curiosity. The book is a warning that there are some places where you don't go poking your nose, no matter how pure you convince yourself that your motives are. The Magistrate, the central character in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, is the universal representative of this obscenely appropriative type. On the face of it, he seems a decent sort, a universal liberal. But the book teaches that he is finally a hateful figure, the embodiment of an imaginative tradition that sees no problem in the processes of inventing testimonies which tell us that they can speak for the victim. Coetzee's absolute victims of imperial power, his Friday, his Barbarian girl, are not allowed to say anything. Crucially they do not want to say anything either, which is not the same thing as saying that they have nothing to say.

In the world of the slave, in the world of absolute power of the one over the other, the torture goes on, but it goes on in the knowledge that there is nothing to confess. It goes on because it goes on, there is no point to it outside the fact of its existence. One challenge in looking at Newton's writings now is in determining where and how he bears testimony to his experience of slavery. Here, finally, is a body of texts which are significant in their knowing failure to testify. Newton's greatness as a writer on slavery resides in the fact that he finds so

<sup>26</sup> A statement made to Primo Levi by a Kapo in Auschwitz, discussed and quoted by Irving Howe, 'Writing and the Holocaust', in Lang (ed.), *Writing and the Holocaust*, 176.

<sup>27</sup> Coetzee's most elaborate treatment of the impossibility of literary confession is in his discussion of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky in J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. David Atwell (London and Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 241–51.

many different ways of telling us that he can never tell us what he did. In this sense he is one of the very few white authors whose work may be said to operate in the same confessional thematic domain as the black slave narratives. What motivates the multiple attempts at testimony is the knowledge that he can never escape the feeling that he has to try to tell us.

Yet the value of Newton's writings also relates to the texts they have generated. The processes of his absorption into the pious literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries extends the traumatic archive. The mass of literature written about Newton since his death, but so rarely written about his writings, enwraps delusions and obfuscations which have operated on successive generations of English historians, intellectuals, and religious thinkers. To wrap things up is both to disguise them, and to bring out the essence of their form, as the sculptor Christo has devoted his creative life to explaining. It is possible to read the responses to Newton as constituting an effacement that is essentially descriptive. Nineteenth-century biographers may pass lightly over 'Mr. Newton's connection with the Guinea trade' and conclude 'whatever evils may have attached to the slave trade, and however injurious it may have proved to those engaged in it, there were few such masters of slave ships as John Newton.'<sup>28</sup> But these words tell us a lot about what England could not and would not see in Newton's slavery testimony.

As a slave captain Newton was efficient and compared to the rest believed himself good; within the obscene parameters of such a comparative dialectic, he probably was 'good'. But it is his continuing belief that goodness exists within a providential Christian framework, despite what he did, no matter what he did, which is something of an interpretative stumbling block. Certain great consciousnesses in the wake of the Holocaust refuse to allow that a New Testament God of Charity can be reintegrated into the history of the Lagers. What happened destroyed the abstract or fictive option of a 'Good God'. We know, we have been explicitly warned, that there are spaces where Christian Providence as a theory is inoperable. Primo Levi, in his last book, *The Drowned and the Saved*, described the attempt of a friend to construct Levi himself as a Providential figure, designed by God to suffer, and spared by God, that he might 'explain' the horror he has seen. For Levi the idea is nothing short of 'monstrous'. How Levi develops this position has great implications for the interpretative options that we bring to Newton's writings now:

After my return from imprisonment I was visited by a friend . . . He told me that my having survived could not be the work of chance, of an accumulation of fortunate circumstances (as, I maintain, and still maintain) but rather of Providence. I bore the

<sup>28</sup> Bull, *Newton of Olney*, 63.



mark, I was an elect: I, the non-believer, and even less of a believer after the season of Auschwitz, was a person touched by Grace, a saved man. And why just I? It is impossible to know, he answered. Perhaps, because I had to write, and by writing bear witness: wasn't I in fact then, in 1946, writing a book about my imprisonment?

Such an opinion seemed monstrous to me. It pained me as when one touches an exposed nerve, and kindled the doubt I spoke of before: I might be alive in the place of another, at the expense of another; I might have usurped, that is, in fact killed. The 'saved' of the Lager were not the best, those predestined to do good; the bearers of a message. What I had seen and lived through proved the exact contrary . . . I felt innocent, yes, but enrolled among the saved and therefore in permanent search of a justification in my own eyes and those of others. The worst survived—that is, the fittest; the best all died.<sup>29</sup>

Newton and Levi, in their attitude to the healing operations of Christian Grace, occupy two extremes. At a certain level it is impossible to see both positions at once, as one cannot perceptually hold the duck and rabbit simultaneously as images in the famous puzzle. Levi saw the temptation 'to seek refuge in prayer' as a horror to be avoided at all costs, because it moved the victim away from the truth:

I must nevertheless admit that I experienced (and again only once) the temptation to yield, to seek refuge in prayer. This happened in the October of 1944, in the one moment in which I lucidly perceived the imminence of death: when, naked and compressed among my naked companions with my personal index card in hand, I was waiting to file past the 'commission' that with one glance would decide whether I should immediately go into the gas chamber or was instead strong enough to go on working. For one instant I felt the need for help and asylum, then, despite my anguish, equanimity prevailed: one does not change the rules of the game at the end of the match, nor when one is losing. A prayer under these circumstances would have been not only absurd (what rights could I claim? and from whom?) but blasphemous, obscene, laden with the greatest impiety of which a non believer is capable.<sup>30</sup>

For Newton the rules were very different, perhaps it was even a different game. At one level Newton is the same as the figure Primo Levi's friend wanted to find in Levi. Newton and Levi's friend would, officially, have spoken a similar language; Newton considered himself one of the elect, spared by Divine Providence to tell his tale, and precisely because he was not innocent, to devote his life to testimony. There are large parts of his written works which as a result appear morally abhorrent to an agnostic post-Nazi Holocaust readership now. But there is a crucial difference between Levi's friend and Newton. Newton had both experienced and perpetrated atrocity in the world of the slave ship, a little world which, in its methodical denial of humanity to millions on the grounds

<sup>29</sup> Primo Levi, *Drowned and the Saved*, trans. R. Rosenthal (London: Michael Joseph, 1988), 62–3.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 117–18.

of greed and racial theory, has been seen to share some very general external similarities with the Lagers.<sup>31</sup> So Newton is outside our experience, and this he shares with Levi. We have to stay open to the possibility that his compulsive testimony to what he did may finally emerge as incomprehensible. Or that if we can understand it, what we understand bears no relation to what actually happened on his slave ships.

Levi's warns the 'outside' world, the world which has not experienced the horror, that its 'interpretations . . . seem to me approximate and simplified, as if someone wished to apply the theorems of plain geometry to the solution of spheric triangles'.<sup>32</sup> In the light of this comment it could be contended that judging Newton is not possible because again we lack the proper theory or language. The more of Newton one reads, the more one realizes that there is no point judging. Levi talks of an 'impotentia judicani' that paralyses thought, and warns the questioner who would say: "In your place I would not have lasted a single day." This statement does not have a precise meaning: one is never in another's place. Each individual is so complex an object that there is no point in trying to foresee his behaviour, all the more so in extreme situations.<sup>33</sup> It is this extraordinary insight, grounded in a terrifying generosity, which allows Levi to avoid hatred of his tormentors, but it also throws a lifeline to those who would try to understand Newton's writings.

Newton was, for all his periods of inspirational certainty, a tormented soul. He was a compulsive testifier, he could not stop telling his story, dwelling upon his sin, and this compulsion to testify might suggest that he felt he had never, and could never, tell his story. Levi prefixes the following stanza from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* to *The Drowned and the Saved* 'Since then, at an uncertain hour, / That agony returns, / And till my ghastly tale is told / This heart within me burns.'<sup>34</sup> One can construct another reading of Newton's life, after his experience as a slaver, which presents him as an Ancient Mariner who cannot stop reiterating his story when the agony falls upon him. In the last year of his life, Newton, by now, totally blind and frequently incoherent, still insisted upon public preaching. He was a shambling ludicrous sight, unable to maintain the most elementary train of thought and a friend urged him to withdraw from public appearance, he silenced his friend's doubts with the pronouncement, 'I cannot stop. What! Shall the old African blasphemer stop while he can speak?' Contemporary accounts suggest a man preaching in the style of a pro-

<sup>31</sup> The comparison was first crudely established by Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery a Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, [1959] 1963), 27-139. The most sensible treatment is Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), 213-17.

<sup>32</sup> Levi, *Drowned and the Saved*, 65.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 43.

<sup>34</sup> Coleridge, quoted as epitaph in Levi, *Drowned and the Saved*.

leptic Billy Graham, even that sombre mausoleum of English cultural, military, political, and religious achievement, the *Dictionary of National Biography*, states, ‘The bulk of his preaching was extempore, and both Venn and Cecil testify to his scant preparation. His utterance was not clear, and his gestures were uncouth. But his marked personality and history, his quaint illustrations, his intense conviction of sin, and his direct address to men’s perplexities, temptations and troubles sent his words home. His printed sermons have no literary value.’<sup>35</sup> Newton is a figure out of control; like the speaker in Beckett’s *Not I* he ‘can’t go on’ but he ‘must go on’, although not sure how or why. The question of value, literary or otherwise, in Newton’s writings, is a vital one, and in addressing it one needs to ask, how should Newton be read, or perhaps *can* Newton be read?

### Newton, Paul de Man, and the Languages of Confession

Many of the questions which reading Newton raises suggest questions which Shoshana Felman asks, and to a large extent answers, in her deeply compassionate consideration of Paul de Man and his involvement with Nazism ‘After the Apocalypse: Paul de Man and the Fall into Silence’.<sup>36</sup> Felman does not try to excuse de Man in any orthodox sense but nor does she engage with the smug outrage of the part of the academic establishment who see in de Man’s wrongdoing a cause for self-congratulation and self-defence. Felman sends out the essential warning, ‘A certain noisiness about the Holocaust does not diffuse the silence but deepens it, while deafening us to the complexity of our implication in it. To talk about the Holocaust from a position of self-righteousness and rightness is to deny the very essence of the Holocaust, which was to render this position un-available.’<sup>37</sup> Substitute the words ‘Slave Trade’ for ‘Holocaust’, and the statement would hold good for the English cultural memory of slavery today. Felman asks, having done what he did, which was to produce a large amount of anti-Semitic literary journalism in a collaborationist Belgian journal, what could de Man do afterwards? How can we understand de Man’s bequest: ‘given such a radical failure of vision, such a lapse of consciousness experienced early in one’s life, how can one *wake up*? What would waking up mean? And what can one consequently do, for oneself, and for another, not simply with the dead-weight of the past, but specifically, with the mistake and with one’s own awakening?’<sup>38</sup> Is it appropriate to apply these questions to Newton? The externals

<sup>35</sup> *Dictionary of National Biography*, ‘John Newton’, 397.

<sup>36</sup> Shoshana Felman, ‘After the Apocalypse: Paul de Man and the Fall into Silence’, in Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 120–64.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* 123.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

are very different; unlike de Man, Newton attempted to maintain no silences. There were no secrets except the secrets which were beyond the power of Newton's confession and witnessing. These, of course, are the silences which it is our duty to discover.

Newton, although he had a 'radical failure of vision' which allowed him to be a slave captain for several years, then re-examined that past during a period when political, religious, and social conditions in England favoured, indeed induced, public testimony and confession over the slave trade. Unlike de Man, silent at Yale, Newton at Olney and St Mary Woolnoth was extremely noisy, his life given over to a celebration of guilt, and his centrality as a living embodiment of it. But this confession is typified first by its varieties, secondly by its repetitions, and thirdly by its silences. By attempting constantly, and in so many forms, to confess, Newton paradoxically emphasizes the impossibility of confession, an impossibility which de Man emphatically demonstrated in his writing on Rousseau, and which Felman succinctly integrates into her discussion of de Man's apparent silence. It is in this sense that reading Newton, knowing what he did, might be aligned to reading de Man, knowing what he did. Newton paradoxically covers up by revealing all. The more he reveals, the more he demonstrates what cannot be revealed. Felman again warns, 'The reductive notion of the writing as a 'cover up' or as a psychological defence against the past paradoxically situates *us* outside these moral and historical implications. It thus fails to grasp what is essentially at stake: how de Man articulates *our silence*; how today we are all implicated in de Man's ordeal and in his incapacity to tell us more about it.'<sup>39</sup> The more of Newton we read, the more evident it becomes that 'we are all implicated in his ordeal and in his incapacity to tell us more about it'.<sup>40</sup>

**Newton's First Confession: *An Authentic Narrative of Some Remarkable and Interesting Particulars in the Life of* \*\*\*\*\***

'I considered myself as a sort of *gaoler* or *turnkey*, and I was sometimes shocked with an employment that was perpetually conversant with chains and bolts.'

(Newton, of his slave voyages)

Scholarship, not to say thought, has moved on since David Cecil's absurdly donnish verdict that the *Authentic Narrative* is 'a fusty, forbidding little book, and more than half of it is pious platitude'.<sup>41</sup> The *Authentic Narrative* is now

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 124.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> David Cecil, *The Stricken Deer or the Life of William Cowper* (London: Constable, 1929), 111.

being taken a good deal more seriously and so it should be. The text was Newton's celebration of the Evangelical mission through his own spiritual narrative. It is an autobiography that covers the full period of Newton's slavery experiences in Africa, the West Indies, and Liverpool. Yet it is also a text which hardly speaks of Africa or Africans, which mentions no African by name, and which only introduces slavery when Newton can use it didactically as an example to explain his own miraculous preservation by God. The *Authentic Narrative* is a book about sin, and the chief sin of Newton, the self-styled chief of sinners, is blasphemy; his actions in the slave trade do not register as sin in this text.<sup>42</sup>

As the first official site of his testimony regarding his life and sins within the slave trade, this volume holds many of the answers to the strategies that Newton brings to the act of epistolary confession. This volume is a combination of maritime adventure story, spiritual autobiography, and confessional manual. It was written in a series of letters to a friend, then expanded in another series of 'familiar letters' to an interested clergyman, Thomas Haweis in 1763, and then published to forestall an unauthorized account in 1764. Although corresponding to the widespread literary conventions of the personal letter, it is in essence a piece of Evangelical propaganda, celebrating God through Newton's deliverance and conversion.<sup>43</sup> As such Newton places himself directly in the tradition of the Puritan conversion narrative.<sup>44</sup> Newton repeats several times in the narrative the idea that he is God's 'monument'. The *Authentic Narrative* was written over twenty years before abolition of the slave trade became a matter of national interest and before Newton entered into the movement. While the *Journal* was written as a document to convince his owners that he had not wasted money, the *Authentic Narrative* was written to convince his audience that he had not wasted his spiritual capital, namely his experience of sin. It is a document primarily designed to persuade his readers to turn to God through Newton's example. In this text the slaves hold a particularly strange position. Of all the writings Newton produced which think about slavery and his involvement in it, this one is the most pathologically competitive. Newton's compulsive desire to present himself as both a slave of sin and a victim of sin leads him into a series of bizarre positions whereby he is lower than the slave, or even attempts to become black himself. Slavery emerges primarily in terms of how Newton considers himself to have been enslaved, both literally and figuratively.

<sup>42</sup> For the centrality of blasphemy in Newton's form of Calvinism, see Hindmarsh, *Newton*, 57–8.

<sup>43</sup> For a summarizing discussion of the form, and influences on the *Authentic Narrative* and the familiar letter in particular, see Hindmarsh, *Newton*, 29–40. See also Howard Anderson et al., *The Familiar Letter in the Eighteenth Century* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1966) and Thomas, *Romanticism and Slave Narratives*, 60–9.

<sup>44</sup> For a wonderfully detailed exposition of Newton's relation to this tradition, see Hindmarsh, *Newton*, 34–9.

The process of enslaving and transporting Africans emerges as virtually irrelevant to this agenda.

When, in the last third of the *Authentic Narrative* Newton finally treats his slaving voyages, slavery operates very much as a backdrop to Newton's story of his spiritual struggles. Indeed the account of the first voyage continues the competitive relationship between Newton and African slavery. The first Atlantic crossing operated as a sort of inverse middle passage in which Newton is seen to be enslaved, but enslaved to sin: 'by the time I arrived in Guinea, I seem to have forgot all the Lord's mercies and my own engagements . . . I was now fast bound in chains and had little desire and no power at all to recover myself.'<sup>45</sup> The account of the first experience Newton had of the middle passage is blanked-out of the text. The Atlantic crossing home is described, but only in a single sentence: 'We finished our voyage and arrived in Liverpool.'<sup>46</sup> Newton's second slaving voyage maintains a similar relation to the processes of slaving. The slaves, and their sufferings, are eccentric to the story of his spiritual growth. Newton presents the last two voyages as a God-given opportunity to educate himself and commune with the Lord, and goes so far as to state that he was never happier: 'I never knew sweeter or more frequent hours of divine communion than in my two last voyages to Guinea, when I was either almost secluded from society on shipboard, or when on shore with the natives. I have wandered through the woods, reflecting on the singular goodness of the lord to me.'<sup>47</sup>

When the slaves are introduced, it is in parallel with the crew as a source of danger and distraction. As the crew nearly mutiny, and only Divine Providence prevents them, so the slaves almost organize an insurrection until God intervenes to protect the happy Captain. The account of the third voyage makes no mention of the slaves at all, their absence from the text is complete. Newton's concluding comments on the trade come from a very different world than that which was to receive his *Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade* a quarter of a century later, in the midst of abolition fever. His astonishing summary of his engagement with the trade runs:

During the whole time I was engaged in the slave trade, I never had the least scruple as to its lawfulness. I was upon the whole satisfied with it, as the appointment Providence had marked out for me; yet it was, in many respects far from eligible. It is, indeed, accounted a genteel employment, and is usually very profitable, though to me it did not prove so, the Lord seeing that a large increase of wealth would not be good for me. However, I considered myself as a sort of *gaoler* or *turnkey*, and I was sometimes shocked with an employment that was perpetually conversant with chains,

<sup>45</sup> John Newton, *An Authentic Narrative of Some Remarkable and Interesting Particulars in the Life of \*\*\*\*\**, in *Fourteen Letters* [London, 1762], *Works*, i. 75.

<sup>46</sup> Newton, *Works*, i. 81. <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* 88.

bolts and shackles. In this view I had often petitioned in my prayers, that the Lord, in his own time, would be pleased to fix me in a more humane calling.<sup>48</sup>

Newton's adieu to this 'genteel employment' is drawn up in a suitably genteel and circuitous language. The slaves do not function, the slaves are not there, except as the elusive bodies which force Newton into the ignominious occupation of *gaoler* or *turnkey*. Like a contemporary slavery museum case, Newton remembers his engagement with the slaves in terms of a series of 'chains, bolts and shackles'. It is the ignominiousness of the job which causes Newton to petition his God, and presumably in Newton's extraordinarily solipsistic religious consciousness, causes God to answer the prayer. This writing can teach us a lot about the almost abstract approach which Newton and his contemporaries could bring to slaving. The slave bodies simply do not exist, they are down below out of sight, out of mind. This writing expresses a ruthlessly self-assured self-interest. Yet this voice, Newton on his best behaviour signing off from an unpleasant episode in his business career, is not the only voice to speak of slavery in this text. While the terrible complacency of this writing is one side of the story, Newton's engagement with his own forms of slavery is the other. Together they reveal an awful lot about how the slave trade was being imaginatively processed in the religious thought and literature of the late eighteenth century.

### **'There is a significant phrase used in those parts that such a white man is grown *black*': Newton's Competitive Edge over Slavery**

If slavery and race are not treated centrally in the passages describing the slave voyages, they certainly permeate other parts of the work. Slavery and blackness enter the text in peculiar ways. Newton's first serious discussion of slavery in the *Authentic Narrative* relates to his own experience of enslavement to the black mistress of his white master, a slave factor working on the Plantane islands of Africa. The first mention of his experience among black slaves is to tell us that he is beneath them: 'I was rather shunned than imitated; there being few, even of the negroes themselves . . . but thought themselves too good to speak to me. I was as yet an "outcast lying in my blood" (Ezek. xvi).'<sup>49</sup> The comparative approach to slavery is handled with subtlety. Newton is not merely saying that his slavery is worse than the blacks, but that his suffering and slavery are to be read using a different set of criteria. He is defining his suffering and humiliation via biblical parallel, not simply in comparison with African chattel slavery.

<sup>48</sup> Newton, *Works*, i. 96-7.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* 39.

The final reference to himself in words from Ezekiel, chapter 16, analogically connects him with the extraordinary account of the whoredom and consequent humiliation of Jerusalem. This long and intense outburst from the Prophet runs through Jerusalem's fornications and sin obsessively, including accounts of her sexual relations with Egypt: 'Thou hast also committed fornication with the Egyptians, thy neighbours great of flesh, and hath increased by whoredoms to promote me to anger.' Jerusalem is then punished by God, stripped naked, enslaved by her enemies and has stones cast upon her. This terrible account of retribution on Jerusalem for sins held out to be worse than those of Sodom is seen by Newton as a typological prefigurement of his own enormities (presumably, given the emphasis of this particular biblical chapter, sexual in nature) and consequent suffering in the slave trade. Newton's suffering is to be measured against absolute, and mythical, biblical standards and consequently places him below the black slaves in his ignominy, and above the blacks in his capacity for redemption. In the *Authentic Narrative* Newton falls ill and is then barbarously treated by the black woman to whom he never gives a name. He describes how eating raw roots gives him appalling diarrhoea and again leads him into a state where even the field slaves pity him: 'I have sometimes been relieved by strangers; nay, even by the slaves in the chain, who have secretly brought me victuals (for they durst not be seen to do it) from their own slender pittance.'<sup>50</sup> While, certainly, this places the slave in a positive light, as possessing a charitable instinct, the reason for introducing this detail is to show the extent of Newton's suffering as greater than that of the slave. This competitive tendency reaches its climax in the final passage describing Newton's persecution. When he is too weak to stand, the black woman makes him walk and his unsteady motion is then the cause for hilarity and mocking:

She would call me worthless and indolent and compel me to walk; which, when I could hardly do, she would set her attendants to mimic my motion and to clap their hands, laugh, throw limes at me; or, if they chose to throw stones (as I think was the case once or twice), they were not rebuked: but, in general, though all who depended on her favour must join in her treatment, yet, when she was out of sight, I was rather pitied than scorned by the meanest of her slaves.<sup>51</sup>

How many other Evangelical abolitionists could write that they were 'rather pitied than scorned by the meanest . . . slaves'? Although this is a relatively short section in the *Authentic Narrative*, it is this experience, as it is described on his tombstone the point at which he became a 'servant of slaves', that became one of the most compulsively elaborated and celebrated aspects of the Newton myth. The reasons are simple: Newton's suffering, presented as suffering which goes beyond that of the slave, not only normalizes but diminishes the slave's

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 42.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.



suffering. The white martyr, even if he is a martyr to his own sinful impulses, is still capable of suffering to a degree that enforces even the slave to take pity on him.

The struggle between black and white victimhood within the context of slavery exerts a fascinating pressure on this part of the text. Newton's obsession with blackness, and its threat to him because of his predominant martyr status as white slave, is introduced obliquely. The account of his first full abandonment to sin occurs when he has requested to be swapped from a man of war to a slave ship. In this new environment he rejoices 'that I now might be as abandoned as I pleased, without any control'; it is as if the slave ship represents a new realm of moral chaos where anything goes (quite precisely the Jerusalem of Ezekiel 16). Yet, from the first it is precisely this freedom to sin in all ways, while engaged in the sin of slaving, which allows Newton the chance to be redeemed. Just after detailing the extent of his sin Newton interjects:

But let me not be silent from the praise of that grace which could pardon, that blood which could expiate, such sins as mine: Yea, 'the Ethiopian may change his skin, and the leopard his spots,' since I, who was the willing slave of every evil, possessed with a legion of unclean spirits, have been spared, and saved, and changed, to stand as a monument of his almighty power for ever.<sup>52</sup>

Again slavery enters the text not as African slavery, even though the location is a slave ship, but as sin: Newton is the slave of Evil. Not only this but by implication sin is black and African. Newton compares himself to the biblical Ethiopian, only to intimate that in this guise the impossible can happen, and through his change, through Grace, the black skin can become white. Yet this passage, where Newton compares the effects of Grace to the impossible phenomenon of a black man turning white, should be seen against another and even more bizarre foray into the dynamics of colour and race theory. Newton's account of his white slavery ends with him 'lent' by one white master to another. The latter treats him far more kindly and allows him to run one of his slave factories. This is the first time Newton enters the trade and this is his account of it:

This man had several factories, and white servants, in different places; particularly one in Kittam . . . where I had a share in the management of business, jointly with another of his servants. We lived as we pleased, business flourished, and our employer was satisfied. Here I began to be wretch enough to think myself *happy*. There is a significant phrase frequently used in those parts, that such a white man is grown *black*. It does not intend an alteration of complexion, but disposition. I have known several, who, in settling in Africa after the age of thirty or forty, have, at that time of life, been gradually assimilated to the tempers, customs, and ceremonies, of the natives, so far as to prefer that country to England: they have even become the dupes to all the

<sup>52</sup> Newton, *Works*, i. 37.

pretended charms, necromancies, amulets and divinations of the blinded negroes, and put more trust in such things than the wiser sort among the natives. A part of this spirit of infatuation was growing upon me (in time perhaps I might have yielded to the whole); I entered into closer engagements with the inhabitants.<sup>53</sup>

In this extraordinary passage the experience of trading in slaves, while a white slave himself, is in danger of turning Newton black. Unlike his later experiences after conversion, running a very English and very Christian slave ship, here Newton's initiation into slave trading on the African mainland has a very different effect. He starts a process of cultural assimilation which in its empathetic intensity runs the danger of turning him from a white to a black slave. The thing he is falling for, becoming infatuated with, is not just blackness but the specific culture of one part of Africa. We are left to speculate on what happened; he never enlarges on that arch phrase: 'I entered into closer engagements with the inhabitants.'<sup>54</sup> What is for certain is that in the world of the narrator of the *Authentic Narrative* slavery is a business which he is good at, but not really a sin; the sin which God protects and saves him from is the sin of thinking and acting like an African. The sin is the sin of falling in love with African culture and African people. And this, to his eternal credit, Newton seems to have done, albeit briefly. For one instant Newton is challenging one of the central tropes of racism. Ephraim Chambers's *Cyclopaedia* of 1741 defines trope as 'a word changed from its proper and natural signification to another, with some advantage. As when we say . . . to *wash the blackmor white, for a fruitless undertaking*.'<sup>55</sup> Newton, black with sin; can be whitewashed by God, but more strangely, and in a far more challenging reversal of the trope, Newton, as white European, can turn himself black through a love of Africa. Although he does not want to talk about it, Newton must, at one point, have been imaginatively and emotionally open to African people and culture.<sup>55</sup>

### Newton's Second Testimony: *Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade*

The experience and observation of nine years, would qualify me for being a competent witness upon this subject, could I safely trust to the report of Memory.

(John Newton)

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. 49.

<sup>54</sup> See Thomas, *Romanticism and Slave Narratives*, 65–7. This provides an intriguing reading of this passage from the perspective of George Vason's 'soft pornography' accounts of interracial sex in *An Authentick Narrative of Four Years' Residence at Tongataboo*.

<sup>55</sup> Chambers is quoted and discussed together with a series of other examples in Srinivas Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans Colonialism and Agency, 1688–1804* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 1–4.

Compassion and brutality can coexist in the same individual and in the same moment, despite all logic.

(Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*)

Newton's official testimony to his slaving activity, *Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade*, was published as part of the abolition publishing spree in the late 1780s, and was composed some thirty-five years after Newton had worked on slave ships. This is a text in which Newton's self-confessed aim is to tell the truth as he remembers it. 'I have advanced nothing, but what to the best of my judgement and conscience is true.'<sup>56</sup> Yet Newton makes us aware of what is won and lost in this pursuit of a pure and unemotional objectivity. The cold eye with which he hopes to survey his past activity is the result of a private battle with his enthusiastic imagination. Newton goes so far as to see his mind potentially seduced by his emotions: 'it is not easy to write altogether with coolness, upon this business, and especially not easy to me, who have formerly been so deeply engaged in it; I have been jealous lest the warmth of imagination might have insensibly seduced me, to aggravate and overcharge some of the horrid features'.<sup>57</sup> Newton is deliberately attempting to remove himself from the more violent extremes of the atrocity literature which abolition was generating, and which were taken up in degenerate form in pamphlet literature and popular prints.<sup>58</sup> The form in which the *Thoughts* is constructed is broadly that of legal testimony, the pamphlet is primarily designed as a witnessing of facts which can stand up as evidence in a House of Commons debate. Newton makes the real political space for which this text is designed clear: 'I have . . . written . . . simply from the . . . conviction that the share I have formerly had in the trade, binds me, in conscience, to throw what light I am able upon the subject, now it is likely to become a point of Parliamentary investigation.'<sup>59</sup> Yet even here, at the point of announcing public confession, the metaphoric operations of bondage and captivity are entrained within this statement of intent. Newton seems incapable of breaking out of his construction of himself as slave and is again using the metaphor of bondage to describe his compulsion to testify. He talks about slavery from the position of being the slave of his memory of slavery. He has become the slave of his 'conscience' and consequently of the remembered experience of slavery it contains. This position is articulated in slightly different terms at the beginning, where Newton opens by holding out the spectre of a silence that is criminal; his crime is not his historical involvement in slavery, but his refusal to testify to the experience in words. He states bluntly his:

conviction that silence, at such a time, and on such an occasion, would, in me, be criminal. If my testimony should not be necessary, or serviceable, yet, perhaps, I am

<sup>56</sup> John Newton, *Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade* (London, 1788), 22.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> See pp. 71, 84–5, 96–100, 106–9, 164–8, 172–4, 178–80, 200–2, 299–300, 411–14.

<sup>59</sup> Newton, *Thoughts*, 22.

bound, in conscience, to take shame to myself by a public confession, which however sincere, comes too late to prevent or repair, the misery and mischief to which I have, formerly, been accessory.<sup>60</sup>

This is a crucial passage because it shows that Newton did not, eventually, believe in the blinding efficacy of his own redemptive myth. He suggests that despite Divine Grace the facts of his wrongdoing cannot be expunged; he can talk about his sins as a slave captain but he cannot take back the suffering and evil they were rooted in. Newton, a slave to his agonized conscience (here meaning both consciousness and sense of guilt), sets himself up as compulsively, and eternally belated. Newton nicely pre-empts the circular torment which Primo Levi extracted from the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Newton feels compelled to make ‘public confession’ and continued throughout the remainder of his life to confess and relive different memorial reconstructions of his ‘mischief’ in the slave trade. Yet the real bleakness of the situation is that he confesses in the full knowledge that the act of confession ‘comes too late to . . . repair’. This is a fundamentally different position from the euphoric redemptive Newton of the *Authentic Narrative*.

The model he chooses for the narrative of the *Thoughts* is a highly topical one. At precisely the moment Newton was organizing his legal testimony, Thomas Clarkson was compiling his brilliantly constructed *Substance of the Evidence of Sundry Persons on the Slave-Trade. Collected in the Course of a Tour Made in the Autumn of the Year 1788*. The highly influential report was published, distributed free by the Quakers, and used as the basis for the Commons debate on the bill to abolish the slave trade in 1789.<sup>61</sup> The meat of the book consists of a series of personal testimonies from sailors involved in the slave trade; many of the contributors are Liverpool slave captains like Newton. The accounts set out, with a shattering repetitiveness, the basic scenes of atrocity, abuse, and suffering which are seen to typify the experiences of slaves and sailors alike on the middle passage. Setting these accounts next to Newton’s *Thoughts* the formal similarities between each sailor’s testimony and Newton’s are remarkable. All of them have been constructed according to a fixed narrative pattern which involves the following elements: an account of the slave trade and slave purchase in Africa; description of methods for procuring sailors; an account of the middle passage in terms of conditions and treatment of slaves; a description of the sale of slaves in the West Indies and their subsequent treatment; an account of the treatment of poor and sick sailors deserted in West Indian islands; and finally a narrative of the abuse and torture of seamen on the slave ships.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 3.

<sup>61</sup> For Clarkson and abolition free publishing including the *Evidence*, see Marcus Wood, ‘“The Abolition Blunderbuss”: Free Publishing and British Abolition Propaganda, 1780–1838’, in James Raven (ed.), *Free Print and Non-Commercial Publishing since 1700* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 67–93.

There are as many accounts of the abuse of seamen as of slaves, and the accounts of the sufferings of the white sailors are more personalized. They contain protracted accounts of the ordeal of single figures rather than the generalized misery which is typical of the account of the slave experience. A parallelism is set up between the abuse of sailors and the abuse of slaves, and inevitably there is a competitive edge to the narratives with the white always emerging on top. Newton follows Clarkson's witnesses in being more concerned to talk about the suffering and corruption which slavery inflicts on its white practitioners, as he is to talk about the suffering of the slaves. He clearly states that this division is central to his methodology.<sup>62</sup> Newton is adopting the political position advised by Wilberforce; namely that a primary aim of abolition propaganda is the destruction of the pro-slavery argument that the slave trade was the 'nursery' of British seamanship. Yet Newton takes a very different tack from any of the other witnesses. One significant absence from the *Evidence* is any account of the sexual abuse of slaves during the middle passage. It is as if this subject has been eradicated from the agenda. For Newton it is a theme of central importance which he returns to several times, each time developing a new tactic for its description. This particular form of abuse demonstrates the extent to which Newton is possessed with an almost insatiable investigative hunger. It is as if he feels compelled to develop not one, but a series of narrational personae, in order to try to get back at the crimes he describes. His sexual obsession also relates to his encoded fantasies in the *Authentic Narrative* relating to his own promiscuity with slave victims.

The first time he takes on the theme he appears utterly detached, and the subject itself is set up as a rhetorical gambit in a larger argument. In talking of the contributory causes to the mortality of seamen on the African coast Newton breaks them down into three areas, 'the climate . . . the intemperate use of spirits, and . . . women'. Newton's ability to create a diction of almost insane detachment from the horror he describes comes out in his initial treatment of the 'intemperate use' of slave women. What is in reality an account of the multiple rape of countless slave women and children is presented as a health lecture for the benefit of the British sailor. What is referred to as 'the article of women' exists as a potential death threat for the sailor, not as a site of trauma, abuse, or victimhood:

The article of Women, likewise, contributes largely to the loss of our Seamen . . . On ship-board they may be restrained, and in some ships they are; but such restraint, is far from being general. It depends much upon the disposition and attention of the Captain. When I was in the trade I knew several commanders of African ships, who were prudent, respectable men, and who maintained a proper discipline and regu-

<sup>62</sup> Newton, *Thoughts*, 6.

larity in their vessels; but there were too many of a different character. In some ships, perhaps in most, the licence allowed in this particular, was almost unlimited. Moral turpitude was seldom considered, but they who did the ship's business might in other respects do as they pleased. These excesses if they do not induce fevers, at least, render the constitution less able to support them; and lewdness, too frequently terminates in death.<sup>63</sup>

In this remarkable passage a diction of massive propriety and obfuscation is developed to describe the phenomenon of mass rape on the middle passage. Newton is, to put it bluntly, arguing that a good many of the white sailors fuck themselves to death, yet the locutions developed to describe the process could not be less salacious. From the opening words, it becomes apparent that Newton is speaking in a language of deferred meaning. The black body is strangely removed from the scene of its abuse, the bodies of African women, and girls, become the 'article' of woman. Woman is objectified, part of a coded language restricted to the law or commerce, the act of rape itself cannot be named but is 'this particular'. Exactly what happened to the bodies of the violated 'article' of woman in a world of absolute powerlessness is not set out, but is swallowed up in the staggering latitude of the phrase 'the licence allowed, in this particular, was almost unlimited'. What does this 'almost' tell us, there is no way of imagining.

Newton's *Thoughts* differs from the personal narratives of Clarkson's witnesses in several other important ways. What comes out plainly if Newton's text is set against the testimony of the other sailors is the extent to which he has evolved a diction for describing the horror of the middle passage. The most telling descriptions in the *Thoughts* manage to combine coldness, or a sense of detachment, with a densely visual deployment of metaphor. The point can be made by setting a strong passage from Clarkson's *Evidence* against what is undoubtedly, and deservedly, the most famous passage in the *Thoughts*. Mr James of the *Britannia*, describing the smallpox taking hold of a slave cargo, gave Clarkson the following account of what he had seen:

The infection however still spread, and the situation of the slaves became such, as no pen or language is able to describe. The sick births were incapable of containing all that were ill. Those only could be admitted into them who were so bad as not to be capable of moving. There they lay in one mass of scab and corruption, frequently sticking to each other, and to the decks, till they were to be thrown into the sea.<sup>64</sup>

While appearing factual this writing finally works on a different plane via the deployment of disease metaphor. Having set up the scene with the customary

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 8.

<sup>64</sup> Thomas Clarkson, *The Substance of the Evidence of Sundry Persons on the Slave Trade Collected in the Course of a Tour Made in the Autumn of the year 1788* (London: James Phillips, 1789), 45.

rhetorical denial that a language exists to describe such horror, a language is then provided. The slave bodies become the disease that consumes them ‘one mass of scab and corruption’, and in so doing become a metaphor for the evil of slavery itself. Their literally fluid status as not so much floating, but as oozing, signifiers, is encapsulated in the detail that they promiscuously stick not only to each other but to the boat. The corruption of the slave bodies becomes a universally open and affective wound. The dissolution of the human form into a living wound is a sign for the wider corruption not merely of the boat, but of the whole slave trade.

Newton’s approach to describing the horror of the middle passage is completely different and involves a staggering ability to abstract. Where James chooses to work from a realistic image base of scabs and corruption, Newton sees the body of the slaves themselves transformed into texts: ‘for the Slaves lie in two rows, one above the other, on each side of the ship, close to each other, like books upon a shelf. I have known them so close, that the shelf would not, easily, contain one more.’<sup>65</sup> What are these book/bodies, what words do they contain: perhaps the written testimony of abolition, perhaps the books Newton compulsively read while trying to teach himself the classics as he trod the boards above his slave cargoes, perhaps the amassed knowledge of European cultures which had done nothing to stop the slave trade. Whatever these book/bodies are, they exist in another memorial world from that of James’s rotting mass of humanity. Newton, in his bizarre bibliographic personification, is not speaking with the outraged eye of the reforming zealot and former sinner, but with the cold pathological eye of a very literary slave captain. The prose is wonderfully clean and precise, picking its way along in a series of beautiful composed parallelisms, ‘two rows, one above the other, on each side of the ship’. Newton has created a fantastic world where a slave captain becomes a librarian, trying to squeeze one more book onto his shelves. It is the bizarre impropriety of the simile that makes it so persuasive. In turning the slave bodies into books, Newton flings in our faces the fact that each slave body is a unique cultural resource, a life and a history which remains lost forever, locked within its covers. It is a writing of terrible amplitude, and it is uncanny to what extent Felman’s intensely moving plea that we do not forget de Man’s writings, because we are implicated in them, precisely defines the operation of Newton’s *Thoughts*. Again if we substitute Newton for de Man in the following quotation it makes perfect sense: ‘The question that should be addressed in light of de Man’s history is, therefore, not how we can dismiss or forget de Man, but why we *must* relate—why we cannot escape from—de Man’s writings: how his later writing, the mature work, is inextricably tied up with an historical event

<sup>65</sup> Newton, *Thoughts*, 33.

that, whether we like it or not, is still a crucial and immediate part of our present.<sup>66</sup>

### Telling Tales: Fact as Fiction in Caryl Phillips's Abuse of Newton

I want to end with a case study of how Newton's testimony might or might not be used. With the publication of Caryl Phillips's 1993 *Crossing the River*, Newton's testimony became absorbed into the diasporic consciousness, and into the production of black fictions of slavery, in more direct and more troubling ways than ever before.

Phillips's novel carries a single short acknowledgement, which runs as follows: 'I have employed many sources in the preparation of this novel, but would like to express my particular obligation to John Newton's eighteenth century *Journal of a Slave Trader*, which furnished me with invaluable research material for part III.'<sup>67</sup> The third section of *Crossing the River* consists of extended quotations from Newton's journal and from another unacknowledged source: the love letters which Newton wrote to Mary Catlett in England at the same time the journal was being composed.<sup>68</sup> Key phrases from Newton's journal are also set in italics within the framing passages at the opening and closing of *Crossing the River*.

Phillips's literary technique when 'writing' historical fictions set within the slave diaspora in the eighteenth century has often involved the extended quotation of virtually unamended and rearranged materials from eighteenth-century journals, books, and pamphlets. His collage, or pastiche approach, to eighteenth-century travel and journal literature has been commented on at length in the context of his 1991 novel *Cambridge*. One approach is to see Phillips as a diasporic variant of the post-colonial bricoleur. The hybrid texts which result from Phillips's magpie processes of assemblage can be constructed as an assault upon Western notions of the authoritative text. Indeed it has been argued that this aspect of Phillips's work constitutes an ingenious politico/literary intervention which throws into doubt the very process of recording the history of slavery at all. In this reading Phillips emerges as in essence a post-colonial-postmodern-diasporic-literary-strategist.<sup>69</sup> Yet it might be necessary to ask to what extent Phillips has managed to convert fact into fiction—where does

<sup>66</sup> Felman, 'After the Apocalypse', 124.

<sup>67</sup> Caryl Phillips, *Crossing the River* (London: Picador, 1993), acknowledgements.

<sup>68</sup> John Newton, *Letters to a Wife. Written during Three Voyages to Africa. From 1750 to 1754*, reprinted in *Works*, v. 303–613.

<sup>69</sup> For a remarkably prolix defence of Phillips's 'appropriations' in *Cambridge*, see Evelyn O'Callaghan, 'Historical Fiction and Fictional History: Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge*', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 28 (1993), 46.



the act of creation begin and the act of appropriation end? In the case of Newton's *Journal*, has the 'real' John Newton been ironically effaced? Certainly Newton's writings are given a new author, actually two authors; the first the fictional Captain Hamilton, who stands in for Newton, the second Phillips, who looks over Hamilton's shoulder.

I think it legitimate to question how successful these games of 'transposition' are in creating a meta-fiction beyond the authority of Newton's text. The traces of his story are not transformed into something new, as Margaret Garner's story was transmogrified from press cuttings into *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. What saturates part III of *Crossing the River* are the virtually unadulterated writings of Newton himself. To argue that Newton is transformed by retroactive influence, to argue that his texts are now changed forever because of their encrustation onto the larger narrative patterns of *Crossing the River*, is disingenuous. What if the act of transposition exploits the power of Newton's historical specificity because the imaginative vision of the late twentieth century cannot invent anything more powerful than the words Newton has already made/written/invented/recorded? Maybe those words cannot be changed, except in their smallest details, because they have an authority which a late twentieth-century consciousness desperate to reclaim the past cannot mimic.

It is a troubling move, this extended quotation of Newton in the guise of fictive slave captain. Newton's words, with minuscule readjustments, are shipped in to provide a pivotal narrative encircled by three other narratives, within the overall framework of *Crossing the River*. In terms of the authority it generates this move is not innocent. For the reviewers, unaware of the direct quotation of Newton, this section of the novel is read, not as quotation, pastiche, or reappropriation, but as a masterful piece of creative interposition, history brought to life by the artist's vision. One reviewer talks in the following terms of part III: 'The next section of *Crossing the River* is devoted to Captain James Hamilton, the English captain who bought the children in 1753. Containing both his dispassionate log book and two ardent letters he sends to his wife, the text reveals a Janus like personality. Hamilton is at once ruthless towards his crew and the slaves he regards merely as goods, yet also capable of genuine filial and marital love.'<sup>70</sup> But whose is this Janus voice the reviewer

<sup>70</sup> Oliver Reynolds, 'Sold into Slavery', review of *Crossing the River*, *Times Literary Supplement*, 14 May (1993), 22; for other reviews which see Hamilton as an unproblematic fictional creation, see Charles P. Sarvan, *World Literature Today*, 68/3 (Summer 1994), 624-5; John Spurling, *Spectator*, 29 May (1993), 30-1; Galen Strawson, 'Children of the Ever-rolling Stream', *Independent on Sunday*, 16 May (1993); James Woodall, 'Lost Voices of Slavery', *Times*, 13 May (1993); Maya Jaggi, 'Spectral Triangle', *Guardian*, 5 May (1993), 4; Nicholas Lezard, 'Facing it. Crossing the River', *London Review of Books*, 23 September (1993), 21; Janet Burroway, 'Slaves to Fate', *New York Times Book Review*, 30 Jan. (1994), 10; Nicholas Delbanco, 'Themes of Lament', *Chicago Tribune Books*, 23 Jan. (1994), 5.

hears, Newton's or Hamilton's?<sup>71</sup> We live in a theoretical climate that demands that parody, pastiche, and the simulacrum saturate any fiction that claims awareness of its ironic strategies. It could be argued that Phillips's use of Newton constitutes a diasporic equivalent of Pierre Menard's *Quixote*. If one sets down the texts side by side, Newton's originals and Phillips quotations, it is possible to construct an elaborate *post-facto* rereading of the text which would see in Phillips's 'writing' a brilliant and perhaps satiric reworking of Newton. Anyone wishing to construct such a reading will find an ironic blueprint for the method set out by Jorge Luis Borges in his prophetically amusing 'Pierre Menard Author of the Quixote'. The laconic interrogation of the concepts of 'originality', 'fiction', 'historical recovery', and 'plagiarism' show Borges, as ever, to be way ahead of the post-colonial game.

I want to end by taking a slightly different route into thinking about the relationship between Newton's and Phillips's texts. The great connoisseur and aesthete Giovanni Morelli developed a theory for attribution whereby one could detect an original old master against a fake not by looking at the grand aspects, colouration, composition, narrative, and so on.<sup>72</sup> The secret to the master's touch lay in the details and they always gave the fake away: the way Rembrandt painted eyelids, ears, thumbs would provide the key to the difference between him and his imitator. One might attempt something of a linguistic parallel by setting the minutiae which differentiate Newton and Phillips texts in relief. If there are changes, why are there changes, and what effect do they have on the two texts? I am consequently going to isolate the changes Phillips makes and try to ask what these changes may mean. So what does it mean when Phillips changes two men into one woman in the following example:

This day buried a fine woman slave, No. 11, having been ailing some time, but never thought her in danger till within these 2 days, she was taken with a lethargic disorder, which they seldom recover from. Scraped the rooms, then smoked the ship with tar, tobacco and brimstone for 2 hours, afterwards washed with vinegar.<sup>73</sup> (Phillips)  
*Tuesday 20th April* . . . This day buried 2 fine men slaves, Nos. 27 and 43, having been ailing for some time, but not thought in danger. Taken suddenly with a lethargic disorder from which they generally recover. Scraped the men's rooms, then

<sup>71</sup> Phillips's situation is not unique and relates closely to debates around the fictionalization of the Holocaust. When an author of fiction decides to 'quote' extensively from a historical source in order to describe mass trauma certain questions arise. The different positions which can be set out regarding plagiarism, creativity, truth fiction, and ethics in such a context are summarized in J. M. Young's discussion of D. M. Thomas's *The White Hotel*, and his unacknowledged 'quotations' from Kuznetsov's *Baba Yar*. Thomas's ingenious defence in a series of letters to the *TLS* are educative. See J. M. Young, 'Holocaust Documentary Fiction: The Novelist as Eyewitness', in Lang (ed.), *Writing and the Holocaust*, 202–10.

<sup>72</sup> See Edgar Wind, *Art and Anarchy* (London: Duckworth, [1963] 1985).

<sup>73</sup> Phillips, *Crossing*, 116.

smoked the ship thoroughly with tar and tobacco for 3 hours, afterwards washed clean with vinegar . . .<sup>74</sup> (Newton)

Those two ‘fine men slaves’ had numbers and existed, and those numbers insist, in their muteness that some forms of testimony demand to be left alone in their terrible integrity. Or do they? This one change focuses discussion on the relation between art and documentary. Take the following consideration of whether there can be art about the Holocaust: “Keep literature out of that fire zone. Let the numbers speak, let the documents and the well-established facts speak.” I have no wish to belittle that claim, but I do wish to point out that the numbers and the facts were the murderer’s own well proven means. Man as a number is one of the horrors of dehumanisation. They never asked anyone who he was or what he was.<sup>75</sup> This is Aron Applefield’s passionate defence of the need to write art about the Holocaust so that the victims are not remembered solely in the terms in which their abusers chose to record them. Yet the question here is has Phillips fundamentally altered those terms, has he stopped the slaves being numbers? Surely the answer is that he has not, all he has done is to substitute a number that once did exist as a person into a number which now does not. Are his new numbers somehow magically artistic because he chose them?

Any changes to Newton’s text raise ugly questions. Frequently, Phillips’s changes are tiny, one might think unnecessary, yet have almost limitless implications for the memory of slavery. Take the following: ‘*Saturday 7th November* . . . In the morning had a visit from some Portuguese of Pirates Bay. They brought a woman slave, whom I refused being long breasted.’<sup>76</sup> (Phillips) ‘*Saturday 3rd November* . . . In the morning had a visit from some Portuguese of pirates bay, brought a woman slave, who I refused being long breasted.’<sup>77</sup> (Newton) The only substantive change here is the date; the day is kept the same, but the Saturday is moved from the third to the seventh of November. Why? What lay behind this decision? We now have a day that in calendar terms never existed, but the long breasted woman is still there, as are the Portuguese pirates and the bay. The decision to change the date but not other facts or words occurs again and again in the reproduced journal entries.<sup>78</sup> Is this change, the mani-

<sup>74</sup> Newton, *Journal*, 29.

<sup>75</sup> Aron Applefield, ‘After the Holocaust’, in Lang (ed.), *Writing and the Holocaust*, 83.

<sup>76</sup> Phillips, *Crossing*, 104. <sup>77</sup> Newton, *Journal*, 14.

<sup>78</sup> Some further examples: ‘*Thursday 4th February* This morning at daybreak I was saluted by the agreeable vision of my longboat, and soon after she came on board with crew well and a dozen slaves, viz. 4 men, 2 women, 1 man-boy (4 feet) and 4 girls (under-size)’ (Phillips, *Crossing*, 111). ‘*Wednesday 28 November*. This morning had the agreeable sight of my longboat, and soon after she came on board with every body well and brought 11 slaves, viz. 3 men, 1 woman, 2 men boys, 1 boy (4 foot) and 3 girls (undersize) . . .’ (Newton, *Journal*, 20). ‘*Saturday 27th February* . . . A continual calm. At 3 p.m. weighed with the flood tide to drive downwards, but at sunset can hardly perceive we have made any advance. The Carpenter’s work is complete, having constructed yet another platform in the men’s room. The ship is clear enough to take the remainder of our slaves without inconvenience. This day

festation of a desire to make a fictional time outside Newton's real time, that somehow escapes history, or is it a desire to make a little change for change's sake? Is it a gesture of failed appropriation or of genuine political commitment?

When the changes to Newton's writing are more substantive, then the stakes are considerably raised. Frequently, the alterations will squeeze out some vital emphasis or disguise the justificatory subtleties of the original. Newton's writings are, of course, written in certain places at certain times for certain reasons. The *Journal* was a manuscript written for a specific audience and not intended to be published, and consequently has a quite precise performative and rhetorical agenda. Newton is producing an account (in both senses of the word) designed to be read by the owners of his ship on return. It is economic testimony. The journal was a financial document explaining where all the money was going, justifying dealings on the coast, celebrating his business acumen, and accounting for the loss of sailors through disease and death. It was first and foremost an exercise in bookkeeping, saying who was bought when and where, how much was paid. Newton therefore has an audience of traders and an agenda for what he will write for this audience. He needs to come across as sensible and above all trustworthy. Phillips, on the other hand, does not have a clear notion of his audience, unless he had already foreseen that the novel would be short-listed for the Booker prize. Given the performative and promotional authorial role in which the contemporary post-colonial novelist operates, or is made to operate by his agent, it is inevitable that Phillips performs as the creative anathema of Newton. Phillips as authorial persona must demand, or at least assume that his audience desires, his intellectual and ideological independence. He must not think himself to be accountable in any immediate way to his readers, he plays at autonomy, and in this sense his account is a very different one from Newton's. Yet this has implications for what happens to Newton's text. It is not coincidental that when Phillips does choose to make substantial changes to Newton's work they are often amendments to those very revelatory lacunae which treat the operations of slave power in its most impossibly abusive yet intimate forms. In other words Phillips is inclined to fiddle about with precisely those sites of horror which cannot be retranslated without rendering them, in terms of their original authority, meaningless.

Phillips's changes raise even more difficult questions when he comes to accounts of torture and sexual abuse. What happens to the victims if we take

fixed 6 swivel blunderbusses in the *barricado* which will, I hope, be sufficient to intimidate the slaves from any thoughts of an insurrection . . . ? (Phillips, *Crossing*, 112). 'Friday 7<sup>th</sup> December. At 10 p.m. having shoaled our water to 15 fathoms, and being so near in as to hear the surf on the beech, came to an anchor . . . this day fixed 4 swivel blunderbusses in the *barricado*, which with the two carriage guns we put through at the Bonanoes, make a formidable appearance upon the main deck, and will, I hope, be sufficient to intimidate the slaves from any thoughts of an insurrection . . . ? (Newton, *Journal*, 22).

them up, put their words or actions into the mouth of another, and move them around, just a little bit? The changes that have been made to the following account of the rape of a heavily pregnant slave woman focus some of the issues at stake:

*Saturday 10th April . . .* At 6 p.m. George Robinson seduced a woman big with child, and lay with her in view of the whole quarter deck. I put him in irons. I suspect this has not been the first affair of this kind on board. Her number is 72 . . .<sup>79</sup> (Phillips)

*Wednesday 31st January . . .* William Cooney seduced a woman slave down into the room and lay with her brute like in view of the whole quarterdeck, for which I put him in irons. I hope this has been the first affair of the kind on board and I am determined to keep them quiet if possible. If anything happens to the woman I shall impute it to him, for she was big with child. Her number is 83. . . .<sup>80</sup> (Newton)

Initially there really does not seem a lot of difference, but the deeper in the reading goes, the more disturbing the relation of these two texts becomes. Again the date is changed, yet on this occasion a time of day is also introduced, the rape we are told is definitely in the evening. Then the woman's number, the only way Newton identifies the slave subject in his *Journal*, is changed from 83 to 72. Phillips could be seen trying to make this woman a part of his appropriate fantasy, conversely he could be seen to destroy that one small vestige of historical identity she possessed—her number. Number 72 has been removed from her place in the historical archive into another space, a space hard to identify, perhaps harder still to justify.

Even more troubling is the change of the rapist's name. He, let us note, is given a name, not a number, and of the countless unrecorded rapes of slave women during the middle passage, this one criminal was recorded. When William Cooney becomes George Robinson has the record of a rape been changed into the fantasy of a rape? Other substantive changes both to the facts and language have the effect of reducing the complexity and the horror of Newton's accounts. Phillips's Captain Hamilton emerges as a much more predictable and reassuring consciousness than Newton. For example Newton's adjectival compound 'brute-like' to describe the rape is excised by Phillips. In the original the suggestion of bestiality is troubling because of its frightening ambiguities. Does Newton consider the rape itself to be brute-like or merely the fact that it is carried out in full view of the sailors? There is then the terrible possibility that Newton would not have considered the rape 'brute-like' if it had gone on behind closed doors. There are even darker possibilities: does the phrase refer to the sexual position the rapist enforced on the victim? Beyond this there is even the possibility of the rape being 'brute-like' because it involves

<sup>79</sup> Phillips, *Crossing*, 115.

<sup>80</sup> Newton, *Journal*, 75.

miscegenetic union. Black women, troped in racist discourse as animal in their sexuality, must reduce any man who has intercourse with them to their level, namely that of an animal. The implications of this phrase are further complicated when one remembers that Newton had a history of sexual involvement with blacks. Newton's attitude to his own sexual unions with black slave women is highly oblique in his later writings, but that he used many slave women prostitutes in his youth is certain. That he abused slave women on the middle passage is possible.<sup>81</sup>

Other changes similarly reduce the complexities and complicities of the original. The change from 'I hope that this has been' to 'I suspect that this has not been' again reduces Newton to a far less troubling consciousness. The Newton of the original is trying to reassure his ship-owning readers of his propriety, and of the good conduct of his crew. Phillips creates a flatter voice, Newton's hope is more appalling than Hamilton's passively constructed and banal suspicion.

The most crucial change relates to the transposition of the information that the victim is heavily pregnant. What makes Newton's account truly appalling is the fact that he introduces this information, outrageously, in the context of a pre-emptive defence against a charge from the ship owners. The rape of the woman concerns him, and is finally introduced, because she is a fertile piece of property purchased with the owner's money. If the rape damages either her or the unborn slave child Newton is setting out clearly that it is Clooney who will carry the can for this assault on property. The rape will only result in further punishment for Clooney should his victim subsequently die or miscarry. The *Journal* remains silent about what follows. This hugely insightful aspect of Newton's thought is lost in Phillips's rearrangement. Newton/Hamilton emerges as a more conventional moralist, shocked at the outset by the woman's pregnancy. Again the real Newton emerges as the more terrifying mentality. Another change alters the descriptions of the circumstances surrounding the rape. Newton tells us that the woman was 'seduced' down into a room, seduced here meaning 'persuaded' or 'enticed' down, where she then endured her 'brute-like' rape. In the rewrite Phillips misconstrues the word 'seduction' and describes the rape itself as a process of seduction. This suggests at some level a volitional element on the part of number '72' or '83' lacking in Newton's hard-edged account. Surely this anonymous victim of a horrible abuse has been radically reappropriated in ways which force us to ask if anyone has the right to play around with the account of her abuse. Newton's words have a terrible authority as one of the few recorded eye-witness accounts of a rape on the

<sup>81</sup> For Newton's use of slave prostitutes in Madeira, and probable abuse of slave women on ships, see Hindmarsh, *Newton*, 57–8. That Newton continued to lust after slave women once a slave captain is stated by David Cecil, *Stricken Deer*, 119, 'If he had female slaves on board he ate no meat, for fear it might strengthen his flesh to lust after them.'

middle passage. The question pops up again: how much of the integrity of Newton's writing is destroyed in this weak and psychologically dull reworking? Similar questions apply to the account of child torture:

*Friday 2nd April . . .* By the favour of Divine Providence made a timely discovery today that the slaves were forming a plot for an insurrection. Surprised 4 attempting to get off their irons, and upon further search in their rooms found some knives, stones, shot, etc. Put 2 in irons and delicately in the thumbscrews to encourage them to a full confession of those principally concerned. In the evening put 5 more in neck-yokes.<sup>82</sup> (Phillips)

*Monday 11th December . . .* By the favour of Divine Providence made a timely discovery to day that the slaves were forming a plot for an insurrection. Surprised 2 of them attempting to get off their irons, and upon farther search in their rooms, upon the information of 3 of the boys, found some knives, stones, shot etc., and a cold chisel. Upon enquiry there appeared 8 principally concerned to move in projecting the business and 4 boys with supplying them with the above instruments. Put the boys in irons and slightly in the thumbscrews to urge them to a full confession. We have already 36 men out of our small number.<sup>83</sup> (Newton)

Apart from the habitual fussing with dates and numbers again the account of extreme physical abuse is altered, and lessened. Newton states that he initially found out about the insurrection via the information of three boys, then that he tortures four children in the thumbscrews who he considers implicated in the failed insurrection to 'urge them to a full confession'. We do not know if he initially gained the information from the first three boys by also torturing them but the implication is there. In the rewrite the fact that the children are being tortured in order to make them inform on the adults is lost. One of Newton's most pathological recorded acts is wiped out of Phillips resetting of the record. Again Hamilton emerges as a softer figure, the preciousness of the substituted adverb 'delicately', for Newton's more practical 'slightly' carries a very different weight.

Phillips revealingly goes back to this passage again. In the climactic epilogue, the final two pages of the novel which are intended to draw all the narrative strands together in a message of triumphant survival, Newton's reworked words are sandwiched between the Narrator/Phillips's summarizing voice: 'Only if they panic will they break their wrists and ankles against Captain Hamilton's instruments. *Put 2 in irons and delicately in the thumbscrews to encourage them to a full confession of those principally concerned. In the evening put 5 more in neck-yokes.* Survivors all.'<sup>84</sup> It is as if Phillips cannot bear the sheer horror of Newton's original, where the anonymous tortured children briefly appear and disappear. Phillips wants to claim them back and situate them within a triumphalist narrative of survival. But surely the terrible truth about Newton's

<sup>82</sup> Phillips, *Crossing*, 112.

<sup>83</sup> Newton, *Journal*, 71.

<sup>84</sup> Phillips, *Crossing*, 235.

account is that he has no interest in their fate, and we have no idea if any of them survived, let alone the certainty that they are ‘survivors all’. What disappears again and again in the alterations is Newton’s utter practicality, and his consistent desire to smooth all potential doubts of the owner’s over his handling of trouble.

The appropriations of Newton become even more complicated when one recognizes that they are drawn from two very different sorts of writing. Phillips does not only appropriate passages from the *Journal* but, as mentioned briefly above, also takes sections out of the love letters which Newton wrote to his wife Mary (née Catlett) during the period that he was a slave captain. These remarkable letters are part travel narrative, part confession, and part emotional manipulation of his lover (a role now voyeuristically played by the reader). They show Newton professing, interrogating, and satirizing his love for Mary by recounting and then commenting upon various conversations and social exchanges he has on his slaving voyages. In one passage, which Phillips incorporates, Newton combines reassurance and threat in a letter in which he somewhat oddly defines his love for Mary through his refusal to use prostitutes. The whole discussion is framed in the form of a reported Socratic dialogue between Newton and a group of anonymous slave captains. Phillips’s ‘version’ runs as follows:

I take a good deal of raillery among the sea captains, for they *know* I have not a secure knowledge of life, and I *know* they have not. They claim I am melancholy; I tell them they have lost their wits. They say I am a slave to a single woman; I claim they are a slave to hundreds, of all qualities. They wonder at my *lack* of humour, I pity theirs. They declare they can form no idea of my happiness, I counter with knowledge that being pleased with a drunken debauch, or the smile of a prostitute, can never give one such as I pleasure. They pretend, all the while, to appeal to experience against me, but I stand firm.<sup>85</sup> (Phillips)

I give and take a good deal of raillery among the sea-captains I meet with here. They *think* I have not a right notion of life, and I *am sure* they have not. They say I am melancholy; I tell them they are mad. They say I am a slave to one woman, which I deny, but can prove that some of them are mere slaves to a hundred. They wonder at my humour; I pity theirs. They can form no idea of my happiness; I answer, I think the better of it on that account; for I should be ashamed of it if it was suited to the level of those who can be pleased with a drunken debauch or the smile of a prostitute. We shall hardly come to an agreement on these points, for they pretend to appeal to experience against me.<sup>86</sup> (Newton)

This is certainly a dramatic passage to have excised from its original context and set up sandwiched between the extracts from Newton’s *Journal*. There is

<sup>85</sup> Phillips, *Crossing*, 109.

<sup>86</sup> Newton, *Works*, v. 348–9.



an ironic impact which results from setting the day to day treatment of the slaves against the amorous trope, ingeniously reconstructed by Newton, of the lover as slave of the beloved.<sup>87</sup> Phillips does achieve a powerfully satiric juxtaposition, *but*, and it is a big *but*, again the changes which he makes might be seen to damage Newton's original. Newton uses the captain's 'raillery' to set himself up as the faithful and 'melancholy' lover, enslaved to his mistress's heart. Newton is 'slave to a single woman', Newton claims that the captains are, through their lust, 'slave to hundreds of all qualities'. A lot of slave captains have suddenly become slaves. Again, however, the precise weight and meaning of the text are disrupted at key moments. Newton/Hamilton as a fictional creation loses far more than he gains via the process of reduction and emerges as a compact, certainly essentialized as stereotypes must be, but in his solipsistic banality much weaker, persona.

Phillips's changes in the above passage again may appear marginal but are not. There are several points where he recasts grammar and introduces extra phrases emphasizing the self-centred persona of the Newton/Hamilton narrator. For example Newton's sophisticated argument that his experience of happiness is inaccessible to the captains is framed in the following words, and takes on an abstract quality: 'They can form no idea of my happiness; I answer, I think the better of it on that account; for I should be ashamed of it if it was suited to the level of those who can be pleased with a drunken debauch or the smile of a prostitute.' Newton's happiness, as something distinct from himself, is the main subject of the sentence, and the phenomenon of his happiness is so tangible as to verge on personification. Newton goes so far as to say that, like a protective parent he must 'be ashamed of his happiness' should it appear explicable to the debauched sensibilities of his colleague captains. Phillips changes are as follows: 'They declare they can form no idea of my happiness, I counter with knowledge that being pleased with a drunken debauch, or the smile of a prostitute, can never give one such as I pleasure.' This is clearer, duller, and linguistically much cruder. Newton's strangeness has been muscled into a more accessible form, a straightforward argument of the 'I am better than you' variety. Newton's odd relationship with a personal happiness which Mary encapsulates disappears, to be replaced by a sanctimonious bore telling us that a man 'such as I' could get no pleasure from drinking or whoring. Newton would never be that self-righteously dull, especially given his notorious past as a libertine, and his pathological focus on that past. The problem is that the intellectual ingenuity of Newton's argument, and the sense of balancing different human perceptions, is lost.

That Phillips's changes frequently obfuscate Newton's terrible moral clarity, and imperturbable sense of his own worthlessness, leads to a confusing texture

<sup>87</sup> For the operation of this trope in pro-slavery rhetoric, see Wood, *Blind Memory*, 58.

in the adapted text. Here is a final example, another passage grafted in wholesale from the letters by Phillips:

These last few days have been amongst the most fatiguing I can ever recall. I, therefore, write to you in the hope of making some amends for this misfortune. Those, myself aside, who have experienced pleasant and agreeable evenings in our company, could never imagine the contrast between such sweet times, and the present miserable situation. I am continually assaulted by the combined noises of slaves and traders; suffocated by heat; and subjected to perpetual talking, the greater part of it to no purpose. Last night I managed some two hours sleep and I dreamed of you. I *saw* us walking together, and discoursing on the many things which have occurred since our parting. We took our most happy of scenes, when you first gave to me your hand. I sat stupid for some time, and embarrassed you by my awkwardness. But my heart was so full, its beat heavy and irregular, that I knew not how to utter a word out. Your kindness and patience soon restored to me the use of my tongue, and we both concurred that the greater intimacies that have followed are the source of our supreme happiness. But then my dream was invaded by daylight and the noises of people above my head broke the pleasing illusion . . .<sup>88</sup> (Phillips)

This has been one of the most fatiguing days I have met with, and therefore, though it is not my regular post, I write a little by way of amends. No one who has not experienced it like me, can conceive the contrast between my present situation, distracted with the noise of slaves and traders, suffocated with heat, and almost chop-fallen with perpetual talking; and the sweet agreeable evenings I have passed in your company. But all is welcome for your sake. I shall never forget, and you doubtless well remember, the evening when you first gave me your hand, as an earnest of what has since followed; how I sat stupid and speechless for some minutes, and I believe, a little embarrassed you by my awkwardness. My heart was so full, it beat and trembled to that degree, that I knew not how to get a word out. I hope I shall never entertain a fainter sense of the invaluable present you then made me, though a greater intimacy has since restored to me the use of my tongue. But I am writing in the midst of talkers, and am obliged to answer questions about business, so that my head is so confused to talk upon subjects of this kind without spoiling them.<sup>89</sup> (Newton)

Again Phillips trades narrative economy for a predictably washed out contemporary language. This time Phillips introduces cliché and stock props from the fiction of popular romance. His Newton/Hamilton is horribly familiar from the pages of Patrick O'Connor if not Barbara Cartland. This writing actively erodes the bizarre contradictions which inflect Newton's own voice. Newton, when reimagining first holding hands with Mary, had no need of the ridiculous prop of the lover's dream vision (complete with the risibly predictable conclusion, albeit recast in a diction of eighteenth-century pastiche 'and then I woke up and found it was all a dream'). Newton also avoids the constant sly references to a sexual intimacy, which plague Phillips's Newton/Hamilton. What gives

<sup>88</sup> Phillips, *Crossing*, 118.

<sup>89</sup> Newton, *Works*, v. 343.

Newton's writing its power is the urgency with which he writes, trying to forge a sensitive and generous love letter focused upon his feeling for his wife, while actually trading slaves in the middle of the day. Ultimately the irreconcilability of his position bursts upon him and Newton abandons the letter because the distraction of business makes him worried that he will hit the wrong emotional and stylistic notes. That final phrase, when Newton states that he is 'obliged to answer questions about business, so that my head is so confused to talk upon subjects of this kind without spoiling them', brings the business of slavery and the business of love into head-on collision. This phrase disappears from Phillips's reworking, having been squeezed out by the dream vision. Yet these words occupy one of those crucial places in Newton where the text is brought up short in a world of crazy contradictions. The yawning gulf that opens between that neat little euphemism 'business', and the entries in the *Journal* which tell us exactly what that business is, defines the double consciousness pervading Newton's thought and action. He finally concludes that he cannot trade slaves on deck, and talk about trade prices, without 'spoiling' the 'kind' language of love. Despite the fact that Newton has tried to force the language of romance and the language of slavery to cohabit, he must admit their total divide. Phillips's decision to recast the bulk of Newton's romantic confession in the form of a tawdry dream vision obliterates what is most difficult and horrible in Newton's writing. Again Newton/Hamilton emerges as a bland and nondescript figure shakily encrusted onto the stock conventions of the romance novella. The voice of Newton/Hamilton emerges as a comfortably familiar romantic fiction: the voice of Newton is something altogether more incredible and terrible.

The voice of John Newton which comes through his unadulterated texts surely requires us to protect its ghostly authenticity. Finally neither the value of Phillips's work as an *oeuvre* nor the charge of plagiarism are the issues. What does need answering is whether it is better to have a Newton/Hamilton who is merely a shadow of Newton's former self (and indeed present self, encased in his own archive) rather than no Newton at all? Postmodern-post-colonial theory gestures towards an interpretative space of complete and necessary relativism. In this world Captain Hamilton sits very comfortably, and will no doubt continue to do so. Where John Newton sits, if he is allowed to sit, is entirely another matter.

### Cowper's Competitive Madness and the National Conscience

Newton remained intensely competitive, refusing to believe that Cowper's alienation from God could in any way rival his own [Newton's] past depravity.

(James King, *William Cowper*, 69)

William Cowper, with the possible exception of Christopher Smart, has emerged as the most significant inheritor of the 'high' Augustan tradition, and simultaneously as a leading formal and thematic precursor of Wordsworth. He appealed to the age of sentiment in a number of ways. His pathos took many forms. He could produce elegies on almost anything including the death of his mother, the caging and shooting of birds, a comic yet strangely haunting lament on a halibut he has eaten. He could express intense sorrow for the sickness of animals, especially his pet hares. He produced moving laments on the destruction of trees, and terrifying articulations of the terror with which he confronted his own periodic bouts of insanity.<sup>90</sup> For today's 'Green Romanticists' Cowper is remarkably desirable: laconically loveable, sensitive but intellectually tough, there appears to be no victim he was incapable of empathizing with.<sup>91</sup> Cowper was also a poet abreast of contemporary developments, whether recent exploration in the South Seas, the expansion of the press and leisure industries in the eighteenth century, or the economic and moral implications of plantation slavery.<sup>92</sup>

Cowper emerges as strangely central to *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography*, and to the analysis of how the memory of slavery led to a series of cultural pathologies across the whole range of British cultural production. Consequently, the following consideration of Cowper's relationship to slavery sidelines Cowper, the contemporary literary construct. Cowper's work, and the fictions of his life, held a very different aura for his contemporaries and near contemporaries than they do at the beginning of the new millennium. He was read not only as a poet but as a religious enthusiast capable of articulating his sense of sin, despair, and salvation with a peculiar transparency and intensity.<sup>93</sup> In the first decades of the nineteenth century, Cowper was held out as a literary example of Divine Grace, much in the way that Newton's example operated in the areas of institutionalized religion. His most recent biographer sees Cowper as a highly significant exporter of missionary colonialism across the British Empire.<sup>94</sup> A biographical cult flourished around the poet's memory and the majority of the early biographies are obsessed with Cowper's madness.<sup>95</sup> This

<sup>90</sup> 'On a Goldfinch', 'Epitaph on a Redbreast', 'On the Loss of the Royal George', 'Epitaph on a Hare', 'The Valediction', 'To the Halibut', 'The Poplar Field'.

<sup>91</sup> See Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (London and Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 10–14.

<sup>92</sup> The best of the literary biographies covering Cowper's location within literary studies is James King, *William Cowper: A Biography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1986).

<sup>93</sup> For Cowper as a Divine poet, see the enthusiastic George Melvyn Ella, *William Cowper: Poet of Paradise* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 1993), 17–30.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.* 17.

<sup>95</sup> See Anon, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of William Cowper* (London, 1803); John Corry, *The Life of William Cowper esq.* (London, 1803), 27–31; John Newton, *The Life of John Newton Written by Himself; With Continuation by the Rev. Richard Cecil* (Edinburgh, 1853), 109–21; George B. Cheever, *Lectures on the Life, Genius, and Insanity of Cowper* (London, 1856), 123–60.

obsession was given a further fillip in 1816 when Cowper's own harrowing accounts of his insanity, despair, and final religious ecstasy appeared in the form of the posthumous publication of his autobiographical manuscript *Adelphi*.<sup>96</sup> He was a deeply tortured individual whose imaginatively intimate yet violent literary collaboration with John Newton led to extreme expressions of spiritual despair. The most extreme poem to stare into this darkness was the extraordinary *Lines Written during a Period of Insanity* with the unforgettable opening line 'Hatred and vengeance my eternal portion'.<sup>97</sup> Cowper shows himself as powerless, his passivity in the face of an implacable authority presents the poet as victim in a rhetoric which will later be shifted onto the African slave:

Hard lot! Encompass'd with a thousand dangers,  
Weary, faint, trembling with a thousand terrors,  
Fall'n and if vanquish'd, to receive a sentence  
Worse than Abiram's.<sup>98</sup>

Cowper's poetry of spiritual angst exists in parallel with, frequently in competition with, the poetry of slavery. Cowper, given the typically ambitious range of his approaches, wrote more about slavery, or about the Western ability to provide multiple fantasies around the inheritance of this subject, than any other English poet. Yet the desire to enter into and explore the limits of this dark theme was not devoid of self-interest. Cowper is constructed by his biographers, and constructs himself, in terms of a variety of forms of enslavement. John Newton is the figure at the centre of much of this area of the Cowper legacy.

Cowper studies are, inevitably, heavily inflected by the mythology which is attached to John Newton. During and leading up to the period of Cowper's most severe breakdown, he and Newton were unusually close. While the popular image of Newton amongst his own hagiographers, as emphasized in the earlier discussion, is benign and celebratory, several of the early biographies of Cowper present Newton as a sadistic and bullying ex-slaver. He is shown transferring his brutal view of humanity and his narrow Calvinistic vision to the vulnerable, weak, and feminized Cowper. Some accounts go so far as to see Newton as 'enslaving' the little poet. Newton emerges as a man who 'wielded the Gospel as fiercely as a slaver's whip' and whose 'savage piety' makes him 'Cowper's tyrant'.<sup>99</sup> Yet this external construction of enslavement to Newton is balanced

<sup>96</sup> 'Adelphi', *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, ed. Charles Ryskamp, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979–86), i. 3–48.

<sup>97</sup> William Cowper, *The Poems of William Cowper*, ed. John Baird and Charles Ryskamp, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980–95), i. 489–90.

<sup>98</sup> Cowper, *Poems*, i. 490. Abiram was swallowed alive in the earth by God's command.

<sup>99</sup> *London Mercury*, 1920, 2. For a brief survey of this tradition from the early nineteenth century, see Ella, *Cowper*, 22–4. For a fine summary of the tedious biographical battles which the biographers/hagiographers of Cowper and Newton have waged, see Hindmarsh, *Newton*, pp. ix, 3–4.

within Cowper's own work by a series of counter-readings of enslavement. If Newton is to be seen wanting to enslave Cowper, then Cowper emerges as determined to see himself enslaved. The enslavement takes several forms: spiritually he is the slave of his corporeality, personally he is slave to a series of powers, which include God, pleasure, and his despair. Finally he presents sensibility as an enslaving force; he sees himself held in thrall by his obsessive relation to human suffering and to that of African slaves in particular.

Cowper went through two massive mental breakdowns in his career, and even after his 'cure', from the debilitating nihilism of the fit of 1773, the effects of which lasted at least five years, he had to fight to keep his sense of despair at bay. As a result Cowper, Newton, and their contemporaries saw in his life another example of God's 'Amazing Grace'. Cowper's return to sanity from a state where he was convinced that God was his torturer, slave master, and nemesis was seen as another manifestation of the irresistible force of God's love. Cowper's self-dramatization has the effect of turning him into a spiritual hero, different from, but as charismatic as, Newton.<sup>100</sup> In the midst of his worst breakdown, which began in 1773, and effectively stopped him writing for seven years, Cowper's only real confidant and spiritual guide was Newton. Out of Newton's sin and Cowper's despair a peculiar interrogation of how the state of slavery might be comparatively constructed results.<sup>101</sup>

**'What are these things to me who am damned?':  
Cowper's Crazy Slavery<sup>102</sup>**

Cowper's letters constantly use slavery as a tool for self-examination. Cowper first seriously mentions slavery in his surviving letters in the context of his own depression. Writing to Lady Hesketh in response to her request that he write verse on the slave trade he finally refuses. He argues that Hannah More is writing a poem which will be more effective as propaganda. The denial is, however, prefaced with a rumination about the connections between the subject and his own emotional subjection to melancholy:

I cannot describe to you, nor could you comprehend it if I should, the manner in which my mind is sometimes impressed with melancholy on particular subjects . . . Before you gave me the hint [to write a poem about the slave trade], I had once or twice as I lay on my bed watching for the break of day, ruminated on the subject which in your last but one, you recommended to me. Slavery, or a release from slavery such

<sup>100</sup> King, *Cowper*, 69–71.

<sup>101</sup> The earliest biographies are appalled and excited by this aspect of Cowper's life. See *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of William Cowper* (London, 1803), 33–40.

<sup>102</sup> Cowper, *Letters and Prose Writings*, i. 27.

as the poor Negroes have endured, or perhaps both those topics together, appeared to me a theme so important at the present juncture, and at the same time so susceptible of poetical management that I more than once perceived myself ready to start in that career.<sup>103</sup>

The poet's mind is 'impressed' by melancholy, an intriguing verb choice. The primary meaning may use 'impressed' as in 'That which is pressed or forced in, having an appearance of being stamped in, sunk in, depressed' (*OED*, ppl. a1); but there is a second contemporary meaning relating to the press gangs, the verb meaning 'enlisted, compelled to serve' (*OED*, ppl. a2). Impressment was widely constructed as a form of enslavement for poor whites. Cowper is saying that he is kidnapped by sadness, as seamen are impressed into a form of white slavery in the British navy. The word is used often by John Newton who uses the same metaphor of impressment to describe his 'love at first sight' encounter with the 13-year-old Mary Catlett, his future wife: 'I was impressed with an affection for her, . . . in degree it actually equalled all that the writers of Romance have imagined; in duration it was unalterable.' He also uses it too in its literal sense, 'I was impressed . . . and put on board a tender.'<sup>104</sup> Writing about slavery is seen by Cowper as a career, but an enforced career. Slavery hovers out there ready to grab the insomniac creative imagination. Slavery is a disaster that has happened, but more appallingly it is lodged in the recollection, the memory, a disaster waiting to happen to the poet.

As the abolition movement picked up pace, John Newton published his notorious *Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade* at the start of 1788. Cowper read Newton's pamphlet and immediately wrote to him about it. In the resulting critique of Newton's prose Cowper developed his most complete identification of the poet with the Atlantic slave. Cowper and the slave emerge as equally vitiated and tormented by a cold opaque deity. Cowper begins to formulate this comparative horror with the idea that the Atlantic slave experience might be constructed according to the paradigmatic biblical myth of slave emancipation, that of 'Israel out of Egypt'. The slave trade is:

a subject on which I can ruminate 'till I feel myself lost in mazes of speculation never to be unravell'd. Could I suppose that the cruel hardships under which millions of that unhappy race have lived and died, were only preparatory to deliverance to be wrought for them hereafter, like that of Israel out of Aegypt, my reasoning would cease, and I should at once acquiesce in a dispensation, severe indeed for a time but leading to invaluable and everlasting mercies.<sup>105</sup>

<sup>103</sup> To Lady Hesketh, 16 February, *Letters and Prose Writings*, iii. 102–3.

<sup>104</sup> Newton, *Works*, i. 18, 27.

<sup>105</sup> Cowper, *Letters and Prose Writings*, iii. 106.

The idea of such necessary suffering leading to redemption is, however, immediately and radically rejected. Cowper's analysis is initially predicated upon the idea that the Bible affords no form of typological projection or evidence that could interpret the black African slave as a chosen people in the manner of the Israelites. Cowper jumps from this position to an increasingly bleak set of suppositions, which emerge as ever more closely entangled with his own sense of spiritual desolation. Cowper envisions a sort of proto-existential world where the individual has no reason to believe that suffering, no matter how dreadful, is the work of a sentient and conscious God. The associative argument is set off by contemplating the coming generations of suffering Africans and those already condemned to an oblivious death:

But there is no room, Scripture affords no warrant for any such expectations. A question then presents itself which I cannot help asking, though conscious that it ought to be suppressed. Is it to be esteem'd a sufficient vindication of Divine justice, if these miserable creatures, tormented as they have been from generation to generation, shall at last receive some relief, some abatement of their woes, shall not be treated absolutely as brutes for the future? The thousands of them who have already passed into an eternal state, hopeless of any thing better than they found in this life, what is to become of Them?<sup>106</sup>

The last question leads Cowper to create a bleak vision of God. Even Gloucester in *King Lear* imagines a Divine presence that gains some transient ludic pleasure from the infliction of pain: 'As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, They kill us for their sport' (iv. i. 36–7). For Cowper we enter a world more akin to that of Joseph Conrad's cosmic knitting machine, God as a blind and pointless piece of machinery which 'knits us in and it knits us out. It has knitted time, space, pain, death, corruption, despair and all the illusions,—and nothing matters.'<sup>107</sup> Cowper's thought comes out of the premiss that if God could have created such non-Christian objects of total suffering as the African slaves, then he can have no interest in human life:

Is it essential to the perfections of a plan concerted by infinite wisdom, that such wretches should exist at all, who from the beginning of their Being through all its endless duration can experience nothing for which they should say, It is good for us that we were created? These reasonings and such as these engage me often and more intensely than I wish them to do, when the Case of the poor Negroes occurs to me.<sup>108</sup>

Cowper begins the inevitable process of identification whereby the black Atlantic slave (created by mercantilism) and the English poet slave (the product

<sup>106</sup> Cowper, *Letters and Prose Writings*, iii. 106.

<sup>107</sup> For Conrad and the 'knitting machine', see Edward Said, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), 31–41.

<sup>108</sup> Cowper, *Letters and Prose Writings*, iii. 106.



of his own creative depression) can be described through a common language and can be seen to exist within a common vision of nihilistic eschatology. Cowper ends by demanding nothing less than a total identification between his own hate-filled and suicidal mental state during depression and the ordeal of the slave on the middle passage:

For I have frequently thought that the Happy are easily reconciled to the woes of the Miserable. But in the School of affliction I have learn'd to cavil and to question, and finding myself in my own case reduced frequently to the necessity of accounting for my own lot by means of an uncontrollable sov'reignty which gives no account of its matters, am apt to discover, what appear to me, tremendous effects of the same sov'reignty in the case of others. Then I feel—I will not tell you what—and yet must. A wish that I had never been. A wonder that I am. And an ardent but hopeless desire not to be. Thus have I written to you my whole heart on a subject which I thought to have touched only and to have left it.<sup>109</sup>

The reaction to Newton's *Thoughts* has been seen as an unconditional paean to Newton's style, but it constitutes something much darker, and more important in terms of what slavery meant to the Evangelical imagination.<sup>110</sup> It is a harrowing sequence of thought which moves directly from praise for Newton's factual propaganda detailing his knowledge of the 'trade' to a series of increasingly startling moves which finally identify the poet and the slaves as victims of a blind, vicious yet unconcerned deity. This confessional document explains the mental processes by which Cowper achieved complete identification between poet as martyr and slave as martyr; this identification permeates his work. His position is not now easy to either accept or achieve. It is, in terms of Cowper scholarship, a position which appears to have remained invisible: yet its recovery is crucial to an understanding of the familiarization of slave experience within the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century cultural landscape. That Cowper should have arrived at his clearest articulation of this identification in a letter to Newton is not a coincidence. Newton, the man who saw his involvement with the slave trade as his chief sin, yet who was convinced of his own state of spiritual Election through this sin, stands in a competitive relation to Cowper. Cowper here, in saying that he wished he had never been born, and in justifying this sense by imagining his lot as analogous to that of the slave, commits a bigger sin than any of Newton's and consequently earns the place of ultimate sinner and simultaneously ultimate victim. It is as if he is trying to usurp the slave's position in front of Newton's very eyes. The final brilliantly constructed irony is that Cowper uses Newton's own testimony as a slave captain as the raw material for the usurpation. This is one of the clearest points at which the disguises are finally thrown away and where the Evangelical's role

<sup>109</sup> Cowper, *Letters and Prose Writings*, iii. 106–7.

<sup>110</sup> Ella, *Cowper*, 241–2.

within abolition is shown to be ultimately triggered by envy for the slave as innocent victim.

The lot of the slaves increasingly becomes for Cowper the site which can contain speculations on his own suicidal state. In this world of solipsistic suffering Cowper can see in the suffering and death of thousands of slaves past and present an indictment of God, a proof that God simply does not care, which legitimates his own suicidal tendencies and sense of spiritual desolation. Cowper's compulsion to identify the lot of the slaves with his own leads to an essentially conflational approach. Yet Cowper is aware of the dangers of getting too close: elsewhere his letters reveal an intense awareness of his tendency to try to appropriate the slave's suffering. While the following passage can be read simply as a refusal to write about slavery because the subject depresses him, it can also be seen as expressing a desire to find a way of writing that will neither constitute an inventory of torture and horror (as in the *Evidence* Clarkson laid before the Commons) nor an exercise in emotional self-identification:

The more I have consider'd it [the slave trade] the more I have convinced myself that it is not a promising theme for verse. General censure on the iniquity of the practise will avail nothing, the world has been overwhelm'd with such remarks already, and to particularise all the horrors of it were an employment for the mind both of the poet and his readers of which they would necessarily soon grow weary. For my own part I cannot contemplate the subject very nearly without a degree of abhorrence that affects my spirits and sinks them below the pitch requisite for success in verse.<sup>111</sup>

This final idea, that you cannot write from a point of crude empathy with the slave's suffering, but must assume an inspired state of mind, outside the subject, articulates a stark awareness of the function of art in the context of human trauma. In another letter written a year before Cowper began work on anti-slavery propaganda, he rehearsed the theme more fully:

Slavery and especially Negro Slavery, because the cruellest, is an odious and disgusting subject. Twice or thrice I have been assailed with entreaties to write a poem on that theme; but . . . I felt myself so much hurt in my spirits the moment I enter'd on the contemplation of it, that I have at least determined absolutely to have nothing more to do with it. There are some scenes of horror on which my imagination can dwell not without some complaisance, but then they are such scenes as God not man produces. In earthquakes, high winds, tempestuous seas, there is the grand as well as the terrible. But when man is active to disturb there is such meanness in the design and cruelty in the execution that I both hate and despise the whole operation, and feel it a degradation of poetry to employ her in the description of it.<sup>112</sup>

<sup>111</sup> Cowper, *Letters and Prose Writings*, iii. 172.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.* 177–8.

Cowper is articulating the argument, so often rehearsed since the Holocaust, that the mass destruction of humankind by humankind on the grounds of economic competition and race hatred does not furnish a suitable subject for art. In suggesting that natural calamities possess 'grandeur', while human ones do not, he poses a central problem for the art of slavery. It was not until Turner painted *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying* that a great Romantic artist was to evolve a solution as to how the monumentally mean realities of the slave trade and the grandeur of natural calamity could be fused into a single tragic vision.<sup>113</sup>

The discussion so far has emphasized the extent to which the middle passage and the Atlantic slave trade were subjects which Cowper read through a complicated and persecutory form of Calvinism. Yet when he came to treat slavery in his verse, rather than his letters, he broke into a much wider performative space, and infused it with several other interpretative inflections. A lot is lost if the discussion of slavery in Cowper's work is restricted to those short poems, and passages from the longer poems, which treat Atlantic slavery explicitly. Cowper's work is obsessed with debates over power, guilt, and free will within the context of his perpetually agonized relationship with God.

Cowper's central philosophical and cultural discussion of the question of slavery occurs in 'Charity', a poem which David Brion Davis rightly isolates and summarizes as 'a paradigm of British anti-slavery thought'.<sup>114</sup> Yet 'Charity' is the climax to a series of poems which come at questions of slavery from a variety of directions, and which frequently question pain, trauma, guilt, and suffering by setting up comparisons between the poet's consciousness and that of colonized peoples in Asia or Africa. African slavery is consequently relativized in ways which again appear unfamiliar to the current historiographies of slavery.

The first extended discussion of slavery in the *Poems of 1782* occurs in 'Table Talk' in the context of Nationalism and duty.<sup>115</sup> This poem provides the philosophical platform for Cowper's later work on the Atlantic slave trade. Liberty and freedom are ruthlessly set up in nationalistic terms as the Providential bequest of the English male. What finally emerges is as much Cowper's paranoid conservatism over defining personal liberty, as his compassion for the slave. The poem is a dialogue, from A to B and back again. The argument on slavery opens nationalistically by suggesting the individual who is not inspired by reading historical accounts of heroic deeds performed to protect the British nation state deserves to be enslaved: 'The man that is not moved by what he reads, / That takes not fire at their heroic deeds, / Unworthy of the blessings of the brave / Is base in kind and born to be a slave' (ll. 25–8). 'Table Talk' is a

<sup>113</sup> See Wood, *Blind Memory*, 41–68.

<sup>114</sup> Davis, *Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, 368–73, a superb summary.

<sup>115</sup> Cowper, *Poems*, i. 247–51.

prolonged meditation upon freedom and slavery, and at its core celebrates the concept of an innate love of liberty in the British. The theme is introduced explicitly as a source of poetic inspiration (ll. 199–201). Cowper's poem then takes this lead and the remainder constitutes an ingenious defence of the 'Freeborn-Englishman' as the instinctive representative of Liberty and enemy of slavery (ll. 218–21, 224–7). He is set up, in order that he can be counterbalanced by an icon of European domestic enslavement—the Frenchman. Cowper's caricature of the servile French imagination is a debased figure who is constitutionally happy with a state of slavery under absolute monarchy. The passage articulating the French natural character is significant in that it tropes the Frenchman in precisely the manner in which pro-slavery rhetoric presents the black plantation slave:

Born in a climate softer far than our's,  
Not form'd like us, with such Herculean pow'rs,  
The Frenchman, easy, debonair and brisk,  
Give him his lass, his fiddle, and his frisk,  
Is always happy, reign whoever may,  
And laughs the sense of mis'ry far away:  
He drinks his simple bev'rage with a gust;  
And feasting on an onion and a crust,  
We never feel th'alacrity and joy  
With which he shouts and carols, *Vive le Roy*,  
Filled with as much true merriment and glee,  
As if he heard his king say—Slave, be free.

(ll. 234–45)

Substitute a pumpkin and a rum bottle for the onion and the crust, and a plantation melody for 'Vive le Roy' and you have the picture of Cobbett and Carlyle's plantation black.<sup>116</sup> Cowper then makes the ingenious move of suggesting that since Divine Providence has engendered both the potentially violent discontent of the free consciousness and the contented oblivion of the slave neither is necessarily to be privileged. This stalking horse is then used to set up a paean on the advantages of the free English consciousness. The subsequent inventory of the advantages of freedom leads into a theme which was to be of central concern to Hannah More in *Slavery, A Poem*, a testimony not only to abolition ideas on slavery, but a stern treatise on the necessary policing of the political thought of the poor.<sup>117</sup> If Liberty is to be prized as a cultural

<sup>116</sup> For a discussion of the pro-slavery construction of the contented and insensate black slave, see pp. 168–9, 366–8, 370–1, 385, 389.

<sup>117</sup> Hannah More, *Slavery, A Poem* (London, 1788), expanded and retitled *The Black Slave Trade, A Poem* reprinted Paula R. Feldman (ed.), *British Woman Poets of Romantic Era* (Baltimore and

treasure above all others, what are the limits, and how is anarchy to be prevented as the natural outcome of the defence of each individual's free will?

Cowper closely anticipates More in the political theorization of mass violence and most intensely in his anxiety over the possibility that universal libertarianism might simply become anarchy. It is the spectre of the Gordon riots which lies behind the definition of Liberty to which both poets ascribe. Liberty is a social responsibility all ends around, a social contract between governor and governed.<sup>118</sup> Yet intriguingly in Cowper's discussion of the riots, the process of rioting itself is reconstructed in two forms, first as the outraging, and perhaps rape, of a feminized personification of Liberty (a rape for which she is held partially responsible), secondly as a form of slave revolt:

When the rude rabble's watch word was—destroy,  
And blazing London seem'd a second Troy:  
Liberty blush'd and hung her drooping head,  
Beheld their progress with the deepest dread;  
Blush'd that effects like these she should produce,  
Worse than the deeds of galley-slaves broke loose.  
She loses in such storms her very name,  
And fierce licentiousness should bear the blame.

(ll. 322–9)

This is a troubled piece of writing, and its worst trouble is located in slavery. Why is the worst form of anarchic depravity figured as the revolt of galley slaves? Are they somehow more depraved than other slaves, or is their unreasoned violence the acme of revenge because of the unique extremity of the suffering which caused it? It is not clear; what is clear is that Cowper, in making the link between anarchy, spiritual enslavement, and licentiousness reiterates the Evangelical triangle founded in guilt. It is crucial in understanding Cowper's later construction of slavery to see this larger theological take on the connection between sin and slavery. It is a connection which links him with Newton.

If 'Table Talk' is a verse sermon on the dangers of Liberty, and the possibility that too much Freedom becomes a form of Slavery, then in 'The Progress of Error' Cowper extends the argument in a remarkable fashion by defining

London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 472–82. For discussion of the poem's social messages, Moira Ferguson, *Subject to Others: British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery, 1670–1834* (London: Routledge, 1992), 148–55; *Romantic Women Poets 1788–1848*, ii, ed. Andrew Ashfield (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 20–1.

<sup>118</sup> For More's proximity to Cowper on social unrest in England and its relation to Liberty/Slavery debates, see *The Black Slave Trade*, ll. 21–50. For More's complicated domestic politics and their relation to her religious thought, Angela Keene, *Women Writers and the English Nation in the 1790s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 133–58. For Cowper on More's poem, *Letters and Prose Writings*, i. 102–3.

Pleasure itself as a form of slavery. For the Evangelical sinner in this world of sin and judgment, each individual stands as the potential victim of an infinitesimal variety of forms of self-inflicted enslavement. Cowper's Pleasure principle is set out with forceful economy:

Pleasure admitted in undue degree,  
 Enslaves the will, nor leaves the judgment free.  
 'Tis not alone the grape's enticing juice  
 Unnerves the moral pow'rs, and mars their use;  
 Ambition, av'rice, and the lust of fame,  
 And woman, lovely woman, does the same.  
 The heart, surrender'd to the ruling pow'r  
 Of some ungoverned passion ev'ry hour,  
 Finds by degrees the truths that once bore sway,  
 And all their deep impressions, wear away.<sup>119</sup>

In moral terms it is a behavioural jungle out there: alcohol, sex, meanness, greed, all of them or any of them can jump out of the bushes and enslave us in an instant. Here, in essence, Cowper sets out the mechanism by which Temperance propaganda, in relation to both alcohol and prostitution, was to become linked to abolition propaganda. The slave experience is not necessarily alien, or 'other', but can take over the white English mind and body at any moment—how exciting. We all have the potential to become slaves to our passions in any place at any time. The question is if sin emerges as such a universal and comparative experience, where does this place the unique suffering of the plantation slave? Obviously somewhere not very unique, somewhere quite normal. How relative can slavery become, can the Evangelical sinner claim an analogy through sin, abuse, and the concomitant suffering it brings? If this is a possible approach, then the experience of slavery becomes comfortably comparative. The absolute suffering of the plantation slave exists as a yardstick for measuring the suffering the Evangelical experiences through sin, and therefore ceases to be absolute.

It was in the early 1760s that Cowper first explored the notion that he was enslaved by sin in two of the *Olney Hymns*.<sup>120</sup> Hymn 56 puts forward the conventional argument through a dramatic personification: 'Sin enslav'd me many years, / And led me bound and blind; / Till at length a thousand fears / Came swarming o'er my mind'. Here Cowper not only sets himself up as the bound and blind slave/victim of sin, but makes the crucial link between his mental breakdown and enslavement. He goes mad because he is the slave of sin. This enslavement, paradoxically, is seen as an act of rebellion against God, and the

<sup>119</sup> Cowper, *Poems*, i, 269.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.* 195–6.

poem ends with a perverse scenario. Cowper's only option in order to break out of his slavery to sin is to abase himself before God, and in turn to be broken/enslaved by him. He moves from one form of total servitude to another:

Thus afraid to trust his [God's] grace,  
 Long time did I rebel;  
 Till despairing of my case,  
 Down at his feet I fell:  
 Then my stubborn heart he broke,  
 And subdu'd me to his sway.<sup>121</sup>

In this world of theological double binds, the only way out of the slavery of sin is to become God's spiritual slave. Cowper takes the gentle paternalistic authoritarianism which concludes George Herbert's intriguingly entitled 'The Collar' and gives it a brutal twist. Hymn 55 examines in a more subtle light the inevitability of slavery for the Evangelical Christian, and explores the double meanings of the key Christian concepts of bondage and servility, when placed in the context not merely of Christian worship but of enslavement. In this poem Cowper sets himself out not as the slave of sin, but as the slave of something far more terrifying, his feelings of colossal inadequacy. The Evangelical obsession with the figure of the enslaved African is then in part to be read as founded upon a dubious parallelism which sees the human will as inevitably enslaved by its own desire.

It was from such a complicated philosophical interrogation of slavery in the context of a Calvinist discussion of sin that Cowper arrived at his first central discussion of Atlantic slavery in 'Charity'. Again it is crucial to note how the discussion of charity (love) is located initially in a discussion of the history of European colonization. Again the discussion of slavery is framed by a clear and very conventional Nationalist agenda. Cowper is basically celebrating enlightened English colonial policy at the expense of that old Imperial punch bag the Spanish 'Black Legend'.<sup>122</sup> The poem opens by celebrating Captain Cook's atti-

<sup>121</sup> Cowper, *Poems*, i. 195-6.

<sup>122</sup> The literatures generated by the 'Black Legend' of Spanish colonialism are vast. They begin in English with the translations of Bartolomé de Las Casas, into English under such elaborately self-explanatory titles as *Popery Truly Display'd in Bloody Colours: Or, a Faithful NARRATIVE of the Horrid and Unexampl'd Massacres, Butcheries and all manner of Cruelties, that Hell and Malice could invent, committed by the Popish Spanish Party on the Inhabitants of the West India* (London, 1689). For the subsequent development of the tradition, see: Inga Clendinnen, 'La Légende noire antihispanique', *Revue de Psychologie des Peuples*, 10 (1964), 188-223; Charles Gibson (ed.), *The Black Legend of Spain: Anti-Spanish Attitudes in the Old World and the New* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971); Jonathan Hart, 'The Black Legend: English and French Representations of Spanish Cruelty in the New World', in M. V. Dimić (ed.), *Comparative Literature Today: Theories and Practice* (Paris: Champion, 1999); Benjamin Keen, 'The Black Legend Revisited: Assumptions and Realities', *Hispanic American*

tude to the natives of the South Seas (ll. 26–7, 33–4). Benign British colonization is then set against the wicked, Catholic, and Spanish Conquistador, the argument is neatly summarized in the couplet: ‘While Cook is loved for savage lives he saved / See Cortez odious for a world enslaved!’ (ll. 39–40). Cowper demonstrated a passionate admiration for a fully blown rendition of the main themes of the demonizing black legend in his enthusiastic review of *The Vision of Columbus* by Joel Barlow.<sup>123</sup> Cowper rehearses the black legend in ‘Charity’ to provide a suitable platform to introduce the theme of commerce. Compared to Spanish colonial depredations, an idealized view of British imperial trade is conjured up whereby cultures beneficially exchange the best of all they have. This celebratory view of the British fleet, and of British mercantilism, builds to a climax with the articulation of the evangelizing mission which lies behind commerce, the bringing of the word of God to the heathen (ll. 123–36).

It is at this point that attention is directed to the slave trade, as the one major blemish upon the British economic and imperial mission. The attack on the trade opens with a sentimentalized scenario first made popular in Behn’s *Oroonoko*, the male slave torn from his beloved laments his fate on the middle passage.<sup>124</sup> Yet far from attempting to move into the psyche of the sufferer Cowper starts to back off. The process of imaginative withdrawal reaches a climax of objectification with the poet’s transformation of the ‘sable warrior’ into beast:

The sable warrior, frantic with regret  
Of her he loves, and never can forget  
.  
.  
.  
Depriv’d of her and freedom at a blow,  
What has he left that he can yet forego?  
Yes, to deep sadness sullenly resign’d,  
He feels his body’s bondage in his mind,  
Puts off his gen’rous nature, and to suit  
His manners with his fate, puts on the brute  
(ll. 145–54)

In attempting to describe the processes of psychological brutalization within the slave system, Cowper makes the final step of turning the victim into a brute. These lines inaugurate a complicated train of animal imagery within the poem,

*Historical Review*, 49 (1969), 703–19; William S. Maltby, *The Black Legend in England* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1971).

<sup>123</sup> The full review, including extended extracts describing Spanish colonial depredations is quoted, Cowper, *Prose*, iii. 133 ff.

<sup>124</sup> Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko and Other Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1688] 1994), 37.



which is in danger of legitimating the animalizing vocabularies which racist discourse attached to the slave:

Nature imprints upon what'er we see  
 That has a heart and life in it, be free;  
 The beasts are chartered—neither age nor force  
 Can quell the love of freedom in a horse:  
 He breaks the cord that held him at the race,  
 And conscious of an unencumber'd back,  
 Snuffs up the morning air, forgets the rein,  
 Loose fly his forelock and his ample mane,  
 Responsive to the distant neigh he neighs,  
 Nor stops, till overleaping all delays,  
 He finds the pasture where his fellows graze.

(ll. 169–179)

In these lines while Cowper is arguing in abstract terms that all creatures are by Nature free, his liberated horse appears to enjoy a spirited and instinctual love of freedom which the black man who 'feels his body's bondage in his mind' is incapable of. The black slave is placed below the animal creation in terms of the ability to enjoy freedom.

As the poem progresses Cowper finds different ways of talking about enslavement coming from a series of forces outside England. In the following emancipation vignette the slave is presented as going through a bizarre series of states involving slavery, emancipation, and immediate yet voluntary re-enslavement to Christianity and the former master:

Oh 'tis a godlike privilege to save,  
 And he that scorns it is himself a slave.—  
 Inform his mind, one flash of heav'nly day  
 Would heal his heart and melt his chains away;  
 'Beauty for ashes' is a gift indeed,  
 And slaves, by truth enlarg'd, are doubly freed:  
 Then would he say, submissive at thy feet,  
 While gratitude and love made service sweet,  
 My dear deliv'rer out of hopeless night,  
 Whose bounty bought me but to give me light,  
 I was a bondsman on my native plain,  
 Sin forg'd and ignorance made fast the chain;  
 Thy lips have shed instruction as the dew,  
 Taught me what path to shun, and what pursue;  
 Farewell my former joys! I sigh no more  
 For Africa's once lov'd, benighted shore,

Serving a benefactor I am free,  
 At my best home if not exiled from thee.

(ll. 226–43)

The argument is as follows: first, the slave owner is warned that he will become a slave himself if he does not grant the slave freedom. Then the slave is given freedom by the slave owner, a gift that is his ‘godlike privilege’. Second, s/he expresses gratitude by immediately entering a state of voluntary servitude as a gesture of gratitude, much as Friday does on being saved in *Robinson Crusoe*.<sup>125</sup> Yet the slave’s gratitude is not for the gift of liberty in the abstract but for the gift of Christianity which is inevitably tied to it. The slave then goes into a paean which incorporates yet another metaphor of enslavement. Here it is the sin and ignorance of African society which first enslaved the African consciousness, not European slave trading. With the coming of Christian conversion the slave feels ‘free’ to reject the entire African cultural inheritance. In that strange line ‘Africa’s once lov’d benighted shore’ the Dark Continent is stamped as anathema to a Christian, though Black African, soul. The slave ends by reiterating his/her re-entry into a voluntary state of servitude to the old master, ‘Serving a benefactor I am free’, and ends by emphasizing the new state of dependence on the master. The slave is completely packaged and silenced within the nexus of passivity and complicity demanded by the Evangelical agenda. In this fantastic reversal enslavement within the plantation system of the sugar industry is miraculously and voluntarily supplanted by slavery not merely to God, but to God’s representative the ex-slave owner.

This extraordinary catch-22 for the liberated slave should be seen in the wider context of the poem’s argument that we are all the slaves of Christ because of his sacrifice for us. African slavery thus emerges as an extraneous element within the much larger eschatological master–slave dialectic which structures the whole. The harrowing of hell, carried out by Christ in human form is seen as the triumph of Christ as ‘captive’ over fallen man ‘captive’ to his sin:

To look at Him, who form’d us and redeem’d,  
 So glorious now, though once so disesteem’d,  
 To see a God stretch forth his human hand,  
 T’uphold the boundless scenes of his command,  
 To recollect that in a form like ours,  
 He bruised beneath his feet th’infernal pow’rs,  
 Captivity led captive, rose to claim  
 The wreath he won so dearly in our name

(ll. 579–86)

<sup>125</sup> See pp. 415–18 below.

When Cowper came to write 'The Time Piece', Book II of *The Task*, his final treatment of slavery before the explicit propaganda poems of his abolition phase, he maintained the larger structural concerns which are evident in 'Charity'. Again the slave and slavery are relevant not primarily in and of themselves but as an example of a National danger and a National sin. It is again a completely orthodox imperially driven nationalist agenda which leads the discussion. Having inveighed against all forms of oppression, wrong, and outrage, Cowper introduces the idea that racial difference can justify slavery. Again, however, the discussion inevitably moves towards bestial comparison, the slave emerging once more as below the animal:

He finds his fellow guilty of a skin  
 Not colour'd like his own, and having pow'r  
 T'inforce the wrong, for such a worthy cause  
 Dooms and devotes him as his lawful prey

And worse than all, and most to be deplored  
 As human nature's broadest, foulest blot,  
 Chains him, and tasks him, and exacts his sweat  
 With stripes, that mercy with a bleeding heart  
 Weeps when she sees inflicted on a beast.

(ll. 12–25)

As the personification of Mercy weeps, Cowper cranks up the diction and turns what was an attack on British domination of the slave trade into an attack on plantation slaveholders and a celebration of the virtues of traditional English liberty:

We have no slaves at home.—Then why abroad?  
 And they themselves once ferried o'er the wave  
 That parts us, are emancipate and loos'd.  
 Slaves cannot breathe in England; if their lungs  
 Receive our air, that moment they are free,  
 They touch our country and their shackles fall.  
 That's noble, and bespeaks a nation proud  
 And jealous of the blessing. Spread it then,  
 And let it circulate through every vein  
 Of all your empire.

(ll. 37–46)

In moral terms this move pre-empts the justificatory mechanism of the British abolition movement. Slavery is seen as something vaguely connected to

England commercially but as physically a thing apart. The argument is based on the false premiss, 'We have no slaves in England.' In fact there were a lot of slaves in England, probably about ten thousand, and there were slave auctions held in Liverpool, Bristol, and London.<sup>126</sup> The legal situation over whether a slave owner gave up his property rights over a slave if he brought him or her from the Caribbean to mainland Britain were immensely complicated and unclear.<sup>127</sup> Yet Cowper wants to create an absolute divide between 'us' and 'them', the foreign colony which is 'abroad', other, and the home land, with its magical emancipatory air and earth: air which cannot physically be inhaled by the slave and earth which springs open shackles. Cowper's belief that abolition was essential to maintain the National image ran very deep. If one wishes to see the extent to which he played abolition off against his celebratory Nationalist agenda, it is useful to remember the following. Once the abolitionists had failed to secure the bill to abolish the slave trade in Parliament, Cowper wrote several letters in which he argued that it would be better not to attempt abolition than to attempt it and not succeed. He argued in very fulsome terms that it would be better for the slave trade to continue uncontested than that the National 'honour' be tarnished by England being *seen* to fail in its attempted abolition.<sup>128</sup>

Looking at all this evidence Cowper's abolition propaganda does not emerge as politically or racially straightforward. When Cowper finally came to treat slavery head on in the abolition verse he wrote for popular circulation across England in the late 1780s, he had already worked through a variety of strategies for thinking about the subject. As we have seen, slavery related to several larger political and religious frameworks of thought. Slavery within the context of faith related to ideas concerning the inevitability of human enslavement to sin, and the possibility of escape through voluntary 'service' to Christ. Politically slavery related to a larger imperial history in which the Spanish stood as an ultimately bad example, and in which Britain's current involvement in the trade stood as a blot on the National conscience. Yet what Cowper's poetry had not done up to this point was to attempt give the Atlantic slave a voice, or to attempt to address the question of the trauma which the slave trade generated for Africans.

The abolition verse of Cowper emerges as formally the most ambitious, intellectually the most thorough, satirically the most tough, and aesthetically the richest body of work by an English poet on the subject of slavery. Cowper's

<sup>126</sup> Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1984), 4–10, 58–64; Gretchen Gerzina, *Black England: Life before Emancipation* (London: John Murray, 1995), 10–16, 133–60.

<sup>127</sup> The legal situation is summarized in Fryer, *Staying Power*, 113–30.

<sup>128</sup> Cowper, *Letters*, iii. 150.

achievement as abolition's most subtle rhetorician deserves serious attention. As we have seen Cowper could condense the ethical essence of abolition argument into the majestic blank verse of *The Task*, or conduct debates over entire paragraphs of heroic couplets in 'Charity', with an intellectual authority which tempts comparison with Dryden. When he came to write for the society for effecting the abolition of slavery he had a different agenda. He was asked to turn out ballads with genuine popular appeal. Thomas Clarkson noted:

circumstances occurred to keep up a hatred of the trade among the people in this interval, which trivial as they were ought not to be forgotten. The amiable poet Cowper had frequently made the Slave-trade the subject of his contemplation. He had already severely condemned it in his valuable poem *The Task*. But now he had written three little fugitive pieces on it. Of these the most impressive was that, which he called *The Negro's Complaint* . . . This little piece Cowper presented in manuscript to some of his friends in London; and these conceiving it to contain a powerful appeal in behalf of the injured African, joined in printing it. Having ordered it on the finest hot-pressed paper, and folded it up in a small and neat form, they gave it the printed title of 'A Subject for Conversation at the Tea Table'. After this, they sent many thousand copies of it in franks into the country. From one it spread to another till it travelled almost over the whole island. Falling at length into the hands of a musician, it was set to music; and it then found its way into the streets both of the metropolis and of the country where it was sung as a ballad; and where it gave a plain account of the subject, with an appropriate feeling to those who heard it.<sup>129</sup>

The impact of Cowper's abolition writing was lasting here and in America; Cowper was more frequently reprinted by American abolitionists than any other poet with the exception of Wordsworth, and his significance for American abolition verse was quite literally emblemized when his anti-slavery allegory, 'The Morning Dream', was reprinted together with an emblematic engraving as frontispiece and preface to the first collected edition of Whittier's anti-slavery verse.<sup>130</sup>

'The Morning Dream' is a significant poem of Cowper's to have alighted on as the basis for an emblematic illustration of abolition aims. It is, to put it mildly, eccentric to the main body of Cowper's abolition verse. Cowper's impact as a propagandist for the abolition cause lay in his range. The poems could be aggressively confrontational and sickeningly sarcastic. They attacked the violence of slaveholders' and traders' practices through a variety of means

<sup>129</sup> Thomas Clarkson, *History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament*, 2 vols. (London, 1808) i. 188–92. For Cowper as propagandist, see Wood, 'Free Publishing and British Abolition Propaganda', 67–93.

<sup>130</sup> John Greenleaf Whittier, *Poems Written during the Progress of the Abolition Question in the United States* (Boston, 1837), frontispiece.

ranging from the ironic satiric monologue of 'Sweet Meat Has Sour Sauce' to the unanswerable sarcasm of a poem such as 'Epigram (to purify their wine)' ('printed in the *Northampton Mercury*') which is so disconcertingly late Augustan in the urbanity of its social tone. Cowper also launched satiric attacks on the hypocrisy of half-hearted British abolitionists at home, most notoriously in *Pity for Poor Africans*. 'The Morning Dream' stands apart from such angry and accusatory compositions. It is a highly stylized and patriotic celebration of abolition, that in many ways expands the emancipation moment first treated in 'Charity'.<sup>131</sup>

The poem envisions emancipation in the British sugar colonies, but does so in terms of a highly sanitized allegory, the abstract, idealizing, and impersonal nature of which configures the basic rules for the prints, medals, paintings, and panegyrics which actually accompanied British celebrations of slave emancipation in the 1830s. This poem might be construed as a versified master plan for what was to become the high Victorian reinvention of Britain's historic commitment to the slave trade and to plantation slavery in the Caribbean. The poem deals with this history in two parts. The first stage is to celebrate abolition of the slave trade by presenting a new version of the middle passage. The narrative machinery of the poem constitutes a debased appropriation of the conventions of the medieval dream vision in which divine and sexual love are allegorically fused. Here the dreamer at dawn, on a spring day, envisions a sea voyage in which the middle passage is repeated but reinvented. This boat brings liberation instead of bondage and anticipates that standard element of *Boy's Own* mythology namely Britain's new role as scourge of the slave traders through its anti-slavery patrols. The allegorical female on board the vessel of liberation is Britannia. The last four lines of the second stanza show her literally ruling the waves. Cowper brings a new emphasis to the idea that the sun never sets on the British Empire, for Britannia is the sun. This metaphor presents British naval dominion as enforcing the suppression of the slave trade, an idea which became one of the foundation stones for the Victorian celebrations of British abolition.<sup>132</sup>

The second stage of mythical renewal takes up the last three stanzas of the poem and presents the moment of emancipation in the slave colonies. Cowper provides an uplifting and most accessible account of the demise of slavery. The slave power is personified as 'Oppression', an emblem of wickedness carrying the identifying badge of the scourge. It is inhuman, socially outcast, and instantly destroyed by a mere viewing of Britannic abolition in its full effulgence.

<sup>131</sup> For a brief reading of Cowper's anti-slavery verse as an ironic commentary on his own suffering, see King, *Cowper*, 183-4.

<sup>132</sup> Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade: The History of the Atlantic Slave Trade 1440-1870* (London: Picador, 1997), 656-710.

The death results in a spontaneous celebration by the slaves. They are present as a euphoric body and give vent to 'shouts that extended the sky, from thousands with rapture inspired'. This is an orchestrated crowd effect which goes off like a firework to mark the emancipation jubilee; the slaves express a delight which is paradoxically passive. They are not politically enabled by emancipation but perform the role of extras at Britain's moment of religious and moral cleansing. Cowper provides a coherent mythological interpretation of abolition, but more crucially a way of forgetting slavery in the staged euphoria celebrating its demise. It is not so much in what it celebrates, but in what it represses, that the power of this myth lies. Cowper's vision performs, with an uncanny proleptic accuracy, the narrative patterns which were to mark the actual passage of emancipation in England 1832. These patterns re-emerge in emancipation celebrations in America at the conclusion of the Civil War and in Brazil with the passage of the Golden Law of 1888.<sup>133</sup>

'The Morning Dream' could hardly be more hands off and idealizing in its treatment of the suffering brought about by slavery but stands in stark contrast to the other slavery verse Cowper composed in the late 1780s. Cowper tries several approaches to the description of suffering. Formally the boldest and certainly the most dramatic is 'Sweet Meat Has Sour Sauce or the Slave Trader in the Dumps'. In this poem Cowper takes the step of speaking out ironically in the assumed voice of a slave captain. The poem as a description of white depravity contrives to possess an ironic freedom which not only enables, but in fact demands, the most brutalized and objectified descriptions of the black slave. What we are given is the way the abolitionist liked to see the slave trader seeing his slaves. In its extremity, vulgarity, cruelty, and stupidity, this version of the slave trader's views represents an abolition ideal, or anti-ideal. A picture of perfect cynicism and depravity which, however, shares with the abolitionist descriptive paradigms an inability to see the slave as anything but the site for a white moral contest:

When a Negro his head from his victuals withdraws,  
 And clenches his teeth and thrusts out his paws,  
 Here's a notable engine to open his jaws,  
   Which nobody, &c.

Thus going to market we kindly prepare  
 A pretty black cargo of African ware,  
 For what they must meet with when they get there,  
   Which nobody, &c.

<sup>133</sup> For the emancipation rhetorics, see David Brion Davis, *The Emancipation Moment* (Fortenbaugh Memorial Lecture, 1983).

'Twould do your heart good to see 'em below,  
 Lie flat on their backs all the way as we go,  
 Like sprats on a gridiron, scores in a row,  
 Which nobody, &c.<sup>134</sup>

Here a fictional narrator argues that the torture of the blacks, their force feeding, and the treatment of them as less than human on the middle passage is a positive kindness because it strips the slaves of their humanity, a necessary feat if they are to continue to live within white New World slave societies after their arrival. The climactic reduction of the slaves as they are compared not even to live animals but dead ones, like fish neatly packed about to be grilled, has a graphic precision which suddenly aligns it with the notorious 'Plan of the Slave Ship Brookes'. The slave cargo is finally to be admired as an exhibition, an art exhibition, of efficient packaging. The ensuing stanza precisely describes the stowage of the slaves as an art, 'But ah! if in vain I have studied an art, / So gainful to me'. Cowper as devil's advocate, his slave trader as devil, hit on one essential quality of the 'Plan', its descriptive efficiency. We should ask what perception of black-slave or black-African societies this poem has. The same question might be asked of Cowper's other truly bitter anti-slavery satire, the little 'Epigram' printed in the *Northampton Mercury*:

To purify their wine some people bleed  
 A *Lamb* into the barrel, and succeed;  
 No Nostrum, Planters say, is half so good  
 To make fine sugar, as a *Negro's* blood.  
 Now lambs and negroes both are harmless things,  
 And thence, perhaps, this wondr'ous Virtue springs,  
 'Tis in the blood of Innocence alone—  
 Good cause why Planters never try their own.<sup>135</sup>

It is certainly a tight little joke at the fictional planter's expense, but the slave is again excluded, and again animalized. It is true, in terms of biblical symbolism, the black is being compared to Christ in being compared to a lamb, and for Cowper there could be no more absolute gesture of human elevation. The problem lies with that hook line 'Now lambs and negroes both are harmless things'. African slave cargoes were not, as Newton's constant terror of slave insurrection indicated, harmless, neither were they 'things' in their own eyes, even if they were in the eyes of the crew. It is, however, a central and virtually unbroken tenet of abolition thought that blacks must be portrayed as harmless and passive victims if they are to merit our pity. Again Cowper articulates with great power and economy a central assumption regarding race and power which

<sup>134</sup> Cowper, *Poems*, iii. 15–16.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.* 183.



underpinned abolition thought. The planter can only be utterly demonized if the slave is represented as totally innocent and incapable of protecting him/herself. Cowper's abolition verse is finally characterized by a restless desperation. He seeks to play every role, from patriarchal abolition liberator, to vicious slave captain, to tortured slave, to urbane social commentator. Yet for all the appropriative experiments, the slave as a psychological entity is finally little more than an open playground.

Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography in John Gabriel  
Stedman's *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition  
Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*

Slavery in some of its workings is too dreadful for the purposes of art. A work which would present it strictly as it is would be a work which could not be read.<sup>1</sup>

(Stowe, *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*)

Through aesthetic principles or stylisation . . . the unimaginable still appears as if it had some ulterior purpose. It is transfigured and stripped of some of its horror, and with this injustice is already done to the victims.

(Theodore Adorno, quoted *Writing and the Holocaust*, 179)

### Slavery and Pornography: Defining Terms for a Taboo

Plantation pornography is now a huge business and has infiltrated literature, fine art, popular publishing, film video, and BDSM cultures on the Web.<sup>2</sup> There are plantation pornographies devoted to each of the major Atlantic slave colonies. Edgar Mittelholzer's *Kaywana* trilogy attempted to make a pornographic epic out of Dutch slavery in Guyana; it sold internationally in millions. Jamaica, Cuba, Haiti, and Brazil have all been the settings for formulaic exploitation, ranging from hard-core bondage materials to plantation erotica.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (London 1853), 1.

<sup>2</sup> There is no official bibliography of the pornography of Atlantic slavery. BDSM is defined as 'Bondage and Discipline, Domination and Submission, Sadism and Masochism. Catchall term used in North America to lump together those perverts who play with pain and those who don't'. For the ubiquity of slavery pornography simply type 'slavery, bondage, torture' into any web search engine. *Who Is & What Is II*, <http://www.freespeech.org/sassybeobdsm/who2.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Edgar Mittelholzer, *Children of Kaywana, Kaywana Stock, Kaywana Blood* (London: New English Library, 1968). The trilogy first appeared in English in 1952, and is still in print. It has been translated

Lance Horner and Kyle Onstott, who wrote *Mandingo*, still dominate the soft-core area of the field having produced well over twenty novels, many of which remain perennially in print. *Mandingo* was a global publishing success and was consequently made into a film in 1975, and spawned a series of imitations including *Drum* in 1976. Both films and books have blatantly pornographic elements which play on erotic race stereotypes. The influence of *Mandingo* continues to seep out into pornographic and bondage subcultures. There are now several international 'Mandingo' clubs which cater for pornographic fantasies involving white women and black 'slave' males, and white men and black 'slave' females. The 'Southern California Mandingo Club' is a hard-core website, showing explicit materials involving black men and white women fixated on the erotics of the so-called 'Mandingo' slave relation fantasy. The 'Mandingo Club' advertises itself as for the 'Kings and Queens of interracial swinging'.

In the last two decades radical African-American visual artists have turned their attention to this material, and the stereotypes it feeds off. There have been a number of attempts to subvert slave pornography through visual parody.<sup>4</sup> The pornographic yet nostalgic imagery of Kara Walker's silhouette art lies at the centre of contemporary debates in the African-American literary and artistic community. Furious argument over whether Walker challenges or enforces the staples of plantation and blaxploitation pornography climaxed in the Harvard University Symposium set up in 1998 by Henry Louis Gates. The debate continues.<sup>5</sup>

There has, however, been no systematic investigation of plantation pornography as a genre. It is important to understand why plantation pornography developed, and how it was produced and received, because it remains a dangerous aspect of the continuing European and American mis-presentation

into every major language and has sold millions of copies. Haiti and Jamaica also constitute favourite sites, see Lance Horner and Kyle Onstott, *The Black Sun* (London: Pan, 1968); Alston Anderson, *The Slave* (London: Nel, 1965); Harold Underhill, *Jamaica White* (London: Pan, 1968). Voodoo is also frequently fed into the pornographic package: a spectacularly bad example is Leo Callan, *Black Sapphire* (London: New English Library, 1980). Proof that soft-core plantation porn is totally acceptable is George MacDonald Fraser's, *Flash For Freedom* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1989).

<sup>4</sup> For an attempt to subvert and critique the covers of plantation novels, see Donald Rodney's collages 'Mandingo' and 'Black Sapphire' in *Mirage Enigmas of Race, Difference and Desire* (Arts Council of England and British Film Institute, 1995), 51-2. For a pungent assessment of the limitations of contemporary black art which tries to overturn the conventions of plantation pornography through parody, see 'Sistahspace', *Watermelon and Aunt Jemima: SATIRE OR RACISM? Young African-American artists' use of stereotypes*, <http://sistahspace.com/backdoor/ajsatire.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Walker's major mural cycles are *Gone: An Historical Romance of Civil War As It Occurred between the Dusky Thighs of a Young Negress and her Heart* (1994), 21 paper silhouettes; *The End of Uncle Tom* (1995); Walker has also produced a series of Hard Ground etchings, most powerfully, *The Means to an End: A Shadow Drama in Five Acts* (1995). Walker has massive representation on the Web, for an extensive collection of polemical materials surrounding her and her work, see 'Kara Walker Articles and Review Page', [http://www.proarte.com/artists/kara\\_walker/kwalkerrev.htm](http://www.proarte.com/artists/kara_walker/kwalkerrev.htm).

of slavery. The mainstream film industry is capable of absorbing and then reconstituting the memory of slavery in damaging ways. For example John Duigan's grotesque 1993 filmic adaptation of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* shows how crude and effective the sexual stereotyping of the plantation can be.<sup>6</sup> Rhys worked for thirty years to produce her delicate and profoundly responsible analysis of the psychopathology which Atlantic slavery induced within Creole and white English consciousness. Duigan and the film industry abused her inheritance. Yet the crucial point to hold onto is that Duigan represents merely the devolved final stage in a centuries long process. The thought and languages which enable Duigan's film, or the whole *Mandingo* phenomenon out of which it grows, were firmly implanted in the European cultural imagination by the end of the eighteenth century. They have proved remarkably resilient, and remarkably unstudied.

Pornography focused on slave imagery flourished in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and was produced as 'high art' by people for whom erotic imagery was central. Both inside and outside the realms of 'high art' a lot of this material was disseminated ostensibly as anti-slavery propaganda, and as such has never been critically constructed or read as pornography.<sup>7</sup> A sustained exploration of how pornography fed into, and fed off, slavery has never been attempted. There are many factors which have enforced the taboo over approaching the relationship between slavery and pornography in American and European cultures. First, there is the problem of suitable qualification. Experts on Atlantic slavery and the cultures of abolition seem to know, and to want to know, very little about pornography and the development of the pornographic industries in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Historians of pornography, who until the 1980s were not openly embraced within the intellectual communities of Europe and America, have not turned to a serious study of Atlantic slavery.<sup>8</sup> Indeed given the recent proliferation of what

<sup>6</sup> Rita Kempley, *Washington Post*, 8 May 1993, accurately stated: '*Wide Sargasso Sea* is really just coffee table pornography with sound effects.' The film video is a standard in porn sites; it is top of the list in 'The Softer Side of Porn' site on <http://www.erotica-readers.com>.

<sup>7</sup> The connections between abolition publicity and the emergent European pornographic industries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries constitute a significant and total silence across the relevant academic disciplines. Some aspects of this huge topic are discussed in Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 19, 44-5, 53-4, 189-90, 236-9, 261-3, 273-4, 273; see also Louis Fernando Henriques, *Prostitution and Society*, ii. *Prostitution in Europe and the New World* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1963); Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 21-4, 132-80. For bondage, pornography, and the representation of the slave body in high art, see Srinivas Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans: Colonialism and Agency, 1688-1804* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 34-8.

<sup>8</sup> Standard texts on late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century pornography are Stephen Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth Century England* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1966); Ronald Pearsall, *The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian*

might be seen as a new cultural history of pornography, focused on the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the black body is massively conspicuous by its absence.<sup>9</sup>

Lynn Hunt, one of the most influential of the new cultural historians charting the evolution of the pornographic in the period 1750–1850, sees pornography as a site of cultural contestation.<sup>10</sup> The emergence of a pornographic industry, and of a pornographic counter canon, is seen as contingent upon the shifting culture wars between oppressors/censors and pornographers/free thinkers. Hunt's big contribution is to emphasize some ways in which pornography is culturally relative. She rightly insists that the Western pornographic industries emerged when they did, and took the forms they did, partly because of the economic and political contexts of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Simply put the argument boils down to the assertion that the Enlightenment and the French Revolution created intellectual and political pressures which ensured that Western pornography developed in certain ways.<sup>11</sup> Yet there are some disconcerting absences in this work, of which the black body is one of the most troubling.

Hunt's introduction to the highly influential collection of essays *The Invention of Pornography* is a methodical account of the formation of a pornographic canon within eighteenth-century France and England. Yet as I read it, a question kept recurring to me: what of the pornography focused on the slave body that went uncontested and unrepressed? This is pornography which, unlike the explicitly politicized pornographies directed against the clergy or aristocracy in the fallout from the French Revolution, had no clear basis in satire. It is also pornography that has never been called pornography, which is not to say that it has not been *seen* or enjoyed as pornography. So where are the myriad texts pornographically displaying the slave body from 1750 to 1850 to be fitted in? They certainly do not fit the historical space which Hunt creates with the statement: 'Until the end of the 1790s, explicit sexual description almost always had explicitly subversive qualities. At the end of the 1790s, pornography began to

*Sexuality* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969); Michael Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> This absence is evident in the two landmark collections of essays on the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century origins and political functioning of pornography, Lynn Hunt (ed.), *Eroticism and the Body Politic* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991) and Lynn Hunt (ed.), *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500–1800* (New York: Zone Books, 1993).

<sup>10</sup> Lynn Hunt, 'Introduction: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500–1800', in Hunt (ed.), *Invention*, 9–45.

<sup>11</sup> The Enlightenment effect on the development of pornography is summarized in Lynn Hunt, 'Introduction', in Hunt (ed.), *Invention*, 30–5; for the French Revolution, see 301–39. See also Vivian Cameron, 'Political Exposures: Sexuality and Caricature in the French Revolution', in Hunt (ed.), *Eroticism and the Body Politic*, 90–108.

lose its political connotations, and became instead a commercial, “hard core” business.<sup>12</sup> It is the very invisibility of plantation and slave pornographies to the societies, that produced them, and to subsequent Western audiences, which must be scrutinized. What does it mean that detailed pornographic accounts of child torture and sexual abuse (an area of pornography with which *The Invention of Pornography* also refuses to deal) are very rare in eighteenth-century pornography generally yet frequently occur both in Sade’s work and in abolition print and pamphlet literature? The recent historiography of eighteenth-century pornography uncovers the power and class influences which went into setting up definitional frameworks for the pornographic. Yet the method has its dangers. Reconstructing lists of pornographic texts by scrutinizing the records of the censors, and then restricting the cultural analysis of the pornographic to those texts, is to remember the pornographic through the prescriptions of censorship.<sup>13</sup> The purpose of such forensic categorization is to establish what the official censors in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century saw as pornographic. The limitation of this work is that it is bound by those very frameworks of censorship that it purportedly critiques. The direct consequences of such an approach can be to avoid whole areas of pornography on the grounds that such areas were not seen as pornography by the society which produced them. This has particularly serious implications for the representation of the colonial body. Because eighteenth-century cultural production objectified or commodified the slave body, and, in terms of pornographic codification, officially refused the slave body the status of pornographic victim, does that mean that we should continue to follow suit? The desire to claim historical responsibility has its dangers and can easily shade into a closed form of memorial mimicry. Depictions of the black body, African or Caribbean, appear to have been placed in representational contexts (travel literature, anthropological treatise, abolition propaganda) which are non-pornographic within the definitions of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>14</sup> Contemporary scholarship appears reluctant to move the black body out of these categories. Consequently, the pornographies of slavery remain invisible to the new historians of pornography intent to give us an ‘authentic version’ of the late eighteenth-century pornographic imagination.

It is a fact that the black body remains a significant absence within the new cultural history of pornography. It is highly significant that *The Invention of Pornography* contains no reference to slavery, abolition, or the black body; the

<sup>12</sup> Hunt (ed.), *Invention*, 42.

<sup>13</sup> See particularly, *ibid.* 14–45.

<sup>14</sup> For stunningly original analysis of the difficulties and extreme dangers of defining ‘the pornographic’ within the context of the Enlightenment, see Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (London: Harper Collins, 1996), 85–115.

plates reproduced throughout this book similarly write the black body, male and female, child, adolescent, and adult, out of pornographic history. This is remarkable given the fact that much of the recent work on the origins of pornography focuses on the late eighteenth century, precisely the time when abolition propaganda in England and France inaugurated the insertion of slave torture as a pornographic category across the whole range of print culture. It is now possible to see the extent to which late eighteenth-century English culture was producing mainstream publications depicting the black body in pornographic ways. The motive behind the work is not simply to 'out', as pornographic, works that have hitherto been considered 'respectable'. Of deeper significance is the attempt to explain why it was, and why it has remained, so difficult for the West to see what it has done to the black body. I want to think about the enabling processes behind a paradox. The paradox lies in the fact that the slave body has been categorically excluded from debates on the emergence of the pornographic industry in the late eighteenth century, while it has simultaneously formed the basis for the production of an elaborate, and archivally very real, pornography of slavery.

In analysing the connections between slavery and pornography, it is important to take seriously the problem of defining pornography. Much contemporary theory starts from a premiss of the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of producing any working definition of pornography. This difficulty stands in stark contrast to the serene confidence, that runs throughout *The Invention of Pornography*. The historical recovery of eighteenth-century definitions of pornography, when placed against the anxiety of current pornographic theory, might be seen to embody a certain intellectual closure, or even complacency. By far the most level-headed study of pornography as a contemporary cultural phenomenon is Laura Kipnis's *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America*. Kipnis is fully aware of the immense difficulties involved in arriving at any workable definition of what pornography is. She is also concerned to think about why pornography exists, and what its limits are, and although she does not move on to talk about slavery directly she has vital insights. Kipnis instructs, 'Pornography . . . is a genre devoted to fantasy, and its fantasies traverse a range of motifs beyond the strictly sexual.' She also states that pornography 'gets appropriated as a form of speech and deployed around subjects and issues that are the most "unspeakable", the most buried, but also the most politically and culturally significant'. Reading Stedman's *Narrative* as pornography reveals Atlantic slavery, and the abuses it generated, to be just such an unspeakable and buried, yet culturally significant, appropriation.<sup>15</sup>

There is a lot of abolition propaganda, both written and in the form of single-sheet prints and oil paintings, which treats the slave body (any gender, any age)

<sup>15</sup> Laura Kipnis, *Bound and Gagged* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), p. viii.

as punishment object or fetish in directly exploitative and eroticized ways which are blatantly pornographic.<sup>16</sup> What is pornography? Pornography is difficult to define, and no single definition is watertight. Here are three definitions which are helpful for the purposes of this discussion. One: A depiction with sexual elements

in which there is clear force, or an unequal power that spells coercion. It may be very blatant, with weapons of torture or bondage, wounds and bruises, some clear humiliation . . . It may be much more subtle: a physical attitude of conqueror and victim, the use of race or class difference to imply the same thing, perhaps a very unequal nudity, with one person exposed and vulnerable while the other is clothed. In either case there is no sense of equal choice or equal power . . . pornography is about power and sex-as-weapon . . . its message is violence, dominance or conquest.<sup>17</sup>

Two: pornography is present where the victim is represented (i) as a dehumanized sexual object, thing, or commodity; (ii) as a sexual object which enjoys pain or humiliation; (iii) as a sexual object cut up, or mutilated or physically hurt; (iv) where the victim is depicted in postures of sexual submission or sexual servility, including inviting penetration; (v) body parts are exhibited such that the victim is reduced to those parts; (vi) the victim is shown penetrated by objects or animals; (vii) where the victim is shown in scenarios of degradation, injury, torture, shown as filthy or inferior, bleeding, bruised, or hurt in a context that make these conditions sexual.<sup>18</sup> Three: ‘pornography is material that explicitly represents or describes degrading or abusive sexual behavior *so as to endorse and/or recommend the behaviour as described*.’<sup>19</sup> Taking these definitions as a benchmark the following discussion suggests ways in which it might now be possible to see the extent to which late eighteenth-century English culture was producing mainstream publications depicting the black body in pornographic ways.

### Stedman’s *Narrative* as a Test Case

Is the eroticization and fetishization of bondage within the literatures of slavery necessarily pornographic? In the following extended analysis Stedman’s

<sup>16</sup> Wood, *Blind Memory*, 43–5, 152–71, 260–3.

<sup>17</sup> Gloria Steinem, ‘Erotica and Pornography: A Clear and Present Difference’, in Laura Lederer (ed.), *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography* (London: Bantam, 1982), 23. For a survey of definitions of pornography past and present, see Cheris Kramarae and Paula S. Treichler, *A Feminist Dictionary* (London and Boston: Pandora Press, 1985), 344–8.

<sup>18</sup> Adapted from the definition in Andrea Dworkin and Catherine A. MacKinnon (eds.), *Pornography and Civil Rights: A New Day for Women’s Equality* (Minneapolis: Organizing against Pornography, 1988), 138–9.

<sup>19</sup> H. E. Longino, ‘Pornography, Oppression, and Freedom: A Closer Look’, in Lederer (ed.), *Take Back the Night*, 29.



*Narrative* is used to provide some ways of addressing this difficult question.<sup>20</sup> This text, and the copperplate engravings, which accompany the words, constitute an intriguing test case. The *Narrative* exists on the edge, an edge that cuts across several areas of publishing including abolition polemic, pro-slavery discourse, exotic travelogue, sentimental novella, Romance, *bildungsroman*, and pornography. As such it is a useful text with which to question the practice of defining pornography within isolated historical contexts.

Stedman's book and its engravings, particularly those by William Blake and Francesco Bartolozzi, raise tricky questions relating to the trans-historical nature of aesthetics, torture, the fetish, and pornography. The images which I am going to subject to some close readings are particularly charged in the present context because they stand in a complicated relation to what the late eighteenth-century art market constructed as, and to what many art historians still construct as, 'high art' categories. Academic oil painting and sculpture represented the acme of 'high art', and copperplate engraving existed outside and below these categories and was seen more as an artisanal skill than an art. Yet both Blake and Bartolozzi, the two engravers who made all the images in the following analysis, constitute special cases in terms of their relationship to the high art market, and to high art tradition and stylistics. Blake, of course, was like no other engraver before or after him. Blake cannot now easily be seen, even in his jobbing commercial work, as an artisan engraver. He eschewed oil painting with a wonderfully eccentric set of arguments, and consequently ruled himself out of the academic painting market. Yet he was of course a painter in watercolour and used his own peculiar form of tempera. His engravings, and even in the context of the Stedman pieces he produced works of creative transposition, and the formal vocabulary which Blake used, are developed out of what are now considered to be canonic sites of high art. These include medieval cathedral tomb sculpture, the work of Michaelangelo (in all media), and the paintings of Raphael (which Blake would only have seen in the form of engraved reproductions). Consequently, Blake's Stedman engravings are fine prints, produced by a practising painter whose mind was deeply saturated in canonic Western art and literature. Bartolozzi's relation to high art is just as complicated as Blake's. Bartolozzi studied history painting for three years at the Florentine Academy, under the tutelage of Ignazio Hugford.

<sup>20</sup> Stedman's text now exists in two distinct forms the first is *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam: Transcribed for the First Time from the Original 1790 Manuscript* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988). This is the recently edited text of Stedman's original fair copy manuscript. It is this text which forms the basis of the following analysis. It is referred to as Stedman, 1790. The second is *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*, 2 vols. (London: J. Johnson, 1796). This is referred to as Stedman, 1796. There is also a further and earlier account of Stedman's time in Surinam, *The Journal of John Gabriel Stedman, 1744–1797: Soldier and Author, Including an Authentic Account of his Expedition to Surinam in 1772*, ed. Stanbury Thompson (London: Mitre Press, 1962). It is referred to as Stedman, 1962.

Having trained primarily as a painter, it was only after his first trip to Rome that he became articulated to a historical engraver in Venice at the age of 18. Bartolozzi continued throughout his career to pursue painting, although the sensational success of his stipple prints left him little time. Bartolozzi was one of the first to be nominated as a member of the Royal Academy, on the grounds that he was a painter as well as an engraver. Bartolozzi consequently approached printmaking via his experience and practice as a history painter deeply immersed in the masterpieces of the Florentine Renaissance. He brought to engraving a formal ambition and a knowledge of the Italian masters which was unique among English printmakers of the period. The celebrated series of large stipple engravings, which Bartolozzi made after Holbein's drawings of the court of Henry VIII, show him to have possessed a unique sensibility as an engraver. Holbein's court portraits, with their mesmeric economy of line and apparently ruthless honesty, should be beyond the power of stipple engraving to reproduce. This resulted from Bartolozzi's inspirational use of the grain stipple technique, as opposed to the colder and more mechanical cluster technique.<sup>21</sup> Bartolozzi's act of transposition raised engraving to a new interpretational level, which it was never to reach again.<sup>22</sup> The work that both men produced for Stedman consequently enjoys a liminal relationship with high art, and their engravings of Surinam slave subjects make interpretational demands which more blatantly pornographic, and aesthetically low-grade material, describing slave torture, do not. The *Narrative* emerges as a deeply disturbing work which produces beautiful images of eroticized torture.

The words and engravings in the *Narrative* have now generated several extended discussions by literary scholars. The majority of these when they have moved towards discussing issues of slavery and sexuality have exclusively focused on Stedman's account of his relationship with the slave woman/girl Joanna. These accounts are frequently complicit with Stedman's sophisticated sentimentalist agendas.<sup>23</sup> It has never been hinted, let alone strongly argued, that these materials may involve a pornographically exploitative stance in their

<sup>21</sup> The standard work on Bartolozzi's life and printing techniques remains Andrew W. Tuer, *Bartolozzi and his Works: A Biographical and Descriptive Account of the Life and Career of Francisco Bartolozzi, R.A.*, 2 vols. (London and New York, 1883).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, i. 1–25, 82–7.

<sup>23</sup> For a discussion which goes further and considers Joanna's construction as an interracial identity, see Helen Thomas, *Romanticism and Slave Narratives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 129–32. A recent study of Stedman's *Narrative* treats the relation between sentimentality and slavery, Tassie Gwilliam, "Scenes of Horror", *Scenes of Sensibility: Sentimentality and Slavery in John Gabriel Stedman's Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Slaves of Surinam*, *ELH* 65/3 (1998), 653–73, and inevitably focuses primarily upon the sentimental romance between Stedman and the slave girl Joanna. In allowing Stedman's romance narrative to dictate the terms of the discussion Gwilliam follows the preferences of the popular market place from the early adaptations: Thomas Morton, *The Slave: A Musical Drama in Three Acts* (London, 1816); *Joanna, or the Female Slave: A West Indian Tale. Founded on Stedman's Narrative . . .* (London, 1824); *Narrative of Joanna; an*

relationship to slavery, and to the ritualized punishment of the black body, male and female.<sup>24</sup> For Stedman Surinam is a centre of decadence, vice, frivolity, cruelty, sensuality, and the unequal distribution of wealth. His stated aim, or one of them, is to go about and uncover the nature of this perversion and depravity. Yet his attitude is constantly shifting between a moral outrage that is rhetorically constructed and shrill, and an equally hysterical series of attempts to emotionally bond with the slave victim by attempting to appropriate their pain in order to demonstrate his own sensitivity.

### Stedman's Surinam Already a Violent Inheritance

Stedman in going to Surinam was going to a colony that had already been mythologized within European culture, and which had a reputation for extreme brutality, luxury, and above all sensuality. Behn's *Oroonoko*, and Southerne's popular and enduring dramatic adaptation of the novella, meant that for over one hundred years Surinam had been set out as a literary space for the presentation of extremes of violence and interracial sexuality focused on plantation slavery.<sup>25</sup> Stedman's text is stylistically and formally continually engaged with the eroticized description of slave torture.

*Emancipated Slave of Surinam* (Boston, 1838); *Curious Adventures of Captain Stedman, during an Expedition to Surinam, in 1773: Including the Struggles of the Planters, Dreadful Executions, the Manner of Selling Slaves, Mutiny of Sailors, Soldiers &c and Various Other Interesting Articles* (London, 1809); through the abolition adaptation 'Joanna', in *The Oasis*, ed. Lydia Maria Child (Boston, 1838), 65–105, and right up to the present manifestation Beryl Gilroy, *Joanna, a Life in Bondage* (New York: Vantage, 1991). In using Smith and the theory of moral sentiment throughout this discussion of Stedman's *Narrative* I hope to take the discussion into a series of new areas outside sentimental romance. Although the Stedman–Joanna relationship is important, it constitutes only one small element within a much larger and more complicated application of sentimental theory to the slave body.

<sup>24</sup> For an affectionate account of the Stedman–Blake relationship, G. E. Bentley, Jun., *The Stranger from Paradise: A Biography of William Blake* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), 112–16. Standard treatments of Blake's images of slave torture are David Erdman, 'Blake's Vision of Slavery', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 15 (1952), 242–52; David Erdman, *Blake, Prophet Against Empire*, 3rd edn. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 157, 228–42, 291; Albert Boime, *Art in an Age of Revolution* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987), 339–40; Steven Vine, '“That mild beam”: Enlightenment and Enslavement in William Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*', in Betty J. Ring and Carl Plasa (eds.), *The Discourse of Slavery* (London: Routledge, 1994), 50–7; Anne Rubenstein and Camilla Townsend, 'Revolted Negroes and the Devilish Principle: William Blake and the Conflicting Visions of Boni's Wars in Surinam, 1772–1796', in Jackie di Salvo, G. A. Rosso, and Christopher Hobson (eds.), *Blake: Politics and History* (New York: Garland, 1998), 273–301; Thomas, *Romanticism and Slave Narratives*, 120–1, 124–5. None of them raise the possibility that the work might be pornographic. The only discussion to prioritize sexualized violence in a discussion of certain of the Surinam plates is Anne K. Mellor, 'Sex, Violence, and Slavery: Blake and Wollstonecraft', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 58/3–4 (1997): 345–70.

<sup>25</sup> See Moira Ferguson, *Subject to Others: British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery, 1670–1834* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 28–32, 45–9; Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans*, 29–49, 60–70, 137–8, 250–2; Stedman, 1790, pp. xiii–xvi; Rubenstein and Townsend, 'Revolted Negroes', 273–7.

The colony had both grown and degenerated since Behn wrote about it.<sup>26</sup> Death, violence, decadence, sex, luxury, slavery, torture, and bondage are constant foci in Stedman's writing about his life in Surinam. Given these fixations, the work almost inevitably shades into pornography. Take for example the following account of the white Creole women's after dinner conversation. The passage begins innocently enough but soon shifts into an account of organized prostitution and the effects of flagellation:

But it is after this time that the ladies chiefly make theyr appearance who delight [in] the most innocent and unequivocal discourse, such as . . . the situation of their young female slaves, or whom they propose you the acceptance at the Price of so much Money Per Week, payable to themselves according to theyr value in their *own* estimation—For instance having ordered half a Dozen of Girls to stand in a row the Lady tells you Sir this a *Calebasee* (that is a Maid) and this is not, this has only had one Husband but this had 3 & c . . . I ought not to omit, that to give a proof of their keeping and discipline, and good order, they sometimes order the girls to strip as naked as they were born, when you may have a better opportunity of seeing the marks of the Whip which indeed some of them are barbarously covered over with from Neck to heel.<sup>27</sup>

The sarcastic tone cannot hide the fact that Stedman is excited by revealing the availability of these slave women and the eagerness of their white mistresses to sell them into prostitution. Yet Stedman's own compromised interest comes out most clearly in the way he shifts from the plantation mistress's point of view to his own. The white women order the black girls to strip naked in order to show of their physical charms to potential male clients. Stedman looks at the naked girls as an 'opportunity of seeing the marks of the whip', as we shall see this is a site/sight which then enables him to enter a sado-masochistic fantasy based on the exploration of his own sensibility. Looking at the scars he imagines the girls' pain and this gives him aesthetic pleasure.

The passage then moves straight onto a discussion of the male slaves and their treatment by the white women. Here again voyeurism is at a premium:

as for the Negroe Men, they go always intirely Strip'd, a small Slip of Cotton that serves as a fig leaf only excepted, in which dress they attend their Mistresses at Tea Tables, breakfast, Dinner, and Supper, without it should happen that some of them had found the means of purchasing a pair of Holland-trowsers, but in this case, should they chance to forfeit a flogging, they are by their Ladies industriously order'd, to take them off in theyr *presence*, while the other covering being soon whip't to attums, she has the better chance of beholding the effects of flagellation . . .<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Stedman, 1790, p. xiv.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 239.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

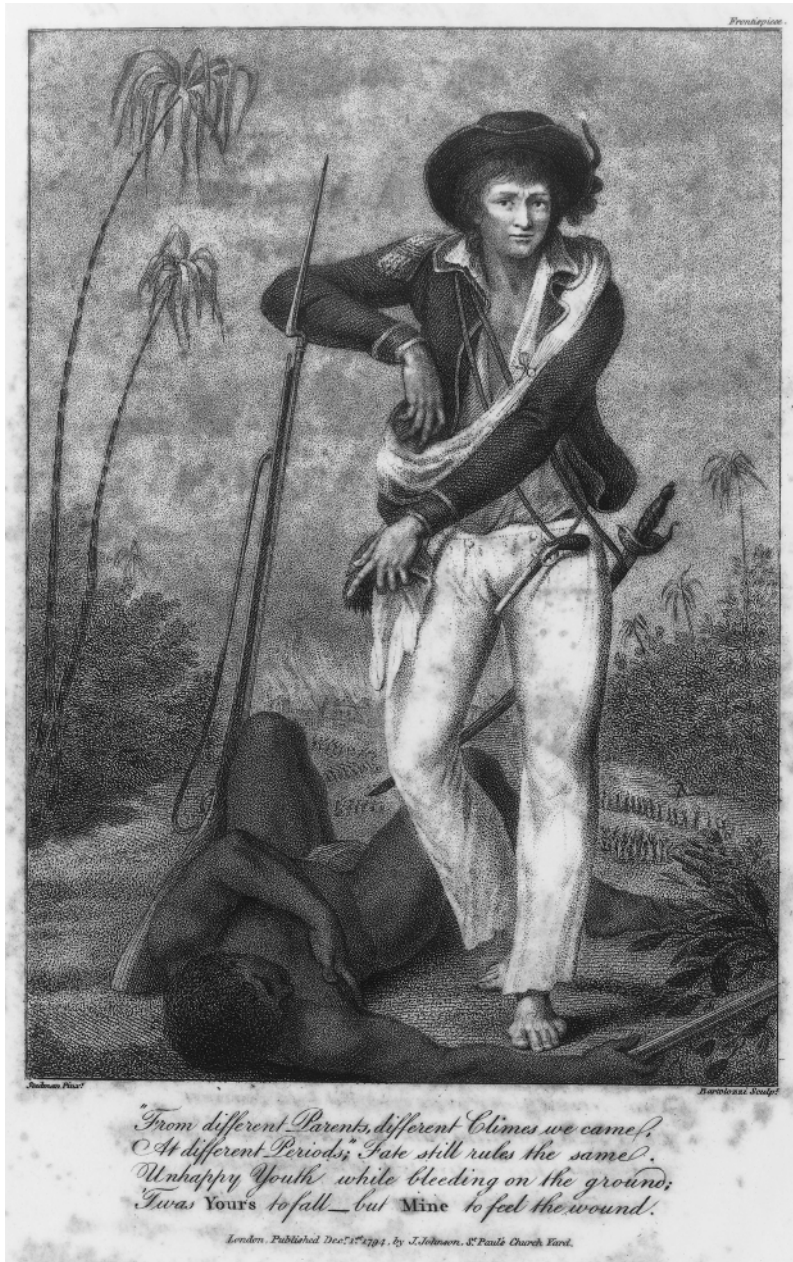
This is not an account of a specific event or conversation which Stedman has seen or heard, but a composite fantasy based around the imagined flagellatory obsessions of the white slave-owning women. The black man is first presented in the tiny loin cloth, figured as Adamic ‘fig leaf’, which fetishistically floats around the black male genitalia throughout the plates of the *Narrative*.<sup>29</sup> The black man then has the temerity to get himself some trousers; this is no sooner accomplished than Stedman, imagining himself in the guise of the white female, imagines the slave flogged, the trousers are removed, and he then imagines the ‘small slip of cotton . . . whip’t to attums’ revealing the naked black man to the imagined gaze of the sadistic white woman/Stedman. This is a straightforward bondage fantasy generated by white male anxiety over the power of the black male to attract the white female. Stedman’s text returns to the scenario, often with the incorporation of a religious flavouring as in the following, again featuring a perverted Dutch woman: ‘at the house of a Mr. Reynsdorp . . . the pious Mother of the Charity-House Nephariouly Kept Flogging the Poor Slaves dayly because they were she said Unbelievers . . . the Men she Always Strip’d *Perfectly* Naked, that not a *Single* Part of theyr Body might Escape her Attention—to what is Religion come at last?’<sup>30</sup> This is another perfect example of how the enlightened man of sentiment in exposing the sexual abuse of the male slave can have his cake and eat it.

### ‘Never felt poor devil more than I on this occasion’: Stedman’s *argumentum ad misericordiam* and Homoerotic Moral Sentiment

Is the frontispiece to the *Narrative* a pornographic image? (Fig. 1) I think that it is; it is certainly highly erotic, but the manner in which it both sentimentalizes, sexualizes, and trans-sexualizes the body of the black victim at the moment of death has pornographic elements. The virtually naked black abandons himself to death before the voyeuristic attention of a beautiful clothed young white man, while the white man stares straight at us and asks us to enjoy the spectacle of his own sentimental fantasy. The accompanying lines of verse demand that we see the real victim here as Stedman, because of his painful susceptibility to emotional empathy. It is not the black who feels the death pangs but Stedman himself: ‘Unhappy youth while bleeding on the ground; ’Twas *Yours* to fall—but *Mine* to feel the wound’. This is the appropriative essence of the man of sensibility. The victim’s sufferings are only relevant in the degree to

<sup>29</sup> See Stedman, 1790, 105, 166, 391, 535, 548. The classic case study account of the role of textiles and particularly underwear in sexual fetishization is still Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis* (London: Velvet Publications, 1996).

<sup>30</sup> Stedman, 1790, 472.



1. Francesco Bartolozzi, 'Frontispiece' (copper engraving, 1796)

which they stimulate empathetic suffering in the observer, a movement which is complicated when the victim's suffering is the direct result of action by the observer. This peculiar emotional mechanism goes off frequently within the literary persona Stedman developed while composing his 1790 manuscript. In fact Stedman goes to almost ludicrous extremes in order to demonstrate his capacity to feel. During the battle in which the black in the frontispiece is butchered, Stedman describes himself shooting with his eyes closed, because he has been overcome by an excess of sensibility. Meanwhile his colleague in arms is shooting five or six 'Hottentots' with a single blast:

While I honestly Acknowledge that in Place of Mr. *Sparman* who kill'd 5 or 6 Hottentots at one shot—Even at this Moment my Sensibility got so much the Better of my Duty, And my Pity for these poor miserable ill treated people Was such, that I was rather induced to fire with Eyes shut.<sup>31</sup>

This attitude is quite simply absent from matter of fact journals Stedman kept nearly twenty years earlier when serving on the spot as a soldier. He thinks nothing of brutally punishing and killing blacks and white soldiers alike.<sup>32</sup> Yet in the 1790 manuscript Stedman's capacity for true sentiment saturates the accounts of abuse both of slaves and animals.

In order to understand how and why this happens, eighteenth-century moral theory surrounding sentimentality is crucial. Stedman is writing within an intellectual context in which the spectacle of pain had suddenly been aesthetically theorized in new ways. Pain was at the centre of debates over aesthetic experience and its description and ascription in the area of colonial race theory.<sup>33</sup> Stedman's contemporaries were deeply concerned with the question of how the perception of another's pain opened the way for sympathetic and sadistic projection.<sup>34</sup> Response to another's pain was the touchstone of Sentiment and is a central concern of Gothic fiction, and of much Romantic poetry, including some of Wordsworth's greatest.<sup>35</sup> Pain was also becoming intensely eroticized in new ways in the late eighteenth century, Sade's work providing the most specacu-

<sup>31</sup> Stedman, 405.

<sup>32</sup> Stedman, 1962, 132, 134, 137, 139, 145, 159, 161.

<sup>33</sup> For race and sentimentalism, see Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans*, 133–4, 312, 315; Roxann Wheeler, *The Complexion of Race Categories of Difference in Eighteenth Century British Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 154–7.

<sup>34</sup> The best survey of the intellectual, aesthetic, and medical cross-currents relating to eighteenth-century pain theory is Steven Bruhm, *Gothic Bodies: The Politics of Pain in Romantic Fiction* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 1–29. For Smith's centrality to colonial texts, Anita Rupprecht, 'Civilised Sentience and the Colonial Subject', D.Phil. thesis (University of Sussex, 2000), pp. 37–59, 131–40; Vivienne Brown, *Adam Smith's Discourse: Canonicity, Commerce and Conscience* (London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>35</sup> James H. Averill, *Wordsworth and the Poetry of Human Suffering* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980). For Wordsworth and sensibility, Bruhm, *Gothic Bodies*, 30–2, 45–8, 50–60.

lar and extreme articulation of an immensely complicated and widespread phenomenon.<sup>36</sup> How one responded to the spectacle of suffering was the true test of the man or woman 'of feeling', and consequently of what defined a civilized consciousness. The ability to empathize with another's pain is set up as the supreme test of humanism, and in Burke as a true test of the 'Sublime' experience. The sympathetic capacity is seen above any other to separate the human from the brute or the savage. Yet Stedman was also writing at a time when the Stoic ideals of endurance and fortitude in the face of extreme suffering had been powerfully revived.<sup>37</sup>

Sentimental empathy and stoic endurance, rather than Christian martyrological ecstasy, are the two poles which underpin the most influential, and highly sophisticated, eighteenth-century discussion of the relation between the perception of pain in the sufferer and the witness, Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiment*. In his *Narrative* Stedman creates an erotics of pain which finds its centre in the black slave body. Smith's *Theory* provides the theoretical parameters defining Stedman's thought and vision.<sup>38</sup>

Stedman places his own perceptual capacities at the centre of his text, and particularly at the centre of the accounts of torture, many of them intensely sexualized, which it contains. Smith's theory is the essential key to unlock the specific mechanisms, which have made parts of the *Narrative* function as algo-philic psychodrama. Two hundred years before Elaine Scarry came to a very similar conclusion, Smith was to present extreme pain as an untranslatable experience, and, perhaps more significantly, as an experience which cannot be recovered by the victim but only by the spectator: 'Nothing is so soon forgot as pain. The moment it is gone the whole agony of it is over, and the thought of it can no longer give us any disturbance. We ourselves cannot then enter into the anxiety and anguish we had before conceived.'<sup>39</sup> While pain is seen to exist in an immediate and isolated present, its very incommunicability makes it into

<sup>36</sup> For the relation of Sade's erotic pain theory to English sensibility, Bruhm, *Gothic Bodies*, 2–5. For the eroticization of flagellation in the eighteenth century, Lawrence Stone, 'Libertine Sexuality in Post-Restoration England: Group Sex and Flagellation among the Middling Sort in Norwich 1706–7', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 3/1 (1992), 511–27; Wood, *Blind Memory*, 260–75; Karen Halttunen, 'Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture', *American Historical Review*, 100/2 (1995), 308–9.

<sup>37</sup> For the marriage of sentimentality and stoicism in the imagery of the French Revolution, Bruhm, *Gothic Bodies*, 25.

<sup>38</sup> Smith's *Theory* was a book which he compulsively re-edited and altered from its first edition of 1759 to the elaborately revised and expanded sixth edition of 1790, published the same year that Stedman finished the manuscript of the *Narrative*. For the sustained popularity of this work in Britain, France, and Germany, see Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, [1759 and 1790] 1984), 32–3, which provides a complete list of editions, and for the continuing influence, Rupprecht, 'Civilised Sentience', 136–42.

<sup>39</sup> Smith, *Theory* (1984), 29. For the capacity of pain to destroy language, see Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 29–50.



the key site for the individual witness's exploration, or testing, of his/her capacity for sympathy. Smith places Sympathy as the central motive force in the development of Morality. Stedman's compulsive and sexualized accounts of the extreme physical abuse of slaves, and the images which accompany them, can be read, as his contemporaries would have read them, against this central premiss of Smith's theory of moral sentiment.<sup>40</sup>

The first page of Smith's meditation on the dynamics of sympathy sets out, with a ruthless clarity, the essentially competitive and voyeuristic basis of Sentimental theory. The paragraph is worth quoting in full because it establishes a perceptual world in which Stedman's pornographic accounts of slave torture, and their accompanying engravings, operate:

As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation. Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, they never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations. Neither can that faculty help us to this any other way, than by representing to us what would be our own, if we were in his case. It is the impression of our own senses only, not those of his, which our imaginations copy. By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them. His agonies, when they are thus brought home to ourselves, when we have thus adopted and made them our own, begin at last to affect us, and we can then tremble and shudder at the thought of what he feels for as to be in pain or distress of any kind excites the most excessive sorrow, so to conceive or to imagine that we are in it, excites some degree of the same emotion, in proportion to the dullness or vivacity of the perception.<sup>41</sup>

The communicability of pain through empathetic fantasy could not be set out more transparently. We are all imprisoned within 'our own perception'. This means that our senses can never realize or communicate precisely what constituted, constitutes, or will constitute another person's traumatic suffering under torture. Consequently, the only way of drawing near to the sufferer's experience of pain is to mimic it, to fantasize it, using imagination. This assumption is finally based on the premiss that an observer's (viewer's, voyeur's, witness's) sympathetic response to another person's pain lies in a gesture of extreme psychic masochism. It is the duty of the sympathetic imagination to try to appropriate the victim's pain to such a degree that we 'enter' that person's body.

<sup>40</sup> Gwilliam, 'Scenes of Horror', 653-73.

<sup>41</sup> Smith, *Theory* (1984), 9.

Stedman's *Narrative*, text and engravings, is a sentimental text in precisely Smithsonian terms. Blake's and Bartolozzi's engravings of abused slave bodies provide iconic sites that invite the viewer to fantasize his/her own fictions of torture. It is the duty of the sympathetic gaze to try to take over the body of the black victim through a supreme empathetic effort. For, as Smith stresses in that challenging and terrifying final phrase, we can get close to the victim's pain only 'in proportion to the dullness or vivacity of the [individual viewer's] perception'. Stedman's text lays out an essentially competitive theory of *co-miseration* nicely encapsulated in the challenge: 'never felt poor devil more than I on this occasion'. The spectacle of extreme physical suffering is the ultimate test for the capacities of the sentimental imagination, but also shades very easily into pornographic fantasy.

### The Great Chain of Suffering: Slaves, Monkeys, and Mercenaries

One year before Stedman completed the 1790 manuscript of the *Narrative*, Jeremy Bentham placed the ability to suffer at the centre of his theory of moral development. In a famous passage he thought about the animal creation and stated: 'The question is not, can they reason? Nor, can they talk? But *can they suffer?*'<sup>42</sup> Stedman unequivocally answers this question in the biggest sentimental set piece in the *Narrative*. Here the emotional sensitivity of Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* is grotesquely grafted onto the figure of the great white hunter to produce a tableaux which works in sinister ways to equate tortured animal body with tortured slave body.<sup>43</sup> In the 1776 *Journal* Stedman simply wrote, 'I shoot 2 large apes'.<sup>44</sup> When he came to rework the event for the 1790 manuscript he wrote the following account:

I lay'd my Piece to my shoulder and brought him down from the Tree plump in the Stream but may I never again be more Witness to such a Scene, the Miserable Animal was not dead but mortally Wounded, thus taking his Tail in both my Hands to end his torment, I swong him round and knock'd his head against the sides of the Canoo with such a force, that I was covered all over with blood and brains; but the Poor thing still continued alive, and looking at me in the most Pitiful manner that can be conceived, I knew no other means to end this Murder than by holding him under Water till he was drown'd while my heart felt Seek on his account; here his dying little Eyes still Continued to follow me with seeming reproach till their light gradually

<sup>42</sup> Jeremy Bentham, *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (London, 1789), 32.

<sup>43</sup> Stedman's sympathetic response echoes Yorick's cry on seeing a caged starling, 'I vow I never had my affections more tenderly awakened' (Lawrence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 71).

<sup>44</sup> Stedman, 1962, 131.

forsook them and the wretched Creature expired. Never Poor Devil felt more than I on this occasion, nor could I taste of him or his companion when they were dress'd<sup>45</sup>

Again the victim's suffering is not really important, it is incidental to the depth of feeling aroused in Stedman: 'Never poor devil felt more than I on this occasion'. But here there is a contrast between imaginative worlds that should be kept apart but which Stedman, in the act of creative recollection, forces into an uneasy union. Stedman is seeking to reconcile the irreconcilable, the world of macho, mercenary, and military violence which he represents as Captain John Stedman in the early 1770s, and the world of hypersensitized empathy which he embodies as John Stedman, author and man of feeling, in 1790. The eighteenth-century physician George Cheyne stated, 'there are as many and as different Degrees of *Sensibility* or of *Feeling* as there are degrees of Intelligence and Perception in *human* creatures . . . One shall suffer more from the Prick of a *Pin*, or *Needle*, from their extreme sensibility, than others from being run thro' the Body'.<sup>46</sup> Stedman impossibly marries both extremes.

Stedman made a drawing for his frontispiece, and then Francesco Bartolozzi, technically the most subtle engraver in Europe during the age of sensibility, transformed the design into a seductively hazy, high-quality, stipple engraving.<sup>47</sup> The collaboration produced an exploitative art image out of the violent and sexualized death of a black male victim. An ex-slave fighting to maintain his liberty and butchered by a mercenary force, which included this lovely looking young white officer, becomes an icon upon which Stedman may project, ten years after the event, a vicarious form of pain.

Stedman's own text deals cursorily with the remarkable image which opens his *Narrative*. The image in the foreground only merits a single line of actual description in the text, and it occurs in the context of the aftermath of the only real fight which Stedman had with the rebel slaves:

Upon the Whole to draw this Picture Were a fruitless attempt, thus I Shall only say that the incessant Noise of the Firing, Mixed With a Confused Roaring, Hallooing, Damming and Sinking, the Shrill Sound of the Negro Horns, the Crackling of the Burning houses, the Dead & Wounded all Weltering in Blood, the Clowd of Dust in Which we were involved—And flames and Smoak Ascending; were such a Scene of Beautiful Horror / if I may use the Expression / as would not be unworthy of the Pencil of Hogarth—And Which I have faintly tried to Represent in the Frontispiece, Where I may be seen After the Heat of the Action Dejectedly Looking on the Body of an Unfortunate Rebel Negro Strech'd at my feet.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Stedman, 1790, 141.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in G. J. Barker Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 9.

<sup>47</sup> For a subtle analysis of the fashionable Italianate qualities of Bartolozzi's style and of the way they infuriated Stedman, see Rubenstein and Townsend, 'Revolted Negroes', 293.

<sup>48</sup> Stedman, 1790, 406

We do not know from this if Stedman killed the black man himself. What we do know is that he considers the whole thing, the noise of the maroon settlement burning and of negro horns, the carnage, his own lament over a single corpse, to amount to a 'beautiful horror'.

The frontispiece is a bizarre fusion of violence and passivity, and in this sense disconcertingly mimics the emotional dynamic within the passage on the killing of the monkey, just quoted. Stedman also writes within the emotional dynamic of the bondage relationship. The clothed Stedman, with naked feet, hands, face and chest, stands erect and dominates the composition. For all his languid concern, and delicate emotion, Stedman embodies a dominant violent white male colonizing sexuality. His hat carries a burning fuse, the origin of the fire which rages in the background.

Stedman's small pistol hangs across his groin, the barrel resting where his penis would be if hanging out of his breeches, and points down directly between the legs of the black man. Stedman's cutlass swings out behind his thigh, the tip reappears beyond his left knee, hanging between the black's open legs. The swinging curve of the sword is precisely mirrored by the length and curve of Stedman's left arm, which ends with a beautifully tapering white index finger mirroring the point of the sword. There is an extraordinary tension between the two bodies: the black all vanquished, supine, feminized and available nudity, the white clothed and full of points, and pointing. Yet at no point are the actual bodies allowed to touch. The only contact the two bodies enjoy is through the barrel of the gun, the biggest phallic object of them all. The muzzle of the gun is propped against Stedman's elbow, the breach of the barrel rests up along the outside of the black's left thigh and knee. The only other point at which a physical contact between white and black flesh almost occurs is via Stedman's toe. Stedman's text fetishizes his own feet in the context of his health: he claims the act of going barefoot saves him from a variety of tropical diseases. Elsewhere he gives a detailed, and overtly fetishized, account of the torture of his feet by his mulatto mistress Joanna, in order to pick out the chigoe flies from under his toenails.<sup>49</sup> Here his delicately stippled naked white feet are planted close to the black body in a spatial well between the rebel slave's out-flung thigh and arm.

Everything about the composition sets up questions, and tensions, regarding the nature of the relationship between the pale Stedman, lovely in his concerned pity, this beautiful, naked, black victim, and the viewer/voyeur. The black man inclines gently towards us, he looks languid, contemplative, and relaxed. He lies in a state of abandonment more reminiscent of a Correggio nymph receiving the transformed power of a lover God, than of a big, powerful, black, corpse on the battlefield. The black man's sexualized passivity is

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 284.

extreme. He is the only black figure in the whole book shown lying down. In fact there are very few figures of recumbent naked young black men in the whole of the eighteenth century Western visual archive.<sup>50</sup> The black legs are parted, and in the coloured version of the print his pubic hair is very visible, although his genitalia are not. In extreme foreshortening a white loin cloth cuts off the view of his genitals, and with legs spread makes him appear female or at least androgynous. As Stedman points down at this black body the message is that it is there for the taking.

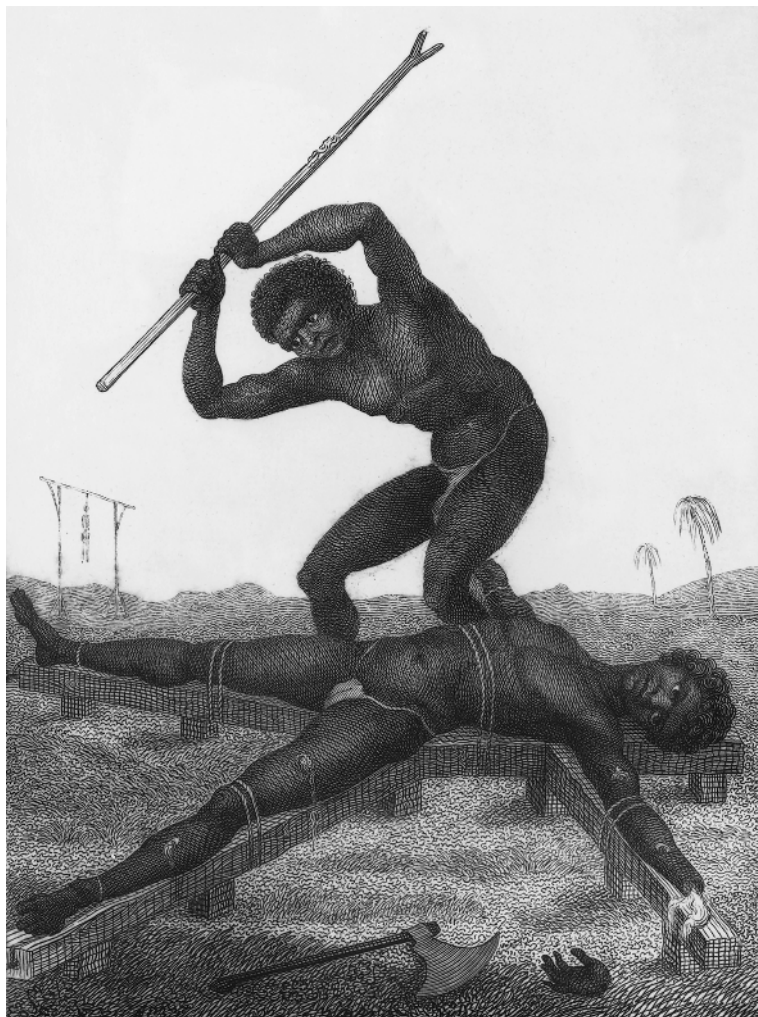
### Marx and Commodified Slave Bodies: Neptune as Self-Constructed Comedic Commodity Fetish

Objectification of the victim's body is central to the pornographic impulse; one efficient means for achieving objectification is commodification. Blake produced an engraving for Stedman's protracted account of the death of a convicted black called Neptune (Fig. 2). Having had his limbs pulverized, and lying dying and broken upon a cross, Neptune's behaviour and speech are reported. What he says interrogates the logic underlying the concept that the body can be commodified; in a sense it is a parodic theory of the pornographic:

Then casting his eyes on a Jew, whose name was *de Vries* 'A-props, sir,' said he 'won't you please to pay me the ten shillings you owe me?'—'For what to do?'—'To buy meat and drink, to be sure—don't you perceive I am to be kept alive?' Which speech, on seeing the Jew stare like a fool, this mangled wretch accompanied with a loud and hearty laugh. Next, observing the soldier that stood sentinel over him biting occasionally on a piece of dry bread, he asked him 'how it came to pass, that he, a *white* man, should have no meat to eat along with it?' 'Because I am not so rich,' answered the soldier—'Then I will make you a present, sir,' said the negro; 'first, pick my hand that was chopped off clean to the bone, next begin to devour my body, til you are glutted; when you will have both bread and meat, as best becomes you'.

Neptune is demanding that the white slave owners acknowledge the commodification of the slave body, literally by consuming it, first as dead object, then as living whole (what is the relation of the dead hand and the living body?). In doing so he both fetishizes and destabilizes his body as a commodity. Neptune, amazingly, is providing a particularly clever black colonial take on a problem which will come to lie at the heart of Marx's theory of the commodity

<sup>50</sup> For naked black males in harem pornography, Hugu Honour, *The Image of the Black in Western Art: From the American Revolution to World War I*, iv/2 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 181–3.



2. William Blake, 'Death of Neptune' (copper engraving, 1796)

fetish—can the human body be a commodity fetish? The theory of commodity fetishism now has its own literature and it is well surveyed and documented; yet one absent commodity from this literature is the colonial slave body.<sup>51</sup>

Marx begins his great project with the following sentences: 'The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as a "monstrous collection of commodities," the single commodity as its elemental form. Our investigation therefore begins with the single commodity in its

<sup>51</sup> For the most important texts, see pp. 401–2, 423–5 below.

elemental form.<sup>52</sup> *Capital* opens by announcing the slipperiness of the commodity within the world of capitalist exchange. The words insist that the commodity is monstrous, a metaphor, not what it seems, but that it is Capitalism's only way of representing the idea of wealth. Marx then argues that the development of commodity fetishism within Capitalism is defined by its relation to labour and time. Human labour changes a log into a table, the table then has a certain set of use values. Yet beyond this it has, because of its changed form, and the labour expended on it, a certain set of exchange values and exists as a commodity. It is the 'mystical' quality which comes out of the expenditure of labour, the time spent working on the commodity, which is responsible for making the commodity into a fetish, something with a power outside its 'objectness', something which Capitalism has made into magic, a magic closely related to the power of money.

In choosing the fetish as the central weapon in his attack on bourgeois obsession with the commodity and its values, Marx was consciously drawing on the inheritance of racist fetish discourse directed at Africa. In alluding to the enormous body of nineteenth-century work which had been produced in order to construct African fetish religion as dark and superstitious, Marx was taunting Europe with its own racist discourse. Yet he is using the force of the racist rhetoric to attack the bourgeoisie, not in order to interrogate that rhetoric's basis in a racist construction of Africa.<sup>53</sup>

Marx, finally, is not concerned with the colonial slave body during the birth of capitalism, yet that body poses a set of unique problems for the theory of the commodity fetish. A slave has not been 'manufactured' in the manner of the commodities Marx describes, yet can nevertheless be seen to constitute a commodity, albeit a unique human commodity. The slave has certain use values and a quite precise exchange value within a market place where its value relates to that of other commodities, whether animals or objects. In other words the slave is legally economic property. Yet without the mystical quality of a transforming and extended labour spent in changing it from object to commodity can the slave body be a fetish? I will argue that Neptune seems to think so, and in so doing confronts the European reader with their own infinite capacity to use the slave body as objectified site for aesthetic exploitation.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Thomas Keenan, 'The Point is to (Ex)change it: Reading Capital, Rhetorically', in Emily Apter and William Pietz (eds.), *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), 157. The following discussion is indebted to Keenan's delicate teasing out of the problematics of 'use value' and 'exchange value' in Marx's account of commodity fetishism.

<sup>53</sup> Dawn Ades, 'Surrealism, Fetishism's Job', in Anthony Shelton (ed.), *Fetishism: Visualising Power and Desire* (London: South Bank Centre and the Royal Pavilion Art Gallery and Museums, Brighton, in association with Lund Humphries, 1995), 69–71, has provided the best discussion of the satiric intent behind Marx's application of fetish to capitalist commodification. She is not concerned, however, with the question of whether Marx was in fact trying to subvert the racist base of anthropological theory on the fetish. In fact it is central to the force of her argument that the negative troping of 'primitive' fetishism stay culturally intact if Marx is to maintain his satiric edge.

Marx does, of course, show an awareness of the way in which power relationships between humans might be seen to operate in ways that run parallel to the operations of exchange value. We weigh, he argues, the value of one commodity up by comparing it with another, and both commodities are then mutually interdependent in terms of establishing value as a result. Marx takes this model and states:

In a sort of way, it is with man as with commodities . . . man first sees and recognises himself in other men. Peter only establishes his own identity as a man by first comparing himself with Paul as being of like kind. And thereby Paul, just as he stands in his Pauline personality, become to Peter the type of the genus homo.<sup>54</sup>

Marx is intrigued by such a relation, and immediately relates it to Hegelian reflex categories. The most renowned and extreme articulation of such a reflex within Hegel is of course the analysis of the Master–Slave relationship. Slavoj Žižek has recently provided a fascinating analysis of this area where the human and the economic overlap in Marxist fetish theory. Žižek resists Marx’s terrifying assertion that ‘it is with man as with commodities’. For Žižek the crucial point to make is that man as commodity fetish only operates in feudal, pre-capitalist societies, not within capitalist ones.<sup>55</sup> In a passage of great significance for the discussion of Neptune’s behaviour Žižek states:

we cannot say that in societies in which production for the market predominates—ultimately that is, capitalist societies—‘it is with man as with commodities’. Precisely the opposite is true: commodity fetishism occurs in capitalist societies, but in capitalism relations between men are definitely *not* fetishised; what we have are relations between ‘free’ people, each following his or her proper egoistic interest. The predominant and determining form of their interrelations is not domination and servitude but a contract between free people who are equal in the eyes of the law.<sup>56</sup>

The assertion of ‘freedom . . . in the eyes of the law’ under capitalism is wildly optimistic, and a reading of *Disposable People* might convince Žižek of late capitalism’s mission, and success, in turning a large number of non-European and non-American people into commodities, when they are young and female, frequently sexual commodities. Leaving this aside, the crucial point for Neptune is that neither Marx’s initial speculation, nor Žižek’s response to it, find any place for the colonial body, or labourer, under slavery. We have a pure ideological world where there are two types of utterly distinct commodity

<sup>54</sup> Quoted in Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London and New York: Verso, 1989), 24.

<sup>55</sup> Žižek does, of course, provide a far more extended and less straightforward analysis of the fate of commodity fetishism in the current theoretical climate (*Plague of Fantasies* (London and New York: Verso, 1997), 98–109).

<sup>56</sup> Žižek, *Sublime*, 25.



fetishism, the one feudal and incorporating the human as commodity fetish, the other capitalist and excluding the human:

the two forms of fetishism are thus incompatible: in societies in which commodity fetishism reigns, the 'relations between men' are totally defetishized, while in societies in which there is fetishism in 'relations between men'—in pre-capitalist societies—commodity fetishism is not yet developed, because it is 'natural' production, not production for the market which predominates. This fetishism in relations between men has to be called by its proper name: what we have here are, as Marx points out, 'relations of dominance and servitude' that is to say precisely the relation of Lordship and Bondage in a Hegelian sense.<sup>57</sup>

The 'proper name' which Zizek demands but cannot name is Slavery. Zizek appears almost desperate here to keep capitalist man away from the fetish and the slave, to keep things clean, to make absolute conditions of 'Lordship and Bondage', along the abstract Hegelian model. Slavery is a power relation that can be cleanly tied down to and limited by, historical categorization, the magical division between Feudalism and Capitalism. Try telling that to Neptune: he insists through an almost insane satiric intensity, that in the world of the plantation slave, the normal rules of commodity fetishism do not apply.

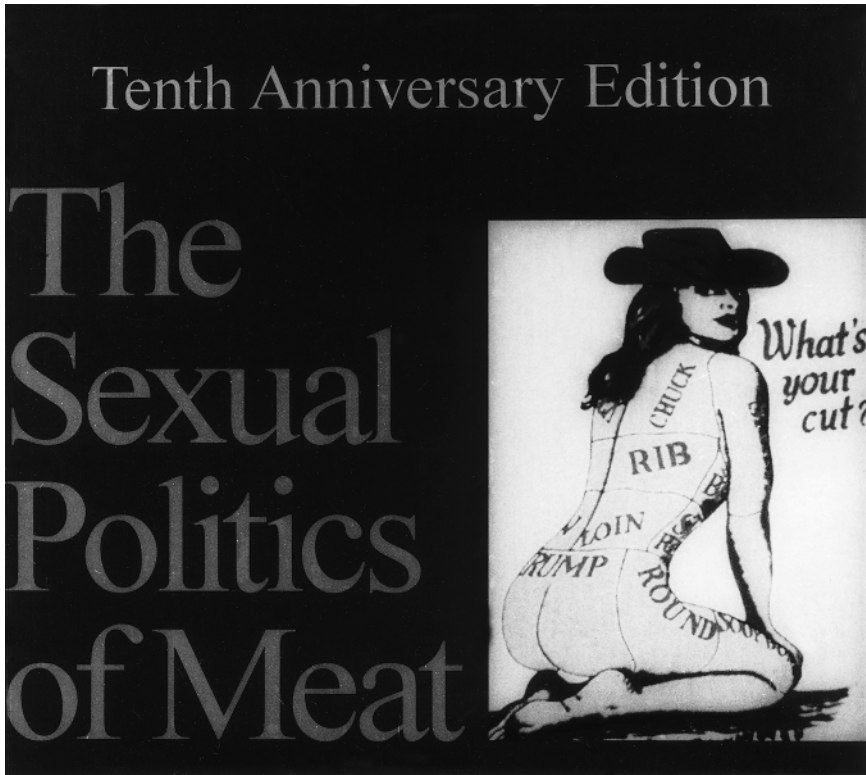
The big slave plantations of the late eighteenth century constitute factories which are capitalist in their economic forms and feudal in their social and political structures.<sup>58</sup> And that leaves the slave body peculiarly situated as a commodity fetish. Sugar plantations were the first factory systems, and certainly by the late eighteenth century operated as 'societies in which production for the market predominates; the market being Europe, 'dictates' might be substituted for 'predominates'. They were in economic terms essentially capitalist constructions. Yet in terms of their social organization they were feudal, built on an absolute power relationship between master class and slaves. Yet the mastery was also defined in economic terms, in that the slave was legally property and as such had a precise exchange value.

<sup>57</sup> Zizek, *Sublime*, 25–6.

<sup>58</sup> There is still debate over the precise extent to which the large sugar plantations in Haiti, Jamaica, Brazil, and Surinam, during the last three decades of the eighteenth century may be said to resemble capitalist factories in all their aspects. The most persuasive discussion of the capitalist nature of the slave economies, both in terms of their internal organization and in terms of their relation to capitalist production in the metropolitan centres of England, remains Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (New York: Perigee Books, 1980), and *From Columbus to Castro: The History of the Caribbean 1492–1969* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1983), 217–326. See also Peter Kolchin, 'Some Controversial Issues concerning Nineteenth Century Emancipation from Slavery and Serfdom', in M. L. Bush (ed.), *Serfdom and Slavery Studies in Legal Bondage* (London and New York: Longman, 1996), 42–69; the footnotes to this fine discussion set out the major historiography. The arguments will continue, yet there can surely be no doubt that the largest of the sugar plantations bore a close resemblance, in terms of production methods and economic imperatives, to a capitalist factory while they bore no resemblance to a feudal farm.

A post-Marxist reading of Neptune's death cannot but see him asking the society which tortures him to death all sorts of questions about his use value and exchange value, and his status as commodity and as human. In fact he hilariously commodifies himself in various ways before his death in order to demonstrate that the slave body can become a commodity fetish within slave cultures precisely because its pure exchange value denies its human status.

The sequence begins when he invokes the operations of money within a debit and credit exchange. In calling the Jew's attention to an outstanding debt Neptune draws attention to the way, as a free black, he was once enmeshed in the economic exchange of Surinam, an active free-trader. Now re-enslaved as a result of murder, the debt no longer exists in the eyes of the debtor; Neptune's loss of free status has destroyed him in the eyes of the colonizer as a 'free' agent. His time, the time which remains to him, is economically worthless, so what is the value of his suffering? In returning to slave/criminal status Neptune begins to interrogate exactly what he is worth; in this predicament what has happened to his use value, how can he be used, or abused, any further? He forces confrontation of the commodification of the slave body through the complicated cannibalistic metaphors to which he turns. Isolating a poor soldier who is not paid enough to eat meat, but only bread, Neptune confronts the wage labourer with his poverty. As a substitute for the meat he cannot afford the soldier is offered the slave's body. In isolating his hand, which has been severed, Neptune presents himself as suddenly commodified and fetishized. Neptune rebuts legal symbolism with the fetish. The hand of the criminal which is cut off as a sign of guilt, the guilty hand, the beast with five fingers, is physically separated from the body. Immediately it is reconfigured as a commodity, something which is an object and which can be consumed. Neptune demands to extricate himself from legal symbolism, and demands that it be acknowledged that part of him has become quite literally dead meat. As such the hand has a use value, in that it can be consumed, and a fetish value resulting from its construction via a soldier's labour in cutting it off. This use value is compromised by only one thing, the fact that Surinam planter society does not acknowledge cannibalism. Neptune's hand can be considered a classic Marxist commodity fetish. A certain amount of labour was expended in cutting the hand off, in transforming it from part of a human to a cut of meat. Once separated from the living body it has a new status, it has been transformed to pure commodity. In suggesting that as meat the hand possesses a specific exchange value, Neptune forces recognition that the slave body itself, as property, is no different from the severed hand. Neptune invites the soldier first to eat the dead hand, then to eat the living/dying flesh of his whole body. In converting his body into a potential feast for the whites Neptune has provided an enormous metaphor for the slave power and for the nascent European capitalist mode which enables it. The



3. Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, 1999 (colour lithograph), front cover

cannibalism describes the whole system which from beginning to end consumes the slave, and which feeds off the slave body by denying it 'free' or even human status. In this sense the slave body is dead meat from the start, more commodity than body.

It is at this point, in advertising himself as a moving carcass, to be butchered and consumed, that Neptune's imagined violent self-commodification through cannibalism reaches a point where the sexual fetish and the commodity fetish collide. Compare Neptune's desire to be cut up, picked up, and consumed with the following image on the front cover of *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (Fig. 3). The front cover of this book carries the image of the 'Cattle Queen'. A popular image in the 1980s this shows a nude woman, kneeling, looking over her shoulder and accompanied by the question/invitation 'What's your cut'. Her entire body is marked out according to the nomenclature of the butcher's shop. She is fragmented, labelled, and each label designates that the process of butchery has converted each cut section into an object with a use value and exchange

value, which relates to the process of ‘objectifying’ or ‘commodifying’ the carcass of a cow in the abattoir. It is the labour of cutting, a metaphor of course for the sex act, carried out by the person who looks at this image and takes the invitation as a basis for a pornographic fantasy, which give the pieces of human meat their value as commodity fetishes. Carol Adams reads the impulse behind the ‘Cattle Queen’ as rooted in the desire to destroy through ‘objectification’:

Objectification permits the oppressor to view another being as an object. The oppressor then violates this being by object like treatment, e.g., the rape of woman that denies women freedom by saying no or the butchering of animals that converts animals from living breathing beings into dead objects. This process allows fragmentation, or brutal dismemberment, and finally consumption . . . Consumption is the fulfillment of oppression, the annihilation of will, of separate identity.<sup>59</sup>

Neptune, in demanding that his objectification be acknowledged, through his desperate fantasies of self-objectification and self-consumption, is confronting the slave power with its own ruthless justification. In doing so he converts himself both into commodity fetish and object of physical desire. Neptune is carrying out a sick counter fantasy to those Stedman engages in as a man of Sentiment. Neptune’s invitation to imagine picking up the hand and eating it, and then to imagine further feasting on the flesh to go with the meat, is inviting us into a perverse and erotic world of cannibalism. The European viewer, quite content to go along with Stedman and ‘imagine’ Neptune’s suffering, cannot go along with Neptune and imagine themselves implicated in the ruthless and metaphorically cannibalistic system which lies behind his destruction. Perhaps the finest irony of all lies in that invitation to eat the flesh, to go with the bread. Neptune, in faintly calling up the Eucharist, gives us the ultimate model for the tortured and fetishized body as cannibalistic ritual—Jesus. Neptune’s parody of the Eucharist suggests just how right Marx was to anchor the fetish firmly in the context of religion.<sup>60</sup> It should be noted that when Marx first hunts out the fetish he justifies the gesture by stating: ‘In order, therefore, to find an analogy, we must have recourse to the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world.’ Which religion he is careful not to specify, but Neptune is taking the fetish full circle, back to its origins in sado-masochistic Christian martyrology.<sup>61</sup> There are different ways of commodifying the martyr’s body. One way is to turn the flesh and blood into symbols that are also comestibles: ‘Jesus took bread . . . and gave it to the disciples and said, Take, eat, this is my body. And he took the

<sup>59</sup> Carol Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990).

<sup>60</sup> It should be added that the style of cross upon which Neptune is executed is a favourite with martyrologically and christologically inspired bondage fetishists. See e.g. Grace Lau’s work in *Fetish Masterpieces of Erotic Fantasy Photography*, ed. Tony Mitchell (London: Carlton, 1999), 142.

<sup>61</sup> For Christian originary theory of the fetish, see my discussion of Shelton, pp. 408–11 below.

cup and gave thanks and gave it to them saying, Drinke ye all of it: for this is my blood.' Another way is to wait until you are actually being dismembered and to say: 'first, pick my hand that was chopped off clean to the bone, next begin to devour my body, 'til you are glutted; when you will have both bread and meat, as best becomes you.' Which is the more demanding invitation is difficult to say, but Neptune certainly shared with Christ an understanding of the fetishistic potential of the politics of human meat.

**'[T]o See a man stark naked, black and bloody, clung with arms  
and legs around the slimy and yet living monster': Stedman and  
the Fetish of the Black Penis Serpent**

'The chief fetiche is the snake'  
(*Gentleman's Magazine*, 1761)

In his diary entry for August 26th 1774, Captain John Stedman, a mercenary soldier hunting maroon slaves in the Surinam jungle stated: 'I shoot a snake eighteen feet long.'<sup>62</sup> In 1790 Stedman was taking these journal entries and expanding them into his *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*. The snake shooting incident undergoes some tremendous expansion, the snake may remain eighteen feet long but it is the only thing that does not grow. The enlarged account begins when Stedman and two black male slaves stumble across the enormous snake in the jungle. It is found by the black men who ask Stedman to shoot it. Stedman aims for the head but hits the body. This causes the enormous reptile to go into a violent paroxysm 'the animal struck around and with such force as to cut away all the underwood around him with the facility of a scythe'. Stedman rushes off terrified, but the blacks urge him back, he fires again, only to hit the body and cause further convulsions. He then runs off, and is lured back by the blacks for a final attempt. He fires a third time, this time together with an armed black slave. They shoot the snake in the head. It is now mortally wounded, yet it still has tremendous energy continuing 'to writhe and twist about, in such a manner as rendered it dangerous for any person to approach'. It is then towed behind their canoe, but continues to 'swim like an eel'. Finally they string it up from a tree. It is at his point that Stedman's horror of the black man skinning the enormous penile reptile spills over. This little passage is an extravaganza of masturbatory, sadistic, and oral imagery:

<sup>62</sup> Stedman, 1962, 132.

David, with a sharp knife between his teeth, now left the tree, and clung fast upon the monster, which was still twisting, and began his Operations by ripping it up, and stripping down the Skin as he descended which . . . had a terrible appearance, viz. to See a man stark naked, black and bloody, clung with arms and legs around the slimy and yet living monster.<sup>63</sup>

Blake's interpretation (Fig. 4), based on an original sketch by Stedman now lost, seems similarly suspended between horror of, and humour at, the black penis. The snake as gigantic member spills down beneath the embrace of the black man's two legs, which cling erotically around it. Two other black men asphyxiate the snake. The two black men are also totally unclothed, a unique occurrence in the plates to the *Narrative*. Stedman, with his back to us is clothed, and significantly nervously clutches his sabre with one hand while pointing with the other. The giant snake looks down with comic balefulness at its abuser.

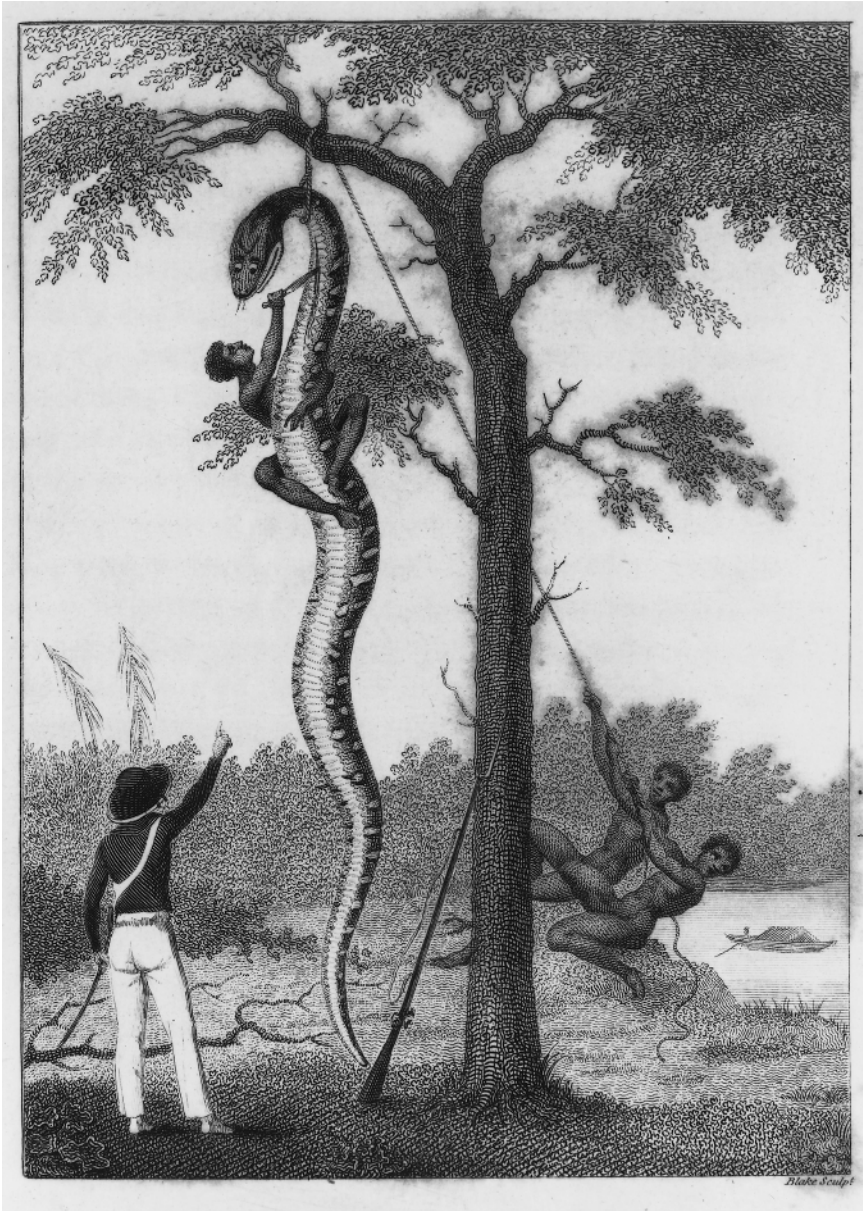
Snake imagery, and particularly the association of snake worship with black African, and black Caribbean slave rituals connected to *voodoo* and *obea*, permeate the travel literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Indeed the anonymous 1786 *An Apology for Negro Slavery* saw snake worship as a good reason for maintaining the slave system.<sup>64</sup> While the inevitable association of snakes and black slaves is generally relevant to this design, Blake's own obsessive use of snake imagery needs to be set out. In particular, the sexual currents running through this extraordinary image are best understood through a consideration of Blake's peculiarly sexualized construction of the serpent.

For Blake the serpent, although a constantly shifting symbol, was both the phallus and the embodiment of evil energy; the latter is, in Blake's world, both necessary and destructive. Both qualities are fused in the renowned and peculiar account of the 'rape' of the church in the sixth lyric from the *Rossetti Notebook*:

I saw a serpent rise between  
The white pillars of the door,  
And he forc'd and forc'd and forc'd,  
Down the golden hinges tore.  
And along the pavement sweet,  
Set with pearls and rubies bright,  
All his slimy length he drew,  
Till upon the altar white

<sup>63</sup> Stedman, 1790, 147.

<sup>64</sup> For this background, and for the argument that this material inflects the serpent imagery in Keats's *Lamia*, see Debbie Lee, 'Poetic Voodoo in *Lamia*: Keats in the Possession of African Magic', in Robert M. Ryan and Ronald A. Sharp (eds.), *The Persistence of Poetry: Bicentennial Essays on Keats* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 138–43.



4. William Blake, 'Skinning of giant aboma snake' (copper engraving, 1796)

Vomiting his poison out,  
On the bread and on the wine.<sup>65</sup>

The sexualized symbol of the serpent excites Blake's imagination. There is perverse delight in the metaphor of the poisoned ejaculation with which Blake has the giant snake desecrate the altar, once it has penetrated the 'white pillars'. For Georges Bataille 'it would be hard to give a better description of the sexual act in as far as it is the sacrilegious transgression of a taboo'.<sup>66</sup>

The most fascinating construction of Blake's serpent imagery, from the perspective of this analysis, is that of E. P. Thompson. For Thompson Blake's sexualized serpent imagery constitutes one of the cornerstones for an overall thesis which argues that Blake is directly connected to extreme forms of revolutionary sectarian thought coming out of the English Civil war. Central among these influences is Muggletonian theory. The Muggletonians constructed a gloriously sexualized and violent version of the fall, the so-called 'theory of two seeds'. In this version of the fall Satan as phallic serpent, and impregnator of Eve, holds centre stage. Thompson summarizes the theory as follows, the 'Devil (or Angel of Light) appeared in the form of a glorious Serpent, who copulated with Eve. Entering within Eve's womb the Serpent transmuted himself into flesh, blood and bone, and the offspring of the intercourse was Cain.' Cain, the seed of the Devil, exists as a diabolic manifestation of humanity, whereas Abel and Seth, remain Divine, part of the same generation whereby God created Adam. The fall, then, involves not merely the eating of the fruit of the forbidden tree but the sexual penetration of Eve by the Serpent, who then engenders the diabolical race of Cain.<sup>67</sup> The theory is set out with graphic clarity in John Saddington's forty-eight articles of the Muggletonian faith:

xvii

I do believe that that outcast angel or serpent-tree of knowledge of good and evil did enter into the womb of Eve, and dissolve his spiritual body into seed, which seed died and quickened again in the womb of Eve.

<sup>65</sup> William Blake, *The Complete Poems*, ed. W. H. Stevenson (London: Longman, 1971), 146. There is a substantial literature on Blake's serpent imagery, although most of it is reluctant to go into the sexual implications, see S. Foster Damon, *A Blake Dictionary* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), 365-6; David Erdman, *Blake, Prophet Against Empire*, 3rd edn. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 136-7, 212-13, 316-17, 397-8. The most detailed treatment of Blake's use of the serpent as penis in his work, including an obsessively contradictory reading of this lyric, see Leopold Damrosch, Jun., *Symbol and Truth in Blake's Myth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 203-7, 224-6. For a superbly observed naturalistic portrait of a striking serpent, see Butlin, i plate 283, *A Serpent*.

<sup>66</sup> Georges Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, trans. Alistair Hamilton (London: Calder and Boyars, 1973), 80.

<sup>67</sup> Edward Palmer Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 73-9, 96-101.



I do believe that Eve brought forth her first born the son of the devil and the very devil himself.<sup>68</sup>

It is in this context that the series of astonishingly erotic representations of Eve's temptation and fall, which Blake produced between 1795 and 1808 are to be read. These images, from the perspective of the Stedman engraving, should also be seen as embodying a profound anxiety regarding the black phallus, constantly threatening and penetrating the white woman. In *Eve Tempted by the Serpent* the enormous black reptile rears up behind the naked woman, offering her the forbidden fruit in its mouth. In *Satan Exulting over Eve* the serpent is entwined around Eve's prostrate body, the tip of his tail pushing suggestively between her feet, his head and neck arched back to rest with a gloating possessiveness on her breasts. Eve lies in a state of post-coital lassitude, as if dead. The Serpent is rough and black, Eve is translucently white. The association of darkness, and blackness with the diabolic runs through these images (Fig. 5). Finally in *The Temptation and Fall of Eve* of 1808 the orgasmic moment of union between Eve and the giant snake is described. Eve gently enfolds the serpent's body in her right hand as it slides across the front of her genitals, in her left she softly supports and guides the snakes head towards her mouth. The snake holds the forbidden fruit in its mouth, and presses it gently against Eve's open mouth, in an exchange that suggests both a kiss and fellation. Eve stares out with an indescribable expression which somehow combines horror and bliss, much in the manner of Egon Schiele's orgasmic self-portraits.

There is a further series of images Blake created in which the giant snake enwraps and terrifies white males, including Adam and Job. I do not want to run through all of these here, and will take one symptomatic example. The destruction of horrified white males by colossal dark serpent forms reaches its apogee in the superb *Moses Erecting the Brazen Serpent*. This design constitutes an orgy of serpent fetishism (Fig. 6). No less than five terrified naked white men are shown being agonizingly constricted by giant open mouthed snakes. The two airborne figures top left and right both have their left leg bent, the figure top left has the serpents tail emerging from between his open legs like a giant penis; his own genitals seem to have disappeared. The figure top right appears to have the serpent's tail emerging from between his buttocks. Moses stands gazing with bewildered despair at a colossal snake, while another flaccid snake is wrapped around his shoulders. The design is cut in half by a dark erect pillar around which the brazen serpent entwines itself. In the bottom left corner of the design a naked white youth flees in terror from a pursuing snake, while two young women, one with a limp serpent draped around her shoulders like a fox

<sup>68</sup> Quoted, Thompson, *Witness*, 73.



5. William Blake, *The Temptation and Fall of Eve*, from *Nine Illustrations to Paradise Lost* (pen and watercolour on paper, 1808)

fur, look on in sorrow and wonder. This image is Blake's most direct confrontation with white male horror at the black phallus. In this image it is not white female sexuality that is threatened but the white male who is the primary victim in a rape fantasy.

In the Stedman engraving Blake may be seen to explore, and perhaps to satirize, a long-standing obsession with the Serpent as black phallus. He again takes up the association of serpent and penis, to explore the white psychotic fixation with black male sexual potency. Yet what the image is actually telling us is not so easy to work out. In introducing the naked black body, and in having that body carry out an act of aggression on the snake Blake complicates the symbolic language, and problematizes the Muggletonian theory of the two seeds.



6. William Blake, *Moses Erecting the Brazen Serpent* (pen and watercolour on paper, c.1805)

David, the black who skins the snake, is shown clasping the snake with one arm, the fingers delicately extended over the snake's skin. His legs, spread wide, are erotically clasped around the body of the reptile, and although invisible his genitals must be pressed tight against the snake. David's body appears more like a woman's, in the act of penetrative intercourse, than a man's. The complicated gender dynamics of the print are further developed in the portrayal of the stabbing. The black hand clasps a long blade which is shown penetrating the vaginal slit in the snake's throat. The black man appears to be violating the enormous snake, which is both feminized, in the form of its wounding, and simultaneously the embodiment of black male sexual potency. The fact that the snake is being slowly strangled while all this happens may have further sexual connotations. Asphyxyphilia and hypoxyphilia are extreme forms of bondage, and both asphyxiation and hanging, involving the severance of the spinal cord, are related to sudden and uncontrollable erection. Also ritual binding and hanging of the penis itself is central to much gay bondage, and heterosexual dominatrix bondage, pornography.

The important question remains: why is the black man shown abusing his own penis?<sup>69</sup> Penis torture has been and remains an important element of dominatrix, and male homosexual bondage cultures. Blake and Stedman seem to have tapped into a complex of imagery moving around serpents, knives, white female and black male sexuality which lies at the centre of white male sado-masochistic fantasy.

### Blake and Mapplethorpe: Strange Bedfellows

There are two lengthy sections in Terence Sellers's *The Correct Sadist* which describe the different techniques of penis torture she employs. Binding the penis at its base with a single cord, followed by stabbing, burning, and even partial skinning with a razor blade are all described as possible rituals. BDSM Internet boutiques devote special sections to ritual objects, rings, blades, harnesses, and traps used for penis torture. Some of Mapplethorpe's most violent bondage imagery simply shows various forms of the abuse of the erect black penis, and white penis; many images involve the insertion of stiletto blades, or ritualized binding.<sup>70</sup>

Stedman's account, and the image which he and Blake collaboratively produced, is an elaborately extended penis torture ritual in which Stedman and Blake have produced a fantasy of the black man attacking and finally destroying the symbol of his own dominant sexuality. Surely Blake is finally working in a world of hilarious parody where white male sexual pathology is given a thorough working over. The message seems to be shoot it, drown it, lynch it, disembowel and skin it, the black man's mighty member lives on in the crazy imaginings of the white man. Even more ironically it is the black slave himself who is finally the driving force behind the destruction of this phallic wonder. Is this pornography, or slapstick with a sexual undertow? It depends on what you think the snake means, but as a penis you could not put one through more extreme abuse if you tried, or at least no one did until Robert Mapplethorpe decided to show the world what really happened to black and white penises in the bondage clubs of 1970s New York. Yet Mapplethorpe's oeuvre, like Blake's, when surveyed in its entirety shows him to create a complicated web of imagery

<sup>69</sup> For an example of such games and a silly reading of *Beloved* and sexual fetishism, see Henry Krips, *Fetish: An Erotics of Culture* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1999), 45–57.

<sup>70</sup> Terence Sellers, *The Correct Sadist: The Memoirs of Angel Stern* (Brighton: Temple Press, 1990), 45–9. *Mapplethorpe Prepared in Collaboration with the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation* (New York: Random House, 1992), 99, 107, 117, 118, 119, 122. See also entry for CT in *The Deviant's Dictionary*; Brenda Love, *Encyclopaedia of Unusual Sex Practices* (London: Abacus, 1992), 202–205: 'penis modification', 'bihari', 'implants', 'incision', 'meatotomy', 'splitting', 'sub incision'.

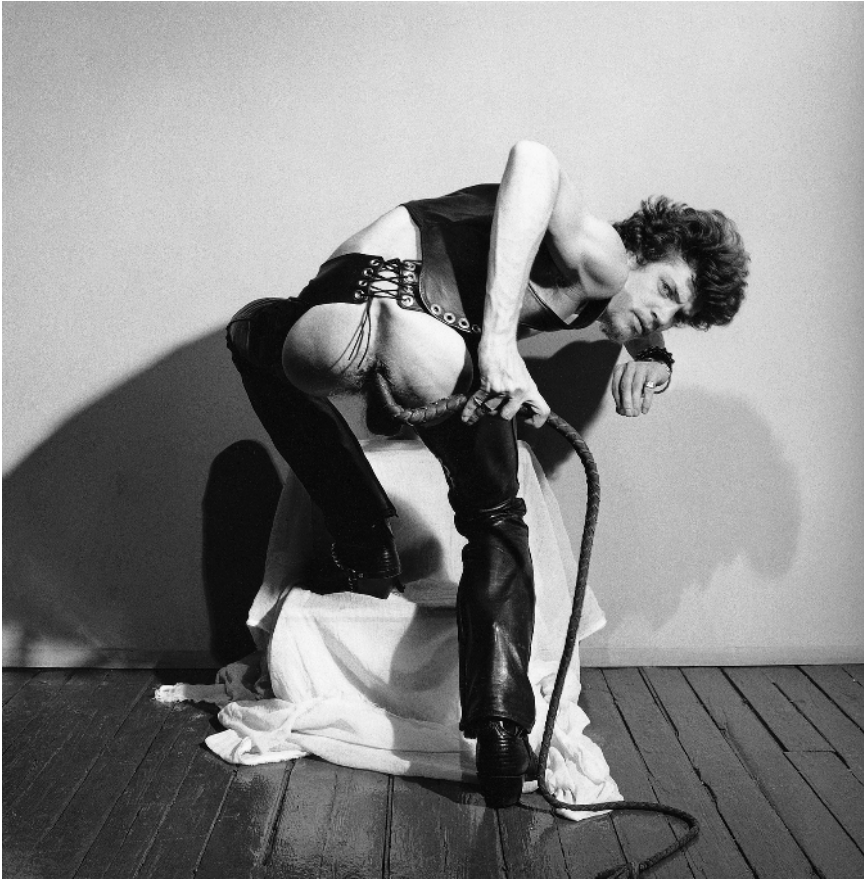
which plays with the different associations of snake and penis within Western sexual iconography. Mapplethorpe introduced his own direct joke on the Anaconda–penis analogy in one of the 1982 portraits of the American female super-star bodybuilder Lisa Lyon. She is shown sitting nude on an African throne with a vast live python crawling out from between her legs. The snake lady of circus folklore (so memorably blown apart in Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*) is resurrected as a masculinized icon. Mapplethorpe’s photograph also relates to the widespread practice of ophidicium, which occurs not only in the BDSM community but in heterosexual sex shows in Thailand and the near East.<sup>71</sup> The snake is no longer representative of the male penis, but the dominant female has taken it over. Then there is Mapplethorpe’s notorious self-portrait of himself bending over in a pair of bondage trousers completely open at the back (Fig. 7). He has inserted a jet black bull whip into his rectum, so that the handle has completely disappeared, the braided leather lash cascades down and out of the picture frame like an enormous snake. Is this a particularly self-abusive meditation on the invasive and threatening power of the black man’s penis?<sup>72</sup> But of equal importance to grafting the penis onto the white woman, or symbolically inserting the black penis-as-whip-snake into his own body, was Mapplethorpe’s obsession with the black penis, and its ritual abuse.<sup>73</sup> In one of his most notorious images, the *Man in a Polyester Suit* (Fig. 8), the half erect and enormous penis of Mapplethorpe’s black lover Milton Moore snakes out of the flies of his appallingly tailored and flagrantly ugly three-piece polyester suit. For some this is in purely formal terms of its composition and iconography Mapplethorpe’s masterpiece, for others the nadir of his racist exploitation of the black male, for others a joke which confronts racist stereotypification.<sup>74</sup> In fact Mapplethorpe, both in the images he produced and in his reported speech concerning his black model/lovers, evinced a confused sensibility reminiscent of Blake and Stedman’s. He could move from sentimental enthusiasm and aesthetic hyperbole to the most ostentatiously atavistic racism with great ease. There is a similar confusion throughout Stedman’s text: he will refer to the ‘bush negroes’ as animals and creatures beneath contempt, and then launch into a eulogy on the particular points of beauty in black, mulatto, or quadroon slaves. The black gay writer and activist Essex Hemphill delivered the following comments at the OUT WRITE ’90 conference:

<sup>71</sup> Mapplethorpe, ‘Lisa Lyon 1983’, 143. For ophidicium, see Love, *Unusual Sex Practices*, 188.

<sup>72</sup> Mapplethorpe, ‘Self Portrait 1947’, 47. The tone of this piece is hard to judge, some viewers find it outrageous and obscene, some very funny. See Arthur Danto, *Playing with the Edge*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 57–8; Richard Meyer, ‘Robert Mapplethorpe and the Discipline of Photography’, reprinted in Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David M. Haleperin (eds.), *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 360–77.

<sup>73</sup> Patricia Morrisroe, *Mapplethorpe: A Biography* (London: Papermac, 1995), 234.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.* 248–9.



7. Robert Mapplethorpe, *Self Portrait*, 1978 (Gallery announcement, 'Censored' exhibit at 80 Langton Street)

Mapplethorpe's eye pays special attention to the Penis—at the expense of showing us the subject's face, and thus a whole person. The penis becomes the identity of the black male, which is the classic stereotype re-created and presented as *art* in the context of a gay vision . . . What is insulting and endangering to black men on one level is Mapplethorpe's conscious determination that the faces, the heads, and by extension the minds and experiences of some of his black models were not as important as close-up shots of their penises. It is virtually impossible to view Mapplethorpe's photos of black males and avoid confronting issues of exploitation and objectification.

For all its bizarre whimsy and strange comedy, isn't the fixation on this eighteen-foot anaconda, waving between the naked thighs of black slave David, as he skins it, in the end an image about the objectification, animalization, and



8. Robert Mapplethorpe, *Man in a Polyester Suit*, 1980

abuse of black male sexuality? Is it too much to suggest that probably the most shocking images Mapplethorpe produced relating to black-white mutually initiated sexual abuse operate in the same psychic domain as the Stedman/Blake engraving? It is finally the outrageous humour which both Blake and Mapplethorpe bring to the subject of the white man's terror of the black man's penis that unites them and saves them as artists. *Man in a Polyester Suit* is a very funny image, with a very funny title, and part of its ability to shock comes from Mapplethorpe's ability to joke about a taboo. I see the same strength in Blake's engraving: it is beautifully composed (the classical eye of Mapplethorpe would have approved), deeply disturbing but very funny. It evinces precisely that dangerous sexual humour which so attracted and delighted Georges

Bataille. When Bataille praises Blake's 'festive turbulence which gives the feelings he expressed a sense of laughter and of liberty run loose . . . the horror is there to liberate us not to flatten us' he could have had this plate, or *Man in a Polyester suit*, in mind.<sup>75</sup>

### ‘[A] Masculine young *negro-woman*’: Stedman’s Fantasy of the Slave Woman as Male Rapist

It is apparent in the frontispiece how Stedman feminizes black male sexuality, but there is also an impulse to move in the other direction and to masculinize black feminine sexuality. This is another impulse at the heart of much bondage pornography, focused on the figure of the black dominatrix.<sup>76</sup> From the very moment Stedman sleeps with a black woman, which happens almost as soon as he sets foot in Surinam, he is playing games with gender and dominant-submissive role play. Stedman's sexual exploits with black slave women begin very quickly.

In the journal his account of his first night on land is dominated by an account of his forcible seduction or rape by a black slave girl. He initially observed in his diary for 9 Feb. 1773 ‘sleep at Mr. Lolkens . . . I f-[uc]k one of his negro maids’.<sup>77</sup> This straightforward account of who is fucking who then turns into the outwardly humorous account of his seduction, in the 1790 account designed for publication. But it is the subtext in which he is describing the rape of a white man by a black woman which has powerful implications for his gender confusion over the power dynamics within white male constructions of sexuality.

This first account of sex with a black woman follows many of Stedman's concerns about his sexual attractiveness and its results which he had voiced in his earlier autobiographical account of his days as a soldier in Holland. The conviction that he was irresistible, exercising hypnotic sexual power over women, had already been evolved at this time, along with the idea that his hypnotic sexual qualities could lead him into danger, that he could himself be the victim of a female rape.<sup>78</sup> In the early autobiography Stedman sees himself as sexually hypnotic, he is purely phallic, an enormous dangerous snake/penis capable of hypnotizing and consuming all women kind:

<sup>75</sup> Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, 77.

<sup>76</sup> *Black Leather in Color Quarterly*, New York, 1990–2002; Grace Jones encapsulated the phenomenon in ‘Warm Leatherette’, Island Records, 1980, title track and album cover.

<sup>77</sup> Quoted, Stedman, 1790, p. xxxii.

<sup>78</sup> For Stedman's disgust at the possibility of enforced sexual union with a dominant older woman, see the hysterical and intensely misogynistic account in Stedman, 1962, 39–40.



I was certainly much beloved amongst the girls, but particularly of a certain sort, not by the best of them . . . on account of my person which was without vanity allowed to be a lure for most of women species—I has a *Je ne say* qwoy about me, of the fascinating kind, which attracted the girls as the eyes of the Rattlesnake attracts Squirrels, and unaccountably persuades them to submission.<sup>79</sup>

Obviously this has a bearing on my recent analysis of snake imagery in the context of Stedman's horror and repression of the black man's penis. The important thing here, however, is that attraction carries its own dangers and can lead Stedman into the experience of sexual abuse. I do not know of any other accounts of male rape by a woman in eighteenth-century literature or letters, but a little later he tells us that his sexual charms cause him to be raped. He observes that one Dutch 'servant maid commits a rape on me . . . I acknowledge myself at this time one of the completest flecks'.<sup>80</sup>

In Surinam, however, his first experience of rape/seduction at the hands of rapacious black female sexuality is not so straightforward. He opens it as follows: 'having knocked once or twice at the door—it was opened by a Masculine young *negro-woman*, as black as a Coal, holding a lighted *Tobacco pipe* in one hand, and a burning *Candle* in the other, which she held close to my face to *reconoitre* me!<sup>81</sup> Again we are in a place of gender suspensions. The nameless female is not just a young woman but a 'Masculine young *negro-woman*.' What does he mean by this first adjective in the compound, that she is strong, dominant, possessing a body like a European male? She carries a tobacco pipe, and the phallic candle and with this light-shedding object she 'reconnoitres' the young soldier rather than vice versa. The whole exchange is set out in terms of the black woman usurping the white male's dominant position, but only by operating as a black masculine phenomenon. The sex scene continues:

I asked her if her master was at home—she spoke but I could not understand her—I then mentioned him by his Name when she burst out into an immoderate fit of laughter displaying two rows of beautiful Teeth . . . I was fatigued and longed for some rest—thus made a signal that I wanted to sleep—but here I was truly brought into great Distress—for she again misunderstanding me had the unaccountable assurance to give me such a hearty kiss—as had made my Nose nearly as flat as her own—I knew not what do to or how to keep my Temper and disentangling myself with some resentment flung into my sleeping apartment but here *wousky* pursued me again—and in spite of what I could say pull'd of my Shoes and my Stockings in a Moment. Heavens, I lost all patience. This Young Woman was as black as the Devil, to be short

<sup>79</sup> Quoted Stedman, 1790, p. xviii.

<sup>80</sup> Quoted Stedman 1790, p. xviii. The editors show the extent to which just about every explicit reference to his sexual encounters in his different journals was tampered with or excised in the 1962 Stanbury Thompson text.

<sup>81</sup> Stedman, 1790, 42–3.

the rest of this adventure can afford but little instruction or entertainment to the reader. I shall beg leave to draw a Sable Curtain over it—only observing that from this Small Sample the general character of the negro Girls may be decided.<sup>82</sup>

There is a heck of a lot going on here, and it is now certainly not clear, as it so emphatically is in the diary entry, who is being fucked and who is doing the fucking. Stedman, desperate to communicate with the master, finds that the only master there is this ‘masculine’ woman. Her ability to erode white male authority is graphically played out in the colossal kiss she delivers. This kiss takes the form of an exchange which in its violence can actually change the shape of your face, if you kiss a ‘Masculine young *negro* woman’ you are in danger of becoming one. The sheer force of that lip-suction can literally flatten or wipe out a white physiognomy. Then again Stedman’s constant attempt to talk in gestures and signs to the woman, gestures the reader can never see, places him in an ambiguous position. Why did the woman assume he wanted to be kissed, why did she assume he wanted sex, why did she follow him to his bedroom? What kind of signs and signals was the man who tells us he fucked one of Mr Lolkens negro maids really making? Certainly not the ones which the happily married ex-Soldier and aspiring author was imagining in 1790. Finally the only way Stedman can diffuse the threatening sexuality which he has created is to turn it into a set of familiar jokes. The strong, confident, and sensual woman of his experience disappears into the language of international racism. The woman is utterly stereotyped, as black as coal, as black as the Devil, her only attractive features are her two rows of beautiful teeth, while she is characterized in terms of Wowski, a low comedy character from the opera version of *Inkle and Yarico* by George Coleman the younger.<sup>83</sup> It is she who undresses the unwilling white man, and it is he who ‘draws a sable curtain’ over the actual sex act, sexuality itself descends on Stedman as a stage curtain of blackness. The scene is finally signed off as a general warning about black female rapaciousness: he had to do it, they are all like that, ‘from this Small sample the general character of the negro girls may be decided.’ If the negroesses, provided that they are truly black, as ‘black as the Devil’, behave like men, so white men have to behave like women before them.

### Joanna and Stedman’s Breast Fetish

Stedman, of course, subscribes to a racial hierarchy of sexuality. The extreme female wantonness and libidinous animality which permeates Stedman’s texts

<sup>82</sup> Stedman, 1790, 43.

<sup>83</sup> Price, quoted in Stedman, 1790, 632 n.

when describing the 'negress' or even 'samboe' conforms to an absolutely stable set of criteria. There is a direct equation between blackness and wanton, not to say animal, sexuality. The whiter the black girls become, the more beautiful and demure. The opposite of 'wowski', within the sliding scale of the representation of the female slave, appears in Stedman's celebration of the idealized 'Female Quadroon Slave of Surinam'. In the plate she appears as buxom, confident in her sexual allure, which is set off by her see-through, Lady Di in the schoolyard skirt. Stedman enthuses: 'They are mostly tall, Streight, and gracefully form'd though generally rather more Slender than the Mulatos and never go naked above the waist as do the former . . . All these fine women have Europeans for their Husbands, to the no small Mortification of the Creole & fair sex'.<sup>84</sup> In appearance and sexual behaviour these Quadroons exist in a different world from 'wowski'. The ideal of female enslaved sexuality is that it is definitely not black, but not quite white either. But the point which fascinates Stedman and around which he erected his most intricate erotic fantasy in the *Narrative* is the racial equator, the perfect balance of black and white, the mulatta. And this is where his own fictionalized sentimental love, Joanna, enters in the form of a being who cannot be placed on either side of the race divide:

She was perfectly streight with the most elegant Shapes that can be view'd in nature moving her well-form'd Limbs as when a Goddess walk'd—Her face was full of Native Modesty and the most distinguished Sweetness—Her Eyes as black as Ebony were large and full of expression, bespeaking the Goodness of her heart. With Cheeks through which glow'd / in spite of her olive Complexion / a beautiful tinge of vermilion when gazed upon—her nose was perfectly well formed, rather small, her lips a little prominent which when she spoke discovered two regular rows of pearls as white as Mountain snow—her hair was a dark brown—next to black, forming a beautiful Globe of small ringlets, ornamented with flowers and Gold Spangles—round her Arms and her ancles she wore Gold Chains rings and Medals—while a Shaul of finest Indian Muslin the end of which was negligently thrown over her polished Shoulder gracefully covered part of her lovely bosom.<sup>85</sup>

As a description of a mulatta slave girl (she is only 15 at the time of this description) who Stedman is able to purchase as a sexual partner this writing possesses a disturbing agenda. Stedman is both describing a product to his reader, and eyeing up the physical attributes he will soon possess, in very real terms, according to the local system of concubinage designated a Surinam Marriage. He runs through the attractions as if advertising this young woman on the auction block, even down to the hackneyed detail of her blush accentuating her attractiveness (Fig. 9). In the accompanying plate Joanna is respectably clothed except for one

<sup>84</sup> Stedman, 1790, 242.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 88.



9. Francesco Bartolozzi, 'Joanna' (copper engraving, 1796)

nude breast, shown standing out firmly with erected nipple. As she is partly black, so she shows part of her breast. The semi-nudity of the black slaves and darker mulattos is not appropriate, neither is the European style coverage of the Quadroons. Joanna exists on the sexual and race borderline between black and white, wanton and demure, civilized and barbarian. As a result she enjoys a fetishized and idealized status, and her 15-year-old breast is its visual core. Intriguingly when Lydia Maria Child came to produce her cut and paste version of the story of Joanna for her 1834 Boston abolition compilation *The Oasis* her engraver tastefully covered up the naked breast, and also removed the miniature figure of Joanna with her and Stedman's infant son David, which filled the bottom left of the original plate (Fig. 10).

Joanna provides the sentimental erotic focus for the book; Stedman looks, allows us to look, and then buys the girl. But it is not simply the voyeuristic and erotic elements in the presentation of Joanna that move her into the area of the



10. Anon, 'Joanna', *The Oasis* (copper plate engraving, 1842)

pornographic. Rather it is the fact that Joanna as a sexual object exists outside Stedman's power to protect her. She can be sold and used at any point. It is this potential for abuse which provides Stedman both with the opportunity to exhibit his sentimentality and with the opportunity to constantly fantasize the future abuse of the young woman. In this sense the entire sado-masochistic machinery which Stedman uses to describe the multiple scenes of slave abuse in the *Narrative* hangs about Joanna; her beauty, modesty, vulnerability, femininity, and even fertility are all charged by this abusive environment. Indeed the process is immediately inaugurated by Stedman. As soon as he has finished his itinerary setting out Joanna as a compellingly desirable sexual object he then gives her personal history. This narrative stresses that she is in imminent danger of being sold by her bankrupt mistress. This piece of information leads Stedman straight into a series of fantasies of possible abuse, which are linked to the actual torture he has already witnessed:

When reflecting on the state of slavery altogether, while my ears were stunned with the clang of the whip, and the dismal yells of the wretched negroes on whom it was exercised, from morning till night; and considering that this might one-day be the unfortunate fate of the mulatto I have been describing, should she chance to fall into the hands of a tyrannical master or mistress, I . . . became melancholy with these reflections . . . my spirits were depressed and in the space of twenty four hours I was very ill indeed.<sup>86</sup>

This landscape of pain hangs out there ready to engulf Joanna, yet this situation is relevant to Stedman primarily as an opportunity for him to enter into the fantasy of Joanna's hypothetical abuse. Stedman in fact places himself imaginatively in the position of both abuser and protector, as well finally as that of victim. It seems to be the potential for abuse, as much as the act of enjoying the possession of Joanna which excites Stedman in his account of her. In inviting the audience to share this complicated emotional terrain, Stedman invites us to enter his fantasies of Joanna's abuse. Her naked left breast hangs there, and we can imagine doing anything we like to it. The wonderful twist to this aspect of the game of sensibility is that both Stedman and the reader can imagine the violation or torture of Joanna with perfect moral equanimity. In this take on the practice of moral sentiment the more Joanna is imagined as abused, and substituted for the real victims of abuse Stedman has witnessed, the more sympathy is imaginatively generated on her behalf. And the generation of sympathetic feeling is the primary aim of the man of sentiment.

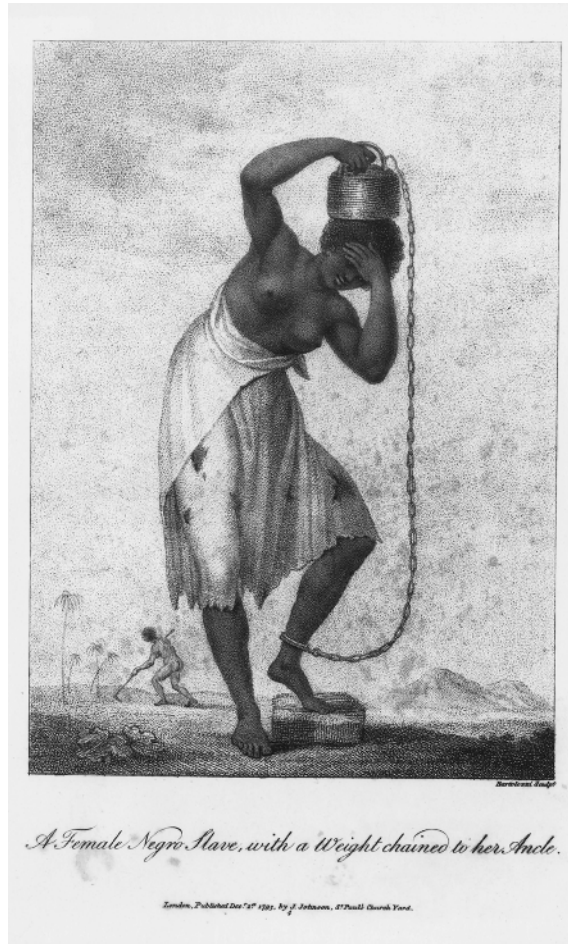
### A Black Female Bondage Icon for the 'Sympathising Reader'

When we come to the treatment of the female slave body in Stedman's text there are equally strong arguments for seeing both images and texts as involved in the pornographic exploitation of female punishment. I have talked elsewhere about the extent to which Stedman's text and the accompanying Blake engraving 'Flagellation of a female Sambo Slave' is pornographic.<sup>87</sup> Now I will turn to some other accounts of the abuse of slave women.

Nudity and the torture of female slaves are set out as the very first thing Stedman sees and responds to when he steps onto South American land (Fig. 11). As the frontispiece was the first image in the book representing a black man, so the first image in the book showing a black woman is a representation of torture, *A Female Negro Slave with a Weight Chained to her Ankle*. As with the frontispiece, it was the star engraver employed on the project, Bartolozzi, who

<sup>86</sup> Stedman, 1790, 90.

<sup>87</sup> Wood, *Blind Memory*, 235-7.



11. Bartolozzi, 'A Female Negro Slave with a Weight chained to her Ankle'  
(copper engraving, 1796)

produced the plate. The effect of this decision is important for Bartolozzi worked almost exclusively in the very expensive, technically refined, and laborious technique of stipple. As opposed to line engraving this method involved building up the image out of a myriad of tiny dots of different depths, the varying depths giving different intensities of ink when printed. It is a technique capable of infinite tonal subtlety and consequently ideal for the description of tonal gradations in the depiction of black skin. The soft, slightly out of focus, effects which result, and the lack of hard outlines, are ideal for the description of the female nude. This means that when Bartolozzi came to represent the

semi-naked form of the tortured female slave the plate has a highly sensuous quality, which the woman's combination of pain and shyness (as she shields her eyes from our gaze) only serves to exacerbate. Stedman's text constitutes his first account of seeing a black slave:

When stepping on Land the first object I met was a most miserable Young Woman in Chains simply covered with a Rag around her Loins, which was like her Skin cut and carved by the lash of the Whip in a most Shocking Manner. Her Crime was in not having fulfilled her Task to which she was by appearance unable. Her punishment to receive 200 Lashes and for months to drag a Chain of several Yards in length the one end of which was a weight of 3 score pounds or upwards. She was a beautiful young negro Maid and while I was Meditating on the shocking Load of her Irons I myself nearly escaped being rivitted by Fascination—I now took a draft of the wretched Creature upon paper which I here present to the Sympathising Reader<sup>88</sup>

For Stedman this eroticized vision of the tortured black female body holds an obsessional power. Whereas in his journal he had created the myth that it was his own eyes which hypnotically 'fasquinated' the female sex, here it is the body of the female victim which turns the relationship upside down, and Stedman is 'rivitted with Fascination'. The woman herself is an unstable subject, she begins as an 'object', she is then a 'miserable young woman' she is then 'a beautiful young negro Maid' and finally a 'wretched Creature'. Stedman as ever shifts between an objectifying gaze that tends to animalize and dehumanize the black female body as 'object' and 'creature' and a highly wrought sentimentalized empathy which clothes the black victim in an elaborately romanticized diction. His vision is suspended between two truths: first, the certainty that the slave is, in legal terms, an object or commodity, and secondly the certainty that the slave is a suffering being.<sup>89</sup>

Stedman fuses the slave body as both object and sentient being. The woman exists as an object for 'meditation', as a visual stimulant for Stedman's unending reserves of sentiment. There is also, even here, the perverse sense that he is vying with her to see who can suffer the more, the victim in her tortured state, or the sympathetic voyeur in his ability to think himself into her pain. This comes out explicitly when Stedman tells us that 'she was a beautiful negro Maid and while I was Meditating on the shocking Load of her Irons I myself nearly escaped being rivitted'. Stedman's approach to the spectacle is essentially pornographic, yet this sentence was completely cut out from the 1796 published edition.<sup>90</sup> It is not clear if his 'meditation' is a fantasy of sadism or masochism;

<sup>88</sup> Stedman, 1790, 39.

<sup>89</sup> For a sensitive discussion of how this central tension between slave as object and sentient being works itself out in nineteenth-century American slavery literatures, see Saidiga V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

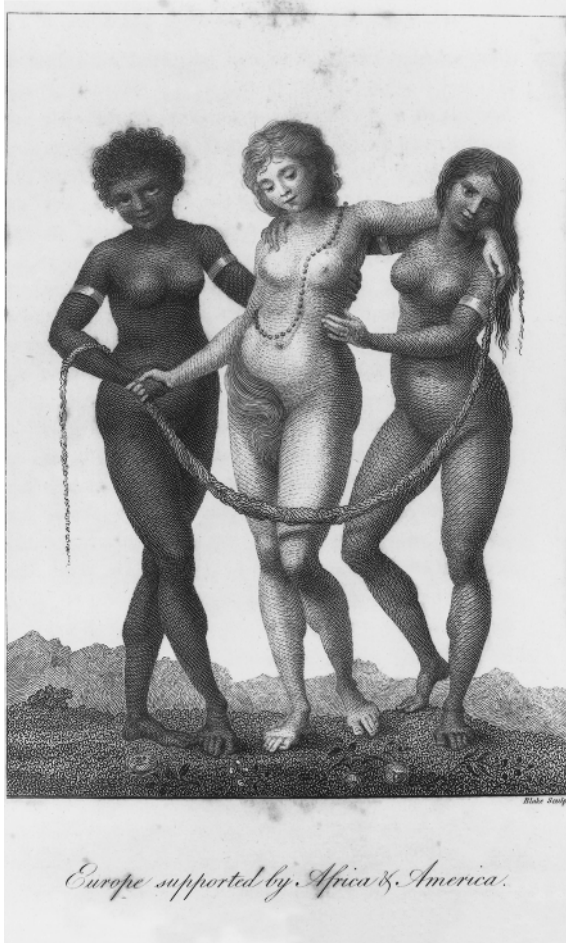
<sup>90</sup> Stedman, 1796, i. 15.



is he turning himself into the master or the slave here? He is, of course *free* to play at being both. His immediate reaction to this aestheticization of the woman's ordeal is to take its visualization one stage further and draw it, a gesture which simultaneously records her torture and relives it, and this is a pornographic impulse. His drawing is then re-created once more and produced as a seductively soft focus deluxe art object by Bartolozzi.

Yet the Bartolozzi design makes several alterations from the text: the provocative shredded rag around the woman's loins is expanded into a substantial skirt-like cloth. He has also introduced a minute and totally naked black male slave in the background to emphasize the woman's partial nudity and her proximity to the viewer. She is very much in the foreground; this is *in your face* abuse. Bartolozzi's biggest innovations relate to the woman's gestures, and it is these which tilt the engraving over into the pornographic. First, she is shown lifting the enormous iron weight above her head. Why is she doing this? In terms of her comfort it seems a pointless and difficult gesture. If it has no practical point, however, it affects how her body is presented to the view. First, it brings the bondage objects which afflict her centre-stage, her black flesh, her softly stippled feminine hand, grasps the cold iron, and the action allows the connected chain to float out in space and fall in a satisfying parabola, to rest around the shackle on her provocatively raised ankle, which for some reason is placed on a small block or pedestal. Through lifting this weight her physical strength is also emphasized, her arm pit is displayed, as are her breasts, the attractive right breast is upraised, and the nipple of the left breast stands out in profile. The victim is put on display. The small pedestal, the weight, the gesture itself all have the effect of sculptural display.

While Bartolozzi has this 'beautiful negro Maid' provocatively give with one hand, he counterbalances this by having her provocatively take away with the other. While the lifting of the weight advertises her beauty, her torture, and her pain, her other hand is raised to hide her eyes. What she is hiding her gaze from is open to question, presumably from Stedman's gaze, and Stedman's gaze became Bartolozzi's gaze and is now, finally the gaze of the viewer. In the heavily inked editions of this print her eyes disappear altogether; in more lightly inked versions and in later editions where the plate is worn, her eyes can just be discerned peeping out with a come hither look, from under her hand. Whichever way you look at it, this gesture has one main effect, to celebrate the victim's powerlessness in the face of the viewer's hungry eyes. The fact that her gesture emphasizes that this forced display is against her will only makes it the more exciting. In the way the image demands that her visual promiscuity be gesturally underlined the image again moves into the pornographic domain. The modesty of this 'Maid' (a word used in the strict sense to denote a virgin) combined with her brutal abuse and partial nudity make her a bondage icon.



12. William Blake, 'Europe Supported by Africa and America' (copper engraving, 1796)

So where do Stedman and his engravers leave us with regard to the pornographic content of a book which sends out such mixed messages concerning race, sex, and torture? (Fig. 12) At the opening of this discussion of the engravings I asked if the first one was pornographic, and in conclusion the same question can be asked of the final plate, *Europe Supported by Africa and America*. The editors of the recent edition of the 1790 manuscript bring a modest gaze to bear when they consider this image; they see 'demure but unmistakable sensuality'.<sup>91</sup> Certainly if this is pornographic, rather than 'healthily' erotic or sensual, then it is 'soft core', Blake's eighteenth-century miscegenetic

<sup>91</sup> Stedman, 1790, lx.

cheesecake. But the more one looks at this image, particularly in the superbly hand coloured editions, and the more one reads Stedman's commentary on it, the less healthy it seems. Stedman introduces the image with the following words:

Going now to take my last Leave of *Surinam* after all the Horror & Cruelties with which I must have hurt both the *Eye* & the *heart* of the Feeling reader. I will Close the Scene with an Emblematical Picture of *Europe* Supported by *Africa* and *America* Accompanied by an Ardent Wish that in the friendly manner as they are Represented they may henceforth & to all Eternity be the Prop of each other.<sup>92</sup>

On one level we are not talking about real women at all, but National emblems. Yet the women Blake engraves are very flesh and blood, they are as sensual and desirable as Goya's wonderfully fleshy Angels in the church of San Antonio de la Florida, painted at exactly the same time.<sup>93</sup> It is only the relative body colours and physiognomies that describe the continents through racial identity; the bodies, as bodies, are physically interchangeable.

In erotic terms the print works around the fact that Europe is the centre of attention, not just compositionally but in tactile terms. On one level the Blake-Stedman collaboration has constructed a classic male sexual fantasy involving the sensual (lesbian?) embrace of three naked women all with the same lovely figure but of different skin colour and hair type. The two non-whites wear ornamental bands (picked out in gold on both arms in the dramatic coloured version) the white woman has no bands. She is the centre of the other women's attention, and while Europe holds the hand of Africa and the shoulder of America the hands of Africa and America stoke Europe's body and reach towards her breasts the fingers straining from all directions.

At this level the image, although clearly prioritizing Europe's desirability within a race hierarchy, is simply erotic. What throws the scene into another sexualized space, is the manner in which Stedman demands that the viewer look on this image as a visual antidote. The opening sentence of the passage just quoted sets up a complicity between author and reader that is sinister and binding, and is a celebration of the success of a sadistic mission. Stedman is certain that in describing the 'horror and Cruelties' of slave abuse he has damaged us perceptually and emotionally, in 'both the *Eye* & the heart'. There is also an implicit threat in the term 'Feeling reader', in that if we could not respond to his sado-masochistic reconstructions of slave bondage and abuse then it is not his fault as a pornographic artist but ours as a *non* 'Feeling reader'. The sensual image of perfect female physical harmony which we now see is given us as a reward for what we have suffered/enjoyed while looking at, and reading about, the torture scenes. Stedman manages to cast a retroactive spell

<sup>92</sup> Stedman, 1790, 618.

<sup>93</sup> *Goya the Frescoes in San Antonio de la Florida* (Skira, Switzerland, 1969), plates 98, 99.

over how we read the engraving, and the image of Africa in particular. The final image is a triumphant example of a technique which runs throughout the text and shows how conscious Stedman is of the way he can orchestrate the sadism in his work by interspersing it with long passages of anthropological or naturalistic description, or with the love story of his reconstructed relationship with Joanna. He earlier ruminated: 'I wish to diversify the Sable Scenes of horror, by the more cheering Sunshine of Content, and to variegate this Work in such a manner / if possible / as to make it please both the Stern Grim Philosopher, and the Youthful, the beautiful and innocent Maid'.<sup>94</sup> Of course the idea that it is only the tough and male 'Stern Grim Philosopher' who will be 'pleased' by the Sable Scenes of horror is, to put it kindly, disingenuous. There is an extent to which the sentimental Captain John Stedman is gloating over a further fantasy, the fantasy of the 'Youthful, the beautiful and innocent Maid' in England, seeing images and reading words describing naked male and female slaves tortured to death in extremely deviant ways. It is a fantasy which would not have displeased Sade. It is also worth remembering that in the aesthetic world of the sublime which Stedman, as a man of 'Feeling', inhabits, the description of the tortured black body carries a double charge; there are special reasons for singling out 'scenes of sable horror'.

Burke set out a series of ground rules for the aesthetic and emotional response to horror in his *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1756) which is useful here. Two distinct areas productive of sublime experience are fused in the image of the tortured black. First, Burke went so far as to suggest that blackness actually assaulted the eye, that to see black was physically, physiologically painful: 'it may appear on inquiry, that blackness and darkness are in some degree painful by their natural operation, independent of any associations whatsoever'. Burke sights, if that is the right word, the example of a boy, blind from birth who regained his vision and tells us that the 'first time the boy saw a black object, it gave him great uneasiness; and that some time after, upon accidentally seeing a negro woman, he was struck with great horror at the sight'. Burke stands at the imaginative extreme of a tradition that is associational and empirical. Black is of its essence melancholy and terrifying. Secondly, Burke isolates as a source of the sublime the experience of watching torture; or as he puts it, 'Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain . . . is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.' If these two stimuli are fused, then it is clear that the aesthetic effect of looking at a black body being tortured is, in the world of Sublime experiences, pretty much unbeatable.<sup>95</sup>

<sup>94</sup> Stedman, 1790, 116.

<sup>95</sup> Edmund Burke, *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, ed. Paul Langford, 9 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981-97), i. 216. For Burke's theory of the sublime in relation to a sado-masochistic

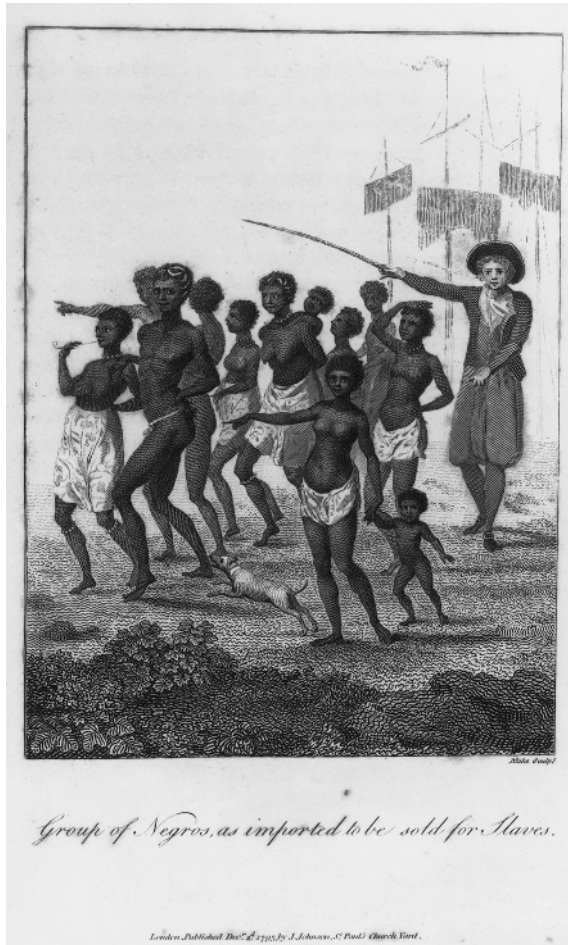
In the example of the final plate, however, Stedman goes even further and demands that the reader view this little piece of concluding 'Sunshine of content' through recollection of the scenes of 'sable horror'. He insists that his scenes of sexualized violence against blacks cannot finally be resisted. His reader can, in narrative terms, run, but cannot hide, he has turned light to dark. This young African woman embracing a lovely white woman is very like the beautiful young woman in the foreground of the slave coffle in the plate *Group of Negroes as Imported to be Sold for Slaves* (Fig. 13); she is also a very close visual relation of the flagellated Samboe slave. The young black woman with the 'come hither look' (white Europe gazes demurely at the ground, America looks us straight and solemnly in the eye) exists in a different narrative and teleological space to the other two nudes. No other naked white women exist in the engravings within *The Narrative*. What is represented is the young female black African slave body repeatedly, ritualistically, and pornographically punished. In this sense even at its conclusion, as Stedman calls up the horrors before his imagined reader's eyes, the text places the black female body in a space connected with extreme punishment and sexual abuse.<sup>96</sup>

The John Stedman who wrote terse and mainly factual journals covering the day to day events of his work in Surinam in the 1770s was a practical, frequently brutal, occasionally kind and charming, mercenary soldier. The defining motivations of his life were the demonstration of his valour and the preservation of his honour, within the military code, and the display of his sexuality, which is explored, defined, and finally asserted through his multiple relations with white and black women which he records. He is a person of strong direct emotional responses and apparently without remorse.

The John Stedman who emerges as an authorial presence in the 1790 manuscript reconstruction of his experiences in the 1770s is a very different phenomenon. Stedman is now consciously creating a persona, he works around the events recorded in the earlier journal and uses them as a series of opportunities to fictionalize himself as, to use McKenzie's notorious title, a 'Man of Feeling'. As we have seen, the words which he chooses to frame the final engraving force the imagined reader to acknowledge that Stedman, as a man of Feeling, writes for a 'Feeling reader'. As such this reader, every reader, is involved in a game of shared fantasies. The exploitative emotionalism which is connected to

power dynamic, see Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 53–60. For Burke's theory of the sublime as racist, see Meg Armstrong, "'The Effects of Blackness': Gender, Race and the Sublime in Aesthetic Theories of Burke and Kant", *Journal of Art and Aesthetics*, 54 (1996), 213–36; and for a wider discussion of links between race and theories of the sublime, Laura Doyle, 'The Racial Sublime', in Alan Richardson and Sonia Hofkosh (eds.), *Romanticism, Race and Imperial Culture, 1780–1834* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 15–39.

<sup>96</sup> For examples and a zealously extended commentary, see Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (London: Women's Press, 1981), 210–17.



13. William Blake, 'Slave Coffle' (copper engraving, 1796)

the displays of extreme and perverse brutality against the black body become competitive sites for white pornographic projection. Stedman expresses his extreme revulsion at slave torture by trying to convince us that he suffers as witness more exquisitely than the slave suffers as victim. It is then our duty to see how fully we can appropriate his fantasy.

Stedman, when dealing with the torture and sexual abuse of slaves, operates in a world of pure fantasy, where all suffering and sexually motivated violence occurs so that it can be measured against his perceptual abilities to enter into it. He is like some gargantuan method actor always trying to get inside the experience of the victim, male or female, animal or slave, always trying to eat up

their suffering, so that in the end he can play their part better than they did. Despite surface similarities, as a pornographer he stands at the opposite extreme from the Sadian male protagonist, who cultivates a cold Epicurean approach to the perpetration of sexual crime. Sade delights in the extremity of his ability to objectivize; Stedman delights in the intensity of his ability to empathize. Stedman does not perpetrate any Sadian crimes, at least not the Stedman who emerges in the 1790 *Narrative*. Yet his approach to the description of sexual crime is in many ways more perverse than Sade, and certainly requires a higher level of complicity on the part of the reader. Stedman witnessed multiple slave tortures on an almost daily basis at one point of his existence. He then, nearly two decades later, cultivated a state of mind where he could produce extended fantasies, which re-fashioned these memories. Stedman had also produced in the 1770s a series of on-the-spot visual records of what he saw. These sketches are now apparently lost, yet during the production of the *Narrative* they were passed on to a series of highly skilled commercial engravers, including Blake, who then had the job of remaking them for the commercial market place. The accounts of slave abuse, which emerge in the combination of text and image, are sentimental artefacts. They are designed to be enjoyed both by Stedman and his audience, as fantastic spaces, or spaces for fantasy. As we have seen with Burke, and as the Gothic genre asserts at its core, to fantasize about torture, to attempt imaginative submersion in that space, is a Sublime experience. When the reader performs such fantasies around the body of the hanging slave, or the whipping of the 'sambo' girl it is also a pornographic experience. Rhetoric can be applied to describe horror in any number of ways, there are many pornographies of pain and many arts of violence. The meeting of Stedman's, Bartolozzi's, and Blake's delicate fantasies with the facts of plantation slave torture produced an aesthetically poisoned chalice.

## William Cobbett, John Thelwall: Radicalism, Racism, and Slavery

All is race, there is no other truth.  
(Benjamin Disraeli, *Tancred*)

. . . we submit to what we admire, but we love what submits to us  
(Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the  
Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*)

### Slavery and the Race Wars: Some Background

Before the mid-eighteenth century there had not been very much visual art, or very many printed texts, produced on the subjects of Atlantic slavery, or the treatment of Afro-Caribbean slaves in Britain and the British sugar colonies.<sup>1</sup> From the late 1780s until 1807, when the bill abolishing the British slave trade was finally passed, there was an explosion of material on the subject. Race theory, the English conception of Africans and the English perception of Atlantic slavery, was suddenly transformed by propaganda in irreversible ways.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Understanding of the complexity of ‘race’ theory in eighteenth-century England has been transformed by the meticulous scholarship of Roxann Wheeler, *The Complexion of Race Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000). This work uncovers the extent to which the concepts of race and colour existed in shifting cultural environments that are now forgotten, or more dangerously overwritten with anachronistic and normalizing theory.

<sup>2</sup> Wheeler, *Complexion*, 236–40, 256–80; see also Harold E. Pagliaro (ed.), *Racism in the Eighteenth Century, Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture*, iii (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1973); Charles Husband (ed.), *Race in Britain: Continuity and Change* (London: Hutchinson, 1982), 11–59; Michael D. Biddiss (ed.), *Images of Race* (Old Woking: Leicester University Press, 1979), 11–37; Nancy Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain 1800–1960* (London: Macmillan, 1982); Michael Banton, *Racial Theories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). For the explosion



Consequently a lot happened very quickly, and the rules for, and parameters of, what are now studied as the political discourses of 'race', were, to a large extent, evolved at this time. Race and colour were read in very different ways from those with which we are now familiar. It was only during the last quarter of the eighteenth century that skin colour emerged as the most significant indicator of race.<sup>3</sup> Yet what increasingly emerges from the writings of plantocratic Negrophobes of the later eighteenth century, typified by Bryan Edwards, Edward Long, and Robert Bisset, is the confident and coherent crudity of the core message over race difference. Despite stylistic camouflage all this work is brutal and brazen in thought.<sup>4</sup> Long in particular is proof that the fundamental cultural frameworks and languages used to denigrate the black slave body are in place at an early stage, and despite the evolution of more refined justificatory rhetorics for racist thought, they formed a bedrock. Long's ground rules were not easily eroded or retranslated even by writers who desired to write sympathetically about slavery.<sup>5</sup>

### Edward Long and the Tragic Familiarities of Negrophobia

Writing what purported to be *The History of Jamaica or, General Survey of the Antient and Modern State of that Island*, Long composed a three-volume work that has a claim to be the most tightly argued and exhaustive defence of

of abolition literatures, J. R. Oldfield, *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery: The Mobilisation of Public Opinion against the Slave Trade 1787–1807* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995); Marcus Wood, 'Free Publishing and British Abolition Propaganda, 1780–1838', in James Raven (ed.), *Free Print and Non-Commercial Publishing since 1700* (London: Ashgate, 2000), 67–93. For a survey David Turley, *The Culture of English Antislavery 1780–1860* (London: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> For the crucial development of skin colour as the defining characteristic of race, see Wheeler, *Complexion*, 6–11, 156–80, 264–70. For the general background, Hannah Franziska Augstein, *Race: The Origins of an Idea, 1760–1850* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996); Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1984), 133–90; Keith Sandiford, *Measuring the Moment: Strategies of Protest in Eighteenth-Century Afro-English Writing* (London: Associated Universities Press, 1988); Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze (ed.), *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997); Larry B. Tise, *Proslavery: A History of the Defence of Slavery in America, 1701–1840* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 75–96; Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 29–89 for a theoretical survey.

<sup>4</sup> Bryan Edwards, *History, Civil and Commercial of the British Colonies in the West Indies*, 3 vols. (London, 1793); Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica or General Survey of the Antient and Modern State of that Island*, 3 vols. (London, 1774); Robert Bisset, *The History of the Negro Slave Trade, in its Connection with the Commerce and Prosperity of the West Indies and the Wealth and Power of the British Empire*, 2 vols. (London, 1805). See Young, *Colonial Desire*, 7–8, 15–18.

<sup>5</sup> For a ground-breaking discussion of the extent to which the 'phobias and bogeys' of high Victorian racism saturate slavery publications of the 1790s, see Deirdre Coleman's remarkable 'Conspicuous Consumption: White Abolitionism and English Women's Protest Writing in the 1790's', *ELH* 61 (1994), 341–62.

colonial slavery ever written. Long takes up every available pro-slavery argument; intriguingly the only mainstream position he excepts is that of biblical sanction. Edwards's arguments fall under several heads. First, there is the appeal to greed, or should it be good business practice. Long provides exhaustive statistical arguments in the first volume to demonstrate the colossal capital gains slavery generates for the mother country. Secondly, there is the appeal to benevolent paternalism: slavery is presented as a supportive and protective system for all enslaved blacks. Thirdly, there is the appeal to missionary zeal: slavery is set up as a Christianizing and civilizing process for mainland Africa. Fourthly, there is the appeal to comparative forms of enslavement: African slaves are presented as criminals in their homeland, or as already enslaved in a form of heathen slavery far worse than that of the Caribbean plantations. Fifthly, there is the appeal to the natural superiority of Europeans: blacks are presented as fundamentally different from whites, they are closer to animals, and require protection and inculcation into the benefits of a work ethic, being naturally idle. Finally there is the appeal to envy, the argument whereby blacks must positively not be pitied because they thrive in a generous and protective system while the white wage labourers in Britain and other parts of Europe endure far more hardship and physical deprivation. Pro-slavery generated a substantial subsequent literature in Europe and the Americas, yet basically performed a series of re-dealings of the cards which Long had formed into a pack.

How does pro-slavery writing work, what impact does it have on the writing and thinking of abolition from 1780 to 1850? The texts defending the plantation systems during this period, what one might call the formal defences of colonial slavery as a branch of British agriculture and economics, change dramatically in response to the pressures of abolition polemic and the strategies adopted by the abolition committees in order to disseminate their ideas. During the initial stages of the anti-slavery campaign the tone and language of pro-slavery discourse can be abstract and elevated, restricting itself confidently to arguments about money and property. The profitability of the slave trade and the plantations as business ventures are emphasized, along with the legality of slavery in the colonies in terms of property law. Arguments based upon what are now termed 'racist' premisses were not particularly dominant at this stage. If the speeches of the pro-slavery body during the slavery debates of the late 1780s and 1790s are examined they are marked out by their abstraction and linguistic propriety. African blacks emerge as an integral element of an economic project.<sup>6</sup>

Yet as anti-black attitudes in Europe and North America hardened as the 1790s progressed, pro-slavery thought increasingly circled back to earlier

<sup>6</sup> Wheeler, *Complexion*, 128–9, 253–9; Fryer, *Staying Power*, 146–65; Davis, *Problem of Slavery in Age of Revolution*, 436–53; *English Parliamentary Debates*, 9 May 1788; James Ramsay, *Objections to the Abolition of the Slave Trade, with Answers* (London, 1788).

positions emphasizing racial difference. The arguments are clearly set out by Long. He began to organize his ideas as early as 1772 in *Candid Reflections Upon the Judgement lately awarded by the Court of King's Bench . . . On what is commonly called the Negroe-Cause* and then massively elaborated them two years later in the *History*. Long's work constitutes a basic rhetorical tool kit for what was to become pro-slavery Negrophobe discourse. Carefully arranging a variety of sources, and binding them with his own laconic style, Long constructed a rule book for racism within the context of Atlantic slavery. It was not his sophisticated arguments about the economics or morality of slavery which finally did the most lasting damage, but his genius for essentializing the myths of racial difference.<sup>7</sup> The fictions of racial difference upon which Long performs endless variations are as follows. Black women in the slave colonies are presented as lascivious and sexually insatiable corrupters of the white male, who has little chance of avoiding their voracious appetites. Sexual relations between blacks and whites constitute a terrifying cultural disaster; the blueprint for this disaster is Spanish America: 'Let any man turn his eyes to the Spanish American dominions, and behold what a vicious, brutal, and degenerate breed of mongrels has been there produced between Spaniards, Blacks, Indians and their mixed progeny; and he must be of opinion, that it might be much be [*sic*] better for Britain and Jamaica too, if the white men in the colony would abate of their infatuated attachments to black women.'<sup>8</sup> When he talks of mulattos they are presented as sexually barren and are: 'actually of the mule kind, and not so capable of producing from one another as from a commerce with a distinct White or Black'.<sup>9</sup> Slaves are described as incapable of organized resistance, when they escape they may fight with agility, but the agility relates to their reversion to an animal type. A group of Maroons is observed giving a military display to the Jamaican governor: 'they all joined in a most hideous yell, or war-hoop, and bounded into action. With amazing agility, they literally ran and rolled through their various firing and revolutions . . . in short, throughout their whole manoeuvres, they skip about like so many monkeys.'<sup>10</sup> Long's 'remarks on the Negroe in general' highlighting their absolute difference from whites are founded in a way of looking that claims a calculating objectivity. He sees, or pretends to see, with the eye of the naturalist trying to explain a life form that is new and fundamentally different. The first and insurmountable difference is skin colour. As Long sees it, the skin *itself* is not different, skin is skin, but the

<sup>7</sup> For a useful discussion of the background to Long's writing in an emergent classificatory approach to race, see Nicholas Hudson, 'From "Nation" to "Race": The Origins of Racial Classification in Eighteenth-Century Thought', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 29 (1996), 247-64.

<sup>8</sup> Long, *History*, ii. 334. For Long's sources in the *Universal History*, see Fryer, *Staying Power*, 153-4, and for contemporary imitators of Long, 163-4.

<sup>9</sup> Long, *History*, ii. 335.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 346-7.

slave's skin is covered by a mysterious 'dark membrane that contributes the black colour to their skins'. Long here is taking up the earlier theories of John Mitchell and Claude Le Cat, who locate body colour within a mucous membrane beneath the skin. According to these theories, colour becomes more than skin deep.<sup>11</sup> Negro hair is *not* hair at all but 'a covering of wool, like the bestial fleece, instead of hair'. Negro features are ticked off as if from a caricature by Richard Newton or George Cruikshank 'the roundness of their eyes . . . tumid nostrils, flat noses, invariable thick lips'. Long's inventory is both familiar and strangely inventive, including some special details of his own. For example he ends by commenting upon the 'large size of the female nipples, as if adapted by nature to the peculiar conformation of their children's mouths'. Breast feeding, a tender and sustaining human activity, and one placed at the centre of Christian iconography, is also at the heart of semiotic battles over white-black slavery relations. The black wet-nurse is a positive figure in plantation mythology, a mammary fountain with enough milk for black children, for white children, for everyone.<sup>12</sup> Long turns the black woman's mythical lactatory abundance into something distasteful, inhuman; it is the result not of excellence but of difference, a sign of her inhumanity. The pseudo-scientific observation is knowing and relies on the pretended minute observation of day to day existence in the plantation. Every aspect of black existence is scrutinized for signs of inhumanity, even the vermin which infest the slave body exhibit race difference. Long talks of another distinguishing feature of 'negros' as: 'The black colour of the lice which infest their bodies. This peculiar circumstance I do not remember to have been noticed by any naturalist; they resemble the white lice in shape but in general are of a larger size.'<sup>13</sup> So, it seems, in Long's pathologically divisive vision even lice have a race agenda in the slave system, white lice stick to white bodies, and black to black, lice are not miscegenetic. Long continues his intimate violence on the black body with another old argument, well tried in the folk annals of racism, odour. Blacks not only look different, they smell different, giving off a 'bestial or fetid smell, which they all have in a greater or less degree . . . This scent in some of them is so excessively strong especially when their bodies are warmed either by exercise or by anger that it continues in places where they have been near a quarter of an hour.' Long even feels confident to set up a racial hierarchy among Africans based on relative levels of body odour; the more stupid they are the worse they smell: 'the Congo's, the Arada's,

<sup>11</sup> For theories of skin colour, Wheeler, *Complexion*, 1-11, 73-80, 264-70; and for Long's sources, 214-17.

<sup>12</sup> For the anxieties surrounding the figure of the female wet-nurse as manifested in racist rhetoric, see Calvin C. Herton, *Sex and Racism* (London: Paladin, 1970), 25-6, 112-13, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 148-9, 151-3.

<sup>13</sup> Long, *History*, ii. 352.

Quaqua's and Angola's, particularly the latter who are likewise the most stupid of the Negroe race, are the most offensive.' This argument was a very old one, and its familiarity in anti-Semitic English thought is evidenced in the fact that one of the 'vulgar errors' which Sir Thomas Browne investigated in the *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* was the belief that 'Jewes do stink naturally'.<sup>14</sup>

Africans past and present are written off, through a technique which might now appear as applied adjectival inventory, but which is in fact a delicately elaborated psychogenetic fantasy of loathing. Long's writing is effective, because while the form is complex, the thought is not, and as we shall see, the basic catechism of race hatred provides the ground rules for the brutally dismissive confidence of subsequent canonic Victorian writers. When black bodies are the subject, authors from Cobbett and Carlyle, to Dickens, Thackeray, Kingsley, and Froude look back to the cumulative crudities of later eighteenth-century pro-slavery polemic. In this writing you do not have to prove anything, you simply have to reiterate the same massive negatives again and again. So all Africans are 'degenerated into a brutish, ignorant, idle, crafty, treacherous, bloody, thievish, mistrustful and superstitious people'. Long goes on to assert that not only are Africans like that, but they always were like that, as the Classics attest. Greek and Roman authors, although none are quoted, are remembered as having provided a vision of Africans remarkably close to Long's own. Africans in the classics are also 'proud, lazy, deceitful, thievish, addicted to all kinds of lust, and ready to promote them in others, incestuous, savage, cruel, and vindictive, devourers of human flesh, and quaffers of human blood, inconstant, base and cowardly, devoted to all sorts of superstition, and in short to every vice that came their way, or within their reach'.<sup>15</sup> This is not merely an invective outburst, but would have been read according to specific rules by Long's educated male English readership. Long is cleverly pretending to remember the Classics through the formal application of classical rhetoric. The summarizing accounts of black characteristics are always constructed in what is technically termed *accumulatio* or *synathroesmus*. Indeed Long's reiterative attacks on blacks carefully employ virtually the full range of formal rhetorical methods which use amplification and repetition. Indeed in the above passage he uses *paramiosis*, *conduplicatio*, *palilogia*, *commoratio*, *disjunctio*, *exergasia*, *plenasmas*, *scesis onomaton*, and *synonymia* to enforce a cumulative denigration of the black body and character. In Long's analysis there is not a

<sup>14</sup> Sir Thomas Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, ed. Robin Robbins, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, [1672] 1981), i. 324–9, 524 ff.; see also i. 507–23, 'Of the Blackness of Negroes'. As early as 1750 the argument is being applied to African Blacks, see *London Magazine*, 19 (1850), 317, 'a great difference between Negroes and all other Blacks, both in Africa and the East-Indies lies in this, that the former smell most abominably when they sweat, whereas the latter have no bad smell even when they are sweating'.

<sup>15</sup> Long, *History*, ii. 354.

‘civilized’ taboo which the Africans have not broken—promiscuity, incest, cannibalism, blood sacrifice, it is all there. Long makes another move of massive influence for subsequent thought on the relative evaluation of colonized peoples. He sets up a colonial hierarchy of race with Africans, and Afro-Caribbean slaves, right at the bottom. Mexican, North American, and Caribbean are, like the Chinese, ‘possessed of many amiable endowments’, while ‘none of them [is] addicted to the brutal practices common to Negroes’.

In terms of extended metaphor the tour de force of Long’s general critique of blacks comes with his celebration of the humanity of the oran-outan, or *wild man*. Long enters his deliberations on the human qualities of the oran-outan with the question: ‘when we reflect on the nature of these men, and their dissimilarity from the rest of mankind must we not conclude, that they are a different species of the same *genus*?’<sup>16</sup> The effect of the long examination and defence of the near human capacities of the ape is to show that the ape is far nearer to the Negro than the Negro is to the white. Throughout the loving descriptions where Long is bringing us emotionally closer and closer to the ape, he is really familiarizing us with his vision of the racial other. Long’s ultimate premiss is that the black is a form of monkey, but that if we can learn to understand it then maybe in certain ways we might even learn to love it.

Given the complexities, self-contradictions, self-delusions, the unconscious and conscious ironies, which permeate the majority of material in this book Long emerges as ruthlessly straightforward in terms of how he looks at blacks and how he constructs the ‘positive good’ of the Plantocratic system.<sup>17</sup> Despite the elaborations of classical rhetoric Long’s vision of the racial other is also a lot clearer than that of the post-colonial intellectual elite in the early twenty-first century. As theorists furrow their brows under the weight of thinking through the full subtleties of abrogation, alterity, ambivalence, appropriation, binarism, compradoricity, neo-colonialism, and other prefix and suffix related compounds, hybridity, interpellation, liminality, Manichaeism, marginality, mimicry, subalternity, synchronicity, synergy, transculturalism, and the rest of it, we forget at our peril the basics of populist negrophobia. The awful truth is that in its solid skeletal frame the basic structures of Long’s racism remain intact in Europe and North America to this day. The academic fallout from post-deconstructive post-colonialism seems to be powerless to change that one whit.<sup>18</sup> The crucial point about the inheritance of pro-slavery theory is that it

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 356.

<sup>17</sup> For a useful contextualizing discussion of Long, see Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica*, ed. George Metcalf, 3 vols. (London: Frank Cass, 1970), i. 1–13.

<sup>18</sup> In this context Young’s *Colonial Desire* remains ground-breaking. Young carefully sets anachronistic post-colonial concepts against a carefully mapped historicist discussion of the evolution of hybridity theory.

is not only the 'bad' white supremacist who is contaminated by the assumptions of populist negrophobia. The myths have to be negotiated, and deactivated by any authorial consciousness which wishes to think about Western labour systems and their relation to human exploitation. While Long's style is capable of unending protean subtleties, the thought remains monolithic and uncompromising; the practical results of this stylistic paradox still saturate English thought and writing on race. The basic elements which emerge when it comes to 'othering' the 'Other' must be extracted from eighteenth-century slavery discourse. I will take two very different English radicals as a test case in order to try to uncover some of the contradictions which saturate eighteenth-century writings on race and human rights. In considering the divergent approaches to race and slavery in the work of William Cobbett and John Thelwall, the shadows cast by pro-slavery fantasy emerge as long, and ultimately all-consuming. The varieties of argument directed against slavery did, for a brief period, attempt to displace the internecine and monumental assumptions regarding the fundamental inferiority and difference of Africans. Yet finally anti-slavery discourse was powerless to resist, when it was not complicit with, the fundamental language which taught whites how to degrade the black body.

### Radicalism, Racism, and Slavery

The cultural interface between Radical reform and race in the period 1790–1820, as in any period, is contentious, a tricky terrain.<sup>19</sup> The English Radical collective consciousness was an ideological mongrel, but one of the few constants in its evolution was a well-defined sense of Nationhood, and this Nationalism/Patriotism, when it did incorporate the colonies, defined itself in contradistinction to them. Indeed for Radicals being British defined, at least in ideal and abstract terms, Freedom. British Liberty, personified as Britannia, consequently existed in a precise contradistinction to slavery. In this sense the Radical consciousness defined the Caribbean slave as the personification of the opposite of British Liberty. Radicalism coincided with popular manifestations of Nationalism in this particular equation, and as ever the slave pays an implicit price for that confident announcement that 'Britons never, never, never, shall be

<sup>19</sup> For the continuing idealization of British abolition as a Treveleyanesque rainbow coalition, see the account in H. T. Dickinson, *The Politics of the People in Eighteenth Century Britain* (London: Macmillan, 1995), 88–91. For the continuing notion that Radicals were naturally sympathetic to abolition, see Peter Spence, *The Birth of Romantic Radicalism: War, Popular Politics and English Radical Reformism, 1800–1815* (London: Scolar, 1996), 36–7. In this context Edward Said's, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1993) is a useful antidote, although he deals predominantly with the inscriptions of imperialism and racism in later nineteenth-century European literatures.

slaves.<sup>20</sup> A dynamic whereby liberty can only be defined through its opposite, slavery, encourages parodic positioning. As we shall see the suffering of the slave can be constructed as a parody of the suffering of the white labourer and vice versa. Laws were passed in England which claimed to abolish the slave trade in 1807 and plantation slavery in 1833.<sup>21</sup> The fifty years from 1780 to 1830 saw the generation of a fantastically varied set of literatures concerning slavery written by men and women and directed at every available area of the publishing market. Radicals could not avoid exposure to, and the influence of, the slavery debates, and their writings on race were parodically moulded around the dominant forms of these polemics. It was during this period that the comparative apparatus which inevitably set 'free white' wage slavery against 'enslaved black' chattel labour systems, developed a varied literature of its own.<sup>22</sup>

Although politically both Cobbett and Thelwall might be designated Radical reformers, they frequently addressed the English and French colonies in the Caribbean. Their reactions to the inheritance of the Atlantic slave trade and colonial slavery could hardly be more different. Thelwall and Cobbett adopted extreme and opposed positions over the question of the ethics of plantation slavery, but ironically and perhaps inevitably, given his sheer rhetorical power, the force which unites them in terms of the intellectual parameters of their engagement is Edmund Burke. In the final analysis both Cobbett and Thelwall

<sup>20</sup> For the centrality of a language of patriotism to the Radical's definition of political opposition in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Hugh Cunningham, 'The Language of Patriotism', in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity*, i. *History and Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 57–89. For the interrelations of patriotism and racism in the context of Caribbean immigration during the slavery period, see Winston James, 'The Making of Black Identities', in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity*, ii. *Minorities and Outsiders* (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), 230–4. For nationalistically defined stereotypes of blacks in Africa and the Caribbean across British Culture at this time, see the finely researched P. J. Marshall and Glyndwr Williams, *The Great Map of Mankind: British Perceptions of the World in the Age of Enlightenment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), 227–58. For Nationalism in relation to Radicalism and Cobbett, see Leonora Natrass, *William Cobbett: The Politics of Style* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 35–6, 122ff., 75–80, 205–16; Daniel Green, *Great Cobbett, the Noblest Agitator* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1983), 124, 132, 230, 318, 392. For Thelwall and Nationalism, see ed. and intro., Gregory Claeys, *The Politics of English Jacobinism Writings of John Thelwall* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), pp. xiii–liv, 237, 242.

<sup>21</sup> By the Act of 1833, Slavery was to end in 1834 in the British West Indies, Mauritius, and the Cape Colony.

<sup>22</sup> The best overview of the propaganda strategies of the initial campaign 1787–96 is Roger Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition 1760–1810* (London: Macmillan, 1975), 256–85. The classic compilation of atrocity narrative centred upon the middle passage was the *Substance of the Evidence of Sundry Persons on the Slave Trade Collected in the Course of a Tour Made in the Autumn of the Year 1788* (London: James Phillips, 1789), 60–112. For an overview of abolition propaganda strategies, Oldfield, *Popular Politics*. For the range of abolition publicity, see Peter Hogg, *The African Slave Trade and its Suppression: A Classified and Annotated Bibliography of Books, Pamphlets and Periodical Articles* (London: Frank Cass, 1973). The background to the wage labour/chattel labour debates is discussed pp. 163–9, 354–8 below.



operate forms of Burkean parody in their writings on race. The uses to which Burke was put suggest the problematic nature of defining limits to the languages of racism. While Long provides a cleverly wrapped blunt instrument for a straightforwardly Negrophobe Radical like Cobbett to seize on, Burke provides something infinitely more troubling.

Burke was, of course, the most influential anti-revolutionary propagandist of the first phase of the French Revolution, and his name is centrally linked with that of Tom Paine, whose phenomenally popular *The Rights of Man* is, in its basic form, a parodic dialogue with Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. This dialogue has dominated discussions of Burke's influence on, and engagement with, Radicalism.<sup>23</sup> But the impact of Burke's writings upon British Radical polemic stretches far beyond both Paine and the *Reflections*, but not in ways which we might now anticipate. In the first half of the 1790s Burke's writings developed, with a unique vigour, the fashionable Loyalist link between French Jacobinism and revolutionary developments in the French Caribbean. He reserved his most lethal moves for developments in San Domingue. The emotionally unstable *Letters on the Prospect of a Regicide Peace*, the last of which Burke was compulsively working on at the time of his death, set up a series of comparisons between developments in France and revolutionary San Domingue.<sup>24</sup> This work constituted a ferocious assault on events in Revolutionary France, and their colonial fallout. Burke's writing grows out of a weird fusion of his aesthetic category of the 'sublime' with what he sees as the dark and potently destructive events generated by the Revolution.<sup>25</sup> Burke paves the way for Carlyle in using the French and San Domingue Revolutions as aesthetic text. As a result of its extremity Burke's prose dictated the terms in which Cobbett and Thelwall subsequently wrote about slavery and race. Cobbett swallowed Burke's positions lock, stock, and barrel, digesting them and then reconstituting them, at times with an horrific Negrophobe relish, into arguments focused on the exploitation of the English labour force. Thelwall

<sup>23</sup> See Marilyn Butler, *Burke, Paine, Godwin, and the Revolution Controversy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

<sup>24</sup> It is significant that Burke's ferocious treatment of the slave revolution continues to be excised from accounts of his thought and writing during the 1790s. For example, Steven Blakemore (ed.), *Burke and the French Revolution Bicentennial Essays* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 145, makes only a single reference to Burke's writing on slavery, and this suggests that Burke was a strident opponent of the slave trade. For the background to Burke's fusion of race, revolution, and cannibalism in his rhetoric, see Peter J. Kitson, '“The Eucharist of Hell”: in Eating People is Right: Romantic Representations of Cannibalism', *Romanticism on the Net*, 17 (Feb 2000), <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~scato385/17cannibalism.html>

<sup>25</sup> The classic reading of the Burkean sublime in relation to events of the French Revolution is Ronald Paulson, *Representations of Revolution* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983), 57–88; see also Neal Wood, 'The Aesthetic Dimension of Burke's Political Thought', *Journal of British Studies*, 4 (1964), 24–36.

passionately opposed everything Burke said, yet he set up his responses in ways which mimic while subverting Burkean argumentative methods.<sup>26</sup>

A consideration of the range of writings which the peculiar consciousnesses of Cobbett and Thelwall generated, around the issues of race and slavery, emphasizes the contradictory nature of the conflicts which shook Radicalism when slavery was incorporated into debates on patriotism, reform, and domestic corruption. There has been a recent growth of interest in black writers and political activists in the 1790–1820 period. The editions of the writings of Olaudah Equiano and Robert Wedderburn testify to this tendency. Wedderburn is seen to fuse elements from his Caribbean background with the extreme intellectual experimentation of religious enthusiasts and ultra-radical reformers. Work has also begun on the links which exist between Equiano's engagement with Radicalism and his ambivalent relationship to abolition.<sup>27</sup> What has not been considered in detail, however, is the extent to which white English Radicals, from the 1790s right through to the emancipation proclamation of 1832, were consistently and violently opposed to the mainstream abolition movement. Radicals were also frequently hostile to the idea that slave populations might be incorporated within the domestic reform agenda. Radical leaders were for the most part wholly uninterested in the plight of the plantation labour force in the colonies. Political disempowerment at home, combined with the central position of Wilberforce (who for Radicals existed primarily as one of Pitt's right-hand men during the White Terror of the later 1790s) in the abolition movement, led Radicals to feel an utter scepticism about the motives and operations of abolitionists.<sup>28</sup> In this sense Cobbett may be seen as typifying, if in extreme form, Radical responses to slavery, while Thelwall emerges as an enlightened exception to the norm. For the majority of Radical polemicists,

<sup>26</sup> Claeys (ed.), *TheLwall*, 329–417.

<sup>27</sup> James Walvin, *Black and White: The Negro and English Society, 1555–1945* (London: Allen Lane/the Penguin Press, 1973), 102–11; Keith Sandiford, *Measuring the Moment: Strategies of Protest in Eighteenth-Century Afro-English Writing* (London Associated University Presses, 1988); *The Horrors of Slavery and other Writings by Robert Wedderburn*, ed. and intro. Iain McCalman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), 3, 14–15; Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, ed. Vincent Carretta (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997), pp. ix–xxviii. For a brilliant discussion of Equiano's subversive technique in the context of Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiment*, see Anita Rupprecht, 'Civilised Sentience and the Colonial Subject', D.Phil. thesis (University of Sussex, 2000), 32–78.

<sup>28</sup> James Walvin, 'The Impact of Slavery on British Radical Politics 1787–1838', in Vera Rubin and Arthur Tuden (eds.), *Comparative Perspectives on Slavery in New World Plantation Societies*, Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, CCXC11 (1977), 343–67; Seymour Drescher, 'Public Opinion and the Destruction of British Colonial Slavery', in James Walvin (ed.), *Slavery and British Society 1776–1846* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 22–48; for the complicated interplay of popular Radical and elite pro-slavery responses to the passage of the abolition bill in the decade following 1807, see Seymour Drescher, 'Whose Abolition? Popular Pressure and the Ending of the British Slave Trade', *Past and Present*, 142 (1994), 136–66.

slavery and slaves were only relevant as rhetorical bargaining chips in the wider battle to set out the grievances of the English labouring classes. The suffering of slaves was codified into a set of emotionalized stereotypes in order to point up the superior suffering of the European white.<sup>29</sup>

### Cobbett's Hatreds

William Cobbett was the most widely read and influential popular journalist of the first three decades of the nineteenth century. With the appearance of David Eastwood and Noel Thompson's collected edition of his writings, it is possible for the first time to gain a ready overview of Cobbett's oeuvre.<sup>30</sup> This mountain of words, when compared with the work of any other popular Radical during the Romantic period, is unprecedented in its scope, intellectual ambition, and voluminousness. Cobbett's capacity to hate and ridicule generated his greatest political writing, and slavery is no exception. The list of things he hated is enormous, and, to the human rights agendas, at least publicly subscribed to by the liberal majority today, quite shocking. Cobbett was a lively racist, an anti-Semite, Francophobe, and primitive Negrophobe. He loathed groups and individuals in abundance, to name just a few favourite targets—Pitt, Wilberforce, Hannah More, Malthus, the Quakers, the Bishops, the Magistrates, and most Army officers or 'epaulette gentry'. He also detested many inanimate things including Tea, Coffee, and Paper Money. The racial stereotyping and bigotry which saturate his work as a whole, as well as the apparently irreconcilable ideological contradictions which permeate Cobbett's writings on slavery, will be oddly constructed if they are isolated and viewed outside the wider picture of his career.<sup>31</sup>

A brief overview of his political and journalistic career reveals how Cobbett devised a sinister set of models for the incorporation of race and abolition into Radicalism. His views on slavery and on the lot of the plantation slave are an

<sup>29</sup> Cobbett represents the most consistent and extreme articulation of this position, see George Spater, *William Cobbett: The Poor Man's Friend*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), i. 194, 205–6; see also *Cobbett's Weekly Register*, 40/1 (21 July 1823), cols. 1–20; 48/10 (6 Dec. 1823), cols. 577–92; 48/11 (13 Dec. 1823), cols. 649–93. For a brutal essentializing of the position on the eve of the emancipation bill, see *The Condition of the West India Slave Contrasted with that of the Infant Slave in our English Factories* (London: W. Kidd, c.1835), Robert Cruikshank's copious plates provide a horrific crash course in the arguments used to denigrate the Caribbean black when compared to the white labourer.

<sup>30</sup> Noel Thompson and David Eastwood (eds.), *The Collected Social and Political Writings of William Cobbett*, 17 vols. (London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1998).

<sup>31</sup> For Cobbett on Pitt, see Green, *Great Cobbett*, 242–5, 287–8, 328–9; on Wilberforce and Hannah More, Green, *Great Cobbett*, 219–20, Spater, *William Cobbett*, 123, 205–6; on Quakers, Spater, *William Cobbett*, 199, Green, *Great Cobbett*, 120, 154, 167, 305, 315. For Cobbett's obsessive food theories, Green, *Great Cobbett*, 50, 63, 269–71, 291 ff., 301, 408.

outcrop from his theories on the plight of the labourer in Britain, and the economic and social policies which Cobbett believed to have brought these about. Above all he hated the ways in which Malthusian economics and Wilberforcian Evangelicalism attempted to reduce and police the lives and culture of the labouring classes in rural England. After an early, and relatively successful, career in the army, followed by an eight-year residency in America, Cobbett arrived in London in 1800 at a period when the campaign for the abolition of the slave trade was starting to revive. The impact of the San Domingue slave revolution in the early to mid-1790s and then of the disastrous British attempt at military intervention on the island in the mid- to later 1790s was finally beginning to subside. The violently pro-British journalism he had written in the States led to his warm reception by the English government and the offer of a Tory backed paper, but Cobbett was always his own man and set up as an independent supporter of the ministry with his paper *The Porcupine*. In 1802 he established *The Political Register* which continued to appear through thick and thin, and a variety of minor alterations to its title, until July 1835. By 1807 he was becoming a passionate supporter of parliamentary reform and an increasingly warm critic of the government, particularly on the issue of paper currency. He was simultaneously becoming a more virulent enemy of Clapham sect Evangelicalism, and began to single out Wilberforce as an arch political hypocrite. Cobbett had long hated Wilberforce as a reform apostate, but now Cobbett began to link Wilberforce's support for abolition with his earlier desertion of the causes of the Radical reformers of the 1790s.<sup>32</sup> For Cobbett abolitionism, and indeed the wider issue of the future of colonial slavery, could not be seen outside the political activities of Wilberforce. For Cobbett the little abolition leader implemented, in the guise of an Evangelical domestic social crusade, a politics of surveillance encouraged by Pitt's administration, as one way of keeping Jacobin and Radical theory in check. Wilberforce's abolition activity was constructed by Cobbett as a sinister plot which would direct the attention of educated philanthropists from the enormous sufferings of the English labourers. Put bluntly Cobbett saw Clapham sect abolition as an obscene sentimental con trick. Thomas Carlyle was of course to update and develop this position within the Victorian intellectual mainstream.<sup>33</sup> Cobbett's fury at the plight of the English working man boiled over when he heard a report of the brutal flogging of 'mutinous' militiamen at Ely, who had been attempting to get the army to pay them their wages. Cobbett was imprisoned for two years from 1810 to 1812 for his passionately sarcastic attack on this abuse. His gesture might, however, be counterpointed with the thought that nowhere in his writings do

<sup>32</sup> For Cobbett on Wilberforce's desertion of reform, see the two open letters to Wilberforce, *Political Register*, 8 Jan. 1803, cols. 33-7; 22 Jan. 1803, cols. 97-106.

<sup>33</sup> See pp. 365-9 below.

we find any account of the whipping of black slaves in the colonies. Within the Cobbettian analysis of ritual punishment martyrological status was reserved for the white English worker. Indeed Cobbett's very stylistic anti-intellectualism is used in one way to defend the English labourer and in another to attack the Atlantic slave.<sup>34</sup>

When Radicalism reasserted itself during the post-war distress of 1816, Cobbett was the most forceful and popular journalist supporting extreme reform. In 1816 he detected a loophole in the laws taxing newspapers. He realized that if he printed extracts from his *Political Register* not as a newspaper but as a weekly political pamphlet he could evade the restrictive stamp tax on paper and publish the essence of his weekly writings for two pence a copy instead of one shilling and a half penny. The circulation of his *Register* immediately soared to between 40,000 and 60,000 copies a week.<sup>35</sup> Throughout the subsequent publishing history of the *Register*, Cobbett continued attacking the old targets, but also expanding and refining his assaults on Evangelical social reformers and abolitionists, and reiterating his belief in the necessity for enforced black labour systems in the colonies.<sup>36</sup> Indeed the casual dismissal of the lot of the slaves, and the continual vitriol he poured upon the abolitionists, from his early attacks in the *Register* in 1803–6, until the articles focused on James Cropper and William Wilberforce in the mid-1820s, reveal an astonishing rhetorical armoury. Cobbett emerges as a sophisticated theorist of race who subverts Radical discourse for the purposes of pro-slavery diatribe.

Is it worth singling out Cobbett's writings on race and slavery for special analysis? Why not continue to write them off as an aberrant, now abhorrent, but finally marginal, aspect of his work? I would stress that if current perspectives on the development of nineteenth-century racist discourse are brought to bear on Cobbett's slavery writings they appear in a new light. I would go so far as to argue that Cobbett *contra* abolition constitutes an ideological nest egg for subsequent Victorian proto-socialist racisms. Cobbett's theories on blacks and Caribbean slavery should not be written off as eccentric either to his own writings or to the development of writings on race and colony in the later nineteenth century. As I argue below his ideas provided the basic ideological framework for the race theory of Thomas Carlyle, and consequently fed directly into the complicated formulations on race and slavery which permeate John Ruskin's political and aesthetic theory. The purpose of the following analysis is to examine in detail what now seems a particularly problematic element in

<sup>34</sup> For a summary of the rhetorical operations of Cobbettian anti-intellectualism, see John Whale, *Imagination under Pressure 1789–1832: Aesthetics, Politics and Utility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 140–66.

<sup>35</sup> Olivia Smith, *The Politics of Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 77–8, 231–9.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 226–39.

Cobbett's thought, his development of a pro-slavery, and more crucially anti-black, rhetoric within the context of his overall defence of the rights of the English labouring classes.<sup>37</sup>

### The Places Where Burke Lurks: Cobbett and San Domingue

William Cobbett was not only the most widely read and influential popular journalist of the first three decades of the nineteenth century, but the most ingeniously post-Burkean Atlantic slave hater.<sup>38</sup> In 1823 William Wilberforce published *An Appeal to the Religion, Justice and Humanity of the Inhabitants of the British Empire, on behalf of the Negro Slaves in the West Indies*. After its interminable delays in the 1790s the bill for the abolition of the slave trade had finally been passed in 1807. After this date there was a decline in abolition activity until interest in British slavery picked up by the early 1820s, and the drive was now on for slave emancipation in the British Colonies. On 18 December 1823 Wilberforce's arguments were met with a resounding counterblast from Cobbett's *Political Register*. The piece included a bizarre reinvention of the story of what happened in San Domingue in the 1790s, which can best be understood as parodic fantasy growing out of previous pro-slavery rhetoric:

The French Colony of St. Domingo was, perhaps, previous to the year 1792, the brightest spot the sun saw in the whole of its course; and, perhaps, the happiest spot, too. The whole colony was a garden; its products were immense; the slaves had nothing of slavery about them except the name. They were treated, almost universally, as men treat the best of servants. The town of Cape François surpassed in riches, (in proportion to its size), in brilliancy, in gaiety, in joyousness any town or city of which we, in modern times, have any knowledge. The town and the whole colony, were the admiration of all who beheld them. To go to St. Domingo was not like going to a place of trade; it was to be lost amidst scenes of hospitality and delight.

Santhonax and Polverel, [the notorious Jacobin Commissioners active in San Domingo during the most violent stages of the slave revolts] two "philanthropists", were sent out by the National Assembly of France to this scene of riches and happiness; and in about three months from the day of their arrival, the beautiful plantations were laid waste, the proprietors and their families were either butchered or driven into exile and beggary; and the light of the sun was obscured by the smoke which begun to ascend from dwellings formerly so full of every thing desirable to man. I saw thousands of these miserable exiles; and I most cordially joined them in cursing the

<sup>37</sup> For Cobbett's influence on Carlyle and Ruskin, see pp. 360–2, 391–4 below, and for a recent discussion of Carlyle and Ruskin on race and Empire, see Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1993), 94–5, 123–6.

<sup>38</sup> For the first time an overview of this aspect of Cobbett's writing is possible with the publication of *The Collected Social and Political Writings of William Cobbett*.

hypocrites that had been the cause of their ruin. I saw many hundreds, and I dare say, thousands of negroe slaves, who had escaped with their masters and mistresses. Not one of them did I ever see, or ever hear of, who, though at perfect liberty to do it, attempted to quit those masters or mistresses. And what has been the result? . . . The consequence as to the wretched negroes themselves. This consequence has been a series of massacres, continuing, with little intermission, for one-and thirty years and put a stop to, from time to time, only by a system of slavery ten times harder than that which existed before; and which system of slavery and that alone has prevented the complete extermination of the wretched beings to whom Santhonax and Polverel gave, what they had the infamy to call, freedom.

With this example before their eyes, will our Ministers lend their hand to any thing having a tendency towards an emancipating tendency?<sup>39</sup>

Cobbett's tirade is retrograde; had it been published during the French Revolution it would have appeared as an extreme if orthodox piece of pro-slavery rhetoric. It reasserts in the most abandoned strokes every pat argument with which the pro-planter lobby met the events in San Domingue in 1791. Cobbett's fiction provides an idyllic account of pre-slavery plantation life, fuses extreme Jacobinism and abolitionism, and sees a demonic manifestation of this fusion in the Jacobin commissioners Santhonax and Polverel. The account also stresses the loyalty and love of the house slaves for their desolated owners. The rebel slaves are presented as motivated by a politically uninformed barbarism, and their fate is to end in a worse slavery after the revolution, while the revolution itself threatens terrible dangers for the entire British Caribbean. All these were well tried and tested pro-slavery positions, the only novelty lies in the extremity with which Cobbett's bullying exaggeration reinvents them. One thing this passage teaches is the continuing centrality of the San Domingue revolution to accounts of slavery and abolition, another is the real danger of making any simple equations between Radical reform and pro-slavery sentiment in England from 1790 to 1820.<sup>40</sup>

The image of the black slave in Europe changed dramatically and irrevocably in late October 1791 when news first began to circulate that more than

<sup>39</sup> *Cobbett's Weekly Register*, 16 Dec. 1823, cols. 584-7.

<sup>40</sup> The most extreme and popular atrocity literature was *Account by the planter Deputies of San Domingo before the French National Assembly at the beginning of November 1791* (London, 1792), and Bryan Edwards's *An Historical Account of the French Colony in the Island of San Domingo: Comprehending . . . a Narrative of the calamities which have desolated the island ever since the year 1789 with some reflections on their causes and probable consequences and a detail of the British Army in that Island to the end of 1794* (London, 1794). For the whole span of responses to San Domingue, see Michael Duffy, *Soldiers, Sugar, and Seapower: The British Expeditions to the West Indies and the War against Revolutionary France* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 225-8, 298-303, 377-8; David Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution: The British Occupation of San Domingue 1793-1798* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 79-132, 360-72, 387-91.

100,000 slaves had risen in the great plain of North San Domingue, fired hundreds of plantations, and murdered thousands of whites. With a remarkable alacrity a flood of publications giving detailed accounts of the most horrific violence changed the popular perception of blacks in England. Burke, who in the 1780s had thrown the weight of his reputation behind the reform and eventual abolition of slavery and the slave trade, had to absorb developments in San Domingue. What resulted was one of the most extreme reactions to the Slave Rebellion to emerge from London. Burke incorporated the slaves within an alternative mythological paradigm which he had been instrumental in developing, that of the foaming animality of Jacobin France. In the unstable world of his imaginative re-creation black and white became curiously interchangeable, he operates a satiric miscegenation in which the black Jacobins are the demonic extension of white Jacobinism, the revolutionary devil you don't know engendered by the one that you do.<sup>41</sup>

Some of the most fevered passages in the *Letters on a Regicide Peace* describe, with crazy elaboration, the hideous unions which the mingling of white and black revolutions engendered in Burke's distraught mind. Slave/savage and Jacobin/savage, white/Jacobin and black/Jacobin are conjoined, and through their ideological union ironically attain a charged equality in iniquity. Without law or morality these imaginative hybrids commit excesses which submerge them in a common chaos—the effluence of Burke's outrage.<sup>42</sup>

Burke's horror reaches one of its crescendos in the First letter when he makes a Gillrayesque leap of the imagination to present the fantasy of England overrun by 'the Regicides in France'. The King and Queen are murdered, the princesses 'whose beauty and modest elegance are the ornaments of their country, and who are the leaders and patterns of the ingenuous youth of their sex' are 'put to a cruel and ignominious death' and the bankers are 'drawn out as from an hen coop for slaughter . . . would not [Burke demands] persecuted English loyalty cry out with an awful warning voice, and denounce rebels, traitors, regicides, and furious negro slaves, whose crimes have broke their chains?'<sup>43</sup>

Burke then imagines havoc in our colonial possessions along the model of San Domingue:

How must we feel if the pride and flower of the English nobility and gentry, who might escape the pestilential clime and the devouring sword, should, if taken prisoners, be delivered over as rebel subjects, to be condemned as rebels as traitors, as the vilest of

<sup>41</sup> For effects of San Domingue, Duffy, *Soldiers, Sugar, and Seapower*; Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 411–12; Geggus, *Slavery*, 382–91.

<sup>42</sup> For the most extreme passages, see Edmund Burke, *The Speeches and Writings of Edmund Burke*, 9 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991–7), ix. 147–8, 156, 245–6, 254–7, 272–5.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* 254–5.



all criminals, by the tribunals formed of Maroon negro slaves, covered over with the blood of their masters, who were made free and organised into judges for their robberies and murders?<sup>44</sup>

This passage could easily be mistaken for a piece of Cobbett, the Cobbett of the American pamphlet period or the rabid foe of abolition and Wilberforce nearly fifty years later. This raises two questions: the first is the extent to which Cobbett was capable of distancing himself from the Loyalist propaganda generated by the San Domingue revolution, and the second is the extent to which Cobbett was, at any point, capable of ideological development over the issue of slavery. He is a perpetual Burke mimic. A comparison of the 1823 attack on Wilberforce quoted above with Cobbett's writings on San Domingue in the 1790s indicates how determinedly consistent he was in his racial prejudices. The 1823 diatribe is in fact an expanded reiteration of an attack, which he wrote on Dr Priestley while Cobbett was resident in America way back in 1794. Cobbett wrote *Observations on the Emigration of Dr. Priestley* as a warning of the potentially dire effects of French Jacobinism in Europe and America.<sup>45</sup> Priestley is seen to have got what he deserved when his house and laboratory were attacked and destroyed and his life threatened by a Loyalist mob during the Birmingham riots. The disturbances were sparked off by Jacobin sympathisers celebrating the anniversary of the storming of the Bastille. In defence of his position Cobbett moves from the Terror in Paris to a consideration of the San Domingue revolution:

The stale pretense that the league against the French has been the cause of their inhuman conduct to each other, cannot, by the most perverse sophistry, be applied to the island of St. Domingo. That fine rich colony was ruined, its superb capital and villas reduced to ashes, one half of its inhabitants massacred, and the other half reduced to beggary, before an enemy ever appeared on the coast. No: it is that system of anarchy and blood that was celebrated at Birmingham, on the 14 July 1791, that has been the cause of all this murder and devastation.<sup>46</sup>

Cobbett's argument that the anarchic essence of Parisian Jacobinism can be studied in its purist form through what happened in the French colonies was taken directly from Burke. Indeed *Priestley's Emigration* continues by stating that Priestley should have taken warning from the numerous Loyalist political prophecies anticipating what French developments would lead to. Cobbett cites a large body of political prophecy on the topic, but the example he chooses to quote at length in support of his argument is from one of Burke's parliamentary speeches:

<sup>44</sup> Burke, *Speeches and Writings*, ix. 255.

<sup>45</sup> Cobbett, *Collected Writings*, i. 26–36; Spater, *Poor Man's Friend*, i. 49–51, 70–1.

<sup>46</sup> Cobbett, *Collected Writings*, i. 26.

The French Constitution . . . is founded upon what is called the *rights* of man; but, to my conviction, it is founded on the *wrongs* of man; and I now hold in my hand an example of its effects on the French colonies. Domingo, Guadeloupe, and the other French islands, were rich, happy, and growing in strength and consequence, in spite of the three last distressing wars, before they heard of the new doctrine of the rights of man; but these rights were no sooner arrived at the islands than any spectator would have imagined that Pandora's box had been opened, and that hell had yawned out discord, murder, and every mischief; for anarchy, confusion and bloodshed, raged every where; it was a general summons for:

'Black spirits and white,  
 'Blue spirits and gray,  
 'Mingle, mingle, mingle,  
 'You that mingle may.'<sup>47</sup>

Burke conjoins the French Revolution, and the spectre of black revolution, more crucially he twins miscegenation with Jacobin atrocity. This was also a standard pro-slavery response—consider for example the Earl of Abingdon's parliamentary assault upon the abolition/Jacobin conflation. He envisions ideological union in terms of an explicitly sexual miscegenetic rhetoric: 'all being equal blacks and whites, French and English, wolves and lambs, shall all, "merry companions every one," promiscuously pig together; engendering. . . a new species of man as the product of this philosophy'.<sup>48</sup> The descent from human interbreeding to animal is a move which Cobbett frequently made himself when he came to incorporate miscegenation into his political arguments.<sup>49</sup> Burke's fusions were similarly absorbed at an early stage into both pro-slavery's and Cobbett's ideological armories, and lingered there, to be drawn upon when occasion called.

### The Strange Pervasiveness of Miscegenetic Phobias

The passage quoted above which Cobbett, as fledgling political journalist, selected from Burke, provides a violent introduction to the racist basis of his Radical political theory. Burke's immediate association of extreme Jacobinism with miscegenation, his definition of social anarchy through the idea that white people would willingly mate with black people, is not eccentric to, but central within, Cobbett's writings on race.

For Cobbett black people were quite definitely not men and brothers or women and sisters. In 1804 Cobbett is still surveying San Domingue in Burkean terms in order to defend the suffering of the English labourer:

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> *Parliamentary History*, 11 Apr. 1793.

<sup>49</sup> For an account of the continued political manipulation of 'amalgamationist' and 'miscegenationist' metaphors in England, see Young, *Colonial Desire*, 9–18, 142–9.

The state of San Domingo is as wretched and the deeds committed upon the whites as bloody, as any negro-lover could possibly wish. . . . And it is a shame to hear men in this kingdom lamenting, or affecting to lament, the hardships and privations of the negroes when so many objects of real compassion amongst their fellow subjects seem to attract but a very little share of their attention. The negroes are a bloody minded race: they are made and marked for servitude and subjection: it is the purpose which they were obviously intended for, and every day affords us fresh proof.<sup>50</sup>

Cobbett's race agenda is most quintessentially Burkean in its continual projection of horror at the idea of miscegenation, and his conviction that black males libidinally desired to prey on white females remained consistent. Cobbett's dehumanizing of blacks constitutes a formula by which black people can be evicted from the possibility of competing with the European labouring classes for intellectual recognition, or at a more basic level, emotional empathy. His rhetorical disenfranchisement of blacks was articulated with a bigoted fulsomeness which suggests that the linguistics of Western racism are depressingly transhistorical from the late eighteenth century to the present day.<sup>51</sup>

Cobbett begins an 1804 harangue on Wilberforce's latest bill to abolish the slave trade by stating that the British public are sick of the whole debate and that 'not a few of them would consent to be deprived of the power of hearing' rather than be subjected to hearing more about it. He then shifts the discussion to consider the existence of a black population in Britain: 'The importation and propagation of negroes in *this country* is, however, with me, a matter of much greater importance than the manner of catching them in Africa, or working them in the West-Indies', a social tendency which he sees as inevitably degrading 'the mind and character of the common people'.<sup>52</sup> The attack continues:

To confine myself, at present, to the Negroes . . . who, that has any sense or decency, can help being shocked at the familiar intercourse, which has gradually been gaining ground, and which has, at last, got a complete footing between the Negroes and the women of England? No black swain need, in this loving country, hang himself in despair. No inquiry is made whether he be a Pagan or a Christian; if he be not a downright cripple, he will, if he be so disposed, always find a woman, not merely to yield

<sup>50</sup> *Political Register*, 28 July 1804, cols. 125–6.

<sup>51</sup> For a comprehensive historical overview of the popular reception of the milestones of scientific racism, see Augstein, *Race*; for the longevity and popular influence of extreme eighteenth-century racist theory, see Philip D. Curtin, *The Image of Africa: British Ideas and Action 1780–1850* (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 1964), 46–7, 240–3, 253–7; Anthony J. Barker, *The African Link: British Attitudes to the Negro in the Era of the African Slave Trade 1550–1807* (London: Frank Cass, 1978), 157–94; for connections between abolition and the rise of racism, see Seymour Drescher, 'The Ending of the Slave Trade and the Evolution of European Scientific Racism', in Joseph E. Inikori and Stanley Engerman (eds.), *The Atlantic Slave Trade: Effects on Economies, Societies and Peoples in Africa and the Americas* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1992), 365–9; for race stereotypes in the popular graphic arts, see Wood, *Blind Memory*, 151–205.

<sup>52</sup> Cobbett, *Political Register*, 16 June 1804, col. 934.

to his filthy embraces, that, amongst the notoriously polluted and abandoned part of the sex, would be less shocking, but to accompany him *to the altar*, to become his wife, to breed English mulattos, to stamp the mark of Cain upon her family and her country! Amongst white women, this disregard for decency, this defiance of the dictates of nature, this foul, this beastly propensity, is I say it with sorrow and with shame, *peculiar to the English* . . . Yes, though I would fain make an apology for my countrywomen, I cannot! Yes; notwithstanding all the encouragement they receive from the rich, still their own conduct is foul, unnatural and detestable.<sup>53</sup>

We are back with Burke's paranoia, social anarchy defined by miscegenetic impulses: 'Black spirits and white / Blue spirits and gray / Mingle mingle mingle / You that mingle may'. For Cobbett the real horror here lies in his fantasy that white women find happiness and sexual fulfillment with black men out of choice. This is a crime not only against sense and decency, but more crucially against family and Nation. As for Burke, so for Cobbett, the volitional union of Black and White defines a state outside culture, and outside humanity, women who take black men operate 'outside the dictates of nature', and are animals, literally 'beastly'. Cobbett was to go even further and suggest that blacks themselves in the colonies should stop reproducing, because the growth of their population was a threat to the development of mankind. With a wicked sense of humour he supported his argument by quoting a personal theoretical Utilitarian bugbear, Malthus on the English labouring population. He argued that enforced celibacy of all Jamaican blacks would constitute a Malthusian 'check to population . . . conducive to the *good* of mankind'.<sup>54</sup>

From the start Cobbett's writings as a political journalist use blacks and slavery within a morally dubious space. Take for example Cobbett's earliest sustained discussions of slavery within the context of the American Revolution. The 1795 *A Bone to Gnaw for the Democrats* climaxes in an assault on the 'American Union' which is seen as an ideal of political hypocrisy. Central to the definition of its ideological anarchy is slavery. Yet even in this discussion, no matter how many rhetorical houses Cobbett goes around, finally the imaginative driving force behind the writing emerges as a terror of miscegenetic union. Cobbett presents America as 'a kind of political land-mark, on one side of which, Order walks hand in hand with the most perfect Liberty; and, on the other, Anarchy revels, surrounded with its den of slaves'.<sup>55</sup> In order to prove this argument Cobbett adopts an ingeniously hands off approach in which parallel quotations from the same issue of the *Philadelphia Gazette* are used to force home the contradictions of American libertarian idealism and the existence of

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. 935–6.

<sup>54</sup> Quoted and discussed in Philip Connell, *Romanticism, Economics, and the Question of 'Culture'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 195.

<sup>55</sup> William Cobbett, *A Bone to Gnaw for the Democrats* (Philadelphia, 1796), 43.

slavery within the Union. Having quoted a list of ‘Toasts drunk on the 6th of Feb. 1794 by French and American Citizens’, and concluding ‘Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity—may they pervade the Universe. Three cheers, and a salute of three guns’, Cobbett sneeringly provides two more extracts:

one of them is an elegant account of the close of a civic feast, and the other, though not absolutely on the same subject as the first, certainly adds to its beauty. The first is the precious jewel, and the last the foil: I shall therefore place them as near as possible to each other.

After this the cap of Liberty was placed on the head of the President, then on each member. The Marseillois hymn and other similar songs were sung by different French citizen members Thus cheerfully glided the hours away of this feast made by congenial souls to commemorate the happy day, when the sons of Frenchmen joined the sons of America to overthrow tyranny in this happy land.

‘FOR SALE’  
TWO NEGRO LADS ONE ABOUT TWELVE AND THE OTHER ABOUT FIFTEEN YEARS OLD—BOTH REMARKABLY HEALTHY;—THE YOUNGEST IS NEAR FOUR FEET NINE INCHES HIGH AND THE OLDEST ABOVE FIVE FEET.—ALSO A NEGRO WENCH FOR SALE . . . EIGHTEEN YEARS OLD, AND FAR ADVANCED WITH CHILD—BUT VERY STRONG AND CAPABLE OF ANY KIND OF WORK!!!<sup>56</sup>

Cobbett’s deployment of quotation is dramatic, economic, and clever, what better way of proving the hypocrisy of the celebrants of liberty than of bringing them up against the concrete text of a slave advertisement placed within the same newspaper? Yet the terms of the attack are not innocent in the way they manipulate gender and race: once again the agenda is anchored by the fantasies Cobbett inherited from Burke. Miscegenetic union provides a metaphoric short hand for social and political anarchy. It is no coincidence that the advertisement chosen ends by focusing upon a heavily pregnant young black woman. While it could be argued that Cobbett isolated this detail because of its emotional kick, and desired the reader to feel pity for an abuse of motherhood, I would argue for a less attractive interpretation. As the attack progresses we are given more paired quotations which foreground miscegenation more explicitly. An extract from a debate on a Bill of Naturalisation in Congress which involved the proposition that foreign noblemen should only be granted citizenship if they renounced both their titles and their right to hold slaves provides the basis for the satire. The bill led to members from two slave states making the following statements:

<sup>56</sup> Quoted, Natrass, *William Cobbett*, 52.

the gentleman *durst not* come forward, and tell the house, that men who *possessed slaves* were unfit for holding an office under a *Republican* government.—He desired the gentleman to consider what might be the consequence of this motion, at this time, considering what has happened in the West Indies.—His amendment would irritate the minds of thousands of *good citizens* in the *southern* States, as it affects the *property* which they have acquired by their *industry*.—He thought that the amendment partook more of *monarchical principles* than anything he had seen for some time.

A member from *Virginia* said on the same occasion, that ‘He held *property sacred*, and never could consent to prohibit the emigrant nobility *from having slaves* any more than other people. But as for *titles of nobility* they were *quite a different thing*.<sup>57</sup>

Having carefully set up the participants for a fall, Cobbett delightedly launches into an ironic paean to American Liberty, but the thing to note here is how the attack climaxes in a disguised account of the miscegenetic union of the slave holder and female slave:

Oh! happy Carolina! happy, thrice happy Virginia! No tyrannical Aristocrat dares to lord it over the free born swains who cultivate the delicious weed, that adorns, first thy lovely fields and then the lovelier chops of the drivelling drunkard! After having spent the day in singing hymns to the Goddess of Liberty, the virtuous Democrat gets him home to his peaceful dwelling, and sleeps, with his *property* secure beneath his roof, yea, sometimes in his very *arms*; and when his ‘*industry*’ has enhanced its value, it bears to a new owner the proofs of his Democratic Delicacy!<sup>58</sup>

The black woman exists as Cobbett’s satiric tool. The writing is finally energized predominantly by Cobbett’s disgust at the union of white slave owner and black slave woman. Cobbett’s brilliant reinvention of the American act of union through a series of puns, pointed up by italicized and ironized vocabulary, critiques the economics of property ownership. His toying with the concepts of property and *industry* again looks back to a central Burkean proposition: that the French Jacobinical definition of Liberty is synonymous with anarchy. Yet again the trope of miscegenation provides the ultimate definition of this chaotic union.

### Cobbett’s Martyrology of Labour

Cobbett responded to abolition and the condition of the plantation slave through parameters defined exclusively by British domestic politics. Cobbett’s writings on slavery and abolition always circle around several of his favourite hobby horses: the sacred status of the British farmer, and of the land, the

<sup>57</sup> *Bone to Gnaw*, 47–8.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

religious hypocrisy of the Clapham sect, and the superiority of the British labourer over any foreign rival black or white. Or to put it another way, whenever he writes about slavery it is within a larger agenda set on the celebration of Nation through a mythologization of the English labour force, and more specifically the English farm.

Plantation slavery in the Caribbean only came alive for Cobbett in these contexts, and could only be defined through his extant opinions on them. This is not surprising: the examination of the ideologically and socially unfamiliar through the familiar is a defining premiss of Western colonialism and the texts it generated. The concept of 'the other', now overused in post-colonial studies to the point of uselessness, evolved out of the position that before anything else the imperial subject knows what s/he believe themselves to be.<sup>59</sup> For Cobbett, as for the vast majority of English Radicals, the definition of self through the anathematization of the 'other' is a complicated affair. The difficulty goes beyond contemporary theory which predicates the colonial 'margin' as the originary space for the process of 'othering'. For Cobbett's Radical consciousness, the 'other' did not operate predominantly within the dynamics of colonizer and colonized, or empire and motherland. For popular Radicalism, as for popular loyalism, the primary dynamic of 'othering' existed within Britain, in a society composed of the one and the other, the haves and the have nots. In a country which was organized along ruthless lines of class division, defined in terms of political power via the disenfranchisement of the majority of the population, 'othering' operated in ways which could suspend boundaries predicated upon nationality, colour, and at times even gender.<sup>60</sup> Within the Cobbettian mythology of social types, the labouring man, the honest farmer, or artisan was primarily defined by comparison with his contrary, the placeman, the pensioner, the clergyman of the Established Church, the army officer. For Cobbett, Clapham sect philanthropy, symbolized by the figure of Wilberforce, was part and parcel of this demonology of corrupt and economically usurious social types. Cobbett was not alone in seeing in Wilberforce the embodiment of a sinister and hypocritical government plot to shift the attention of politicians and social reformers from the suffering of the labouring poor in the British isles. Radicals across a broad front, from journalistic intellectuals including Hazlitt, to front-line activists like Thomas Hardy, shared a deep dislike for Wilberforce. Yet Cobbett's fanatical faith in the sacred status of agriculture led him into arguments which in the extremity of their diction, and the lopsidedness of their

<sup>59</sup> For the ridiculous state to which the term has sunk, Lacanian misreading and all, see the definition for 'the other' in B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, and H. Tiffin (eds.), *Key Terms in Postcolonial Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 169–73.

<sup>60</sup> Young, *Colonial Desire*, 55–89. Young's work on domestic race theory and its targets within the British Isles has enormous theoretical implications for radical positioning over race.

logic, are quite outside the main body of Radical writing on the subject. He achieved some bizarre linguistic contortions in defending the planters. By the late eighteenth century, there was a well-defined stereotype of the pampered and decadent Creole planter, who in the popular mythology was second in brazen corruption only to the Nabob.<sup>61</sup> Yet under Cobbett's wand the pre-emancipation planter is reinvented as a tropical yeoman farmer: 'The planters are sugar farmers and coffee planters and their interests ought to be as scrupulously attended to as if they were farmers in Cornwall or in Yorkshire.' In Cobbett's political landscape the parasitical and chimerical Wilberforce was a far more corrupt figure than the troubled Caribbean sugar planter. But where did this leave the slave?

Blacks were in practice of no concern to Cobbett outside their rhetorical potential for either highlighting the corruption of foreign political systems or for championing the domestic suffering of the English labouring classes. Cobbett's interest in slavery was also mainly fuelled by his hatred of Clapham sect abolition. Cobbett's furious assault on the Quaker James Cropper is perhaps the most condensed articulation of his ability to incorporate blacks within his satiric arsenal. His views on slavery and planters exist primarily as an outgrowth of his ideas on Radical reform, and the agrarian revolution. This comes out clearly in the following pronouncement:

West India Planters, the greater part of whom, and the *most active* of whom, I abhor, not because they have Negroe slaves, but because they have been amongst the worst of the miscreants who have endeavoured to *enslave Englishmen*, who have, to the utmost of their miserable talents and with all the weight of their purses, upheld those infamous corruptions, for combating which, and for endeavouring to remove them, so many good men have been either killed or ruined. In short, these West Indians have been and are bitter enemies of the cause of *Reform*.<sup>62</sup>

He hates planters because of the policies they back in England, and the anti-reform lobby they support in parliament; their slave economy is an irrelevance in terms of the slave resources which operate it. Cobbett is excruciatingly clear about his professed lack of interest in the racial status of the slave:

Let me also explain myself clearly as to *Slavery*. I wish it were wholly destroyed; but, then, I am ready to dispense and to dispense in my own person, with the use of *sugar* and *coffee*; for, my opinion is, that they are not to be had by us, in any considerable quantities, *without the employment of slaves*. That the Negroes are a race of beings *inferior* to white men I do not take upon me to assert; for black is as good a *colour* as white.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>61</sup> See James Raven, *Judging New Wealth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 221–2, 228, 245–6; for caricatures, Wood, *Blind Memory*, 154–77.

<sup>62</sup> *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register*, 4 Aug. 1821, col. 147 (hereinafter *Cobbett's Register*).

<sup>63</sup> *Cobbett's Register*, 4 Aug. 1821, cols. 147–8.



So far so good, this would seem a model of balanced enlightenment, but the disinterested comparisons continue in terms which immediately give the game away. Cobbett's professed airy disconcert over the relative value of black or white is a trap which he soon springs: the passage above continues by developing a series of jaw-breakingly crude stereotypes. The inventories of Edward Long move back into place as blacks are figured as monkeys, as dogs, as outside human reason, as irrepressibly comic, as malodorous and finally quite simply as beasts:

and the Baboon may, for any thing I know or care, be *higher* in the scale of nature than man. Certainly the negroes are of a *different sort* from the Whites. An almost complete absence of the reasoning faculties, a sort of dog-like grin, and a *ya-ya-ya* laugh, when spoken to, may be, for any thing that I know, marks of *superiority*; and indeed, we should be disposed to adopt this opinion, if we were to draw our conclusions from the choice which has, in some countries, been made of white men to be invested with power; for, they come very near to Negroes in all respects except colour of skin and smell of carcass. I am, therefore, not presumptuous enough to take upon me to assert, that the Blacks are not the *superior* beings; but, I deny all *equality*. They are a *different* race; and for Whites to mix with them is not a bit less odious than the mixing with those creatures which, unjustly apparently, we call beasts.<sup>64</sup>

Crude this may be, but its basic argument has terrible implications for the development of white supremacist systems of racial segregation in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Again the terror of miscegenation lies at the heart of argument. Cobbett's theory of difference is, in essence, an extreme definition of apartheid, an ultimate separationist stance; the issue of black and white equality is not an issue at all because blacks and whites cannot and should not be compared. The final sentence places the taboo topic of miscegenation beyond the bounds of practical and rational possibility. Cobbett is using the word 'race' in its older sense of a separate genus, and suggesting that the union of black and white is on a par with bestialism. That which is most disconcerting, about Cobbett's racism, and a quality which has seduced so many commentators on his writings to sideline or excuse this aspect of his writing, is the cynical complexity of the stylistic disguise which introduces it:

Nevertheless I would not *enslave* them; and yet if I were so unfortunate as to be the ruler of a slave country, I would not be induced by canting hypocrites to set them free to cut the throats of their owners; for *free* they cannot be in any considerable numbers, without a total change as to property and as to the security to life. They will not work unless *compelled* to work. They are true *sinecure* gentlemen and ladies.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>64</sup> *Cobbett's Register*, 4 Aug. 1821, cols. 147.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.* 147-8.

Cobbett fuses one of the mantras of English Radicalism with one of the mantras of English racism. A constant target of Radical satire and polemic throughout the three decades 1790–1820 were the corrupt beneficiaries of the sinecure system of places and pensions. In setting the free post-emancipation black up as a new form of sinecurist, Cobbett is misappropriating the inherited political vocabulary of English Radicalism. He performs an obscene rhetorical miscegenation which irresponsibly combines white corrupt aristocracy and the black colonial communities of free ex-slave. That Cobbett's imagination could knowingly accomplish such a cultural transposition indicates the complexity of the task which now faces us in rethinking the relationship between Radicalism and racism during the revolutionary period.

At times Cobbett comes close to admitting that his exaggerated and simplified descriptions of the blacks are a necessary fiction in his unbending mission to discredit the Clapham 'Saints':

You [Wilberforce] seem to have a great affection for the fat and lazy and laughing and singing negroes; they it is for whom you feel compassion: I feel for the careworn, the ragged, hard-pinched, the ill-treated, and beaten down and trampled upon labouring classes of England, Scotland, and Ireland, to whom . . . you do all the mischief that it is in your power to do; because you describe their situation as being good, and because you do, in some degree at any rate, draw the public attention from their sufferings.<sup>66</sup>

Cobbett believes himself to be fighting a humanitarian battle for the misrepresented labouring Englishman, and even Scotsman and Irishman, and there are consequently a series of assumptions which underlie his rhetoric. The absurd extended compound 'the fat and lazy and laughing and singing negroes' does not exist primarily as an attack upon blacks, for Cobbett deemed such an attack unnecessary; it exists as a marker against which to measure the detailed examination of the poor in England which follows. The assumptions behind such a compound are as follows. First, extreme distortions are necessary to set the balance right against Wilberforce's callous misrepresentation of the labouring poor. Secondly, the rhetoric of the abolitionists is bad because it siphons off available supplies of public benevolence, and must be countered with a brutal set of rhetorical countermeasures for the description of blacks. We are back with the essentially combative basis of Cobbett's race rhetoric when he addresses the nexus of Wilberforce, the slave, the poor English labourer, and emancipation. Cobbett goes to war with the abolitionists, seeing all their publications as a personal affront to the labouring poor of England. In order to attack abolition he appropriates the most extreme forms of abolition propaganda and reinvents them to prove the extremity of the plight of the poor in England. For example,

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 30 Aug. 1823, col. 553.

he uses the abolitionist reprinting of the most outrageous articles in the slave codes as a text which if refuted, step by step, can precisely define the suffering of the cotton weavers of Tyldesley. The list of fines under which they work are set out as a slave code for the English workers:

A list of fines at Tyldesley; and the heat from 80–84 degrees;  
 Any spinner found with his window open .....1.s.  
 Any spinner found dirty at his work .....1.s.  
 Any spinner found washing .....1.s.  
 Any spinner heard whistling .....1.s.  
 Any spinner found together in the necessary  
 each man.....1.s.

Read it Wilberforce and then go back to the West Indies, collect a parcel of Black people together and offer them a comfortable situation amongst these ‘free British labourers’ . . . look at their perishing and emaciated frames: then look at your fat lazy and laughing, singing and dancing negroes and negresses; and then believe, if you can; flatter yourself if you are able, that we shall think you a man of humanity, making as you do such a bawling about the imaginary sufferings of the latter.<sup>67</sup>

Cobbett’s position makes Radicalism’s imaginative construction of the masses of the slave plantations, the colonial labouring ‘other’, intensely problematic. The Radical consciousness was forced, if only at the level of racist negation, to acknowledge the basis of its engagement with slavery as an ironic power struggle, ironic because it involved the articulation of dis-empowerment as a positive. The fundamental energizing force behind the majority of Radical writing which does introduce the subject of colonial slavery is envious and competitive. The central concern is to prove that the labouring masses of Britain are more disadvantaged—that they suffer more, and are exploited more, and are abused more fully—than any other group, including colonial slaves. In this sense the British labourer becomes a parody of the plantation slave. In Cobbett this obsession with articulating the labouring classes as a collective martyrological ideal reaches its apogee. Yet the rhetorical celebration of this essential disadvantage is achieved at a terrible price for the colonial slave populations. Throughout the whole range of Cobbett’s writings which discuss slavery, white economic hardship, physical suffering, and political disadvantage are placed in perpetual, if sometimes implicit, comparison with the absolute dis-empowerment which defines the state of the plantation slave. The slave populations were cut off from a claim to the political rights of Radicalism, and the mechanism by which this severance was achieved was a crude racism. Blacks were not seen as part of the class struggle because they were not seen as human.

<sup>67</sup> *Cobbett’s Register*, 30 Aug. 1823, col. 553.

Viewed from this perspective Radical antipathy to the humanitarian claims of abolition propaganda makes perfect sense.<sup>68</sup>

### John Thelwall and Radical Solidarity with the Slave

Jim Walvin first put forward the view that abolition, from its first rise to attention as a mass movement in 1788, exerted a decided influence on the development of popular Radicalism in Britain.<sup>69</sup> This view has now been heavily qualified, both by Walvin and others. Scholars, with Patricia Hollis at their head, have argued that Radicals became increasingly suspicious of organized abolitionism in the first three decades of the nineteenth century. Popular Radical demagogues and journalists including Henry Hunt and Henry Hetherington, as well as Cobbett, singled out the anti-slavery movement, and Willberforce, in particular, because of its increasing connection with emergent bourgeois political economy, and because of its strong links with a type of establishment Evangelicalism which the Radicals had come to associate with a support for the political repression of the poor. There was particular fury over the way in which prominent abolitionists, with Lord Brougham at their head, contributed to, and supported, the Poor Law.<sup>70</sup> Hollis argues that the Chartists got to the stage of regarding the violent disruption of anti-slavery meetings as an act of Radical solidarity and class consciousness.<sup>71</sup>

It has become something of a commonplace to claim common political roots for both Chartism and abolition in the general pronouncements of English

<sup>68</sup> The most significant attempts to uncover the ideological interrelationships between abolition and ultra-Radicalism are Iain McCalman, 'Anti-Slavery and Ultra-Radicalism in Early Nineteenth-Century England: The Case of Robert Wedderburn', *Slavery and Abolition*, 7/2 (1986), 99–117; Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries and Pornographers in London, 1790–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 43–4, 51–60, 69–71, 145–8, 191–3; McCalman (ed.), *Horrors of Slavery*. For Radicalism, abolition, and the operations of racism, Drescher, 'Ending of the Slave Trade'.

<sup>69</sup> There has been debate on the issue of the relations between abolition and Radicalism since the publication of Walvin's, 'Impact of Slavery', 343–67. Subsequent work has indicated the fundamental differences between the mainstream publicity methods of the two movements. See Seymour Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery: British Mobilisation in Comparative Perspective* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 40, 63, 117, 84–5, 124, 138, 142–9, 200, 252–4; J. Walvin, 'The Public Campaign in England Against Slavery 1787–1834,' in D. Eltis and J. Walvin (eds.), *The Abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981), 67–8; Betty Fladeland, *Abolitionists and Working Class Problems in the Age of Industrialisation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 98, 104; for an overview of Radical reform and abolition in the Chartist period, see Miles Taylor, *The Decline of British Radicalism, 1847–1860* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 179–83.

<sup>70</sup> McCalman, 'Anti-Slavery and Ultra-Radicalism'.

<sup>71</sup> Patricia Hollis, 'Anti-Slavery and British Working Class Radicalism in the Years of Reform', in Christine Bolt and Seymour Drescher (eds.), *Anti-Slavery, Religion and Reform: Essays in Memory of Roger Anstey* (Folkestone: Archon, 1980), 297–311.

Radicals in the late eighteenth century.<sup>72</sup> The idea of an early link between reform and abolition is still supported, yet it is very unclear to what extent this ever went beyond the general enthusiasm for abolition which increasingly swept the country in the 1782–91 period. Perhaps even more fascinating, though almost completely unresearched, is the possibility that extreme English revolutionary Radicals were influenced by the experience and political theory of blacks who had been involved in slave insurrections in the Caribbean and then ended up among the London proletariat.<sup>73</sup> Granville Sharp (never a straightforward contributor to the mainstream reform campaign of 1790–94), Major Cartwright, and Thomas Hardy all made pronouncements on the abstract equality of black and white, on their common experience in labour exploitation, and on their common requirements for reform, although all of them seem to have stopped short of advocating combined and violent political collaboration between Caribbean slave and English labourer.<sup>74</sup>

But it is noticeable that these statements, which have become a virtual litany for historians attempting to establish connections between Radicalism and slavery, were nearly all in the form of private correspondence or reported speech in later biographical sources. Also while they are thin on the ground in the period 1788–92 they appear to all but disappear during the later 1790s, and on into the first two decades of the nineteenth century. Racism and Negrophobia in England were standard and deeply rooted; it took great intellectual stamina to consciously detach them from their contexts, let alone resist them. A general support for the abolition of the slave trade during the heady days of early abolition enthusiasm did not provide the basis for the serious integration of the two movements when the going got tough after the San Domingue uprising and the declaration of war with France. It is a grave mistake to assume that Radicals shared an understanding of the minutiae of abolitionist politics, or that they even had an instinctive sympathy with the physical realities of suffering black slaves. Sharp and Hardy were, it appears, unusual among white Radicals, and come to that abolitionists, in having close personal and intellectual contacts with black freed slaves, and political activists in Britain.

<sup>72</sup> Oldfield, *Popular Politics*, 97–8, suggests some relations between the Wilkite inheritance and the abolition propaganda strategies in the period 1788–92. Oldfield, 96–103, also develops the important argument that the London Committee of the SEAST, although the most influential of the Abolition Committees, was also politically the most timorous in terms of its preparedness to admit connections with Radicalism. He demonstrates that it was the provincial Committees, and particularly those of Manchester and Newcastle, which combined Radicalism and abolition in their work.

<sup>73</sup> See Linebaugh, *London Hanged*, 136–7, and James Walvin (ed.), *Slavery and British Society 1776–1846* (London: Macmillan, 1982).

<sup>74</sup> For Sharp as propagandist, see Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament* (London, 1808), i. 95–8. For Sharp's mingling of Radicalism and abolition, see Fladeland, *Abolitionists*, 1–16.

Equiano was instrumental in helping Hardy forge links with abolitionists and members of the Corresponding Society in Sheffield, but this collaboration appears exceptional.<sup>75</sup>

How deep do the connections between Radicalism and abolition really go? From mid-1795 until the end of the century there appear to be no Radical publications, apart from Thelwall's *Tribune*, which attempt a detailed comparison between the aims and exploited status of the poor white labourer in England and the black slave in the Caribbean. The theory, generally subscribed to by Radicals, that many of the poor in England were worse off than the majority of slaves in the Caribbean, was a difficult one for Radicals to square with a commitment to abolition. This line was, after all, a classic planter argument in defence of the paternalistic and benevolent basis of plantation slavery. The comparison of the British labourer and the plantation slave soon became a commonplace in basic broadside and print expressions of the suffering of the poor, and by the mid-1790s it was not exclusive to the planter lobby. The slave became necessary for the definition of the suffering labourer: you could not define the one without the other. The youthful print satirist Richard Newton produced a classic expression of this comparative impulse in his *Justice and Humanity at Home* where Wilberforce comments upon seeing an English labourer beaten. 'I and my tribe must look abroad for acts of cruelty and oppression. This is so near home it is beneath our notice. My duty to my maker teaches me thus to act.' This line had become a commonplace in parliamentary debates and it was this which inspired Thelwall, as late as 1795, to confront the paradox which it posed for British Radicalism and to produce one of the most trenchant pleas for the ideological unification of abolition and reform theory.

I want to focus on Thelwall here, because in many ways he acts as such an intriguing counterfoil to Cobbett, and because his originality as a political thinker on the issues of race, slavery, nationalism, and the West India trade monopolies have not been recognized. It has recently been convincingly argued that Thelwall was the most significant public orator and political theoretician during the initial burst of London mass Radicalism which centred around the London Corresponding Society in the early 1790s. As Gregory Claeys has rightly stressed the inordinate interest in the life and writings of Paine has tended to drown out Thelwall's centrality as a rhetorician of popular Radicalism, as a political and economic theorist of property and as a Radical activist.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Linebaugh, *London Hanged*, 415–16. For Equiano's correspondence with Hardy, BL Add. MS 27811, London Corresponding Society, vol. i, letter 18 April 1792. Hardy is known at one point to have had Olaudah Equiano living with him. Sharp's benevolent dealings with poor black slaves in the 1770s and 1780s are documented in Prince Hoare, and in Clarkson, *History*.

<sup>76</sup> It is only with the recent publication of Gregory Claeys's *Politics of English Jacobinism: The Writings of John Thelwall* that it is possible to gain an overview of the remarkable range of

While Thelwall's reintegration into the centre of 1790s Radical publication and theory is now underway, one area which continues to remain eccentric, when noticed at all, is his remarkable position over the questions of slavery and race. To an extraordinary degree Thelwall appears to have stood out against the Negrophobe orthodoxies of English Radicalism. Unlike the majority of Radicals engaged in grass-roots activism, he was not a political pragmatist over questions of race and empire, but remained a profound idealist. The Thelwall who emerges from the great speeches and open letters of the mid-1790s is a figure who hated all social and political injustice with an intensity and uncompromising absolutism that put him, as a disciple of Godwin's *Political Justice*, next to Shelley, and nowhere near Cobbett.

Thelwall's engagement with slavery is varied and frequently astonishingly bold. The first extended treatment of slavery in his recorded political oratory consists of a bizarre anecdote 'related by Citizen Thelwall, at the Capel Court Society' in which he turned the tables on Cobbettian style denigration of the slave's capacity to suffer.<sup>77</sup> In this piece Thelwall sets up a parallel between the multiple tortures and eventual execution of a West Indian slave and the killing of a cockerel, who exists within Thelwall's political fable as a thinly disguised representation of King George III. The relevant passage is worth quoting at some length because it is unique in the boldness of its comparative base—the pairing of slave torture and genocide:

We have been told, Citizen Chairman! by a learned orator . . . that the love of life must certainly have the strongest influence on the actions of mankind . . . He has told [a] melancholy tale of a poor tortured slave in the West Indies . . . This poor kidnapped negro, we are told (for there are pressgangs to make men *slaves of labour* as well as *slaves of war*), having had his hands and feet chopped off, by order of this tyrant masters, on account of some seditious attempt to regain his freedom, was afterwards put into a large frying pan over the fire, that he might expiate, by his tortures, that impious love of liberty which he had the audacity to entertain. In the midst of his torments, we are told, that one of his companions, more compassionate than the rest, rushed towards him, and, aiming a blow with his cudgel, would have dashed out his brains, had not the poor mutilated wretch conceived (such is the curious reasoning that is offered to us by the tame advocates of life without liberty) that the tortures of the frying pan were preferable to instant death, and therefore lifted his poor bleeding stumps, with sudden terror, and broke the force of the blow. Now if this magnanimous advocate for the *frying pan of despotism*, had happened to have reflected a little on the physical laws of the animal frame, he would have known that this motion of

Thelwall's thought and style. For a fine overview of the career and writings, see the introduction, pp. xiii–liv.

<sup>77</sup> The piece is printed in Daniel Isaac Eaton's ultra-Radical journal, *Pig's Meat or Politics for the People*, vol. i, part 1, no. 5, p. 1.

the arms was merely involuntary, and that neither love, nor fear, nor liberty, nor any other preference of the judgment, had anything at all to do with it—it being natural to all animals, after they have been long used to perform certain actions in consequence of any particular stimulus, applied either to the sight or any other of the senses, to continue those actions, by mere mechanical impulse, whenever the usual objects are presented, without ever reflecting what it is that they are doing . . . I had a very fine majestic kind of animal, a game cock: a haughty and sanguinary tyrant, nursed in blood and slaughter from his infancy—fond of foreign wars and *domestic rebellions*, into which he would sometimes drive his subjects, by his oppressive obstinacy, in hopes that he might increase his power and glory by their suppression . . . So I believe, if guillotines had been in fashion I should have certainly guillotined him . . . However, I managed the business very well; for I caught Mr. Tyrant by the head and dragging him immediately to the block with a heavy knife in my hand separated his neck at a blow: and what will surprise you very much, when his fine trappings were stripped off, I found he was no better than a common tame scratch-dung-hill pullet: no, nor half so good, for he was tough, and oily, and rank with the pollutions of his luxurious vices. But that which it is particularly my duty to dwell upon, as applicable to the story of the poor mutilated negro, is the continuance of the habitual muscular motion after (by means of the loss of his head) he was no longer capable of knowing what he was about. In short, having been long in the habit of flying up, and *striking* with his spurs, and cuffing about with his *arms*—or his *wings*, if you please (for anatomists can tell you, that arms are only wings without feathers and wings are nothing but feathered arms) he still continued the same hostile kind of action, bouncing, and flapping, and spurring and scuffling about, till the muscular energy (as they call it) was exhausted.

This is terrific writing: Thelwall has created a satiric *tour de force* which works at a series of levels. Most obviously the parable of Chaunteclere parodies Burke's increasingly extreme fantasies eulogizing the merits of tradition, monarchy, and inherited aristocracy. The comic climax operates both a Burkean and Paineite parodies. The revelation that the apparently powerful and beautiful bird is in reality nothing more than a dung-hill pullet, develops out of one of Paine's most celebrated aphorisms concerning Burkean monarchophilia. When Paine stated that in relating to the fate of the French Royal Family with such sentimental extremity Burke 'pitied the plumage but forgot the dying Bird', he opened the door for Thelwall's fabular parody. Here the monarch is transformed from plumed beauty to both dead and dying bird, but the dead bird is revealed, beneath its plumage to be well beneath the calibre of the average plebeian corpse. Thelwall's bizarre comparison goes even further than this, however, when he compares the dying bird to the body of the tortured dying slave. Thelwall initially plays dangerously with pro-slave rhetoric which animalizes the slave. His account of slave torture has a tone of amused brutality which is disturbing, while also, in the use of the frying pan imagery, flirting with



cannibalistic metaphor. It is, however, only in the grotesque conclusion that we see the satiric justification for this racist mimicry. The reality of torture and execution are seen to operate a horrific leveling system in which instinct and reflexology conjoin not only slave and animal, but Western Royalty as well. Thelwall's final point is that there is nothing which separates the suffering humanity of Louis XVI (or the imagined sufferings of George III) from those of an anonymous tortured black slave. Thelwall goes further and points out that in terms of basic physiological response there is nothing to separate the corpse of a newly decapitated King from that of a pullet. Pain and cruelty do not discriminate in terms of social station, race, genus, or species.

Yet Thelwall's originality in satirizing Burke in the context of race and labour was not restricted to the ironic paralleling of slave and royalty. Thelwall's *Tribune* frequently included discussions of, and references to, slavery in the colonies which were unprecedented in their committed recognition of the equalities between exploited British labour forces and those of the plantations. For example in an attack on the rejection of Catholic emancipation in Ireland and of British military coercion, Thelwall attacks Nationalism cleverly through reference to the recent rise of abolition. He opens with a passionate anti-racist assault on the destructive capacity of Nationalist fictions within Britain by referring to the brotherhood that unites English, Scottish, and Irish: 'Citizens, I speak not from national feelings, I wish to triumph over all nationality: and with me, indeed there is now no such national distinction between *Irishmen, Scotchmen and Englishmen*.'<sup>78</sup> Yet he immediately extends the discussion, in a tone of high sarcasm, to the slave colonies:

The light of reason has gone abroad, humanity has warmed the breast of man; and we have found (strange indeed that we should have been so long in making the discovery!) that even the sooty *African* is our brother: that even the poor 'whip-galled slave' in the *West Indies*, deserves our commiseration: and, this being the case, do you suppose we can be blind to this still more evident truth, that *English, Scotch and Irish*, are one and the same.<sup>79</sup>

No other theorist of the period was capable of indicating the fundamental connections between Nationalism and the prejudicial mechanisms of racism.

With great sophistication Thelwall also attempted an alignment of black and white within the exploitative dynamics of proto-capitalist trade monopolies. In an article in *The Tribune* in October 1795 he developed an argument which grew out of Adam Smith's strictures on the inefficiency of West Indian trade monopolies, but which gave Smith an extreme and quirky Radical spin.<sup>80</sup> Thelwall develops the economic position into a moral one arguing in his title

<sup>78</sup> Claeys (ed.), *Thelwall*, 237.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* 242.

<sup>80</sup> For a detailed analysis of Smith in this context, see pp. 301–4 below.

for a 'Connection between Parliamentary Corruption and Commercial Monopoly'. Thelwall goes on to make the astonishing claim that 'at present (although the open barter only appears in the infamous African slave-trade) almost all the inhabitants of the universe are rendered as it were, the saleable commodities of a few engrossers and monopolists.'<sup>81</sup> This is to see the West, and nascent global capitalism in the form of West and East India monopolies, as constituting a system of economic enslavement for black and white alike. In complete opposition to Cobbett, Thelwall was appalled at the British West India expedition, sent out to invade San Domingue and to save the West India Islands for British monopolists in the mid-1790s. He saw the British military force as the sacrifice of white youths in the cause of perpetuating the slave trade, 'Thousands of our British youth are annually sacrificed by the yellow pestilence (that high priestess to the Moloc of West Indian avarice) for the perpetuity of the African slave trade.'<sup>82</sup> Uniquely among the radicals, Thelwall isolates the British military disaster in San Domingue, where fifteen thousand troops died of the yellow fever within two years, and which was to take an eventual toll of 100,000 casualties, as a war fought to protect the slave trade within an international monopolist context.

It is however in his brilliant and furious reply to the extremities of Burke's *Letters on the Prospect of a Regicide Peace*, that in 1796 Thelwall first elaborated a detailed connection between the suffering of the labouring classes in Britain and of the slaves in the colonies.<sup>83</sup> Thelwall launches a general attack on the Burkean defence of privilege and tradition. Thelwall isolates Burke's argument that only the privileged orders can formulate the political opinion which will guide the management of the nation. He then moves on to isolate Burke's theory of social trusteeship, namely that it is the duty of the privileged orders to protect those suffering within the lower orders, both in the domestic and imperial spheres. Thelwall is a superb close reader, and moves in on the minutiae of Burke's language. When Burke sets out what he sees as the necessary basis to the relationship of the governors to the governed he uses the phrase 'the rest, [of the English population] when feeble, are the objects of protection'. For Thelwall this is a crucial slip, the word 'objects' allows Thelwall to set up a direct comparison between the ways in which the slave populations are seen by the West India monopolists, and the manner in which the labouring poor in Britain are seen by the governing classes. The processes of commodification which we earlier saw Thelwall reading implicitly within the processing of

<sup>81</sup> Claeys (ed.), *Thelwall*, 286.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.* 391.

<sup>83</sup> The whole text is reprinted Claeys (ed.), *Thelwall*, 389-436; the volume also reprints the whole of Thelwall's equally severe *Sober Reflections on the Seditious and Inflammatory Letter of The Right Hon. Edmund Burke to a Noble Lord*, 329-87.

humanity by monopolies are now developed into the more frightening territory of objectification. Thelwall's assault upon Burkean objectification of the labourer revolves around a complicated set of parallels between English labourer, West Indian slave, medieval serf, and domestic beast of burden:

[Burke] Having assigned the exclusive privilege of opinion to the favoured four hundred thousand—a mixed herd of nobles and gentles, placemen, pensioners and court-expectants, of bankers and merchants, manufacturers, lawyers, parsons and physicians, warehousemen and shop-keepers, pimps and king's messengers, fiddlers and auctioneers, with the included 'twenty thousand'—petticoat allies—ladies to the court, and ladies of the town! having secured this motley group (the favoured progeny of Means and Leisure) in the exclusive, and unquestioned enjoyment of the rights of information and discussion, he proceeds to observe, that 'the rest, when feeble, are the *objects* of protection!'—Objects of protection! so are my lady's lap dog, and the Negro slave. It is easy to determine, which, of the two, *polished sensibility* will shelter with the most anxious care!—Ye murky walls and foul, straw-littered floors of the plantation hospital!—Ye full-crammed, noxious workhouses of Britain—vile dens of tyrannic penury and putrescence! speak—Ye roofs and floors of wretchedness! speak ye (for that part of nature which should be loud and eloquent is spell-bound in panic apathy)—What is the *protection* which the feeble labourer, or the sick Negro finds? and then refer, for comparison, to the down pillow of yon pampered, snarling cur; or the commodious chambers of the canine palace at Goodwood.<sup>84</sup>

What Thelwall is telling us is that this one substitution of Burke's, whereby nine-tenths of the population of Britain have been described not as people but as objects, is an act of imaginative enslavement which indicates the corrupt totalitarianism underlying Burke's defence of privilege and tradition. Thelwall continues to elaborate the implications of Burkean objectification of the labour force by developing a series of set piece warnings in which the British population emerge first as white slaves:

But foul befall the government, that considers the great mass of the people as brute machines; mere instruments of physical force; deprived of all *power*, and destitute of the right of information; and doomed like the dray-horse, or the musquet, to perform mechanically whatever task of drudgery, or murder a few 'counsellors and deliberators' may command! . . . Such my fellow citizens is the language of pensioned indolence. Nine out of ten of the human race (it will anon be nineteen out of twenty) are born to be beasts of burthen to the remaining tith: to be 'hewers of wood, and drawers of water'.

From this position Thelwall goes on to make the crucial move of constructing white physical force revolutionaries as white-slave revolutionaries whose cultural agency is defined in terms of their equivalence to the revolutionaries of

<sup>84</sup> Claey's (ed.), *Thelwall*, 406.

Paris and the rebellious slaves of San Domingue. Thelwall warns that extreme forms of exploitative coercion can lead the masses into a madness of suffering, and that this madness of suffering has been witnessed both in Paris and in San Domingue.

Thelwall treads a line here, his polemical daring lies in the way he takes up the language of panic utilized by the loyalist press to demonize the Terror and the San Domingue slave uprising. For Thelwall these events, though terrible, are simply a proof that extreme abuse leads to social anarchy. Thelwall absorbs the rhetoric of the Right into an ingenious Radical, and essentially parodic, reform agenda, and in so doing pulls the rug out from under Burke's feet:

In vain do you shudder at the cannibals of Paris—in vain do ye colour, with exaggerated horrors, the 'tribunals of Maroon and Negro slaves, covered with the blood of their masters'; if, obstinately vicious, instead of being warned, ye are irritated by the example.

I deplore, as ye do, the 'robberies and murders', committed by these poor wretches—the blind instruments of instinctive vengeance. But I cannot, like you, forget by whom those lessons of murderous rapacity were taught. I cannot forget, that slavery itself is robbery and murder; and that the master who falls by the bondsman's hand is the victim of his own barbarity. . . . Had the Maroons and negroes never been most wickedly enslaved, their masters had never been murdered. Had the chains of France been less galling, they had never fallen so heavy on the heads of the French oppressors. To avoid their fate, let governors avoid their crimes. To render sanguinary revolution impossible let them yield to temperate *reforms*. To avert a dreaded vengeance, let the provocations of injustice be instantly removed; and the padlock from the mouth of an injured people, be transferred to the lips of pensioned indolence!<sup>85</sup>

But by this stage Thelwall was fighting a lost cause, his egalitarianism doomed to find no audience. The identification of white workers with black slaves as equally the victims of an unreformed and corrupt English political system was not as appealing a position to the popular imagination in the mid-1790s as it was in 1788 or even most of 1791. As we have seen the image of the slave had been irrevocably altered by events in San Domingue in 1791. For Cobbett, and the Negrophobe alliance within English Radicalism, there was no need to look further than the polemical inheritance of the early 1790s to write blacks out of the debate over political rights. Blacks were increasingly figured in terms of a potentially dangerous diversion; they came to represent an emotional vacuum. White suffering upon the killing floors of the English factories increasingly held centre stage. This expanding empathetic space not only equalized, but finally obliterated any obligation to think through the inheritance of Atlantic slavery for the white working man or woman. At the same time that a

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. 407–9.

new poetics of suffering was evolving around the white victims of industrialization, an equally effective mythologization of abolition, sanctifying the heroes and martyrs of English and North American abolition increasingly pushed the memory of slavery out of the picture. We live with the result of these mythic shifts; British attitudes towards slavery and race in the early twenty-first century are still underpinned by them. Recent work by race and post-colonial theorists points up the frequent parallels in Victorian literatures between European industrial pauper masses (and particularly factory child labour) and slaves or colonized blacks. Yet what is not emphasized, particularly within the context of working-class race dialectic, is that the slave and the factory worker do not occupy a common rhetorical ground.<sup>86</sup> Within the Cobbettian Radical tradition the parallel operates to stress an absolute difference founded in race(ist) distinction, rather than similarity, and this difference becomes most pronounced in the representation of violence.<sup>87</sup>

The slave populations are shown as idle, fallen, passive, and debased. Their suffering, when it is presented, exists in a different physical sphere from that of the white labourer. The mass success of abolition in its heyday in the late 1780s as a focus for the sentimental projection of the philanthropic public had demonstrated a phenomenal National capacity for empathy with an abstract black suffering. For English Radicals the lesson to be learned was simple: bring that sympathy home and change its colour. Yet this domestication of pity was to be achieved at the price of objectifying the black slave and ex-slave populations. Increasingly the black slave is set up beside, but cannot compete with, the suffering labour force of the English factories. Chartist literatures are shot through with sentimentally fraught illustrations of this statement.<sup>88</sup> 'The Black and the White Slave' is a poem which encapsulates, in extreme form, an argument whereby the black male slave exists as a privileged backdrop for the depiction of the suffering of the white freeborn Englishman, or here, freeborn white girl:

I had a dream of slavery,  
A vision of the night;  
And methought I saw, on either hand,  
The victims—black and white.

<sup>86</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1995), 123–9, provides the best overview. Catherine Hall (ed.), *White Male and Middle Class: Explorations in Feminism and History* (London and New York: Polity Press, 1988), 215–50, explores the implications of race in the context of the valorization of a nineteenth-century bourgeois domestic norm.

<sup>87</sup> Stoler, *Race*, 127–9, emphasizes the extreme 'semantic fluidity' of race/class conflation in Victorian writing and culture. She expands the discussion into a critique of Foucault's argument that a 'language of class, always emerges out of an earlier discourse of race.'

<sup>88</sup> For Chartist poetry and slavery, see Anne Janowitz, *Lyric and Labour in the Romantic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Peter Shekner (ed.), *An Anthology of Chartist Poetry: Poetry of the British Working Class 1830's–1860's* (London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1989).

I glanced my eye to the negro sky,  
 And I looked to the spinner's room;  
 And one was lit with the hues of Heaven,  
 And one was a hell of gloom.

There were fruitful, bright, and shining fields,  
 And the sun was all above  
 And there was something in the air  
 That even a slave might love.

And there was the quick incessant whirl  
 Of wheels revolving fast,  
 And there was the rank and moted air—  
 Like a siroc's deadly blast . . .

Then I heard the crack of the sounding whip  
 Ring sharply through the air;  
 But the slave was a huge and hardy man,  
 That well the lash might bear.

The next was the dull and sickening sound  
 Of the 'strap' in that vale of tears;  
 I saw no man, save the wretch who struck  
 The child of tender years.

He smote the infant o'er the face,  
 The neck, the trembling breast;  
 And the words that fell from his brutal tongue  
 But made her the more distressed.

And still as the blood came creeping down  
 Towards the crime stained floor,  
 Still on was urged that little slave,  
 Till her hateful task was o'er.

While the 'man' slave sat at his cottage door,  
 Or lay in the plantain shade,  
 That Worn out child crept sadly home,  
 Where her bed of chaff was laid.<sup>89</sup>

The initial move is orthodox Cobbettian levelling antithesis; the black slave is in heaven and the white English slave in hell: a 'negro sky . . . lit with the hues

<sup>89</sup> 'The Black and the White Slave', *The Chartist Circular* (7 June 1840), quoted, Sheckner (ed.), *Anthology of Chartist Poetry*, 74–6.

of Heaven', and a 'spinner's room' which is 'a hell of gloom'.<sup>90</sup> The poem continues in a familiar vein, while the black man, who is built for the ordeal, is beaten crisply with a whip that 'cracks', the sound that the 'strap' makes on infant white female flesh is peculiarly muffled and is a 'sickening sound'. The inference is clear: the pistol shot of the cow hide on a burly black man is almost attractive, but within the divisive dynamic of this verse there is not space for the sound of the whip on the absent bodies of black women and children. This poem articulates the basis of English anti-Caribbean racism to this day, hatred of the black is bound in with envy of black suffering under slavery. The central stimulant behind this verse is one of paranoid competition—the desperate desire to prove that *we* (ultimately in the form of the little white girl) suffered more than *them*. The thought underlying the poem is quite simply this: when it comes down to the nitty-gritty the little white girl on the factory floor is worth more as a human being than the big black man in the cane field.<sup>91</sup> Cobbett believed this to be the case, Thelwall did not. Yet it was, as we shall see, the Cobbettian view which became orthodoxy as the nineteenth century progressed.

<sup>90</sup> For the crude development of the comparison of white factory girl and black slave in popular graphic satire, see Wood, *Blind Memory*, 272–4. More work needs to be done on the extent to which Chartist literatures feed off such material, particularly as a benevolent interpretation of mid-nineteenth-century working-class constructions of the black slave persists, see Fladeland, *Abolitionists*, 171–5.

<sup>91</sup> For a succinct assessment of the new politicization of race in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Wheeler, *Complexion of Race*, 236–87. For Carlyle's brutalist expansion of the theme of the superior suffering of the white labourer, see pp. 355–8 below. For Ruskin's crazy but beautiful developments of the theme, pp. 384–95.

## Slavery and Romantic Poetry

### ‘Conversing with shadows dire’: William Blake and the Psychopathology of Atlantic Slavery

where there is no law but every man does what is right in his own eyes, there is the least of liberty

(Henry M. Robert, *Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised*)

Blake’s engagement with Atlantic slavery is now generating a veritable sub-discourse within Romantic studies. These debates focus on two loci that are seen to constitute Blake’s most direct treatment of slavery. The first are the engravings which Blake made for Captain John Stedman’s *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* and the second is *The Visions of the Daughters of Albion*.<sup>1</sup> Yet, as with Austen, Percy Shelley, and Charlotte Brontë, the critique of slavery that Blake generated is one that does not fall into any easy polemical category. Blake never preached a narrow political agenda, and he does not produce straightforward propaganda on slavery.<sup>2</sup> Attempts to tie his exploration of slavery down to the precise historical events of the late 1780s and early 1790s are of limited use.<sup>3</sup> Like Walt Whitman, Blake

<sup>1</sup> For discussion of the *Visions* and Atlantic slavery, see David Erdman, “Blake’s Vision of Slavery”, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 15 (1952), 242–52; David Erdman, *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 157, 228–42, 29; Steven Vine, “‘That mild beam’: Enlightenment and Enslavement in William Blake’s *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*”, in Betty J. Ring and Carl Plasa (eds.), *The Discourse of Slavery* (London: Routledge, 1994), 40–50; Nancy Moore Goslee, ‘Slavery and Sexual Character: Questioning the Master Trope in Blake’s *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*’, *ELH* 57 (Spring 1990), 101–28; Anne K. Mellor, ‘Sex, Violence, and Slavery: Blake and Wollstonecraft’, *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 58/3–4 (1997), pp. 363–70. The most recent overview of Blake’s possible relation to slavery discourse via ‘the language of dissenting Protestantism’ is Helen Thomas, *Romanticism and the Slave Narratives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 114–24.

<sup>2</sup> For my argument that Blake’s atrocity prints for Stedman can be read as pornography, see pp. 94–6, 106–25, 135–40, and Wood, *Blind Memory*, 230–8.

<sup>3</sup> For recent speculation on the possibility that Blake was in contact with black Radicals in London, see Thomas, *Romanticism*, 115.



is prepared to say what now might appear to be terrible things. When considering the operations of power and sexuality within the slave dynamic, Blake engages with sadism, masochism, bondage, and pornography.<sup>4</sup> Blake's poetry and engraving is as concerned to examine the implications of slavery for the psychic state of the slave-holder, as it is to attempt to consider the effects of trauma on the victim. Blake produced images that challenge the viewer through their paradoxes: he simultaneously humanizes the black slave, and invites us to look at slave torture as erotic fantasy.<sup>5</sup> Within the body of his major poetry the inheritance of slavery, and the representation of slave abuse, is not treated with such directness, but that is not to say that the work is disengaged from attempting to think through the most terrifying implications of the Atlantic slave systems.<sup>6</sup>

There is also an extent to which Blake's general concern to confront abuses of power, and the suffering of the innocent, in a variety of contexts, influenced the concerns of the transatlantic abolition crusade in unexpected, and hitherto unexamined, ways. The fact that Blake's first substantial printing in North America was as an abolition poet is the most spectacular demonstration of this. The inspirational American abolition polemicist Lydia Maria Child was to print, over a period of seven months in 1842, a substantial selection of Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* in the mass circulated *National Anti-Slavery Standard*. At this point Blake was, even in England, virtually unknown as an author. Blake consequently first appeared before a popular American readership as an anti-slavery propagandist. The following discussion begins by considering what is unique about the treatment of slavery in two of Blake's major prophecies at the turn of the eighteenth century. It then concludes by considering the implications and ironies of the printing of some of the *Songs* as abolition propaganda in the States in the mid-nineteenth century.

<sup>4</sup> For Blake as pornographer, see pp. 106–25 below.

<sup>5</sup> See my discussion *Blind Memory*, 38–9, 230–8; and for a more expanded discussion in the context of the theory of moral sentiment, pp. 301–4 below. Blake's engravings for Stedman have formed the focus for a substantial literature which considers Blake's relationship to colonial slavery, see Erdman, *Prophet Against Empire*, 157, 228–42, 291; Erdman, "Blake's Vision of Slavery", 242–52; Albert Boime, *Art in an Age of Revolution* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987), 339–40; Vine, 'That mild beam', 50–7; A. Rubenstein and C. Townsend, 'Revolted Negroes and the Devilish Principle: William Blake and Conflicting Visions of Boni's Wars in Surinam, 1772–1796', in J. Di Salvo, G. A. Rosso, and Christopher Hobson (eds.) *Blake, Politics, and History* (New York: Garland, 1998), 273–301; Mellor, 'Sex, Violence', 345–70.

<sup>6</sup> Almost every critic who has written on Blake and slavery attempts to couple those parts of the prophetic books, but particularly the *Visions*, with Blake's engravings for Stedman. These are two very different types of text, and this inevitable process of parallelism is generally debilitating. For the dangers of over literalism in attempting to bounce the engravings to the *Narrative* off the *Visions*, see Erdman, 'Blake's Vision of Slavery', 245, where Erdman attempts to set up a dualism between Stedman's narrative persona and Theotorman. I argue that Blake's treatment of slavery in the *Visions* and *Vala* must be seen as operating in more ambitious terms than the Stedman imagery.

Slavery, and the reactions of Europe and America to its existence during the revolutionary period, is a central theme in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. Blake's responses within this poem to the difficult subjects of slave rape, slave child-breeding, and the moral chaos of the slave power which enabled these phenomena have not been seen as central concerns of the poem. What is unique about the *Visions* is the way it sets up an abusive triangular relationship between a male slave-owner and rapist, his female victim, and her former partner. In analysing the destructive effects of female slave rape on the powerless male, Blake examines an area that is neglected by other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century slave literatures.<sup>7</sup>

*The Visions* stands as Blake's first great, and most intensely pessimistic, analysis of the operations of Atlantic slavery. His subsequent approaches to slavery in *America a Prophecy* and in the ninth book of *Vala* may both be read as dialogues with the earlier poem and attempt, in different ways, to overturn the despairing conclusion to the *Visions*. The central theme of the *Visions* is a bold and horrific one. It concerns the seemingly irreparable effects of slave rape upon the consciousness of the victims, who, with a typical Blakean imaginative amplitude, are finally seen to include the slave-owner as well as the slaves. The surprising move that Blake makes here is to concentrate not upon a black slave victim in the Americas, but upon a white English female, Oothoon, the 'daughter of Albion' who goes to America of her own volition and is raped by a North American slave-holder, Bromion. Further Blake then concentrates not only on the trauma of the victim, but upon the trauma that the rape of the woman causes her powerless male lover, and initial partner, Theotormon.<sup>8</sup> Most of the poem after the rape is devoted to exploring how this pair must live with the decimating effects of her rape on their future life. Despite Oothoon's many attempts to find ways of getting beyond her abuse, including a series of arguments that suggest that the rape may open the path to increased sexual freedom, the poem ends with the pair despairing and ruined. The poem consequently brings the effects of slave rape into the psychological domain of a white English couple; it brings slavery and slave rape home to England, and into the white sexual consciousness. Blake shares the impulse at the core of the sentimental literatures of slavery, typified by Stedman's *Narrative*, because he is, in effect, forcing

<sup>7</sup> See Erdman, 'Blake's Vision of Slavery', for an over-literal reading. For a reading of *Visions* as a critique of Wollstonecraft's arguments for female equality, see Thomas, *Romanticism*, 122–3.

<sup>8</sup> Blake criticism seems determined to reconstruct Oothoon in any number of guises except that of a white English woman. She has been seen to represent black African American slave, Native American, and even Marie Antoinette as fantasized by Burke as rape victim. While I agree with Catherine McClenahan, 'Albion and the Sexual Machine: Blake, Gender and Politics 1780–1795', in Di Salvo, Rosso, and Hobson (eds.), *Blake, Politics*, 312–13, that at some level Oothoon is 'the voice of the oppressed', the emotional charge of her violation in this poem stems from the fact that she starts out and remains a white English female.

us to think ourselves into the position of both oppressor and victim. Yet Blake manages to transcend the voyeuristic elements that permeate sentimental slave literatures.

The poem opens with the relationship of Oothoon and Theotormon. Oothoon in a state of delight following their initial ecstatic, though apparently sexually unconsummated, union, makes an impetuous crossing to America. She is immediately raped by Bromion, the violent manifestation of the American slave power. The act apparently immediately both enslaves and Americanizes Oothoon, who is subsequently both an embodiment of the suffering African American slave and a white English daughter of Albion. Oothoon at no point becomes complicit in the rape, and her misery and suffering terrifies and then enrages Bromion. In terms of the psychopathology of rape this is a classic reaction. A common syndrome among rapists, and within the rape fantasies of pornography, is the belief that the victim in fact desires them, no matter what they do, or have done:<sup>9</sup> 'Bromion rent her with his thunders; on his stormy bed / Lay the faint maid and soon her woes appalled his thunders hoarse.'<sup>10</sup> It is in reaction to his own appalled state at Oothoon's 'woes' that Bromion makes the first of two speeches in the poem. As an outburst by the slave power it is a unique moment in Blake's *oeuvre* and constitutes an explicit articulation of the complex justificatory machinery which lies behind plantation slavery:

Bromion spoke, behold this harlot here on Bromion's bed,  
And let the jealous dolphins sport around the lovely maid!  
Thy soft American plains are mine, and mine thy north and south  
Stamped with my signet are the swarthy children of the sun;  
They are obedient, they resist not, they obey the scourge;  
Their daughters worship terror and obey the violent.<sup>11</sup>

These lines articulate the psychology created by the limitless power that the Atlantic slave codes conferred on the slave-owner. Bromion sees slavery as a state that is not circumscribed simply by ownership, but as one involving complicity on the part of the enslaved. This comes out in the final two lines with their obsessive repetition of the concept of obedience. Initially the enslaved blacks of America, as constructed by the slave power, are seen to demonstrate an utter passivity based in the threat of violence 'they are obedient, they resist not, they obey the scourge'. Obedience, founded in the fear of flagellation, then

<sup>9</sup> By far the most profound analysis of rape fantasy and its social constructions is Diana Russel, 'Pornography and Rape: A Causal Model', in Drucilla Cornell (ed.), *Feminism and Pornography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 48–92; see also Laura Lederer (ed.), *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography* (New York and London: Bantam, 1980), 133–56.

<sup>10</sup> *Blake: The Complete Poems*, ed. W. H. Stevenson, text by David V. Erdman (London: Longman, 1971), p. 175, ll. 16–17.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175, ll. 18–23.

develops into something far more horrific, a fantasy of complicity. The slave woman is shown as an idealized masochist whose obedience extends to the positive worship of her persecutors. The slave women 'worship terrors', fear becomes the religion of the enslaved. Blake has managed an astonishing articulation of the crazy power fantasy of the slaver: it is not enough to terrify the victim, absolute power lies in forcing the victim to believe in their abuse as the only option. This is a conviction upon which Atlantic slavery was founded. Having set up this perverse paradigm of human power relations within a dynamic where one person legally owns another, Bromion concludes with the corrupt injunction to the powerless Theotormon: 'Now thou mayest marry Bromion's harlot and protect the child / Of Bromion's rage, that Oothoon shall put forth in nine moon's time.'<sup>12</sup> Having raped and impregnated the enslaved Oothoon he returns the slave woman to her former partner. Of course 'marriages' within the slave systems occurred, there were various rituals which the slave-owners allowed slave couples to perform. In legal terms, however, they were meaningless: any progeny produced by a slave woman, whether the father was a slave or a slave-owner, was the legal property of the slave-owner. The womb of the slave mother could only produce slaves: it was a universally held law of Atlantic slavery systems that all children of slave mothers were legally slaves. Consequently, Bromion's injunction that the couple may now marry carries an appalling twist. The child resulting from the rape will be Bromion's property.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, the statement that Theotormon can 'protect the child of Bromion's rage' is a bitter piece of sarcasm, but is also commercially pragmatic. Theotormon is powerless to protect both the woman and the child from future sale. Within the slave relation, human sexuality is divorced from love, and relates to procreation. Oothoon's despair results from the facts that she has been used like a breeding animal. In this sense the psychological dynamic of the *Visions* can be aligned with Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Both are works which explore the irreparable damage which slavery does to the capacity for human love, and to the capacity of the enslaved to re-enter human sexual relationships.

The couple are shown attempting various ways to break out of the emotional prison which tortures and perverts any future attempts at intimacy or commitment. Despite Oothoon's multiple and ingenious arguments, and her seemingly limitless emotional resources in trying to restart and repair her former love, the attempt is doomed. Bromion's cynical articulation of the 'might is right' doctrine in his second speech proves unanswerable.<sup>14</sup> The poem ends with Oothoon's heroic attempt to resurrect love and life in a positive construction of

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 175, ll. 24-5.

<sup>13</sup> Erdman, 'Blake's Vision of Slavery', 242, bluntly states 'Bromion . . . rapes her [Oothoon] to increase her market value', but does not follow up this insight.

<sup>14</sup> Bromion's second speech occurs at ll. 99-110.

the birth of her slave child: 'Arise, you little glancing wings, and sing your infant joy! / Arise and drink your bliss! For everything that lives is holy.'<sup>15</sup> But what seems to be a celebration is revealed in the next couplet to be a lamentation. Oothoon is not singing but wailing: 'Thus every morning wails Oothoon. But Theotormon sits / Upon the margined ocean, conversing with shadows dire. / *The daughters of Albion hear her woes, and echo back her sighs*'.<sup>16</sup> Blake teaches that there is no escape from the traumatic effects which slavery exerts on the capacity of the slave, and ex-slave, to love. Oothoon and Theotormon cannot escape the effect of Bromion's abuse, they will always be 'conversing with shadows dire'. In this sense Blake's economic little quatrains that set out the 'argument' also provide a proleptic warning of Oothoon's terrible fate. Bromion's rape, and his belief that all slave women will finally 'worship terrors', snuffs out the possibility of love for the victim, or freedom for the child. For Bromion everything that lives is not holy, in his doctrine everything that is enslaved is property, and this includes the innocent child/slave that is the product of his rape:

I loved Theotormon,  
And I was not ashamed;  
.  
.  
.  
But the terrible thunders  
Tore my virgin mantle in twain.<sup>17</sup>

Blake's argument ends with the rape of the virginal Oothoon, because, for all the ingenious attempts of the victims to deal with the fallout, this hideous fact is final. Every attempt at a new beginning comes back to it, and that is why, even though it occurs chronologically at the poem's opening, for Blake it constitutes the end of the argument.

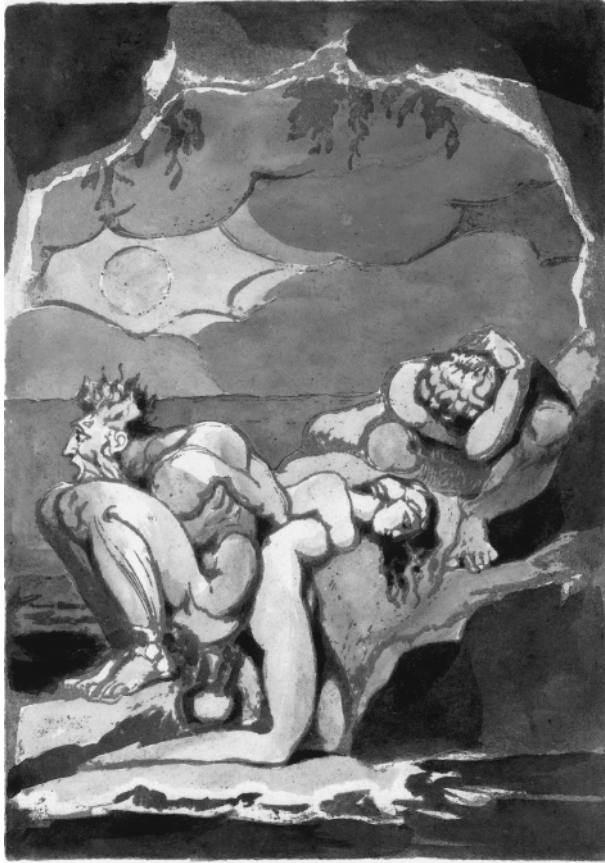
*'They become what they behold': Blake's Master/Slave Dialectic*

Blake continued his profound analysis of the psychological damage which violent abuse within the slave systems exercised over both oppressor and victims. Slavery, sexual domination within slavery, and the possibility of renewal through emancipation remain central to, if elliptically worked out within, several of Blake's other major prophetic poems. Yet Blake increasingly moves from the psychological despair at the end of the *Visions* to explore the possibility of violent liberation. The implications of slave insurrection and the process of emancipation through revolutionary violence are treated most fully in *America*

<sup>15</sup> Blake, *Complete Poems*, p. 186, ll. 214–15.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 186, ll. 216–18.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173, ll. 1–2, 7–8.



14. William Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, plate 11  
(relief etching and watercolour, 1795)

that paves the way for the climactic ninth book of *Vala or the Four Zoas*. In both cases Blake suggests new ways of thinking about how spiritual renewal might or might not be possible within the damaged psychology of the ex-slave. Blake also continues his concern to think about the destructive effects of slavery on those with the power.

Blake consistently argues that slavery enslaves the oppressor, an insight he shares with the Shelley of *Prometheus Unbound*. Bromion is finally shown to be enslaved by his belief in violence and power. It is he who is physically shackled and terrified by the effects of his blind belief in power, in the final plate to the *Visions* (Fig. 14). Yet, as this plate shows so magnificently, Bromion's enslavement to his own vision of power does not make the suffering of Oothoon and Theotormon any the less. There is throughout a terrible pragmatism in

Blake's writing about slavery. He refuses to limit the subject to a discussion of white subjection of the black African slave. When Los binds Urizen in *The Four Zoas*, the process of binding makes Los into a slave: 'And as he beat around the hurtling Demon, terrified at the Shapes / Enslav'd humanity put on, he became what he beheld'.<sup>18</sup> This insight is central in defining the emotional networks which grow out of enslavement. Enslaver and enslaved become locked within an unending process of distorted reflection. Again in *Jerusalem* when the Sons of Albion torture Luvah they simultaneously become the victims of their own abuse:

While they rejoice over Luvah in mockery & bitter scorn.  
Sudden they become like what they behold, in howlings & deadly pain!  
Spasms smite their features, sinews & limbs; pale they look on one another:  
They turn, contorted; their iron necks bend unwilling towards  
Luvah; their lips tremble: their muscular fibres are cramp'd & smitten.  
They become like what they behold!<sup>19</sup>

This is not simply a poetic variation on the Hegelian master/slave dialectic whereby enslaver and enslaved are locked in a battle of mutual interdependence, which is in turn a necessary stage in the advancement towards an understanding of what constitutes freedom.<sup>20</sup> This is far closer to the terrible insights of Browning's great meditation on the inevitable and total psychological corruption which slavery causes in *Caliban Upon Setebos*. For both Blake and Browning total abuse within a slavery continuum inevitably leads to a situation where the enslaved can only re-create themselves in the image of the enslaver. Concomitant with this process is another: that the enslaver comes to identify their power through a pornographic identification with the victim.

Yet Blake having articulated this apparently nihilistic dead end then moved beyond it and in *Vala* achieved a triumphant refutation of this appalling psychological scenario. The ninth book of *Vala* constitutes Blake's central expression of the overthrow of colonial slavery. In the climactic dance around the wine press of Luvah an ultimate reconstruction of the enslaved consciousness is set out as possible, but can only be achieved at a terrible price and through extraordinary violence. Blake's emancipation moment is articulated in stark counterpoint to the abolition establishment's preferred rendition of the theme, nicely encapsulated within the concluding stanzas of Cowper's 'A Morning Dream'.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> William Blake, *Vala or the Four Zoas*, Book 4, in *Complete Poems*, p. 346, ll. 119–203, at ll. 203–4.

<sup>19</sup> Blake, *Complete Poems*, p. 766, ll. 74–9.

<sup>20</sup> For the master/slave dialectic, G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 111–17; for Hegel and race, Henry Louis Gates, Jr, *Figures in Black: Words, Signs and the 'Racial' Self* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 19–21.

<sup>21</sup> By far the best discussion of the central rhetorical stereotypes of the representation of slave emancipation is David Brion Davis, *The Emancipation Moment*, see also my *Blind Memory*, 7–8. For Cowper's 'A Morning Dream', see pp. 82–4 above.

Blake's is not a bloodless ceremony in which the slaves delightedly receive freedom from the hands of their former masters in a state of paradoxically passive celebration. Neither does Blake demand, as all abolition propaganda celebrating emancipation was to do, that a necessary condition of liberation is that the freed slave embrace a policing form of Christianity. The Christianity that Blake embraces has nothing to do with Wilberforcian Evangelical pietism. For Blake the slave power is manifested in terms of extremist radical millenarian rhetoric. Slavery is Rahab, the whore of Babylon, the forces of mystery. The rhetoric Blake uses to describe slavery relates explicitly to that of the millennial counterculture of London at this period, and is connected to that rare political breed, the Radical reformer who is also an abolitionist.<sup>22</sup> This breed inhabited a different anti-slavery orbit to that of Clarkson, Wilberforce, and Hannah More.<sup>23</sup> Pamphleteers, most notably Granville Sharpe and Nathaniel Brassy Halhead, had made explicit, and extended, comparisons between slavery and the whore of Babylon, and had gone so far as to describe the major slave-holding cities in England as contemporary Babylons because of the defilement of slavery.<sup>24</sup>

When the trampling of mystery into the vintage of eternity occurs, it is the whore of Babylon who is first conjured up: 'O mystery!' Fierce Tharmas cries: 'Behold thy end is come'. This Mystery who is to be destroyed by the liberated slaves is the whore of Babylon from Revelation: 'I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. And the woman was arrayed in scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication. And upon her forehead was a name written, MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH' (Rev. 18: 3–5). For Blake the machinery enabling Atlantic slavery is not to be isolated in the colonies but exists within the political and economic power elites of the European metropolitan centres.<sup>25</sup> In Blake's cosmic moment of emancipation, it is these powers of 'mystery' who will be called to a reckoning.

<sup>22</sup> For the interaction of abolition and radical reform, see Marcus Wood, 'William Cobbett, John Thelwall, Radicalism, Racism and Slavery', *Romanticism on the Net*, 15 (Aug. 1999), p. 14, <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~scat0385/thelwall.html>.

<sup>23</sup> For Blake's 'apocalyptic imagery which emphasises the violent doom of tyrants' and London millenarian discourse, see Jon Mee, "'The Doom of Tyrants': William Blake, Richard Citizen Lee, and the Millenarian Public Sphere", in Di Salvo, Rosso, and Hobson (eds.), *Blake, Politics*, 98–114. Note particularly Lee's 'Babylon's Fall' from *Songs from the Rock*, with the stanza 'Babylon the great is fallen! / All her Pomp descends to Hell / How the Kings of Earth are wailing! / How they trembled when she fell', quoted, p. 107.

<sup>24</sup> For Blake's connections with Antinomians who made the London Babylon equation via slavery, see the meticulous work of Jon Mee, 'Is There an Antinomian in the House? William Blake and the After-Life of Heresy', in Steve Clark and David Worrall (eds.), *Historicizing Blake* (London: Macmillan, 1994), 24–42.

<sup>25</sup> Andrew Lincoln, *Spiritual History: A Reading of William Blake's Vala or The Four Zoas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 213, for the identification of 'Mystery' here with the Whore of Babylon.



Go down, ye kings & councillors & giant warriors!  
 Go down into the depths, go down & hide yourselves beneath!  
 Go down, with horse & chariots & trumpets of hoarse war!  
 Lo! how the pomp of Mystery goes down into the caves!  
 Her great men howl & throw the dust & rend their hoary hair;  
 Her delicate women and children shriek upon the bitter wind,  
 Spoiled of their beauty, their hair rent and their skin shrivelled up.  
 Where shall the graves receive them all, & where shall be their place,  
 And who shall mourn for Mystery who never loosed her captives?<sup>26</sup>

It is the last line that paves the way for Blake to move into his central discussion of slavery and emancipation. The reason that the fall of Mystery will be a celebration relates to the appalling nature of enslavement. But if Mystery is doomed because she 'never loosed her captives' the poem at this moment inaugurates a process of universal liberation for the slave and universal and agonized destruction for the slave-holder. Blake kicks this cosmic party off by quoting verbatim from the central emancipation moment in his earlier *America a Prophecy*:

'Let the slave grinding at the mill run out into the field;  
 Let him look up into the heavens & laugh in the bright air;  
 Let the enchained soul, shut up in darkness & in sighing,  
 Whose face has never seen a smile in thirty weary years,  
 Rise & look out—his chains are loose, his dungeon doors are open.  
 And let his wife & children return from the oppressor's scourge—  
 'They look behind at every step and believe it is a dream'<sup>27</sup>

Yet Blake in quoting these beautiful lines again is not simply repeating himself. In *Vala* he is careful to make sure that the association of this moment of liberation for all enslaved people is located within Africa and the Atlantic slave trade. In that ecstatic moment when 'all the slaves from every earth in the wide universe / Sing a new song, drowning confusion in its happy notes' there is a crucial detail. Before launching into an extended and terrifying paean to the destruction of the slave power Blake slows down, to point out that: 'the song that they [the emancipated slaves] sung was this, / Composed by an African black, from the little earth of Sotha.' The aesthetic touch paper for orgiastic and explosively violent process of emancipation that follows is created by a black African American slave, who returns to his/her homeland. Blake is careful to leave the gender of the singer of the song open, and the song runs:

<sup>26</sup> Blake, *Complete Poems*, p. 454, ll. 656–64.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 454, ll. 667–73.

Aha! Aha! How came I here so soon in my sweet native land?  
 How came I here? Methinks I am as I was in my youth,  
 When in my father's house I sat & heard his cheering voice;  
 Methinks I see his flocks & herds & feel my limbs renewed;  
 And lo, my brethren in their tents & their little ones around them!<sup>28</sup>

This song sets off the universal slave insurrection that *is* the dance round the wine presses of Luvah. What this song tells us is of vital importance. The singer may be African, but has been removed from there. The slave explains in the song that s/he has returned to the African homeland and been reunited with family. The idea that through death one returned to the homeland and to one's family and ancestors was central to the religions of many of the Africans enslaved and shipped to the Americas, and accounted for many suicides on the middle passage and in the plantations. Coleridge was to celebrate the belief in his prize ode on the slave trade, which enacts the ecstatic return of a dead slave, and this belief was referred to in countless abolition publications dealing with African culture. Blake uses the idea to create a song in which the innocent victim of slavery is finally reunited with his family through a death, which is also a miraculous rebirth. Blake is not, however, providing a cosmic re-colonization argument, rather he is affirming the continuing validity of African cultures within the slave Diaspora. The return of the liberated slave to Africa is the seminal event which enables the trampling of the slave power, the sons and daughters of Mystery, into the vintage of eternity. As soon as the African black has sung: 'Then the Eternal man said: "Luvah, the vintage is ripe: arise! . . .". The slave revolution is under way and it is not a gentle or civilized process but an ecstatically sadistic one. The entire creation, from the largest of mammals, to the smallest insect and maggot, and finally even the vegetable creation, is incorporated into this sublime act of vengeance:

Then fell the legions of Mystery in maddening confusion  
 Down, down, through the immense, with outcry, fury & despair  
 Into the winepresses of Luvah. Howling fell the clusters  
 Of human families through the deep. The winepresses were filled,  
 The blood of life flowed plentiful

in the winepresses the human grapes sing not nor dance:  
 They howl & writhe in shoals of torment, in fierce flames consuming,  
 In chains of iron and in dungeons, circled with ceaseless fires  
 In pits & dens & shades of death, in shapes of torment & woe.  
 The plates, the screws and wracks & saws & cords & fires & floods,

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 454-5, ll. 684-8.

The cruel joy of Luvah's daughters, lacerating with knives  
And whips their victims, & the deadly sports of Luvah's sons.

Timbrels & violins sport around the winepresses. The little seed,  
The sportive root, the earthworm, the small beetle, the wise emmet  
Dance round the winepresses of Luvah. The centipede is there,  
The ground spider with many eyes, the mole clothed in velvet,  
The earwig armed, the tender maggot, emblem of immortality,  
The slow slug, the grasshopper that sings & laughs & drinks—  
The winter comes, he folds his slender bones without a murmur—  
There is the nettle that stings with soft down, & there  
The indignant thistle whose bitterness is bred in his milk  
And who lives in the contempt of his neighbour; there all the idle weeds  
That creep about the obscure places show their various limbs  
Naked in all their beauty, dancing round the winepresses.

They dance around the dying & they drink the howl and groan . . .<sup>29</sup>

The poem may never have been published in Blake's lifetime, but what he achieved here nevertheless constitutes an extreme affirmation of the Atlantic slave's right to the violent act of self-liberation, even if it means the destruction of the slave power in a maelstrom of blood lust. Within the Romantic canon, and within the whole of slavery literature, this is the one moment when a white author, living in one of the great slave-trading capitals of Europe, gives unbridled support to the concept of slave revolution. Blake was the only English poet who dared to do it, and he wrote this account before the abolition of the slave trade when the pro-slavery propaganda machine was deluging London with horror stories about San Domingue. Blake delightedly feeds off this anti-black atrocity literature in an act of inspirational parody. The horrific accounts of massacre, sexual abuse, and blood lust which flooded England from the early 1790s onwards in the wake of the 1791 slave-led massacres in the great northern plane of San Domingue are here transmogrified into a universal hymn of triumph. Blake shifts attention away from the 'black beast' stereotypes of this counter-literature of emancipation, and places the cause of violence at the door of the slave power. The very torture implements of the slave-holders, their thumb screws, wracks, ropes, whips, knives, and fires are turned back upon them. This is Blake's personal revenge upon the terrorist tactics that the fourth estate of London had used to dehumanize the black slave revolutionaries. In order to understand the imaginative extremity of what Blake is doing here it useful to go back to those lines he quotes from *America*. Blake ended the lovely

<sup>29</sup> Blake, *Complete Poems*, pp. 456-7, ll. 719-23, 745-64.

sixth plate of *America* with a gentle vision of millennial renewal, of which Shelley would have approved:

They look behind at every step and believe it is a dream,  
Singing, "The sun has left his blackness, and has found a fresher morning,  
And the fair moon rejoices in the clear and cloudless night;  
For empire is no more, and now the lion and wolf shall cease"<sup>30</sup>

In *Vala* the quotation of this passage breaks off from the last two lines, and instead takes up the lacunae within the statement 'For empire is no more'. What does it take for the vast power of European imperialism to simply disappear? *Vala* provides the answer and in the apocalyptic events at the conclusion of Book 9 enacts the process by which empire is destroyed. Blake has moved into a different world of revolutionary violence in which the destruction of the oppressors by the delighted victims is the necessary price for spiritual renewal. The world of *Vala* is one where what goes around comes around, Bromion's cut and dried belief in the efficacy of tyrannical power is ironically relocated. Liberation at this point is embodied in a total energy focused upon the excruciating obliteration of the oppressor.

Blake's deep thought into the implications of slavery and violent insurrection lay buried to his contemporaries. The prophetic books remained in almost complete obscurity throughout the period of the slavery debates, and the enactment of the abolition bills of 1807 and 1833. Even had the *Visions* or *Vala* been mass-produced, it is unlikely that they would have been taken up by the abolition community. The focus upon the complicated dynamics of suffering and trauma in the *Visions*, and the celebration of insurrectionary violence in *Vala*, would not have been attractive to a late eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century abolition readership. It is an ironic statement of fact that when Blake was to have a direct input into abolition propaganda it was to be with poetry which is not normally constructed as specifically anti-slavery, it was to be in America not England, and it was to be over a decade after his death. I want to conclude this discussion of Blake and slavery by thinking about how we might read some of the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* the way the New England transcendental abolitionists read them.

The first substantial printing of William Blake in North America occurred as early as 1842 within the pages of one of the most successful abolition journals, the heavily Garrisonian *National Anti-Slavery Standard*. While under the editorship of the brilliant abolition propagandist Lydia Maria Child, the *Standard* regularly included poems by Blake and continued to print others under the

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 194, ll. 48–51.

subsequent editors David Child and Sydney Howard Gay.<sup>31</sup> Given that only three of Blake's lyrics appear to have been printed in America prior to this date, Child was responsible for the first significant American printing of Blake. Child selected the poems from the first popularly available edition of the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, printed in London in 1839. Blake was then very little known outside a coterie of admirers and disciples in England; he was virtually unknown in America with the exception of a small circle of transcendental intellectuals with whom Child had long-standing connections.

The only popular account of Blake's life at this period was that contained in Alan Cunningham's *Lives of the Painters and Sculptors*, which appeared in London in 1833, and was printed in 1835 in an American edition in New York. That Child knew the English edition well comes out in the fact that she had already made the remarkable decision to include Blake's wife Catherine among the figures in her *Good Wives*.<sup>32</sup> This account of the Blake's married life draws heavily on Cunningham, indeed more than half of it is direct quotation. Unless she had access to a copy of one of Blake's original editions of the *Songs of Innocence*, which is virtually impossible, Child would at this stage have seen very little of Blake's verse. Cunningham had reprinted a curious selection: the lyric 'Whether on Ida's Shady brow' from the youthful *Poetical Sketches*, the whole of 'The Tyger', some speeches from *King Edward the Third*, and the introductory poem to *Songs of Innocence*. The lyrics then reappeared in several journals in the form of American reviews of Cunningham's book.<sup>33</sup> It was not, however, until 1839 that all of the lyrics from *The Songs of Innocence and of Experience* had become generally available, when they were reprinted for the first time in a relatively large commercial edition without plates. J. J. Garth Wilkinson, a Swedenborgian, organized an edition of the full text printed by William Pickering.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> The paper was edited from vol. 1, no. 1 to vol. 1, no. 49 by Nathaniel P. Rogers. Lydia Maria Child took over, with husband David as assistant editor, for issue no. 50, 20 May 1841 and continued until vol. 4, no. 3, when David took over on Thursday, 3 Aug. 1843. For the full bibliographical background to the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* publication of Blake, and for the full list of poems printed, see Andrew M. Stauffer, 'The First Known Publication of Blake's Poetry in America', *Notes and Queries* (Mar. 1996), 40–3. Stauffer is unaware of the series of republications of Blake in the 1830s from Cunningham's *Lives of the Painters*. These, and not Child's, are in fact the first known American printings of Blake. Stauffer is also unaware of Child's reprinting of Cunningham on Blake in *Good Wives*.

<sup>32</sup> Lydia Maria Child, *Good Wives* (Boston, 1833). Child's account was then further disseminated when it was reprinted in edited form in *The North American Review*, Boston, 1833, vol. 37, pp. 158–60.

<sup>33</sup> See *Atkinson's Casket, or Gems of Literature, Wit and Sentiment*, no. 7 (July 1832), cols. 317–19.

<sup>34</sup> Geoffrey Keynes, *A Bibliography of William Blake* (New York: Grolier Club, 1921), 261; G. E. Bentley, Jun., *Blake Books: Annotated Catalogues of William Blake's Writings* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 436, no. 171. Keynes states: 'Blake was known to few as a poet during his lifetime, and after his death in 1827 his poetic fame was almost completely obscured. It was not until 1839 that his name was brought again before the public, when a Swedenborgian homeopathist, J. J. Garth Wilkinson was sufficiently impressed by their merit to print an edition of the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. . . . After 1839 Blake's poetry was again neglected for more than twenty years, and no edition was published until the selection edited by D. G. Rossetti in 1863.'

It appears that somehow Child had gained access to a copy of this edition for she reprinted a series of lyrics, none of which had been previously printed in America, and which she considered relevant to the abolition cause.<sup>35</sup> The poems selected by Child were all from *Songs of Innocence* and appeared in the *Standard* from March to September 1842. Child selected 'The Little Black Boy', 'The Chimney Sweeper', 'Night', 'The Divine Image', and 'A Dream'. Subsequently under David Child's and then Gay's editorship 'The Little Black Boy' and 'The Chimney Sweeper' were reprinted and the *Standard* also began including other 'Songs of Innocence' and some of the 'Songs of Experience', namely 'On Another's Sorrow', 'A Little Boy Lost' and 'Ah Sunflower'.<sup>36</sup> It is a remarkable fact that the first substantial printing of major poetry from the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* had Blake appear before a mass popular readership in the States as an abolition poet.

Child's decision to reprint Blake within the poetry section of her abolition journal might be set against the fact that she would have known his graphic work that engaged with slavery most directly. She must have seen Blake's engravings of slave atrocities in Stedman's *Narrative*, for she had produced her own rearrangement of Stedman's account of his relationship with Joanna in her 1834 abolition compilation *The Oasis*. This reprint carried a cut and paste narrative of Stedman's romanticized account of his relationship and a reproduction of the engraving of Joanna from Stedman's *Narrative*. This is one of the images Blake did not engrave for the volume. As noted above, in Child's modest abolition publication the image of Joanna has been made over, and her half-naked and voluptuous right breast is now completely covered up (Fig. 10).<sup>37</sup>

Child's inclusion of Blake among her poetry selections for the *Standard* must also be set in the context of the literary criteria that dominated her selections generally. The *Standard* carried a poetry column which from its first issue, Vol. 1, no. 1, 11 June 1840, p. 4, showed some interest in English Romanticism and slavery for it carried two pieces by Coleridge and one by Wordsworth which were abstract discussions of slavery and liberty. There were also reprintings of two lyrics by the 'Corn Law Rhymers', Ebenezer Elliot, before Child took over.<sup>38</sup> But under its first editor Rogers the paper was focused primarily on narrowly prescriptive, and for the most part thoroughly mediocre, and indeed sometimes quite woeful doggerel, by American abolition poets, the dominant

<sup>35</sup> For evidence that several copies of the Wilkinson edition were owned and circulated amongst the New England Transcendental intellectual community in the early 1840s, see Stauffer, 'The First', 43.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 42.

<sup>37</sup> See *The Oasis*, 65–105, and plate opposite p. 65, and my discussion, pp. 129–30 above.

<sup>38</sup> Vol. 2, no. 9, 5 Aug. 1841, p. 36, Ebenezer Elliot, 'Wrong not the Labouring Poor'. Vol. 2, no. 11, 18 Aug. 1841, p. 44, Ebenezer Elliot, 'The Locustry of Britain'.

names being Maria Weston Chapman, Mary Howitt, William Lloyd Garrison, Longfellow, and Whittier. Child's emphasis was very different, and demonstrated profound erudition and a passion for the English Romantics as libertarian theorists. Under her editorship the poetry column expanded and took in a variety of European poetry, ranging as far afield as Michaelangelo's sonnets, as well as less well-known Romantic poets. Child had a particular liking for Leigh Hunt as well as for Blake.

When Child took over editorship of the *Standard*, under highly conflagratory circumstances, she rapidly transformed the paper, giving it a new highbrow and Anglophile literary emphasis, and a more open intellectual platform. Child got beyond the narrow debates focused on the schism between the Anti-Slavery Society and the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society. She created a liberal newspaper with broad appeal. The result was that she had doubled the circulation after one year to over 5,000, making it the biggest abolition paper in America, eclipsing the circulation figures of Garrison's *Liberator*.<sup>39</sup> Blake's verse consequently appeared before a mass readership in company with that of the far more popular and widely known work of the canonic English Romantics who emerge, via Child's gift for creative literary collage, as a united libertarian front. He also appears alongside copious extracts from the American writings of Charles Dickens, Harriet Martineau, and Frances Trollope. One wonders what he would have made of it all.

Child chose to begin her mini-anthology of Blake with the poem in *Songs of Innocence* most directly, though ambivalently, engaged with the question of interracial conflict and colour, 'The Little Black Boy'. Child also later included 'The Divine Image', the other poem in the *Songs* which passionately argues against all nationalistically defined racism. The argument is condensed in the famous injunction of the final quatrain: 'Then all must love the human form / In heathen, Turk or Jew. / Where mercy, love and pity dwell / There God is dwelling too.' Child's decision to print these beautiful anti-racist formulations should be seen in the context of an overall editorial strategy combating both Southern and Northern prejudice. Child included passionate editorials that refused to acknowledge inferiority or a servile disposition as natural qualities of Blacks. In one editorial entitled 'Our Anglo Saxon Ancestry', Child made the unprecedented step of setting up a detailed comparison between Anglo-Saxon serfdom under the Normans and American plantation slavery. She stated bluntly, 'The plain unvarnished truth is our Anglo-Saxon Ancestry were slaves.' Norman enslavement of the Anglo-Saxons was a theme central to Scot's *Ivanhoe*, but it had not previously been developed in parallel with Atlantic

<sup>39</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of Child's brilliant transformation of the *Standard*, see Carolyn Karcher, *The First Woman in the Republic: A Cultural Biography of Lydia Maria Child* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1994), 267–94.

slavery within abolition discourse. Child also argued passionately against segregation, and attacked Northern abolitionists for their racial hypocrisy. Finally she practised what she preached, incorporating speeches and writings by African Americans into her paper at a time when Northern abolitionism wanted to confine their work to a literary ghetto. She sent reporters to take down Frederick Douglass's first public lecture performance and reprinted material from his *Northern Star*. She stated bluntly, 'Until abolitionists *eradicate prejudice from their own hearts* they never *can* receive the unwavering confidence of the people of colour.'<sup>40</sup> In this context her reprinting of Blake's 'Little Black Boy' was a culturally radical act, which gave Blake's poem a new political and anti-slavery edge. That Child should choose to open her Blake publications with the poem in *Songs* that most directly addresses race is significant. It was a good poem with which to confront a prejudiced Northern readership, because while it appears to be endorsing a conventional set of beliefs relating to the superiority of whites the poem has a sting in its tail. Blake's approach to relations between black and white is not easy to work out in 'The Little Black Boy'. Indeed this poem has generated extended debate, and the exhaustive study of its possible race agenda has provided a plethora of readings which see it as anything from 'the finest poem of the abolition movement' to a racist meditation in which the 'black boy is just a shadow of the white, a slave to his mother's Sunday-school fantasy'.<sup>41</sup> The vastly conflicting critical literatures which this poem has generated since the early twentieth century proves at least one thing, that it does not preach in any kind of straightforward way. Reading the different interpretations that these paradoxical verses have generated, Harold Bloom emerges as the most sentient voice. The strength of Bloom's approach lies in its refusal to impose categorical interpretation on the words. He argues that it is both 'the best poem in the series' and that it is 'the most misleading and ironic of all Blake's lyrics'. For Bloom the black child's blind acceptance of his mother's doctrine demonstrates the 'inadequacy of Innocence of the natural context to sustain any idealisations whatsoever'. I would go further and suggest that the poem is a forceful meditation on the dangers of Christian Evangelical indoctrination on the mind of the African, or African American. The black boy is presented in the first stanza as having internalized the stereotypical colour

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Karcher, *The First Woman*, 279. For a systematic analysis of Child's anti-racist theory and practice in the *Standard*, see Karcher, 277–80.

<sup>41</sup> For a comprehensive survey of all discussions of the poem up to the mid-1990s, see Lisa Kozlowski, 'The Little Black Boy', <http://virtual.park.uga.edu/~wblake/SIE/9/9kozlows.bib.html>. For the poem as great abolition verse, Richard M. Kain, 'The Problem of Civilization in English Abolition Literature, 1772–1808', *Philological Quarterly*, 15 (1936), 111–18; Vincent Newey, *Cowper's Poetry: A Critical Study and Reassessment* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1982), 236–7. For the poem as racist, Nelson Hilton, "'I" Sings Blake's *Songs*', in Peter Otto and Dierdre Coleman (eds.), *Symposium on Romanticism* (Adelaide: Centre for British Studies, University of Adelaide, 1990).



symbolism of European Christianity and has consequently accepted the resulting encoded readings of black and white in absolute moral and spiritual terms.

My mother bore me in the Southern wild,  
And I am black, but oh, my soul is white;  
White as an angel is the English child,  
But I am black, as if bereaved of light.<sup>42</sup>

Blackness is seen to indicate a soul-less state of unenlightenment, the soul to which the black boy aspires is a white one. This approach to whiteness supports racist stereotypes, yet if Bloom is right, and the poem is to be seen as intensely ironic, then Blake is not asserting but subverting the rhetoric of racism. Read in this way the poem stands alongside the work of Blake's contemporary Oluadah Equiano. Equiano, an ex-slave, constructed his autobiographical *Interesting Narrative* in ways that cleverly interrogated black/white colour codes. He frequently appears to be asserting conventional colour symbolism, yet does so in ways that undercut conventional imagistic associations. Blake applies a similar method. The beginning of 'The Little Black Boy' is to be taken as a purely ironic reiteration of racist platitudes that are interrogated as the poem progresses. Blake seems finally to be questioning the basis and adequacy of conventional European constructions of blackness. Blake also, in emphasizing the naive credibility of both black mother and child, implicitly questions how adequate innocence might be as a resource for survival or development in the real political world of the colonizer. The perversion of the black consciousness via a policing Christianity constitutes the poem's final subject. The poem's conclusion is to be seen as a densely ironic meditation on the phenomenon of colonial mimicry:

Thus did my mother say, and kissed me;  
And thus I say to little English boy,—  
When I from black, and he from white cloud free,  
And round the tent of God like lambs we joy,  
  
I'll shade him from the heat, 'till he can bear  
To lean in joy upon our Father's knee;  
And then I'll stand, and stroke his silver hair,  
And be like him, and he will then love me.<sup>43</sup>

The penultimate stanza appears to envision an ideal redemptive state of harmony that has moved beyond considerations of racial difference—the black cloud and the white cloud. Yet the final stanza denies the equality of the relationship between black and white, recasting the black boy within stereotypes of

<sup>42</sup> Blake, *Complete Poems*, 'The Little Black Boy', p. 58, ll. 1–4.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58, ll. 21–8.

subservience, and mimicry, typical of European racism. The black boy prioritizes whiteness and light as the qualities possessed by the white. The black boy is also attracted to the white because of these qualities—he wants to stroke the silver hair. Indeed his admiration is so intense as to manifest itself in a desire to become white. If we take that last line literally, the black boy is saying that the white boy can only love him when he has become white. The conversion of the black boy into something which is ‘like’ the white boy becomes the shared goal of both. In order to be loved the black boy must become white. With ‘The Little Black Boy’ Blake produced a subtle poetic examination of the dynamics of European racist thought. Beyond this the poem demonstrates the destructive impact of this thought on the mind of the black victim. Child, in placing this work before a mass readership, reinvented Blake as an effective propagandist for, yet critic of, abolition race agendas. In doing so she indicated how Blake’s unorthodox and ironic approaches to the languages of race stereotypification had a potency which more historically specific and stylistically conventional abolition literatures lacked.

### Robert Southey: Woeful Slavery Bard, Experimental Slavery Historian

Centuries hence, when Brazil shall have become the great and prosperous country which one day it must be, I shall be regarded there as the first person who ever attempted to give a consistent form to its crude, unconnected and neglected history.

(Robert Southey)

The treatment of Atlantic slavery within Southey’s *oeuvre* falls into two periods. First, the youthful *Poems on the Slave Trade* and associated verse, and letters of the late 1790s, written during Southey’s intimacy with Coleridge. Secondly, the more reasoned, less sentimental, and ultimately more prescient prose meditations produced in the *History of Brazil* and the closely related *History of Ursua and Crimes of Aguirre*.<sup>44</sup> Southey’s most sustained and profound work on colonial plantation slavery came not in the context of the early abolition poetry but in the prose works. This work has been entirely neglected. When Southey came to write his enormous three-volume *History of Brazil*, during the dark days of social unrest and war from 1807 to 1819, he produced a profoundly reasoned

<sup>44</sup> For an exhaustive citation of references to slavery in Southey’s collected work, see Maria Odila da Silva Dias, *O Fardo do Homem Branco: Southey, historiador do Brasil* (São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1974). For the social backdrop to the Bristol years, see Joan Baum, *Mind-Forg’d Manacles: Slavery and the Romantic Poets* (North Haven, Conn.: Archon Books, 1994).

analysis of the development of slavery in Brazil. He included an account of slave *marronage* that, as will become apparent, was way ahead of its time. Yet even in 1807, the very year that the English slave trade was finally abolished, Southey also published the laconic mock travel book *Letters from England: by Don Manuel Alvarez Espriella. Translated from the Spanish*. These epistles introduced the subjects of chattel slavery in the West Indies and wage slavery in England in radical and intriguing ways. *Letters from England* consequently forms a bridge on which he crosses over from elaborate poetic reiterations of abolition dogma to a radical reappraisal in prose, of the implications of slavery for European societies.

*Empathetic Absurdity in Southey's Early Slavery Verse*

*Poems Concerning the Slave Trade*, Robert Southey's public response to the first phase of English abolition, outlines the limitations of his aesthetic response to slavery during the heady days of his early Radicalism. Thematically the sonnets are, when compared to the establishment abolition verse of Hannah More, or even of Cowper, frequently very bold. The sonnet sequence is a logical narrative, which begins on the African mainland, contemplating the interrelations of African and European slave traders. The narrative then moves through the middle passage and on to delineate the outrages of the plantation.

Southey is intellectually ambitious in attempting to look beyond atrocity and provide an overview of the intercontinental economic forces that enable slavery. The basic problem is that a diction of sentimental hysteria kills the argument. The first sonnet is a prime example. This poem takes the unusual step of confronting the problem of the internal slave trade within Africa, and is addressed to the African traders, as the use of the possessive in 'your plain' and 'your shore' emphasizes:

Hold your mad hands! for ever on your plain  
 Must the gorged vulture clog his beak with blood?  
 For ever must your Nigers tainted flood  
 Roll to the ravenous shark his banquet slain?  
 Hold your mad hands! what daemon prompts to rear  
 The arm of Slaughter? on your savage shore  
 Can hell-sprung Glory claim the feast of gore,<sup>45</sup>

Here the hyperbolic rhetoric of anti-slave-trade propaganda directed against English Atlantic slavery (slave traders as vultures and sharks, the waters dyed red with blood and guilt) is redirected against the African traders who enable

<sup>45</sup> Robert Southey, *Poems Concerning the Slave Trade* (London, 1797), p. 33, ll. 1-7.

the European trade to continue. Southey is unusual in being sensitive to the interrelations between African and European commerce. The poem ends with the injunction that Providence destroy the slave ship, not only because it is the symbol of a corrupted European mercantilism, but because the effects of European greed within the Atlantic slave trade is to foment war across the African continent. Yet the poetry fails as political discourse because the diction, simultaneously emotionally effusive and aesthetically burnt out, destroys the clarity of the social analysis. The anti-saccharite sermon concluding the second sonnet is another glaring example of the same failing:<sup>46</sup>

. . . Oh ye who at your ease  
Sip the blood-sweeten'd beverage! thoughts like these  
Haply ye scorn: I thank thee Gracious God!  
That I do feel upon my cheek the glow  
Of indignation, when beneath the rod  
A sable brother writhes in silent woe.<sup>47</sup>

Southey buttonholes the 'gentle reader', as they sip their English cup of tea. Yet it is not the tortured slave body, the 'sable brother' who 'writhes in *silent woe*' who forms the final subject, it is the poet's ability to feel 'righteous indignation'. Southey takes up the abolitionist's God given right to possess the suffering of the slave, and runs with it. The poem ends with an extraordinarily perverse gesture of imaginative appropriation, which combines Religion and sentimentality in a particularly suspect manner. The whipping of the slave becomes a cause for celebration and triumph because it allows the poet to feel a vulgar empathy that the contented tea drinker, at their ease, cannot feel. The possessive mechanism, which in the writing of Sterne, Stedman, and Wordsworth, has been revealed to lie at the centre of empathetic responses to slave torture, is perhaps nowhere more brazenly exploited.

Southey achieved an equally perverse take on the literary possession of the slave's suffering during the middle passage in his *The Sailor, who had Served in the Slave Trade*. This parodic rewriting of Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is a truly woeful ballad in every sense of the word. The narrative presents a Bristol clergyman who hears the sound of human agony coming out of a cow house. The clergyman asks the sailor what the problem is, which prompts the sailor to retell the narrative of how he whipped a slave girl to death, under his captain's instructions, during the middle passage. Southey's sinner is a dull

<sup>46</sup> For a clever reading of Southey's metaphorical applications of sugar imagery across the sonnet sequence as a whole, see Timothy Morton, 'Blood Sugar', in *Romanticism and Colonialism Writing and Empire, 1780-1830*, eds. Tim Fulford and Peter J. Kitson (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998), 99-101.

<sup>47</sup> Southey, *Poems* (1797), p. 35, ll. 9-14.

and familiar figure, who emerges simply as a victim of demonic possession. His sin has made him the property of the Devil, and his terror is a banal selfish fear of orthodox Evangelical damnation. When it comes to narrating the murder of the slave, a woman the sailor is forced to whip because she will not eat, the slave inevitably emerges not as a suffering human but as a catalyst for the sailor's suffering. Indeed Southey goes to the bizarre extreme of placing his white torturing narrator in direct competition with the victim. Who will win this competition is never in question:

One woman sulkier than the rest,  
 Would still refuse her food—  
 O Jesus God! I hear her cries—  
 I see her in her blood!

She groan'd, she shriek'd I could not spare,  
 For the Captain he stood by  
 Dear God! that I might rest one night  
 From that poor woman's cry!

She twisted from the blows—her blood  
 Her mangled flesh I see—  
 And still the captain would not spare—  
 Oh he was worse than me!

She could not be more glad than I  
 When she was taken down,  
 A blessed minute—'twas the last  
 That I have ever known!<sup>48</sup>

The compulsion to own the pain of the slave, and then to go beyond it, is embodied in that impossible assertion, 'She could not be more glad than I / When she was taken down.' A white sailor, compelled to torture a black slave woman, asserts that he feels a greater degree of 'gladness' at the cessation of the torture, than the victim herself. Even in death the victim is presented as ultimately fortunate, compared to the perpetrator: 'They flung her overboard;— poor wretch / She rested from her pain,—/ But when—o Christ! o blessed God! / Shall I have rest again!'<sup>49</sup>

By 1810 Southey, as Poet Laureate, was writing verses in which the black body had been written out completely. Within the grandiose self-satisfaction of the 'Verses Spoken in the Theatre at Oxford, Upon the Installation of Lord

<sup>48</sup> Robert Southey, *Poems* (London, 1799), pp. 111–12, ll. 68–75, 80–7.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113, ll. 97–100.

Grenville', Southey takes what is to become the standard British line on the history of Atlantic slavery. This poem is a test case for how English involvement in slavery could be effectively mythologized as a cause not only for National celebration but for missionary expansion into Africa. The central premiss is one that is to become fundamental to Victorian imperialistic fiction. The evil of slavery is constructed as necessary because it enables the altruistic glories of the English abolition movement to flourish. By this stage Southey can also use Atlantic slavery as a handy rhetorical club with which to beat the myth of Napoleon over the head. Consequently, abolition is set in a wider triumphalist context relating to the war with France, and what is seen as England's fight against Napoleonic slavery within Europe. The first forty lines of the poem meditate upon the recent calamitous events in Europe, the destruction of European monarchies and enslavement of entire white populations: 'rightful kings . . . dragg'd away to eat the bread of bondage or escaped / Beneath the shadow of Britannia's shield, There only safe'.<sup>50</sup> The rest of Europe has been enslaved by Napoleon: 'Europe, bound / In iron chains, lies bleeding in the dust, / Beneath the feet of upstart tyranny.'<sup>51</sup> It is in this context that the slave trade is introduced. Initially, in what is, even for Southey in full laureate mode, a particularly bombastic strain, he proclaims the complete redemption of England, the flag of St George cleansed of the blood of slaves:

. . . the wrongs of Africa  
 Cry out no more to draw a curse from Heaven  
 On England!—For if still the trooping sharks  
 Track by the scent of death the accursed ship  
 Freight with human anguish, in her wake  
 Pursue the chase, crowd round her keel, and dart  
 Toward the sound contending, when they hear  
 The frequent carcass from her guilty deck  
 Dash in the opening deep, no longer now  
 The guilt shall rest on England;  
 . . . . .  
 . . . the red cross flag,  
 Redeem'd from stain so foul, no longer now  
 Covereth the abomination.<sup>52</sup>

This achievement is then presented as Grenville's personal property, a deed that will place him, in the annals of history, above Napoleon. Abolition becomes a

<sup>50</sup> Robert Southey, *Poems of Robert Southey*, ed. Maurice Fitzgerald (London: Oxford University Press, 1909), p. 397, ll. 23, 26–8.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 397, ll. 31–3.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 398, ll. 54–63, 67–9.

National gain, the saviour of European history, a positive that will precisely wipe out the negative effects of the enormities of Napoleonic France. Grenville is finally set up mythologically lording it over Africa. In an imagined scenario of universal jingoism Africa becomes a continent devoted to the celebration of one thing—the heroes of English abolition, with Grenville at their head

. . . Grenville, even then  
 Thy memory will be fresh among mankind  
 Afric with all her tongues will speak of thee,  
 With Wilberforce and Clarkson

. . . . .

. . . Long ages hence  
 Nations unborn, in cities that shall rise  
 Along the palmy coast, will bless thy name;  
 And Senegal and secret Niger's shore,  
 And Calabar, no longer startled then  
 With sounds of murder, will, like Isis now,  
 Ring with the songs that tell of Grenville's praise.<sup>53</sup>

With Niger swallowed up by Isis in the competition to 'Ring with the songs that tell of Grenville's praise', Southey's slavery verse entered its nauseating nadir. This is consequently a good point at which to consider the prose writings, which in their sustained intelligence constitute a very different take on the inheritance of Atlantic slavery.

One of the most impressive aspects of the *Letters from England* lies in Southey's critique of the newly expanding centres of industrial production. The hinted connection between British commercial production and the African and Atlantic slave trades that the first slavery sonnet contained is examined in more depth at various points in the *Letters*. The following account of Birmingham manufacture lays bare the internecine economic connections enabling the slave trade:

The noise of Birmingham is beyond description; the hammers seem never to be at rest. The filth is sickening; filthy as some of our own old towns may be, their dirt is inoffensive; it lies in idle heaps, which annoy none but those who walk within the little reach of their effluvia. But here it is active and moving, a living principle of mischief, which fills the whole atmosphere and penetrates everywhere, spotting and staining every thing, and getting into the pores and nostrils. I feel as if my throat wanted sweeping like an English chimney . . . if it be considered how large a proportion of that ingenuity is employed in making what is hurtful as well as what is useless, it must be confessed that human reason has more cause at present for hu-

<sup>53</sup> Southey, *Poems* (1909), pp. 398–9, ll. 81–4, 95–101.

miliation than for triumph at Birmingham. A regular branch of trade here is the manufacture of guns for the African market. They are made for about a dollar and a half; the barrel is filled with water, and if the water does not come through, it is thought proof sufficient: of course they burst when fired, and mangle the wretched negro who has purchased them upon credit of English faith, and received them most probably as the price of human flesh! No secret is made of this abominable trade; yet the government never interferes, and the persons concerned in it are not marked and shunned as infamous.<sup>54</sup>

Southey creates a resonant and extended metaphor in order to attack the new mass production policies upon which Birmingham *laissez-faire* is based. The intriguing concept that manufacture in Birmingham generates not merely a new type of wealth, but a new type of filth, sets things going. Dirt is presented as relative to the means of production that generates it. Old pre-industrial dirt is stable, not good, but at least a known containable element; new post-industrial dirt is unstable, alive 'a living principle of mischief'. By this stage it is becoming evident that Southey's dirt has more to it than meets the eye, ear, nose, and throat. This new caustic destructive filth is the necessary adjunct to the objects thrown up by mass production, and as the discussion progresses the dirt and the objects of manufacture become fused. Blind mass production emerges as a polluting evil, contaminating all that it touches, wealth and filth become one and the same, the actualization of 'filthy lucre'. When Southey turns to a specific example of this polluting manufacture he chooses slavery. The slave trade may be officially over, but the trade in slave goods to Africa continues unchecked. The shoddy firearms manufactured in Birmingham spread out to do their dirty work in Africa, not merely damaging the African slaving armies who use them, but bringing slave money back into Britain and polluting our economy. Southey is putting forward an argument of huge importance which still has relevance today and points out with visionary power the extent to which the international trade systems demanded by capitalism can enforce the continuation of slavery, while European governments can claim the moral high ground. Southey demands acknowledgement of the naked truth that arms manufacture and the textile industry set up transcontinental interdependencies which demand that different forms of slave system operate in Africa, the Americas, and Europe.

Throughout the *Letters*, Southey suggests that there are direct parallels to be drawn between chattel slavery in the Americas and wage slavery in England. Frequently the poetic use of extended metaphor, noticed in the last quotation, is the means used to effect the link. Take the following discussion of child labour in Manchester:

<sup>54</sup> Robert Southey, *Letters from England* (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, [1807] 1984), 198.



He took us to one of the great cotton manufactories, showed us the number of children who were at work there, and dwelt with delight on the infinite good which resulted from employing them at so early an age. I . . . returned with a feeling at heart which makes me thank God I am not an Englishman.

There is a shrub in some of the West Indian islands which the French call *veloutier*; it exhales an odour that is agreeable at a distance, becomes less so as you draw nearer, and when you are quite close to it is unsupportably loathsome. Alciatus himself could not have imagined an emblem more appropriate to the commercial prosperity of England.<sup>55</sup>

This is morally centred prose that unites the corrupt exploitation of black slave labour in the West Indies with child labour in the Manchester factory systems via the construction of a botanical emblem. West Indian slavery, which exists *out there*, is both as near at hand and as far away as the wage slavery at home that destroys thousands of English children every year. The sweet odour of slave-produced goods, whether sugar from the West Indies, or textiles from the looms of Manchester, does not smell so good if you actually get right in there and shove your nose into the means of production.

Southey attacks wage slavery in the Manchester textile industry via an equally ingenious comparison with another slavery context, this time Spartan Greece. Having suggested that ‘Commerce is the queen witch’, plunging the inhabitants of English towns into an enchanted blindness, he continues:

We purchase English cloth, English muslins, English buttons, &c. and admire the excellent skill with which they are fabricated, and wonder that from such a distance they can be afforded to us at so low a price, and think what a happy country is England! A happy country indeed it is for the higher orders; no where have the rich so many enjoyments, no where have the ambitious so fair a field, no where have the ingenious such encouragement, no where have the intellectual such advantages; but to talk of English happiness is like talking of Spartan freedom, the Helots are overlooked. In no other country can such riches be acquired by commerce, but it is the one who grows rich by the labour of the hundred. The hundred, human beings like himself, as wonderfully fashioned by Nature, gifted with the like capacities, and equally made for immortality, are sacrificed body and soul. Horrible as it must needs appear, the assertion is true to the very letter . . . they live to grow up without decency, without comfort, and without hope, without morals, without religion, and without shame, and bring forth slaves like themselves to tread in the same path of misery.<sup>56</sup>

Southey is not interested in setting the suffering of the white juvenile wage slave in the factory off against that of the plantation slave. Such a comparison, as

<sup>55</sup> Southey, *Letters from England*, 207.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* 209–10.

we shall see, would have inevitably occurred had the passage been written by Cobbett, Carlyle, or Ruskin. Southey articulates the self-perpetuating degradation and inhumanity that result from the enslavement of any human consciousness.

Throughout the *Letters*, Southey is good at elucidating an English capacity for moral self-deception and hypocrisy. In the context of West Indian slavery this comes out explicitly in a satiric passage where the fictive Spanish narrator considers British cultural investment in the history of the Spanish 'Black Legend'.<sup>57</sup> Turning the received history of Spanish colonization of the Americas on its head, Southey sets out Spanish missionary work in the Americas in contrast to the barbarous and anti-cultural operations of the sugar planters in the English Caribbean:

In the sixteenth century the language, history and customs of Mexico and Peru were elucidated in books printed in the country, and now, in the nineteenth, nothing issues from the press in Jamaica and the other English Islands except a few miserable newspapers; every number of which contains something disgraceful to the English character and to human nature. I have seen some of these precious publications. They abound with notices which show with what propriety these islanders cry out against the cruelty of the Spanish conquerors. Pompey, or Oroonoko, or Quashee, (for these heretics never baptise their slaves!) is advertised as a run-away: he is to be known by the brand of a hot iron upon his breast or forehead, the scars of the whip, and perhaps the mark of his fetters;—and it is sometimes added that he is supposed to be harboured by his wife—harboured by his wife! This phrase alone is sufficient for national infamy.<sup>58</sup>

Playing the foreigner gives Southey the opportunity to have a go at the hypocrisy that saturates the English cultural memory of Caribbean slavery. Yet this deeply sardonic verdict on English propagandistic misappropriation of Spanish colonial history came out of profound erudition. Southey was, of all the British Romantics, the figure most engaged with, and deeply versed in, the colonial history of Latin America. Although inflected by his increasingly Nationalistic agenda, Southey's writings on Brazil constitute a significant but very much neglected intervention into the construction of European imperialism in South America.<sup>59</sup> Southey had an instinctive taste for dramatic histori-

<sup>57</sup> For the 'Black Legend', see pp. 76–8, 144 above.

<sup>58</sup> Southey, *Letters from England*, 406–7.

<sup>59</sup> Robert Southey, *The History of Brazil*, 3 vols. (London, vol. i, 1817; ii, 1819; iii, 1819), remains a completely neglected text in English literary and historical studies. The most detailed overview of the context for its composition and the shifting political agenda underlying its structure remains R. A. Humphreys, *Robert Southey and his History of Brazil*, Diamante 28, Twenty-third Annual Lecture of the Hispanic and Luso Brazilian Council (Printed and Distributed Grant and Cutler, London, 1978). There has been far more sustained analysis within Brazil, the most comprehensive and racially sensitive analysis of the *History* being Dias, *O Fardo do Homem Branco*. Dias has also written a fascinating

cal narrative that could be fitted into his larger colonial vision. This was not restricted to Brazilian history. For example while researching the *History* he came across the then virtually unknown tale of the megalomaniac exploits of Lope de Aguirre in what was to become Venezuela. Seeing no relevant place for this protracted chronicle of blood lust, corruption, and greed within the strict structure of the *History*, Southey produced a separate study *The Expedition of Ursua and the Crimes of Aguirre*.<sup>60</sup> This was, on one level, a vivid and sensational contribution to the English literature of the anti-Spanish 'Black Legend'. Southey's stated intention in the preface was to provide 'a frightful, but salutary story; exemplifying that power, which intoxicates weak men, makes wicked ones mad'. He then went on to see in the tale of Aguirre a prefiguration both of 'the fanatics of Cromwell's age, and the monsters of the French Revolution'.<sup>61</sup> The parallels are intriguing; for Southey the worst excesses of the Spanish Conquest as exemplified by Aguirre lie in direct relation to the worst outrages of European revolutionary upheaval, whether Cromwellian depredation or Jacobin Terror. Yet Southey's political conservatism is only one side of the story, his construction of Aguirre is also, paradoxically, very forward looking. Southey in fact produced a historical narrative, focused upon the uncontrolled ambition of one Conquistador, which was to anticipate by one hundred and fifty years the popular mythologizing of Aguirre as an icon of colonial evil within the literature of Latin America and the cinema of the European New Wave. Southey's Aguirre emerges as an even more reprehensible and nihilistic force than the evil yet charismatic anti-hero at the centre of Werner Herzog's 1972 film masterpiece *Aguirre der Zorn Gottes*.<sup>62</sup> Southey's vision of Aguirre is in fact much closer to the figure who emerges in the pages of Eduardo Galeano's magisterial *Genesis*.<sup>63</sup> Southey's conclusion to the narrative of Aguirre is in some ways more insightful than those of either Galeano or Herzog. Southey recounts the death in three stages. He first gives an account of Aguirre's ruthless unconcern for his own end. Shot initially with only 'a slant wound' he exclaims, 'that's badly done', and meets the final, fatal, shot with the exclamation 'this will do'. Southey then meticulously catalogues the butchering and physical dispersal of Aguirre's remains, his body 'quartered, and the quarters set up by the wayside', 'His head was sent to Tocuyo, and exposed in an iron

study of the place of Brazil within the English Romantic consciousness focused on a comparison of Scott and Southey, *O Brasil na historiografia romântica inglesa: um estudo de afinidades de visão histórica; Robert Southey e Walter Scott* (1967). Of the three Brazilian editions the most carefully annotated is Roberto Southey, *Historia do Brasil*, 6 vols. (São Paulo: Editora Obelisco, 1965).

<sup>60</sup> Robert Southey, *The Expedition of Ursua, and the Crimes of Aguirre* (London, 1821), preface, p. vi. This was first printed in abbreviated form in the *Edinburgh Annual Register* as *Crimes of Aguirre*.

<sup>61</sup> Southey, *Crimes of Aguirre*, pp. vii–viii.

<sup>62</sup> Film released in English as *Aguirre, Wrath of God* (Werner Herzog 1972 [Tartan Video, 1995]).

<sup>63</sup> Eduardo Galeano, *Genesis*, trans. Cedric Belfrage (London: Methuen, 1985), 134–6.

cage. When Pedro Simon wrote, the skull was still remaining', his hands are sent off to two armies loyal to the King, yet 'these trophies became offensive on the way; the one was thrown into the river Motatan, the other cast to the dogs.'<sup>64</sup> Yet this attempt to destroy the acts and effect of Aguirre's tyranny by chopping up and posting off the earthly remains is not gratuitously macabre. These details are introduced by Southey as a dramatic foregrounding for his final point. The tale ends by suggesting that the effects of Aguirre's depredation are indestructible, that the trauma he inflicted on the land and people will always live on within the colonial and post-colonial imagination of Europe and Latin America:

Aguirre's crimes made a deep impression upon the people of Venezuela. There was something marked as well as monstrous in his character. The rebellion was the better remembered for its wild and unconnected nature and because no dramatic fable was ever brought to a more distinct and tragic catastrophe. Aguirre is still spoken of in those countries by the name of *El Tyrano*, the tyrant; and it is the belief of the people, that his spirit, as restless now as when it animated his body, still wanders over the scenes of his guilt, in the form of that fiery vapour which is frequently seen in the island of Margarita, and in the *Llanos*, or plains of New Andalusia. And this visible but intangible phenomenon is called in those countries to this day, the Soul of the Tyrant.<sup>65</sup>

Southey has a poetic insight into the enduring inheritance of colonial suffering, and equally into the ineradicable effects of the memory of terror.

Yet Southey's detour into Spanish colonial history is finally only a footnote. His most remarkable interventions into the Western construction of the colonization of South America, and into the effects of Atlantic slavery, were firmly focused not on Spain but Portugal. Southey's *History* was an extraordinary achievement which evolved out of a curious set of circumstances, some of them personal, some of them relating to international political developments between Europe and South America. Southey's interest in Brazil had initially grown out of his enthusiasm for Portugal, which he visited for several extended trips.<sup>66</sup> His maternal uncle Robert Hill was the British Chaplain in Lisbon and first invited Southey out to Lisbon in 1796. Southey stayed for several months and in his uncle's remarkable library would have come across the copious materials it contained relating to Portuguese imperial history. It would be his uncle's vast collection of books and manuscripts that would form the core of Southey's mammoth collection of Luso-Brazilian materials, amounting at his death to some 14,000 items.<sup>67</sup> Throughout his life, Southey maintained what amounted

<sup>64</sup> Southey, *Crimes of Aguirre*, 212.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.* 214.

<sup>66</sup> The most comprehensive survey of the impact of Portugal and Portuguese literature on Southey's oeuvre is Adolfo de Oliveira Cabral, *Southey e Portugal 1774-1801: Aspectos de Uma Biographia Leterária* (Lisbon: P. Fernandes, 1959).

<sup>67</sup> For Southey's Brazilian Library, Humphreys, *Robert Southey*, 9.

to an obsession with writing a major history of Portugal, which would focus on Portuguese imperial operations. The proposed twelve-volume work would cover the Portuguese in Asia, Brazil, and even take in Jesuit missions in Japan, and the interrelations of Spain and Portugal in the Americas. It was, however, British military incursion into South America in the early nineteenth century that directly led to Southey's focus on Brazil. British expeditionary attacks on Montevideo, and Buenos Aires, which was taken by the British in July 1806, ignited a massive resurgence of interest in Latin America as a colonial opportunity. As part of the fallout from this development Southey was urged, initially by his uncle Herbert Hill, and finally by Grenville, the prime minister, to shelve all other parts of his history of Portugal and to give an account of Brazil.<sup>68</sup> The *History* emerges as a complicated cultural product with a coherent political agenda aimed at celebrating British colonialism at the expense of that of Portugal, France, Holland, and Spain. The *History* also maintains a consistent critique of slavery, and it is in this area that its importance for this analysis lies.

The *History* dealt extensively with Portuguese enslavement of the Brazilian Indians, particularly the activities of the *Bandeirantes*. Southey describes the policy of kidnapping Indian slaves in the interior to sell to the sugar and coffee plantations. Southey also considered the workings of African slavery within Brazil. He analysed in detail the effects that the gold rush in Minas Gerais was to have on the living and working conditions of the slaves during the late eighteenth century. Yet by far the most significant aspect of the *History*, from the context of the British cultural construction of slavery, related to the treatment of Brazilian *marronage*. Southey produced the first extended account in English of the legendary *Quilombo* of Palmares, and of its final charismatic black leader Zumbi.

Southey's *History* is flavoured by a Nationalist agenda, and produces a Portuguese colonial 'Black Legend' against which English slavery appears almost benign. As with the literature of the Spanish 'Black Legend', it is the enslavement and genocidal massacre of the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas during the first century of the 'Conquest', which Southey sees as the unforgivable crime of the colonizers. Indeed the first mention of slavery in the book concerns the corrupting influence of Portuguese slave trading upon the indigenous inhabitants who as early as 1516 have got the Indians slave trading their own people: 'A slave was offered for a hatchet; . . . the natives then had already been taught a slave trade.'<sup>69</sup> The first big set piece discussion of slavery is also

<sup>68</sup> The best survey of political developments in Latin America and their impact on the *History* is Humphreys, *Robert Southey*, 6–9.

<sup>69</sup> Southey, *History*, i. 28.

focused on the Indians. Southey presents a conventional pre-lapsarian view of the indigenous inhabitants before conquest.<sup>70</sup> When free, the Indians are described most commonly as admirable, full of grace and fortitude.<sup>71</sup> When enslaved, they go into a decline ‘as if the main spring of the machine had lost its impulse; and the heart withered as if under the influence of witchcraft, or some slow poison’. The Portuguese slaughter thousands through overwork and are set out as the harshest of all exploitative colonial forces, coming in below even the Dutch in the league table of colonial abuse: ‘no task-masters were ever more merciless than the Portuguese of the seventeenth century not even the Dutch.’

In his accounts of atrocities against the Indians, Southey emerges as a sophisticated propagandist. He is familiar with the tropes developed within European travel literature to alienate the indigenous populations of the Caribbean and Americas. Cannibalism was perhaps the most potent of these tropes and Southey appropriates the negative associations of cannibalism in order to reapply them to the colonizers. The *History* cites numerous instances of how the ‘horror of such a slavery’ as the Portuguese inflicted on the Indians was so intense that it led many (all his examples are females) to offer themselves up as cannibalistic feasts to their own people rather than enter Portuguese slavery:

A ransoming party one day found a female slave tied to a stake, and the savages dancing, singing, and carousing round her; they brought her drink occasionally, and as they danced so she moved her feet, and as they sung so she sung also in an under-voice. This woman was clearly a Cord Indian; and the Portuguese having arrived just in time to redeem her from butchery, thought it an especial instance of God’s mercy. They bargained for her, and probably paid the dearer in consideration of the disappointment which the assembled guests consented to undergo; but when they came to untie her, contentment was changed to tears, and she lamented her fate, that instead of dying at so famous a feast and leaving behind her a celebrated name, she was to become a slave among the white people.<sup>72</sup>

In this clever piece of writing the enormities of Portuguese slavery emerge as a form of moral and economic cannibalism worse than the physical cannibalism of the savages. Southey is gesturing towards an Old World behind and beyond the perceived New World of the Conquistadores. The cannibalism of the Indians is desirable, estimable, and normal, compared to the alternative slave systems of the Portuguese invader. Within this culturally sensitive writing,

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, ii. 638–44.

<sup>71</sup> There is inconsistency; in his letters Southey was capable of a rather different approach: ‘as for a state of nature the phrase as applied to man is stark naked nonsense, savage man is a degenerated animal’. Quoted Humphreys, *Robert Southey*, 14.

<sup>72</sup> Southey, *History*, ii. 369.

Southey pre-empts contemporary post-colonial deconstructions of colonial self-justificatory fictions.<sup>73</sup>

The critique of Portuguese colonialism within the *History* is sophisticated in its irony and insightful in ways in which Southey's attempts to write on the plight of the Amerindian within his verse are not. Early in his career, alongside the *Poems on the Slave Trade*, Southey also published *Songs of the American Indians*. The majority of these are sentimental attempts to write imitations of the funeral and ceremonial songs of Native North Americans. There is one poem, however, that deals with the slavery of the South American. 'The Peruvian's Dirge over the Body of his Father' highlights the extent to which Southey, as a poet, is absorbed into facile race tropes.<sup>74</sup>

The first set piece discussion of 'Negro' slavery in the *History* occurs shortly after the account of the exploitation of the Indians. Southey gives a general assessment of the suffering of the slaves in the Bahian sugar plantations. He is prepared to move into difficult territory, dealing with European and colonial parallels which abolition literatures conventionally saw as taboo. Quoting Vieyra he develops an extended comparison of the suffering of the slave and the martyrdom of Christ.<sup>75</sup> It is, however, in his lengthy narrative interlude on the history of the rise and destruction of the legendary Palmares *Quilombo*, that Southey's importance to slave culture and black heroic mythology come out most forcefully. This episode had never been recounted in English when Southey wrote. Even within Brazilian history it was obscure. When the episode had been treated by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Dutch and Portuguese travel writers and historians, it was as a patriotic victory for the colonizers over the powers of darkness.<sup>76</sup> Southey placed the Maroon wars centre stage and dispassionately defended the life and activities of the slave revolutionaries, and particularly their leader Zumbi. In doing so Southey became the first Latin American or European to develop what is now a central legend of liberation within Brazil, and increasingly the entire slave Diaspora of the Americas. Brazil's national day of black self-awareness is November the twentieth, Zumbi

<sup>73</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 271–311.

<sup>74</sup> Robert Southey, *Songs of the American Indians* (London, 1797).

<sup>75</sup> Southey, *History*, ii. 674–9.

<sup>76</sup> The most detailed summary, in English, of the extant historiography on Palmares and Zumbi is Robert Nelson Anderson, 'The *Quilombo* of Palmares: A New Overview of a Maroon State in Seventeenth-Century Brazil', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 28/3 (Oct. 1996), 545–65. Despite his otherwise exhaustive listing of primary and secondary materials, Anderson makes no reference to Southey's account, although it is the first written for the English-speaking world by some fifty years. Southey also provides a detailed translation of the section of the primary sources that Anderson extracts as crucial (pp. 555–6) and interprets the text in ways that frequently parallel Anderson's late twentieth-century perspectives. The most comprehensive general discussion of Brazilian marronage in English is in Richard Price (ed.), *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas* (New York: Anchor Doubleday, 1973), 169–229.

day. The date commemorates the day the Portuguese finally overran the rebel slave headquarters, and destroyed the black slave state of Palmares. The details of Zumbi's death are given in various narratives. Southey takes the preferred black myth, and recites the story that Zumbi and his officers leaped to their deaths from the precipice overlooking the Palmares *Quilombo*, rather than face re-enslavement.<sup>77</sup>

Southey's *History of Brazil* was not only a big seller in this country but became a standard Brazilian authority. You cannot walk into a second-hand book shop in Rio or São Paulo today without seeing the shelves groan under rows of decaying-gilt multi-volume sets of *Historia do Brazil para Roberto Southey*. The history remains in print in Brazil and, in a country passionate about its Nationalist mythologies of conquest, Southey remains one of the most widely known and respected English literary figures of the nineteenth century. What is genuinely ground-breaking about Southey's spirited defence of Zumbi and Palmares is the way in which it runs counter to nineteenth-, and even twentieth-century, Brazilian historiography. The black revolutionaries had conventionally been presented as enemies of the State within Luso-Brazilian narrative history. Palmares was constructed as a threat, the most organized attempt to resist Portuguese (and subsequently Brazilian) imperial sovereignty. Consequently, the destruction of this 'African state' within Brazil and the death of Zumbi were read as a patriotic victory. It was only in the later twentieth century that Zumbi was erected as the figurehead of Luso-Brazilian colonial resistance. The black Brazilian underground traditions had finally seeped to the surface. One could go further and say that in dwelling in some detail upon the divine status of Zumbi within Palmares, and on his construction as a specifically Angolan deity, Southey anticipates the attitude of black radical consciousness in Brazil today. No doubt Southey produced his reading of Zumbi's resistance because it could be used to defame Portuguese colonialism. Yet, whatever the political motives, the narrative effect is close to that of contemporary black Brazilian celebration of the slave revolution. Since the adoption of Zumbi as the central focus for black consciousness day in Brazil in 1978, he has become more than a historical entity, he is a symbol of resistance to slavery and imperialism. Southey was the first to provide a protracted version of the myth. He has, however, apparently slipped through the net of North American and Brazilian scholarship on Palmares, and it is time to give him his due.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>77</sup> For Zumbi in contemporary Brazilian popular culture, see *Brazil* (Oct. 1995), cover story, also 'About Zumbi and the Quilombos', <http://www.iei.net/~pwagner/gooddeeds/zumbi.htm>; for Zumbi within the radical Caribbean and Brazilian consciousness, see Micheal R. Dávila, 'The Dread Library, Oppression and Resistance in Jamaican Reggae and Afro-Brazilian Music A Comparative Study of Race in Music and Culture', <http://debate.uvm.edu/dreadlibrary/davila.html>

<sup>78</sup> Southey is accused of turning from the subject of slave resistance in his later slavery writings, see Alan Richardson, 'Race and Representation in Bristol Abolitionist Poetry', in Tim Fulford and Peter



Early on in the analysis Southey emphasizes his profound respect for the slave revolutionaries: 'The only account which exists of their short but memorable history comes from the people who exterminated them; but it renders them full justice, and will not be perused without some feeling of respect for their character and compassion for their fate.'<sup>79</sup> Southey goes on to outline an organized and moral political state with an elected leader, and presents a democratic society of almost perfect social harmony: 'They were under the government of an elective Chief, who was chosen for his justice as well as his valour, and held the office for life: all men of experience and good repute had access to him as counsellors: he was obeyed with perfect loyalty; and it is said that no conspiracies or struggles for power had ever been known among them.'<sup>80</sup> Southey then goes on to argue that it is Religious belief, focused upon their leader Zumbi, who is both elected political head and Afro-Christian deity, which enables their social organization: 'Perhaps a feeling of religion contributed to this obedience; for Zombi [*sic*], the title whereby he was called, is the name for the Deity, in the Angolan tongue. They retained the sign of the cross, some half-remembered prayers, and a few ceremonies which they had mingled with superstitions of their own, either what they preserved of their African idolatry, or had invented in their present state of freedom.'<sup>81</sup> In stressing the Afro/Christian syncretism of the Maroon religion of Palmares, Southey anticipates the recent conclusions of Robert Anderson.<sup>82</sup> Southey proceeds to argue that it is the success of the rebel slaves in trading with the Portuguese that finally spurs Catano de Mello into leading a major force against them. This again is a point which recent social anthropologists have seen as highly significant as an indication of the complex nature of black Maroon independence. It was not the fact that Palmares existed as a successful Maroon society which most troubled the colonizers, but the ability of the *Palmaristas* to integrate themselves into the socio-economic life of the colonies. Southey describes how both Indians, and colonial Portuguese, became to some extent dependant upon maintaining trade relations with the free blacks. He then provides further detail of the social coherence and mechanical sophistication of the Maroons and describes the construction of the *Quilombo* in detail:

A double palisade of the hardest wood which the forest of Brazil produced, enclosed within a circuit of four or five miles a population of more than 20,000 persons. The fortification was strengthened by many bulwarks: there were only three gates, which were placed at equal distances; each had its platform of defence, and was at all times under the charge of one of their best officers. The palace of the Zombi [*sic*] was spa-

J. Kitson (eds.), *Romanticism and Colonialism: Writing and Empire, 1780-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 144-5.

<sup>79</sup> Southey, *History*, iii. 24.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> Anderson, 'Quilombo of Palmares', 555-6.

cious, and not without a kind of rude magnificence; and the houses of individuals were, after their fashion, commodious and splendid. . . . There was also a high rock within the enclosure, which served them for a watch-post, and from whence some of the Pernambucan towns and settlements were visible in the distance: Porto Calvo was the nearest. The place was called the Palmares, from the number of cocoa groves which they had planted round about. Besides this, their chief city, they had many smaller settlements or garrison, called *Mocambos*, in which chosen men were stationed for the defence of the plantations. Their weapons were of all kinds, and they were equally skilled in using the bow and arrow and the spear, or the sword and the firelock.<sup>83</sup>

The description Southey has concocted out of his sources is important, and ties in with the work of late twentieth-century historians in stressing high levels of social organization, and an extensive network of settlements, which together make up the Palmares *Quilombo*. The fugitives are shown to have developed a form of water purification and irrigation, to have built elaborate defences and impressive housing, and to have integrated expertise in European and African evolved weapons. The key point is that Palmares is not a single haphazard settlement, but a confederacy, several *Macambos* operating as satellite settlements around the focus of the city state of Palmares.<sup>84</sup> The slaves also developed their own plantation economy, which has evolved out of their agrarian experiences within slavery. The later description reveals, however, that while they use the plantation methods they had seen operating during their experiences in slavery, the crops they are growing are for basic foodstuffs (notably bananas and coconuts) not the luxury slave plantation products designed for European consumption.

Southey's articulation of the complicated organization of Palmares is the earliest comprehensive refutation of the more commonly held stereotypes of Maroon life, which had presented escaped fugitives either as helpless children, or as desperate, violent, and socially primitive barbarians. Southey moves on to discuss military tactics, and sets the Portuguese off unfavourably against their black adversaries. De Mello, leader of the Portuguese expeditionary force, is presented as arrogant yet culturally naive. In following the received colonial wisdom relating to the inhabitants of the *Quilombos*, and in assuming that a war against black rebel slaves will be equivalent to his experience fighting the Indian wars, he causes a military disaster for the colonists:

In front of this place the Paulista pitched his camp, with the carelessness of a man who regarded his enemies as of an inferior race. During two days he remained there

<sup>83</sup> Southey, *History*, ii. 27.

<sup>84</sup> For the complicated distinctions between *Mocambo* and *Quilombo*, and the Angolan *Kilombo*, see Anderson, 'Quilombo of Palmares', 558–9. The term *Quilombo* was only generally introduced in the eighteenth century.

unmolested; for the Negroes, as well as himself, were watching an opportunity when they might act with effect. On the third, while his men were plundering a banana plantation, they sallied in their force. Jorge collected his people as well as he could, and fought with his accustomed intrepidity: so fierce a conflict ensued, that more than eight hundred persons on both sides were killed and wounded. Each party was taught by such an action to respect its antagonist.<sup>85</sup>

That last sentence suggests that while the Portuguese seriously underestimated their antagonists, the Maroons possessed a justified sense of their tactical superiority and superior courage. The implication is that the blacks are surprised to face a colonial militia who usually deserve respect for their fighting spirit and courage.

After this initial setback the Portuguese call in massive reinforcements and begin an invasion. The blacks then take the drastic step of deserting the plantation settlements, and destroying everything within them and the outlying areas of the central citadel of Palmares. In other words they retreat and use a scorched earth policy. They trust to the impregnable nature of the Palmares defences and hope that starvation and disease will defeat the besieging army.<sup>86</sup> The fatal error for a guerrilla force was to concentrate their numbers within a single fortified location. After a series of successful defensive operations the invaders are driven back and the resulting stand-off looks like going the Maroon's way until yet another set of reinforcements arrive. At this point defeat is inevitable; Southey's account of the final stages of the destruction of Palmares comes down heavily on the side of Zumbi's forces:

from the rock which served them for a watch-tower [the Maroons] beheld large convoys of cattle, laden horses and carts, advancing from the *Penedo*, on the river S. Francisco, from the Alagoas and from S. Miguel. At this sight they lost their only remaining hope; and it seems that famine had now in a great degree deprived them of their strength: for when the Portugueze encouraged by this arrival, renewed their attempt to force an entrance with the axe, little resistance was opposed. The three gates were hewn down, and the Zombi [*sic*] and the most resolute of his followers retired to the summit of the rock; and preferring death to slavery, threw themselves from the precipice . . . men worthy of a better fate for their courage and their cause. The Governor was on the point of setting out from Recife with a reinforcement of two thousand men and six pieces of artillery, when tidings of the conquest reached him; and it was deemed of such importance, that money was thrown to the populace from the Government-House, and a solemn procession appointed for thanksgiving. In its consequences to the vanquished, this conquest resembles the unhuman wars of antiquity. The survivors, of all ages, and of either sex, were brought away as slaves. A fifth of the men were selected for the Crown; the rest were divided among the

<sup>85</sup> Southey, *History*, iii. 27.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, iii. 27–8.

captors as their booty, and all who were thought likely to fly or capable of vindicating their freedom, were transported to distant parts of Brazil, or to Portugal. The women and children remained in Pernambuco, being thus separated for ever, without remorse, the one from their fathers, the others from their husbands. The necessity of rooting out such enemies from their own border is clear and indisputable; but that necessity originated in the nefarious system of slavery, and surely the victory might have been more humanely used.<sup>87</sup>

The Portuguese emerge as brutal and mercenary, yet also as frightened. At the news of the destruction of Palmares the local colonial capital is given over to a festival of thanksgiving. The rebel population is divided and dispersed across the slave empire; some are taken back to Portugal. In stressing that the active males are cut off from all contact with their families, Southey argues that the separation of monogamous households constitutes the worst ordeal the defeated survivors must face. Portuguese colonial accounts often stressed the debauchery and polygamy of Maroon societies, and Southey is consequently making a claim of some significance for a European readership. While it would have been conventional for a European author to celebrate indigenous Indian resistance, and suffering, at the hand of another European colonial power, Southey is unique among early nineteenth-century European historians, in celebrating the moral superiority of Maroons over colonial Europeans. Zumbi emerges as a charismatic man, who chooses heroic and tragic suicide rather than capture, and who is followed by a devoted group of committed revolutionaries. Against this libertarian idealism of the ex-slaves, the Portuguese are painted as less than human, and as morally primitive. Indeed their behaviour places them outside humanity; their actions resemble ‘the unhuman wars of antiquity’. The only excuse for the actions of the Portuguese is the suggestion that they have been corrupted by the ‘nefarious’ system of slavery. Southey may have disappointed his contemporaries, and subsequent literary critics of the Romantic canon, in terms of his attitudes towards the abuses of English domestic politics in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Yet Southey is a more complicated political consciousness than the crude, and continuing, charge of radical apostasy would suggest. His attitudes towards colonial history in the Americas have been carefully ignored. Southey’s methodically researched, yet powerfully expressed, insights into the exploitation of indigenous native, and more exceptionally imported black slave, communities deserve closer attention. The defence of the *Quilombo* of Palmares, in particular, appears from an early twenty-first century perspective to demand to be uncovered from the oblivion that has fallen both upon it, and the whole of the *History of Brazil*.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., iii. 28–9.

‘[A]n ardent and *almost* lifelong denouncer of slavery’: Coleridge  
overseeing Christianity, Emancipation, and Teatime

Coleridge and slavery is a theme unfortunately dominated recently by discussion of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. As the poem is paradoxically tied down to ever expanding contexts—exhaustive treatises on the yellow fever, the travel literature of the period, Coleridge’s eccentric marginalia to *Robinson Crusoe*, Clarkson’s *Evidence*, the list can be indefinitely extended—the *Rime*’s aesthetic independence from these mountains of clay-footed minutiae shines through ever more brilliantly.<sup>88</sup> Why do we have to read slavery into the *Rhyme*, surely there are some creations that have been constructed in ways which avoid a crude engagement with contemporary politics? It is not, after all, as if Coleridge were not capable of addressing the question of slavery in both poetry and prose in the most direct ways when he wanted to. The ‘Greek Prize Ode’ on the slave trade, the lectures and journalism of 1795, and their selective reprintings in *Omniana* show what Coleridge was capable of, when he decided to be a hands-on anti-slavery polemicist.<sup>89</sup> For my money there have now been enough failed critical experiments to show that nothing useful is gained from the attempt to think slavery into the *Rime*. The following discussion consequently focuses upon those parts of Coleridge’s work where he *did* write

<sup>88</sup> Patrick J. Keane, *Coleridge’s Submerged Politics: The Ancient Mariner and Robinson Crusoe* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1994), gives the most comprehensive overview of the literature of political interpretations of the *Rime*. For specific over-interpretations and the monomaniac amassing of ‘contexts’, see Bernard Smith, ‘Coleridge’s “Ancient Mariner” and Cook’s Second Voyage’, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 29 (1956), 117–54; J. R. Ebbatson, ‘Coleridge’s Mariner and the Rights of Man’, *Studies in Romanticism*, 11 (1972), 171–206; James Twitchell, “‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ as Vampire Poem”, *College Literature*, 4 (1977), 21–39; Jerome J. McGann, ‘The Meaning of “The Ancient Mariner”’, *Critical Enquiry*, 8 (1981), 63–86; Arnd Bohm, ‘George Foster’s *A Voyage Round the World* as a Source for “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”: A Reconsideration’, *ELH* 50 (1983), 363–77; Martin Bidney, ‘Beneficent Birds and Crossbow Crimes: The Nightmare-Confessions of Coleridge and Ludwig Tieck’, *PLL* 25 (1989), 44–58; Peter J. Kitson, ‘Coleridge, the French Revolution and “The Ancient Mariner”’: Collective Guilt and Individual Salvation’, *Yearbook of English Studies*, 19 (1989), 197–207; Peter J. Kitson, ‘Coleridge the French Revolution and the “Ancient Mariner”: A Reassessment’, *Coleridge Bulletin*, 7 (1996), 30–48; Debbie Lee, ‘Distant Diseases: Yellow Fever in Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*’, *ELH* 65 (1998), 675–700. The most balanced overview of the poem’s aesthetic resonance, and of its final resistance to any single interpretation based on a narrow socio-political context, is Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Early Visions* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), 173–4 n.

<sup>89</sup> For the Greek Prize Ode, see Anthea Morrison (trans.), ‘Coleridge’s Greek Prize Ode on the Slave Trade’, in J. R. Watson (ed.), *An Infinite Complexity: Essays in Romanticism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press (for the University of Durham), 1983), 145–55; for Bristol writings on slavery, see *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (Bollingen Series Princeton and London: Princeton University Press and Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971–90), vol. i. *Lectures, 1795, on Politics and Religion*, 231–51, vol. ii. *The Watchman*, 123–4, 133–40, 155–8, 163–5; and for the background Alan Richardson, ‘Darkness Visible? Race and Representation in Bristol Abolitionist Poetry 1770–1810’, in T. Fulford and P. J. Kitson (eds.), *Romanticism and Colonialism: Writing Empire, 1780–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 129–47.

explicitly about slavery, and attempts to see to what extent he remained, throughout these discussions, an intellectual creature of his time. Coleridge emerges as engaged in a series of tortured and delicate intellectual manoeuvres which show his deep awareness of the difficulty of writing about slavery from the position of a white English Christian philanthropist.

The reiteration of the essential selfishness of the cult of sensibility, and of its inappropriateness as an imaginative resource for interpreting slavery, is a central concern in the Radical journalism and lectures that Coleridge produced in Bristol in 1795. Coleridge increasingly turned away from any direct attempt to work through the emotional inheritance of transatlantic slavery. He did this because he fully understood the contradictions involved in the project. Consequently, all his writings on slavery in prose might be seen as an elaborate set of explanations as to why he kept slavery out of the *Rhyme*.

*‘There is observable among the Many a false and bastard sensibility’:  
Coleridge’s Critique of Empathetic Sentimentality*

The remarkable article on the slave trade in *The Watchman*, and the closely related ‘Lecture on the Slave Trade’, which were produced in 1795, both climax in an impassioned critique of the sensibilities of his audience.<sup>90</sup> Coleridge ruthlessly analyses the assumptions underlying white imaginative responses to slave experience. Coleridge’s lecture is a rigorous assault on the emotional mechanisms that underlie abolition responses to slavery. He brilliantly isolates ‘sensibility’ as a corrupting mode of thought which allows the slave trade to become distorted into a dangerously attractive sentimental fiction. Coleridge’s writing is not so much directed at the slaves, as at the emotional hypocrisy underlying popular abolitionism. The lectures might be seen as a direct assault on the creative machinery that enabled the solipsistic outrage encapsulated within Southey’s anti-slavery verse.<sup>91</sup> Coleridge’s writing works through the complicated development of a set of images working around food, digestion, and cannibalism.

The chain of imagery begins by using Abbé Raynal’s statistics to estimate that ‘nine millions of slaves had been consumed by the Europeans’, and then expands the total of slaves ‘consumed’ to one hundred and eighty million. Having set out slavery as a process of cultural ingestion, the metaphoric application of consumption is then extended. In answer to the question, ‘And what is the first and constantly acting cause of the Slave-trade?’ Coleridge provides a further set of questions which shift the ground from the economic consumption of the slave body to the physical consumption of slave produce: ‘Is it [the

<sup>90</sup> Coleridge, *Works*, i. 249–51; ii. 139–40.

<sup>91</sup> See pp. 199–204 above.

cause of the slave trade] not self evidently the consumption of its products? And does not then the guilt rest on the consumers?’<sup>92</sup> Having established the crucial link between the abuse of slaves and the consumption of slave products Coleridge then proceeds to elaborate the connection in a bizarre parody of the Eucharist. This passage needs to be quoted in full:

At your meals you rise up and pressing your hands to your bosoms, you lift up your eyes to God, and say, ‘O Lord! bless the food which thou hast given us!’ A part of that food among most of you, is sweetened with Brother’s Blood. ‘Lord! bless the food which thou hast given us?’ O Blasphemy! Did God bless the food which is polluted with the Blood of the Murdered? Will God bless the food which is polluted with the Blood of his own innocent children? Surely if the inspired philanthropist of Galilee were to revisit Earth, and be among the Feasters as at Cana, he would not now change water into wine, but convert the produce into the things producing, the occasion into the things occasioned. Then with our fleshly eye should we behold what even now Imagination ought to paint to us; instead of conserves tears and blood, and for music, groanings and the loud peals of the lash.<sup>93</sup>

It is difficult to disentangle this web of associative imagery, it is almost as if Coleridge cannot quite believe the boldness of the moves he is making. As the ironic interrogatives grow, an unsettling under-swell begins to undercut the primary surge of the argument. Each of the questions that Coleridge asks, relating to the consumption of the slave, works towards a remarkably daring set of parallels between Christological martyrdom and the destruction of the slave body. The answer to the two charged questions: ‘Did God bless the food which is polluted with the Blood of the Murdered? Will God bless the food which is polluted with the Blood of his own innocent children?’ must surely be ‘Yes’. Christ’s torture, death, resurrection, and continued consumption within the Eucharist constitutes the originary site for a sacrificial and cannibalistic ritual based in the spilling and consumption of innocent blood. From God’s perspective this is the blood of an innocent child, his son Jesus Christ. The cannibalistic inferences of this imagery are made explicit in the text of the lecture: ‘Did God give food mingled with Brother’s blood? Will the God of men bless the food of Cannibals—the food which is polluted with the blood of his own innocent children?’<sup>94</sup> Christ, himself, both at the last supper and in a typological prolepsis at the marriage feast at Cana, blessed the wine that also represents his own innocent blood sacrifice. The true believer is then invited to feed on this blood in every experience of the Eucharist.<sup>95</sup> Coleridge lives in a world of

<sup>92</sup> Coleridge, *Works*, ii. 138.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, i. 248

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> For a contrary but equally compelling reading of Coleridge’s cannibalism imagery in this passage, which detects an underlying metaphoric of miscegenetic phobia, see Deirdre Coleman, ‘Conspicuous Consumption: White Abolitionism and English Women’s Protest Writing in the 1790’s’, *ELH* 61 (1994), 349–52. For a fascinating discussion of Revolutionary cannibalistic metaphor, including other examples where Coleridge takes up the Eucharist, see Kitson, ‘The Eucharist of Hell.’

diseased appearances where Christian religion itself celebrates the sacrifice of God's own child in violent death. Even more bizarrely Christ is then resurrected and invited back by Coleridge to enjoy a fashionable tea in an English drawing room. Under Christ's tortured vision things fall apart, and contented affluence splits into a vision of horror. In this world of symbolic excess Christ re-performs the miracle of turning water into wine at the marriage feast at Cana. He now turns the outward signs of affluence and luxury into the signs of the economic process underlying the production of luxury goods. The world of luxury becomes a hallucinogenic nightmare: conserves become both wine and water, tears and blood, music unravels into the screams of the flagellated slave.

For Coleridge the hideous charade whereby we construct an objective pity, yet where we simultaneously continue to support the systems that lead to exploitation, is finally embodied within the emotional charlatanry of the Age of Sentiment. For Coleridge 'the Many' are no longer able to see beyond appearances, and they can only see pain and extreme suffering through the narrow constraints of a carefully cultivated sensibility:

There is observable among the Many a false and bastard sensibility which prompts them to remove those evils and those evils alone which by hideous spectacle or clamorous outcry are present to their senses, and disturb their selfish enjoyments. Other miseries, though equally certain and far more horrible, they not only do not endeavour to remedy—they support, they fatten on them. Provided the dunghill be not before their parlour window they are well content to know that it exists, and that it is the hot-bed of their pestilent luxuries. To this grievous failing we must attribute the frequency of wars, and the continuance of the Slave-trade. The merchant finds no argument against it in his ledger; the citizen at the crowded feast is not nauseated by the stench of the slave vessel—the fine lady's nerves are not shattered by the shrieks! She sips a beverage sweetened with human blood, even while she is weeping over the refined sorrows of Werther or of Clementina. Sensibility is not Benevolence. Nay by making us tremblingly alive to trifling misfortunes it frequently prevents it and induces effeminate and cowardly selfishness.<sup>96</sup>

Coleridge articulates an enduring truth: there are different rules guarding the perception of suffering and articulation of exploitation. For those who run the machinery of colonial exploitation out of sight is out of mind. When another's suffering, or the suffering of the other, is to be articulated there is a sophisticated language which has been developed to allow for those with power to appropriate the suffering of the colonial victim, and to reinvent that suffering in their own image. Sentimentality comes to constitute an emotional loose canon, a machine that can fire off at any 'trifling misfortune', which can accommodate everything and nothing. Coleridge warns that the cult of sensibility finally lacks any sense of what its proper targets or perspective should be. Coleridge's

<sup>96</sup> Coleridge, *Works*, i. 139.



massive distinction between ‘Sensibility’ and ‘Benevolence’ sees in the former an ultimate perversity that allows any suffering to be normalized and emotionally exploited. The ultimately self-centred response to slave suffering which I have examined in detail in the very different ‘sensibilities’ of Stedman, Southey, and Wordsworth is, for Coleridge, a dangerous thing. The danger lies in replacing responsible political action (a defining feature of Coleridgean benevolence) with a self-dramatizing empathy that is essentially inactive and amoral. The substitution of emotional fantasy for action is what Coleridge finally picks out as the most disgusting aspect of ‘Sensibility’:

Sensibility indeed we have to spare—what novel-reading Lady does not over flow with it to the great annoyance of her Friends and Family—Her own sorrows, like the Princes of Hell in Milton’s Pandemonium sit enthroned ‘bulky and vast’ while the miseries of our fellow creatures dwindle into pygmy forms and are crowded, an innumerable multitude, into some dark corner of the heart. There is one criterion by which we may distinguish benevolence from mere sensibility—Benevolence compels to action and is accompanied by self-denial.<sup>97</sup>

Given that Coleridge had arrived at this dark and horribly truthful verdict on the moral trickery underlying abolition sensibility it is no wonder that he chose to sidestep slavery and the middle passage in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. He had the imaginative and emotional honesty to realize the moral dishonesty and creative futility involved in plunging headlong into the attempt to re-create the horror of Atlantic slave systems through crude sentimental projection.

*Coleridge and the Abolition Orthodoxies: The Verdict on Thomas Clarkson*

Coleridge was unable to maintain the intellectual clarity and creative boldness of the first phase of his thought on Atlantic slavery. The creative decline and the confusion which descended upon his verse generally as the nineteenth century progressed also characterizes the work on slavery. The longest piece of sustained writing that Coleridge produced on, or around, the subject of the English slave trade was the review article he wrote for his friend Thomas Clarkson’s *History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the English Slave Trade* published in 1808.<sup>98</sup> This is an important document because, despite editorial interpolations of which Coleridge did not approve, it provides an overview of how his thinking on the slave trade and race had

<sup>97</sup> Coleridge, *Works*, i. 139–40. For a reading of this passage as a ‘sneering’ assault on white women, and for Coleridge’s paralleling of slaves and women as savage, threatening, and sexually voracious, see Coleman, ‘Conspicuous Consumption’, 351–2.

<sup>98</sup> The circumstances surrounding Coleridge’s decision to request to have his review published in such an unlikely journal are discussed in Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Darker Reflections 1804–34* (London: Harper Collins, 1998), 141–3.

altered. In this article Coleridge, like Wordsworth with his sonnet 'To Thomas Clarkson', shifted his literary meditation on the slave trade, thinking not so much about the black victims, as about the thought and actions of one of the figureheads of the abolition movement, Thomas Clarkson.<sup>99</sup> Yet the shift to thinking about the history of slavery as the history of abolition is not complete in Coleridge at this stage. The most impressive part of this long review is the opening. Coleridge is able to get back to thinking about the evil of the slave trade itself. In doing so he is refusing to follow the lead of the major abolitionists in celebrating the abolition of the trade, and seeing in it a force for good which counterbalanced, if it did not outweigh, the evil of the trade itself.<sup>100</sup> Clarkson had brought his huge history out a few months after the passage to abolish the slave trade bill was passed, and had obviously been writing it for years and holding it back for this historic moment. The main emphasis of the work is the activity of the abolitionists, with Clarkson at their centre, the trade itself emerges as incidental.

The focus on the heroes of abolition, and Clarkson's sense of his own importance within the movement, are most succinctly demonstrated in the first plate to the book. This is a large fold-out copper engraving; a fantasy map which sets out the history of English and American abolition as a system of rivers and tributaries, each of them carrying the name of an abolitionist.<sup>101</sup> When deciding to write his review, one of the first things that struck Coleridge, and something that he immediately communicated to Clarkson, was the absence of his own name from the map and the book, and the mortification this absence caused him. He lamented in a letter to Clarkson: 'Bye the bye your book, and your little map were the only publication I ever wished to see my name in . . . my first public Effort was a Greek Ode against the Slave Trade . . . and I published a long Essay in the *Watchman* against the Trade in general.'<sup>102</sup> Yet, with typically Coleridgean paradox, despite this urge to be officially enjoined to such an august philanthropic company, Coleridge's impassioned review has brilliant patches which deny the self-congratulatory rhetoric that greeted the abolition bill. Coleridge can still see the trade as a crime that stands alone as an 'evil the most pernicious, if only because the most criminal that ever degraded human Nature'. He emphasizes the unique horror of the trade by incorporating the vocabulary of biological categorizations. If evil exists as certain distinct species, then the trade exists outside such a systematics of wrongdoing and is a moral *lusus naturae* 'some strange nondescript in iniquity, waged by unprovoked

<sup>99</sup> For Wordsworth on Clarkson, pp. 231, 239 below.

<sup>100</sup> For Clarkson's insistence at the outset of the *History* that the evil of the trade is precisely counterbalanced by the concomitant 'good' of its abolition, see Wood, *Blind Memory*, 3-4.

<sup>101</sup> For an analysis of this map in relation to white abolition fantasies of empowerment, see Wood, *Blind Memory*, 1-6.

<sup>102</sup> Holmes, *Coleridge: Darker Reflections*, 142.

strength against uninjuring helplessness . . . in order to make barbarism more barbarous, and to add to the want of political freedom the most dreadful and debasing personal suffering'.<sup>103</sup> Coleridge talks more like C. L. R. James or Toni Morrison than Wordsworth or Southey when he announces that the history of the slave trade is: 'the history of one great calamity,—one long continuous crime, involving every possible definition of evil; for it combined the wildest physical suffering with the most atrocious moral depravity.'<sup>104</sup>

Yet despite this magnificent opening, the review article is a strange and compromised document. Coleridge complained that it had been seriously altered by interpolations that were the work of the editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, Francis Jeffrey. Certainly there are crucial changes. Wilberforce for example was something of a touchstone in terms of registering the degree of political Radicalism that survived within the Romantic consciousness by 1807. Two very different Radicals, William Hazlitt and Cobbett, if they shared very little else, combined in a passionate and unerring hatred of Wilberforce as the tool of Pittite repression.<sup>105</sup> Coleridge's review gives the impression that he has taken the establishment line on Wilberforce, blindly celebrating the abolition mythology, without considering Wilberforce's support of repression at home. The review carries an absurd Eulogy to Wilberforce, climaxing in a risibly crude extended metaphor of the sacred flame:

He it was who for twenty long years watched day and night over the sacred flame which his eloquence had kindled, and cherished and kept it alive when, chilled by an atmosphere of false policy, and blown upon by the breath of corruption, it sickened and almost ceased to glow; nay, when the broader glare of other fires drew away from it the eyes of all men, he kept it steadily in view, and sent it forth at last to consume the scourges and fetters of oppression, and to purify and enlighten a benighted world.<sup>106</sup>

Coleridge did not write one word of this, and he lamented that this passage made him appear to contradict himself. He fulminated against 'a nauseous and most false ascription of the Supremacy of Merit to Mr. Wilberforce . . . in a vulgar style of rancid commonplace metaphors'.<sup>107</sup>

Yet despite the powerful opening, overall the article is firmly focused, as is Clarkson's *History*, upon the sufferings and achievements of the abolitionists,

<sup>103</sup> Coleridge, *Works*, xi. *Shorter Works and Fragments*, ed. H. J. Jackson, 2 vols. (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1995), i. 217.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, i. 218.

<sup>105</sup> See Cobbett's brutal and rhetorically superb assaults on Wilberforce in *Cobbett's Weekly Register*, 40/1 (1821), 1–39; 40/3 (1821), 147–86; 47/9 (1823), 513–62; 48/10 (1823), 577–94; 48/11 (1823), 641–94. For Hazlitt on Wilberforce, see *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt in Twenty One Volumes*, ed. P. P. Howe (London: J. M. Dent, 1931), xi. 149–51; xvii. 16.

<sup>106</sup> Coleridge, *Works*, xi/1. 218.

<sup>107</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956–71; repr. Oxford University Press, 2000), iii. 125.

not the slaves. Coleridge's review is finally a contribution to the battle of egos that was being fought over who deserved the credit for abolition—Wilberforce, Foxe, Pitt, Granville Sharpe, or Clarkson. Coleridge comes down fairly on the side of his friend Clarkson. Much of the argument does not so much feature what Clarkson achieved as what he suffered. Even the suffering of the slaves is finally alluded to explicitly in terms of how accounts of atrocity acted as a torment upon Clarkson's overstretched imagination, leading to a total mental and physical breakdown.<sup>108</sup>

One revealing aspect of the article, in terms of how it locates Coleridge's political thought on race and slavery in 1808, relates to his arguments concerning nationalism and empire. The account of Clarkson's trip, on behalf of abolition, to Paris in the momentous year of 1789, is curiously exploited. For Coleridge this episode is an opportunity to launch into a celebration of British imperial unity, as opposed to French imperial corruption.<sup>109</sup> Having established the intimate link between the success of British abolition and the soundness of British imperial processes, Coleridge moves to a conclusion that inevitably sees in abolition and subsequent African emancipation the opportunity to now colonize the entire African continent and to turn it into a Christian satellite of the British empire. Africa emerges as a colossal trade opportunity, the Africans a faulty resource which can easily be 'modified', yet modification and commodification will only be possible under the civilizing influence of Christianity: 'The Africans are more versatile, more easily modified than perhaps any other known race. A few years of strict honest and humane attention to their interests, affections and prejudices, would abolish the memory of the past, or cause it to be remembered only as a fair contrast.'

What Coleridge is positing here is that after a few years of benign missionary activity in Africa the history of the slave trade and its effects will be erased. The statement that 'human attention' can 'abolish the memory of the past' articulates a sentiment in perfect accord with Clarkson's *History*. With a troubling dexterity, abolition is shifted from the abolition of slavery to the abolition of the memory of slavery. The direct inheritance of Christian abolition will be the Christian colonization of Africa.

*'Negros . . . ought to be forcibly reminded of the state in which their brethren in Africa still are, and taught to be thankful for the Providence which has placed them within the means of Grace': Coleridge, Christianity, and Racism*

Coleridge's engagement with slavery and the slave trade, taken in its shifting entirety, is the most contradictory of all the major Romantics. The subject has

<sup>108</sup> Coleridge's longest direct quotation from the *History* is Clarkson's own account of his sufferings and breakdown, *Shorter Works*, i. 237–8.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, i. 235–6.

been treated in detail in Patrick Keane's exhaustive, subtle, and methodologically incoherent, *Coleridge's Submerged Politics*. What emerges from Keane's remarkable detective work, despite the effect of intellectual freefall he generates around the *Rhyme*, is the extent to which Coleridge's early and passionate hatred of slavery, and his desire for an immediate and universal emancipation, became diluted and trimmed as his life progressed.<sup>110</sup> There has been a sudden interest in the extent to which Coleridge was seduced by Blumenbach's writings. Blumenbach set out some influential classificatory structures for subsequent scientific racist discourse to refine, and consequently Coleridge's interest in this work leads to the easy assumption that he can be labelled a 'racist'. Yet recent discussion has proved the limitations of shallow late twentieth-century definitions of racism as a way into thinking about Coleridge on race.<sup>111</sup> What has not been taken up is the question of how Coleridge's thoughts on Caribbean slavery after the 1790s are marked by a regression into a certain politicized application of Christianity. Coleridge's increasing doubts over the practical workings of emancipation in the Caribbean were fuelled not by early elements of scientific racist thought but by his commitment to an authoritarian social theory of Christianity. I would go further than Keane, and see in Coleridge's later positioning over the 1832 Slave Emancipation Bill a series of moves backward which place him close to the Evangelical, and Pittite, abolitionism of Wilberforce, or which can even shift into several tried and trusted pro-slavery positions.

Coleridge has moved from the outrage and compassion of his early slavery writings, to an altogether more ambivalent and pragmatic set of positions on race and slavery. He is recorded in his table talk as having grave doubts in the early 1830s over the feasibility of the Emancipation Bill. Yet, intriguingly, his objections boiled down to worries over the absence of Christian conversion as part of the emancipation process. In this sense Coleridge is aligning himself with those abolition and missionary factions which increasingly saw the policing use of Christianity as the only form of moral restraint which would make slave emancipation, or indeed any major social reform in Europe, practicable. For Coleridge, as for Wilberforce and even Hannah More, the only good freed

<sup>110</sup> Keane, *Submerged Politics*, 66–8, 78–9, 125–7, 162, 289.

<sup>111</sup> Both Keane, *Submerged Politics*, 57–9, and Peter J. Kitson, provide ameliorative arguments, suggesting the delicacy and complexity of Coleridge's views on race and slavery. See also Trevor H. Levere, *Poetry Realized in Nature: Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Early Nineteenth-Century Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 114–15, 210–11. For an earlier account of Coleridge and race theory, J. H. Haegar, 'Coleridge's Speculations on Race', *Studies in Romanticism*, 13 (1974), 333–57. For accounts which provide a context for race and aesthetic theory, see Meg Armstrong, '“The Effects of Blackness”: Gender, Race and the Sublime in Aesthetic Theories of Burke and Kant', *Journal of Art and Aesthetics*, 54 (1996), 213–36; and for a more speculative approach to the relationship of race to theories of the sublime, Laura Doyle, 'The Racial Sublime', in Alan Richardson and Sonia Hofkosh (eds.), *Romanticism, Race and Imperial Culture, 1780–1834* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 15–39.

slave was a Christian freed slave.<sup>112</sup> When Coleridge expressed the following opinions, he was putting forward a position that would have warmed the cockles of all Clapham sect hearts:

You are always talking about the *rights* of the Negro;—as a rhetorical mode of stimulating the people of England *here*, I don't object but I utterly condemn your frantic practice of declaiming about their rights to the Blacks. They ought to be forcibly reminded of the state in which their brethren in Africa still are, and taught to be thankful for the Providence which has placed them within the means of Grace. I know no right except such as flows from righteousness and as every Christian believes his righteousness to be imputed, so his right must be an imputed right. It must flow out of a Duty, and it is under that name that the process of Humanization ought to begin to be conducted throughout.<sup>113</sup>

Coleridge is talking like a missionary in a Sunday school. Christian Duty and the gift of Grace are the only things that will prepare the slave for freedom. Yet, beyond the fusion of freedom with Christian obedience Coleridge is also, ironically, putting forward the most long-standing and powerful European pro-slavery dogma of them all. From the fifteenth-century slaving voyages of the Portuguese, to the late eighteenth-century slavery defences of Edwards, Bisset, and Long, it was a universal axiom that it is better to be a Christian slave in the colonies, than a free Heathen in Africa.<sup>114</sup> What Coleridge means by that sinister phrase that the slaves must be 'forcibly reminded of the state in which their Brethren in Africa still are' is open to debate. Is he suggesting temporary repatriation to the 'mother' continent, so that they can 'see how they like it'? Is he suggesting the temporary implementation of a regime in the colonies parodically mimicking Coleridge's image of an African barbarity?

However we take it Africa is violently traduced as a spiritual and cultural wasteland. Coleridge is a very long way from the noble and innocent African societies that he set out in the Bristol lecture of 1795. In the 1790s Coleridge's Africa was a fiction evolved out of his reading of leading abolitionist writings by Benezet and Clarkson. Coleridge argued that any depravity and corruption within European society had been exclusively the result of contact with the Europeans via the slave trade: 'The Africans, who are situated beyond the contagion of European vice—are innocent and happy—the peaceful inhabitants of a fertile soil, they cultivate their fields in common and reap the crop as the common property of all.'<sup>115</sup> This agrarian Utopia has evaporated as an

<sup>112</sup> For More, see pp. 73–4; see also my discussion of Cowper, pp. 73–83 above.

<sup>113</sup> Coleridge, *Works*, xiii. 386.

<sup>114</sup> For Coleridge and slave emancipation, Charles de Paolo, 'Of Tribes and Hordes: Coleridge and the Emancipation of Slaves', *Theoria: A Journal of Studies in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 60 (1983), 27–43

<sup>115</sup> Coleridge, *Works*, ii. 134.

imaginative option for Africa by 1831. A remarkable letter two years later to Thomas Pringle, the young president of the Anti-Slavery Society, takes things a good deal further. Coleridge opens this diatribe against the present approach of the government to emancipation by introducing himself as an ‘ardent and *almost* lifelong Denouncer of Slavery’ (my emphasis).<sup>116</sup> That ‘almost’ tells us what, exactly, that the Coleridge who speaks now no longer denounces slavery? Certainly the letter bears such a reading. Coleridge opens by stating the ‘great Truth that for men in the state of the W. India Negroes motives grounded on even the most obvious calculations of future Instance . . . will be powerless against the dictates of his [their] present animal impulses.’ Coleridge continues to elaborate the argument in ways familiar to anyone versed in the pro-slavery rhetoric of the 1780s and 1790s. The state of slavery has reduced the slave to a state of dependence and ignorance that renders him/her inadequate to the task of comprehending liberty, or the dictates of a free labour market. For Coleridge it is only the implementation of a regime of dictatorial Christianity that can save the slave population. The slaves in fact constitute ‘a body of Death into which Religion alone can awake the spirit of life’. This is an extreme metaphor, for Coleridge the slaves in their state of unblessed ignorance are envisioned as a giant corpse which can only be reanimated by the introduction of two big Frankensteinian Christian ideas. The first is belief in a single God, or overseer, who is ‘as a Father and Universal Governor’. Using the familiar pro-slavery device of slave/child conflation, Coleridge then suggests that if ‘even little children’ can master such a concept, then the slave stands a chance. The second ‘most momentous truth’ to which Coleridge’s slave population must give total obedience is ‘the Fact of a FALL’. Coleridge then comes up with a sinister but again familiar definition of freedom: freedom is only attainable through discipline. Belief in a ‘Fall’ provides access to ‘the true notion of human Freedom—viz. that Control from without must ever be *inversely* as the Self-government or Control from within’. Without this self-imposed control, or total subservience to God, the slaves will fall ‘into the state of wild beasts, or more truly wild Fiends’. We move effortlessly here into the rhetoric that had been underpinning pro-slavery diatribe since San Domingue. For anti-revolutionary rhetoricians of the 1790s, including Edmund Burke, the heathen slaves who rose on the Great Plain of North San Domingue in 1791 are animals and fiends; for Coleridge the emancipated West Indian slaves will follow the same route. The only thing that can save them is subservience to a God whose power lies in his ability to communicate the fallen state of man, and man’s consequent and eternal spiritual debt-bondage to God as a result. We are back with John Newton’s normalizing structures of guilt and sin, and the paradoxical effects of ‘Amazing Grace’ within

<sup>116</sup> Coleridge, *Collected Letters*, vi. 940.

the power dynamics of the slave experience. Coleridge inevitably works his way into the dangerous final pronouncement that the ‘great Truth’ (of the Fall and the consequent possibility of Grace) means that ‘even in slavery he [the slave] may be free with a freedom, compared with which his oppressor is a pitiable Slave’. After all the Coleridgean meandering, and put in plain terms, he has landed himself in the position of defending a Christian slavery as superior to an unchristian freedom. The freedom to which Coleridge alludes is precisely that freedom through martyrdom and total Christian submission that Stowe melodramatized in the death of Uncle Tom. Coleridge does not want the emancipated slave let out of this Christian cage, and in this his thought on the relation of colonial expansion to orthodox policing Christianity could not have been more mainstream.

### Wordsworth, Slavery, and Egotistical Empathy

For myself, I own  
That this particular strife had wanted power  
To rivet my affections.

(Wordsworth on the agitation for abolition  
of the English slave trade)

Compassion itself eludes logic. There is no proportion between the pity we feel and the extent of the pain by which the pity is aroused.

(Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*)

In Wordsworth the desire to possess the suffering of other humans and make it into something beautiful is intense and recurrent. With the victims of slavery the ‘egotistical sublime’ found a useful resource, yet the Wordsworthian approach to this resource was ambivalent and shifting. That Wordsworth felt detached from the slave trade as a general political issue comes out in the curious discussion of the subject in the 1805 *Prelude*. In Book 10 Wordsworth describes his return from France after a year’s absence. He gauges the moral health of the nation initially via the success of the abolition movement, yet rapidly moves on to see this as symptomatic of a general desire to support libertarian causes. Wordsworth sees the agitation for slave trade abolition as a preparatory move for a more general reform. It is simultaneously, however, a movement the worth of which lies primarily in the way it acts as a catalyst for an earlier set of rather cloudy ideals, ‘old forgotten truths, dismissed from service’.<sup>117</sup> Wordsworth, finally, does not appear to be summarizing the

<sup>117</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York and London: Norton, 1979), 1805, Book 10, ll. 202–10.



political situation so much as justifying his own take on abolition as part of a general moral groundswell:

. . . For me that strife [slave trade agitation] had ne'er  
Fastened on my affections, nor did now  
Its unsuccessful issue much excite  
My sorrow, having laid this faith to heart,  
That if France prospered good men would not long  
Pay fruitless worship to humanity,  
And this most rotten branch of human shame  
(Object, as seemed, of superfluous pains)  
Would fall together with its parent tree.

(1805, Book 10, ll. 219–27)

Wordsworth opens by stating that he was not much interested in abolition agitation before he left for France, and the failure to abolish the slave trade is not of much interest to him on his return. He places the slave trade in a wider picture, arguing that as long as the ideals of the French Revolution triumph, then slavery will naturally fade away, as simply one particularly rotten branch on the tree of ‘human shame’. Slavery and its traumatic effect on thousands of African individuals are not seen as a unique challenge to the consciences of England and France. While figures as diverse as Cowper, Coleridge, and Hazlitt saw the middle passage as a unique site of horror, which reaches beyond the resources of the creative imagination, Wordsworth simply is not that interested in thinking about the subject as raw material for his art.<sup>118</sup> Slave trade abolition is written off as a movement that has generated ‘superfluous pains’ around a phenomenon which will simply fade away and die. When Wordsworth came to revise the passage for the wordy 1850 version of *The Prelude*, the concern with abolition primarily in terms of the effect it *fails* to have on the poet, is more forcefully expressed: ‘For myself, I own / That this particular strife had wanted power / To rivet my affections’ (1850, Book 10, ll. 253–5; emphasis added). The slave trade fails to ‘rivet’, to nail down and to penetrate, the poet’s affections.<sup>119</sup> The slaves may themselves be riveted in irons on the middle passage, but their experience will have no ultimate impact within the imaginative world of *The Prelude* because it fails to engage the poet emotionally.

When Wordsworth came to deal with slavery directly in his poetry it was not by engaging with general political and economic theory but by concentrating on individual black victims of the corrupted French Revolutionary process. His

<sup>118</sup> For Coleridge and Cowper, see pp. 68–70, 218–20, 223–4 above. For Hazlitt’s meditations on the middle passage, see Wood, *Blind Memory*, 15–16.

<sup>119</sup> For John Stedman’s use of this verb to describe the effect of witnessing slave trauma, see p. 133 above.

two greatest poems on slavery are also about the processes of imperial chaos that were part of the fallout of the French revolutionary wars. Wordsworth's most famous poem about a slave is the sonnet *To Toussaint L'Ouverture, September 1802*.<sup>120</sup> It is one of three sonnets that he wrote about slavery and abolition. Of the other two, one concerns an anonymous black woman, an ex-slave refugee from the French colonies, the other is dedicated to Thomas Clarkson, indefatigable workhorse of the English abolition movement. As a threesome, these poems nicely condense Wordsworth's problematic engagement with the subject of slavery.

### *Wordsworth's Toussaint and Appropriative Containment*

Let your sensibility be touched at my position, you are too great in feeling and too just not to pronounce on my destiny.

(Toussaint L'Ouverture, writing from prison in the Jura mountains to Napoleon<sup>121</sup>)

Napoleon famously, or infamously, refused to reply to any of the pathetic letters that Toussaint wrote him from his freezing prison.<sup>122</sup> It is ironic that Toussaint's request, which forms the epigraph to this discussion, is quite precisely taken up and fulfilled in Wordsworth's sonnet. Wordsworth is confident in his ability to apply his sensibility to pronounce on Toussaint's destiny. In taking Toussaint as his subject when he did, Wordsworth was being fashionable, and beyond this he was contributing to the anti-Napoleonic propaganda currently flooding the nation. A mythologized Toussaint was coming to take up an increasingly important position within this propaganda.<sup>123</sup>

The crucial point with regard to the timing of Wordsworth's sonnet is that it was written after the withdrawal of British troops from San Domingue. The disastrous six-year attempt by Pitt to establish control in the colony had put a different complexion on things. With the rise of Bonaparte and the real threat of French invasion, the cynical entrapment and fatal imprisonment of Toussaint L'Ouverture by the French had provided the British with the chance to create the myth of a noble black who had been fighting, and winning, against the

<sup>120</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Cornell Wordsworth. Poems in Two Volumes and Other Poems 1800–1807*, ed. Jared Curtis (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1983), 160–1.

<sup>121</sup> Quoted, C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins* (London: Allison & Busby, [1938] 1989), 364.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.* 362–5; Wenda Parkinson, 'This Gilded African': *Toussaint L'Ouverture* (London and New York: Quartet, 1978), 202–5.

<sup>123</sup> George F. Tyson, Jr (ed.), *Toussaint L'Ouverture: Great Lives Observed* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973); Bob Corbett, *Bibliography on the Haitian Revolution*, <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/43a/099.html>. David Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution: The British Occupation of Saint Domingue, 1793–1798* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982); Parkinson, 'Gilded African', 208–9.

common enemy. Wordsworth certainly had his weather eye open when he wrote the sonnet to Toussaint; it would have been a lot more remarkable had he composed an equivalent paean to the martyred and forgotten Boukman in the early 1790s. But had he done so, no one would have wanted to read it anyway.<sup>124</sup>

The fashionability of Wordsworth's sonnet is highlighted by the fact that the Radical Samuel Whitchurch composed his epic *Hispaniola* in 1804. This used the San Domingue rebellion to set up a bloodthirsty assault not only on Bonaparte but upon the entire history of the French Revolution. *Hispaniola* is a useful tool with which to lay bare Wordsworth's chosen approach to the Toussaint myth. Whitchurch's poem demonstrates that the cult of Toussaint, and especially the English myth of his moral and military superiority to Bonaparte, was firmly in place by the time Wordsworth took him up. The cultural fictions explaining the slave revolt had shifted, and it is no longer the English abolitionists and the Amis des Noirs who are given sole responsibility for the carnage in San Domingue. Bonaparte, as the incarnation of French Jacobin blood lust, has gained the sole credit. For Whitchurch, Toussaint is the spiritual embodiment of a terrible, but implacably active, spirit of vengefulness. In this sense he could not be further from Wordsworth's Toussaint. Near the conclusion of *Hispaniola* the souls of murdered slaves call upon Toussaint's spirit to rise up and haunt Napoleon's bed:

Rise, mighty shade of *Toussaint*—rise!  
Thou who by freedom's enemies  
Wert doomed in hopeless solitude to death;  
O rise, and haunt thy murderer's bed,<sup>125</sup>

In the poem's conclusion the spectre of Toussaint appears and speaks in apocalyptic language of French responsibility for the violence and atrocity they have unleashed:

Rivers of blood now run around  
Drenching the burnt up thirsty ground;  
But thou [Bonaparte] art chief in perfidy and guilt;  
The outraged children of the sun  
But mimic what thy Gauls have done—  
Thou must account for all the blood that's spilt<sup>126</sup>

The shadow of the old parallelism between Jacobin Frenchman and black slave Jacobin, first set out in a language of colourful hysteria by Burke in the *Letters*

<sup>124</sup> See James, *Black Jacobins*, 86–7; Geggus, *Slavery, War*, 22–32; Thomas Ott, *The Haitian Revolution 1789–1804* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1973), 196–8.

<sup>125</sup> Samuel Whitchurch, from *Hispaniola, A Poem; with appropriate notes. To which are added, Lines on the Crucifixion; and other poetical pieces* (Bath: W. Meyler, 1804), 22.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

on a *Regicide Peace*, haunts the writing. The abused slaves have learned their trade from the excesses of the revolution, and perform a hideous colonial mimicry of the September massacres upon the bodies of the planters. It is a bitter irony that when Dessalines, first leader of the black Haitian republic, finally did order the massacre of all French whites on the island in 1805, it was under the specific influence of English colonial advisers.<sup>127</sup> In Whitchurch's pre-emptive fantasy, however, it is not Dessalines, but the spirit of Toussaint that appears and calls down a terrible vengeance on Napoleon and his troops. The passage is marked out by its extreme retributive violence:

Grim horror strides across the plain;  
Lift, son of Ham, thy wrath red eye,  
Behold thy prostrate enemy  
Where victory stalks o'er mountain heaps of slain!  
Gaul's vanquished myrmidons have felt  
The dreadful blow by justice dealt-  
Heart-smote by sickness or by famine driven  
Some few escaped thy warriors hands;  
Some prisoners bound for distant lands;  
Routed like chaff before the winds of Heaven.<sup>128</sup>

This is not very good poetry, yet Whitchurch has, nevertheless, produced verse that is powerful in its commitment to black violence as the inevitable response to the slave systems of the French Caribbean, and this is a position Wordsworth avoids. So what is the most famous slavery poem in English, Wordsworth's 'To Toussaint L'Ouverture', really about?

Toussaint, the most unhappy Man of Men!  
Whether the rural Milk-maid by her Cow  
Sing in thy hearing, or thou liest now  
Alone in some deep dungeon's earless den,  
O miserable Chieftain! where and when  
Wilt thou find patience? Yet die not; do thou  
Wear rather in thy bonds a cheerful brow:  
Though fallen Thyself, never to rise again,  
Live, and take comfort. Thou hast left behind  
Powers that will work for thee; air, earth, and skies;  
There's not a breathing of the common wind  
That will forget thee; thou hast great allies;

<sup>127</sup> This is a particularly filthy little footnote to the sorry English involvement in the San Domingue Revolution. English responsibility for the massacres was brought to light in a language of justifiably brutal scorn by James, *Black Jacobins*, 370–2.

<sup>128</sup> Whitchurch, *Hispaniola*, 28–9.

Thy friends are exaltations, agonies,  
And love, and Man's unconquerable mind.<sup>129</sup>

The first six and a half lines of the sonnet constitute one elaborated question, namely 'Toussaint . . . where and when wilt thou find patience?' But between these two grammatical crusts there is a lot of meat in the sandwich, and before we get to think about this question the verse has characterized Toussaint in compromised ways. Above all, the first line emphatically states, Toussaint is a victim, the ultimate victim, the essential victim the 'most unhappy Man of Men'. He is also not really quite one of us, he is miserable, but he is also a 'Chieftain'. This is not C. L. R. James's brilliant military strategist and general; for Wordsworth a whiff of the savage, of the African, still lies about him. Chieftain is a word reserved for the leaders of barbarian cultures beyond the European pale, whether Irish, African, or Caribbean.<sup>130</sup> Toussaint is also safely locked up in solitary confinement within the poet's imagination: 'Alone in some deep dungeon's earless den.'

By the end of that first question one thing is certain, Wordsworth's Toussaint is a very different creature from Whitchurch's spirit of vengeance. If one feels that there is a suggestion in that question, 'Where wilt thou find patience?', that Toussaint has some volition, some energy, that he is in fact running out of patience, this suggestion is immediately quashed. The patience Wordsworth is talking about, and soon demands, is not the patience Toussaint needs to conquer his fury at the way he has been betrayed, or his desire for violent revenge, but patience to go on living, patience, presumably, to avoid suicidal thoughts. Wordsworth has created not merely a fallen and powerless Toussaint, but a depressed Toussaint as well. With a typically lofty piece of stage management Wordsworth then makes sure that the power to conquer this depression is to be bestowed on Toussaint by the poet himself. Wordsworth assumes the power of life and death over the debilitated ex-slave, commanding him basically to pull himself together, snap out of it, and 'wear . . . in thy bonds a cheerful brow'. The explanation for this confusing command constitutes the poem's magnificent conclusion. But the conclusion is, finally, a generalizing one. Although the influence of Toussaint will be everywhere, its very ubiquity dissolves what is historically unique about Toussaint's achievements in the first stages of the San Domingue Revolution. Any greatness he possesses will be granted on Wordsworth's terms alone, and posthumously. Toussaint has been comprehensively abstracted; he has been drawn into a Wordsworthian grand

<sup>129</sup> Wordsworth, *Poems in Two Volumes*, 160–1.

<sup>130</sup> For the longevity of the epithet, and for the classic construction of Toussaint as dupe and victim of French diplomatic shenanigans, see Baron de Vastey, *An Essay on the Causes of the Revolution and Civil Wars of Hayti, being A Sequel to the Political Remarks Upon Certain French Publications and Journals Concerning Hayti* (Exeter, 1812), 26: 'General Toussaint . . . the unfortunate chieftain'.

design. He has become, whether he wants to be or not, Wordsworth's symbol for anti-Napoleonic revolutionary aspiration. Glorious, perhaps, but the only 'friends' Toussaint is left with are a series of abstract nouns: 'exultation', 'agony', 'love'. His final friend is that troubling phenomenon which is, ultimately, the possession of the poet, 'man's unconquerable mind'.

It makes an intriguing contrast to place Wordsworth's farewell to Toussaint next to that of 'quite simply the greatest West Indian of the twentieth century', C. L. R. James.<sup>131</sup> When James last mentions Toussaint in his masterpiece *The Black Jacobins*, it is not in terms of the racially non-specific, and finally vague immensities, of Wordsworth, but as a grass-roots revolutionary who used European intellectual models to construct a workable revolutionary theory. As such he is above all else a black man, and specifically a hybridized and politicized black radical consciousness which, both as an ideal, and in its methodology, still has a vital impact on the future of Africa and the Caribbean:

From the people heaving in action will come the leaders; not the isolated blacks at Guys Hospital or the Sorbonne, the dabblers in *surrealisme* or the lawyers, but the quiet recruits in a black police force, the sergeant in the French native army or British police, familiarising himself with military tactics and strategy, reading a stray pamphlet of Lenin or Trotsky as Toussaint read the Abbé Raynal.<sup>132</sup>

At the end of the day James's Toussaint, who is as much a mythologized political construct as Wordsworth's, is an anti-colonial consciousness, which succeeded against France and England because it was prepared to draw on, and then reinvent, their cultural resources. Wordsworth's Toussaint is basically a whitewashed figure of nobility who in his generalized victimhood can be subsumed into the white pantheon of British heroism. You could take those last five and a half lines of Wordsworth's sonnet and apply them to any heroic figure—Nelson, Wellington, Wilberforce, or Clarkson.

Wordsworth's other great sonnet devoted to a black subject, 'September 1 1802', shares with 'To Toussaint L'Ouverture' an entirely passive construction of that black subject. Wordsworth's sublime objects of pity are, of course, always the passive conduits for the poet's sensibilities. His discharged soldier, his leech gatherer, his tragic peasant in the ruined cottage are there as nourishment for the hungriest, and most aesthetically Epicurean sensibility in the English language, to consume. Yet the capacity to abstract another human into a pure space for the poet's pitiful feast reaches a new level of density in *September 1 1802*. Wordsworth has moved from the most famous black man of the Romantic era to a woman without a name. Yet she shares with Toussaint an

<sup>131</sup> Caryl Phillips, *The Guardian*, quoted *The Black Jacobins* (London: Allison & Busby, 1989), back cover.

<sup>132</sup> James, *Black Jacobins*, 377.

utter silence, and an utter dejection that the poet, having constructed, refuses to leave in peace:

We had a fellow-Passenger who came  
 From Calais with us, gaudy in array,  
 A Negro Woman like a Lady gay,  
 Yet silent as a woman fearing blame;  
 Dejected, meek, yea pitiably tame,  
 She sate, from notice turning not away,  
 But on our proffer'd kindness still did lay  
 A weight of languid speech, or at the same  
 Was silent, motionless in eyes and face.  
 She was a Negro woman driv'n from France,  
 Rejected like all others of that race,  
 Not one of whom may now find footing there;  
 This the poor Out-cast did to us declare,  
 Nor murmur'd at the unfeeling Ordinance.<sup>133</sup>

This terrifying poem defines new limits for the creative disempowerment of the colonial subject. The black woman begins as a 'fellow-passenger' but within two lines has become something very different. The loudness of her clothing, a quality apparently as generally applied to Caribbean women in Wordsworth's day as it is at the start of the new Millennium, exists as a visual equivalent to acoustic volume, and is set against the woman's verbal silence. Wordsworth creates a broken animal, a once garish Caribbean bird which starts out 'gaudy' but which ends 'dejected, meek, yea pitiably tame.' Wordsworth creates the sort of black creature his audience felt at home with.

The four lines that immediately follow give two scenarios in which Wordsworth and his fellow passenger's engage with this 'tame' creature. Wordsworth articulates a passivity that is the outward manifestation of a total despair. Like a bird in a cage, used to its dependence and its unavoidable and promiscuous display, the woman has lost the capacity to desire privacy. It is the unassuming publicness of her grief that fascinates. In the words 'She sate, from notice turning not away', Wordsworth manages to express the oblivious dignity of despair. He then articulates something even more horrible: the dissolution of language within the consciousness of the victim. When questioned the woman's response was: 'A weight of languid speech, or at the same / Was silent, motionless in eyes and face.' It makes no odds to her, or more terrifyingly her interlocutors, whether she answers them with words or silence. Incredibly, speech and silence have come to mean 'the same' thing to her, and by implica-

<sup>133</sup> Wordsworth, *Poems in Two Volumes*, 161–2.

tion, the poet. She has become Wordsworth's ideal of mute suffering, a perfect *tabula rasa* onto which the poet can fantasize absolutely anything. As if he cannot bear the emptiness of his own creation Wordsworth, as narrational presence, jerks the poem away at this point, filling in some biographical detail in what is to emerge as reported speech. However, even when the story of her life is to be told, this woman can only speak through the poet's intervention. The poem consequently ends as an attack on the 'Ordinances' of Napoleonic France, which, in the wake of the disastrous San Domingue campaign, banned all colonial blacks from the French mainland. Yet even here the objection to racist French policy is reserved for the poet, and his way of expressing that objection is implicit. The fact that the black victim is incapable of articulating resentment at her treatment allows the poet to suggest his own. Yet this conclusion also suggests a lack of political consciousness in the victim. The black woman can state the facts of what has happened to her, but cannot even 'murmur' her anger or despair. Indeed that entirely negative final line, 'Nor murmur'd at the unfeeling Ordinance', has a good claim to be the most downbeat last line in an English sonnet, and leaves a strange taste in the mouth. Finally the Ordinance may be unfeeling, but the woman has been shown to be equally unfeeling through the effects of her suffering. In this strange line victim and legislation are peculiarly equated in their insensibility.

While this poem constitutes a staggering insight into the personal dissolution of a colonial refugee, it simultaneously constructs the colonial subject as a suffering void that can only be humanized by the poet's projective power. The 'tame' lady is a very different creature from the heroines who pepper the pages of James's *Black Jacobins*. Even in the dog days of the San Domingue Revolution when Rochambeau attempted to slaughter the entire slave population, death quite simply became a cause for female revolutionary heroism and celebration:

When Chevalier, a black chief, hesitated at the sight of the scaffold, his wife shamed him. 'You do not know how sweet it is to die for liberty!' And refusing to allow herself to be hanged by the executioner, she took the rope and hanged herself. To her daughters going to execution with her, another woman gave courage. 'Be glad you will not be the mothers of slaves.'<sup>134</sup>

These women do not merely murmur 'at the unfeeling Ordinance' they destroy its power through an energized and politicized courage, through extempore language and gestures of mythical proportions. But then again they are not the kind of black women whom either Wordsworth, or British abolition, ever wanted to write about.

<sup>134</sup> James, *Black Jacobins*, 361–2.



What cannot be doubted are the insights this poem gives into the European capacity to project passivity onto the black colonial consciousness. In this context Wordsworth's final poetic treatment of the subject of the black colonial refugee seeking asylum in England, 'Queen and Negress Chaste and Fair', now appears bitterly ironic, and is also stupidly unpleasant. This parody of Jonson is Wordsworth's final word in verse on the slave rebellion in San Domingue. The disastrous dictatorship of Henri Christophe, self-appointed Emperor of Haiti, ended in rebellion and his suicide in 1820. His wife and daughters were allowed passage to England where they stayed with the Clarksons.<sup>135</sup> Thomas Clarkson had in fact conducted a voluminous correspondence with Christophe over many years. The arrival of the Christophe household was an event which caused much hilarity in the papers of the day, and also obviously to Mary and William Wordsworth. One evening, amidst outbursts of mirth, Wordsworth composed 'Queen and Negress Chaste and Fair':

Queen and Negress chaste and fair!  
 Christophe now is laid asleep  
 Seated in a British Chair  
 State in humbler manner keep  
 Shine for Clarkson's pure delight  
 Negro Princess, ebon bright!

Lay thy Diadem apart  
 Pomp has been a sad Deceiver  
 Through thy Champion's faithful heart  
 Joy be poured, and thou the Giver  
 Thou that mak'st a day of night  
 Sable Princess, ebon bright!

Let not 'Wilby's'<sup>136</sup> holy shade  
 Interpose at Envy's call,  
 Hayti's shining Queen was made  
 To illumine Playford Hall<sup>137</sup>  
 Bless it then with constant light  
 Negress excellently bright.<sup>138</sup>

<sup>135</sup> For the Clarkson-Christophe relationship, see Earle Leslie Griggs (ed.), *Henry Christophe and Thomas Clarkson: A Correspondence* (New York: Greenwood, 1968).

<sup>136</sup> 'Wilby' a mocking reference to William Wilberforce, parliamentary spearhead for the abolition movement. Mary Wordsworth wrote in the margin of her letter of 24 Oct. 1821 to Catherine Clarkson 'Mrs. Wilberforce calls her husband by that pretty diminutive—"Wilby"—you must have heard her.'

<sup>137</sup> 'Playford Hall' was the Clarkson's residence. Mary Wordsworth, letter, 24 Oct. 1821, explained the poem's genesis in the 'lively picture I shaped myself of the sable Queen with her sable daughters beside you on the sofa in my dear little Parlour at Playford'.

<sup>138</sup> William Wordsworth, *Last Poems 1821-1850*, ed. Jared Curtis (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1999), 24-5.

Wordsworth's view of the Haitian Revolution, which began with such elevated patronization in the sonnet to Toussaint, ends in sniggering bathos. Beyond this, Wordsworth's poem is embedded in a series of moves that relate to the Negrophobe humour of the popular prints of the day. The social/sexual congruence of black women with abolition leaders had long provided the subject for obscene comic prints, which saw the spectre of miscegenation between the elevated Wilberforce and his followers as unavoidably funny.<sup>139</sup> Similar punning and paradox around the capacity of black beauty to turn day into night, and black into white, had been a staple of parodic love lyrics since William Dunbar's 'Ane Blake Moire'.<sup>140</sup> Wordsworth's approach to this tragic refugee is very different from that he felt on the Calais packet in 1807. What is finally disturbing about this flippant little escapade is the manner in which the ex-Queen, of what had promised to be the first black slave republic, exists as a prize to be fought over by two leading white abolitionists.<sup>141</sup>

In the end when Wordsworth wanted to celebrate a hero of slavery it was to white abolition leaders, and not the slave revolutionaries of the Diaspora, that he turned. The Sonnet 'To Thomas Clarkson' shows the completely orthodox parameters of Wordsworth's vision of slavery.<sup>142</sup> As a poem celebrating the abolition of the English slave trade this work is typical in its usurpations. It focuses exclusively upon the labour and suffering of the white political agitator, who is a metaphoric, and unintentionally ironic, slave figure, the 'pure yoke-fellow of Time'. The real slaves are strangely absent from the whole process, but then as this book argues, they always were.

### Slavery and the 'young Romantics'

Neither Keats nor Byron wrote about Atlantic slavery in their poetry directly, although both addressed colonialism and other forms of slavery in different, and frequently politically confused, ways.<sup>143</sup> This may well have had to do with timing. Agitation and publicity directed against the slave trade had increased in the 1780s and in the 1789–92 period reached a phenomenal intensity. Thereafter the subject steadily declined, and after the 1807 abolition bill went into something of a lull. The period 1807–25, when the second-generation Romantics were most active (Keats died in 1821, Shelley in 1822, Byron in 1824),

<sup>139</sup> For Wilberforce and black women, Wood, *Blind Memory*, 155–6, 168–9.

<sup>140</sup> For popular prints on this theme, and for the Dunbar poem, Wood, *Blind Memory*, 158–9.

<sup>141</sup> For an attack on this poem as quite simply 'racist', see Thomas, *Romanticism*, 113–14.

<sup>142</sup> Wordsworth, *Poems in Two Volumes*, 246–7.

<sup>143</sup> For colonialism and slavery in Byron and for his association of blackness with the Devil, Baum, *Mind-Forg'd Manacles*, 86–7, 145–7.

coincided with a distinct decline in writing on slavery and the slave trade.<sup>144</sup> In this sense Byron and Keats are not unusual in eschewing Atlantic slavery as a subject. Of the three it was Shelley, with his passionate hatred of all forms of tyranny and enslavement, who wrote most extensively about Atlantic slavery. He drew in subtle and majestic ways on the imagistic and thematic inheritance of abolition publicity to interrogate the dynamics of power within slave relationships.

**‘Much have I travelled in the realms of gold’:  
Keats and Reading as Colonial Energia**

Colonialism and the global exploitation of labour is directly confronted in extended fashion only once in Keats’s work, and that is in the lengthy aside detailing the commercial activities of the two brothers in *Isabella or the Pot of Basil*. Keats is ostensibly referring to the activities of a pair of Florentine Renaissance traders, yet the passage has been shown to have contemporary relevance for the activities of the British East India Company at the turn of the eighteenth century, and also alludes to a variety of slave-driven industries in the Americas.<sup>145</sup> It is so intrusive an outburst that Keats inserts an *apologia* to Boccaccio for so boldly departing from the original narrative. In Keats’s fair copy he begs forgiveness for ‘venturing one word, unseemly, mean / In such a place on such a daring theme’. The theme is daring, in that it is a general critique of the ability of monopoly capitalism to contaminate populations and ruin economies on a global scale, and in a ‘hands off’ manner. The two Brothers are described as:

Enrichèd from ancestral merchandise,  
And for them many a weary hand did swelt  
In torchèd mines and noisy factories,  
And many once proud-quivered loins did melt  
In blood from stinging whip. With hollow eyes  
Many all day in dazzling river stood,  
To take the rich-ored driftings of the flood.

For them the Ceylon diver held his breath,  
And went all naked to the hungry shark;

<sup>144</sup> For the saturation of the publishing market with abolition atrocity literature, and the consequent public disgust, see my discussion, pp. 299–301 below.

<sup>145</sup> For Ceylon references, see Carl Woodring, *Politics in English Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970), 80; and for a discussion of the passage in relation to contemporary colonialism, Baum, *Mind-Forg’d Manacles*, 119 and 214–15.

For them his ears gushed blood; for them in death  
 The seal on the cold ice with piteous bark  
 Lay full of darts; for them alone did seethe  
 A thousand men in troubles wide and dark.  
 Half-ignorant, they turned an easy wheel  
 That set sharp racks at work to pinch and peel.

Why were they proud? Because their marble founts  
 Gushed with more blood than do a wretch's tears?  
 Why were they proud? Because fair orange-mounts  
 Were of more soft ascent than lazar stairs?  
 Why were they proud? Because red-lined accounts  
 Were richer than the songs of Grecian years?  
 Why were they proud? Again we ask aloud,  
 Why in the name of glory were they proud?<sup>146</sup>

Following James Grainger's lead in *The Sugar Cane*, major abolition poets, most spectacularly Cowper, had been intent to celebrate English colonial trading practice, while at the same time attacking the single abuse of the Atlantic slave trade.<sup>147</sup> Keats separates himself from this nationalistic and self-aggrandizing tendency and launches a general offensive on the interrelations of all fields of mercantile operation. In ten lines he moves from mine, to factory, to gold panning, to pearl diving, to the arctic fur trade, and the massacres of wildlife it creates. The final stanza, using the rhetorical shock tactic of answering a series questions, with a further series of questions, articulates the seemingly unending exploitation of colonialism.

Keats's head on critique of empire is, however, quite exceptional in his published work.<sup>148</sup> Despite recent attempts to read slavery and empire into the poems, Keats is not centrally engaged with these arenas. In the few direct allusions to New World colonialism at other points in his work, Keats is inconsistent and politically disengaged. When, for example, he alludes to European expansion into the Americas directly, he does so in a way that ostentatiously parades celebratory Eurocentric narratives. There is no clearer example than in the famous allusion to the originatory moment of Spanish enslavement of Central America. The Spanish decimation of the Aztec empire is the focus for the finale of the early sonnet 'On first Looking into Chapman's Homer'. In the

<sup>146</sup> John Keats, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Miriam Allott (London: Longman, 1970), 333-4.

<sup>147</sup> James Grainger, *The Sugar-Cane: A Poem. In Four Books. With Notes* (London: Dodsley, 1764), pp. 160-2, Book IV, ll. 635-81; Cowper, *Poems*, i. 337-55; see pp. 72-3, 82-4 above.

<sup>148</sup> For a recent attempt to 'read' slavery into Keats, see Debbie Lee, 'Poetic Voodoo in *Lamia*: Keats in the Possession of African Magic', in Robert M. Ryan and Ronald A. Sharp (eds.), *The Persistence of Poetry: Bicentennial Essays on Keats* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 132-52.

concluding lines Keats strangely sets his own readerly ‘conquest’ of Homer in a bizarre yet exciting comparison with Cortez’s conquistadorial invasion of Mexico. Having just read Chapman’s translation of Homer in a frenzied sleepless night with his friend Cowden Clarke, Keats states that he ‘felt’:<sup>149</sup>

. . . like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes  
He stared at the Pacific, and all his men  
Looked at each other with a wild surmise  
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.<sup>150</sup>

These lines have been interminably cited as one of Keats’s famous historical blunders. It was not Cortez but Balboa who first sighted the Pacific Ocean from the Darien isthmus.<sup>151</sup> Yet what is revealing is precisely the nature of the substitution, or more accurately conflation, which has occurred. Keats has fused two seminal moments of discovery from William Robertson’s *History of America*: the description of Balboa’s wonder on seeing the Pacific, and Cortez’s amazement on first seeing Mexico City. In conjuring up Cortez, rather than Balboa, Keats is fixing on the moment when the Spanish conquistadors suddenly realized the extraordinary resources of the empire they had stumbled upon, and which they were to destroy so quickly.<sup>152</sup> The description of this first sighting of the Aztec capital articulates an experience hovering between dream and reality, but which finally emerges as an opportunity to make money:

In descending from the mountains of Chalco . . . he saw . . . the capital city rising upon an island in the middle, adorned with its temples and turrets, the scene so far exceeded their imagination that some believed the fanciful descriptions of Romance were realised, and that its enchanted palaces and gilded domes were presented to their sight, others could hardly persuade themselves that this wonderful spectacle was anything more than a dream. As they advanced, their doubts were removed, but their amazement increased. They were now full satisfied that the country was rich beyond any conception which they had formed of it, and flattered themselves that at length they should obtain an ample recompense for all their services and sufferings.<sup>153</sup>

Cortez’s sighting of Mexico City is very different indeed from Balboa’s ecstatic view of the Pacific coast, and marks the beginning of the end for the indigenous

<sup>149</sup> The standard account of the genesis of the poem is Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964), 86–9.

<sup>150</sup> Keats, *Poems*, 62.

<sup>151</sup> See *ibid.* 62 notes.

<sup>152</sup> The only interpretation of the poem to look in detail at some of the relevant passages of Robertson is Daniel P. Watkins, *Keats’s Poetry and the Politics of the Imagination* (London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Associated University Presses, 1989), 26–31, Watkins does not, however, discuss the discovery of Mexico City; see also Nicholas Roe, *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 59.

<sup>153</sup> William Robertson, *History of America*, 2 vols. (London, 1788), ii. 51.

civilizations of Central and South America. Within sixty years over two-thirds of the population of the Aztec and Inca empires would be dead, the remainder enslaved.<sup>154</sup> Within two hundred years those populations would be wiped out and Atlantic slavery instituted across the Americas on a mass scale.<sup>155</sup> Keats in comparing the act of conquering and assimilating the classical literary inheritance, an inheritance that had never been granted to him through a formal education, imaginatively aligns himself with the central figure of criminal destruction within the Spanish 'Black Legend'.<sup>156</sup> This is a peculiar move to make in 1816. As we have seen, the literatures spawned around the slavery debates in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries drew extensively upon the long-standing demonization of the processes of Spanish colonization in the Americas. The figure at the heart of this colonial anathematization of Spain in English, French, and Dutch literature of the 'Black Legend' was always Cortez.<sup>157</sup> Keats places himself outside this negative discourse and, knowingly or not, aligns himself with an older pro-slavery discourse that celebrates Spanish destruction of the Americas as a part of Europe's irresistible imperial expansion.<sup>158</sup> From this perspective the poem's opening is strangely violent: Keats, as belated reader of the classics in translation, sets himself up as colonial rapist. The opening line, 'Much have I travelled in the realms of gold', appears caustically ironic from the perspective of the poem's conclusion. There are different forms of gold, the gold of the classics, and of *El Dorado*. The latter is a compulsive fiction that underpinned the rape and massacre of an entire sub-continent. If this reading seems fanciful, I am not the first to question the poem's conclusion from the perspective of enslavement and ruin that Cortez's activities in the Americas were to inaugurate. In a little epigrammatic poetic dialogue with Keats's sonnet entitled 'A Peak in Darien' Robert Louis Stevenson also questioned what Keats was up to:

Broad-gazing on untrodden lands,  
See where adventurous Cortez stands;  
While in the heavens above his head  
The Eagle seeks its daily bread.

<sup>154</sup> For the Spanish 'Black Legend', see pp. 76–8, 144 above.

<sup>155</sup> Eric Williams, *From Columbus to Castro: The History of the Caribbean 1492–1969* (London: André Deutsch, 1983), 18–110; Edwin Williamson, *The Penguin History of Latin America* (London: Allen Lane, 1992), 16–76; Bartolomé de las Casas, *History of the Indies*, trans. Andrée Collard (New York: Harper Row, 1970).

<sup>156</sup> For the literatures of the 'Black Legend' and the historiography, see pp. 76–7 above.

<sup>157</sup> For the demonization of Cortez, p. 77 and footnote.

<sup>158</sup> Even those critics who attempt to consider the political implications of the sonnet from the perspective of European colonial depravity in the New World tend to defend Keats. The most sophisticated, or sophisticated, apologia is that of Watkins, *Keats's Poetry*, 31. Watkins argues that the very absence of engagement with the minutiae of Spanish exploitation suggests that Keats is drawing the reader into an inevitable relationship with his historical sources.

How aptly fact to fact replies:  
 Heroes and eagles, hills and skies.  
 Ye, who contemn the fatted slave,  
 Look on this emblem, and be brave.<sup>159</sup>

In this bitter poem, written in the didactic form of a children's religious emblem, Stevenson interrogates Keats's unthinking approach to imperial history. Keats's adjective is changed and 'stout Cortez' becomes a mere 'adventurer'. His 'eagle eyes' are given back to the original owner, who is shown flying in the skies, admittedly seeking for prey, but only in order to live. The ironic quotation from the Lord's prayer, 'daily bread', alludes to the monumental greed of Cortez and his men, who, not in the least content with 'daily bread', deliriously lay waste an entire civilization in their pursuit of gold. The final four lines climax in an assault: Keats's easy parallel of eagle and Hero finds no place for the slave victim. The final couplet turns around to address the reader. Stevenson demands that the European racist construction of the enslaved as fat, content, and better off with colonization than without, be set against what has been lost in the process of the destruction of the Americas. Stevenson's point is that having stared that inheritance in the face, it is then difficult to 'be brave' in the manner of Cortez.

### Shelley and the Mythopoeics of Slavery

If Keats's engagement with Atlantic slavery is peripheral and confused, Shelley's is elaborate, and to use Bloom's vocabulary, incurably mythopoeic. Yet Shelley, of all the major Romantic poets, has spoken to the descendants of slaves in the Diaspora. The uncompromising energy of his libertarian diction has re-manifested itself in some unpredictable contexts. The great dub poet Mikey Smith, a few months before he was stoned to death in Kingston, Jamaica, performed Shelley's *Song to the Men of England* in Westminster Abbey. Smith's gorgeous performance constituted a furious demonstration that slavery and tyranny are excoriated by Shelley in a language that maintains transparent power for the oppressed ex-slave populations of the Diaspora. Shelley's ability to talk about the power relations of slavery in abstract terms, which nevertheless have a continued application to human culture in its unpredictable efflorescence, is a feature of the major verse from *Queen Mab* on.

Yet the extent to which Shelley directly addressed Atlantic slavery in his major work has, rightly, been questioned. Alan Richardson recently suggested that

<sup>159</sup> *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*, Vailima Edition, 26 vols. (London: William Heinemann, 1922–3), xxv. 131.

Shelley made his 'opposition to colonial slavery clear', although he never wrote a 'poem against slavery per se', and suggests that Shelley's *Prometheus* may relate to abolition literature, although he provides no evidence for the assertion.<sup>160</sup> In fact Prometheus was a central symbolic figure not only for Blake, Southey, Byron, and Shelley, but for the anti-slavery movement.<sup>161</sup> The lavish *Poems on the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (1809), edited by James Montgomery, brought out to commemorate the 1807 abolition bill, carried an elaborate emblematic engraving opposite the title page. This was accompanied by an explanatory Ode 'Prometheus Delivered'. This poem makes it clear that Prometheus is a typological prefigurement of the suffering African slave. At the poem's conclusion he becomes a representative of all who suffered because of the Guinea trade:

Prometheus rises man again!  
 Such Africa, thy suffering state!  
 Outcast of nations, such thy fate!  
 The ruthless rock, the den of pain,  
 Were thine—oh long deplored in vain,  
 Whilst Britains's virtue slept! at length  
 She rose in majesty of strength;  
 And when thy martyred limbs she viewed,  
 Thy wounds unhealed and still renewed,  
 She wept; but soon with graceful pride,  
 The vulture, Avarice, she defied,  
 And wrenched him from thy reeking side;  
 In Britain's name then called thee forth,  
 Sad exile, to the social hearth,  
 From baleful Error's realm of night,  
 To Freedom's breath and Reason's light.<sup>162</sup>

Montgomery's Prometheus/Africa is a very nationalistic figure. He is saved by British altruism from the vulture of 'Avarice', which constitutes the monopolist greed enabling the slave trade. Prometheus stands as an emblem of British beneficence, rather than a celebration of African liberty.

<sup>160</sup> Alan Richardson, 'Slavery and Romantic Writing', in Duncan Wu (ed.), *A Companion to Romanticism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992), 465.

<sup>161</sup> The construction of the Promethean myth within mainstream English Romantic poetry, and its relation to Aeschylus is brilliantly traced in Harold Bloom, *Shelley's Mythmaking* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1969), 46–64, 91–100. There is a more extended, and refreshingly sensible, treatment of the theme in the context of Milton's Promethean obsession, Linda M. Lewis, *The Promethean Politics of Milton, Blake and Shelley* (Columbus and London: University of Missouri Press, 1992).

<sup>162</sup> James Montgomery, *Poems on the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (London, 1809), 1–3 and frontispiece.



Back in the 1790s Romantic poetry had already played a series of imaginative variations on the slave body as Promethean. One of Southey's 1797 sonnets on the slave trade presented the punishment of a rebel slave in the following terms:

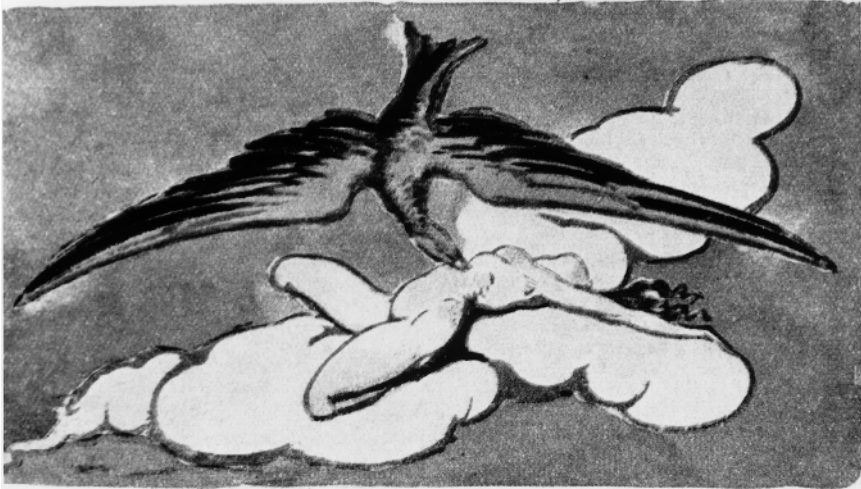
High in the air expos'd the Slave is hung  
 To all the birds of Heaven, their living food!  
 He groans not, tho' awak'd by that fierce Sun  
 New torturers live to drink their parent blood!  
 He groans not, tho' the gorging Vulture tear  
 The quivering fibre! hither gaze O ye  
 Who tore this Man from Peace and Liberty!<sup>163</sup>

The slave suffers for his revolutionary act, made in an attempt to restore peace and liberty. Although a vulture is substituted for an eagle the punishment and the dramatic situation are essentially Promethean. And four years before Southey's poem Blake had produced a typically bizarre take on Promethean iconography within the context of North American plantation slavery. In 1793 he published *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* and at the opening of this short prophetic book the female Oothoon, incarnated as the 'soft soul of America' is brutally raped by the incarnation of the slave power, Bromion. In response to this her lover Theotorman sends an eagle to rend her side (Fig. 15). The image at the bottom of the third plate of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* shows Oothoon as the tortured Prometheus, the eagle feeding upon her liver.<sup>164</sup>

Shelley's analysis of slavery and liberty in *Prometheus Unbound* is very different from these precursors. The engagement of *Prometheus Unbound* with slavery is, first and foremost, an abstract meditation on the tendency of power to enslave the powerful, and more horrifically those who make themselves dependent on the powerful. It is, finally, a deliberation on the self-destructive limits of absolute power and as such deals with the question of slavery in terms of a strangely detached absolutism. Act I of *Prometheus Unbound* considers how power corrupts and how power manifests itself in violence. It is Jupiter's enslavement to his own tyranny, and not the consequent suffering of the humans he has enslaved, or the torture of the enslaved Prometheus, which is Shelley's primary moral concern. With a typical loftiness Shelley reveals the great slave to be Jupiter, who, no matter what he does, is consequently to be pitied, not hated. This is stated in Prometheus's great opening speech, when he sees the

<sup>163</sup> Southey, *Poems* (1797), p. 390, ll. 1–7.

<sup>164</sup> For an extended analysis of the manner in which *Visions* intersects with contemporary slavery debates, see pp. 181–7 above. For an extended analysis of Blake's manifold approaches to the Promethean myth, see Lewis, *Promethean Politics*, 111–55, and for the plate in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, 114–15.



15. William Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, plate 5 (relief etching and watercolour, 1795)

point at which Jupiter's tyranny will be overthrown. Prometheus can see, and then personifies, the arrival of a single hour which:

Shall drag thee, cruel King, to kiss the blood  
 From these pale feet, which then might trample thee  
 If they disdain'd not such a prostrate slave.  
 Disdain! Ah no! I pity thee

I speak in grief,  
 Not exultation for I hate no more<sup>165</sup>

It is at this point, with the drama poised to turn from Prometheus's suffering to the drawn out process of regeneration and emancipation, that Shelley produces his one great set piece on the traumatic effects of torture within the master/slave relationship. With the arrival of the Furies Shelley presents an evil that is pragmatically intelligent. When the fiends first arrive to torture him, Prometheus makes the terrible assertion that absolute evil, manifested in brute power, has the force to convert, or reduce, any victim's consciousness into its likeness: 'Whilst I behold such execrable shapes, / Methinks I grow like what I contemplate, / And laugh and stare in loathsome sympathy.'<sup>166</sup> Yet when the Furies begin to work on him through a series of tortures that are both mental and

<sup>165</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1945), pp. 208–9, ll. 50–3, 56–7.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218, ll. 449–51.

physical, it is Prometheus's ability to resist mimicry that saves him. In refusing to imitate the mental habits which justify a nihilistic philosophy of 'might is right', Prometheus denies his tormentors their reason for existing. In the central exchange in the poem to overturn the terrible thesis that the enslaver can re-create the enslaved in his/her own image, Prometheus refuses the option of empathy with evil through terror. The scene of this refusal is as follows. Having outlined a series of catastrophic events that have struck the world, the Furies then make the argument that it is not the violence in itself that is important, but its inheritance. Torture and cruelty leave a lasting social residue in the form of a corrupting terror that destabilizes all human thought and personality. Terror manifests itself in the form of a morally blind hypocrisy, a terrible acquiescence with the dictates of the ruler:

*Fury:* In each human heart terror survives  
 The ravin it has gorged: the loftiest fear  
 All that they would disdain to think were true:  
 Hypocrisy and custom make their minds  
 The fanes of many a worship, now outworn.  
 They dare not devise good for man's estate,  
 And yet they know not that they do not dare.  
 The good want power, but to weep barren tears.  
 The powerful goodness want: worse need for them.  
 The wise want love; and those who love want wisdom;  
 And all best things are thus confused to ill.  
 Many are strong and rich, and would be just,  
 But live among their suffering fellow-men  
 As if none felt: they know not what they do.<sup>167</sup>

This is the spiritual and moral nadir of the work. Shelley here distils the mental structures, which those who survive, and thrive, under systems of dictatorship and slavery must erect. Yet he puts the words into the mouth of one of the damned, one of the slave collaborators, who ironically enunciates them as a form of extreme psychological torture for Prometheus. The Promethean response is to maintain the spirit of forgiveness as the one power that the powerful cannot pervert, and he announces: 'Thy words are like a cloud of winged snakes; / And yet I pity those they torture not.'<sup>168</sup> Astonished at this response the final Fury vanishes, and the torturers make no further appearance in the drama. Pity, in this setting, has been able to overthrow the worst violence that a sadistic power can inflict. Yet the Promethean response is not a human response. The central

<sup>167</sup> Shelley, *Poetical Works*, p. 222, ll. 617–30.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222, ll. 632–3.

tension in the work from here on revolves around whether Shelley can achieve the impossible task he has set himself. Having shown the full horror that enables the slave system of Jupiter to continue, can a poetry of emancipatory joy create a counterforce capable of combating this moral black hole? For my money it cannot, and that is why Shelley had to go back to this desolate ground in *The Triumph of Life*, but that is another story. The point I want to make about Shelley's treatment of slavery in *Prometheus Unbound* is simple. As the poem develops to its euphoric conclusion the final speech of the Fury cannot be gainsaid. It is a point of cynical realism, a description of psychological things as they are in a world controlled by violence. Against this black backdrop, Shelley's subsequent idealism is all the more poignant in its glorious futility. In this astonishing poem Shelley may not provide any sort of historically engaged discussion of the workings and effects of the Atlantic slave systems on its victims. What he does provide, in the first act, is a peculiarly desolate psychic diagram of the ability of slavery to infect the intellect of the enslaver. While *Prometheus Unbound* constitutes Shelley's central meditation on slavery in the context of human ethics, he did write other verse that is more intimately involved in the rhetoric of the abolition debates.

Shelley's *Similes for Two Political Characters of 1819* (1819) and *A Vision of the Sea*, which was significantly published in the 1820 volume *Prometheus Unbound: A Lyrical Drama in Four Acts with Other Poems*, both confront the slave trade directly. *Similes* is one of the poems that Shelley wrote in 1819 in a state of politicized indignation after he had heard about the Peterloo massacre. The poem is a grim satire aimed at Sidmouth and Castlereagh, two leading Cabinet members in the hated Liverpool administration. Having compared the two politicians to ravens and 'gibbering night-birds', in the third stanza Shelley brings in a reference to the slave trade, turning the men into fish:

As a shark and dog-fish wait  
Under an Atlantic isle,  
For the negro-ship, whose freight  
Is the theme of their debate,  
Wrinkling their gills the while—  
Are ye . . .<sup>169</sup>

The image of the shark following the slave ship hoping for corpses to be thrown overboard was introduced into English poetry by James Thompson, in a justly celebrated passage of the *Seasons*.<sup>170</sup> Thompson's passage connected the ugly reality of slave mortality with the distant business interests enabling slavery. In

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., p. 573, ll. 11–16.

<sup>170</sup> James Thompson, *The Seasons, Summer* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 106, ll. 1013–25.

converting leading members of the government into a shark and a dogfish Shelley makes a similar move through political satire. His marine predators stand symbolically for British political corruption. The implication is that the same monsters that feed off the African body via the slave trade also feed off the exploited labouring poor of England. Shelley's treatment of the middle passage in this poem is politically effective in the way it suggests connections between the processes of imperial exploitation and domestic politics. Shelley's discussion of the middle passage in this poem is, however, finally both slight and brief. In 1820 he was to return to the theme in a far more elaborate form, which again finds its origin in a dialogue with Thompson.

*A Vision of the Sea*, a substantial late narrative fragment, intriguingly published alongside *Prometheus Unbound*, is a poem that is almost completely ignored in Shelley criticism. When it is mentioned, it appears to cause total bamboozlement. Kenneth Neal Cameron summarizes, 'as it stands, the poem makes little sense. It does not appear to have either symbolic or autobiographical meaning.'<sup>171</sup> I will argue that *A Vision* is a coherent poem that takes for its subject a slave insurrection on the middle passage. It is also a poem that engages in profound ways with the inheritance of abolition propaganda. *A Vision* describes the violent destruction of a guilty ship laden with a furious and oppressed living cargo. The main events of the poem run as follows. At the opening the ship is torn about by a series of violent forces that constitute a virtual inventory of the natural signs of Divine retribution catalogued in the anti-slavery verse of Thompson, Cowper, and Hannah More.<sup>172</sup> At the point of its destruction two chained tigers burst from the hold. There is then an account of how the 'populous vessel' was becalmed, and of how most of the crew died of disease, and were thrown to the fish. As the ship is about to go down a single lovely woman with her child is seen at the helm. The woman is terrified, but the child is delighted both by the fury of the storm and by the tigers. As the ship is finally ripped apart, the tigers dive overboard. One is destroyed in a violent conflict with a giant sea snake. The other is executed by marksmen who arrive in a ship's boat. As the wreck goes down, the beautiful woman clings to her child, who is still fearless.<sup>173</sup>

The originary poetical account of the destruction of a slave ship by an infuriated and Divinely inspired Nature, is again to be found in the slave ship passage from Thompson's *Summer*. In Thompson's account the vessel is torn apart in the tempest, and the shark rushes in for his terrible feast:

<sup>171</sup> Kenneth Neil Cameron, *Shelley: The Golden Years* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), 293-4.

<sup>172</sup> See Wood, *Blind Memory*, 38-40, and Thomas, *Romanticism*, 75-81.

<sup>173</sup> Shelley, *Poetical Works*, 596-600.

The stormy fates descend: one death involves  
 Tyrants and slaves; when straight their mangled limbs  
 Crashing at once, he [the shark] dyes the purple seas  
 With gore, and riots in the vengeful meal.<sup>174</sup>

Shelley's *Vision* opens with a 'black ship' caught in the terrible deluge. The storm, in terms of its rage is also equated to an earthquake 'an earthquake of sound'. As is evident from Cowper's abolition poetry the deluge, thunder, lightning, and earthquake are all called up as signs of God's wrath against the slave colonies and the slave trade. Fuseli made a painting to illustrate Cowper's 'The Negro's Complaint'. The painting takes the lines in Cowper's poem which demonstrate God's fury at slavery as he creates 'Wild tornadoes / Strewing yonder flood with wrecks.' The painting shows the upturned slaver going down in a tempest, while a pair of black slaves look exultingly on from a cliff top.<sup>175</sup> That the natural cataclysms which destroy the ship in *A Vision* are to be read as direct signs of Divine vengeance is almost obsessively reiterated in the lines 'lightning is loosed, Like a deluge from Heaven, She sees the black trunks of the waterspouts spin / And bend as if Heaven was ruining in', and then later 'The intense thunder balls that are raining from Heaven / Have shatter'd its mast, and it stands black and riven'.<sup>176</sup> Why the ship should be the object of such explosive destructive ire emerges in the subsequent lines. The ship founders, and itself becomes as a corpse, an ironic metaphoric enactment of the dead slaves cast overboard from it, 'The heavy dead hulk / On the living sea rolls an inanimate bulk, / Like a corpse on the clay'.<sup>177</sup> Yet Shelley at this point makes a daring departure from his sources. Abolition verse invariably reserves vengeance on the slave ship and its crew for God. The 'steaming crowds' in the hold are anonymous and passive, and go down with the ship. Shelley makes the unprecedented move of fusing Divine and slave vengeance. He gives an account first of the slaves rising in fury from the hold in the form of two chained tigers:

Twin tigers, who burst, when the waters arose,  
 In the agony of terror, their chains in the hold;  
 . . . . .  
 Who crouch, side by side, and have driven, like a crank,  
 The deep grip of their claws through the vibrating plank:—<sup>178</sup>

Shelley then makes another unusual move in switching attention from the slaves to the crew. Abolition publicity against the slave trade in its initial phase put

<sup>174</sup> Thompson, *Summer*, 106.

<sup>175</sup> See Wood, *Blind Memory*, 38, 40.

<sup>176</sup> Shelley, *Poetical Works*, p. 597, ll. 5-6, 29-30.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 597, ll. 31-3.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 597, ll. 40-1, 43-4.

nearly as much emphasis on the suffering and mortality rates among the sailors in the slave trade as did upon the slaves. This was a pragmatic move designed to overturn pro-slavery rhetoric that constructed the slave trade as the ‘nursery of British seamanship’.<sup>179</sup> Shelley is influenced by this body of propaganda, but his take on it is to overturn the shark imagery that he had already used in the *Similes* and shift it from the slave victim to the white slaving crew:

. . . Nine weeks the tall vessel had lain  
 On the windless expanse of the watery plain,  
 Where the death-darting sun cast on shadow at noon,  
 And there seemed to be fire in the beams of the moon,  
 Till a lead-coloured fog gathered up from the deep,  
 Whose breath was quick pestilence; then the cold sleep  
 Crept, like blight through the ears of a thick field of corn,  
 O’er the populous vessel. And even and morn,  
 With their hammocks for coffins the seamen aghast  
 Like dead men the dead limbs of their comrades cast  
 Down to the deep, which closed on them above and around,  
 And the sharks and the dogfish their grave clothes unbound,  
 And were gluttoned like Jews with this manna rained down  
 From God on their wilderness.<sup>180</sup>

In these extraordinary lines the shark and dogfish are compared to the Israelites under Moses. At a low-ebb during the Exodus, attempting to escape slavery, the Israelites are granted Manna from heaven, a divine and miraculous food. In a hideous upending of the myth, the rotten and diseased corpses of the perpetrators of the British slave trade feed Shelley’s deeply strange marine representatives of liberated slavery. Again, however, it is finally seen as God’s act of vengeance (on the sailors) and miraculous generosity (for the shark and dogfish). It is in the introduction of the slave presence as an energized revolutionary force, the Tigers, that the most confrontational aspect of Shelley’s poem emerges.

Is there any external evidence to support a reading of the Tigers as symbolic of a slave cargo? Tigers are of course Asian, not African, in origin, but this had not prevented them from being used as the symbol of slave vengeance and rebellion in earlier poetry. Blake’s destruction of the slave power, the sons and daughters of Mystery, which forms the climax to *Vala*, shows us ‘ramping

<sup>179</sup> The most meticulous and influential text to put forward the argument through hundreds of detailed testimonies from sailors who worked on slavers is Thomas Clarkson, *Substance of the Evidence of Sundry Persons on the Slave Trade Collected in the Course of a Tour Made in the Autumn of the Year 1788* (London, 1789).

<sup>180</sup> Shelley, *Poetical Works*, pp. 597–8, ll. 45–58.

tygers jingling in the traces' of the carts that draw the victims to destruction. Maybe that gives us a hint about the nature of his more famous Tyger, 'burning bright in the forests of the night'.<sup>181</sup> In the 1790s Bryan Edwards, the Jamaican planter and at times strangely ambivalent pro-slavery rhetorician, had written an *Ode on Seeing a Negro Funeral*. In this poem the Ghost of the slave Malco is presented as an inspirational force bringing joy to the bereaved. The mourners at his funeral do not lament his death but celebrate it. They envision Malco flying over the Ocean to his ancestors to rouse 'Africk's God' to vengeance. The God looses 'Africk's ruthless rage' in the form of a horde of ravening tygers:

The thunder, hark!—'Tis Africk's God!  
 He wakes; he lifts th'avenging rod,  
 And speeds th'impatient hours:  
 From Niger's golden stream he calls;  
 Fair Freedom comes; oppression falls,  
 And vengeance yet is ours!

. . . [Africk] Shalt roam th'affrighted wood:  
 Transformed to tygers, fierce and fell,  
 Thy race shall prowl with savage yell,  
 And glut their rage for blood!<sup>182</sup>

Shelley's magnificent Tigers plunge into the ocean, and meet destruction, but they go out fighting with convulsive energy. The tiger's rebellion may lead to inevitable death, but it is a glorious assertion of freedom in which nature conjoins in a spectacular fusion of destruction and celebration. The combination of innocence and vengeful fury that Shelley articulates as the essence of the revolutionary spirit in this poem is formulated in the meeting between the 'bright child' and the Tigers. The infant:

. . . laughs at the lightning, it mocks the mixed thunder  
 Of the air and the sea, with desire and with wonder  
 It is beckoning the tigers to rise and come near,  
 It would play with those eyes where the radiance of fear  
 Is outshining the meteors; its bosom beats high,  
 The heart-fire of pleasure has kindled its eye<sup>183</sup>

<sup>181</sup> For a reading of the 'Dance round the winepresses of Luvah' in *Vala* Book 9, as an enactment of slave insurrection and emancipation, see pp. 189–93 above.

<sup>182</sup> *Anti-Slavery Scrap Book* (London, 1829, Sold by Harvey and Darton, Westley and Davis, Seeley and Son, and Houlston and Son), unpaginated, item 11, *Inscription at the Entrance of a Burial Ground for Negro Slaves, Bryan Edwards*.

<sup>183</sup> Shelley, *Poetical Works*, p. 598, ll. 70–5.



It is vital to the poem that the gender and race of the infant remains suspended. This fearless little spirit, whether girl or boy, black or white, has an instinctive love of the tigers in their desperate revolt, which is the final vindication of the violent and doomed insurrection. The poem ends in confusion, the ship wrecked, the Tigers killed, the bright infant, and its mother apparently about to go down, while 'Near this commotion, / A blue shark is hanging within the blue ocean, / The fin winged tomb of the victor.' Yet for Shelley this is a worthwhile annihilation 'Death, Fear, Love, Beauty, are mixed in the atmosphere.' This is the atmosphere of Turner's *Slavers*, if the death of slaves is to be celebrated by a white Romantic consciousness it is only at a terrible and paradoxical price. Shelley shares with the Blake of the dance around the wine presses of Luvah a desire to celebrate the victims of slavery through a vastly inclusive account of insurrectionary violence.

## ‘Born to be a destroyer of slavery’: Harriet Martineau Fixing Slavery and Slavery as a Fix

She was born to be a destroyer of slavery, in whatever form, in whatever place, all over the world, wherever she saw or thought she saw it. The thought actually inspired her: whether in the degraded offspring of former English poor-law, of English serfdom forty years ago,—in any shape; whether in the fruits of an abuse,—social, legislative, or administrative,—or in actual slavery; or be it in the Contagious Diseases Acts, or no matter what, she rose to the occasion.

(Florence Nightingale on Harriet Martineau<sup>1</sup>)

Nightingale’s jumpy testimony reveals several things, first that slavery, in her opinion, was, for Martineau, ubiquitous, global, and comparative. Slavery emerges at home as well as abroad, and is understood to be as much the product of domestic, economic, and political theory as the result of individual actions by planters in the colonies. More weirdly, it is the fertile progeny of sin ‘the fruits of an abuse’, and even exists as a source of inspiration. In those troubling words ‘wherever she saw, or thought she saw it. The thought actually inspired her’, it seems as if the fiction generated around slavery, whether the slavery actually exists or not, is the source of Martineau’s inspiration. In this sense, like Thomas Clarkson, William Wilberforce, and John Newton before her, Martineau’s life found its purpose in thinking about slavery, and thinking about slavery became one major purpose of her life. What did slavery drive her to?

Harriet Martineau generated what is, taken for all in all, probably the most varied and intellectually ambitious body of texts produced by any woman during the nineteenth century, and slavery runs throughout this body of work. At the age of 22 in 1824 she published her first essay in the *Monthly Repository*. For the next fifty-five years, with hardly a break, she produced a mass of didactic essays and pamphlets and several full-length romantic novels.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in [Maria Weston Chapman], *Memorials of Harriet Martineau*, vol. 3 of *Harriet Martineau’s Autobiography with Memorials by Maria Weston Chapman in Three Volumes* (London, 1877), 479.

From 1832 to 1834 she wrote the extraordinary, and extraordinarily successful, *Illustrations of Political Economy*. She also brought out a series of travel books *Society in America*, *Retrospect of Western Travel* (1848), and *Eastern Life: Past and Present* (1848), the former based on American travels, the latter on her travels in Egypt and the Holy Land. She published several works considering aspects of American politics and history in relation to the development of slavery systems. She made several forays into formal philosophy; the most impressive is *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte* (1853). She made substantial contributions to Indian colonial historiography with *British Rule in India: An Historical Sketch* (1857) and *Suggestions towards the Future Government of India* (1858). She ended with a bevy of autobiographical works, *Our Farm of Two Acres* (1865), *Biographical Sketches* (1869), and the *Autobiography* (1877). Add to this an incessant body of occasional journalism in newspapers and periodicals, several devotional guides and expository works, thematically arranged collections of letters, her children's books, and her lectures, and the extent of her achievement begins to emerge.<sup>2</sup>

From the start Martineau was a passionate abolitionist who came at slavery in a variety of ways over several decades. She produced a body of writings on Atlantic slavery in the English and French Caribbean, and in North America, which were highly influential in the period directly leading up to slave emancipation in the British sugar colonies. She wrote two major works on Caribbean slavery, and included lengthy discussion of American slavery in two others. Each one of these works has a specific cultural agenda, and a different form, yet each was almost immediately brought out in the major East Coast cities in American editions. As a result all of her slavery writings were circulating in American editions in the period leading into, and through, the American Civil War. In terms of the English cultural imagination and slavery, Martineau's writings constitute a unique transatlantic cultural barometer.<sup>3</sup>

*Demerara* was Martineau's first major slavery text. It was published as one of her *Illustrations of Political Economy*, coming out in 1832, the year before slavery in the English sugar colonies was officially abolished. Martineau's

<sup>2</sup> The millennial publication of *Women, Emancipation and Literature: The Papers of Harriet Martineau, 1802-1876, from Birmingham University Library* (London: Adam Mathew Publications, 2000) has made available on microfilm many of Martineau's manuscripts and the great bulk of her letters, particularly her correspondence with publishers and journal editors. This reveals yet another unexplored area of Martineau's output. The letters show the range of her interests to be almost limitless. There are a number of autobiographical studies of Martineau that set her life and publications in context, but by far the best book to relate the life and writings to the cultural background is Shelagh Hunter, *Harriet Martineau: The Poetics of Moralism* (London: Scolar Press, 1995). This includes a very useful 'Brief Chronology and Selected Writings', pp. ix-x.

<sup>3</sup> In the absence of a proper Martineau bibliography, the quickest way to gain a sense of how quickly each of her major publications came out in a variety of American editions is to look at the National Union Catalogue entries. Invariably, her books appeared within a year of their English imprint brought

second extended treatment of slavery turned to North America. The 1836 *Travels in America* attempted to provide an overview of American society and to provide an objective account of the operations of slavery in the South and the impact of the institution on American democratic procedure across the entire Union. Martineau was careful to exclude from this volume any extended account of her personal dealings with, or views on, American abolitionists. She filled this gap when she wrote of the abolition controversy at the opening of her second volume of the *Autobiography*, actually written when she thought she was dying in 1855, but published on her own wishes a year after she died in 1877.<sup>4</sup> This constitutes a full-blooded development of abolition's martyrological and hagiographic traditions of biography, and forges links between British and American abolition martyrs. Martineau concluded her treatment of slavery by approaching the black mythic hero, Toussaint L'Ouverture, and writing a history of the San Domingue rebellion in the form of a Romantic novel published in 1841, *The Hour and the Man*. It was a book that set out to counter the anti-black atrocity literatures focused on Haiti, which became increasingly popular in the United States. Yet, mainly because of this agenda, Martineau distorted the activities of Toussaint L'Ouverture and the black Jacobins in a grotesque manner.<sup>5</sup> Martineau's slavery writings are characterized by restlessness. Slavery is a subject that her mind dwells on in ways that are inquisitive and acquisitive. Finally, however, there is a general shift away from the principled intelligence of *Demerara* and into the mechanisms of sentimental empathy and martyrological self-identification, which emerge as characteristic of so much of the writing in this book.

### Telling it how it is: Anti-Empathy and the Impulse to Degrade in Martineau's *Demerara*

If the champions of the slave had but seen how his cause is aided by representing him as he is,—not only revengeful, but selfish and mean,—not only treacherous to his master, but knavish to his countrymen, indolent, conceited, hypocritical, and sensual,—we should have had fewer narratives of slaves more virtuous than a free peasantry and exposed to the delicate miseries of a refined love of which they are incapable or of social sensibilities which can never be generated in such a social condition as theirs.

(*Demerara*, Preface, p. v)

out by publishers in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. *Women, Emancipation and Literature* also includes some detailed accounts of exchanges with American publishers and literary figures.

<sup>4</sup> Hunter, *Martineau*, 148–95; R. K. Webb, *Harriet Martineau: A Radical Victorian* (London: Heinemann, 1960), 134–74.

<sup>5</sup> For a survey of the relevant literatures, see pp. 231–4 above.

The most intellectually and aesthetically effective of Martineau's major writings on slavery was the first, *Demerara*. It treated slavery in the British Caribbean at a point when the substantial slave revolts of 1816 in Barbados, the Demerara revolt of 1823, and the Jamaica revolt of 1831–2, had led to increased assaults on anti-slavery from a variety of quarters.<sup>6</sup> Martineau produced an ingenious critique of plantation slavery that completely changed the orthodox ground upon which attacks on slavery had been based. Yet despite its initial success in England and America, fifty years after its publication *Demerara* had drifted into, and has remained in, almost total obscurity. *Demerara* is not treated with any serious attention by Martineau scholars and is bypassed by social and cultural historians of slavery.<sup>7</sup> One explanation for this neglect is that *Demerara* brought slavery home, to Europe, in ways that are still very hard for Europeans to acknowledge. Martineau also refused to limit her rhetoric to conventional 'literary' language.

As one of the *Illustrations of Political Economy*, *Demerara* was a text with huge circulation on both sides of the Atlantic. Martineau herself states that she was well known as an anti-slavery publicist across the Eastern states, even before she arrived in America, because of this book.<sup>8</sup> *Illustrations of Political Economy*, which came out in parts from 1832 to 1834, made Martineau suddenly famous: she emerged as 'governess to the Nation' writing for 'my great pupil the public', the most popular female educational writer since Hannah More, and far more intellectually ambitious.<sup>9</sup> The *Illustrations* is a series of case studies that fuse economic and social theory with fiction. Each short work preached the basic economic advantages of a free market economy by placing a set of fictional characters in a specific geographical and industrial setting. Despite some very cruel, and unfortunately very amusing, criticisms in the *Quarterly Review*, ridiculing Martineau's treatment of the question of population growth, the series was

<sup>6</sup> For the historical background to the slave revolts in the English Caribbean, Michael Craton, 'Emancipation from Below? The Role of the British West Indian Slaves in the Emancipation Movement, 1816–34', in Jack Hayward (ed.), *Out of Slavery: Abolition and After* (London: Frank Cass, 1985), 19–25; Michael Craton, *Empire, Enslavement, and Freedom in the Caribbean* (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 1997), 265 ff.; for the rhetorical response to slave insurrection by leading British male abolitionists, see Gelien Matthews, 'The Other Side of Slave Revolts', in Sandra Courtman (ed.), *The Society for Annual Caribbean Conference Papers*, vol. i (2000), electronic text, <http://www.sconline.freereserve.co.uk/olvol1.html>

<sup>7</sup> The major exception to this statement is the excellent discussion of the cultural context for *Demerara* in Moira Ferguson, *Subject to Others: British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery 1670–1834* (London: Routledge, 1992), 273–80.

<sup>8</sup> Harriet Martineau, *Harriet Martineau's Autobiography*, 2 vols. (London: Virago, [1877] 1980), ii, 11, 19.

<sup>9</sup> For Martineau's development of a theory of mass education, see Hunter, *Martineau*, 38–58. Martineau used the phrase 'my great pupil the public' in a letter to William Tate, 14 Sept. 1833, MS Ogdon 101, University College London. For Hannah More's slavery writings and Martineau's relation to them, see Ferguson, *Subject to Others*, 146–63, 218–20.

enthusiastically received, and its sales were massive.<sup>10</sup> In publishing terms the series grew out of, while it improved upon, the attempts at mass education publishing that had been pioneered by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge.<sup>11</sup> *Demerara*, one of the earlier *Illustrations*, consequently analysed slavery within the parameters of a much wider ideological project. The attempt to argue against slavery on grounds not merely of morality but of economic inefficiency was not new. The first great assault upon the logic of trade monopoly within the British sugar islands had been carried through by Adam Smith in the *Wealth of Nations*.<sup>12</sup> In this sense Martineau's *Demerara* is a Utilitarian update of *The Wealth of Nations*, infusing Mill and Bentham into Smith, to make an economic argument for free labour in the colonies on the very eve of the passage of the slave emancipation bill in the British Caribbean. But Martineau's text is a good deal more than a revamped Smithsonian critique. Martineau's thought and method are also deeply inflected by the varieties of abolition polemic that had been generated over the previous fifty years. *Demerara* is a sophisticated abolition treatise, which comes at slavery in terms of how the plantation systems might be affected by political economy but which also contains a series of set pieces developed out of many different areas of slavery rhetoric. *Demerara* concludes with a concise and brilliant summary of why monopoly capitalism in the sugar colonies constitutes both a moral and economic disaster: but this critique is bedded in a series of emotionally manipulative and descriptively ingenious tableaux that occur earlier in the novella.

One of the most daring aspects of *Demerara* is the manner in which Martineau sets out her stall against literary conventions that would either sentimentalize or ennoble the slave. This attitude is articulated with devastating clarity in that part of the preface I have used as an epigram. The vision of the slave which results is disturbing because of its proximity to that painted at length in pro-slavery accounts of the social and moral make-up of slave communities. Martineau's unforgiving verdict summarizes the slave character as: 'not only revengeful, but selfish and mean,—not only treacherous to his master, but knavish to his countrymen, indolent, conceited, hypocritical, and sensual'.<sup>13</sup> These qualities are deputed to Caribbean slaves at length in the pro-slavery writings of Edward Long (one of Martineau's acknowledged sources for *Demerara*) and Bryan Edwards, and pepper subsequent pro-slavery rhetoric throughout the 1790s. Martineau is taking a radically new and dangerously

<sup>10</sup> For a fine summary of the contemporary reviews of the *Illustrations*, see Hunter, *Martineau*, 44–58, and for the *Quarterly Review*, 44–6.

<sup>11</sup> For the publishing and political background to the *Illustrations*, see Hunter, *Martineau*, 38–53.

<sup>12</sup> For Smith and the critique of colonial trade monopoly, see pp. 301–4 below.

<sup>13</sup> Harriet Martineau, *Demerara* (London, 1832), Preface, p. v.

derogatory stance for an abolitionist. The fundamentally anti-heroic depictions of slave characters that she creates exist in stark opposition to that of the most successful slavery fiction produced in England and America from 1780 to 1850.<sup>14</sup> *Demerara* is a revolutionary text that argues for abolition but which refuses to configure the slave through sentimental or Christian paradigms. Martineau's slave population is a very long way from that to be found in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or indeed her own *The Hour and the Man*. The slaves in *Demerara* are universally degraded, corrupted, and despairing. There is no Uncle Tom figure who can find fulfilment in Christological mimicry; Martineau's slaves interrogate Christianity, and find it seriously lacking.<sup>15</sup> Martineau also takes a definite stance over the representation of slave language. She refuses to attempt to reconstruct 'the language of slaves', in the sense of West Indian patois. Where for Hannah More in the *Sorrows of Yamba* a farcical approximation of 'slave dialect' is seen as an unproblematic, but honestly sympathetic, move, Martineau takes a definite stand: 'I have not attempted to imitate the language of slaves. Their jargon would be intolerable to writer and readers, if carried through a volume. My personages therefore speak the English which would be natural to them, if they spoke what can be called English at all.'<sup>16</sup> These words certainly communicate a dismissive approach to West Indian dialect, and the arrogant suggestion that, had Martineau decided to imitate it, there would have been no problem.<sup>17</sup> Yet Martineau is making a more important point. It is the ideas that matter in arguing for abolition, not the packaging of them. *Demerara* is consequently linguistically varied and theoretically rigorous in ways that are unique in abolition polemic. There is no other abolition text that dares to operate the language of the courts and of the pseudo-science of economics with such 'economic' knowingness.

<sup>14</sup> For a summarizing discussion of the major texts of pro-slavery during the 1790s, see pp. 141–8 above. For English sentimental abolition fiction, Wylie Sypher, *Guinea's Captive King's: British Anti-Slavery Literature of the XVIIIth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1942), 157–230; Ferguson, *Subject to Others*, 69–113; Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans*, 113–14, 126, 251; and for the American context, Amy Swedlow, 'Abolition's Conservative Sisters: The Ladies New York City Anti-Slavery Societies 1834–1840', and Debra Hold Hansen, 'The Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society and the Limits of Gender Politics', in Jean Fagin Yellin and John C. Van Horne (eds.), *The Abolition Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Ante-bellum America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, in collaboration with the Library Company of Philadelphia, 1994), 31–67.

<sup>15</sup> See pp. 266–72 below.

<sup>16</sup> Martineau, *Demerara*, Preface, p. vi. For Hannah More's race attitudes in *Yamba* and other works, see Ferguson, *Subject to Others*, 146–63, 218–20.

<sup>17</sup> That Martineau is even concerned with the problematic nature of the act of imitating black dialect shows an unusual involvement in the subject. For English and American approaches to the imitation of Black slave dialect within the shifting contexts of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century fiction, see Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 90–6; Wood, *Blind Memory*, 186–9; Sterling A. Brown, 'On Dialect Usage', in Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr (eds.), *The Slave's Narrative* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 37–40.

**‘Since the slave system is only supported by legislative protection,  
the legislature is responsible for the misery caused’: Monopoly  
Capitalism and Slavery in our own Front Yard**

The concluding appendix to each of the *Illustrations* sets out, in a quasi-legal, quasi-economic language, the overall argument of each volume. *Demerara* is no exception, and consequently the last pages bring the world of plantation slavery within a familiar domestic linguistic fold. These pages consider the way money works in its application to slavery in precisely the same language in which Martineau describes Scottish croft-holding economies, the workings of the Poor House system, or the economics of Northern textile or arms manufacture elsewhere in the *Illustrations*.

The forceful conclusion to the volume consequently places Atlantic slavery smack-bang in the centre of European economic thought and social practice. The opening two sentences of Martineau’s summary explode the fancied distinctions generated in Western discourse between Atlantic slave labour (assumed to be not only racially but economically other) and mainland European forms of labour: ‘This volume treats of the respective values of different kinds of labour, and of a particular mode of investing capital. The truths may be arranged as follows.’<sup>18</sup> The mode of investing capital is, of course, a reference to the purchase of slave labour. But the second sentence stresses that although Martineau is adopting a language abstraction to discuss methods of deploying capital, ethics are not to be squeezed out of it. Economic theory need not preclude a consideration of ‘Truth’. She continues by arguing that ‘property’ is a relative phenomenon, in which the owner is allowed the right of possession through mutual contract. In the case of Atlantic slavery, because there is no contract between owner and owned, ownership happens through natural right (basically force). Under ‘conventional’ right slavery is impossible; as a ‘right’, it can only occur through mutual consent as a social convention:

PROPERTY is held by conventional, not natural, right.

As the agreement to hold man in property never took place between the parties concerned, I.E. is not conventional, Man has no right to hold Man property. Where one of the parties under the law is held as property by another party, the law injures the one or the other as often as they are opposed. Moreover, its very protection injures the protected party, as when a rebellious slave is hanged.<sup>19</sup>

This is deliberately circumflex and layered rhetoric. The final statement, ‘a rebellious slave is hanged’ is colloquially available and semantically transparent; yet what precedes it is the opposite, legalistic and opaque. Martineau’s brutal

<sup>18</sup> Martineau, *Demerara*, 141.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*



point is that in this crazy world of immoral contract the law's ability to protect the property-owner, 'slave master' sanctions murder, 'a rebellious slave is hanged'. Property law is murderous. Martineau continues, with an almost bored sense of the inevitable, to reiterate the fact that in slave societies animal labour (assuming the degeneration of the will of the slave) is more valuable than human slave labour:

'Human labour is more valuable than brute labour, only because actuated by reason; if human strength is inferior to brute strength. The origin of labour, human and brute, is the Will.'

The Reason of slaves is not subjected to exercise, nor their Will to more than a few weak motives.

The labour of slaves is therefore less valuable than that of brutes, in as much as their strength is inferior; and less valuable than that of free labourers, in as much as their Reason and Will are feeble and alienated.<sup>20</sup>

Martineau opens up that terrible grey area of slavery, a grey zone which Toni Morrison's *Beloved* finally searched to its rotten quick. Namely, if you treat slaves legally as property, but socially and emotionally, in some contexts, as humans, you are dealing with a world of insane contradictions.<sup>21</sup> And Martineau is prepared to go further, and attempt a really mature set of comparisons between white wage labour and slave labour. The basic argument here is that if you own human beings and treat them like animals you have a very inefficient system (slavery) whereas if you own the labour of human beings which you buy as the market requires (free labour) you have an efficient system in which you get exactly what you pay for.<sup>22</sup> Martineau then proceeds, developing an argument of Adam Smith's, that the inevitable inefficiencies of colonial slave labour systems requires the mother country to prop them up, through the 'hand-out' policy of protected trade monopolies.<sup>23</sup> If sugar becomes the cash crop most heavily subsidized within the monopoly system, then of course the planters will grow that crop exclusively:

In order to make up for this loss of capital to slave owners, bounties and prohibitions are granted in their behalf by government; the waste committed by certain capitalists abroad, being thus paid for out of the earnings of those at home.

<sup>20</sup> Martineau, *Demerara*, 141–2.

<sup>21</sup> Jill Matus, *Toni Morrison* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 23–5; Bonnie Angelo, 'The Pain of Being Black: An Interview with Toni Morrison', *Conversations* (1989), 258; Toni Morrison, 'The Site of Memory', in William Zinsser (ed.), *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of the Memoir* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 103–24.

<sup>22</sup> Martineau, *Demerara*, 142.

<sup>23</sup> For Smith and the critique of colonial monopoly capitalism, pp. 302–4 below.

Sugar being the production especially protected everything is sacrificed by planters to the growth of sugar.<sup>24</sup>

Martineau has now wheeled the argument around to the central premiss. That slavery only exists because of the trade laws set up by the British government. Slave systems and slave codes do not exist because wicked planters want them to exist, but because British economic policy has made the system and the manner of its administration inevitable. Martineau is prepared to say what other abolitionists cannot countenance: the fact that slavery is not an autonomous evil existing in a distant colony, but the direct result of domestic economic policy at Home. In other words, it is our fault:

Legislative protection, therefore not only taxes the people at home, but promotes ruin, misery, and death in the protected colonies.

A free trade in sugar would banish slavery altogether, since competition must induce an economy of labour and capital; i.e., a substitution of free for slave labour.

Let us see, then what is the responsibility of the legislature in this matter.

The slave system inflicts an incalculable amount of human suffering, for the sake of making a wholesale waste of labour and capital.

Since the slave system is only supported by legislative protection, the legislature is responsible for the misery caused by direct infliction and the injury indirectly occasioned by the waste of labour and capital.<sup>25</sup>

Slavery is suddenly brought home; it is justified, and necessitated, by laws passed in the House of Commons. No other abolition author dared to argue this position so uncompromisingly. Yet if Martineau is prepared to say daring things in the language of economists, her position is more ambivalent when it comes to finding a language for communicating the political thought of slaves.

**‘Now the time is flush / When crouching marrow, in the bearer  
strong, Cries of itself—NO MORE’: Martineau’s Problem with  
the Slave Rebel**

Slave insurrection hovers around *Demerara* without ever being explicitly described. It operates as a perpetual background fantasy of terror for the whites, and as a terrifying, tempting, but finally unrealizable option for the blacks. Horror of slave insurrection is shown as a force of imaginative imprisonment

<sup>24</sup> Martineau, *Demerara*, 142.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 143.

for white males.<sup>26</sup> When a planter called Mitchelson gets stranded in the woods he fantasizes the rape of his wife and daughters.<sup>27</sup> Yet Martineau's slaves themselves enjoy no such straightforward desire for lustful retribution. When she places individual slaves in situations of extreme suffering that should drive them to think of revenge as the appropriate option, they are invariably presented as either paralysed with fear or capable only of desiring revenge, Hamlet like, through divine sanction.

For example when the industrious Cassius who is attempting to save enough to buy his freedom is forced into despair by the destruction of his crops at the hands of the wicked and greedy Robert and Sukey, he finally expresses his desire for revenge in the supplicatory form of a prayer. This would certainly have pleased an English Exeter Hall readership:

May he sell no sugar, that no woman may die of the heat and hard work, and that her baby may not cry for her. If Christ came to make men free, let him send a blight that the crops may be spoiled; for when our master is poor we shall be free. . . . Let him see that his canes are dead and that the wind is coming to blow down his house and his woods; and then he will say to us 'I have no bread for you and you may go.' O, God! Pity the women who cannot sleep this night because their sons are to be flogged when the sun rises. O, pity me, because I have worked so long, and shall never be free. Do not say to me, 'You shall never be free.' Why should'st thou Spare Horner [the brutal overseer] who never spares us. Let him die in his sleep this night, and then there will be many to sing to thee instead of wailing all the night. We will sing like the birds in the morning if thou wilt take away our fear this night. If Jesus was here he would speak kindly to us, and, perhaps, bring a hurricane for our sakes. O, do not help us less because he is with thee instead of with us! We have waited long, O, Lord! we have not killed any one: we have done no harm, because thou hast commanded us to be patient.<sup>28</sup>

The conditionals and interrogatives reign down upon us, this is the grammar of favour begging: 'May he sell no sugar . . . If Christ came . . . let him send . . . let him see . . . let him die in his sleep . . . if Jesus was here . . . perhaps, bring a hurricane . . . If we must wait . . . If we may not be angry . . .?'. That slave rebellion is unnecessary because God will punish the slave-owner is a recurrent theme in the abolition pamphlets and poetry of the 1790s.<sup>29</sup>

When Martineau finally does describe the violent destruction of the plantations, she takes the option of Divine intervention and has Cassius's prayers answered. A hurricane comes and lays the island waste, and the cruel overseer Horner is drowned in the deluge. His death scene brings Martineau's painful

<sup>26</sup> For the exaggerated impact of the almost bloodless Demerara slave insurrection of 1823 on English opinion, see Matthews, *The Other Side*, 4–8; Craton, 'Emancipation from Below', 125–7.

<sup>27</sup> Martineau, *Demerara*, 185–6. <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 88–9.

<sup>29</sup> See Helen Thomas, *Romanticism*, 75–81, and pp. 251–2 above.

compromise over the subject of slave insurrection into sharp focus. Horner is about to be swept away when a huge tree forms a momentary bridge between him and the slaves, who are safe on a higher hill some thirty feet away:

With intense gratitude—gratitude which two hours before he would have denied could ever be felt towards slaves—Horner saw the negroes cluster about the root of the tree to hold it firm in its position. Its branchy head seemed to him to be secure . . . clinging with knees and arms, and creeping forward as he battled with the spray. The slaves were no less intent. Not a word was spoken, not one let go, and even the women would have a hold. A black cloud hid the moon just when Horner seemed within reach of the bank; and what happened in that dark moment,—whether it was the force of the stream, or the strength of the temptation,—no lips were ever known to utter; but the event was that the massy trunk heaved once over, the unhappy wretch lost his grasp, and was carried down at the instant he thought himself secure. Horrid yells once more arose, from the perishing man, and from the blacks who dispersed along the bank to see the last of him . . . ‘Hurra! Hurra!’ was the cry once more. ‘God sent the wind. It was God that murdered him, not we.’<sup>30</sup>

At the crucial moment Martineau cannot commit her fictive slaves, or herself, to an act of insurrectionary murder. The precise moment of death is hidden in darkness, and Martineau inscribes the invented murder in secrecy. Martineau uses her voice as omniscient narrator to dodge the really big questions. Blood lust and the slave’s craving for retribution are crimes that dare not speak their names.

It is no coincidence that probably the most powerful articulation of the necessity of rebellion and active retribution occurs outside the confines of the main text, and hangs in the epigraph on the front cover:

Till now ye have gone on and filled the time  
 With all licentious measure, making your wills  
 The scope of justice: till now, as many such  
 As slept within the shadow of your power,  
 Have wandered with their traversed arms, and breathed  
 Their sufferance vainly. Now the time is flush  
 When crouching marrow, in the bearer strong,  
 Cries of itself—NO MORE.<sup>31</sup>

These rousing lines occur at the end of *Timon of Athens*, and are taken out of Alcibiades’ great set-piece oration as he returns to Athens a triumphant conqueror, and berates the corrupt Senators who had formerly banished him. Alcibiades exists as a precise counterbalance to Timon within the play. As Frank Kermode neatly summarizes, ‘The presence of Alcibiades in the play is

<sup>30</sup> Martineau, *Demerara*, 112–13.

<sup>31</sup> Shakespeare, *Timon*, v. iv. ll. 3–9.

justified by the implicit contrast between him and Timon in their reactions to the ingratitude of Athens. At first he is as angry as Timon, and he knows why the Senate is inhumane: usury “good business”—has become the sole object of its life’.<sup>32</sup> Martineau is dealing with another society where ‘good business’ can justify any violation of human rights. She appropriately takes this great retributory speech and hangs it out in front of her narrative. It constitutes a disembodied, yet grand, call to vengeance for the slave population, who have been the victims of a system of usury that exhibits an utter contempt for black humanity. And yet Shakespeare’s rhetoric is not internalized: within the body of *Demerara* there is no Alcibiades to be seen. The final irony is that Martineau’s string of bitter, articulate, broken males—Cassius, Willy, Robert—end, in their final nihilistic misanthropy, as black figurations of the desolate Timon.

‘[T]he most dreadful lot on earth is to be the slave of slaves’:  
Martineau’s Great Chain of Brutalization

Martineau’s *Demerara* is unusual in its preparedness to deal with the outfall from the corrupting effects of slavery on the moral vision of the enslaved. Consequently, she takes the unusual, indeed for an abolitionist, unique, step of presenting the most extreme cruelties, physical and psychological, as perpetrated not by the whites but by the slaves upon one another. This is potentially a very dangerous tactic in that it can easily feed into the hands of the pro-slavery lobby.<sup>33</sup> If you show black slaves behaving with an insane cruelty towards their own children, then it is easy to argue that this reflects the moral depravity of blacks, not the depravity of the system they exist within, and which has created them in its own image. Yet Martineau effectively manages to situate the accounts of physical abuse within a much larger causal framework that incorporates the dynamics of monopoly trading between the mother country and the colonies. Martineau’s extraordinary ability to combine a novelistic style of emotionalized realism with the abstract language of economic theory can be effectively illustrated in the set-piece history of little Hester.

Martineau’s extended account of the torture of a little girl by two old black slaves is meticulously constructed in terms of the way it relates back to her formal discussion of the shifting work policies which changes in sugar prices effect. No other writer on slavery in the nineteenth century so skilfully brings

<sup>32</sup> Frank Kermode, ‘Timon of Athens’, *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 1490.

<sup>33</sup> In fact one of the major sources for Martineau’s accounts of slave life was the pro-slavery apologist Bryan Edwards, *History of the West Indies*. For the ironies and tensions that result from the use of this source, see Ferguson, *Subject to Others*, 275–8.

out the manner in which cold economic pressures exerted by monopoly capitalism shape the formation of individual slave minds. Although Hester's torture ends up being written in a prose of high sentiment, it is framed by two contexts, set out in a very different language. Hester's abuse emerges as the result of a labour policy that is described in a debate some twenty pages before her character is introduced.

In order to explain how monopoly capitalism directly affects the living conditions and death rate of field slaves, Martineau gives an example. Her innocent interlocutor Alfred, just returned from England, is discussing the treatment of slaves with his father. The father explains the vagaries of how slaves are worked by referring to a planter called Mitchelson who takes a sugar plantation on a lease basis from a planter called Stanley. Knowing that he will have to pay for any loss of value to the 'property', but that he may pocket any 'improvement' Mitchelson calculates that he must not work his slaves hard, because any loss of slave life will badly cut into his profits, and his levels of productivity, when the price of sugar is fairly low. When, however, the prices suddenly shoot up, owing to the protectionist policies on West India sugar operated by the British government, Mitchelson's sums suddenly change and it makes more sense to work the slaves to death. Martineau puts the explanation into the mouth of Alfred's father:

when prices rose . . . it became clearly in his interest to increase his crop. He determined therefore to add 100 tons to it, even at an expense of life of 1000l. But it is inconceivable what trouble he had after a time. He can tell you as much as any man I know about the inefficiency of the law for the protection of property . . . At the close of the lease, that is, five years ago,—he willingly paid up for the slaves that were underground and got a renewal—'

Pray did Stanley understand his system?

'Why, I should suppose he did, having lived here some years himself; but whether he did nor not, he found Mitchelson a good tenant, and that was all that concerned him.'<sup>34</sup>

Martineau employs a language of terrifying obliqueness to describe what is basically a policy of slow and deliberate murder for the field slave. The sentence 'He determined therefore to add 100 tons to it, even at an expense of life of 1000l' shows that human death, as well as life, has a precise value within the economics of plantation slavery. In the world of slave production, economics exists outside moral value; what happens to the slaves is not connected to the individual virtue of the owners. Whether you treat your slaves well or ill has

<sup>34</sup> Martineau, *Demerara*, 25–6.

very little to do with whether you are bad or good. It is simply a question of measuring production off against a market price. The relative life expectancy of slave labour is simply one element in a complicated sum, in which the only unalterable law is that profit must be made. Martineau forces home the terrible truth that it is English financial policy that will finally decide how the planter will treat his slaves. The discussion ends with the ironic reversal of the initial policy once prices dive:

No sooner was Mitchelson set going again, than prices fell, and fell . . . So he changed his system entirely, as you will see presently. He raises food for slaves and cattle on ground which he cropped before, feeds them well, and works them lightly, so that their numbers increase, and has even had his slaves taught mechanical arts. He will have a pretty heavy lump of profits, at the end of another five years.<sup>35</sup>

Working conditions, education, even sexuality and population growth, the whole world of slave existence emerges as entirely contingent upon British price fixing and the surges in European import markets.

Having set the broader economic picture out in these cold terms, Martineau then goes on to look at the long-term fallout of Mitchelson's actions by taking a pair of old slaves who have lived through the shifting lifestyles dictated by the shifting prices. The slave Robert and his wife 'knew something of the worst treatment of slaves' and had 'survived the system of over-working which high prices had occasioned'.<sup>36</sup> In other words both Robert and his wife are survivors, from a system which was precisely designed to kill them by degrees. When it is a policy to work slaves to death, it is only going to be a certain kind of individual who will make it through—it is the wily, the complicit, the corrupt, corrupted, and corrupting who live on. Martineau gives a portrait of two people whose minds have become completely in tune with the system that conditions them, they think and act according to the dictates of this system in order to be one step ahead of it. The best way to survive is to feed off those who are weaker or more vulnerable than you within the system. Within the world of institutionalized slavery, there is a ruthless hierarchical structure. This is a lesson that Primo Levi forces home again and again when he talks of life within the Lagers.<sup>37</sup> It is often going to be the most complicit figure, the figure most intimately attuned to the world of the enslaver, who will survive. This survival is inevitably at the expense of the weak, or the good, in a world where goodness easily retranslates as weakness. Nobility, idealism, unselfishness, charity are all potentially lethal or even suicidal qualities.<sup>38</sup> As Martineau's Alfred repeatedly

<sup>35</sup> Martineau, *Demerara*, 27.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 46.

<sup>37</sup> The most succinct formulation of these terrible insights is in Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. R. Rosenthal (London: Michael Joseph, 1988), 22–51.

<sup>38</sup> For analyses of the psycho-dynamics of slavery in terms of its long-term implications for slave consciousness, see Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, [1959] 1963); Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World*

exclaims: 'How this world is turned upside down when there are slaves in it.'<sup>39</sup> Martineau's next step is to demonstrate how the earlier high price system essentially formed the debased character of the two old slaves. Their suffering through a hard labour regime has not only made them experts in cunning, but has made them intractably cruel:

Not a slave on the plantation was so inventive of excuses, so rich in pretenses, so ready with long stories and jokes, all designed to stave off work, as Robert, unless it were his wife. None were at the same time so impatient of idleness in others as they; and there was not a hardship which they had suffered, not a threat which had terrified them in former days, not a punishment that it came within their power to inflict, that they did not practice whenever opportunity threw an inferior in their way.<sup>40</sup>

Using a standard abolition technique, their cruelty is illustrated first in terms of the maltreatment of the domestic animal, then extends to the treatment of vermin, and finally to the treatment of other slaves.

If Robert had to lead a horse or drive an ox anywhere, he was sure to beat and torment the animal to the utmost by the way. If his wife found a reptile in her dwelling, she killed it as slowly as she dared, and as cruelly as she could. It would have been well if their power had not been extended beyond beast, birds and reptiles, but it was not only shown, by their example, that slavery is the school of tyranny, but in the instance of a poor little sufferer who lived with them that the most dreadful lot on earth is to be the slave of slaves.<sup>41</sup>

Little Hester, a slave orphan whose father was executed for his part in an insurrection and whose mother is worked to death during the high price period, forms the focus for the old slaves persecution. In a move which is to anticipate one of the central insights in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Martineau emphasizes that suffering is a relative phenomenon and its effects relate not so much to present pain, as to a knowledge of a life in memory outside this pain:<sup>42</sup>

When she [Hester] came home damp and shivering, she was thrust from the fire; and creeping under her mat, lay awake till the smoke hung thick enough round her to warm her, and make her forget her bodily hunger and her cravings of the heart in sleep. These cravings of the heart were her worst misery; for she had known what it was to be cherished, and to love in return. Of her father she remembered little. He had been executed for taking part in an insurrection when she was very young; but her mother and she had lived together till lately. She had seen her mother die and

*the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage, 1972), 482–523; see also Ronald L. Takaki, *Violence in the Black Imagination* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 17–34, 215–28. The most brilliant recent work in the area is Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1982).

<sup>39</sup> Martineau, *Demerara*, 32.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* 46.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> The best discussion of this aspect of Morrison's work is in Jill Matus, *Toni Morrison* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 22–36.



had stood by the grave when she was buried, yet she woke every morning expecting to see her leaning over her mat. She dreamed almost every night that her arm was round her mother's neck, and that her mother sang to her, or that they were going together to find out the country where her father was waiting for them; but as often as she woke she saw old Robert's ugly face, instead as he stood with his red and blue cap on, mocking her.<sup>43</sup>

The living hell that constitutes the life of the weakest and most defenceless in a world run by ruthless survivors is described as an infernal cycle in which even sleep is contaminated:

There was no end to her troubles but in sleep; and she never slept without dreading the waking. Wearied as she was when she laid herself down on her mat, she was apt to sleep long as the old people; and if she ever failed to jump up when the gong sounded, Robert was sure either to throw cold water over her, or to touch her feet with a blazing piece of wood from the fire, and to laugh at her start and cry.<sup>44</sup>

Martineau directly links discussion of profit margins in relation to colonial pricing policies with the horrific torture of an innocent black child. Blame is not apportioned, causes are simply laid bare and effects set out. This is shockingly effective political polemic: the stature of this writing lies in its clarity of purpose and its refusal to become absorbed by the desire to empathize. Martineau's intellectual rigour and profound insight into the links between economic theories of improvement and the suffering of the human resources involved in the application of these theories set her naturally beside the Jane Austen of *Mansfield Park*. *Demerara* is entirely different from Martineau's other slavery writings in the manner in which it is prepared to examine a variety of areas of the emotional experience of slaves which other mainstream abolition could not, or would not, investigate. As Martineau's engagements with slavery continued, she increasingly became reabsorbed into the empathetic dynamics that this book seeks to place at the centre of white cultural fantasies around slavery.

### 'The heart of the slave is made to love': Martineau's Appropriation of the Toussaint Myth

Toussaint L'Ouverture never was a stable historical entity, and he is now a more Protean cultural phenomenon than ever before. More perhaps than any other black slave subject, he baffled and continues to baffle the packaging techniques of conventional biography. Biographies of him have continually flowed out of France, England, North America, and the Caribbean during the last two

<sup>43</sup> Martineau, *Demerara*, 48–9.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* 47–8.

hundred years, invariably attempting to eke out the meagre materials surrounding his physical existence into something reassuring, familiar, and substantial.<sup>45</sup> The favourite padding technique relates to the desire to set him up in parallel to, or more frequently in opposition to, the First Consul, as a 'Black Napoleon'.<sup>46</sup> Maybe because the materials relating to his life and actions are so scanty, Toussaint has invited the imaginative re-creation of his legend in forms that lie outside the boundaries of conventional literary biography. Poets from Samuel Whitchurch to Edouard Glissant and Aimé Césaire used him as the central symbolic presence for black revolutionary aspirations in the Americas.<sup>47</sup> There is even a children's graphic novel that sets his life in the form of an extended comic.<sup>48</sup> He is more or less a central character in numerous novels set around the Haitian Revolution.<sup>49</sup> Undoubtedly, the most ridiculous of these is F. Tennyson Jesse's deservedly forgotten *Moonraker, or The Female Pirate and her Friends*.<sup>50</sup> In this Haitian pirate adventure, replete with a beautiful young woman disguised as a buccaneer captain, Toussaint flits in and out of the central romance narrative like a fruit bat. The last we see of him, as he is taken on board the *Héros*, gives some idea of the oblivious racist rhetoric which saturates the document:

Toussaint was standing there, unbound . . . He was very quiet and still, only his eyes rolled in his wrinkled black face. He looked more than ever like a sick monkey . . .

<sup>45</sup> A comprehensive survey of this vast field up to the early 1970s is to be found George F. Tyson, Jr (ed.), *Toussaint l'Ouverture: Great Lives Observed* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973). The most complete survey of recent work is included in the web site, Bob Corbett, *Bibliography on the Haitian Revolution*, <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/43a/099.html>. Standard biographies are Parkinson, 'This Gilded African' *Toussaint l'Ouverture* (London and New York: Quartet, 1978); Stephen Alexis, *Black Liberator: The Life of Toussaint l'Ouverture* (London: Ernest Benn, 1949); General Nemours, *Toussaint l'Ouverture: Fonde a Saint-Domingue* (Port au Prince: Editions Fardin, 1988).

<sup>46</sup> The crudest articulation of the thesis is Percy Waxman, *The Black Napoleon* (London: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1931); the most sophisticated is the imaginative epilogue to David Brion Davis, *The Problem . . . Revolution*, 557–64. Davis attempts a reading of the Toussaint–Napoleon relationship via Hegel's master/slave dialectic.

<sup>47</sup> Samuel Whitchurch, *Hispaniola* (London, 1804), and see discussion, pp. 232–4 above. Edouard Glissant, *Monsieur Toussaint* (Washington, DC: Three Continents Press, 1981); Aimé Césaire, *The Collected Poetry*, trans. Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith (Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1983), 46–9.

<sup>48</sup> *Toussaint l'Ouverture* (Ring Bell Classics, African History Series, London, 1988). Vol. 1, no. 1. Apparently the only issue.

<sup>49</sup> Henry Bedford Jones, *Drums of Dambala* (New York: Covici-Friede, 1932); James Gibson Taylor, *Dark Dawn* (New York: Mohawk Press, 1932); Guy Endore, *Babouk* (New York: Vanguard, 1934); Anatoli Vinogradov, *The Black Consul* (New York: Viking Press, 1935); Peter Bourne, *Drums of Destiny* (New York: G. P. Putnam's, 1947); Kenneth Roberts, *Lydia Bailey* (New York: Doubleday, 1947); Katherine Sherman, *The Slave who Freed Haiti* (New York: Random House, 1954); Marie Chauvet, *Dance on the Volcano* (New York: William Sloane, 1959); Benjamin Levin, *The Black Triumvirate* (Seaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1972).

<sup>50</sup> F. Tennyson Jesse, *Moonraker, or The Female Pirate and her Friends* (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1927).

He stood quite simply, not striking an attitude, not drawn up proudly, looking sad and puzzled, rather like a sick child . . . Jacky made a diversion by calling out: 'Here are Madame Toussaint and the children. They are coming aboard.' And indeed a small boat was approaching with the ample form of old Madame Toussaint overflowing the stern sheets, the children clustered about her like a great bunch of black grapes . . . old Madame wept quietly while the children howled more loudly and plucked at her skirts.<sup>51</sup>

At precisely the time this drivel was being brought out for a popular English readership, the great Caribbean Marxist historian C. L. R. James was locked away in the Paris archives researching his masterpiece, *The Black Jacobins*. This work established Toussaint as an icon, but James's Toussaint is really a blueprint for what he hoped a black Marxist revolutionary leader might be in the British Caribbean of the 1930s. James's treatment shows how Toussaint has become something far more important than merely one of the major players in the first phases of the Haitian Revolution.<sup>52</sup> The myriad fictional appropriations of Toussaint in the West reveal him to be arguably *the* most open, and complicated, site for the cultural contestation of the inheritance of Atlantic slavery. Toussaint is reinvented and re-appropriated according to the political and race agenda of those who write about, or make art about, him: he reflects the cultures that take him up. Consequently, Martineau's decision to write an extended romantic novel based on the life of Toussaint produced an important cultural document. This work is Martineau's last major publication on slavery and in a sense her final word on the degree to which she thinks ex-slaves are capable of living up to the expectations of Western liberals. Martineau, champion of a benevolent political economy, enemy of Atlantic slavery in all its forms, and, insofar as she considered the future of the emancipated slave, committed missionary Christian, was also consistently wary of celebrating black rebellion as autonomous and violent. She consequently created a very unusual sort of Toussaint—a devout, Catholic, libertarian, black, a political economist who is also a Bonapartist wannabe with a paradoxical pacifist streak, and a love of classical stoicism as well as of his family. Add to this a man who possesses the impeccable social manners and the stilted diction of the hero of a Victorian silver fork novel, and you have a very odd fish indeed.

### Martineau's Toussaint as an Act of Cultural Containment

All the accounts agree that, from his earliest childhood, he was distinguished by a tenderness of nature which would not let him hurt a fly. He attached himself to cattle and horses which were under his charge when a boy, to a degree which made him famous in a region where cruelty to animals at the

<sup>51</sup> Jesse, *Moonraker*, 98–9.

<sup>52</sup> James, *Black Jacobins*, 91–3, 117–19, 155–68, 188–98, 262–84, 325–35.

hands of slaves was almost universal . . . Piety was also his undisputed early characteristic.

(*The Hour and the Man*, Appendix 1)

Why did Martineau choose to write *The Hour and the Man* in the early 1840s? The Haitian slave revolution was, and remained, a highly contested cultural domain in terms of continuing arguments in Europe and North America regarding the slave's ability to live with freedom. Her decision to create in Toussaint a reassuring picture of the slave revolutionary as agonized Christian Stoic, blanophile, and perfect European gentleman was designed to allay fears in North America regarding the role and behaviour of the emancipated slave.<sup>53</sup> Her book was also aimed at undercutting the recolonization agenda by arguing strongly that free blacks had a lot to offer the Americas, and no real connections with their African roots. Martineau's Toussaint is consequently a ruthlessly policed construct designed to destroy the picture of the black slave rebel as lustful, vengeful, animalistic, and incapable of comprehending the basic principles of parliamentary democracy. Yet what emerges is a walking lecture rather than a character, Martineau's Toussaint is an amalgam of the author's desires and anxieties about the free slave. Toussaint is first presented as newly promoted on the Breda estate to the role of slave overseer. Yet in the midst of his slaving activities Toussaint is simultaneously a compulsive reader of the classics. He reads Epictetus because he is a slave author, and because he is a stoic whose repeated message is to 'bear and forbear'.<sup>54</sup> From the outset Martineau sets out the cultural parameters within which Toussaint's consciousness of freedom will operate. Toussaint's cultural hybridity is recognized, but his African heritage is going to be carefully stage managed, and his moral coordinates are going to be European:

the books that he had got hold of were Epictetus, and some fragments of Fenelon. With all the force of youth, he had been by turns the Stoic and the Quietist; and while busied in submitting himself to the pressure of the present, he had turned from the past, and scarcely dreamed of the future. If his imagination glanced back to the court of his royal grandfather, held under the palm shades, or pursuing the lion-hunt amid the jungles of Africa, he had hastily withdrawn his mind's eye from scenes which might create impatience of his lot; and if he ever wondered whether a long succession of ignorant and sensual blacks were to be driven into the field by the whip every day in San Domingo for evermore, he had cut short the speculation as inconsistent with his stoical habit of endurance and his Christian principle of trust.<sup>55</sup>

The Stoics teach him to endure, Christianity teaches him to trust. Toussaint's African heritage teaches nothing and is to be avoided at all costs; he may be

<sup>53</sup> For American responses, see Donald R. Hickey, 'America's Response to the Slave Revolt in Haiti,' *Journal of the Early Republic*, 2 (1982), 361–79.

<sup>54</sup> Harriet Martineau, *The Hour and the Man*, 2 vols. (New York, 1841), i. 8.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, i. 58.

descended from African culture, but it is a violent, sensual, and vengeful inheritance. It is also a rather fuzzy inheritance: lions do not actually live in jungles, but this is not very important to Martineau: Africa is not real, it is a terrifying pro-slavery chimera that must be tamed. What Martineau is arguing, in this typically brief and inaccurate allusion to Toussaint's African origins, is that the unruly emotions she fantasizes have been reduced and controlled by contact with European culture via the Classics. Toussaint is a fit leader for the free blacks because he is set apart from them: while they are anonymous, 'sensual and ignorant', he is saved by his reading. The Stoics, who form the behavioural model in Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiment*, and the desire to serve and trust preached in the popular abolition take on Christianity, and essentialized in Hannah More's publications, are ideally married in Toussaint. It is not only Toussaint's religious and moral opinions that have been formed by European high culture. As a military strategist, it is again a knowledge of the Classics that enables Toussaint to lead the blacks against the French. It is not the warrior traditions of Africa which inform his battle strategy, but a solid grounding in Caesar, and in the memorialization of Greek military battles.<sup>56</sup> Even his role as revolutionary prophet is predicted not by the blacks but by the Abbé Raynal, and is again set in the context of Roman slavery: "He is surely the black, the Spartacus predicted by Raynal, whose destiny it should be to avenge the wrongs of his race." From mouth to mouth went these words and from heart to heart spread the glow they kindled.<sup>57</sup> Toussaint repeatedly articulates the certainty that without embracing European culture there is no hope for the free blacks, and that this necessitates the continued protection of what remains of the *grand blanc* community on the island.<sup>58</sup>

Toussaint is shown as simultaneously inspired, and terrified by, freedom. Martineau exploits the historical fact that Toussaint, for quite pragmatic political reasons, initially tied himself to the Loyalist forces, both French and Spanish in Santo Domingo.<sup>59</sup> In *The Hour and the Man* this decision is

<sup>56</sup> Martineau gleaned her knowledge of Toussaint's reading from the account of Marcus Rainsford; in 'Appendix 1' to *The Hour and the Man*, she quotes 'Rainsford, *Historical Account* p. 244 . . . The following books were conspicuous in the library of Toussaint, a list of which was handed to the author in consequence of his inquiries respecting the progress of his mind: Caesar's Commentaries, French translation by De Crisse; Des Claison's History of Alexander and Caesar; D'Orleans' History of Alexander and Caesar; Marshal Saxe's Military Reveries; Guischart's Military Memoirs of the Greeks and Romans; Herodotus, History of the Wars of the Persians Against the Greeks; Le Beau's Memoirs of the Academy of Inscriptions and Belle's Lettres; Lloyd's Military and Political Memoirs; the Works of the English Socrates, Plutarch, Cornelius Nepos, etc.'

<sup>57</sup> Martineau, *The Hour*, i. 50. Martineau is almost quoting Rainsford, *Historical Account*, 247: 'General Laveaux called him "the negro, the Spartacus [sic.], foretold by Raynal, whose destiny it was to avenge the wrongs committed on his race".'

<sup>58</sup> Martineau, *The Hour*, i. 186-7.

<sup>59</sup> James, *Black Jacobins*, 125-8; Ott, *Haitian Revolution*, 57-8, 68, 82-3.

presented as reflecting a positive need to continue to serve a master. There is a neurosis which runs throughout the novel, and which is focused on Martineau's desire to make Toussaint simultaneously an irresistible revolutionary force, and an obedient house servant. The contradiction comes out with almost comic force in the following paragraph:

'We are free—this is freedom!' said Toussaint more than once, as he laid his hand on the bridle of his wife's horse, and seemed incapable of uttering any other words. He looked up at the towering trees, as if measuring with his eye the columnar palms, which appeared to those in their shade as if crowned with stars. He glanced into the forests with an eye which, to Margot, appeared as if it could pierce through darkness itself. He raised his face in the direction of the central mountain peaks, round which the white lightning was exploding from moment to moment; and Margot saw that tears were streaming on his face—the first tears she had known him shed for years. 'We are free—this is freedom!' he repeated as he took off his cap; 'but, thank God! we have the king for our master now.'<sup>60</sup>

This passage articulates the tensions at the centre, not of the San Domingue slave revolution, but Martineau's abolition dialectic. She begins by setting Toussaint out as an explosive incarnation of the Romantic leader. Toussaint is allied with the unstoppable energy and beauty of the natural world, huge phallic palm trees, flashing lightning, and stars. And yet Martineau cannot leave him in this state of Turnerian exaltation, it is not just the horse that is reigned in by the paragraph's close. At the very moment when Toussaint gets the full measure of the limitless implications of the state of freedom, metaphorically expressed as a tropical storm, he literally doffs his cap and craves a new master: 'We are free—this is freedom!' he repeated as he took off his cap; 'but, thank God! we have the king for our master now.' A recurrent trope attached to Toussaint is that of the child in search of his parents. So when news of the King's execution arrives, Toussaint presents the King as the star of freedom, here literally the North star which American slaves followed to freedom in the North, and the Jacobins as monkeys who have murdered the parent of the free blacks: 'They brought him [Louis XIV] to trial and executed him. The apes plucked down the evening star and quenched it. We have no king. We and our country are orphaned.'<sup>61</sup>

### Toussaint as Martineau's 'Oreo'

'Every one who loves the blacks hates the whites.'  
'I think not', said Toussaint.

(Martineau, *The Hour*, i. 41)

<sup>60</sup> Martineau, *The Hour*, i. 37.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, i. 51.

Toussaint exists culturally as a white Romantic hero who happens to have a black skin, his behaviour, his thought patterns, his military strategy, his education are all drawn from white European intellectual, social, and military tradition. He exists as a whited black sepulchre to Martineau's version of the revolution; the blacks themselves in the book exist *en masse*, and are to be linked with the flora and fauna of the island. The black revolutionaries are a fun-loving animal force, with apparently no intellectual content until an educated black such as Toussaint takes it on himself to undertake their education and to bring them into the religious and cultural nets of European thought. Moving through the island after the first impact of the insurrection, Martineau refers to 'the popular revolutionary airs which were then resounding through the colony like the hum of its insects or the dash of its waterfalls.' Blacks are presented as naturally warm, loving, celebratory beings, not far from 'the fat and lazy and laughing and singing negroes' of William Cobbett:<sup>62</sup>

The whole country was full of song. As M. Loisir, the architect from Paris, said to Genifred, it appeared as if vegetation itself went on to music. The servants of their own party sang in the rear; Moyse and Denis and sometimes Denis's sisters, sang as they rode; and if there was not song already on the track, it came from behind every flowering hedge, from the crown of the cocoanut-tree, from the window of the cottage. The sweet, wild note of the mocking-bird was awakened in its turn . . . But for the bird, the Spanish painter Azua would have supposed that all this music was the method of reception of the family by the peasantry; but on expressing his surprise to Aimée, she answered that song was as natural to St. Domingo when freed, as the light of sun or stars when there were no clouds in the sky. The heart of the negro was, she said, as naturally charged with music as his native air with fragrance. If you dam up his mountain streams, you have, instead of fragrance, poison and pestilence; and if you chain up the negro's life in slavery, you have for music, wailing and curses. Give both free course and you have an atmosphere of spicy odours and a universal spirit of song.<sup>63</sup>

The cultural fuzziness of this writing, in terms of its approach to the Diaspora, comes out in the way Martineau unwittingly aboriginalizes the blacks, they become the natives of Haiti. In Aimée's phrase 'the heart of the negro was . . . as naturally charged with music as his native air with fragrance', but this fragrant native air is not native to the African slaves, any more than it is to the Europeans. There is an essential uneasiness throughout *The Hour and the Man* about what to do with Africa and African civilization. As has been noted Toussaint is carefully shut out from his African inheritance. The activities of the black revolutionaries in general are never seen as related to their African origins. Drumming, Voodoo, song, and other forms of African-evolved cultural interaction had been presented as central to the coordination of the first stages

<sup>62</sup> For the Negrophobe stereotypes of Cobbett and Carlyle, see pp. 156–78, 363–75.

<sup>63</sup> Martineau, *The Hour*, i. 126–7.

of the revolution in pro-slavery rhetoric. African-evolved cultural forms were taken up again by James in *The Black Jacobins* when explaining the mass coordination that enabled the great uprising of 1791. These cultural forms hold no interest for Martineau.<sup>64</sup> Yet some of the most intense parts of *The Hour and the Man* happen at exactly that point where Africa forces its way into the text, slipping into the centre almost beneath Martineau's cultural radar. While all of Martineau's leading character's emerge as conforming in speech and behaviour to the norms of European civilization parts of the text open up aporias, which somehow get away from the ruthless desire to Europeanize the Haitian Revolution. Take, for example, the following account of the arrival of the L'Ouvertures at an old planter's mansion that has been taken over by a Congo black called Bellair. The lengthy description of the place is an extended meditation on what post-colonial theory has designated hybridity. But beyond this the words articulate, at a profound level, what the newly acquired freedom that comes out of revolutionary violence might mean. The description opens with a vision of a harsh tropical nature reassuming the land in the wake of revolutionary devastation:

The courtyard through which they passed was strewn with ruins, which, however, were almost entirely concealed by brushwood, through which only a lane was kept cleared for going in and out. The whole was shaded, almost as with an awning, by the shrubs which grew from the cornices, and among the rafters which had remained where the roof once was. Ropes of creepers hung down the walls so twisted and of so long a growth, that Denis had climbed half way up the building by means of this natural ladder, when he was called back again. The jalousies were decayed—startling away from their hinges, or hanging in fragments; while the window-sills were gay with flowering weeds, whose seeds even took root in the joints of the flooring within, open as it was to the dew. The marble steps and entrance-hall were kept clear of weeds and dirt, and had a strange air of splendour in the midst of the desolation.<sup>65</sup>

The splendours of European colonialism, essentialized in the material of classical sculpture, marble, have been laid waste, but even in decay maintain aesthetic power. This is Martineau creating San Domingue as a Romantic art of ruins producing a linguistic equivalent for Joseph Anton Koch or Thomas Cole's lovingly elaborate renditions of the ruins of Rome.

Martineau may well have developed this set piece out of a passage in one of her principal research sources, Marcus Rainsford's *Historical Account*. Entering the ruined Cap Français Rainsford observed:

In traversing the once superb city of the Cape, though presenting a tolerable appearance from the shore, desolation everywhere presented itself. On the site where elegant

<sup>64</sup> Bryan Edwards, *An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti* (London, 1805), 95–108; James, *Black Jacobins*, 17–22, 86–7; Alejo Carpentier, *The Kingdom of this World* (London: André Deutsch, [1949] 1990), 18–24.

<sup>65</sup> Martineau, *The Hour*, i, 130.



luxury had exhausted its powers to delight the voluptuary, all was magnificent ruin! And to mark the contrast the stronger, many of the wrecks were composed of temporary houses for the American merchants, and petty shops inhabited by the natives. Several spacious streets towards the centre displayed the wall of superb edifices of five and six stories with gilded balconies, of which the beautiful structure exhibited the devastation that had occurred, with additional horror. Nor was this all, for in different parts of these ruins the sad remains of the former possessors were visibly mingled with the crumbling wall.<sup>66</sup>

Martineau may use Rainsford as a starting point, but her approach to the destructive processes of revolution goes beyond a nostalgic celebration of fallen European civilization, gorgeous even in its decay. What is Martineau's race and cultural agenda here? As the account continues, the Congolese Bellair is presented positively and the approval of the narrator for this African relates to two qualities, first his racial purity and secondly the fact that his proximity to his African origins means that he has not had his spirit broken by slavery.<sup>67</sup> Yet when she comes to a detailed description of Bellair's habitation, Martineau starts to do something odd. The terrible processes of destruction necessitate, as part of the basic process of day to day survival, a melding of global culture—the aesthetics of Europe, Asia, and Africa are thrown promiscuously together. Martineau may keep her human characters fiercely separate, and shut miscegenation as an issue out of her text, but at some level racial intermingling has to happen. Cultural objects from different civilizations and different times are thrown together and the energy behind this aesthetic amalgamation is the consciousness of the Congolese artificer. The revolution is here being celebrated not as something that is happening, but as something that has happened. The bomb has gone off and the only option that is left is to make something useful by putting the fragments back together in a bizarre, useful and unprecedented new pattern:

The gilding of the balustrades of the hall was tarnished; and it had not furniture but the tatters of some portraits, whose frame and substance had been nearly devoured by ants; but it was weather-tight and clean. The saloon to the right constituted the family dwelling. Part of its roof had been repaired with a thatch of palm-leaves, which formed a singular junction with the portion of the ceiling which remained, and which exhibited a blue sky-ground with gilt stars. An alcove had been turned into the fireplace, necessary for cooking. The kitchen corner was partitioned off from the sitting-room by a splendid folding screen of Oriental workmanship, exhibiting birds of paradise, and the blue rivers and gilt pagodas of China. The other partitions were the

<sup>66</sup> Marcus Rainsford, *An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti: Comprehending a View of the Principal Transactions in the Revolution of Saint Domingo with It's Ancient and Modern State* (London 1805), p. 126.

<sup>67</sup> Martineau, *The Hour*, i. 129.

work of Bellair's own hands, woven of bamboo and long grass, dyed with the vegetable dyes, with whose mysteries he was, like a true African acquainted. The dinner-table was a marble slab, which still remained cramped to the wall, as when it had been covered with plate or with ladies work-boxes. The seats were benches hewn by Bellair's axe. On the shelves and dresser of unpainted wood were ranged together porcelain dishes from Dresden and calabashes from the garden; wooden spoons, and knives with enameled handles. A harp, with its strings broken and its gilding tarnished, stood in one corner; and musical instruments of Congo origin hung against the wall. It was altogether a curious medley of European and African civilization, brought together amid the ruins of a West Indian revolution.<sup>68</sup>

This is a remarkable set piece, which anticipates aspects of post-negritude thought with regard to the positive effects of cultural intermixture created by the processes of colonial trade and Diaspora. Martineau manages to summarize the global implications of the slave trade, the slave revolution, and the destruction of the most prosperous Caribbean colony in the world, through the description of a single domestic space. Alejo Carpentier decided to adopt a similar technique to describe the outfall of the Haitian Revolution in *The Kingdom of this World*. With the death of Henri Christoph, and the sacking of his fortress citadel Sans Souci, the people move in and take what they want. The old sorcerer and ex-slave Ti Noël collapses the culture of colonialism in a manner, which on the surface of things, is similar to Bellair:

Ti Noël had been among the ringleaders in the sack of the palace of Sans Souci. As a result, the ruins of the old manor house of Lenormand de Mézy were bizarrely furnished. The building continued roofless for lack of two points of support on which to rest a beam or roof-tree. But with his machete the old man had pried away fallen stones, bringing to light parts of the foundation, a windowsill, three steps, a piece of a wall that still displayed, clinging to the brick, the molding of the old Norman dining-room. The night the Plaine teemed with men, women, and children carrying on their heads pendulum clocks, chairs, draperies, saints' canopies, girandoles, prayer stools, lamps and washbasins, Ti Noël had made several trips to Sans Souci. In this way he had become owner of a *boule* table that stood before the straw-strewn fireplace where he slept, hidden from sight behind a Coromandel screen covered with dim figures against a dull gold background. An embalmed moonfish, the gift of the Royal Society of London to Prince Victor, lay on the tiles of a floor pushed up by grass roots alongside a music box and a decanter whose thick green glass held bubbles the color of the rainbow. He had also carried off a doll dressed as a shepherdess, an armchair upholstered in tapestry, and three volumes of the *Grande Encyclopédie* on which he was in the habit of sitting to eat sugar cane.<sup>69</sup>

Yet one fundamental difference between Martineau and Carpentier lies in the essentially satiric impetus of the latter. Ti Noël's consciousness is manifested

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, i. 130–1.

<sup>69</sup> Carpentier, *Kingdom of this World*, 136–7.

in the chaotic fusions which result from his looting forays to Sans Souci. In this topos of topsy-turvidom a fireplace becomes a bed, and the symbol of the French enlightenment, the *Encyclopédie*, carries the weight of an ex-slave's buttocks. What this passage seems to be telling us is that the kind of freedom that the Haitian Revolution offers is the chance to do what you will with things. Capitalist use value becomes demonstrably useless, the Arts generated by Europe have a beauty that is entirely relative, and personal. Ti Noël takes an elaborate armchair, but decides not to use it, in terms of what it should be used for. Conversely, the acme of European book-learning is transformed, with a wicked wit, not into a seat of learning but into a seat. The image of the broken down ex-slave, sitting in fantastic splendour and the coat of a king, on the great volumes, chewing at raw sugar cane, effortlessly conjoins monarchy, slavery, sugar, and the summit of French cultural endeavour. Each one played a part in the collapse of the slave regime. Ti Noël is both ruined by the revolution and the symbol of its spectacular ruination.

There is a very different artistic agenda separating Carpentier's act of cultural conflation and Martineau's. Martineau's description is finally underpinned by a practical dislike of luxury and by her unwavering Utilitarian outlook. She cannot stare the violent chaos of the black revolution full in the face, she must be forever tinkering with the loss, the desolation, and the craziness, in order to try to make something sensible and useful out of it. There is no place for Ti Noël's dangerous imbecility, throwing down a challenge and an accusation at European colonialism. While Carpentier's mid-twentieth-century perspective is prepared to countenance the fact that slavery and the slave revolution which it created finally simply ruined Haiti, Martineau wants to set all to rights. The portraits in the hall have gone, eaten out by ants, but the hall itself, as building, is habitable 'weathertight and clean'. Palm leaves physically join on to the artificial paradise created by a European artist on a Haitian aristocrat's ceiling, sky and stars meet palm leaf thatch. The inference is that both roofs constitute weather proofing, the art is demonstrably unnecessary but at least the ceiling still has a function. An alcove, which had no use value before the revolution, has now been made into a kitchen. The marble surface in the alcove, which had held the paraphernalia of planter evening entertainment, is now a kitchen table. The kitchen wall, like the ceiling, sees African vegetable weaving meet high art, this time Asian. The wall is constructed out of an oriental screen, which is now patched up in places with African grass weaving. All the domestic objects have been mixed and mismatched, but a clean, dry, civilizational process endures. The passage ends with what seems to be the triumph of African music over European: 'A harp, with its strings broken and its gilding tarnished, stood in one corner; and musical instruments of Congo origin hung against the wall.' Yet Martineau leaves it open for the reader to decide

whether the loss of European high culture and the implementation of African culture is a cause for celebration or regret. The culture of the planters seems to manifest itself in refined but useless luxury, that of the Congolese revolutionaries who now inhabit the space seems actuated by coarseness and practicality. Finally the blacks emerge as sober workmen who, under the correct European guidance, will create a society that will please even the most exacting Evangelical Utilitarian.

### Colour and Violence, Martineau's Whited Sepulchre and a Strangely Bloodless Revolution

What exactly did Moïse stand for? We shall never know.

(C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins*)

If the treatment of black violence is carefully controlled in *Demerara*, in *The Hour and the Man* it has become a site of central confusions and colossal historical evasion. Nowhere is Martineau's inability to deal with the reality of black violence within the San Domingue Revolution more frantically brought home than in the treatment of Toussaint's murder of the radical black leader of the people, General Moïse. Martineau, unlike James, knew exactly what she thought Moïse stood for, namely a pathological and unacceptable hatred of whiteness. He becomes an almost abstract embodiment of blancophobe revolutionary violence. It is worth dwelling on what Martineau does to Moïse in *The Hour and the Man* because it clearly lays out her race agenda when violence is the subject.

Moïse, as C. L. R. James so unequivocally enunciates, is a shadowy figure in the San Domingue Revolution. Some facts are known. He had been brought to the colony as a child in a slave ship, was black, and was adopted as a 'nephew' by Toussaint and his family when they were all slaves on the Breda estate. He followed Toussaint to the mountains in the North at the outbreak of the revolution, and rapidly became a leading officer in the revolutionary army. He was Toussaint's right-hand man during the triumphant invasion of Spanish Santo Domingo in January of 1801. He was made Commandant of the North Province, yet by the end of 1801 Toussaint had ordered his execution on a charge of treason. Moïse was accused of fomenting black revolution in the North, as the blacks became increasingly incensed at Toussaint's re-implementation of the plantation regime, and at his support of the former slave-owners. Toussaint was becoming unpopular with black insurgency and was terrified that Moïse would supplant him. He had him arrested for treason, and would not allow Moïse to speak at the military tribunal which had been ordered to condemn him. In James's

wonderful words, ‘Toussaint had shot him for taking the part of the blacks against the whites.’ Toussaint immediately realized his mistake and panicked, issuing a long proclamation in which he attempted to combine praise and defamation of Moïse in equal measure. In a state of near paranoia, following the insurrection in the North and the death of Moïse, Toussaint entered a period of mass repression and political murder. He summarily executed black labourers who did not answer quickly enough when interrogated about their political affiliations, and he implemented an Apartheid style passport system for the blacks. He also ruthlessly sought to prevent contact between the ex-slave labourers on the newly restored plantations, and the revolutionary army. James summarizes, stating that Toussaint ‘was now afraid of the contact between the revolutionary army and the people, an infallible sign of revolutionary degeneration’.<sup>70</sup>

Martineau’s verdict is very different. Moïse’s execution does not constitute an act of political expediency designed to remove a rival, but is Toussaint’s finest moral gesture. Moïse is set up as a pathological enemy of all things white who authorizes his troops to carry out anti-white atrocities in the North. Toussaint, although he loves Moïse as a son, and has promised marriage with Toussaint’s favourite daughter Génifrède, must then sacrifice Moïse to the higher principle of ‘no-retaliation’. Martineau takes a constant stance over the vexed question of Toussaint’s attitude to the *Grand Blancs* as the revolution progressed. For many French and Caribbean historians Toussaint’s conciliatory attitude towards the powerful whites is seen as undermining the ideals of the revolution. From the beginning Toussaint was respectful to the former masters, and frequently trusting, not to say gullible, in terms of the manner in which he would allow French officials to dictate his policy. The highly influential writings of the Haitian aristocrat Baron de Vastey, although in many ways sympathetic to Toussaint, paint him as a dupe of French and of white Haitian diplomatic corruption.<sup>71</sup> The execution of Moïse constitutes a key moment in Toussaint’s career as a revolutionary, the moment when he loses the plot and betrays the ideals of the ex-slaves to a corrupt Colonial government intent on the reinstitution of slavery.

For Martineau Toussaint’s execution of Moïse is a central gambit to persuade a white readership of his ultimate morality. To reorder James’s words, Martineau shoots Moïse in order that the blacks can take the place of the whites in her reader’s imagination. Toussaint emerges from *The Hour and the Man* as an Oreo, the adoring trusting friend of the whites, who stands in opposition to

<sup>70</sup> The most balanced assessment of Moïse remains James, *Black Jacobins*, 131, 147, 188, 219, 238–9, 257, 275–7. See also Geggus, *Slavery, War*, 203.

<sup>71</sup> Baron de Vastey, *An Essay on the Causes of the Revolution and Civil Wars of Hayti, being A Sequel to the Political Remarks Upon Certain French Publications and Journals* (Exeter, 1812). Thomas Clarkson was sent a copy of the book in 1819.

the black radicals after the first phase of the revolution. Moïse is not really a character so much as the mouth-piece of an essential ultra-radical black vengeance, a position which has no place in Martineau's revolutionary world. His philosophy is succinctly summarized: "Do you suppose the whites are less cruel than they were? Do you believe that their thirst for our humiliation, our slavery, is quenched? Do you believe that the white man's heart is softened by the generosity and forgiveness of the blacks?" When one of Toussaint's sons runs out of a pond with dead ducks on his belt Moïse delightedly exclaims: "Many a white would shudder to see that child . . . that is the way Jean's blacks wore their trophies during the first days of the insurrection." "Trophies", said Génifrède. "You mean heads—heads with their trailing hair": and her face worked with horror as she spoke. Moïse is the manifestation of the slave power's worst fantasies, and also of abolition's worst nightmare. He is a racist, who has been taught by slavery to hate the whites and to desire brutal and eternal retribution. As such he must be destroyed, he represents a threat to the abolition cause, and he makes emancipation impossible for an Anglo-American white readership to countenance. The solution is to show Toussaint willing to sacrifice his own family rather than have a white ex-planter suffer. When Toussaint's wife pleads Moïse's innocence, she meets the argument that 'every traitor to the whites must die'. This is a very reassuring sentiment for the abolitionists in England and America to hear, but an utterly fictitious rationalization of what was in fact a cold-blooded political murder:

'But Moïse did not murder any. He was not even present at any death.'

'It has just been proved that while he knew that slaughter was going on, he took no measures to stop it. The ground of his guilt is plain and clear. The law of the Revolution of St. Domingo, as conducted by me is NO RETALIATION. Every breach of this law by an officer of mine is treason; and every traitor to the whites must die.'<sup>72</sup>

Toussaint starts to become whiter than white, in more ways than one. His final interview with the condemned Moïse is sanctimonious to a preposterous degree. Talking of how his daughter Génifrède will respond to the death of Moïse he states: 'When she awakes, she will regard you as a martyr to a professional necessity. A woman's love is sanctified and made immortal when baptized in the blood of martyrdom. Hers may be so if your last moments are full of holy contrition and purged from passion.'<sup>73</sup> Perhaps Martineau's most extreme distortion of Toussaint's acts of atrocity occurs when she rereads the mass executions that Toussaint carried out among the supporters of Moïse. This is the story as told by James: 'Why should the blacks support Moïse against Toussaint? That question he did not stop to answer. In the districts of

<sup>72</sup> Martineau, *The Hour*, ii. 6.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, ii. 11.

the insurrection he shot without mercy. He lined up the labourers and spoke to them in turn; and on the basis of a stumbling answer or uncertainty decided who should be shot.<sup>74</sup> Martineau tells a very different story. Interracial atrocity is a spectral figment in Martineau's account of the revolution. The mass murders are presented through the eyewitness report of a white. The victims are shown as in fact delighted to be selected for death, simply because they worship Toussaint. They go to their deaths in the sure knowledge that by killing the whites they have betrayed the revolution:

'... I have seen man as a god among his fellow-men . . . It was too touching to be endured,' resumed M. Pascal. 'The countenances of those poor creatures will haunt me to my dying hour. Never was man idolised like L'Ouverture. For him men go willingly to their deaths; not in the excitement of a common danger, not for glory or for a bright future, but solitary, in ignominy, in the light of a calm sunrise, with the eyes of a condemning multitude upon them. Without protest, without supplication—as it appears, without objection—they stoop to death at his word . . . This sacrifice of his nephew will confirm it with my countrymen as well as with yours, for ever. These thirteen others—for he has sacrificed thirteen of the soldiers for dereliction of duty in the late rising—. . . L'Ouverture stood in the midst and addressed them. He told them that it was needless to explain to them what they had been learning from his whole course of conduct since he was chosen by the blacks to lead and govern them. It was needless to insist on the protection due to every inhabitant of the colony, and especially the whites; and on the primary duty of a liberated race—that of keeping the peace. They knew their duty as well as he did; and those who had violated it should suffer the long-declared and inevitable punishment of death. All knew that everything was prepared on the rampart near at hand. L'Ouverture walked slowly along each line of the soldiery; and I declare to you, Madame, that, though all knew that he was selecting victims for instant death, there was passionate love in every face.'<sup>75</sup>

This is one of the low points in Martineau's writing on slavery. Martineau transforms Toussaint's murderous uncertainty over his standing with the extreme black revolutionaries. What emerges is an ecstatic scenario, where the black victim's of Toussaint's intimidatory violence emerge as joyful and willing martyrs, pleading to be killed as the necessary sacrifice for Toussaint's pro-white policy. The extreme pressures that Martineau's ameliorative stance has put on the facts as we know them can hardly be exaggerated.

### Toussaint's Martyrdom

Martineau's terror at the prospect of frightening off her respectable transatlantic readership and her insistence on a completely non-retaliative construction of

<sup>74</sup> James, *Black Jacobins*, 279.

<sup>75</sup> Martineau, *The Hour*, ii. 14.

Toussaint mean that violence is squeezed out of *The Hour and the Man* far more completely than it is in *Demerara*. Toussaint is shown to maintain the spirit of 'no retaliation' to the bitter end. Locked in the Jura mountains, Martineau's Toussaint is possessed of a passive patience of which even Wordsworth must have approved of. The final quarter of the book is given over to the portrait of Toussaint's heroic, stoical, and utterly passive suffering in captivity. Taking the lead from Wordsworth's sonnet, Martineau gives Toussaint a series of monologues that prioritize patience, and see the 'work' of the black revolutionary to lie in accepting his fate without a murmur:<sup>76</sup>

one consolation of being buried alive, soul or body—or, both, as in this case—is that release is sure and near . . . my body, already failing, will soon die, and my work be done. To die, and to die thus, is part of my work; and I will do it as willingly as in the field. Hundreds, thousands of my race have died for slavery, cooped up, pining, suffocated in slave-ships in the wastes of the sea. Hundreds of thousands have thus died, without knowing the end for which they perished. What is it, then, for one to die of cold in the wastes of the mountains for freedom and knowing that freedom is the end of his life and his death? What is it? If I groan, if I shrink, may my race curse me, and my God cast me out.<sup>77</sup>

The basic thrust of most of this section of the book is to show Toussaint not as a black leader betrayed by Europe, but as a noble soul, whose ordeal stands as a 'black' mark against the debased character of Napoleon. Toussaint's thoughts are shown to focus obsessively on the conduct and character of Napoleon.<sup>78</sup> Almost nothing is known about Toussaint from the period of his capture in Haiti, to the point of his death in the Jura. Some dubious eyewitness accounts and Toussaint's pitiful, and unanswered, protestations to Napoleon, leave the imaginative interpreter with a lot of room for manoeuvre. Martineau used this virtual historical blank to create a pacifist martyr, whose main value to the English lay as a weapon with which to put a few more dents in the Napoleonic legend. Martineau again obtained her blueprint for the invention of Toussaint's incarceration as a piece of anti-Gallic propaganda from Marcus Rainsford's *Historical Account*. Written in 1805 during the wars with Napoleonic France, this, not surprisingly, focused upon Napoleon and the infamous French:

He [Toussaint] who had been the benefactor of white people in a country where their enormities had provoked hatred, whose power was never stained by malevolence, and who was greater in his fall, than his enemies in their assumed power, was kept in a

<sup>76</sup> Martineau declares her admiration for Wordsworth's sonnet in an appendix to *The Hour and the Man*: 'How the lot of Toussaint was regarded by the generous spirits of the time is shown in a sonnet of Wordsworth's, written during the disappearance of L'Ouverture. Every one knows this sonnet; but it may be read by others, as by me with a fresh emotion of delight, after having dwelt on the particulars of the foregoing history' (ii. 186).

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, ii. 161.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, ii. 171.



damp; and cheerless prison, without the comfort of a single friend, without trial or even examination; a proof of his exalted innocence, and a perpetual memorial of the political effort of the Conqueror of Italy, which will throw a gloom over this apotheosis . . . The prison may be considered the sepulture [*sic*] of Toussaint. France forgot awhile the habits of a civilized nation, to entomb one she should have graced with a public triumph . . . in no one instance does the mind linger with such keen sensations as on the unhappy lot of fortune of the great, the good, the pious and benevolent Toussaint L'Ouverture.<sup>79</sup>

Martineau had inherited a myth, and she was using the myth of Toussaint to fight the abolition cause on her terms, in the 1840s, not only in England, but in the country she had toured quite recently as an abolitionist celebrity, America. The myth of Toussaint was of vital importance to English and American abolitionists at this point because it provided an uncomplicated way of presenting an idealized pro-black version of the Haitian Revolution, with which to counter the pro-slavery atrocity literatures. Tales of Voodoo, drums in the night, snake worship, poisoning, the torture and rape of white slave-owners, a civilization in flames, had flooded England and France and America from 1791 onwards. Toussaint, as cultured, pious, pacifist, and above all victim of the very processes of revolution that had created him, was an ideal antidote. In this sense Martineau, writing in 1842 was contributing a particularly sentimental and Anglophile strand to a body of literature that developed in the States from the mid-1830s up to the outbreak of the Civil War. Yet her timidity and revisionism in dealing with Toussaint and the San Domingue Revolution need to be emphasized. Martineau's hands-off approach to the realities of the black revolution, and her desire finally to see Toussaint not as a hero in his own right, but as a pitiful object showing Napoleon's perfidy, comes out neatly in a little piece which Martineau wrote in 1843 a few months after *The Hour and the Man* came out. In a short essay 'Persevere' published in the celebrated Boston annual anthology *The Liberty Bell*, Martineau tells the story of the Marquis de Rivière, who was imprisoned in Toussaint's cell in the Jura immediately following his death.<sup>80</sup> At the request of Rivière's lover Mademoiselle de la Ferté, Josephine Bonaparte agreed to make the Emperor acquainted with the terrible conditions of the prison. The story goes that Josephine constructed a minute model of the prison cell that she then placed before Napoleon. Gazing on it with horror he is reported to have exclaimed: 'Otez-moi ça! Cette vue me fait frémir'. Martineau responds with a question: 'Was there a remorseful thought of Toussaint amidst the shudder of which the tyrant complained?' and concludes: 'exhibit to the

<sup>79</sup> Rainsford, *Historical Account*, 324.

<sup>80</sup> For Martineau and *The Liberty Bell*, see Lee Chambers Siller, '“A Good Work among the People”: The Political Culture of the Boston Anti-Slavery Fair', in Yellin and Van Horne (eds.), *The Abolition Sisterhood*, 250–74.

conscience of the oppressor the injuries of the oppressed, is *your* work, friends of the slave! Persevere! Never relax! . . . withdraw the picture only to present it again, assured that the disturbed conscience must sooner or later make the avowal, *Cette vue me fait frémir*'.<sup>81</sup> Toussaint could hardly be pushed further to the margins, represented as the *possible* echo of white aristocratic suffering within the consciousness of the Emperor as he stares at a model of the cell in which Toussaint was incarcerated.

Compared to what American writers, black and white, were prepared to do with the inheritance of San Domingue, Martineau emerges as positively dainty. In 1836 the brilliant abolition propagandist Elizur Wright had published the ironically titled 'The Horrors of San Domingo'. This tightly argued disquisition was focused on overturning, point by point, the arguments and evidence of the pro-slavery propagandists. Wright began by laying waste that bastion of pro-planter rhetoric Bryan Edwards's *Historical Account of the French Colony in the Island of San Domingo: Comprehending . . . a narrative of the calamities which have desolated the country ever since the year 1789*. Unlike Martineau, Wright had no problem with bringing narratives of atrocity centre stage. His basic argument was that, given what they had endured and witnessed under slavery, the blacks showed admirable restraint during the insurrection. Wright makes his case by cataloguing the torture of blacks and mulattos by whites in extensive detail.<sup>82</sup> Wright is, however, close to Martineau in the way he uses Toussaint. In a landscape of savagery, cannibalism, and sexual crime, Toussaint is erected as an almost inexplicable power of *civilité*:

We have seen the condition of St. Domingo under the noble Toussaint, the perfect security of property to the planters, the industry of its people, the almost miraculous resuscitations of its ancient splendor,—truly the light was breaking forth as the morning . . . He rescued it [San Domingue] He reduced its jarring elements to harmony. He gave it a well digested constitution.<sup>83</sup>

Wright, like Martineau, basically extracted the legend of Toussaint from the gore and expanded and idealized it without restraint. Yet he differs fundamentally from Martineau in that he does not whitewash the black revolution so that it would conform to the demands of respectable readership. Wright, as C. L. R. James was to do after him, saw the horrific violence of the revolution, perpetrated by whites *and* blacks, as the final indicator of the terror underpinning colonial slavery. Martineau could not countenance this step. She simply turned away from the horror, and as a result produced a fictional reading of the revolution which was profoundly consoling to an Anglo-American readership, but

<sup>81</sup> Harriet Martineau, 'Persevere', *The Liberty Bell* (Boston, 1842), 32–3.

<sup>82</sup> Elizur Wright, 'The Horrors of San Domingo', *Quarterly Anti-Slavery Magazine*, vol. i, pp. 241–303.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, i. 300–1.

which was also a lie. Far more challenging readings of San Domingue were to come out of America, and were to be the work of individuals with a first-hand knowledge of slavery and power. In 1852 John Rely Beard's *The Life of Toussaint L'Ouverture: The Negro Patriot of Hayti* was published and provided a resource for William Wells Brown to develop a radical black interpretation of events. In 1854 this former slave published *St. Domingo its Revolutions and its Patriots. A Lecture*. Brown, brilliantly subversive as ever, took the process of 'whiting' Toussaint to ironic and bizarre extremes. Parodying the idealizations of Wright and Martineau, Brown suggests a comparison between Toussaint and George Washington, which appears initially straightforward and unthreatening: 'Toussaint's career as a Christian, a statesman, and a general will lose nothing by a comparison with that of Washington. Each was the leader of an oppressed and outraged people, each had a powerful enemy to contend with, and each succeeded in founding a government in the New World.'<sup>84</sup> Yet he rapidly turns the tables on his audience, suggesting that Toussaint, comes out of the comparison rather better:

Toussaint's government made liberty its watchword, incorporated it in its constitution, abolished the slave-trade, and made freedom universal amongst the people. Washington's government incorporated slavery and the slave-trade, and enacted laws by which chains were fastened upon the limbs of millions of people. Toussaint liberated his countrymen; Washington enslaved a portion of his, and aided in giving strength and vitality to an institution that will one day rend asunder the UNION that he helped to form.

Martineau was to remain constitutionally averse to the subject of black revenge. Her Toussaint is finally to be re-created as a martyr, not as a highly adaptable black guerrilla leader who survives for a time, because he is capable of adopting the political expediency of the Europeans. It is finally a vision of the anti-slavery crusade as essentially an opportunity to mimic, in a strange union, both the suffering of the slaves, and the suffering of the early Protestant martyrs, which saturates Martineau's anti-slavery thought after *Demerara*.

### Martineau, Masochism, and Martyrdom: Abolition as an Opportunity to Suffer More than the Slaves Suffered

I happened to witness the opening of the martyr age . . . and I am thankful that I did witness it. There were times when I was sorry that I was not the victim of the struggle.

(Harriet Martineau, *Autobiography*)

<sup>84</sup> William Wells Brown, *St. Domingo its Revolutions and its Patriots. A Lecture delivered before the Metropolitan Athenaeum, London, May 16 and at St. Thoms' Church, Philadelphia, December 20 1854* [Boston, 1855] (Afro American History Series, Rhistoric Publication, no. 208, for the Library Company

When Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* appeared under the pseudonym of Currer Bell there was widespread speculation concerning the identity of the author. Among Martineau's circle there was a general belief that she had written the book. The reasons behind this assumption indicate Martineau's compulsive tendency to identify herself with the figure of the suffering slave:

I was taxed with the authorship by more than one personal friend, and charged by others, and even by relatives, with knowing the author and of having supplied some of the facts of the first volume from my own childhood. When I read it, I was convinced that it was by some friend of my own, who had portions of my childish experience in his or her mind.<sup>85</sup>

The sections of the book that Martineau refers to are, of course, the accounts of the mental torture and physical abuse of the infant Jane, at the hands of the tyrannical Reid family. In these sections of the book Jane repeatedly configures herself as a slave rebel and the Reids as a slave-owning family.<sup>86</sup> Martineau did not restrict her identification with the suffering slave to this example. The conception and genesis of *The Hour and the Man* also involved a complicated series of identificatory moves involving her increasing desire to conjoin her own suffering consciousness as an invalid, with that of the incarcerated Toussaint, starved and frozen in his fortress prison in the Swiss Alps. The original idea for writing a novel based on the Haitian Revolution came when Martineau was travelling in the Alps and determined to visit Toussaint's prison cell in the fortress of Joux. The account of the arrival of Martineau, and a single female travelling companion, at the prison cell is a curious passage:

The air of desolation here and there rendered more striking by the dreary settlements of the charcoal-burners would have been impressive enough if our minds had not been full of the great negro, and therefore disposed to view everything with his eyes . . . We passed through the vault and passages I have described, and thoroughly examined the cell. No words can convey a sense of its dreariness. I have exaggerated nothing: the dim light, the rotten floor, shining like a pond, the drip of water, the falling flakes of ice, were all there . . . the dreary impression of the place saddened our minds for long after we had left it.<sup>87</sup>

Martineau surreptitiously approaches the terrain of appropriative empathy, her mind becomes so 'full of the great negro' that she can 'view everything with his eyes'. Of course what is really happening here is the reverse of what is claimed: Martineau does not gain the eyes of Toussaint, Toussaint is reinvented as the

of Philadelphia); see also Monroe Fordham, 'Nineteenth-Century Black Thought in the United States: Some Influences of the Santo Domingo Revolution', *Journal of Black Studies*, 6/2 (1975), 115–26.

<sup>85</sup> Martineau, *Autobiography*, ii. 145.

<sup>86</sup> See pp. 333–42 below.

<sup>87</sup> Martineau, *Autobiography*, ii. 184–6.

consciousness of Martineau. And the keynote of that consciousness is repeated three times, namely, 'dreariness'.

The treatment of Toussaint and the conception of *The Hour and the Man* take an even more extreme twist in the account contained in Martineau's posthumously published *Autobiography*. In 1839 Martineau became seriously ill with a colossal ovarian cyst. As she lay bedridden and convinced she was dying in the spring of 1840 she decided to write *The Hour and the Man* and began with the extended account of Toussaint's incarceration and death. Her diary entries as quoted in the *Autobiography* make it clear that she felt strong parallels between her own plight and that of her hero:

I find, in the sickly hand writing of that spring of 1840, notices of how my subject opened before me, and of how, as I lay gazing upon the moon-lit sea, in the evenings of April and May, new traits in the man, new links between the personages, and a clearer perception of the guiding principle of the work disclosed themselves to me. I find, by this record, that I wrote the concluding portion of 'The Hour and the Man' first, for the same reason that I am now writing the fifth period of the Memoir before the fourth,—lest I should not live to do the whole. It was on Saturday, the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May 1840, that I began the book with Toussaint's arrival at the Jura.<sup>88</sup>

As Martineau suffers, Toussaint in his death cell is opened up to her imagination. As she thinks she is dying so she writes the death of Toussaint.

Martineau wrote *The Hour and the Man* after having had her first exposure to the realities of slave life in the Deep South. Her novel was in part an attempt to create an imaginative antidote to what she had seen. What comes out of Martineau's literary re-creations of her experiences in America, both in *Society in America* and in the *Autobiography*, is a desire to articulate the corruption of white society, and the heroism of the leaders of abolition. In the retellings of her American travels the slaves are increasingly absent from the account. Martineau can empathize with great intensity over the imagined suffering of fictionalized and idealized slave victims, whether Jane Eyre, or her imaginative reconstruction of Toussaint. Yet when she comes face to face with the reality of slave life she keeps the victims at arm's length, or rather further off. The slaves become either a symptom of white depravity, or an opportunity for white heroism. As a social phenomenon in their own right they are quite simply disgusting. Martineau, although given complete liberty to see what she wished on a number of slave plantations, appears to have ventured into the slave quarters only once, or at least to have decided to write only a single account of what she saw. She describes the experience with a combination of disgust and detachment that is devoid of compassion, but more intriguingly devoid of any desire to interact

<sup>88</sup> Martineau, *Autobiography*, ii. 157.

with the black. The slaves emerge as eccentric to humanity, they are mad, and they are animal, they are explicitly 'Other':

We visited the negro quarter; a part of the estate which filled me with disgust, wherever I went. It is something between a haunt of monkeys and a dwelling-place of human beings. The natural good taste, so remarkable in free negroes, is here extinguished. Their small, dingy, untidy houses, their cribs, the children crouching round the fire, the animal deportment of the grown-ups, the brutish chagrins and enjoyments of the old, were all loathsome. There was some relief in seeing the children playing in the sun, and sometimes fowls clucking and strutting round the houses; but otherwise, a walk through a lunatic asylum is far less painful than a visit to the slave quarter of an estate.<sup>89</sup>

Martineau has a polemical purpose in presenting the slaves in such utterly degraded terms. She was writing at the height of the transatlantic propaganda wars over the relative superiority of 'wage slavery' in England and the Northern states, as compared with 'chattel slavery' in the Southern states.<sup>90</sup> This passage constitutes an eyewitness account designed to discredit pro-slavery accounts that presented the American slave population as well cared for and content under a benevolent patriarchal slave power.<sup>91</sup> Bearing this context in mind there are, nevertheless, disturbing elements within Martineau's prose. While she presents the slaves as victims, she also falls easily into the associational tricks of emergent racism. The real subject of this passage, which is also the central subject of this book, is the mental state of the white witness, not the slave. Martineau's emotional state dominates the description. She is disgusted, she feels pain, and the only relief from her 'loathsome' experience comes from the contemplation of children and chickens. The children 'play in the sun', the fowls 'cluck and strut', they exist on one level. The black children are unconsciously animalized; the black adults exist in the 'haunt of monkeys' and with their 'animal deportment' and 'brutish chagrins' are deliberately animalized: animalization is one of the building bricks of racist rhetoric. Martineau's account of slavery in *Society in America* and in the *Autobiography* is in fact symptomatic of a cultural groundswell which begins with the abolition of the slave trade in England in 1807, and which gains in strength throughout the

<sup>89</sup> Harriet Martineau, *Society in America*, ed. Martin Lipset (New York: Doubleday, [1848] 1962), 155.

<sup>90</sup> The most learned survey of this neglected field of publication is Marcus Cunliffe, *Chattel Slavery and Wage Slavery: The Anglo American Context 1830-1860* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1979), 1-69. See my discussion, pp. 387-96 below. For Martineau's unusually positive construction of America, slavery aside, in the context of the general body of English mid-nineteenth-century travel literature, see Cunliffe, *Chattel Slavery*, 40-50.

<sup>91</sup> The most influential and certainly the wittiest formulation of the pro-slavery thesis was George Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All! or Slaves Without Masters*, ed. C. Vann Woodward (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, [1856] 1960).

nineteenth century. The slave increasingly becomes an abject, and abstract, mass of suffering. The history of slavery becomes an account not of the suffering of slaves but of the degradation of the slave-owners, and more centrally of the acts and monuments of anti-slavery activists.<sup>92</sup> The process of celebrating the figureheads of white philanthropy reaches a climax in Martineau's *Autobiography* and *The Martyr Age in the United States* where American abolition is carefully set up as a sort of *Book of Martyrs*, with Martineau herself as one of the chief participants. Martineau is writing and traveling in the states at almost exactly the same point that Alexis de Tocqueville was making a similar trip. There is vast distance between de Tocqueville's constantly engaged, sceptical, but wholly open responses to slavery, and Martineau's closed perspective and tightly regulated political agenda. Where de Tocqueville almost invariably asks intelligent questions and listens to the answers, Martineau preaches. Every conversation has the feeling that it is set out to illustrate a foregone conclusion, her textual horizons are predetermined.<sup>93</sup>

Martineau spends much of the text talking of the extreme dangers she faces as a potential victim of lynching in Ohio.<sup>94</sup> The narrative is increasingly driven by a competitive edge; Martineau is desperate to join the inner sanctum of abolition martyrs:

I believe there was scarcely a morning during those three months when it was not my first thought on waking whether I should be alive at night. I am not aware that the pleasure of that glorious journey was materially impaired by this; yet I learned by that experience to sympathise with the real griefs of martyrdom, and to feel something different from contemptuous compassion for those who quail under the terror of it.<sup>95</sup>

She even goes so far as to articulate her disappointment that she was not murdered for the cause: 'I happened to witness the opening of the martyr age of its reformers; and I am thankful that I did witness it. There were times when I was sorry that I was not the victim of the struggle, instead of Lovejoy, or some other murdered citizen.'<sup>96</sup> American abolitionists are set out in a language of exquisite exaggeration. Maria Weston Chapman is presented as the ultimate female abolition icon:

I still see the exquisite beauty which took me by surprise that day;—the slender graceful form,—the golden hair which might have covered her to her feet;—the brilliant

<sup>92</sup> For Martineau's extensive treatment of the moral and sexual degradation of slave-holding societies, see Martineau, *Society in America*, 152–4, 206–10; see also the fascinating work of David M. Levy, *Hard Times and the Moral Equivalence of Markets and Slavery* (Fairfax, Va.: George Mason University Center for Study of Public Choice, 1999), 55–6.

<sup>93</sup> See George Wilson Pierson, *Tocqueville in America* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1969), 393–429.

<sup>94</sup> Martineau, *Autobiography*, ii. 47.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, ii. 55. <sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, ii. 56.

complexion, noble profile, and deep blue eyes;—the aspect meant by nature to be soft and winning only, but that day (as ever since) so vivified by courage, and so strengthened by upright conviction, as to appear the very embodiment of heroism. ‘My hopes’, said she, as she threw up her golden hair under her bonnet, ‘are stronger than my fears’.<sup>97</sup>

Martineau has fallen a very great distance from the controlled intelligence of *Demerara*, and the slaves have fallen out of the picture. Yet Martineau’s portrait of Maria Weston Chapman—hovering somewhere between Lady Godiva, a Guido Reni angel, and a sort of proleptic anti-slavery Barbie-doll—is positively restrained compared to the hagiographies she created in her formal attempt to create an official canon of American abolition martyrs, *The Martyr Age in the United States*. Garrison is explicitly a living saint, indeed apostle, to black and white alike:

William Lloyd Garrison is one of God’s nobility . . . the faces of his friends brighten when his step is heard: the people of colour kneel to him . . . he springs from his bed singing at sunrise; and if, during the day, tears should cloud his serenity, they are never shed for himself. His countenance of steady compassion gives hope to the oppressed, who look to him as the Jews looked to Moses. It was this serene countenance, saint-like in its earnestness and purity, that a man bought at a print-shop, where it was exposed without a name, and hung up as the most apostolic face he ever saw.<sup>98</sup>

As this text runs through the litany of abolition saints—Garrison, Lovejoy, Dresser, Tappan, Chapman, the Grimke sisters, the leaders of the Lane and Oberlin seminaries—an unreal world evolves, where the suffering of the abolitionist first parallels, and finally explicitly outruns, that of the slave:

One must experience something of the soul-sickness and misgiving caused by popular hatred, and of the awful pangs of an apprehended violent death, to enter fully into their conception of what it is to have no respite, no prospect of rest, of security, within any calculable time. The grave, whether it yawns beneath their feet, or lies on the far horizon, is, as they well know, their only resting-place: adversity is all around them, like the whirlwind of the desert. But, if all this can be scarcely conceived of at a distance, neither can their bright faces be seen there. Nowhere but among such can an array of countenances be beheld so little lower than the angels.<sup>99</sup>

It is easy to write such excess off as enthusiastic nonsense, created in the heat of the moment. Indeed *The Martyr Age* has attracted no serious attention in recent slavery studies. The above passage is certainly equally devoid of aesthetic or factual content, but it is highly significant. The crucial point about this writing is that it comes out of a well-established tradition predicated on a

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, ii. 28.

<sup>98</sup> Harriet Martineau, *The Martyr Age of the United States (From the London and Westminster Review 1838)* (Boston, 1840), 3–4.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.



compulsion to steal black pain. The primary effect of this work is the effacement of Atlantic slavery and the reinscription of a history of voluntary white suffering which somehow outweighs the history of involuntary black suffering which made the sacrifice of the abolitionists possible in the first place. The opening sentence, if transposed, could describe with an uncanny accuracy the state of terror and anxiety in which a slave lives under the control of the slave power. Martineau has re-created the abolition volunteer as slave victim. The transposition defines the limitless capacities of Anglo-American culture to absorb and possess its own fictions of enslavement. It was the creation of these weird white angels of abolition that enabled Martineau to create her peculiar version of the Toussaint legend and the Haitian Revolution two years later. Toussaint emerges as, or should it be disappears into, not a black Napoleon, but a black Garrison.

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### Canons to the Right of them, Canons to the Left of them: *Mansfield Park*, *Jane Eyre*, and Memorial Subversions of Slavery

Because the slave system appeared to be dominated by an unmitigated drive for wealth, it could symbolise all the forces that threatened to unravel the fabric of traditional deference, patronage and hereditary status. Englishmen were acutely sensitive to such dangers.

(David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*)

The debates concerning how nineteenth-century England responded to the inheritance of slavery have penetrated the orthodox literary canon. Nowhere is this more forcefully in evidence than in the numerous recent readings of *Mansfield Park* and *Jane Eyre* which focus on colonial reference. The two novels have emerged as critical foci for the discussion of nineteenth-century imaginative engagement with Atlantic slavery. There are also arguments that both works set up various parallels between the exploitation of colonial labour and that of women within England. There are enormous difficulties involved in advancing the latter position. The equation of the suffering of slaves, either during the middle passage, or on plantations, with the suffering and dis-empowerment endured by English women, in the contexts of work and marriage, tend to misrepresent the experience of all concerned, and to suggest that human suffering can be considered in essentially comparative ways. The inevitable result is the confounding of the specificities of race, gender, and history.<sup>1</sup> That female writers during the Romantic period were acutely aware of these dangers is becoming

<sup>1</sup> For a succinct demonstration of how such comparisons can go disastrously wrong, see Jeanne Perreault, 'Mary Wollstonecraft and Harriet Jacobs: Self Possessions', in Helen M. Buss and D. L. Macdonald (eds.), *Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001), 99–113.

apparent.<sup>2</sup> There has also been a tendency for recent post-colonial interpretations of these works to take a narrow approach which generally endorses Edward Said's influential argument in *Culture and Imperialism* that 'Austen, and indeed, pre-imperialist novels generally, will appear to be more implicated in the rationale for imperialist expansion that at first sight they have been'.<sup>3</sup>

I argue, through close readings of the passages in these texts explicitly devoted to slavery, that the subjects of slavery and 'imperialist expansion' are elaborated upon and problematized, in terms which are not politically transparent, and indeed that these novels resist the types of static political positioning which have recently been laid upon them. Fully acknowledging the political good faith behind Said's *Culture and Imperialism*, and some of the cultural criticism he has spawned, his work nevertheless provides a convenient focus for exploring the dangers and limitations of adopting a post-Foucaultian cultural schematics when approaching Austen and Charlotte Brontë. Said is troubled by a paradox: *Mansfield Park* is, for him, a humanist masterpiece but it appears to uphold the status quo with regard to the uncritical silences which it creates around the subjects of imperialism and plantation slavery.

Taking *Mansfield Park* as a starting point I will argue that Austen is more profoundly, and more ingeniously, critical of slavery than has so far been assumed. This analysis opens by suggesting that Austen was writing at a point when slavery and abolition were not particularly fashionable topics, and when the publishing market had recently been saturated with sensational, sentimental, and frequently violent propaganda literature relating to the abolition debate. Austen, in taking an oblique approach to the questions of slavery, and its effect on the English planter class, may well have been reacting to this publishing environment. This gesture of distancing is not to be mistaken for unconcern. It is further argued that Austen, far from being politically disengaged from the question of slavery, produces an extended critique of the effects of slavery upon English society. The core of this critique is seen to lie in Austen's ironic application of the concept of 'improvement', a key concept within economic, social, and aesthetic theory from the mid-eighteenth to the early nineteenth centuries. Austen's ambitious politicizing of the term has not been recognized. She forces the word to carry meanings which relate not only to the aesthetics of landscape gardening, and the politics of enclosure in England (contexts which *have* been theoretically addressed) but to the economics of empire and the economics of the marriage market (contexts which have remained invisible). Adam Smith's

<sup>2</sup> See Deirdre Coleman's remarkable 'Conspicuous Consumption: White Abolitionism and English Women's Protest Writing in the 1790's', *ELH* 61 (1994), 341–62; Karen Sanchez-Eppler, 'Bodily Bonds: The Intersecting Rhetorics of Feminism and Abolition', *Representations*, 24 (1998) 28–58.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1993), 100. The relevant theoretical and critical literatures are surveyed in the following discussion.

notorious critique of monopoly capitalism in the British sugar colonies, which is focused upon the concept of improvement, is seen to inflect Austen's use of the term. Fanny exists within an economic nexus which creates complicated sets of parallels between herself as commodity, the Antigua plantation, and the estates of Sotherton and Mansfield.

In the wake of Jean Rhys's compelling and transformative recasting of the colonial context for *Jane Eyre*, and in her creation of an emotionally fleshed out Bertha Mason, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, there has been an equally distorting tendency to read Brontë's book as a work which either evades, or compounds, an imperialist take on the colonial inheritance. It is reassuring to argue that Brontë silences, distanciates, and quite literally locks up, the memory of slavery, in the character of Bertha Mason. Yet Brontë has provided a far more confrontational and disturbing account of the corrupting inheritance of colonial slavery than she has been given credit for. If Jane Eyre's careful construction as a slave revolutionary at the novel's opening is examined in detail, then it is possible to construct a reading of the novel which sees Jane and Bertha as two loci for the examination of the silences and erasures which English culture requires in order to avoid the memory of the slavery holocaust. Bertha, if viewed not as a silenced character, but as an open sign for the unspeakable history of slavery, can then be seen for what she is. Bertha Mason emerges as an uncompromising anatomization of the fictions of denial with which British art and culture have camouflaged a site too terrible to enter.

### The Price of Fanny's Improvement: Jane Austen and the Fluidities of Economic Diction

'As to St. John Rivers, he left England: he went to India . . . he labours for his race: he clears their painful way to *improvement*; he hews down like a giant the prejudices of creed and caste that encumber it'

(Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*)

On the continent of Africa were another race, savage in their natural state, which would domesticate like sheep or oxen, and learnt and *improved* in the white man's company.

(J. A. Froude, *English Seamen in the Sixteenth Century*, 1891)

Despite the mass of recent publications to focus on *Mansfield Park* slavery and colonialism, the issues remain clouded. The question of the extent to which Austen is, or is not, encouraging a critique of Sir Thomas Bertram because of the source of his wealth remains hotly contested. There is also varied debate

over whether Fanny's treatment and social position can be seen to invite comparisons between her maltreatment and that of the silent and under-represented slaves of Antigua. Beyond this exists the wider question of whether the whole gamut of contemporary discussions which foreground the brief citations of the plantation and slavery have any relevance to the overall aesthetic concerns of the book.<sup>4</sup> The most extreme and succinct articulation of the position which would see contemporary post-colonial trends of interpretation as obsessive and distorting is Harold Bloom's. In *The Western Canon* he is scathing about attempts to relate Austen's work to colonial contexts, and directly and dismissively quotes the title of Said's *Culture and Imperialism*:

it has become fashionable to talk about the socio-economic realities which Jane Austen excludes, such as the West Indian slavery which is part of the ultimate basis for the financial security most of her characters enjoy. But all achieved literary works are founded on exclusions, and no one has demonstrated that increased consciousness of the relation between culture and imperialism is of the slightest benefit whatsoever in learning to read *Mansfield Park*. . . Austen's is a great art founded upon exclusions, and the sordid realities of British sea power are no more relevant to *Persuasion* than West Indian bondage is to *Mansfield Park*.<sup>5</sup>

Yet Said's discussion cannot be so comprehensively sidelined. Said's achievement lies in the way he has emphasized the centrality of the plantation to the economic concerns, and to the action, of the novel. Said established that Austen 'sees clearly that to hold and rule Mansfield Park is to hold and rule an imperial estate in close, not to say inevitable association with it'.<sup>6</sup> Where Said is misleading, however, is in his repeated assertions that Austen is detached from, uninterested in, ignorant of, and finally unquestioning about the realities of the colonial context in Antigua. For those with eyes to see, *Mansfield Park* is politically engaged and contains a caustic assault on the moral basis of British colonial slavery. Austen lays bare the complicities and deceptions which enable the economic relationship between the Mansfield Park estate and the Antigua plantation.<sup>7</sup> Austen's critique emerges in nuanced and ironic punning on key

<sup>4</sup> Reference to *Mansfield Park* in the text are to the Oxford University Press edition, edited R. W. Chapman (Oxford, 1923, repr. 1966). A comprehensive survey of recent post-colonial discussions of *Mansfield Park*, and of the maelstrom of critical reactions in the press generated by Said's discussion of the novel, is Susan Fraiman, 'Jane Austen and Edward Said: Gender, Culture and Imperialism', *Critical Enquiry*, 21 (1995), 804–21.

<sup>5</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon* (London: Vintage, 1995), 257.

<sup>6</sup> Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 104.

<sup>7</sup> For readings which have presented forceful historical contextualization relating to Austen's political awareness of slavery, see Margaret Kirkham, *Jane Austen: Feminism and Fiction* (London: Athlone, 1997), 116–19; Moira Ferguson, 'Mansfield Park: Slavery, Colonialism and Gender', *Oxford Literary Review*, 13 (1991), 118–40; and the substantially reworked version of this article 'Mansfield Park: Plantocratic Paradigms', in *Colonialism and Gender Relations from Mary Wollstonecraft to Jamaica Kincaid: East Caribbean Connections* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 65–9;

terms which can equally be used to describe wealth, domestic and foreign property, breeding, aesthetics, and personal ethics. Austen's insights into the reach of the sugar money generated by slaves in Antigua problematizes, in ethical terms, every major character in the novel.<sup>8</sup>

Before beginning an archaeology of Austen and 'improvement', I want to suggest an explanation as to why she did not choose to engage with the day to day realities of slave life. Edward Said, and innumerable subsequent critics, are right to assert that Austen avoids head-on engagement with the description of conditions on the Antigua plantation and the suffering of slaves. If, however, the literary environment in which Austen was writing is contextualized, this avoidance may be seen not merely in terms of the limitations of her sensibility, politics, or race consciousness, but can be read as a response to the ways in which slavery had inflected the contemporary publishing market. The years 1811–13, when Austen was writing *Mansfield Park*, were a period when abolition publication was in a substantial lull in the wake of the 1807 slave trade abolition act. It is also relevant that by the time the act was passed the British reading public had been bombarded with pro- and anti-slavery literatures for a period of nearly thirty years. Virtually every position had been explored and exploited from a variety of iconographic and rhetorical directions, and frequently with an unprecedented crudity. The public had been familiarized with a great many ways of thinking about planters, African Caribbean slaves, and the abuses of the slave trade. Austen would have been inevitably exposed to this mass of information, and would have had her own reasons for developing a uniquely subtle approach to a tradition defined by the combined distortions of overstatement, sentimentalization, and horror.<sup>9</sup> It is against this background that

Joseph Lew, '“That Abominable Traffic”: *Mansfield Park* and the Dynamics of Slavery', in Beth Fowkes Tobin (ed.), *History, Gender and Eighteenth Century Literature* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994), 271–300.

<sup>8</sup> For the theory that Austen is 'complicit' in her treatment of empire, see Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 100. The 'complicity' theory in Austen's treatment of empire is also central to the discussion of the novel in Maaja A. Stewart, *Domestic Realities and Imperial Fictions: Jane Austen's Novels in Eighteenth Century Contexts* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 105–11. Fraiman, 'Jane Austen', 807–11, has argued passionately against this position.

<sup>9</sup> For the literary background, see Wylie Sypher, *Guinea's Captive Kings: British Anti-Slavery Literature of the XVIIIth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1942), 165–293; Joan Baum, *Mind-Forg'd Manacles: Slavery and the English Romantic Poets* (North Haven, Conn.: Archon Books, 1994), 57–101; for women's anti-slavery publication in the period, Ferguson, *Subject to Others*, 145–297; for the intellectual and philosophical milieu, Keith Sandiford, *Measuring the Moment: Strategies of Protest in Eighteenth-Century Afro-English Writing* (London: Associated University Presses, 1988); Helen Thomas, *Romanticism and Slave Narratives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and for popular drama in the period, Julia Swindells, *Glorious Causes: The Grand Theatre of Political Change 1789–1833* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 41–76. For the reprinting of a cross-section of key pro- and anti-slavery propaganda texts across the period, see Peter Kitson and Debbie Lee (eds.), *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation Writings in the British Romantic Period*, 8 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1999); for a detailed survey of the production of propaganda

Austen decided to have Fanny's question to Sir Thomas on the slave trade greeted by that now infamous 'dead silence'. Maybe that silence related to the boredom of overexposure.

It is no exaggeration to say that by the turn of the eighteenth century many readers were bored with, when they were not sickened by, abolition atrocity literature and sentimental fiction. Beyond this, however, there was the question of whether abolition had a clear political agenda in the public mind at all. Abolition, no less than any other mass political campaign, became modish. The agitation for abolition became more than a religious and moral crusade, it became intensely fashionable. Josiah Wedgwood's exquisite version of the anti-slavery seal sold in tens of thousands and was marketed as a brooch and hairpin to be worn at the teas and abolition jamborees.<sup>10</sup> In the end abolition shared the dangers of any mass participation propaganda movement and became a coalition with a base broad enough to support commercial entrepreneurs, oratorical opportunists, and anyone with a whim to climb onto the bandwagon.<sup>11</sup> In the highly unlikely event that Austen should have decided to write a novel which incorporated direct discussion of either the passé subject of the slave trade, or which focused on issues of Antiguan plantation slavery, she would have run the risk of seriously alienating her public.

When Austen was writing *Mansfield Park*, the ideological waters surrounding slavery were muddied, not to say poisoned, by the propaganda wars of the preceding three decades. Had a writer of her subtlety even wished to enter the field of abolition publicity she would have had little that was topical to write about (the slave trade was abolished, and there was little interest in emancipation in the colonies before the mid-1820s) and no easy way of locating herself politically. We forget at our cost what a very confused movement British abolition was in terms of its popular manifestations. The political and literary environment in which the novel was composed might, consequently, be seen, in large measure, to explain Austen's indirect approach to the subjects of the slave trade and plantation slavery. Yet her indirection must not be mistaken for either callous unconcern or intellectual naivety. She had read eyewitness accounts of the condition of slaves in Antigua and is known to have been sympathetic to abolition.<sup>12</sup> Her strategic

nationally, Oldfield, *Popular Politics*; for Austen's family connections to slavery, see Michael Steffes, 'Slavery and *Mansfield Park*: The Historical and Biographical Context', *Studies in English*, 34 (1996), 2-30; Claire Tomalin, *Jane Austen: A Life* (London: Viking, 1977), 289-95.

<sup>10</sup> Oldfield, *Popular Politics*, 156-9; Clarkson, *History*, ii, 188-92.

<sup>11</sup> For the detailed treatment of abolition as a mass marketing phenomenon, see Oldfield, *Popular Politics*, and Marcus Wood, "'The Abolition Blunderbuss': Free Publishing and British Abolition Propaganda, 1780-1838", in James Raven (ed.), *Free Print and Non-Commercial Publishing since 1700* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 67-93.

<sup>12</sup> Ferguson, 'Slavery, Colonialism', 118-20, 131-3; Brian Southam, 'Silence of the Bertrams', *TLS* (Feb. 1995), 13-14; Steffes, 'Slavery and *Mansfield Park*', 27-30.

avoidance of this material must therefore be explained in other ways, and it is here that the concept of improvement holds centre stage. It is not through sentimental fictions about African Princes, horrific eyewitness accounts of the rape of women and the murder of children, or recourse to the stereotypical demonizations of the planter class that Austen confronts the inheritance of slavery. Her satire is more lethal, and much nearer home, for she spins a web of interdependencies which relate to a trans-ethical, trans-economic vocabulary of empire.

### The Concept of Improvement: Adam Smith and *Mansfield Park*

Improvement is a key concept within *Mansfield Park*, but its ironization in the context of plantation slavery has remained invisible to American and European interpreters. Building on Raymond Williams's brilliant insights in his discussion of Austen and William Cobbett in *The Country and the City*, Alistair Duckworth devoted a fine book to proving 'that *Mansfield Park* is fundamental to Jane Austen's thought'. He summarizes his thesis: 'For Jane Austen, in *Mansfield Park*, the estate as an ordered physical structure is a metonym of other inherited structures—society as a whole, a code of morality, a body of manners, a system of language—and "improvements," or the manner in which individuals relate to their cultural inheritance, are a means of distinguishing responsible from irresponsible action and of defining a proper attitude toward social change.'<sup>13</sup> Duckworth's wonderfully rich study establishes the centrality of theories of 'improvement' to Austen's oeuvre and to the political, social, and aesthetic theory of Austen's day. What it does not do is to bring out Austen's terrifying ironies in terms of the way she applies theories of improvement to the Antigua plantation and, crucially, to the character and body of Fanny Price. Austen's ironization of the concept of improvement carries a further charge, in the context of post-colonial debate, if the concept is related to Adam Smith's famous critique of the economic monopolies of the sugar plantations in the sections of *The Wealth of Nations* focused upon colonization.

Smith's application of the concept of 'improvement' to the slave colonies can be used to bring slavery home to Mansfield and suggests the possibility of comparisons between the slaves as commodities and Fanny as commodity. Because of Smith's study 'improvement' carried with it a notorious history within economic theory, and specifically economic theory relating to the English sugar colonies. In order to understand why Austen plays so obsessively with the

<sup>13</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973), 135–46; Alistair A. Duckworth, *The Improvement of the Estate: A Study of Jane Austen's Novels* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), p. xxix.



effects of Fanny's improvement, it is necessary to contextualize the word within the discourse of colonial economics.

The concept of improvement permeates Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* from its opening words. The first chapter of the first book is entitled, 'Of the causes of improvement in the productive powers of labour . . .' and the work opens with the statement: 'The greatest improvement in the productive powers of labour . . . seem to have been the effects of the division of labour.'<sup>14</sup> It is, however, in the famous discussion of colonies, and of the destructive effects of the economics of monopoly policy in the context of colonial trade, that improvement is theorized in ways which bear directly upon Austen's trans-economic deployments of the term. The English planter and the economic system he represents are constructed as the absolute enemies of improvement. Smith moves towards the definition of this position initially by unfavourably comparing the English sugar colonies with the French colony of San Domingue. In this discussion 'improvement' emerges as directly related to the relative treatment of slaves. The English colonies are seen as failing because they are not self-sufficient, but have been 'improved' only by the importation of stock from England. The reason for this relative failure lies in the bad management, in other words, high mortality rates of the productive labour force, namely the slaves.<sup>15</sup>

Smith's discussion of the economics of the sugar colonies climaxes in his furious, and highly influential, assault on monopoly theory. British monopolizing of the trade with its colonies (one of the ultimate causes of the American Revolution) is a 'mean and malignant expedient'. The crucial effect is that it shuts the colonies off from improvement. Indeed Smith might be seen to repeat the word in his economic arguments, as obsessively as Austen plays upon it in discussing Fanny's worth. His final formulation on the effects of monopolists, such as Sir Thomas, runs as follows:

By raising the rate of mercantile profit the monopoly discourages the *improvement* of land. The profit of *improvement* depends upon the difference between what the land actually produces and what, by the application of a certain capital, it can be made to produce. If this difference affords a greater profit than what can be drawn from an equal capital in any mercantile employment, the *improvement* of land will draw capital from all mercantile employments. If the profit is less, the mercantile employments will draw capital from the *improvement* of land. Whatever, therefore, raises the rate of mercantile profit, either lessens the superiority, or increases the inferiority of the profit of *improvement*; and in the one case hinders the capital from going to *improvement*, and in the other draws capital from it. But by discouraging *improvement*, the monopoly necessarily retards the natural increase of another great source of revenue, the rent of land.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. Edwin Callan, 2 vols. (London: Dent, 1961), i. 6.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, i. 100–1. <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, ii. 126–7.

As we shall see, Fanny can be fitted very neatly into the terms of this argument; as far as Sir Thomas is concerned 'her profit of improvement' will depend on how advantageously she marries, once she has been improved 'by the application of a certain capital' which went into feeding, educating, and clothing her. Yet Smith makes one final move in his assault on the planter class which can again be seen to inflect Austen's application of improvement to Fanny and the world of Mansfield Park. Smith concludes with the crucial extension of the argument into the moral and social sphere. His *coup de grâce* is the statement that the sudden and exorbitant profits of mercantile monopoly as created in the sugar colonies lead to moral degeneration in the merchant class. Smith presents the planter as a morally contaminated force within English society because he represents a moral view in which 'sober virtue seems superfluous, and expensive luxury to suit better the affluence of his [the absentee planter's] situation'. The sudden wealth of the speculative planter, based upon the protection of monopoly economics is not only economically disastrous, but creates a 'dissolute disorderly master', and Smith argues, this degeneration filters down through the master's family and dependants.<sup>17</sup> While Austen is careful not to present Sir Thomas as immediately conforming to the stereotype of the decadent planter, she certainly does present the rest of the Bertram family as morally degenerate.<sup>18</sup> Lady Bertram's lassitude and moral laziness, Tom's reckless and selfish pleasure-seeking, Maria's finally disastrous sexual licentiousness, and even Mrs Norris's excessive and persecutory avariciousness, all these can be read as a series of examples of the bad effects generated by the sudden arrival of monopolized sugar income.<sup>19</sup> Austen's point is that in this world of moral trickle-down economics the only person who really improves is Fanny. Yet, as we shall see, perhaps Austen's most devastating inference is the suggestion that the closer Fanny moves towards gaining direct access to the power of the sugar money, the greater her desire to become, and ability to enact the role of, an improver.

The connections between the discourse of improvement and slavery and emancipation in the sugar colonies was made explicit in a number of texts in the first half of the nineteenth century. Harriet Martineau, who like Austen is open to the transcultural nature of economic diction, was to place improvement at the centre of her treatment of plantation economics in *Demerara*, one of her *Illustrations of Political Economy* written a few years after *Mansfield Park*.<sup>20</sup> She

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, ii. 125–9.

<sup>18</sup> For Sir Thomas's increasing conformity to behavioural stereotypes applied to the Planter, see Ferguson, 'Slavery, Colonialism', 126–7.

<sup>19</sup> For evidence that Lady Bertram is set out according to literary conventions normally reserved for the Creole plantation mistress, Ferguson, 'Slavery, Colonialism', 125–6, 128 n.; Stewart, *Domestic Realities*, 129–30.

<sup>20</sup> For a detailed discussion of this text in relation to contemporary debates around slave labour wage labour and *laissez faire*, see pp. 257–70 above.

argues against the use of excessive violence on plantations on the grounds that it shuts out the capacity for improvement: ‘there would be no end to violence and fraud, no inducement to improvement, no mutual confidence and enjoyment, if the law of brute force were to exclude all other law.’ And the term continues to hold a key position in the subsequent debates on the merits of coerced and free labour.<sup>21</sup> The concept of improvement was to continue to lie at the heart of debates over slavery and abolition. The slave’s capacity for improvement was a significant focus for argument in Carlyle and Mill’s notorious exchanges over Carlyle’s Negrophobe assault on post-emancipation society in Jamaica, the ‘Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question’. Carlyle argues that all ‘improvement’ in the Caribbean is the result of European and primarily Saxon (in other words, English) intervention. Mill counters with the argument that in order for subject peoples to ‘improve’ they need external encouragement: ‘spontaneous improvement beyond a very low grade—improvement by internal development, without aid from other individuals or peoples—is one of the rarest phenomena in history; and wherever known to have occurred was the result of an extraordinary combination of advantages.’ An argument which Fanny Price’s progress could be seen to exemplify.<sup>22</sup>

### Austen’s Obsessive Improvements

‘Improvement makes strait roads, but the crooked roads, without Improvement, are roads of Genius’

(William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*)

Austen first links the Antigua estate and the concept of improvement in an early reference to the financial support of the Price children. The family patronymic is an ironic one, for the reference concerns the price of supporting Fanny, a theme which gains in importance as the novel progresses, until Fanny becomes inextricably tied to the fortunes of the plantation and the Mansfield estate. From the first, the domestic circumstances of Fanny are set out as fundamentally dependent upon the profits generated by slave labour on the plantation. Sir Thomas wishes to pass Fanny on to her second Aunt, Mrs Norris, only because his plantation has not generated the customary income. This simple fact is expressed in one grammatically intricate sentence:

<sup>21</sup> Martineau, *Demerara*, 21. See also 69, 98.

<sup>22</sup> For Carlyle’s development of a new rhetoric of racism, see my discussion, pp. 363–75 below. For Mill on slave improvement, John Stewart Mill, ‘The Negro Question’, *Fraser’s Magazine* (1850), 468.

The time was now come when Sir Thomas expected his sister-in-law to claim her share in their niece, the change in Mrs. Norris's situation, and the *improvement* in Fanny's age, seeming not only to do away any former objection to their living together, but even to give it the most decided eligibility; and as his own circumstances were rendered less fair than heretofore, by some recent losses on his West India estate, in addition to his eldest son's extravagance, it became not undesirable to himself to be relieved from the expense of her support, and the obligation of her future provision.<sup>23</sup>

This sentence sets down the constant pressure which the income in Antigua exerts on every character at Mansfield. There is a language of enormous subtlety for the description of money. This avoids direct allusion to slavery but uncovers the network of dependencies which the plantation income generates.

A fiscal vocabulary dominates the opening discussion of family relations. Fanny is property, in fact very undesirable property, and as if Fanny were some kind of death duty Sir Thomas expects Mrs Norris 'to claim her share' of the burden of Fanny. Fanny does not simply grow up but there is an 'improvement in Fanny's age'. Fanny's improvement is in direct contrast to Sir Thomas's financial decline which is expressed elliptically. Sir Thomas has, that is, owns, 'his own circumstances' (that is, his capital and his estates in England and Antigua) and these are described not as 'worsening', or even 'not improving' but in language that personifies them, language that indeed could be applied to a growing girl, who was not improving, physically, as well as could be expected, they are 'less fair than heretofore'. Within Sir Thomas's linguistic code, it is not appropriate to express loss positively, nor is it proper ever to state that Sir Thomas cannot afford to do something. Fanny's projected move to Mrs Norris is consequently not expressed positively, as something Sir Thomas desires, but through a double negative, Fanny's removal never became desirable but 'became not undesirable'. Both Fanny's potential loss in being moved and the actual loss of plantation revenue are then set off against a third part of the equation, the 'eldest son's extravagance'. This last *is* a positive; the son and heir is positively extravagant, that is his birthright, but as we have seen, in the context of Adam Smith's critique of monopoly capitalism in the colonies this extravagance is directly linked to bad commercial policy.

Sir Thomas's analysis inextricably links Fanny's improvement with the Antiguan plantation's improvement. Fanny's age improves, but the 'improvement' does not refer simply to numerical increase but is, or rather becomes, a term which is linked to property, and more precisely in terms of its etymology, to the cultivation of foreign property.<sup>24</sup> The connection between Fanny and the

<sup>23</sup> Austen, *Mansfield Park*, 24. I have added the emphasis to 'improvement' here and in the following quotations.

<sup>24</sup> Duckworth, *Improvement of the Estate*, does not define which meaning of improvement is being used. The word appears to carry either his own working definition "improvements," or the manner

estate places her, at this point, as a luxury item made possible through the profits of the estate, as such she is expendable when these profits cease, or when someone else (the corrupt elder son) spends them. Her transfer from the first has been a transaction which reduces her status to that of a burdensome commodity, the continued investment in which is dependent upon the profits of slave labour. The revenue from the improvement of the Antigua estate is ploughed into the education and physical nurturing (the culturing) of Fanny. If the sugar money stops coming in, Fanny will be one of the first excess expenditures Sir Thomas will have to dispense with. If the plantation does not improve in terms of its profits, Fanny's improvement in years, or in any other capacity, cannot be borne, and the improvement of the Mansfield estate itself will be harmed.

Before the extended satire settles upon the subject of Fanny's improvement, Fanny is initially, and meticulously, located within the context of the contemporary aesthetics of the improvement debate as it relates to domestic estates. Rushworth, Julia's suitor, and his estate, Sotherton, provide the focus. Rushworth, we are told, 'had been visiting a friend in a neighbouring county, and that friend having recently had his grounds laid out by an *improver*, Mr. Rushworth was returned with his head full of the subject, and very eager to be *improving* his own place.'<sup>25</sup> From this moment every character is located in terms of their approach to the dangerously destructive practices of improvement. Rushworth is the vapid victim of fashion repeating to Mrs Norris, 'It wants *improvement*, ma'm, beyond any thing. I never saw a place that wanted so much *improvement*' while Mrs Grant is confident that 'Sotherton will have *every improvement* in time which his heart can desire.' Mrs Norris takes a typical line in self-disparagement when it is her turn to join the chorus of improvers: 'For my own part if I had anything within the fiftieth part of the size of Sotherton, I should be always planting and *improving*. . . But if I had more room I would take a prodigious delight in *improving* and planting. We did a vast deal in that way in the parsonage . . . if dear Sir Thomas were here, he could tell you what *improvements* we made.'<sup>26</sup> Austen then slyly reveals Mrs Norris's intended improvements to have consisted of an attempt to cut off her husband's Vicarage from its ecclesiastical function completely. She desired to 'have carried on the garden wall and made the plantation to shut out the churchyard'. Under Austen's critical management, improvement in fact emerges as dangerously destructive action taken to comply with contemporary fashion, new money poured into the destruction of old property. Austen is careful to locate Fanny as the enemy of improvement during the Sotherton debate, and

in which individuals relate to their cultural inheritance' (xxix) or as in *OED* 'to advance or raise to a better quality or condition' 'to increase the value or excellence of'.

<sup>25</sup> Austen, *Mansfield Park*, 52.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 53.

she is shown to ally herself with Edmund. When there is talk of the necessity for cutting down an ancient avenue of trees to improve the prospect at Sotherton Fanny declares to Edmund: ‘Cut down an avenue! What a pity! Does it not make you think of Cowper?’ ‘Ye fallen avenues, once more I mourn your fate unmerited’.<sup>27</sup> For Fanny improvement inevitably produces victims, and she chooses to illustrate her sentiment through reference to Cowper, who was, among other things, the most renowned anti-slavery poet in England. Edmund puts in his own objections along rather different lines: ‘had I a place to new-fashion, I should not put myself into the hands of an *improver*. I would rather have an inferior degree of beauty, of my own choice, and acquired progressively.’<sup>27</sup>

It is during this conversation that Maria Bertram interjects addressing Henry Crawford: ‘My Dear Henry, have *you* nothing to say? You have been an *improver* yourself, and from what I hear of Everingham, it may vie with any place in England’ to which Henry replies, ‘as to *improvement* there was very little for me to do’, a statement which will apply equally well when he comes to consider it his task to improve Fanny by marrying her.<sup>28</sup> Mary Crawford is not precisely positioned by Austen on this occasion during the improvement debate, but later, on being told that the old Mr Rushworth has abandoned family prayers in the chapel, she says spitefully to Edmund, knowing his devoutness and intention to be a clergyman: ‘Every generation has its *improvements*.’<sup>29</sup> It is, however, Henry, who is set up as the central representative of the new power of improvement. The company at Sotherton ‘discussed the possibility of *improvements* with much animation. Nothing was fixed on—but Henry Crawford was full of ideas and projects, and, generally speaking whatever he proposed was immediately approved.’<sup>30</sup> Henry even flirts with Maria Bertram by playing with the concept of improvement. In a fine phrase he suggests that it is Miss Bertram’s presence which is the ultimate force of improvement over Sotherton for him: ‘And to tell the truth,’ speaking rather lower, ‘I do not think I shall ever see Sotherton again with so much pleasure as I do now. Another summer will hardly *improve* it to me.’<sup>31</sup> Of course, by the end of the novel it is made crushingly clear that the improvement of Maria is not a central concern of Henry Crawford. By the end of the Sotherton outing Austen has located improvement at the centre of the aesthetic and moral debates of the book. As the novel proceeds she broadens the terms of the debate to show how the concept can be used to critique the economics of plantation slavery, and their relation to Fanny’s situation at Mansfield.

It is in the economic triangle of Fanny, Sir Thomas, and the Antigua estate that Austen’s most destructive insights into the operation of the colonial

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 57. For an in-depth discussion of Cowperian allusion in *Mansfield Park*, see <http://www.jimandellen.org/mp/DoesnotitmakeyouthinkofCowper.html>

<sup>28</sup> Austen, *Mansfield Park*, 60–1.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 86.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 57.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 98.

plantation and the domestic economy of Mansfield occur. At the end of the third chapter, Sir Thomas quite suddenly decides to visit Antigua personally. Fanny's reaction is contradictory: she is grateful to Sir Thomas for his 'kindness' in promising to invite her favourite brother William to Mansfield, but bitterly upset at the suggestion that William will be disappointed in her. The chapter concludes by reporting this latter part of Sir Thomas's speech: 'If William does come to Mansfield, I hope you may be able to convince him that the many years which have passed since you parted have not been spent on your side entirely without *improvement*—though I fear he must find his sister at sixteen in some respects too much like his sister at ten.'<sup>32</sup> The terms of this announcement are a precise development of Sir Thomas's/the Narrator's earlier ruminations on the relative value of Fanny. Again her behaviour and character are described in financial terms. The six years at Mansfield have been 'passed', but by Fanny they have been 'spent' as well, and for Sir Thomas time spent on Fanny is literally money and the investment must be returned. He must go out to his plantation to improve his affairs, a task which the broad perspective of Adam Smith's economic vision would have seen as impossible as long as monopoly capitalism continued. Fanny must convince her brother that she has improved, or in the language of Sir Thomas (which as we have noticed cannot admit uncircumlocuted affirmation or negation in reference to his investments) that the time 'has not been spent on your part entirely without improvement'. The narrator has already told us that Sir Thomas considers Fanny 'improved in years' so what improvements is he looking for?

To tell a young woman of 16 that she is the same girl she was when 10 is to make a definite, and frightening, inference about her sexuality, or rather lack of it. We must wait for the answer to what Sir Thomas seeks in Fanny until his return from Antigua, but then it is made clear, for Jane Austen almost indecently clear. He expects a physical return for his outlay, he wants his property to 'improve' its value and for a young woman this means becoming more attractive, more capable of the social display of her beauty. Physical improvement represents increased desirability and increased sales potential. The kind of beauty Sir Thomas is looking for is of an explicitly sexual and tangible kind, and he finds it, to his uncontained delight, on his return from Antigua. In the midst of the chaos generated by his unannounced arrival at Mansfield he seeks out Fanny: 'He led her nearer the light and looked at her again—enquired particularly after her health, and then correcting himself, observed that he need not enquire, for her appearance spoke sufficiently on that point. A fine blush having succeeded the paleness of her face, he was justified in his belief in her equal *improvement* in health and beauty.'<sup>33</sup> Fanny has become desirable, her beauty is

<sup>32</sup> Austen, *Mansfield Park*, 33.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 178.

valuable, and this is the crucial 'improvement' Sir Thomas demanded. Again Fanny and the plantation seem inextricably linked in their fortunes, they have both 'improved' at the same time. Austen's word choice begins to reveal a massive and sinister precision.

The word 'improved', and its associates, 'improve' and 'improvement', enjoy a unique appropriateness in bringing together the ideas of the better and more profitable cultivation of colonial territory and the physical and cultural growth of a young person. To improve can mean both to invest in successfully 'to lay out, invest, or turn money to profit' (*OED*, v 2); it also has a specific set of associations referring to the cultivation of land by the aristocracy 'especially used of the lord's enclosing and bringing into cultivation of waste land' (*OED*, v 1). It also carries meanings which slur moral and economic increase as in 'to advance or raise to a better quality or condition' and 'to increase the value or excellence of' (*OED*, v 6), definitions peculiarly appropriate to Sir Thomas's estimation of Fanny, where her 'goodness' of character is as marketable in terms of Henry Crawford's desire to possess her, as is her physical beauty. While improved can mean 'under cultivation', it can also mean 'turned to good account', and 'brought to a higher more desirable condition' (*OED*, ppl a, 1, 2, and 3). 'Improvement' can refer to a process of bodily growth, or 'developed form' (*OED*, a 5) but also has a series of meanings associated explicitly with economic returns, with making a profit: 'the turning of a thing to profit or good account; profitable management or use; making the most of a thing for one's own profit; realisation of the profits of anything' (*OED*, 1).

Not only do these meanings apply equally directly to Fanny and the plantation, but as we see in Sir Thomas's subsequent attempts to market Fanny, they place her improvement in direct comparison with that of the plantation, and with the English estates including Sotherton and Henry Crawford's Everingham, which have been the subject of such intense speculation. Sir Thomas is himself an improver, and he looks for marketable improvement not only in what he is selling but in what he is buying. He may be sceptical about the appropriateness of Rushworth as a husband for his oldest daughter, but on his return from Antigua finally submits to the match with the justification that 'It was an alliance which he could not have relinquished without pain; and thus he reasoned. Mr. Rushworth was young enough to *improve*; Mr. Rushworth must and would *improve* in good society.'<sup>34</sup> The behavioural improvement which Sir Thomas desires will of course be brought about by the good society of Mansfield. Yet it is Fanny who is the central focus for the two most powerful improvers, Henry and Sir Thomas. Her virtue, her innocence, as well as her physical beauty, will have a precise market value, a value well understood by

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 201.



Henry Crawford. And Austen has been meticulous, as we have seen, in setting up Henry, in the context of Sotherton, as the ultimate improver.

Henry, is struck, in much the same way as Sir Thomas, at what has happened to Fanny. He announces to his sister just after Sir Thomas's return: 'When we talked of her last night, you, none of you seemed sensible of the wonderful *improvement* that has taken place in her looks within the last six weeks. You see her every day, and therefore do not notice it, but I assure you, she is quite a different creature from what she was in the autumn. She was then merely a quiet, modest, not plain looking girl, but she is now absolutely pretty.' Henry continues, 'And then—her air, her manner, her tout ensemble is so indescribably *improved!* She must be grown two inches at least, since October.'<sup>35</sup> For Mary the whole thing is a question of surface effect and fashion, 'Her eyes should be darker, but she has a sweet smile; but as for this wonderful degree of *improvement*, I am sure it may all be resolved into a better style of dress and your having nobody else to look at', yet Henry now desperately wants to possess this new improved product of Sir Thomas's investment. The two of them are now bound in an understanding of what Henry wants to buy and what Sir Thomas feels in a position to sell. Henry now commits himself to winning Fanny over, and consequently incorporates Mansfield in his general dynamics of improvement, and finds 'himself continuing *improving*, and *perfecting* that friendship and intimacy with the Mansfield Park family which was increasing in value to him every day'.<sup>36</sup> It is only in Edmund that Austen suggests a degree of reserve, and Edmund's resistance to Henry's improvements comes out in his ironic repetition of the very language of improvement, as he assures Henry, just a little too enthusiastically: 'we will add to the stables on your own *improved* plan, and with all the *improvements* of your *improved* plan that may occur to you this spring.'<sup>37</sup>

If Fanny's improvement makes her desirable, it does not immediately alleviate the passivity and vulnerability of her position. Indeed in terms of her exploitation and the suffering she is forced to endure, her new increase in value has absolutely the opposite effect. In showing how Sir Thomas's philosophy of improvement is morally detached, Austen has to confront the market value of sexuality. It is in this context that further parallels between the position of Fanny and of the slaves on the Antigua plantation are suggested.

Let us return to the passage expressing Sir Thomas's delight at Fanny's improvement. The description of her examination runs in full:

Sir Thomas was at that moment looking round him and saying 'But where is Fanny?—Why do not I see my little Fanny?' and on perceiving her came forward with a *kindness* which astonished and penetrated her, calling her his dear Fanny, kissing

<sup>35</sup> Austen, *Mansfield Park*, 229–30.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 246.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* 247.

her affectionately, and observing with decided pleasure how much she was grown! Fanny knew not how to feel, or where to look. She was quite oppressed. He had never been so *kind*, so *very kind* to her in his life. His manner seemed changed; his voice was quick with the agitation of joy, and all that had seemed awful in his dignity was lost in his tenderness. He led her nearer the light and looked at her again—enquired particularly after her health, and then correcting himself, observed that he need not enquire, for her appearance spoke sufficiently on that point. A fine blush having succeeded the paleness of her face, he was justified in his belief in her equal *improvement* in health and beauty.<sup>38</sup>

Nothing has prepared us for the amorous ferocity of Sir Thomas. Certainly there is a satiric element in the sense that Fanny's 'improvement' and that of the plantation are both to be seen at Sir Thomas's expense. When Sir Thomas's examination is finished Fanny performs her own furtive version a few lines later and finds Sir Thomas, for his part, to be entirely without improvement: 'on having courage to lift her eyes to his face, she saw that he was grown thinner and had the burnt, fagged, worn look of fatigue and a hot climate'.<sup>39</sup> But Sir Thomas's behaviour towards Fanny is not simply there as a balance for her behaviour towards him, there is a lot more going on.

The passage breaks with the assumed proprieties of Austen's style. This is the most overtly sexual writing in the novel. Nothing beyond a little heightened sentiment is described between the constant object of Fanny's love, Edmund, and herself. Edmund, as we shall see, appears only able to talk to Fanny about her sexuality by literally adopting his father's persona, and by enacting his Father's vision of Fanny's improvement. Indeed the closer Fanny and Edmund become, as the novel nears its formally comedic solution, the more distant the prose is, until, at the conclusion Austen's narrator backs off completely and refuses to present any part of the final union of the lovers. Austen's imagined readers are addressed and invited to imagine the climactic union: 'I purposely abstain from dates on this occasion [dates for the proposal of Edmund and his subsequent marriage to Fanny] that everyone may be at liberty to fix their own, aware that the cure of unconquerable passions, and the transfer of unchanging attachments, must vary much as to time in different people.'<sup>40</sup> This is Austenesque propriety at its detached limits, and it contrasts strangely with the full description of Sir Thomas's emotional arousal on his return. Here Fanny is closely examined in the sight of the gathered company, in the glare of a light which she is placed under by Sir Thomas. His behaviour is intensely charged and his language is almost risqué when he observes how she is 'grown!' The vocabulary which describes the scene also has powerful sexual associations; he kisses her repeatedly and 'affectionately', he is '*very kind*' indeed his 'kindness

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 177–8.<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 178.<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 470.

. . . penetrated her', she is 'oppressed', he seems on the verge of ecstasy his voice 'quick with the agitation of joy'.

The insensitivity of Sir Thomas's behaviour is surprising in an English gentleman, but typical, although perhaps mild, for a slave-owning Caribbean planter sizing up a piece of his property. Such brazenness in one of the planter class would not have surprised Adam Smith. At this point it is worth asking exactly what Sir Thomas's social position in England is. As a second-generation planter with a 'modern built house' Sir Thomas's social and economic status possess a certain fluidity. He embodies neither the substantiality of the true landed gentleman, nor the vulgarity of the newly arrived self-made planter, a figure frequently stereotyped in contemporary popular fiction and political diatribe. Sir Thomas is attempting to move beyond his planter inheritance and to establish his credentials as a proper landed English aristocrat, yet he remains a monopoly capitalist buttressed by what was commonly perceived, in the wake of Smith's punishing critique, as a rotten system.<sup>41</sup> Given this ambivalent social status, Sir Thomas's behaviour on his return is particularly significant. What will Antigua have done to him, is he going to behave like a planter or like an English gentleman, or like an English gentleman contaminated by the ethics of monopoly capitalism?

We are still left with the question: where does this transformative scene come from? To answer this question some others must be addressed: is there a literary model for this ritualized exhibition of Fanny's desirability as a sexual item, and why is Sir Thomas so delighted and why does his delight express itself in the manner of a salesman presenting his wares to the public? I would suggest this scene, from Fanny's perspective, corresponds to a popular literary model, that of the slave auction, and that as a result of this scene Fanny and Sir Thomas become tacitly drawn to each other through the subject of slavery. They are the only two characters in the novel who wish openly to discuss the details of slavery on the plantation in Antigua and the details of the slave trade, and this openness is possible only after the public display of the connection between them, the tie between the master and the bond-servant. If this seems fanciful, let me summarize.

An older male who is, as a result of social and economic elements, in a position of complete dominance, fixes upon an outwardly demure, passive, and beautiful young female, in front of a specially assembled and mixed company. He draws her into the limelight, takes liberties with her, and examines her to establish the state of her health and beauty. In the face of this onslaught, her

<sup>41</sup> For Sir Thomas's precise social status, see Southam, 'Silence of the Bertrams', 14; for literary constructions of the planter, James Raven, *Judging New Wealth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 221–2, 245–6; Sypher, *Guinea's Captive Kings*, 204–7; Ferguson, 'Slavery, Colonialism', 127–37; Stewart, *Domestic Realities*, 106–12.

distress and embarrassment are manifested in blushing, a physical change which only accentuates these qualities and the older man's enjoyment of them. This pattern occurs repeatedly in accounts of slave markets which describe beautiful mulatto or quadroon slave girls on the auction block. Such scenes occur in popular travel literature contemporary with *Mansfield Park* and recur in later nineteenth-century fiction. To take one notorious example in the first chapter of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* the slave trader Haley sizes up Eliza with the result that 'The brown of her complexion gave way on the cheek to a perceptible flush, which deepened as she saw the gaze of the strange man fixed on her in bold and undisguised admiration.'<sup>42</sup> The reason that the blush is so prized in the quadroon relates to her distance from the pure black. Blushing was not just sexually encoded but racially so as well. One of the most notorious treatises to celebrate European racial elevation over the African, Charles White's *Account of the Regular Gradation in Man*, focuses upon the blush in the climactic celebration of European white female beauty over black: 'In what other quarter of the globe shall we find the blush that overspreads the soft features of the beautiful women of Europe, that emblem of modesty, of delicate feelings, and of sense? . . . Where except on the bosom of the European woman, two such plump and snowy white hemispheres, tipped with vermilion.' It would seem that Sir Thomas would endorse this view, yet in the peculiar situation in which he places Fanny she is both exemplar of white female beauty and sexual modesty, and of the overtly displayed sexual charms of the quadroon on the auction block. Austen's fiction in fact shows several instances where she conflates the figure of the subservient white woman in domestic situations and the colonial slave.

The identification of the figure of the governess with the slave trade was used not only by Charlotte Brontë in *Jane Eyre*, but by Austen herself who had Jane Fairfax draw out the comparison between the 'governess-trade' and the 'slave-trade' in *Emma* and to conclude that 'as to the greater misery of the victims, I do not know where it lies'. Comparisons between slavery and marriage also evolved. The fusion of the slave auction and the desirability of young women was so commonplace in late eighteenth-century Liverpool as to form the basis for adolescent sport: 'The young bloods of the town, when not engaged in more disgraceful pursuits, deemed it fine amusement to circulate handbills in which young ladies were offered for sale.'<sup>43</sup> The comparison of the young woman on

<sup>42</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins (London: Norton, 1994), 4.

<sup>43</sup> Austen, *Emma*, ed. R. W. Chapman (London: Oxford University Press, 1923, repr. 1997), 300–1. For the governess-slavery conflation, and slave-marriage comparisons within English women's abolition publication, Sanchez-Eppler, 'Bodily Bonds', 28–58; for Brontë and slavery metaphors, Susan L. Meyer, 'Colonialism and the Figurative Strategy in *Jane Eyre*', *Victorian Studies*, 33 (1990), 247–68; for the Liverpool mock auction bills, Gomer Williams, *History of the Liverpool Privateers . . . With an Account of the Liverpool Slave Trade* (London, 1897), 474.

the verge of marriage with the slave on the auction block was familiar by the early nineteenth century. Judith Drake's *An Essay upon the Female Sex* and Mary Astell's *Some Reflections upon Marriage* provide early eighteenth-century examples; the educational theorist Hester Chapone's collected works came out in 1808, and contained an account of her marriage which referred to her father's desire to 'reduce me to the condition of an Indian skreen . . . item me amongst his goods and chattels and put me up for sale to the highest bidder'. The association continues throughout the century; George Eliot, for example, speculates upon Gwendolen Harleth's eligibility during the archery competition in *Daniel Deronda* and concludes, 'perhaps it is not quite mythical that a slave has been proud to be bought first'.<sup>44</sup> It is finally, however, the very delicacy, the elusiveness of Austen's use of the slave/white girl analogue in *Mansfield Park* which makes it potent. The comparisons are hinted at, indeed the reader is required to make them, but a crude and direct conflation of what are finally incomparable states of exploitation, is evaded.

The concentration upon Fanny's public exhibition in a domestic space, the revelation of her marketability, resonates even more powerfully if it is placed in the context of the dynamic of social space and its relation to social activity which permeates the novel. Fran Sendbuehler has argued that there is a distinction between women who do nothing and women who do something in Austen's work. She further argues that women who do things, make themselves noticeable through action, run the risk of moving from the private/domestic sphere to the public/commercial sphere. 'A public woman becomes a courtesan, a barmaid, a laundress, a whore. Activity in the upper classes is allowable only when there is some financial or aesthetic improvement in progress, and then these activities may only be carried out by men, unless that improvement relates strictly to the household and the education of very young children.'<sup>45</sup> This emphasis on public and private women, in the context of improvement, is very helpful in looking at the moral implications of Sir Thomas's display of Fanny. It is shocking for Fanny because Sir Thomas is forcing Fanny to be a public woman within a very private sphere, that of his own home, the one space which should protect her right to remain private. Fanny's shyness, her desire not to be noticed, not to be seen, reflects her unstable social position. If anyone must obey the rules dividing the perception of the private and public social space it is Fanny, for her clouded social status is more affected by its relation to convention than that of the firmly defined, because rich, Bertrams. Sir Thomas annihilates the conventional rules of spatial division as they should apply to Fanny in order to make public his new perception of Fanny's worth. His

<sup>44</sup> For the Hester Chapone quotation, see Ferguson, *Subject to Others*, 106; for Gwendolen Harleth, George Elliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. Graham Handley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 90.

<sup>45</sup> Fran Sendbuehler, 'The Art of Doing Nothing', *Angelaki*, 2/1 (1995), 170.

violation of her personal space and his domestic space becomes intensely ironized in the succeeding pages which focus so powerfully on Sir Thomas's discomfort in experiencing the invasion of his own personal space (his study) which has been transformed into a theatre, a space for public performance. Sir Thomas is in turn forced, unwittingly and most comically, to perform by Mr Yates. We are told of Sir Thomas's 'looks of solemnity and amazement, on this, his first appearance on any stage'.<sup>46</sup>

The scene of Fanny's examination has powerful repercussions in the succeeding pages. It exerts a compulsive force over Austen's characters and is anatomized and re-enacted between Fanny and Edmund in the next chapter in a scene which casts an even darker shadow over the silent sanctioning of slave power in the Bertram household, and over the price which Fanny will have to pay for her improvement. Fanny's initial reaction to her ordeal is confusion: 'Fanny knew not what to feel, or where to look'. She is not allowed at this stage to see that Sir Thomas quite simply values her for her body. While he knows what he wants to look at, Fanny does not know where to look. Fanny's inability, or refusal, to understand makes possible the scene where Edmund brutally explains the nature of the relationship to her, and this in turn makes possible the explicit connection between Fanny, Sir Thomas, and slavery.

The scene occurs in the opening of the third chapter of the second book, the part of the novel which makes most explicit the thought behind Sir Thomas's valuations. It also stresses how Edmund, despite himself, is not only implicated in, but totally upholds, the economic and ethical positions of his father. Edmund and Fanny discuss the alteration which Sir Thomas's return has brought. The closure of social connections and the withdrawal into a small family circle, the tediousness and 'seriousness' of life in his presence. In this context Fanny makes a peculiar claim: 'The evenings do not appear long to me. I love to hear my uncle talk of the West Indies. I could listen to him for an hour together. It entertains *me* more than many other things have done—but then I am unlike other people I dare say.'<sup>47</sup> Fanny's announcement of a special relationship between herself and Sir Thomas manifested in a mutual enthusiasm for discussing his time in the West Indies, and presumably the minutiae of his slave plantation, draws an unusually cynical and charged response from Edmund. Fanny's statement that she 'dares to say' she is 'unlike other people' could relate to her position of dependence, or to the unique position she now occupies in Sir Thomas's eyes. Edmund chooses to interpret her announcement of her difference more brutally, as a way of fishing for compliments:

Why should you dare say that? (smiling)—do you want to be told that you are only unlike other people in being more wise and discreet? But when did you or anybody

<sup>46</sup> Austen, *Mansfield Park*, 182.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* 197.

ever get a compliment from me Fanny? Go to my father if you want to be complimented. He will satisfy you. Ask your uncle what he thinks and you will hear compliments enough; and though they may be chiefly on your person, you must put up with it, and trust to his seeing as much beauty of mind in time.<sup>48</sup>

Sir Thomas's fascination for Fanny, manifested in his knowledge of the West Indies, draws Edmund into this revelation of the motives behind his father's interest in Fanny, and a veiled accusation relating to her interest in him. Despite, or maybe because, of Fanny's embarrassment Edmund drives on mercilessly and not at all kindly:

Your uncle thinks you very pretty, dear Fanny—and that is the long and the short of the matter. Anybody but myself would have made something more of it, and anybody but you would resent that you had not been thought very pretty before; but the truth is, that your uncle never did admire you till now—and now he does. Your complexion is so *improved!*—and you have gained much countenance!—and your figure—Nay, Fanny, do not turn away about it—it is but an uncle. If you cannot bear an uncle's admiration, what is to become of you? You must really begin to harden yourself to the idea of being worth looking at.<sup>49</sup>

Edmund presents himself as a plain speaker, but he is talking about his father's delight in his cousin's sexual charms, which is a peculiar, not to say impossibly awkward, subject for such linguistic reduction. As the speech progresses Edmund performs a reiteration of Fanny's 'worth' in the exact terms Sir Thomas had used. He enumerates the qualities that set her off in her uncle's eyes, complexion, countenance, figure, and harps back to Sir Thomas's vital concept of 'improvement'. Like her uncle he refuses her the liberty to 'turn away' and hide her sexuality. Fanny in her turn re-enacts the distress she felt before, only to be told that it is beyond her power to control her 'worth', that is her sexuality, she must harden herself 'to the idea of being worth looking at'. The process of looking has its own returns.

It is clear then that Edmund forces Fanny to re-enact her earlier examination, but what is his role? He is her cousin but he assumes the persona of the father/uncle. This makes for a potentially even more exploitative exhibition of Fanny's sexuality because Edmund is not only Sir Thomas's son, one of his 'kind', but he is also the object of Fanny's love and trust. When Edmund finally goads Fanny to a physical attempt at escape ('Nay, Fanny, do not turn away') through crude reference to her body's attractiveness, the 'figure', which has 'grown', the body which has 'improved', he immediately qualifies his command: 'Nay, Fanny, do not turn away about it—it is but an uncle'. What does this mean? Why the strange proliferation of impersonal articles 'it is but an uncle', why not

<sup>48</sup> Austen, *Mansfield Park*,

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* 197–8.

'he is only your uncle'? 'It' has no gender, no person, and is outside the family. What is 'it' anyway? Does Edmund somehow imagine himself transmuted into, or absorbed by, some essence of uncleness while he translates Sir Thomas's speech and thoughts? Will Edmund only 'dare' to speak of Fanny's sexuality in the imagined character of Sir Thomas, because that is the only perspective from which its value, its improvement, can be registered, celebrated, or even recognized? The exchange casts a new shadow on Edmund's filling of the role of the absent father and on Lady Bertram's observations concerning 'how well Edmund could supply his [Sir Thomas's] place'. As a result of this scene, Edmund is shown to uphold the economic theory that enables his father to appraise the sale value of Fanny and the Antigua plantation, in precisely the same terms. As a result, his character and relations with Fanny are darkened.

Fanny's embarrassment is the force that leads Edmund to recall himself and to try to change the subject by requesting that Fanny talk more to her uncle. This request, however, leads Fanny to make the novel's most explicit statement of the connection between herself, the subject of slavery, and Sir Thomas. Fanny's answer also incorporates the only direct allusion to black chattel slavery in the book:

[Fanny] But I do talk to him more than I used. I am sure I do. Did not you hear me ask him about the slave trade last night?

[Edmund] I did—and was in hopes the question would be followed up by others. It would have pleased your uncle to have been enquired of farther.

[Fanny] And I longed to do it—but there was such a dead silence! And while my cousins were sitting by without speaking a word, or seeming at all interested in the subject, I did not like—I thought it would appear as if I wanted to set myself off at their expense, by shewing a curiosity and pleasure in his information which he must wish his own daughters to feel.<sup>50</sup>

This is a curious passage which has generated more speculation about the colonial context for *Mansfield Park* than any other part of the text. It is, however, impossible to know exactly what Fanny and Sir Thomas are talking about. Fanny does not talk merely of slavery, but of the slave trade.<sup>51</sup> This might appear a pretty charged subject to discuss with a plantation owner in 1812 because the British slave trade had just been abolished five years before, in 1807, after one of the most consolidated popular moral crusades and propaganda campaigns in British history.<sup>52</sup> The 1807 abolition bill meant that Sir Thomas could not

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 198.

<sup>51</sup> Southam, 'Silence of the Bertrams', 13, establishes Sir Thomas's return to England to be in Oct. 1812.

<sup>52</sup> For the dating of this conversation, see Roger Sales, *Jane Austen and Representations of Regency England* (London: Routledge, 1994), 89–90, 240.



buy any more slaves for his estate from Africa, and this surely would not have been a subject that delighted him. Does Fanny ask the question because she is gauche, socially clumsy? Is she trying to make conversation and unwittingly introducing a subject which Sir Thomas does not feel comfortable discussing in front of his family, although he would discuss it happily with Fanny? In talking 'about the slave trade' would Sir Thomas necessarily have been talking of the abolition of the British maritime trade from Africa to the Caribbean? He might have been talking about a number of things. He might have been talking of the time when the planters believed it a necessity for the British to end the slave trade in order to protect the British West Indies from French competition?<sup>53</sup> He might not have been talking of the transatlantic slave trade at all, but of the internal slave trade in the British West Indies which was the only option for planters wanting new slaves after the 1807 abolition bill? Absentee plantation owners could be spectacularly erratic in their approaches to slave owning and the slave trade. Mathew 'Monk' Lewis, an absentee owner, visited his plantation in 1815 and kept a detailed journal. He refers disparagingly to 'the execrable traffic' of the slave trade, yet saw his business holdings as legitimate and unproblematic.<sup>54</sup> Then what is to be made of the silence of the rest of the family, 'sitting by without speaking a word or seeming at all interested in the subject'? Is it the silence of embarrassment or tedium or dissent? If there is a significant silence in the novel's treatment of slavery, then this is it, for we are never told. The only thing that is certain is that Fanny and Sir Thomas like to talk about slavery and the rest of the family do not. This in itself is highly significant in view of how Fanny describes the effect of the silence on her perception of the Bertram children.

The passage has been read as a heroic assertion of abolition principles by both Fanny and Austen.<sup>55</sup> This seems unlikely given that the question Fanny asks is set in a context where she is trying to please Sir Thomas by making conversation on a favourite subject. She has already set out the special relationship she enjoys with Sir Thomas in terms of talking of Antigua, 'I love to hear my uncle talk of the West Indies. I could listen to him for an hour together. It entertains *me*.' It also appears that far from abhorring the subject of the slave trade, Sir Thomas actively enjoys the opportunity to discourse upon it. This is undoubtedly the inference in Edmund's reply to Fanny's 'Did you not hear me ask him about the slave trade last night?' The answer 'I did—and was in hopes

<sup>53</sup> Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (New York: Perigee Books, 1980), 146–9.

<sup>54</sup> See H. L. Malchow, *Gothic Images of Race in Nineteenth Century Britain* (Stanford, Calif.: University of Stanford Press, 1996), 186–8.

<sup>55</sup> Southam, 'Silence of the Bertrams', 14, takes the 'dead silence' to relate primarily to Sir Thomas, 'Fanny gets no reply to her forbidden question because none is possible from a man who has supported the slave trade as a buyer of slaves.'

that the question would be followed up by others. It would have pleased your uncle to be enquired of farther' can only mean that Sir Thomas enjoyed the subject. Fanny goes on to stress that her primary motive in asking the question is to please her uncle, and that it is the reaction of other family members 'sitting by without speaking a word, or seeming at all interested in the subject' which frightens her off from pursuing the subject further, for fear of appearing to curry favour. These are hardly the motives of an abolitionist.

For Edward Said, Fanny's question is a straightforward acknowledgement that the world of slavery and the world of Mansfield are utterly separate: 'Fanny Price reminds her cousin that after asking Sir Thomas about the slave trade, "There was such a dead silence" as to suggest that one world could not be connected with the other since there simply is no common language for both.'<sup>56</sup> Austen's art can make 'such a dead silence' speak. My reading contends that there *is* a common language for Fanny, Sir Thomas, and the slaves. Austen utilizes an economic language, and a language of ownership and improvement, which can incorporate and equate Fanny, the plantation, and the slaves in identical linguistic terms. Notice that Fanny now sees herself, even within the world of conversational social exchange, as operating within a competitive economic market place. The pleasure she gains from talking about slavery to Sir Thomas is an investment which could damage the emotional credit of the daughters, even conversation is part of the cash nexus. Fanny will not speak through the silence because 'I thought it would appear as if I wanted *to set myself off at their expense*'. This affiliation between Sir Thomas, Fanny, and the plantation means she feels quite at home discussing slavery with Sir Thomas, and he reciprocates the feeling, as long as the exchange is a closed operation, a conversational monopoly. Only the silence of the rest of the family, whether awkwardness or boredom, halts the discussion. The new improved Fanny will talk to Sir Thomas, but only about slavery.

The price of the improved Fanny in the social and economic context defined by Sir Thomas and Henry Crawford is the central subject of the remainder of the novel. It is played out in the context of Henry Crawford's desire to purchase Fanny. When Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram are left with only Fanny at Mansfield the direct equation between their happiness, Fanny's improvement, and the sugar money that has been expended on Fanny is precisely articulated.

'... I am very glad we took Fanny the way we did, for now the others are away we feel the good of it.'

Sir Thomas immediately *improved* this compliment by adding. 'Very true. We shew Fanny what a good girl we think her by praising her to her face—she is now a very valuable companion. If we have been kind to her she is now quite as necessary to us.'

<sup>56</sup> Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 115.

‘Yes,’ said Lady Bertram presently—‘and it is a comfort to think that we shall always have her.’

Sir Thomas paused, half smiled, glanced at his niece . . . <sup>57</sup>

Fanny is again described in terms of ‘value’, her goodness is established not by anything she does, but by the fact she is praised by her superiors. Even the language used to praise her falls under the net of improvement; it appears Sir Thomas cannot manage a verbal quip without turning a linguistic profit, for as he improves his wife’s compliment he invests a bigger linguistic stake in his niece. He endorses her as a ‘valuable companion’, her necessity to the Bertram household is defined as a result of their kindness. Fanny is property who can be used any way the owners like, as Lady Bertram says, they ‘took’ her and now they can ‘always have her’; these are of course verbs not just of economic but of sexual possession. Edmund’s hope that his father will come to see the beauty of Fanny’s mind in time is completely misplaced. It is essential in his pure world of value and market prices that she be without any notion of her own value, indeed any sense of will at all. Fanny’s virtue has value for Sir Thomas only so long as someone with money, like Henry Crawford, considers it worth buying.

Sir Thomas sees Henry Crawford’s interest in Fanny, knows his wealth, which is his worth, and sets about marketing his property. At last it is possible to define Fanny’s price, and again this is to be manifested in public display. Catching on a chance conversation between her brother William and Fanny, Sir Thomas becomes fixated with the idea of having Fanny dance in public. When the conversation first comes up, Sir Thomas immediately connects the imagined occasion of Fanny dancing not with social life at Mansfield, but with the planter balls in Antigua, he ‘prolonged the conversation on dancing in general, and was . . . well engaged in describing the balls in Antigua.’<sup>58</sup> The ball soon gains a momentum of its own, Fanny is to be displayed and bought. Fanny’s commercial entrapment between buyer and seller is symbolically indicated before the ball in the episode of the two chains—ball and chain. The chain which Mary Crawford gives her, on Henry’s instigation, and the chain which Edmund gives her on his family’s behalf, are worn together at the ball; she is fettered by the commercial interests that surround her. That she is being prepared for sale is emphasized in the unprecedented gesture of Lady Bertram’s in lending, albeit unnecessarily, her own maid, Chapman, to dress Fanny. A chapman is of course a vulgar itinerant trader. Lady Bertram’s dull-brained obsession with her own gesture becomes a running gag of almost Dickensian proportions in the remainder of the novel. But the joke makes a serious point: for Lady Bertram all Fanny’s value is a result of the way she has been dressed

<sup>57</sup> Austen, *Mansfield Park*, 285.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* 251.

up for sale by Chapman. As we shall see, Mary Crawford reiterates this assessment of the origin of Fanny's improvement.

The ball represents the formal commitment of the Bertrams to the sale of Fanny. After this she is committed to Henry Crawford's fortune, she must make her own returns to the Bertrams and the Prices. Fanny's passionate commitment to an ideal of romantic love will not allow her, however improved she is, to allow Crawford to purchase/marry her. Yet her initial and personally traumatic rejection of Crawford, in the face of Sir Thomas's extreme coercion, does not separate her from the underlying dynamics of improvement in which she is now so deeply implicated. Austen is careful to work through the extent to which the improved Fanny does not remain closed to Crawford's attractions. Fanny's initial rejection begins to soften, and Fanny begins to measure and test her newfound empowerment, through her own language of improvement.

Austen in fact turns the dynamics of improvement on their head as Fanny appears as the improving force which will transform Henry. As her mood softens so it becomes her turn to conduct a personal examination in search of the signs of improvement: 'She had by no means forgotten the past, and she thought as ill of him as ever; but she felt his powers; he was entertaining and his manners were so *improved* so polite, so seriously and blamelessly polite, that it was impossible not to be civil to him in return.'<sup>59</sup> When Crawford comes to visit Fanny in Portsmouth the first thing that strikes Fanny is: 'The wonderful *improvement* which she still fancied in Mr. Crawford.'<sup>60</sup>

Yet it is not only Henry who becomes the subject of Fanny's passion to improve. There is indeed more than a suggestion that Fanny, having been improved herself by the slave money of the Bertram's, is now to be seen enthusiastically redeploying this wealth for the improvement of new raw materials down in Portsmouth. Having for the first time been entrusted with a sum of money by Sir Thomas, Fanny takes it upon herself to invest this in a venture of cultural improvement, joining a circulating library in order to educate her younger sister. Austen describes the transaction in the following peculiar terms: 'but wealth is luxurious and daring—and some of hers found its way to a circulating library. She became a subscriber—amazed at being any thing *in propria persona*, amazed at her own doings in every way; to be a renter, a chuser of books! and to be having any one's *improvement* in view in her choice! But so it was, Susan had read nothing.'<sup>61</sup> With Fanny's absorption into the Bertram family at the novel's close, Susan is taken on as a suitable new subject for the improving powers of Sir Thomas's venture capital.

The wheel of improvement has come full circle with the result that Austen's insights into the dark workings of the sugar money seem to know no ironic

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. 252.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 413.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. 398.

limits. The final applications of those now terrifying words ‘kindness’ and ‘improvement’ are applied with finesse. The final ‘kindness’ relates to Sir Thomas’s relationship with Fanny after her marriage to his son. It occurs in the context of Sir Thomas’s erection of a fantasy in which Fanny is made ‘kind’, in the sense that she has kindness thrust upon her by a process of imaginative adoption. The final page of the novel informs us, in that strangely suspended narrational voice that appears to re-enact the thoughts of Sir Thomas: ‘Fanny was indeed the daughter that he wanted. His charitable kindness had been rearing a prime comfort for himself. His liberality had a rich repayment.’<sup>62</sup> We are left with a world which appears only to see, and to be seen, through Sir Thomas’s eyes. He gets what he wants in the end, a full return for his outlay, his kindness has been repaid. The repayment justifies his assumption that he is indeed kind, and that Fanny is, by marriage, one of his kind.

The final mention of Fanny’s improvement is reserved for Edmund, whose motives for selecting her as his wife are revealed to lie in the way she represents, in her combination of compliance and ‘mental superiority’, the precise opposite of Mary Crawford. Edward rehearses Fanny’s qualities in terms of the ways in which they do not cause him anxiety with regard to her future development, and the final reassurance is seen to lie in the fact that she need improve no more, she has already been improved: ‘Her mind, disposition, opinions, and habits wanted no half concealment, no self deception on the present, no reliance on future *improvement*.’<sup>63</sup> Fanny has become a Bertram, she no longer has her own Price, as far as the Bertrams are concerned she is now one of their kind. The reader is left to ponder the full loss in her ethical status that this absorption into a sugar fortune indicates. Austen’s black, black ironies are nowhere more appalling.

‘[A] figure ran backwards and forwards’:  
Bertha Mason, Slavery, and Radical Instability

Bertha Mason and Jane Eyre can be constructed as an interactive complex generating, through metaphoric networks, a set of questions concerning the nature of slavery and the memory of slavery. The constructions of Jane and Bertha force an awareness of the constant pressures that the memories of West Indian slavery exert on the cultural consciousness of the West. Through the elaborate parallelisms set up between Bertha and Jane, the novel also suggests a global perspective. *Jane Eyre* asks how the memorial reconfiguration of slavery in India, Africa, and the Caribbean might provide a series of metaphorical

<sup>62</sup> Austen, *Mansfield Park*, 472.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* 471.

approaches for the consideration of slavery within English domestic settings.<sup>64</sup> The ambition of the novel's critique of slavery has not so far been acknowledged, and this is mainly due to the limitations that have operated on the theoretical and fictional rereadings of the character of Bertha Mason. Through the violent completeness with which Bertha has been effaced from, and denied access to, the novelistic conventions involved in the construction of character, Brontë has created a sign for slavery which is open to seemingly limitless interpretations. Bertha's violent characterizational erasure radically destabilizes *Jane Eyre* in ways which raise terrifying questions relating to the ability of European literatures to 'write' the inheritance of slavery into its culture.

With the publication of *The Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë*, it has become apparent that Brontë, from her early teens, displayed a deep interest in exploring the fictions and fantasies generated around British colonial expansion in Africa and the Caribbean.<sup>65</sup> She was clearly familiar with major abolition publications and with the details of slave torture in the colonies.<sup>66</sup> In the novels published after *Jane Eyre*, namely *The Professor* (1849) and *Villette* (1853), Brontë continued to exploit, and to examine, Caribbean contexts in terms of the pressure these ex-slave colonies exerted on the domestic lives and fortunes of her characters.<sup>67</sup> Yet it is in *Jane Eyre* that Brontë really touched bottom when it came to thinking through the effects of Atlantic slavery on the health of English emotional life. Angela Carter essentializes the novel's enduring appeal on the popular front: 'It remains the most durable of melodramas, angry, sexy, a little crazy', and at the centre of its anger, sex, craziness, and melodrama is the figure of Bertha Mason.<sup>68</sup>

Already possessing, due to Rochester's patriarchal generosity, a room of her own, over the last three decades Bertha Mason has accrued a literature of her own, indeed she has become one of the juiciest bones of feminist contention within the field of the Victorian novel.<sup>69</sup> The colonial contexts alluded to in *Jane Eyre* have now also become fashionable and appeal not only to literary

<sup>64</sup> Brontë's novels, and *Jane Eyre* in particular, conduct social and political critiques via associative patterns of metaphor. For an analysis revealing the extent of politicized disease metaphor in *Jane Eyre*, see Judith Clark and Kathy Williams, *Meanings and Metaphors in Jane Eyre* (Coventry: Warwick Working Papers in Sociology, University of Warwick, 1993), 6–23.

<sup>65</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *An Edition of the Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. Christine Alexander, 3 vols. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987–91).

<sup>66</sup> Susan L. Meyer, 'Colonialism and the Figurative Strategy in *Jane Eyre*', in Heather Glen (ed.), *Jane Eyre: Contemporary Critical Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1997), 247.

<sup>67</sup> The references are summarized in Meyer, 'Colonialism', 247–51.

<sup>68</sup> Angela Carter, *Expletives Deleted* (London: Vintage 1992), 161.

<sup>69</sup> For a survey of the development of twentieth-century responses, see Heather Glen, 'Introduction', in Heather Glen (ed.), *Jane Eyre: Contemporary Critical Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1997), 1–34. For a compact summary of Bertha-centric feminist criticism, see Jerome Beaty, *Misreading Jane Eyre: A Postformalist Paradigm* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1996), 148–56.

critics but to novelists.<sup>70</sup> Writers of fiction in the last forty years have found it difficult to leave Bertha Mason alone. Most recently she has been rehashed by D. M. Thomas. Having plundered Holocaust fictions in *The White Hotel*, Thomas picked up the scent of Atlantic slavery.<sup>71</sup> In *Charlotte*, Thomas's variation on a theme, Bertha emerges as an insatiable Creole sexual athlete, who bears Rochester a black child, and who ruins him for any other woman. Thomas's Rochester brings Bertha back to England in a state of mental instability so that he can continue to enjoy her through acts of periodic rape. Thomas creates a Rochester made sexually impotent during his marriage to Jane Eyre, because he cannot get Bertha out of his mind and body. Thomas provides a crude example of the recurrent urge to make Bertha into something comprehensible, something familiar, something which in *Jane Eyre* she explicitly is not. Thomas shows how easily Bertha, because she is such a characterizational blank, can be turned into a race stereotype, and how reassuring a move this is. But exactly who and what is the first Bertha Mason?

**'Now sir tell me who and what that woman was?':  
Bertha Mason and the Spectral Embodiments of Slavery**

In Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* Bertha is given a history that grows out of, and is a corrective to, the fictional biography, or should it be history, provided for Bertha in *Jane Eyre*. The most extended biographical account of Bertha in Brontë's novel is that which Rochester provides. This occurs in the form of an explanation to Jane after the attempted wedding and the subsequent revelatory viewing of Bertha by the shocked wedding party. Here the characterization of Bertha avoids explicit references to the nature and pressures of the life of the white Creole in slave society. Rather we are given a set of novelistic stereotypes concerning the sensual depravity, sadism, and intellectual torpor of the female Creole, and the grotesque fertility of the tropics. As her character is developed Bertha is not so much a woman, as an all-encompassing metaphor for the

<sup>70</sup> For the current state of literary studies vis-à-vis *Jane Eyre*, colonialism, and slavery, see Meyer, 'Colonialism', 92–129.

<sup>71</sup> For a justly hard-hitting and accurate assault on Thomas's unacknowledged appropriations of Holocaust testimony and literature in *The White Hotel*, see James Young, 'Holocaust Documentary Fiction: The Novelist as Eyewitness', in Berel Lang (ed.), *Writing and the Holocaust* (New York and London: Holmes and Meyer, 1988), 202–10. For Thomas's frictional development of *Jane Eyre* see D. M. Thomas, *Charlotte* (London: Duck Editions, 2000).

geographical and physical characteristics of the Caribbean slave, or recently ex-slave, colonies.<sup>72</sup> Her mental and moral degeneration after the marriage are described through metaphors of natural, or from the perspective of European botanical and agricultural norms, unnatural, growth. Almost as if she is a sugar or tobacco crop: ‘her character ripened and developed with fearful rapidity; her vices sprang up fast and rank. What a pigmy intellect she had—and what giant propensities’. Rochester’s reaction to Bertha’s insanity, and to his fate of being ‘bound to a wife both intemperate and unchaste’ is to take her to England and then to go round Europe and be himself intemperate and unchaste. His strange confession to Jane in which he articulates a compulsion to live out the experiences he claims as the preserve of his wife is justified through a piece of monumental logic chopping so nice in its distinctions as to suggest parody, ‘I tried dissipation, never debauchery: that I hated and hate. That was my Indian Messalina’s attribute’.<sup>73</sup> Exactly what the defining line between dissipation and debauchery might be in this context is hard to work out, but it seems to be that casual sex for a woman, without payment, constitutes the latter and for a man, when he pays for it, the former. What Rochester claimed to want is defined in terms of a pure opposition to Bertha, ‘I longed only for what suited me—for the antipodes of the Creole: and I longed vainly.’ But what he does is to behave as he has described Bertha behaving; it is as if he wishes to become her, or at least his fantasy of her depravity, even to the extent of entering into the role of slave-owner, although transplanted to Europe. He seeks a social context where he can establish sexual relationships based upon a domination that amounts to slavery. As he explains: ‘Hiring a mistress is the next worse thing to buying a slave: both are often by nature, and always by position, inferior; and to live familiarly with inferiors is degrading.’<sup>74</sup> This is the closest Rochester, or anyone in the book, comes to directly talking of their experience of black colonial slavery. Yet Jane, although she does not have first-hand experience of slave society, also constantly constructs power relations within sexual relationships by reference to slavery paradigms. As soon as she begins to think of the pros and cons of developing a relationship with Rochester, despite his married state, she sees the status of mistress in terms of sex slavery, and asks: ‘Whether it is better . . . to be a slave in a fool’s paradise in Marseilles—fevered with delusive bliss one hour—suffocating with the bitterest tears of remorse and shame the next—or to be a village schoolmistress?’ Bertha, who spent her youth as part of a family of

<sup>72</sup> For the problematic dating surrounding both *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, see Veronica Marie Gregg, *Jean Rhys’s Historical Imagination: Reading and Writing the Creole* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 83–4.

<sup>73</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. Jane Jack and Margeret Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 397.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.* 397–8.



slave-owners in a slave-owning society, appears to act as a catalyst for the engendering of a series of fantasies on the part of Rochester and Jane which involve enslavement. As we shall see, it is finally only through the symbolic transformation of Rochester himself into the figure of slave victim that Brontë can enact a final union between him and Jane.

Bertha's story, as told by Rochester and understood by Jane, is one which concerns the effects of growing up in the ashes of a newly collapsed slave system in the colonies. This world is unnatural, distorted, wayward, everything is too big or too small, and the 'giant propensities' of this other world of colonial distinction are to be set out through a series of references to other colonial cultures. Bertha is not small-minded but possesses a racially stigmatized 'pygmy intellect', she is not simply like Messalina but, in a strange conflation of classical Roman debauchery and fantastic Asian sexual appetite, an 'Indian Messalina'.<sup>75</sup>

### 'Can you tell when there is a good fire?': Rhys's Pyromaniac Reclamations

It is a reaction to the casual promiscuity of such colonial reference that lies at the heart of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Rhys made no secret of the fact that she saw the writing of *Wide Sargasso Sea* as an act of literary guerrilla warfare on behalf of the Creole woman: 'Take a look at Jane Eyre. That unfortunate death of a Creole! I'm fighting mad to tell her story.'<sup>76</sup> Rhys is explicit about her primary motivation which is to bring Bertha 'alive': 'The Creole in Charlotte Brontë's novel is a lay figure—repulsive which does not matter, and not once alive which does . . . she must be at least plausible with a past.'<sup>77</sup> In other contexts Rhys showed her awareness of a popular literary tradition which had created the figure of the generically 'mad West Indian' female, whose madness is only defined once they move from the West Indies to England.<sup>78</sup> As a result of these explanatory fragments scattered in her papers and letters, Rhys's criticism has made her a victim of her own professed intentions. Most criticism succumbs to the temptation to read Rhys's biography into the story of Bertha, yet Rhys is fighting against something much bigger than the myth of her own victimhood, and in this sense was

<sup>75</sup> For Brontë's deep connection to the English emblem tradition, see Helena M. Ardholm, *The Emblem and the Emblematic Habit of Mind in Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights* (Gothenburg: Gothenburg University, 1999), 71–106. For the particular racial charge which the term 'pygmy' carried within contemporary theories of race, see Kitson and Lee (eds.) *Slavery Abolition and Emancipation*, viii. *Theories of Race*, intro., x.

<sup>76</sup> Jean Rhys, *Letters 1931–1966* (London: Penguin, [1994] 1995), 157.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* 156.

<sup>78</sup> For this tradition and Rhys's relation to it, see Gregg, *Historical Imagination*, 83–5.

too great an artist to be ‘fighting mad’ to tell her *own* story.<sup>79</sup> *Wide Sargasso Sea* is not only about giving the Creole female her due, but it is about the definition of a subjective consciousness as an act of colonial agency. It is the European inability to comprehend the Caribbean as ‘real’ which is the main imaginative spur for Rhys’s passionate meditation on Bertha. What fires Rhys’s imagination is not simply that the Bertha of *Jane Eyre* does not speak for herself, it is that she is only to be seen through the fantasies of Europeans, most significantly through Jane and Rochester’s imaginings. Rhys sees beneath this the terrible obliviousness, and usuriousness, of a dominant imperial nationalism. For the English characters the Caribbean does not exist in its own right but as a definitional contrary, the Caribbean is only ‘real’ in relation to the European thematization of the Caribbean’s very separateness, its tropicity. Rhys’s narrative emphasizes the alterity *not* of the Caribbean to England, but of England to the Caribbean. She does this by mapping the damage that is done to a young female colonial consciousness when England sends its male entrepreneurial emissary to the West Indies. The result of this initial displacement is that it enforces a second and more radical move, in that a young Creole woman must leave her home and come to England. Within Rhys’s chosen fictional dynamic, Jane, however, remains ephemeral, a border presence, a new inhabitant of the literary margin. It is as if Bertha may only speak in *Wide Sargasso Sea* if Jane is silenced, and the Caribbean can only become real if England becomes unreal: this is the price which Rhys’s inspired act of literary vengeance exacts.

In her radical gesture of cultural re-familiarization Rhys does obsessively wonderful things with the tiny details that pick up on Rochester’s colonial experience within *Jane Eyre*. There are glittering moments when strangeness becomes ordinary, and the ordinary fantastic, when the Caribbean bursts out as a place of deep and peculiar beauty which is not alien to English sensibility but an intensification of it. One example of such gorgeous creative dialogue relates to the way Rhys takes up the scene in *Jane Eyre* when Jane tries to steal unnoticed past Rochester’s ‘feeling shadow’ on a summer evening:

But no—even tide is as pleasant to him as to me and this antique garden as attractive; and he strolls on, now lifting the gooseberry tree branches to look at the fruit, large as plums, with which they are laden; now taking a ripe cherry from the wall; now stooping towards a knot of flowers, either to inhale their fragrance or to admire the dew-beads on their petals. A great moth goes humming by me; it alights on a plant at Mr. Rochester’s foot: he sees it, and bends to examine it.

‘Now, he has his back towards me,’ thought I, ‘and he is occupied too; perhaps, if I walk softly, I can slip away unnoticed.’

<sup>79</sup> For an extreme example of such ‘closed’ reading, see Judith Kegan Gardiner, *Rhys, Sted Lessing and the Politics of Empathy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 124–33.

I trode on an edging of turf, that the crackle of the pebbly gravel might not betray me: he was standing among the beds at a yard or two distant from where I had to pass; the moth apparently engaged him. 'I shall get by very well,' I meditated. As I crossed his shadow, thrown long over the garden by the moon, not yet risen high, he said quietly, without turning—

'Jane, come and look at this fellow.'

I had made no noise: he had not eyes behind—could his shadow feel? I started at first, and then approached him.

'Look at his wings,' said he, 'he reminds me rather of a West Indian insect; one does not often see so large and gay a night-rover in England. There, he is flown.'

The moth roamed away.<sup>80</sup>

Rhys alights on the detail of the moth and explodes it into a world of transformative experience from which Rochester, here the narrator, will never recover:

I leaned on the railing and saw hundreds of fireflies—

'Ah yes, fireflies in Jamaica, here they call a firefly la Belle.'

A large moth, so large that I thought it was a bird, blundered into one of the candles, put it out and fell to the floor. 'He's a big fellow,' I said.

'Is it badly burned?'

'More stunned than hurt.'

I took the beautiful creature up in my handkerchief and put it on the railing. For a moment it was still and by the dim candlelight I could see the soft brilliant colours, the intricate pattern on the wings. I shook the handkerchief gently and it flew away.

'I hope that gay gentleman will be safe', I said.

'He will come back if we don't put the candles out. It's light enough by the stars.'<sup>81</sup>

The West Indies has turned Rochester's perception into something foreign, he sees a world Jane cannot, and where he goes an English garden grows huge fruit, and attracts enormous and exotic moths. The brilliance of Rhys lies in the way she makes us understand that it is Brontë who at some level had the intimation that it took the experience of the West Indies to open Rochester's eyes to the sensuality and natural flamboyance of an English summer evening. Through Rochester's actions and vision the narrational Jane is allowed an ephemeral glimpse of this different way of seeing, and if we have eyes to see, we as readers are also invited in. Yet it took Rhys to unpack, maybe without knowing what she was doing, the subversive potential of Brontë's text. Rhys can see in *Jane Eyre* a series of challenges which make her relocate the imaginative boundaries of colony; the Caribbean becomes the 'real' world, England becomes the raw

<sup>80</sup> Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 312–13.

<sup>81</sup> Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (London: André Deutsch, 1966), 81.

material for fantasy, sometimes exotic and sometimes not. Rhys takes the encoded invitations in *Jane Eyre* a very long way. Her creative revenge on Brontë for not giving the West Indies a complete imaginative body is finally absolute, and extends to Bertha's denial, in the concluding sections of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, that she ever is in England, that England in fact exists outside Bertha/Antoinette's fantasy of it: 'When we went to England,' I said. 'You fool,' she said, 'this is England.' 'I don't believe it,' I said, 'and I never will believe it.'<sup>82</sup> English light and English colour prove only one thing, the absolute reality of the Caribbean in comparison: 'It [England] is, I always knew, made of cardboard. I have seen it before somewhere, this cardboard world where everything is coloured brown, or dark red or yellow that has no light in it. As I walk along the passages I wish I could see what is behind the cardboard. They tell me I am in England but I don't believe them.'<sup>83</sup>

Rhys's Antoinette is in mourning for the smells and colours of the Caribbean, her consciousness defines an intense homesickness. The reverse of the coin is that Antoinette's sickness is for a home which is in English terms essentially unhomey, a home which is literally diabolical for Brontë's Rochester.<sup>84</sup> In *Jane Eyre* Rochester approaches suicidal anguish in Jamaica, and both his temporary insanity, and Bertha's depravity, are figured in terms of tropical landscape: 'The air was like sulphur-steams—I could find no refreshment anywhere. Mosquitoes came buzzing in and hummed sullenly round the room; the sea, which I could hear from thence rumbled dull like an earthquake—black clouds were casting up over it; the moon was setting in the waves, broad and red, like a hot cannonball— . . . I was physically influenced by the climate . . . "This life," I said at last, "this is the air these are the sounds of the bottomless pit."<sup>85</sup> The conclusion to *Wide Sargasso Sea* is, among other things, a dialogue with this fantasized infernal West Indian landscape. Rhys creates an equally infernal English landscape, in which the damned tempestuousness of Rochester's Caribbean hell is replaced by the colourless tedium of Antoinette's English hell. Rochester's fire imagery is reappropriated and turned into something beautiful and creative. The warmth and fire colour of the Caribbean is Antoinette's only reality, and finally in this account, the trigger for her pyromania, because flames are the only things that take her back home. Antoinette's one possession, a red dress she has been allowed to keep, comes to stand for warmth, colour, flame, the lost experience of her home:

I saw it hanging, the colour of fire and sunset. The colour of flamboyant flowers. 'If you are buried under a flamboyant tree,' I said, 'your soul is lifted up with its flowers.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid. 183.      <sup>83</sup> Ibid. 181.

<sup>84</sup> For Rhys's definition of 'writing for love' as a form of 'homesickness', see Gregg, *Historical Imagination*, 2–4.

<sup>85</sup> Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 393.

Everyone wants that.' . . . The scent that came from the dress was very faint at first, then it grew stronger. The smell of vetivert and frangipanni, of cinnamon and dust and lime trees when they are flowering. The smell of the sun and the smell of the rain . . . I took the red dress and put it against myself. 'Does it make me look intemperate and unchaste?' I said. That man told me so . . . I let the dress fall on the floor and looked from the fire to the dress and from the dress to the fire . . . I looked at the dress on the floor and it was as if the fire had spread across the room. It was beautiful and it reminded me of something I must do.<sup>86</sup>

The fire which is described by the 'respectable-looking, middle-aged man' in *Jane Eyre*, Rochester's former butler who narrates the scene of Bertha's death to Jane, is conventionally figured as a force of desolation and destruction. Rhys reinvents the fire through Bertha's eyes as an emblem of life and beauty. Rhys finally reclaims, indeed reinvents, Bertha as character and as consciousness. The result is a *tour de force*, but a costly one: the dark amplitude of Brontë's original creation is paradoxically closed down in being so explicitly opened up.

### When is a Character not a Character? When It Cannot Speak

Jane's puzzled and puzzling interrogative assertion to Rochester on her wedding eve, 'Now sir tell me who and what that woman was?' is pronounced just after she has given an account of how, for the first time, she set eyes upon Bertha Mason. It is a question which is open to many, perhaps too many, answers. Bertha is different things to different characters, and to different readers. Bertha in Brontë's novel contains the seeds of all that Rhys was to see in terms of a damaged and damaging colonial inheritance, and a good deal more besides. Perhaps through her silence, through her absence from dialogue, which is after all the most central novelistic structure for the unfolding of character, she communicates something beyond Rhys's Bertha. Rhys's Bertha, renamed the more delicate, and maybe fancy, Antoinette, is ultimately reassuring, she explains what made her what she is, and horrible though Antoinette's narrative might be, it constitutes the recovery of that experience and its consequent familiarization. Brontë's Bertha is something far more horrifying, so horrifying that Rhys could not leave her as she was, but then again Rhys was right to question what she was, and what she is.

So what is she? Bertha is not simply a victim, but a living product, indeed embodiment of, the slave system; she is a metaphor for its accreted greed, madness, and moral decrepitude. Bertha is both victim and aggressor, slave insurrectionary and slave owner. To Rochester she is many different things—a

<sup>86</sup> Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 184–5.

white woman, a black woman, a mad woman, a famous beauty, an heiress, a lover, a wife, an alcoholic, a debauchee, and a sex maniac, a Creole, the devil, Messalina, a series of big fierce animals, an indefinite article, a wrestling partner, a pyromaniac, a corpse, and finally a memory, or a set of memories, or in other words, history. For the first half of *Jane Eyre* Bertha is, in Jane's perception, something even stranger: she is, quite precisely, not herself. For Jane, Bertha is a set of disembodied sounds, sometimes human, sometimes animal. When Jane sets a face and form to the sounds, they are the face and form of someone else, Grace Poole. In all her appearances in the novel Bertha's human status is precarious, frequently it is completely denied. Rochester, in bringing Bertha home, brings home the inheritance of slavery, and no one seems able to see it for what it is, when they want to, or are forced to, look at it at all. Bertha can only be seen in terms of distortion, fantasy, misremembrance, analogue, she is always something else.

When Bertha's voice is characterized by Jane, it is the sound of 'a mocking demon' and a 'carrion seeking bird of prey'. When Bertha is described by Mason she is a preying tigress, when she is seen by the assembled company just after the attempted bigamous marriage she is a hyena. Bertha is continually emblemized and mythologized, and yet never really described at all. She has no personality beyond the animalizations, a veritable bestiary, of the novel's fictive present, or the debauchery, incontinence, and inherited madness described in Rochester's fictive past. As a character her status is to be insane, which is to be outside character; as a metaphor her status is to be slavery, which is to exist outside English collective memory. Jean Rhys felt impelled to fill up this blank in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, to give an account of exactly 'who and what that woman was'. Recent academic discussions of *Jane Eyre* which concern the treatment of slavery, imperialism, and the West Indies have insisted on following Rhys in examining Bertha as something apart, and in seeing in her 'otherness', that much abused word, the only key to unlock a post-colonial Pandora's box.

The temptation to foreground Bertha this way, even without *Wide Sargasso Sea*, is enormous. Within *Jane Eyre* Bertha is 'other'; in terms of novelistic characterization she is mad, beyond the pale of description. She is not granted a contribution to the novel's dialogues, she never speaks directly; when her speech is once reported by Mason it is in the inhuman statement, 'she sucked the blood, she said she'd drain my heart.'<sup>87</sup> This is immediately censored by Rochester as both nonsensical and unrepeatable, 'Come, be silent Richard, never mind her gibberish: don't repeat it.' Maybe, however, as the obsessive treatments of her character in fiction and theory proliferate, she has drained,

<sup>87</sup> Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 267.

and continues to ‘drain our hearts’, in ways that cannot be controlled. She cannot reveal herself but must always be revealed, and yet what the other characters reveal in their reactions and descriptions is the impossibility of describing what Bertha is. It is a vicious circle of exclusion which means that Bertha, like the memory of slavery itself, must be an unending series of comparisons, symbols, emblems, myths. She can only be herself by being like something else—character as analogy, trauma as allusion—and the comparisons applied to her are predominantly the stereotypes of late eighteenth-century Gothic horror. Bertha is a sort of female inventory of the Burkean sublime.<sup>88</sup> Rochester and Jane associate her with darkness, inhuman sound, fire (explicitly hell-fire), various spectres, and the larger carnivorous mammals. Before she asks Rochester point blank ‘who and what this woman was’, Jane has just described what Bertha is in a paragraph which moves uneasily between neuter and female. Bertha exists as both ‘it’ and ‘she’ in Jane’s/Brontë’s imagination. Jane can only explain what she sees as a force to ‘drain our heart’, the ultimate blood-sucking fantasy, the Vampire:<sup>89</sup>

‘Shall I tell you of what it reminded me?’

You may’

‘Of the foul German Spectre—the Vampyre . . .

. . . It drew aside the window-curtain and looked out: perhaps it saw dawn approaching, for, taking the candle, it retreated to the door. Just at my bedside, the figure stopped: the fiery eye glared upon me—she thrust up her candle close to my face, and extinguished it under my eyes. I was aware her lurid visage flamed over mine, and I lost consciousness: for the second time in my life—only the second time—I became insensible from terror.<sup>90</sup>

*Mansfield Park* uses delicate rhetorical strategies in order to bring Atlantic slavery home to a respectable English readership, to domesticate Atlantic slavery. In the above passage Brontë reveals the strategy she has developed for accomplishing a similar end. The first move is massively direct: Brontë brings the slavery inheritance home physically, in the form of Bertha. The second move is to set up a web of possible and fragile, but finally terrifying, connections between the figures of Jane and Bertha. Brontë, like Austen, works through indirection, yet it needs to be emphasized that Jean Rhys’s obsessive *direction* is

<sup>88</sup> For a strong reading of Burke’s theory of the Sublime in relation to gendered power relations, see Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 52–62. The model has great potential for a reading which would replace male and female with the slave power and the slave.

<sup>89</sup> For the complicated cultural status of the vampire when Brontë was writing, see the fine contextualizing discussion in Beaty, *Misreading Jane Eyre*, 118–20.

<sup>90</sup> Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 358–9.

infinitely helpful in teaching all readers of *Jane Eyre* how to see Brontë's previously unseen subtleties.

Among other things, *Wide Sargasso Sea* testifies to Bertha's fluid status as character, for Rhys she is an aesthete, literally, etymologically, one who perceives with an almost preternatural intensity. What matters is what has happened in the Caribbean, before Rochester's arrival, not what happens in England, a place which Rhys's Antoinette/Bertha never believes herself to be in anyway. Rhys's masterpiece enacts the complete disembodiment of Bertha from Brontë's text, a process which Brontë invites, indeed had partially accomplished herself. But there are ways of thinking about Bertha which would take her closer to Jane Eyre, not cut her off. How much more is Brontë trying to tell us by relating Bertha to Jane? The metaphorical conjunctions of, and parallelisms between, the two women might be explored in terms of the way they evolve into a picture of the shadow the inheritance of slavery casts over England. This constitutes another history to explore, an alternative to Rhys's Bertha-centrism, the history of Jane and Bertha's relationship with slavery through their mutual contact with Rochester. Yet if Bertha and Jane are to be read as composite, agonized, but finally mutually enriching embodiments of slavery, how can the unique trauma of Atlantic slavery transcend the comparative process?

Because we are not sure what Bertha is, we cannot be sure what she is not. She is a *tabula rasa* upon which readers and characters project their fears and guilt. One thing Rhys tells us is that Bertha, whatever else she is, is an emblematical realization of the full terror and darkness of the British inheritance of slavery. Bertha is the guilt, the silence, the anger, the suffering, the waste, the violence, and the sorrow which constitute the moral and human elements in the economic system of plantation slavery. This inheritance is difficult, perhaps impossible to take in, but Bertha and Jane constitute a flickering locale in which to glimpse some of its possible implications. The more of the historiography of slavery that the slave industry generates, the more it becomes apparent that such half-lit aesthetic fragments may well finally constitute the only adequate memorial truths. *Jane Eyre* sets up a series of models and symbols for thinking about how slavery damages human consciousness.

Before proceeding there is a problem: the problem that there is a burden of proof on the assertion that Bertha is at one level the incarnation of slavery. This leads back to the passage describing Jane's insensibility which I claimed showed how Brontë domesticated Atlantic slavery. Jane's fall out of consciousness and into the mental suspension of terror is a temporary manifestation of insanity that is not unique, but the repetition of an earlier experience, 'I lost consciousness: for the second time in my life—only the second time—I became insensible from terror.' This statement begs the question—does the novel provide a



description of that crucial first time Jane ‘lost consciousness’, and if so why is it alluded to here? The experience of becoming insensible through terror is, in fact, paired with the moment at the book’s opening when Jane ‘became insensible’ and she falls unconscious through terror at being locked in the red room: ‘Mrs Reed impatient of my now frantic anguish and wild sobs, abruptly thrust me back and locked me in. I suppose I had a species of fit: unconsciousness closed on the scene.’ Jane falls unconscious not simply through terror but because she is forced to experience torture in a state of total dis-empowerment, because she meets the slave power face to face. If this appears fanciful let me return to the text.

At the opening of the novel Jane exists in a state of terror and servitude, picked upon by her older and bigger cousin, the bullying John Reed. In the opening scene describing her persecution, Jane is struck, first with a fist, then a book. She retorts with the accusation: ‘Wicked and cruel boy!’ I said. ‘You are like a murderer—you are like a slave driver—you are like the Roman emperors!’<sup>91</sup> The three similes, with the slave driver poised in the middle, opens a series of comparisons between Jane as slave and John as master which become insistent in the novel’s opening pages. Jane turns on John to avenge herself and in the fury of desperation hurts and terrifies him before she is grabbed by the servants. As she is dragged off, Jane sees herself specifically in terms of a rebel slave, leading an insurrection:

I resisted all the way: a new thing for me, and a circumstance which greatly strengthened the bad opinion Bessie and Miss Abbot were disposed to entertain of me. The fact is I was a trifle beside myself; or rather *out* of myself as the French would say: I was conscious that a moment’s mutiny had already rendered me liable to strange penalties, and, like any other rebel slave, I felt resolved, in my desperation, to go all lengths.

‘Hold her arms, Miss Abbot: she’s like a mad cat.’

‘For shame! for shame!’ cried the lady’s maid. ‘What shocking conduct Miss Eyre, to strike a young gentleman, your benefactress’s son! Your young master.’

‘Master, how is he my master? Am I a servant?’

‘No you are less than a servant, for you do nothing for your keep. There sit down and think over our wickedness.’<sup>92</sup>

Driven ‘*out*’ of herself—that is, beyond reason, or temporarily mad—for a short time she shares a state of mind with Bertha. Her madness results from a combination of fury and the ecstasy of active resistance; Jane still sees herself within a system of absolute power, where ‘a moment’s mutiny’ places her ‘liable to strange penalties’. In the context of such a barbaric system she is at liberty

<sup>91</sup> Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 8.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.* 9.

to dispense with civilized convention and 'like any rebel slave . . . to go all lengths'. Jane's refusal to acknowledge the servant's use of the word 'master' because it suggests her servile status further emphasizes the precise manner in which Jane presents her relationship within the Reed household as that of a brutalized slave making a desperate break for freedom. When she is told she is 'less than a servant', what could she be, a slave?

When first locked in the 'red-room' Jane's terror of the chamber is held at bay through a sense of exultation which, again, is only to be described through analogy with the emotions of slave rebellion:

Superstition was with me at that moment; but it was not yet her hour for complete victory: my blood was still warm; the mood of the revolted slave was still bracing me with its bitter vigour; I had to stem a rapid rush of retrospective thought before I quailed to the dismal present.

All John Reed's violent tyrannies, all his sisters' proud indifference, all his mother's aversion, all the servants' partiality, turned up in my disturbed mind like a dark deposit in a turbid well. Why was I always suffering, always browbeaten, always accused, for ever condemned? Why could I never please? Why was it useless to try to win anyone's favour? Eliza who was headstrong and selfish, was respected. Georgina who had a spoiled temper, a very acrid spite, a captious and insolent carriage, was universally indulged. Her beauty, her pink cheeks, her golden curls, seemed to give delight to all who looked at her and to purchase indemnity for every fault. John no one thwarted, much less punished; though he twisted the necks of the pigeons, killed the little pea-chicks, set the dogs at the sheep, stripped the hot house vines of their fruit, and broke the buds off the choicest plants in the conservatory: he called his mother 'old girl', too, and sometimes reviled her for her dark skin, similar to his own.<sup>93</sup>

This time, however, the presentation of herself as rebel slave leads into an extended analysis of the domestic life of the Reeds as a microcosmic planter household. Jane is the persecuted, embittered, and finally violent slave, Mrs Reed and her children are a fully fledged plantocracy, complete with idle and frivolous females and a torturing and wicked young master, exploiting the potential of his position of absolute power to indulge in sadistic excesses. There is also a suggestion of the taint of miscegenation in the final observation concerning the 'dark' skin of mother and son.

Deposited in the red room, Jane's thoughts are developed in exact accordance with the options open to an uneducated slave seeking freedom:

My head still ached and bled with the blow and fall I had received: no one had reproved John for wantonly striking me; and because I had turned against him to avert farther irrational violence, I was loaded with general opprobrium.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. 12–13.

Unjust!—Unjust! said my reason, forced by the agonising stimulus into precocious though transitory power: and Resolve equally wrought up, instigated some strange expedient to achieve escape from insupportable oppression—as running away, or, if that could not be affected, never eating or drinking more, and letting myself die.

What a consternation of soul was mine that dreary afternoon! How all my brain was in tumult, and all my heart in insurrection! Yet in what darkness, what dense ignorance, was the mental battle fought! I could not answer the ceaseless inward question—why I thus suffered.<sup>94</sup>

Wondering how to ‘achieve escape from inescapable oppression’, Jane thinks of the two classic forms of slave resistance beside insurrection, flight and suicide, running away or voluntary starvation. The horror of injustice and the terrible sense of her own ignorance and impotence place Jane as a small white orphan in an English family in a set of circumstances where her thought processes and language form a startling alignment with those of a fugitive slave autobiography. She is socially ‘other’, because of her social dependence, her orphan status, her actions do not occur within the terms used by and applied by the rest of the household. They are a race apart, a thought Jane explicitly develops in interior monologue when she explains Mrs Reed’s behaviour towards her with the exclamation, ‘but how could she really be like an interloper not of her race’. The meditation ends with the unanswerable question of the slave victim ‘why I thus suffered’.

To summarize, the opening pages of *Jane Eyre* show a small orphaned English girl, residing in a good family, to be in a position of dependence where she must undergo physical and psychological torture so intense as to bring her close to death and madness. Jane imagines herself as a slave, and her persecutors as slave-owners. When she finally reacts violently to violent persecution her resistance to John and Mrs Reed is presented as a slave rebellion. The aftermath of torture and hatred which succeed unsuccessful insurrections in slave societies is worked out through the punishments of the red room and subsequently of Lowood school.

Jane is thereafter constantly figured as of another race, or even species, her very thought processes are heathen and alien. She is catechized by Brocklehurst:

‘No sight so sad as that of a naughty child,’ he began, ‘especially a naughty little girl. Do you know where the wicked go after death?’

‘They go to hell,’ was my ready and orthodox answer.

‘And what is hell? Can you tell me that?’

‘A pit full of fire.’

<sup>94</sup> Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 13.

‘And should you like to be falling into that pit, and to be burning there for ever?’

‘No sir.’

‘What must you do to avoid it?’

I deliberated a moment; my answer when it came, was objectionable: ‘I must keep in good health, and not die.’<sup>95</sup>

Jane is set out as a heathen, part of a race apart, a natural force who will not be the passive and enduring model of the exploited slave/wife/white woman. It is no coincidence in these early stages of the book how often we are reminded of the relationship of Stowe’s Topsy to the white world that ‘adopts’ her. Like Topsy, Jane is catechized, and her childish answers similarly confound the prim wisdom of conventional Christianity with their fierce and pure logic of survival and justice. Topsy realizes that at a deep level she is a pariah, that what she is makes her anathema to Miss Ophelia, and she expresses the intensity of this aversion by comparing herself to a toad. Similarly Jane, just after her act of revolt and subsequent fit, appears a toad to the society she fights. It is not what she does, but what she looks like that makes for the comparison; like Topsy she is physically other, and this is the barrier that cannot be overcome. ‘Yes,’ responded Abbot; ‘if she were a nice pretty little child, one might compassionate her forlornness; but one really cannot care for such a little toad as that.’ Yet this animalizing view of Jane through the eyes of the Reed household is set up in opposition to Jane’s passionate attempts to define her humanity through the inhumanity of her tormentors. In performing an account of her psychological torture before the torturer she asserts her suffering status as victim:

‘You think I have no feelings, and that I can do without one bit of love or kindness; but I cannot live so: and you have no pity. I shall remember how you thrust me back—roughly and violently thrust me back—into the red-room, and locked me up there, to my dying day; though I was in agony; though I cried out, while suffocating with distress, “Have mercy! Have mercy, Aunt Reed!” And that punishment you made me suffer because your wicked boy struck me—knocked me down for nothing. I will tell anybody who asks me questions this exact tale. People think you a good woman, but you are bad; hard hearted. You are deceitful.’

Ere I had finished this reply my soul began to expand, to exult, with the strangest sense of freedom, of triumph, I ever felt. It seemed as if an invisible bond had burst, and that I had struggled out into unhopèd-for liberty. Not without cause was this sentiment: Mrs Reed looked frightened; her work slipped from her knee; she was lifting up her hands, rocking herself to and fro, and even twisting her face as if she would cry.<sup>96</sup>

Suddenly Jane is talking as Bertha would talk, locked in her cell, demonized and animalized. This articulation of abuse by the abused is an act which serves

<sup>95</sup> Ibid. 34.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid. 39.

the dual functions of accusation and revolt. Jane's subsequent quietness and passivity as a governess in Rochester's household should always be placed in the context of this initial character definition. Her moment of absolute terror when she herself identifies with the slave links her to that second moment when she falls out of consciousness when that ambiguous composite of the guilt of slavery manifests itself physically before her in the form of Bertha/vampire. Jane is presented at the book's opening as a violent insurrectionary whose confrontation with oppression endangers her sanity. She fights, and more importantly she constantly denounces a philosophy which promotes passive endurance as the most effective response for the slave consciousness. Jane's initial resistance is not idealized and presented as an easy or fulfilling victory: Brontë's critique insists on the mutually destructive and vengeful consequences of the despotic exploitation of power over servile dependence. Jane is shown victorious, but hopeless, the dawn of a new day immediately consumed in fire and destruction, the fruits of Revolution appear as desolation:

I was left there alone—winner of the field. It was the hardest battle I had fought, and the first victory I had gained: I stood awhile on the rug where Mr Brocklehurst had stood, and I enjoyed my conqueror's solitude. First, I smiled to myself and felt elate; but this fierce pleasure subsided in me as fast as did the accelerated throb of my pulses. A child cannot quarrel with its elders, as I had done—cannot give its furious feelings uncontrolled play, as I had given mine—without experiencing afterwards the pang of remorse and the chill of reaction. A ridge of lighted heath, alive, glancing, devouring, would have been a meet emblem of my mind when I accused and menaced Mrs Reed: the same ridge, black and blasted after the flames are dead, would have represented as meetly my subsequent condition, when half an hour's silence and reflection had shown me the madness of my conduct, and the dreariness of my hated and hating position.<sup>97</sup>

So we are back with Bertha again, the obsession with fire, which is so beautifully transformed by Rhys, is also weirdly transformed by *Jane Eyre*. Both the horror of enslavement and the power of resistance are configured in this symbol of fire. Revolution as fire, the central metaphor in Shelley for inspiration, beautiful while it burns, but final in its processes of destruction.

Slave insurrection is one area of the history of slavery which, as we have seen elsewhere in this study, remains disguised when not taboo. If violent revenge for the evils of slavery is to be visited upon the perpetrators, then it will be in fire and tempest brought down by God. Brontë's retribution is more hands on, metaphorically called up by Jane, but physically enacted by Bertha, fire has a big role to play.

<sup>97</sup> Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 40–1.

The analysis of the result of a revolt bred in vengeful fury is not simply rejected. As the book develops Jane's destructive fury, and just indignation, are examined in the context of Helen Burns's explicitly Christian 'Doctrine of endurance'. While neither view is morally satisfactory, Brontë does endorse the inevitability of Jane's outrage. What Brontë appears to be giving us in the following exchange is a damning critique of the Christian apologia for Caribbean slavery and for missionary expansion in Africa and India:

'If people were always kind and obedient to those who are cruel and unjust, the wicked people would have it all their own way: they would never feel afraid, and so they would never alter, but would grow worse and worse. When we are struck at without reason we should strike back again very hard; I am sure we should—so hard as to teach the person who struck us never to strike again.'

'You will change your mind, I hope, when you grow older: as yet you are but a little untaught girl.'

'But I feel this, Helen: I must dislike those who, whatever I do to please them, persist in disliking me; I must resist those who punish me unjustly. It is as natural as that I should love those who show me affection, or submit to punishment when I feel it is deserved.'

'Heathens and savage tribes hold that doctrine; but Christians and civilised nations disown it.'

'How? I don't understand.'

'It is not violence that best overcomes hate—nor vengeance that most certainly heals injury.'

'What then?'

'Read the New Testament, and observe what Christ says, and how He acts; make His word your rule, and His conduct your example.'

'What does He say?'

'Love your enemies; bless them that curse you; do good to them that hate and spitefully use you.'

'Then I should love Mrs Reed, which I cannot do; I should bless her son John, which is impossible.'<sup>98</sup>

Jane's doctrine of resistance is upheld, the 'savage tribes' and the 'heathens' must fight for survival, so must Bertha Mason. The passive resistance preached as the only course for the slave, emancipated or not, and enshrined in literary terms, in the death of Uncle Tom two decades after *Jane Eyre* was written, is not part of the agenda Charlotte Brontë supports. As Helen listens to the tale of Mrs Reed and responds by preaching her doctrine of forgiveness, the real world breaks in, in the form of 'a monitor, a great rough girl' who commands her to work, and 'Helen sighed as her reverie fled, and getting up obeyed the

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. 65–6.

monitor without reply as without delay'. It appears all Helen's dutiful placidity equips her for is death; she is a sort of white-school-girl prolepsis for Uncle Tom. Brontë is on the side of the rebels, not the victims, she would have had no patience with Uncle Tom's martyrdom. Jane is outraged by Helen's passivity. When Helen is forced by the sadist, Miss Scatcherd, to wear an enormous label 'Slatern' on her head, Jane reacts with fury not to the torture but to Helen's passivity: 'I ran to Helen and tore it off, and thrust it into the fire: the fury of which she was incapable had been burning in my soul all day, and tears hot and large, had continually been scalding my cheek; for the spectacle of her sad resignation gave me an intolerable pain at the heart.'<sup>99</sup>

When Jane is then placed on the stool of repentance, to stand half an hour before the whole school, her second symbolic moment of unjust suffering, she approaches another physical fit. This time, however, she is consoled by the mystically calming glance of Helen Burns; the confrontation is presented in terms of the archetypal meeting of slave rebel and Christian martyr, the roles which the two girls are to pursue in their ensuing dialogues:

I . . . was now exposed to general view on a pedestal of infamy. What my sensations were no language can describe; but just as they all rose up and passed me: in passing she lifted her eyes. What a strange light inspired them! What an extraordinary sensation that ray sent through me! How the new feeling bore me up! It was as if a martyr, a hero, had passed a slave or victim, and imparted strength in the transit. I mastered the rising hysteria, lifted up my head, and took a firm stand on the stool.<sup>100</sup>

Jane's life becomes henceforth a strange battle between subjection to a Christian norm of service and passivity in the face of abuse, and a passionate desire for liberty, expressed through violent action. After the departure of Miss Temple she presents herself passing several years as a broken creature, 'I appeared a disciplined and subdued character'. Yet a passionate desire for freedom lies behind the decision to apply to become a governess: 'I desired liberty; for liberty I gasped; for liberty I uttered a prayer; it seemed scattered on the wind . . . "Then," I cried, half desperate, "grant me at least a new servitude!"'<sup>101</sup> She does indeed get a new form of servitude and this new life also begins a recurrent theme, the governess as slave. This association is brought out explicitly when Jane refers to the Rivers sisters as returning to their jobs as governesses as 'slaving amongst strangers'.<sup>102</sup> Her new servitude as a governess takes her into Thornfield Hall and into the presence of a woman, who is a paradigm of bondage, repression, and the effects of surveillance—Bertha Mason. Jane, insurrectionary and victim of oppression, perceives Bertha first not as a person but as a laugh. She is literally disembodied, or rather falsely embodied:

<sup>99</sup> Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 86.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.* 77–8.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.* 101.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.* 494.

While I paced slowly on, the last sound I expected to hear in so still a region, a laugh, struck my ear. It was a curious laugh; distinct, formal, mirthless. I stopped: the sound ceased, only for an instant; it began again, louder: for at first, though distinct, it was very low. It passed off in a clamorous peal that seemed to wake an echo in every lonely chamber, though it originated but in one, and I could not have pointed out the door whence the accents issued.<sup>103</sup>

The laugh becomes associated in Jane's mind with a certain part of the house 'the corridor of the third story' in which she walks when she wishes to brood because it normally provides calm 'safe in the silence and solitude of the spot'. It is here that her first extended meditation on the subject of the condition of women, in the context of political insurrection, occurs. The disquisition is immediately followed by a further exploration of the origin of the mad laugh, the disembodied exclamation which must be re-embodied, although within the wrong body:

Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot. Nobody knows how many rebellions, besides political rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people the earth. Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint and too, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer . . . When thus alone, I not infrequently heard Grace Poole's laugh: the same peal, the same low, slow ha! ha! which, when first heard, had thrilled me: I heard too her eccentric murmurs, stranger than her laugh. There were days when she was quite silent; but there were others when I could not account for the sounds she made.<sup>104</sup>

Jane and Bertha are curiously conjoined in this passage, as victims of repression, but beyond this their victimhood tempts further comparisons with slavery. Jane seems to be playing games with the rhetoric of abolition. When she states that 'women feel just as men feel', she claims not just equality, but sensational and emotional equality with men. When she continues, 'they need . . . a field for their efforts just as much as their brothers do', she rounds off the equation, and is asking, in barely disguised terms, the famous abolition question reserved for the male slave, 'am I not a man and a brother?'

Immediately following this first direct encounter with Bertha, or with the results of Bertha's torment, Jane goes back to visit the dying Mrs Reed. Mrs Reed remains the representative of despotic authority, 'The well known face was there: stern, relentless as ever—there was that peculiar eye which nothing could melt; and the somewhat raised, imperious, despotic eyebrow.' Jane returns as representative of insane and wicked female independence, to show how they had earlier acted out in embryo the Rochester/Bertha relationship of

<sup>103</sup> Ibid. 129.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. 132–3.



confinement and insanity. To Mrs Reed's mind the recollection of the child Jane is of a monster, not unlike Bertha, which must be confined: 'with her incomprehensible disposition, and her sudden starts of temper, and her continual, unnatural watchings of one's movements! I declare she talked to me once like something mad, or like a fiend—no child ever looked or spoke as she did; I was glad to get her away from the House.'<sup>105</sup> The masculinity of Bertha, her fiendishness and her animalization, are translated onto the infant Jane as she is re-created by the dying Mrs Reed in monologue before the adult Jane: 'I felt fear, as if an animal which I had struck or pushed had looked up at me with human eyes and cursed me with a man's voice.'<sup>106</sup>

Yet if Jane must assume the form of a maddened beast and the voice of a male when she assumes the role of rebel slave, and in so doing approach the power of insanity and the dark colonial memory embodied in Bertha, there are even more disturbing shifts in sexuality to follow. Bertha's ubiquity is not to be circumscribed by mere gender barriers. If Bertha and Jane must become brutish and masculine in order to express their right to freedom, then Rochester must finally assume the role of the widow as voluntary sacrificial victim at the novel's close, in order to pass into the form of suffering slave surrogate. It has never been noted, but by the end of the novel what Gayatri Spivak has suggested is the chief trope of colonial female exploitation operating in the novel, *sati* or Indian widow sacrifice, is transferred from Jane to Rochester.<sup>107</sup> He, it is, who chooses to dive into the conflagration; trying to save his legal wife he attempts self-immolation. Bertha is not in fact burned at all, and is not easily constructed as a widow sacrifice. She leaps to her death and dies of the concussion, her body sprayed on the flagstones. It is Rochester who, like the dutiful wife of Indian custom, throws himself voluntarily into the conflagration.

Brontë's fire is, however, both destructive and transformative. Rochester emerges from his ritual burning as something else: temporarily emasculated in his blindness, he becomes a version of undoubtedly the most grand yet pathetic of biblical slaves, Samson. Yet he transmutes into a variety of other forms, a caged animal, a version of the imprisoned Bertha. His blindness transforms him into what is both a Christian emblem of the imprisoned soul, and an abolition emblem of the captive slave:

In his countenance, I saw a change: that looked desperate and brooding—that reminded me of some wronged and fettered wild-beast or bird, dangerous to

<sup>105</sup> Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 289.      <sup>106</sup> *Ibid.* 290.

<sup>107</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism', in Henry Louis Gates, Jr (ed.), *'Race,' Writing and Difference* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 262–81.

approach in its sullen woe. The caged eagle, whose gold-ringed eyes cruelty has extinguished, might look as looked that sightless Samson.<sup>108</sup>

Deformed, and nearly blind, he can see very little, he cannot even see Jane. Intriguingly the only thing he can see is the very element that destroyed his sight, fire, and the object which brought about the fire, a candle:

‘Can you tell when there is a good fire?’

‘Yes; with the right eye I see a glow—a ruddy haze.’

‘And you see the candles?’

‘Very dimly—each is a luminous cloud.’

‘Can you see me?’

‘No . . .’<sup>109</sup>

In the first exchange with Jane, concerning his sight, fire is no longer terrible but beautiful, he seems to see with Bertha’s eyes, a warm force, a force which Rhys made Antoinette’s saving grace. Jane finally triumphs, she has found a suitable object for her pity, she has her own captive to play with, a caged eagle complete with mutilation and branding, a white slave more pitiable than the black:

‘Your hair reminds me of eagles’ feathers; whether your nails are grown like birds’ claws or not, I have not yet noticed.’

‘On this arm, I have neither hand nor nails;’ he said, drawing the mutilated limb from his breast, and shewing it to me. ‘It is a mere stump—a ghastly sight! Don’t you think so Jane?’

‘It is a pity to see it; and a pity to see your eyes—and the scar of fire on your forehead: and the worst of it is, one is in danger of loving you too well for all this; and making too much of you.’

‘I thought you would be revolted, Jane, when you saw my arm and my cicatrized visage.’<sup>110</sup>

Why does Jane fear the power of sympathy, because she could not feel an equal sympathy for Bertha? Brontë expressed deep concern that despite the piteous state of her own creation she could not make Bertha Mason sympathetic. She commented: ‘it is true that profound pity ought to be the only sentiment elicited by the view of such degradation and equally true that I have not sufficiently dwelt on that feeling; I have erred in making horror too predominant’.<sup>111</sup> When it comes to the history of slavery can ‘horror’ be ‘too predominant’? By the novel’s

<sup>108</sup> Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 552.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.* 558–9. <sup>110</sup> *Ibid.* 558.

<sup>111</sup> Quoted, Michael Thorpe, ‘The Other Side: *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre*’, *Ariel*, 3 (1977), 99–100.

close Brontë does succeed in melding horror and pity, but she can only do it by injecting Bertha into Rochester. She transforms Rochester into a figure who usurps Bertha as a focus for empathetic projection, yet who develops Bertha-like characteristics. Somehow Rochester has become a composite of Bertha and of a generalized African slave victim. His forehead is not just burned but he now possesses a 'cicatrized visage', like any other African or Caribbean slave with tribal markings, like the Africans Livingstone commented upon: 'The Makoa are known by a cicatrice in the forehead'.<sup>112</sup> Although Jane continues to refer to him as her 'master', he is also her slave, and he has supplanted Bertha as the emblematic representation of the price to be paid for the guilt of slavery.

Bertha Mason has become the catalyst for a huge body of writing, theoretical and fictional. Yet whether the object of feminist, Marxist, or post-colonial attention, she is inevitably constructed as a victim, whose suffering must somehow be exposed, enlarged upon, fleshed out. Even Gayatri Spivak, for all her exhibitionist subtleties, subscribes to this appropriative agenda and sees Bertha as a figure that must be reclaimed in relation to colonial history. For Spivak the reclamation can happen in terms of Rhys's application of an absent Caribbean history (a move which Spivak conventionally supports), or in the more wacky terms of Spivak's own insistence that Bertha can be reclaimed through an application of 'the legal manipulation of widow-sacrifice in the entitlement of the British government in India'.<sup>113</sup> Finally, however, Spivak is typical in desiring to fulfil the promise of Bertha as conventional character within *Jane Eyre*. All Bertha-centric criticism starts from the premiss that Bertha needs to 'get a life', and that the job of the commentator is to give her that life. Bertha is then expanded by processes of cultural accretion. If a West Indian background, or an Indian cultural context, can be opened up to accommodate her, then somehow she will have been saved for the feminist or post-colonial project, or for some redemptive escapade. Yet Brontë's Bertha is not to be saved, because the history of slavery is not to be saved, it cannot be seen so easily. As an emblem defining the impossibility of that history Bertha is not a character, but quite explicitly a spectre. The spectre that haunts the novel, and its interpretative history, is fluid, explicitly unformed, or not uniform, violent, changeable yet invasive. Bertha, by the end of the book, has leaked into, indeed saturates, both Jane and Rochester. There is more than enough of Bertha to go round. If she is a sign for the inheritance of slavery, then she moves in and out of the psychic make-up of everyone and everything. Her continued and obsessive cultural reconfigurations are a testimony to this ongoing process. If Bertha has a blood relative in the extending fictions of slavery, it is Toni Morrison's

<sup>112</sup> Livingstone, *Zambesi*, xxi. 438, quoted in *OED*.

<sup>113</sup> Spivak, 'Three Women's Texts', 278.

figure of Beloved. Like Bertha she is beyond the conventions of character and she is paradoxically impossible to love, and impossible to kill off. The lesson cannot be told too often: you can not write off the memory of slavery. Why does Morrison provide such a terrible epigraph to *Beloved*: “I will call . . . her beloved which was not beloved” Romans 9: 25”? Charlotte Brontë’s inability to feel any love for Bertha Mason is one answer.

## The Anatomy of Bigotry: Carlyle, Ruskin, Slavery, and a New Language of Race

If precisely the wisest man were at the top of society, and the next-wisest next and so on till we reached the Demerara Nigger (from whom downwards through the horse etc., there is no question hitherto), then were this a perfect world, the extreme *maximum* of wisdom produced in it.

(Thomas Carlyle, *Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question*, 1853)

The problem of industry and the poor was the theme of his most passionately felt work, *Past and Present*, *Chartism*, and *Latter Day Pamphlets*. The last of these with its ‘Nigger Question’ . . . has been a sad choke-pear to liberal philanthropists and many of Carlyle’s admirers, but, with all its extravagances, it is a central work. It is in the light of what he said there that one must read his earlier works.

(Herbert Grierson, *Carlyle and Hitler*)<sup>1</sup>

I can’t well burn more coals than I do, because of the blacks, which spoil my books; and the Americans won’t let me buy any blacks alive, or else I would have some black dwarfs with parrots, such as one sees in the pictures of Paul Veronese. I should of course, like myself, above all things to buy a pretty white girl, with a title—and I could get great praise for doing that—only I haven’t money enough. White girls come dear, even when one buys them only like coals, for fuel.

(John Ruskin, *Fors Clavigera*)

A young man once asked Carlyle, what was the secret of success. His reply was, ‘Energy: whatever you undertake, do it with all your might’.

(William Wells Brown, letter to Frederick Douglass, 1851)<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Herbert Grierson, *Carlyle and Hitler: The Adamson Lecture in the University of Manchester* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933), 18.

<sup>2</sup> C. Peter Ripley (ed.), *The Black Abolitionist Papers*, 5 vols. (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1985–92), i. 303.

Carlyle and Ruskin wrote repeatedly about slavery from a variety of perspectives. Within their slavery writings the competitive and acquisitive approach to the sufferings of the Atlantic slave took a number of new turns. For both Ruskin and Carlyle the plight of the labouring masses in Britain provided the central platform for comparative discussions of slavery. It is the desire to remove the slave and substitute the white industrial labourer that drives the thought of both men. Yet the expression of this desire could hardly have taken more divergent forms.

Carlyle has always been hard to place as a creative phenomenon. He was essentially an autodidact philosopher, economist, moralist, historian, sermonist, biographer, and above all master of the public epistle of personal outrage. His works, like the style, or rather styles, he evolved, defy easy categorization. A recent bevy of publications across a range of academic disciplines places Carlyle at the centre of fields of inquiry as various as fascism, political economy, and the theoretical construction of the epic, the sublime and the gothic. Yet his views on race and slavery are kept on the margins, constituting as brazen an affront to liberal taste now as they did to many of his contemporaries.<sup>3</sup> The ‘Occasional Discourse on the Negro/Nigger Question’ is the notorious black spot in Carlyle’s oeuvre, and easy target for complacent vilification.<sup>4</sup> Yet from the late nineteenth century up until the Second World War, this work did not have the universally negative profile now associated with it. In many contexts it was seen as central, sensible, and true. As late as 1933, John Harris, the now-forgotten official apologist of English slavery, and author of a host of popular meditations which rewrote Britain’s slavery inheritance in a very pleasing manner (including *Dawn in Darkest Africa*, *Portuguese Slavery: Britain’s Dilemma*, *The Chartered Millions*, and *Slavery or Sacred Trust*) thought that Carlyle might well have had a point and concluded that ‘there were, no doubt, some negroes so lazy as to justify Carlyle’s [sic] cruel description of the “Black Quashee”’.<sup>5</sup> This is a weak echo of J. A. Froude’s cool assertion that Carlyle spoke the truth and that emancipation had caused: ‘the moral ruin of the blacks themselves, who were rotting away in sensuous idleness amidst the wrecks of the plantations’.<sup>6</sup> While Carlyle’s position is no longer actively defended, the general perception is that he was, and is, misunderstood. Although somewhat circumspect, Carlyle’s most recent biographer asserts, when assessing the ‘Occasional Dis-

<sup>3</sup> See Simon Heffer, *Moral Desperado: A Life of Thomas Carlyle* (London: Phoenix, 1996), 274, 275.

<sup>4</sup> The *Occasional Discourse* appeared in two very different versions: first, as ‘The Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question’, first printed in Fraser’s Magazine in December 1849, it was reprinted and extensively reworked as the *Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question*, printed in pamphlet form in 1853. These are referred to below as ‘Occasional Discourse’ 1849 and 1853, respectively.

<sup>5</sup> John Harris, *A Century of Emancipation* (London: J. M. Dent, 1933), 62.

<sup>6</sup> James Anthony Froude, *Thomas Carlyle: A History of His Life in London 1834–1881*, 2 vols. (London: Longmans Green, 1890), ii. 15.

course', that: 'It is the form and tone rather than the actual message which did most of the damage' (a bogus distinction if there ever was one) and that 'Carlyle did not feel he was attacking the blacks; his targets were the liberals who were destroying them'.<sup>7</sup> This is almost exactly the same defence that Froude had made in more extreme language in 1890, stating that Carlyle spoke: 'fiercely, scornfully, in the tone which could least conciliate attention. Black Quashee and his friends were spattered with ridicule which stung the more from the justice of it . . . his objection was to the Cant of Radicalism, to the philosophy of it'.<sup>8</sup> There are two points to be made about these verdicts. First, the repeated assertion that somehow the content exists as distinct from the form remains dangerous. Carlyle's argument and his language are not two separate elements. What made the 'Occasional Discourse' so effective was precisely the 'ferocity and scorn', indeed the obscenity, of its language; its crudity was unprecedented in a publication by a leading European intellectual, and it broke the mould of racist discourse. The other point to make is that there are dangers in taking the 'Occasional Discourse' as an exceptional work in Carlyle's output. Even in less blatant apologia, and even in hostile analyses, the 'Occasional Discourse' still tends to be separated out, and read in isolation from the other works. Although every major work on slavery and empire in the nineteenth century written in the last twenty years alludes to the 'Occasional Discourse' in more or less detail, the net result is always the same. The tract is written off as at worst an aberration, at best a grumpy footnote, which should not be allowed to contaminate an otherwise majestic oeuvre.<sup>9</sup> If this piece is related to any of Carlyle's other writing, it is seen as a hysterical preface to the *Latter Day Pamphlets*, in other words as the preface to Carlyle's descent into atrabilious and misanthropic rant.<sup>10</sup> There has been no systematic attempt to see how the two very different editions of the 'Occasional Discourse' grow out of, and back into, the central discussions of slavery elsewhere in Carlyle's work, or how they relate to wider debates on labour and slavery.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, given its colossal impact on the polit-

<sup>7</sup> Heffer, *Moral Desperado*, 276.

<sup>8</sup> Froude, *Carlyle*, ii, 25.

<sup>9</sup> The continuing invisibility of this work, and this area of Carlyle's output, is typified by the fact that Carlyle's highly political race agenda is not even mentioned in the otherwise humorous and intelligent, Michael Levin, *The Condition of England Question: Carlyle, Mill, Engels* (London: Macmillan, 1998); see also the absence of slavery as an issue in Phillip Mallett, 'Carlyle and Ruskin: Work and Art', in C. C. Barfoot (ed.), *Victorian Keats and Romantic Carlyle: The Fusions and Confusions of Literary Periods* (Atlanta: Rodipi), 223-24.

<sup>10</sup> For a rare exception to this, see Iva G. Jones, 'Trollope, Carlyle and Mill on the Negro: An Episode in the History of Ideas', *Journal of Negro History*, 52 (July 1967), 185-99. By far the best work on the wholesale excision of Carlyle on race from nineteenth-century literary studies, focusing on Carlyle's influence on Dickens, is by an economist, see David M. Levy, *Hard Times and the Moral Equivalence of Markets and Slavery* (Fairfax, Va.: George Mason University Center for Study of Public Choice, 1999), 8-16.

<sup>11</sup> Although, as my prefatory quotation indicates, the case for the centrality of the 'Nigger Question' to Carlyle's overall social and political theory is suggested in the fascinating but forgotten Grierson, *Carlyle and Hitler*, 9-18.

ical and economic theory of labour, Carlyle's work as a whole has remained strangely excluded from post-colonial studies. It is assumed that it is only when he writes directly about black people in the colonies that he is relevant to post-colonial debates.<sup>12</sup> Yet as the following discussions of the absence of San Domingue in *The French Revolution*, and of the presence of serfdom, but not plantation slavery, in *Past and Present*, demonstrate, what Carlyle does not say is more important than what he does. Surveying Carlyle's entire output undoubtedly the most remarkable thing about the 'Occasional Discourse' is that it places the Caribbean black at the centre of any discussion at all. What typifies Carlyle's treatment of Atlantic slavery, and this he shares with, indeed taught to, Ruskin, is his almost total indifference to the phenomenon of black suffering.

Carlyle's aversion to taking the history of Atlantic slavery seriously comes out early, and emphatically, in his career. The first big historical work Carlyle produced dealt with an event and a period of history where slavery was very much at the centre of developments. Yet both slavery and the abolition movement in France remain almost invisible in *The French Revolution*. This is a matter of no small concern, because it enforces the continuing invisibility of San Domingue within that part of the academic industry devoted to the exploration of Carlyle's weird masterpiece.<sup>13</sup>

### Carlyle's *French Revolution* and the Writing *out* of San Domingue

Quashee, it must be owned, is hitherto a kind of blockhead. The Haiti Duke of Marmalade, educated now for almost half a century, seems to have next to no sense in him.

(Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present*)

<sup>12</sup> Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 121–3, proves the exception. This discussion, however, is narrowly focused on the 'Occasional Discourse', which is gutted for its flagrant and vulgarly engineered stereotyping of blacks. Carlyle would probably have enjoyed Said's outrage. More specialist work in the nineteenth century by Africanists and slavery historians tends to dutifully cite the 'Occasional Discourse' as a notorious low point of Victorian racism, but goes no further. Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism 1830–1914* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1988), 81–2, 118–120; Douglas A. Lorimer, *Colour, Class and the Victorians: English Attitudes to the Negro in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1978), 129–30, 180–1; Catherine Hall, 'Imperial Man: Edward Eyre in Australasia and the West Indies 1833–66', in Bill Schwarz (ed.), *The Expansion of England: Race, Ethnicity and Cultural History* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996); R. J. M. Blackett, *Building an Antislavery Wall: Black Americans in the Atlantic Abolitionist Movement, 1830–1860* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1983), 155–8, 18–8, all contain isolationist summaries of the 'Occasional Discourse'.

<sup>13</sup> See the total absence of reference to St Domingue/Haiti in Mary Desaulniers, *Carlyle and the Economics of Terror: A Study of Revisionary Gothicism in "The French Revolution"* (Montreal: McGill Queens University Press, 1995). The study of Edmund Burke's (pp. 30–33) and Adam Smith's (pp. 13–14, 21–4) influence on Carlyle's analysis of the Revolution suffers particularly in the way it refuses to consider what these writers had to say about colony and empire. See also Mark Cumming, *A*



Carlyle's *French Revolution* is an ecstatically violent book. Mass murder, death, torture, dismemberment, decapitation, confusion, madness, war, conflagration, and anarchy lead the prose from one delighted climax to another. From the Storming of the Bastille to Napoleon's 'whiff of Grapeshot' (with which Carlyle sees the Revolution proper as at an end) the process is set up as an apocalyptic carnival sweeping the world clean of centuries of corruption, and also destroying, in Carlyle's energetic inventories, all 'Quackeries', 'Sentimentalisms', and 'Cant'. Carlyle delighted in exaggerating the violent extremity of his own vision to friends. He declaimed to Emerson that the *French Revolution* was 'a wild, savage ruleless very bad book', and to Sterling that it is a 'wild savage book, itself a kind of French Revolution'.<sup>14</sup> It would seem that there is no detail, no matter how terrible, which Carlyle is not prepared to record and confront in order to ram home the utter savagery of his vision of the Revolutionary process.<sup>15</sup> He piles up horror upon horror in a manner that would have delighted Burke. There are potted death-histories of the minor victims of the Terror and the grand set-piece descriptions of the great icons of the Revolution—Louis XVI, Marie Antoinette, Jean Marat, Charlotte Corday, Camille Desmoulins, Maximilien Robespierre, and Danton. Atrocity is funny: black comedy permeates the accounts of mass drowning known as 'Noyading'; the details of the 'Blond Perukes', increasingly sported in Paris in 1794, all fashioned out of hair from the guillotined heads of blond female aristocrats; and even the unspeakable tannery at Meudon, where human skins are made into wash-leather 'superior in toughness (*consistance*) and quality to shamoy [chamois]?' is recounted with a despairing humour. Carlyle obsessively describes a landscape of atrocity.<sup>16</sup> He rounds off the book with a monologue by the hierophant, con-man, and King of 'Quackery' Count Cagliostro that puts into a paragraph what it is about the Revolution that is important to Carlyle:

IMPOSTURE is burnt up: one red sea of Fire, wild-billowing, enwraps the World; with its fire tongue, licks at the very Stars. Thrones are hurled into it . . . metal Images are molten; the marble Images become mortar-lime; the stone Mountains sulkily explode. RESPECTABILITY, with all her collected Gigs inflamed for funeral pyre,

*Disemprisoned Epic: Form and Vision in Carlyle's French Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988); Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830-70* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1957). Houghton's lack of interest in race and empire is significant because this book, still in print, has remained hugely influential in terms of the way it translated Victorian culture into a manageable, if fantastic, whole. The book remained for thirty years the compendium that all undergraduates read if they wanted an overview of Victorian thought and art.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Cumming, *A Disemprisoned Epic*, p. xii.

<sup>15</sup> For Carlyle's experimental approach to the description of atrocity, see Wood, *Blind Memory*, 50-1.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *Centenary Edition of the Works of Thomas Carlyle in Thirty Volumes* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1896), for the Terror, iv. 164-247; for Noyading, iv. 221; for the human tannery and death wigs, iv. 246-7.

wailing leaves the Earth: not to return save under new Avatar. Imposture how it burns, through generations: how it is burnt up; for a time. The World is black ashes; which, ah, when will they grow green . . . A King a Queen (ah me!) were hurled in; did rustle once; flew aloft, crackling like a paper scroll. Iscariot Egalité was hurled in . . . whole kindreds and peoples; five millions of mutually destroying Men. For it is the end of the dominion of IMPOSTURE.<sup>17</sup>

But for all his universalizing bellicosity, and for all the giant canvas with its bold solutions to the communication of violence, there is one area of 'IMPOSTURE', blown away by the process of Revolution, which holds no interest for Carlyle, namely, French colonial slavery. The single arena of the Revolution that was centred upon extreme violence that does not seem to merit celebration is that of the slave revolution in San Domingue. Toussaint L'Ouverture, Henri Christophe, Jean Baptiste Bellay, General Moise, General Dessalines, and the black consuls who visited the National Assembly in Paris fail to put in an appearance. This fact tells us much about the longevity and ubiquity of Carlyle's contempt for the black Atlantic slave populations. Not only the slaves but the abolition movement is written out of history, the *Amis des Noirs* are virtually invisible. The considerable interest shown in abolition and the slave question by virtually all of the Enlightenment proto-Revolutionary intellectuals is tossed aside by Carlyle in the book's opening chapters as a definition of their foolishness.<sup>18</sup> For Carlyle chief among the published causes of the Revolution are Rousseau and the great abolitionist Abbé Raynal. It is the *Philosophes* who, as intellectual quacks, have destabilized society.<sup>19</sup> It is not that Carlyle does not talk of slavery in *The French Revolution*, in the opening chapters it is referred to frequently as a major cause of the Revolution, yet the slavery he talks of is a white French slavery to sin, sorrow, and sensuality:

How is our bright Era of Hope dimmed; and the whole sky growing bleak with signs of hurricane and earthquake! It is a doomed world: gone all 'obedience that made men free;' fast going the obedience that made men slaves—at least to one another. Slaves only of their own lusts they now are, and will be. Slaves of sin; inevitably also of sorrow. Behold the mouldering mass of Sensuality and Falsehood; round which play foolishly, itself a corrupt phosphorescence, some glimmer of Sentimentalism.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, iv. 322–3.

<sup>18</sup> For French abolition history and the *Philosophes*, Davis, *Slavery . . . Western Culture*, 423–55, 460–79; Daniel P. Resnick, 'The *Société des Amis des Noirs* and the Abolition of Slavery', *French Historical Studies*, 7/4 (1972), 558–69; Claudine Hunting, 'The *Philosophes* and Black Slavery 1748–1765', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 38/3 (1978), 405–18. For abolition and Haiti, see David Patrick Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution: The British Occupation of Saint Domingue, 1793–1798* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982); David Patrick Geggus and Barry Gaspar (eds.), *A Turbulent Time: The French Revolution and the Greater Caribbean* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

<sup>19</sup> Carlyle, *Works*, ii. 55–61.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, ii. 57–8.

The enslavement of the French nation to sin is tragic; the absolute enslavement of Franco-Caribbean blacks to the sugar industry is off the map. Carlyle's oeuvre in fact contains very little directly on Caribbean slavery, less on North American, and virtually nothing on Latin American. When Carlyle was to turn to Latin America late in his career, it was to celebrate the brutal dictator, and pro-slaver, Dr Francia of Paraguay, as a saviour and latter-day Cromwell.<sup>21</sup>

Despite the fact that the San Domingue Revolution contains, in exaggerated form, every element that excited Carlyle's imagination when he wrote of events in mainland France, he shut it out. Black slave populations could not be incorporated into revolutionary events because they lacked tragic or epic meaning. Carlyle's position never changed: having no civilization or humanity in the first place, black slaves cannot be transformed by the frenzy of revolution. Consequently, they are seen as at best a minor signification of the depravity of France before the Revolution. During the Revolution itself they testify to the ultimate dangers of revolutionary ideals, if they are let loose on those *incapable* of comprehending Liberty. The blacks are only shown once, and then they are doing what, according to Carlyle they always do, behaving like cowardly animals.

On the very few occasions when San Domingue is named it is always as a warning to civilization. For Carlyle, as for Burke, and then Cobbett, San Domingue is proof of how the essential nature of the black reveals itself, when s/he is offered too much responsibility, and this tradition was kept alive into the 1830s. In 1833 one J. G. Hopkirk felt compelled to publish *An Account of the Insurrection in St. Domingo*, which is introduced as a warning to 'the reader to inwardly digest it, with reference to the present time, when the settlement of the "West Indian Question" is looked forward to with trembling expectation. The fate of the French colony seems a beacon-light striking against the rock on which St. Domingo perished. May she not neglect this solemn warning!'<sup>22</sup>

Carlyle's first mention of San Domingue comes when he talks of the plight of the National Assembly as France falls apart during the winter of 1790. He lists as one of its chief problems abolition pleas from the *Amis des Noirs*. As soon as Brissot and the *Amis* are mentioned they immediately call up the spectre of catastrophe in San Domingue: 'Also it [the National Assembly] has to hear not only of Brissot and his *Friends of the Blacks*, but by and by of a whole San Domingo blazing skyward; blazing in literal fire, and in far worse metaphorical; beaconing the nightly main.'<sup>23</sup>

Carlyle is, in fact, a good Burkean, when it comes to the construction of the revolutionary black. White Jacobins are terrible, black Jacobins are the infernal result of contact with white Jacobins. As a result they constitute the outer, and

<sup>21</sup> Carlyle, *Works*, iv. 261–322.

<sup>22</sup> J. G. Hopkirk, *An Account of the Insurrection in St. Domingo* (London, 1833), preface.

<sup>23</sup> Carlyle, *Works*, iii. 11–12.

expressly inhuman, limits of revolutionary anarchy.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, inevitably, the climax to Carlyle's grand lament on the state of France in autumn 1791, a country torn apart by Revolution, and fast descending into Jacobinical freefall, sees him turn for the last time to San Domingue. The passage explains why Carlyle kept the San Domingue rebellion in the margins of his history:

With factions, suspicions, want of bread and sugar, it [France] is verily what they call *déchiré*, torn apart, this poor country: France and all that is French. For, over the seas too come bad news. In black Saint-Domingo, before that variegated Glitter in the Champs Elysées was lit for an Accepted Constitution, there had risen, and was burning contemporary with it, quite another variegated Glitter and nocturnal Fulgor, had we known it: of molasses and ardent-spirits; of sugar-boileries, plantations, furniture, cattle and men: sky-high; the Plain of Cap Français one huge whirl of smoke and flame!<sup>25</sup>

For Carlyle from the moment of the rebellion the island becomes 'black San Domingue', and exists outside the cleansing violence of the Revolution proper. The inventory is instructive: 'black San Domingue' begins with 'molasses and ardent-spirits'; the black waste products of the sugar-refining system, black treacle and rum, explode; the black slaves become the products of the industry which has made them rebel. The island is a destructive hell, constantly burning, a place simply of depravity, with no hope of regeneration. Carlyle's brilliant insight into the triggers of popular Negrophobia come out in the expanded narration of an anecdote involving the 'quarteroon' revolutionary Ogé. Carlyle uses the little story to imply that African blood contaminates and blackens all it comes in contact with:

What a change here, in these two years since that first 'Box of Tricolor Cockades' got through the Custom house, and atrabiliar Creoles too rejoiced that there was a levelling of Bastilles! Levelling is comfortable, as we often say: levelling, yet only down to oneself. Your pale-white Creoles, have their grievances: And your yellow Quarteroons? [*sic*] And your dark-yellow Mulattoes? And your Slaves soot-black? Quarteroon Ogé, Friend of our Parisian Brissotin *Friends of the Blacks*, felt, for his share too, that Insurrection was the most sacred of duties. So the tricolor Cockades had fluttered and swashed only some three months on the Creole hat, when Ogé's signal conflagrations went aloft; with the voice of rage and terror. Repressed doomed to die, he took black powder or seedgrains in the hollow of his hand, this Ogé; sprinkled a film of white ones on the top, and said to his Judges, 'Behold they are white;' then *shook* his hand, and said, 'Where are the whites, *Où sont les Blancs?*'<sup>26</sup>

The thin film of the *grand blancs* and *petit blancs* is enveloped in a pile of blackness. Somewhere between a showman's trick and a biblical parable this is what

<sup>24</sup> For Burke on black Jacobinism, see discussion, pp. 157–9 above.

<sup>25</sup> Carlyle, *Works*, iii. 221. <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, iii. 221.

Carlyle wants us to take away as the core truth of the slave rebellion. The alliance between the mulattos and the blacks is fatal to all whites. This alliance sets off a powder keg, the black grains moving from seeds to gunpowder:

So now, in the Autumn of 1791, looking from the sky-windows of Cap Français, thick clouds of smoke girdle our horizon, smoke in the day, in the night fire; preceded by fugitive shrieking white women, by Terror and Rumour. Black demonised squadrons are massacring, and harrying, with nameless cruelty. They fight and fire ‘from behind thickets and coverts,’ for the Black man loves the Bush; they rush to the attack, thousands strong, with brandished cutlasses and fusils, with caperings, shoutings and vociferation,—which, if the White volunteer company stands firm, dwindle into staggerings, into quick gabblement, into panic flight at the first volley, perhaps before it. Poor Ogé could be broken on the wheel; this fire whirlwind too can be abated, driven up into the Mountains: but Saint-Domingo is *shaken*, as Ogé’s seed grains were; shaking, writhing in long horrid death-throes, it is Black without remedy; and remains, as African Haiti, a monition to the world.<sup>27</sup>

The immensely complicated history of the revolutionary wars of San Domingue is boiled down to this one paragraph. There is no white atrocity in this version of events, only white, and mainly female, victims. The blacks are demons, whose guerrilla tactics are used as the basis for race humour. The triumphs of the blacks are seen as the death of the island, which remains ‘black without remedy’ a ‘monition to the world’. Carlyle’s terrible vision strains communicability to its limits, and in a distorted metaphor the processes of life and growth, the black ‘seed grains’, are converted into a living death. As the seeds grow they are simultaneously ‘shaking and writhing in long horrid death throws’. At this point San Domingue is written off, and written out of, the French Revolution.

### ‘Liberty requires new definitions’: Brass Collars and Rhetorical Alchemy in *Past and Present*

Their tender hearts were sighing  
As Negro wrongs were told;  
*While the white slave was dying*  
*Who gain’d their father’s gold.*

(Anon., *Birmingham Journal*, 1832)

Why in one of those Lancashire Weavers, dying of hunger, there is more thought and heart, a greater arithmetical amount of misery and desperation, than in whole gangs of Quashees.

(Carlyle, *Past and Present*)

<sup>27</sup> Carlyle, *Works*, iii. 221–2.

*Past and Present* is Carlyle's first sustained effort to insist that the nation's attention shift from the suffering of black slaves in Africa, the Americas, and the Caribbean to the suffering of the industrial masses in Britain under the abominable operations of laissez-faire. While he is never prepared to admit the unique status of the suffering brought about by the Atlantic slave systems, he is emphatic about the unique nature of the suffering of industrial labourers in the mid-nineteenth century.

Yet it is vital to remember that everything Carlyle published on this subject, from the 1830s onwards, was embedded in the extended transatlantic dialogue over free and slave labour. The 'wage slavery' of the industrial workers could not be called up without suggesting some form of comparative relationship with the 'chattel slavery' of the African-American, or Caribbean slave. The remarkable subtlety, longevity, and pervasiveness of comparisons on this subject has not been sufficiently researched, yet enough work has been done to suggest that this is a dialogue which cut through all areas of publishing and which engaged most prominent mid-Victorian authors in one way or another. Comparisons which set the white European labourer off against the black slave in the New World plantations, and which saw the lot of the black as infinitely preferable, had been popular since the mid-eighteenth century. James Grainger's plantation epic *The Sugar Cane* examined the theme at length as early as 1764.<sup>28</sup> By the time Carlyle was writing, slavery had become an intensely competitive domain. The conflictual approaches to the exploitation of black and white labour forces under the two systems remained as much a charged issue with Radicals in the northern states of America as it did in England.<sup>29</sup> The manner in which Carlyle's work was inflected for his readers by the white slavery debates is hard to understand and to reclaim. The 'Occasional Discourse' is, in terms of Carlyle on race, only the tip of a now all but invisible iceberg, and constitutes a logical extension not only of Carlyle's labour theory, but the racially based labour theories of mid-nineteenth-century England. *Chartism*, an essay of Carlyle's from 1840 that looks at social unrest in Britain, is a good example of how Carlyle's texts were read by his contemporaries against the backdrop of the slavery debates. *Chartism* does not explicitly turn to plantation slavery, and is consequently not studied now by post-colonial theorists or historians of slavery. Yet it was seen as a transparent justification of chattel slavery as

<sup>28</sup> James Grainger, *The Sugar Cane: A Poem in Four Books* (London, 1764), 131–5.

<sup>29</sup> The best work on this subject is Marcus Cunliffe's, *Chattel Slavery and Wage Slavery: The Anglo American Context 1830–1860* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1979). The footnotes are remarkable and hold the materials for a far more extensive rhetorical analysis. See also Levy, *Hard Times*, and his forthcoming *How the Dismal Science Got its Name: Classical Economics and the Ur-Text of Racial Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001). The classic Anglo-American comparative study is Larry E. Tise, *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701–1840* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 41–123. For a typically subtle consideration of the English chattel-slavery/wage-slavery debates, during the early stages of abolition mobilization, Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, 343–85.

preferable to waged labour, by the ardently Democratic Bostonian, Orestes Brownson, and obviously by a large contingent of American readership when it appeared. Brownson, in his review of Chartism entitled 'The Labouring Classes', ends by comparing chattel slavery and wage labour with the words: 'We are no advocates of slavery . . . but we say frankly that, if there must always be a labouring population distinct from proprietors and employers, we regard the slavery system as decidedly preferable to the system of wages.'<sup>30</sup> For this reader, Carlyle was setting out a justification for the contractual superiority of chattel slavery over wage slavery. It is not surprising to see that Carlyle's approach to the comparison of labour systems had vast appeal for the American South. Carlyle's writings on the plight of English labourers were lauded in the southern press well before he wrote the 'Occasional Discourse'.<sup>31</sup> Radicals in the 1830s and 1840s again and again return to the theme of white slavery. Karl Marx's interest in exploring possible connections between chattel slavery and wage slavery as labour systems is also a central concern in Chartist and Radical writings. Bronterre O'Brien would announce a year after the publication of the *Communist Manifesto*, which he had not read: 'What are called the "Working Classes" are the slave populations of civilised countries.'<sup>32</sup> Even in the early 1830s, as pressure for the emancipation of the colonial slaves reached a climax, Richard Oastler was returning to familiar Cobbettian ground in setting the plight of the black slave out as preferable to that of the white wage labourer: 'The blacks may fairly be compared to beasts of burden, *kept for their master's use*; the whites, to those *which others keep and let for hire*.'<sup>33</sup> The argument remained popular throughout the nineteenth century spilling out into illustrated pamphlet and print satire. It even became the basis for lurid and pseudo-pornographic pro-slavery fiction, a prime example being Eugene Chase's *English Serfdom and American Slavery*.<sup>34</sup>

Carlyle's views on slavery and the plight of the labouring classes are embedded within, and contribute to, these debates. *Past and Present* is a central articulation of the thesis that the white wage slave must supplant the black chattel slave as the focus for Victorian philanthropy and benevolence. The plight of

<sup>30</sup> Orestes Brownson, *The Labouring Classes* (Boston, 1840), reprinted in Leon Stein and Philip Taft (eds.), *Religion, Reform, and Revolution* (New York: Arno, 1969), 11–12.

<sup>31</sup> For Carlyle's literary reputation in the American South, see Cunliffe, *Chattel Slavery*, 13, 20, 82. See also *Southern Quarterly Review*, 18 (Nov. 1850), 313–56, and (Oct. 1853), 369–411; for the effects of his writings on black abolitionists in Britain, Blackett, *Antislavery Wall*, 155–8.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in G. D. H. Cole, *Socialist Thought: The Forerunners, 1789–1850* (London: Macmillan, 1953), 284.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Cunliffe, *Chattel Slavery*, 10.

<sup>34</sup> For a summary of the popular adaptations of the argument in the press, see Lorimer, *Colour, Class*, 108–31. For print satire on the theme, see *The Condition of the West India Slave Contrasted with that of the Infant Slave in our English Factories* (London, c.1835); 'Telescopic Philanthropy', *Punch*, 48 (1865), 88; Wood, *Blind Memory*, 273–4.

the white slave is, for Carlyle, a uniquely horrible phenomenon that permeates every aspect of British society. Compared with this suffering, the black slave emerges as a comical irrelevance: 'Descend where you will into the lower class, in town or country, by what avenue you will, by Factory Inquiries, by Revenue Returns, by Mining-Labourer Committees, by opening your own eyes and looking, the same sorrowful result discloses itself: you have to admit that the working body of this rich English nation has sunk, or is fast sinking, into a state, to which, all sides of it considered there was literally never any parallel.'<sup>35</sup>

Having set out the general premiss, namely that there is white suffering for which 'there was literally never any parallel', Carlyle then isolates a case from the 1841 Stockport assizes in which a mother and father poison three of their children because of poverty. In arguing for the uniquely horrible status of the trauma of white labourers Carlyle is inevitably displacing the popular rhetoric of abolition focused on the black slave. Although the inheritance of slavery is scrupulously ignored here, a misery that dare not speak its name, it hangs over the discussion and infiltrates linguistic nooks and crannies. The specific example Carlyle chooses again exists against the backdrop of Atlantic slavery. Slave infanticide was a little used theme in abolition literatures focused on the suffering of the Atlantic slave communities. Only Elizabeth Barrett Browning dared to write extensively on the subject in a literary text.<sup>36</sup> Carlyle never alludes to this theme, yet the infanticide of starving Irish labourers emerges as the defining sign of moral and social deterioration within England:

In the British land, a human Mother and Father, of white skin and professing the Christian religion, had done this thing; they, with their Irishism and necessity of savagery, had been driven to do it . . . In starved sieged cities, in the uttermost doomed ruin of old Jerusalem fallen under the wrath of God, it was prophesied and said, 'The hands of the pitiful women have sodden their own children.' The stern Hebrew imagination could conceive no blacker gulf of wretchedness; that was the ultimatum of degraded god-punished man. And we here in modern England, exuberant with supply of all kinds, besieged by nothing if it be not by invisible Enchantments, are we reaching that?<sup>37</sup>

When Carlyle is searching for cultural analogies for the suffering that has driven white parents to kill their children, he turns, not to the plantation, but to the Bible. The cannibalism of the starving inhabitants of Jerusalem in Lamentations 4: 10, who kill and eat the children, is seen as a grand lamentatory analogy. Like Ruskin, and unlike Marx, Carlyle is more interested in mythologizing the

<sup>35</sup> Carlyle, *Works*, x. 3-4.

<sup>36</sup> Andrew M. Stauffer, 'Elizabeth Barrett Browning's (Re)visions of Slavery', *English Language Notes*, 34/4 (1997), 29-49; Sarah Brophy, 'Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" and the Politics of Interpretation', *Victorian Poetry*, 36/3 (1998), 273-88.

<sup>37</sup> Carlyle, *Works*, x. 4-5.



slavery of the industrial wage labourer, than in making comparisons between chattel and wage slavery as economic systems.<sup>38</sup> Because Carlyle refuses to take Atlantic slavery as a significant abuse he needs to find other comparative resources. Consequently, Carlyle's treatments of slavery before the 'Occasional Discourse' predominantly use biblical or feudal models. The feudal model lies at the heart of the discussion in *Past and Present*. The basic framework of the argument is a familiar one. Carlyle sets out from two premisses: one that human life has always been full of pain, and secondly that the necessity of labour is paramount. He then defends chattel slavery because of its contractual basis which is seen as stable and long term, as compared with the temporary contract systems of *laissez-faire*, which are wholly contingent on the vagaries of the market place. He argues that to labour, if you know your place and are protected by your master, is infinitely preferable, both in moral and material terms, to a state where you can be bought and sold in accordance with the laws of supply and demand. The model for this ideal state of servitude is, however, not to be found in the colonial labour systems of the Caribbean but in the serf system of Saxon England.<sup>39</sup> What follows is one of the most influential defences of slavery ever penned:

Gurth, born thrall to Cedric the Saxon, has been greatly pitied by Dryasdust. Gurth, with the brass collar round his neck, tending Cedric's pigs in the glades of the wood is not what I call an exemplar of human felicity: but Gurth, with the sky above him, with the free air and tinted boscage and umbrage around him, and in him at least the certainty of supper and social lodging when he came home; Gurth to me seems happy, in comparison with many a Lancashire and Buckinghamshire man of these days, not born thrall to anybody!<sup>40</sup>

The basic argument is that *laissez-faire* offers no support or protection to 'the dumb labouring millions'. Consequently, the 'freedom' that it represents is necessarily not freedom but a form of slavery. If a more benign slavery exists in the form of feudal serfdom, then surely its re-implementation is necessary. Yet where did Carlyle evolve his model of Saxon slavery from, who is Gurth, and what is the authority of the brass collar?

### Scott, Carlyle, and Anglo-Saxon Collars

'And so that bold and beautiful race became slaves!' thought he. 'The brave and free souled Harolds, strong of heart and strong of arm; the fair-haired Ediths,

<sup>38</sup> For Marx and the comparative approach to slavery, serfdom, and the industrial labourer, see Michael Bush, 'Serfdom in Medieval and Modern Europe: A Comparison', in Michael Bush (ed.), *Serfdom and Slavery Studies in Legal Bondage* (London and New York: Longman, 1996), 199–225.

<sup>39</sup> Carlyle, *Works*, x. 210–14.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, x. 211–12.

in their queenly beauty, noble in soul as well as ancestry; these all sank to the condition of slaves<sup>7</sup>

(Lydia Maria Child, *The Black Saxons*)

One key to understanding Carlyle on slavery is Scott's *Ivanhoe*. Both Carlyle and Ruskin worshipped Scott, as an author, and as an example of the virtues of hard work, healthy living, and single-hearted endeavour.<sup>41</sup> Yet for both of them Scott's works also represented a toolbox for taking apart and exposing the depraved state of contemporary society.<sup>42</sup> Within Scott's novels and poetry lay the celebration of an Anglo-Saxon system which was based on fidelity, honesty, the love of nature, and an absolute respect for one's social superiors, or in a word, willing serfdom. In taking up Scott's construction of Anglo-Saxon serfdom and setting it off against the labour relations of Victorian urban industry, Carlyle was engaging with, indeed re-colonizing, a theme that attracted the attention of abolition polemicists. In an ingenious short story entitled 'The Black Saxons' Lydia Maria Child had worked through an intricate and highly ironic comparison between English serfs and American plantation slaves.<sup>43</sup> In this piece an erudite slave-holder called Duncan is forced, via his parallel reading of an account of the Norman Conquest, and attendance at a secret meeting of his slaves, to make a comparison between the black leaders he hears sing and preach, and Wat Tyler and Robin Hood. The insurrectionary spirit of the Saxon, even the Saxon serf, is harnessed to a defence of black slave rebellion.

Carlyle was to make a very different use of the paradigm of Anglo-Saxon enslavement under the Normans. Carlyle shies away from setting up any direct comparison between Scott's serfs and the 'black Saxons' of the American South. Plantation slavery is sidelined, and when it does appear briefly in this discussion, minutely prefigures the grotesque thought of the 'Occasional Discourse'. Carlyle's excision of race is intriguing given that Scott's *Ivanhoe* contains a sophisticated discussion of slavery which breaks down along race lines, and which sets white serf, as ideal slave type, against African slave, as an inhuman anti-type. It is only one part of Scott's discussion that excites Carlyle. The image of the slave collar, and the definition of the status of Gurth, which Carlyle seizes upon, occurs at the novel's opening. Gurth, the Saxon swineherd, and Wamba,

<sup>41</sup> 'Sir Walter Scott' in Carlyle, *Works*, ix. 22–88; for an encyclopedic citation of Ruskin's Scott obsession, see the article 'Scott, Sir Walter', in John Ruskin, *The Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn, 39 vols. (London: George Allen, 1903–12), xxxix. 539–46.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, xxix. 541–7, is the most elaborate treatment of Scott's medievalism as a social and aesthetic model.

<sup>43</sup> Lydia Maria Child, 'The Black Saxons', *The Liberty Bell* (Boston, 1841). The full text is reprinted in electronic form in Glynis Carr (ed.), *The Online Archive of Nineteenth-Century Women's Writings*, <http://www.facstaff.bucknell.edu/gcarr/19cUSWW/LB/BS.html>.

the fool, are the first characters to be described in *Ivanhoe*. Gurth is described in detail, the description ends:

One part of his dress only remains, but it is too remarkable to be suppressed; it was a brass ring, resembling a dog's collar, but without any opening, and soldered fast round his neck, so loose as to form no impediment to his breathing, yet so tight as to be incapable of being removed, excepting by the use of the file. On this singular gorget was engraved in Saxon characters, an inscription of the following purport:—'Gurth, the son of Beowolf, is the born thrall of Cedric of Rotherwood.'<sup>44</sup>

Carlyle fashioned his myth of the privileged status of the Anglo-Saxon serf out of these words. Anglo-Saxon serfdom emerges as a state that renders emancipation almost superfluous.<sup>45</sup> Gurth serves his master with an unwavering loyalty throughout the improbable ups and downs of the plot of *Ivanhoe* until Scott finally engineers the scene of Gurth's emancipation. Gurth's response lays bare the mechanics of Scott's theory of serfdom:

No longer a serf, but a freeman and a landholder, Gurth sprung upon his feet, and twice bounded aloft to almost his own height from the ground.

'A smith and a file,' he cried, 'to do away the collar from the neck of a freeman!—Noble master! Doubled is my strength by your gift, and doubly will I fight for you! There is a free spirit in my breast—I am a man changed to myself and all around. Ha, Fangs!' he continued,—for that faithful cur, seeing his master thus transported, began to jump upon him, to express his sympathy,—'Knowest thou thy master still?'<sup>46</sup>

Fangs certainly does still know his 'master' only too well. Scott's unconscious irony tells us a lot about why Carlyle took him up as a model for setting out the master/slave relationship. Gurth may claim to be 'a man changed to myself and all around', but Fangs, the dog, sees things differently. Fangs knows his master, and Gurth knows his; it is no coincidence that they wear identical collars, and jump up in a similar manner, because in the world Scott has created Gurth's service to his master is shown to be based upon the mutual respect of master and servant, and master and dog. Scott presents serfs as fundamentally good pets existing within a humane social contract that the mere fact of emancipation does not alter. It was above all the permanent nature of the master/slave contract that appealed to Carlyle when he set out his theory of labour in *Past and Present*.

Yet Scott's defence of Anglo-Saxon serfdom does not exist in a racial abstract, but possesses another more sinister dimension, and is counter-balanced against a mixed race slavery relationship where terror and atrocity are

<sup>44</sup> Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 18–19.

<sup>45</sup> For recent work to consider the usefulness of attempting comparisons between medieval serfdom and New World slavery systems, see Bush (ed.), *Serfdom and Slavery Studies in Legal Bondage*.

<sup>46</sup> Scott, *Ivanhoe*, 273–4.

at the centre of the power relation. When it comes to the world of the Normans, the Barons have no respect for their conquered subjects, and are consequently hated by the Saxons in return. The French system does not work, partly because it is foreign, yet as far as the cultural dynamics of slavery operate there is a further element introduced by Scott. The evil Norman Baron Front-de-Boeuf surrounds himself with black slaves, Moors, whom he has somehow acquired during the Crusades. These figures are monsters, outside culture and outside the normal patterns of human emotional behaviour. The Moorish slaves exist in precise counterbalance to the Saxon serf Gurth. The blacks are a depraved and malign presence, defined by their utter silence and capacity to undertake any form of violence. Their function is most succinctly outlined in the scene where de Boeuf decides to grill the rich old Jew Isaac alive, in order to make him give over his fortune.<sup>47</sup> De Boeuf has trained these black figures up like guard dogs, yet Scott is never clear about whether it is their 'master's will' which has made them evil, or their natural disposition: 'The unhappy Jew eyed their countenances . . . and the savage eyes of the Saracens, rolling gloomily under their dark brows, acquiring a yet more sinister expression by the whiteness of the circle which surrounds the pupil, evinced rather the secret pleasure which they expected from the approaching scene.'<sup>48</sup> In their positive malice, and capacity for sadism, these terrifying figures represent a black slave mythology that Carlyle never embraced. Within his race dynamic, blacks are quite simply never allowed to be this frightening; his blacks are invariably comic, idle, passive, and unthreatening. Consequently, when he comes to couple Gurth with the figure of the Caribbean black, he creates a very different black/white slavery paradigm from that developed by Scott. One paragraph in particular lays bear the precise associative chain that allows Carlyle to link Gurth with the figure of the formerly enslaved black, the stereotypical Quashee. These figures are set up as signs of good slavery and bad liberty:

Gurth was hired for life to Cedric and Cedric to Gurth. O Anti-Slavery Convention, loud-sounding long-eared Exeter Hall . . . black Quashee over the sees being once sufficiently attended to, wilt thou not perhaps open thy dull sodden eyes to the 'sixty-thousand valets in London itself who are yearly dismissed to the streets, to be what they can, when the season ends;'—or to the hunger-stricken, pallid, *yellow*-coloured 'Free Labourers' in Lancashire, Yorkshire, Buckinghamshire, and all other shires! These Yellow-coloured for the present, absorb all my sympathies; if I had a Twenty Millions, with Model-Farms and Niger Expeditions, it is to these that I would give it! Quashee has already victuals, clothing; Quashee is not dying of such despair as the yellow-coloured pale man's. Quashee, it must be owned, is hitherto a kind of block-head. The Haiti Duke of Marmalade, educated now for almost half a century, seems

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 179–83.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 183.

to have next to no sense in him. Why in one of those Lancashire Weavers, dying of hunger, there is more thought and heart, a greater arithmetical amount of misery and desperation, than in whole gangs of Quashees.<sup>49</sup>

This paragraph puts paid to the theory that either the language or form of the ‘Occasional Discourse’ can be seen as eccentric to Carlyle’s overall social project. Everything is in place for the later disquisition; ‘Quashee’ is a lurid stereotype fully formed in Carlyle’s cynical mind, he simply lies dormant for twenty years.<sup>50</sup> The sidelining of the comic black stereotype and the move to attack the old Cobbettian bugbear of Evangelical abolition anticipate in precise miniature the strategies underlying the ‘Occasional Discourse’. The relativizing argument over the worth of black and white victim is also taken up and developed in the later piece.

Yet at this point in *Past and Present* Carlyle leaves Quashee in order to develop a more abstract definitional approach to slavery in contradistinction to liberty. The discussion gives feudal slavery a Platonic twist, and appears to be based on the idea that some are born slaves and some masters, that the role of master is founded in an inalienable process of desert:<sup>51</sup>

Guirth’s brass collar did not gall him: Cedric *deserved* to be his master. The pigs were Cedric’s but Guirth too would get his parings of them. Guirth had the inexpressible satisfaction of feeling himself related indissolubly, though in a rude brass-collar way, to his fellow-mortals on this Earth. He had superiors, inferiors, equals.—Guirth is now ‘emancipated’ long since; has what we call ‘Liberty.’ Liberty I am told is a divine thing. Liberty when it becomes the ‘Liberty to die by starvation’ is not so divine!<sup>52</sup>

Carlyle’s definition of liberty is intimately tied to his fanatical theory of the sacred nature of labour. Doing one’s anointed work is the only true form of labour open to humans. Yet who decides what labour is appropriate for each member of a society is not a subject open to debate. Carlyle’s definition of liberty is predicated on the assumption that Carlyle himself shall be absolute legislator within his imaginative dictatorship of labour:

Liberty? The true liberty of a man, you would say, consisted in his finding out, or being forced to find out the right path, and to walk thereon. To learn, or to be taught, what work he actually was able for; and then by permission, persuasion and even

<sup>49</sup> Carlyle, *Works*, x, 278–9.

<sup>50</sup> Carlyle made ‘Quashee’ his own, but in fact the epithet had originally referred to a brilliant black herbalist and Doctor in Surinam, named Quas’sia, and revered by Linnaeus. ‘Linnaeus applied this name to a tree of Surinam in honour of a negro Quassi who employed its bark as a remedy for fever: and enjoyed such a reputation among the natives as to be almost worshipped by some’, quoted in Brewer, *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*.

<sup>51</sup> Carlyle saw the *Latter Day Pamphlets* as essentially a Platonic take on democracy: ‘I was much struck with Plato and his ideas about Democracy, mere *Latter Day Pamphlets* saxa et faeces (read faeces if you like) refined into empyrian radiance’, quoted in Grierson, *Hitler and Carlyle*, 9.

<sup>52</sup> Carlyle, *Works*, x, 212.

compulsion to set about doing of the same! That is true blessedness, honour, 'liberty' and maximum of wellbeing: if liberty be not that I for one have small care about liberty. You do not allow a palpable madman to leap over precipices; you violate his liberty, you that are wise; and keep him, were it in straight-waistcoats, away from the precipices! Every stupid, every cowardly and foolish man is but a less palpable madman: his true liberty were that a wiser man, that any and every wiser man, could, by brass collars, or in whatever milder or sharper way, lay hold of him when he was going wrong, and compel him to go a little righter.<sup>53</sup>

Although Quashee as a caricature has ostensibly been left behind, this theory of the right distribution of labour is to underpin the later writing on Atlantic slavery. This paragraph, risibly crude in thought and expression as it is, is the intellectual basis for the thesis at the heart of the 'Occasional Discourse', and all Carlyle's disquisitions on the relations between labour and power. The 'right path' of labour for the black slave, or ex-slave, is sugar and spice production on plantations. If the lazy black refuses this destiny, then he moves into that area of stupidity and cowardliness that can only be corrected by the reintroduction of the collar and the whip.

Carlyle rounds off his astonishing theory of labour with a parodic prayer that takes enslavement into a new and perverse domain. The prayer is spoken by an imaginary and essential 'worker' who begs to be enslaved by his master:

O if thou art really my *Senior* Seigneur, my *Elder*, Presbyter or Priest,—if thou wert in very deed my *Wiser*, may a beneficent instinct lead and impel thee to 'conquer' me, to command me! If thou do know better than I what is good and right, I conjure thee in the name of God, Force me to do it; were it by never such brass collars, whips and handcuffs . . .—Liberty requires new definitions.<sup>54</sup>

Here Carlyle enters the dynamics of the Bondage relationship, the only true freedom lies in submitting oneself completely to the control of another consciousness, the master's consciousness.<sup>55</sup> In this prayer Carlyle emerges as both the Sadean master, and as the masochistic subject begging to be collared, whipped, and handcuffed.

### 'This Sacredly Sensitive Subject': Carlyle and Why the 'Negro Question' Became the 'Nigger Question'

'The genius has gone to the devil, only the cult remains'  
(Karl Marx, on reading *Latter Day Pamphlets*)

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, x, 212.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, x, 212–13.

<sup>55</sup> See the discussion of the appropriation of slavery dynamics within *The Story of O*, pp. 398–400 below.

(GD) LOOK I THINK THIS IS A RACIST ADVERT.

(LK) YEAH ALL WHITE PEOPLE SAD AND ALL THAT

(GD) AND YEAH LOOK ALL POWER STATION IN THE BACKGROUND AND THE NIGGERS ALL GOT BEACHES, SUNSHINE, FUCKING

(LK) YOU COULDN'T DO IT THE OTHER WAY ROUND

(GD) I WANT TO MAKE A COMPLAINT ABOUT THAT ADVERT

(Gary Dobson, Luke Knight, *Stephen Lawrence Inquiry*, Appendix 10)

Carlyle's 'Occasional Discourse' has emerged within contemporary post-colonial studies and the historiography of slavery as the most infamous low point of British nineteenth-century racist discourse. English pro-slavery writings focused on the racial inferiority of the black more frequently and more crudely than those of North America.<sup>56</sup> Yet admitting this National bias Carlyle's disquisition is a special case, and constitutes a piece of artistic thug-gery that instantly became, and has remained, a benchmark for extreme anti-black and pro-slavery rhetoric. One reason why the 'Occasional Discourse' remains so significant is because it did real damage on both sides of the Atlantic, on both the occasions of its publication. It was a live political text that had some very immediate and long-lasting effects on the perception of slavery, and of black people in North America. Carlyle already had a huge reputation on the East Coast of the United States, which had begun with the remarkable reception of *Sartor Resartus*, a book that had been largely ignored in England, in the 1830s.<sup>57</sup> The 'Occasional Discourse' both encapsulated the prejudices of, and inspired the work of, subsequent American racist propagandists. The process began with George Fitzhugh, author of *Cannibals All: Slaves Without Masters* and found its apogee in Thomas Dixon Jr, author of *The Clansman*, *The Leopard's Spots* and inspiration for W. D. Griffith's cinematic canonizations of the lowest common denominators of scientific racism, *The Clansman* and *Birth of a Nation*.<sup>58</sup>

Even when it appeared, the 'Occasional Discourse' caused transatlantic outrage. In his brilliant attack on the piece, Carlyle's erstwhile intellectual mentor John Stewart Mill pointed out that no matter what he, or other critics, did to the text, it had a practical value to the Slave Power which they could not affect: 'Circulated as his dissertation will probably be, by those whose interests profit by it, from one end of the American union to the other, I hardly know of

<sup>56</sup> See Tise, *Proslavery*, 107–111.

<sup>57</sup> For an enthusiastic survey of Carlyle's literary reputation in nineteenth-century America, see Andrew Hook, *Carlyle and America* (Edinburgh: The Carlyle Society, Occasional Papers no. 3, 1970).

<sup>58</sup> For Fitzhugh, see Cunliffe, *Chattel Slavery*, 107, note; for Griffith and Dixon, see Michael Rogin, 'The Sword Became a Flashing Vision': D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, *Representations*, 9 (1985), 151–6.

an act by which one person could have done so much mischief as this may possibly do; and I hold that by thus acting he has made himself an instrument of what an able writer in the *Inquirer* justly calls “a true work of the devil”.<sup>59</sup> Mill may now be traduced by the new cultural historians of racism for his imperial complicity, but here he gets right to the point.<sup>60</sup>

Compared to the *Latter Day Pamphlets*, or even to the 1853 version of the ‘Occasional Discourse’, the 1849 edition is an elaborately defensive, even shamefaced, piece. At this stage Carlyle does not dare to put forward extreme Negrophobe ideas without a series of alienation mechanisms: first, an ironic preface, and secondly, a series of interjected, comically ironic, crowd responses to the discourse itself. Yet the first thing to notice about the original publication of the ‘Occasional Discourse’ is that it was clearly framed as a satire, that it is intended to make us laugh about black people through its irony. Carlyle formulates a new, and coarse, form of racialized humour. He traduced the black colonial subject in a manner which was rhetorically unprecedented and which remains influential for subsequent racist literatures in England and America.

The ‘Occasional Discourse’ of 1849 carried an elaborate prefatory apparatus, in which Carlyle presented the body of the pamphlet as an anonymous production left in the possession of the landlady of a bankrupt ne’er do well and charlatan journalist, Dr Phelin M’Quirk, after he had absconded, unable to pay his rent. The piece is introduced with mock disdain as a work putting forward ‘doctrines and notions, which, we rather suspect, are pretty much in a minority of one’. Carlyle is both ridiculing and celebrating his eccentricity and isolation from mid-Victorian public opinion on slavery. The ‘occasion’ of the discourse is the inauguration of the Council of an Association of Associations, the ‘UNIVERSAL ABOLITION OF PAIN ASSOCIATION, which is meant to be the consummate golden flower and summary of modern Philanthropisms all in one’. It is the speaker’s duty to ensure that this Association does not

<sup>59</sup> John Stewart Mill, ‘The Negro Question’, *Fraser’s Magazine* (1850), 469. For the South’s use of Carlyle in Civil War propaganda, see Heffer, *Moral Desperado*, 328–9. For the American reception of the ‘Occasional Discourse’, see Jules Paul Seigel (ed.), *Thomas Carlyle: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1995), 310–18, 367–9; see also Roger L. Tarr, *Thomas Carlyle: A Bibliography of English-Language Criticism 1824–1974* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976), nos. 255, 256, 259, 260, 290; Blackett, *Antislavery Wall*, 154–7.

<sup>60</sup> The classic account of Mill’s defence of empire is Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 69, 96–7, 122, 197. For a subtle analysis of Mill’s ‘The Negro Question’ in terms of its reliance on ‘racist presumption and projection’, see David Theo Goldberg, ‘Liberalism’s Limits: Carlyle and Mill on “The Negro Question”’, *Nineteenth Century Contexts*, 22 (2000), 208–16. For a more sympathetic analysis, Iva Jones, ‘Trollope, Carlyle, and Mill on the Negro: An Episode in the History of Ideas’, *Journal of Negro History*, 52 (July 1967), 185–99. The most succinct contemporary summaries of the cultural and political context for the debate are David M. Levy and Sandra J. Peart, *The Secret History of the Dismal Science: Economics, Religion and Race in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, <http://www.econlib.org/library/Columns/LevyPeartdismal.html>; and *The Carlyle–Mill ‘Negro Question’ Debate*, <http://cepa.NewsSchool.edu/het/essays/texts/carlyle/negroquest.htm>.



become the ‘Sluggard-and-Scoundrel-Protection-Society’. The question of the condition of Slaves in the emancipated sugar colonies is used as a test case.<sup>61</sup>

The ‘Occasional Discourse’ of 1849 is the summation of Carlyle’s conviction that slavery, on the model of Saxon serfdom, is necessary for the survival of the colonies, and for the protection of the weak and the ignorant. ‘Emancipation’, like ‘Liberty’ and ‘Democracy’, has become a dirty word for Carlyle; they are shibboleths erected by an irresponsible and hypocritical liberalism. Immediate responses to the piece varied from outrage to mild amusement. Rossetti is reported by his brother to have been ‘much tickled’ by it. *Punch* treated the whole thing as a joke and put Carlyle on trial for his literary reputation:

Thomas Carlyle was brought before Mr. Punch charged with not being able to take care of his literary reputation . . . witness did not believe the reputation of the accused in any positive danger, until some three or four months back, when he detected him running wildly up and down the pages of ‘*Fraser’s Magazine*’, pelting all sorts of gibberish at the head of the Jamaica niggers—fantastically reproaching them for being ‘up to the ears content in pumpkins when they should work for sugar and spices’ for their white masters—threatening them with the whip, in a word dealing in language only dear to the heart—witness meant pockets—of Yankee slave-owners and Brazilian planters.<sup>62</sup>

The crucial point here is that Carlyle’s outrageous language and behaviour are immediately exiled to the slave colonies. Carlyle in talking the way he does is assumed to be no longer one of us, but one of them, an American slave-owner, a Brazilian planter. This compulsive act of rhetorical distancing tries, through humour, to deflect the fact that Carlyle is saying with outrageous humour what many English people believed in their hearts. *Punch* begins a critical process which attempts to isolate the ‘Occasional’ Discourse’ from Carlyle’s other works, and to see it as the point at which the intellectual rot sets in. The truth is that Carlyle’s piece was not eccentric either to his earlier output or to a receptive readership. There is no better introduction to the ideological conditions that generated the ‘Occasional Discourse’, and no better summary of its arguments, than the discussion by Carlyle’s disciple James Anthony Froude:

A paper on the Negro or Nigger question . . . was Carlyle’s declaration of war against modern Radicalism. Hitherto, though his orthodoxy was questionable, the Radicals had been glad to claim him as belonging to them; and if Radicalism meant an opinion that modern society required to be reconstituted from the root, he had been, was and remained the most thoroughgoing of them all. His objection was to the cant of Radicalism; to the philosophy of it, ‘bred of philanthropy and the Dismal Science’ the purport of which was to cast the atoms of human society adrift, mocked with the

<sup>61</sup> ‘Occasional Discourse’, 1849, 670–1.

<sup>62</sup> For Rossetti, see Wood, *Blind Memory*, 150; *Punch*, 18 (1853), 106.

name of liberty, to sink or swim as they could. Negro emancipation had been the special boast and glory of the new theory of universal happiness. The twenty millions of indemnity and the free West Indies had been chanted and celebrated for a quarter of a century from press and platform. Weekly, almost daily, the English Newspapers were crowing over the Americans, flinging in their teeth the Declaration of Independence, blowing up in America itself a flame which was ripening towards a furious war, while the result of the experiment so far had been the material ruin of colonies once the most precious that we had, and the moral ruin of the blacks themselves, who were rotting away in sensuous idleness amidst the wrecks of the plantations. He was touching this shield with the point of his lance when he chose this sacredly sensitive subject for his first onslaught. He did not mean that the 'Niggers' should have been kept as cattle and sold as cattle at their owners' pleasure. He did mean that they ought to have been treated as human beings, for whose souls and bodies the whites were responsible; that they should have been placed in a position suited to their capacity, like that of the English serf under the Plantagenets; protected against ill usage by the law; attached to the soil; not allowed to be idle but cared for themselves, their wives and their children, in health, in sickness and in old age.<sup>63</sup>

Froude attests to the link between the previous defences of serfdom in *Past and Present* and the current fury at the degraded state of the emancipated colonies. The latter constitutes for both Carlyle, and obviously still for Froude in 1890, the most extreme example of the results of 'Exeter Hall' Democratic policy. Froude argues that Carlyle's theory of a protective paternalism, founded on the model of feudal slavery, is superior to casting the emancipated slave adrift in the wild seas of a free market economy. In doing so he places Carlyle within a standard line of pro-slavery argument circulating in the Caribbean, and in the States, from the mid-eighteenth century to the Civil War. Neither Carlyle nor Froude are eccentric among their contemporaries in holding this view.<sup>64</sup>

The argument is founded on the premiss that certain forms of life, human and animal, are not fit for liberty. There was, even outside pro-slavery circles, a problem when it came to dealing with the emancipated slave. If the system of plantation slavery were one of an abusive and absolute power, which traumatized and debased its victims utterly, then what sort of people would have been produced? Could the products of such a system be the inheritors of personal freedom with the passage of the emancipation bill? In this sense Carlyle, as read by Froude, is centrally engaged in one of the great debates around emancipation: how much support does the slave need in order to make the transition from dependency to independence. Carlyle, if one reads the text, short-circuited all such problems, and that is one reason for his appeal. He was not

<sup>63</sup> Froude, *Carlyle*, ii. 25-6.

<sup>64</sup> For a detailed survey of the 'Positive Good' thesis, as it operated in England and North America from the late eighteenth century to the Civil War, see Tise, *Proslavery*, 75-124.

interested in debating the capacity of the black to deal with liberty, any more than he was interested in debating the intellectual potential of the black slave. For Carlyle there is no debate, and there is no potential for improvement, moral or intellectual, in the emancipated slave. The power of Carlyle's racism comes out of the fact that everything is decided. He operates a sort of racist Calvinism in which 'the Eternal Gods', and the 'Powers of the Universe' have pre-determined that the white European is the elect, and the black is not and never can be. In Carlyle's world the black, emancipated or not, is not quite human, and is made to be a servant of the white. It is the extremity and brutality with which Carlyle puts forward his theory of black inferiority that was new.

The crudest and most effective rhetorical gambit for dehumanization is animalization. Carlyle made this move with a shameless and rapacious alacrity. That the black was, in Carlyle's imagination, wholly interchangeable with the horse, when it came to emancipation, comes out forcefully in the metaphors upon which the description of 'Quashee' is based. Carlyle inaugurates the horse comparisons with the exclamation that the 'beautiful black darlings are at last happy; with little labour except to the teeth, which surely, in those excellent horse jaws of theirs, will not fail!'. The 'horse-jaws' are the rhetorical trigger for the reduction of human to animal, but they are, in terms of racist discourse a complicated device. Perhaps their primary reference point is to physiognomic racism. With the widespread misappropriation of the aesthetic theory of Petrus Camper, and the physiognomic theory of Lavater, the most significant physiognomic indicator of an animal nature was the facial angle. The angle was constructed by a line drawn along the outermost point of the forehead, nose and lips of the facial profile. The more the resultant line tended to the horizontal, the more animal the nature, consequently the more protruding the jaws the closer the human approaches to the simian. Carlyle does not bother with the ape comparison, but progresses to the extremity of a horse jaw, an exaggeration so extreme as to be parodic. The very anti-intellectual extremity of the move typifies what is so new and so devastating in this work. Ironically the comparison of slaves with horses had become a staple of abolition propaganda. A number of abolition publications drew outraged attention to the comparison of blacks and horses within slave culture, as publicly manifested in sale advertisements that paired horses and slaves. Samuel Taylor Coleridge sums up the platitudinous nature of the comparison in the opening ejaculation of his study of slave advertising 'Horses and negroes, negroes and horses, what a history'.<sup>65</sup> For Carlyle it was a history with a useful comparative base. His pathological but fertile imagination immediately takes up the horse jaw reference and as the satire

<sup>65</sup> For the Coleridge horse comparison, see Wood, *Blind Memory*, 82, 82; for *Black Beauty* as 'The Uncle Tom's Cabin of the Horse', 146.

progresses develops it into a monstrous running gag: 'Sitting yonder with their beautiful muzzles up to the ears in pumpkins, imbibing sweet pulps and juices; the grinder and incisor teeth ready for ever new work, and the pumpkins cheap as grass in those rich climates.' For Carlyle this is not outrageous, because as far as their suitability for emancipation is concerned there is no difference between horses, blacks, or indeed the Irish peasantry. The argument made at length in the 'Occasional Discourse' is essentialized in the first of the *Latter Day Pamphlets*, 'The Present Time'. This passage shows Carlyle's atavistic ingenuity at its most potent:

Certainly Emancipation proceeds with rapid strides among us, this good while; and has got to such a length as might give rise to reflections in men of a serious turn. West-Indian Blacks are emancipated, and it appears refuse to work: Irish Whites have long been entirely emancipated; and nobody asks them to work . . . Among speculative persons a question has sometimes risen: In the progress of Emancipation, are we to look for a time when all the Horses also are to be emancipated . . . ?<sup>66</sup>

While meditating on the question of what the limits of emancipation might be, Carlyle allows his prose to effect the creeping fusion of black slave and horse:

Horses too have 'motives'; are acted-on by hunger, fear, hope, love of oats, terror of platted leather; nay, they have vanity, ambition, emulation, thankfulness, vindictiveness; some rude outline of all our human spiritualities,—a rude resemblance to us in mind and intelligence, even as they have in bodily frame. The horse, poor dumb four-footed fellow, he too has his private feelings, his affections, gratitudes, and deserves good usage; no human master, without crime, shall treat him unjustly either, or recklessly lay-on the whip when it is not needed:—I am sure I could make him 'happy', I should be willing to grant a small vote (in addition to the late twenty millions) for that object!

Him too you occasionally tyrannise over; and with bad result to yourselves, among others . . . one fears they are a little tyrannous at times. 'Am I not a horse and a *half-brother*'—To remedy which, so far as remediable, fancy: the horses all 'emancipated'; restored to their primeval right of property in the grass of this Globe: turned out to graze in an independent supply-and-demand manner! So long as grass lasts, I dare say they are very happy, or think themselves so. And Farmer Hodge sallying forth, on a dry spring morning, with a sieve of oats in his hand, and agony of eager expectation in his heart, is he happy? Help me to plough this day, Black Dobbin: oats in full measure if thou wilt. 'Hlunh, No-thank!' Snort Black Dobbin, he prefers glorious liberty.<sup>67</sup>

What apparently starts out as a peon to the sensitivities of the horse rapidly transforms into something far more grotesque. Carlyle, master of the parable, and telling compound formula, makes the black slave equine, and the equine equal, or perhaps a little superior, to the black slave, by applying exactly the

<sup>66</sup> Carlyle, *Works*, xx. 25–6.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, xx. 26.

same diction and descriptive terminology to both. By the time he lets the pretence that he is talking about horses and not people slip, with the mention of the twenty million pounds paid to the planters on the passage of the emancipation bill, it does not even matter, the sinister fusion of human and animal has become so complete. It may sound absurd, it may be tempting to discount this work, but it is terribly effective. Carlyle is of course playing sophisticated games with a whole literary inheritance from the eighteenth century that conflated cruelty to animals and cruelty to slaves. As we have seen, Laurence Sterne could write at length about the 'emancipation' of a caged starling, with a half engaged scepticism reminiscent of Carlyle, and Elizabeth Herrick could draw elaborate comparisons between the suffering of slaves and those of animals at Smithfield market, without any apparent awareness of impropriety in the equations she sets up.<sup>68</sup> When the Humane societies finally published Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* under the title of *The Uncle Tom's Cabin of the Horse* they made a move that would have tickled Carlyle's black sense of humour. Yet Carlyle is not merely taking a sideswipe at the excesses of the age of sentiment; what he accomplishes here, and more elaborately within the 'Occasional Discourse', is something new within the discourses of racism. When critics have objected that it was not the core of Carlyle's argument that was offensive and racist, but the tone in which it was put, they are completely missing the point. *The* seminal achievement of the 'Occasional Discourse', and of the *Latter Day Pamphlets*, as texts centred on race, lies precisely in the way they say what they say. Carlyle mimics the language of the disenfranchised drunken bigot, yet he injects this coarse register with his own special prophetic and millenarian flavour. It is as if Cobbett at this most churlish has been fused with Nathaniel Brassy Halhead at his most enthusiastic. No one had written about black people with such dismissive brutality before, although many were to do so subsequently, or should it be consequently.<sup>69</sup> It is Carlyle's ability to make comic generalizations which nevertheless sum up with horrid familiarity the lowest common denominators of anti-black sentiment which made, and make, this work so dangerous. Carlyle has a peculiar knack for 'Othering' the 'Other' by using nicknames and euphemisms that appear almost immediately to acquire the status of popular myths; his racism is at one level committed name-calling. Carlyle was always prepared to throw stylistic rules out of the window, but here his rudeness performs a very specific function. Put bluntly, the style works according to the formula that if you are writing about animals why not write like an animal. This

<sup>68</sup> For the slave-animal comparison in popular art and literature, see Wood, *Blind Memory*, 274-6.

<sup>69</sup> For Dickens's quite calculating development of Carlyle's race writing, and for a detailed examination of race humour in his work, see Levy, *Hard Times*, 3-4, 22-31, 37-9. Levy argues convincingly that *Hard Times* uses the central slavery critique of *Past and Present* and the 'Occasional Discourse' to write a wage labour parody of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

maxim is literalized when his obscene slave/horse centaur 'Black Dobbin' exclaims 'Hlunh. No-thank', Carlyle produces the gabblement of his own monstrous creation.

The moves Carlyle makes now have a terrible familiarity. Take, for example, Carlyle's set piece oration defining the natural superiority of white over black and the black inability to develop or improve natural resources:

And now observe, my friends, it was not black Quashee, or those he represents, that made those West India Islands what they are, or can by any hypothesis, be considered to have the right of growing pumpkins there. For countless ages, since they first mounted oozy, on the back of the earthquakes, from their dark bed in the ocean deeps, and reeking saluted the tropical sun, and ever onwards 'til the European white man first saw them some three short centuries ago, those islands had produced mere jungle, savagery, poison-reptiles, and swamp-malaria till the white European first saw them, they were as if not yet created—their noble elements cinnamon, sugar, coffee, pepper, black and gray, lying all asleep, waiting the white enchanter who should say to them awake! Till the end of human history and the sounding of the trump of doom, they might have lain so, had Quashee and the like of him been the only artist in the game . . . Him, had he by a miraculous chance been wafted hither, the caribals [*sic*] would have eaten, rolling him as a fat morsel under their tongue.<sup>70</sup>

Essentially uncivilized, the black can never play any part in the civilizing process; his greatest use is as the focus for humour. Carlyle figuratively ingests his victim; what could be funnier than a white sage and social prophet turning himself into a Caribbean savage, and linguistically cannibalizing his black victim? Yet again, however, it is the hyperbole, the extended outrage, and outrageousness, which are important.

I emphasize again when dealing with Carlyle on race you cannot somehow extract a clean argument from the linguistic mess that smothers it, the medium here is the message. The tone, the extremity, enabled and encouraged a new kind of extravagant journalistic hatred. Carlyle endorses race humour of a particular kind; his sneering fury is the voice behind much early twentieth-century literary Negrophobia. If you endorse this form of bigotry you do not have to justify your hatred theoretically, you just have to repeat over and over again that blacks are animals, that they are ugly and irredeemably different. Thackeray developed the strain with linguistic economy: 'They are not my men and brethren, these strange people with retreating foreheads and with great obtruding lips and jaws . . . Sambo is not my man and brother.'<sup>71</sup> Carlyle legitimated a new-look

<sup>70</sup> *Occasional Discourse*, 1853, 36–7. For nineteenth-century constructions of race via the tropics and tropical disease, see Philip D. Curtin, *Death by Migration: Europe's Encounter with the Tropical World in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>71</sup> Quoted in John Sutherland, 'Thackeray as Victorian Racialist', *Essays in Criticism*, 20/4 (1970), 441–5; for Thackeray and pornographic racism, see Wood, *Blind Memory*, 43–5.

racism, it is not polite, it is not pretty, it does not pretend to high seriousness, but rather stands there snarling ready to lynch the spectre of blackness. Carlyle has moved on from the whimsy of eighteenth-century race humour, and even outgone the condescending sarcasm of Edward Long. He has also moved beyond the pseudo-scientific diction of Robert Knox: Carlyle is not interested in the post-Enlightenment debates on race, focused in arguments of lineage, gradualism, gradation. Charles White's notorious *An Account of the Regular Gradation in Man* with its exhaustive categorizational obsession with proving the inferiority of Africans, in its detail, in the very seriousness of its diction, belongs to a different world from the 'Occasional Discourse'.<sup>72</sup> Carlyle's racism, like Thackeray's, does not need elaborate proofs of inferiority, it simply assumes total difference. Carlyle declares that the only way to attack Quashee is to get down and dirty, and his method finds its apotheosis in a bevy of mid- to late Victorian texts reiterating the 'Occasional Discourse'. Anthony Trollope's *The West Indies and the Spanish Main* (1860) and Froude's *The English in the West Indies: The Bow of Ulysses* (1888) are particularly garish examples of a body of work which, in reiterating Carlyle, set out the ground rules for early twentieth-century American Negrophobe blockbusters, most notably, Thomas Dixon Jr's *The Clansman*.<sup>73</sup> The following example, basically extrapolating Carlyle's arguments on black inability to develop the Caribbean and reapplying them to Africa, demonstrates the extent to which Carlyle legitimated a certain humorously dismissive way of talking about blacks and civilization:

Since the dawn of history the Negro has owned the continent of Africa—rich beyond the dream of poet's fancy, crunching acres of diamonds beneath his bare black feet. Yet he never picked one up from the dust until a white man showed to him its glittering light. His land swarmed with powerful and docile animals, yet he never dreamed a harness, cart or sled. A hunter by necessity he never made an axe, spear or arrowhead worth preserving beyond the moment of its use. He lived as an ox, content to graze for an hour. In a land of stone and timber he never sawed a foot of lumber, carved a block, or built a house save of broken sticks and mud . . . He lived as his fathers lived—stole his food, worked his wife, sold his children, ate his brother, content to drink, sing, dance, and sport as the ape!<sup>74</sup>

<sup>72</sup> The best overview of the state of race theory in England when Carlyle was writing is Peter Kitson, 'Introduction', in ed., *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation*, viii. *Theories of Race* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1999), pp. vii–xxxiii. White's *Account* is reprinted, 215–64; see also H. F. Augstein, *Race: The Origins of an Idea 1760–1850* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996).

<sup>73</sup> For the ubiquity of this tradition and its influence on Marx and upon twentieth-century Caribbean historiography, see the fine summary in Veronica Marie Gregg, *Jean Rhys's Historical Imagination: Reading and Writing the Creole* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 5–21.

<sup>74</sup> Thomas Dixon, Jr, *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (Norborne, Mo.: Salon Publishing Company, 1904), 292.

Carlyle had provided a terribly potent blueprint. That is why, finally, Mill was right, neither he, nor John Greenleaf Whittier, who tried to fight satiric fire with fire, could alter the effects of what Carlyle's experiments in the discourse of racism achieved.<sup>75</sup> If a figure widely held up as one of the greatest social critics, moralists, and economic theorists of the nineteenth century could write about black people in the language of the 'Occasional Discourse', then any form of racial abuse seemed to be, and to a large extent was, legitimated. It is no coincidence that it is in the latter half of the nineteenth, and in the early twentieth century that the floodgates for racial humour are opened. It is as if Carlyle is mumbling over the memories of classical slave literatures, and taking the coarsest stuff out. As T. J. Wiedemann emphasizes: 'Ancient literature ascribes to slaves an assortment of vices and shortcomings . . . They are lazy, talkative, interested only in food, sex, and sleep, compulsive liars and steal the wine. These are crude prejudices but the evidence shows they were constants, at least from Aristophanes' time to that of the late antique Christian writers like Salvian.'<sup>76</sup> The fundamental dehumanizing mechanisms for attacking the blacks in popular culture become humorous; the race joke becomes a standard white bonding experience.

The terrible truth enshrined in the white hot despair of Mill's verdict on the publication of the 'Occasional Discourse', 'I hardly know of an act by which one person could have done so much mischief as this may possibly do', lives on. The true inheritance of Carlyle's 'Occasional Discourse' is set down with an awful clarity in the words of Neil Acourt, Gary Dobson, Luke Knight, Charlie Martin, David Norris, and Danny Caetano. Our late twentieth-century version of the 'Occasional Discourse' is Appendix 10 of the *Stephen Lawrence Inquiry*. The taped conversation of these ghastly white boys is formulated in a language Carlyle not only understood, but to a large extent originated.<sup>77</sup>

Where did Carlyle get his information, from what evidence did he extrapolate his racist fantasies of Demerara? According to Mill a superficial perusal, probably half remembered, of the most extreme pro-slavery texts of the late eighteenth century.<sup>78</sup> In fact Carlyle bases his opinions on no authority at all. He delights in his ignorance, because it enables the race fantasy. Carlyle does not want to think deeply about black people, their culture or history, that would problematize, even endanger, the joke. Racist humour feeds in and off

<sup>75</sup> John Greenleaf Whittier, 'Thomas Carlyle on the Slave Question', in Jules Paul Seigel (ed.), *Thomas Carlyle: The Critical Heritage* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 311-17.

<sup>76</sup> T. J. Wiedemann, *New Surveys in the Classics, No. 19, Slavery* (1987, repr. with Addenda 1992 and with Further Addenda 1997), 25.

<sup>77</sup> *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Appendixes, Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for the Home Secretary by Command of Her Majesty, March 1999* (The Stationary Office Ltd, London, 1999), Appendix 10, pp. 1-56.

<sup>78</sup> Mill, 'Negro Question', 466.



stereotypes, and stereotypes grow in, and demand the perpetuation of, ignorance. Carlyle cites no sources, except one, Lord John Russell's speech in the Commons stating that emancipated blacks are 'doing very well'. That is all Carlyle needs to hear to set off the tirade that follows. Black people have no right to do very well. Carlyle, sitting back perusing the newspapers and working himself into a fury over the privileged status enjoyed by lazy blacks, is reincarnated in the figures of the probable murderers of Stephen Lawrence. They sit in front of their television seeing slickly produced images of black people on beaches doing 'very well'. Just like Carlyle, as soon as they see black people frolicking in the sun, they see white people suffering. Just like Carlyle, they are furious and feel the need to voice their right to protest:

(GD) THIS IS A RACIST ADVERT . . . NIGGERS HAVING A GOOD TIME IN THE SUN. ALL THE WHITE PEOPLE WAITING AT A BUS STOP. ALL THE NIGGERS ARE HAVING A GOOD TIME AT THE BAR DRINKING. THE WHITE FAT BOUNCER LOOKS A CUNT, NICE LOOKING BLACK CUNT SUPPOSED TO BE. GOOD LOOKING BLACK GEEZER IN THE CLUB ALL HAVING A GOOD TIME AND THE FUCKING WHITE GEEZERS ARE ALL BORING.

(NA) THAT'S RACIST THAT ADVERT . . . IF HEINEKEN WAS TO DO SOMETHING LIKE THAT WITH ALL THE WHITE PEOPLE LIKE BEING HAVING A GOOD TIME WITH ALL THE NIGGERS ALL ALL THEM FUCKING PRATTING ABOUT—

(GD) YEAH IN THE (SLUMS) AND THE NIGGERS HAVING A RIGHT GOOD TIME WITH BEER AT A PARTY. THAT WOULDN'T EVEN MAKE IT ON THE AIR.<sup>79</sup>

So Acourt and Dobson, just like Carlyle, can sniff out their own 'Sluggard and Scoundrel Protection Society': Exeter Hall philanthropy has been reincarnated as the Heineken advertising team. Acourt and Dobson share the Carlylean vision and cannot see even the fiction of a black person in a state of happiness without seeing white people suffering as the price to be paid. When Carlyle wrote his attacks on the blacks, eating pumpkins and drinking rum in the sunshine, there were a lot of genuine and enormous slums in English cities. When Acourt and Dobson invented their fantasy there really were not any formal 'slums' as such left. Yet they still see those slums as clearly as they still see 'lazy niggers'; these images just do not go away, and Carlyle and Mill both understood that. Just like Carlyle, Acourt and Dobson cannot think of a country where black people live without thinking of a jungle with no civilization. The basis of this language in a monumental slovenliness of thought and feeling, and in an ability to feign outrage, comes straight from Carlyle:

<sup>79</sup> *Lawrence Inquiry, Appendixes*, 10, pp. 55–6.

(NA) YOU RUBBER LIPPED CUNT [LAUGHS]

[NA PICKS UP KNIFE FROM WINDOW LEDGE SITS DOWN STICKS KNIFE INTO ARM OF CHAIR]

(NA) I RECKON THAT EVERY NIGGER SHOULD BE CHOPPED UP MATE AND THEY SHOULD BE LEFT WITH (NOTHING BUT) FUCKING STUMPS.

(LK) D'YA REMEMBER THAT ENOOCH [*sic*] POWELL—THAT GEEZER HE KNEW STRAIGHT AWAY HE WENT OVER TO AFRICA AND ALL THAT RIGHT—

(NA) IS THAT WHAT HAPPENED.

(LK) YEAH HE, HE KNEW IT, HE KNEW IT WAS A SHIT HOLE AND HE CAME BACK HERE SAYING THEY'RE UNCIVILISED AND ALL THAT AND THEN THEY STARTED COMING OVER HERE AND HE KNEW, HE KNEW STRAIGHT AWAY HE WAS SAYING NO I DON'T WANT THEM HERE NO FUCKING NIGGERS THEY'LL RUIN THE GAFF AND HE WAS RIGHT THEY HAVE FUCKING RUINED IT.<sup>80</sup>

Luke Knight and Thomas Carlyle are in harmony over the essentials, they share the same mindset. They both like to call black people 'niggers', they both know that black people have no civilization, and they both know that if black people mix with white societies they 'ruin the gaff'. They both like to laugh at the grotesque caricatures they create but finally do not believe in. Carlyle as a rhetorician of race was, unfortunately, way ahead of his time, he developed a wicked sense of humour. What is truly culpable about Carlyle's text is its knowing stupidity, and this is a quality that is terribly modern.

### The 'Nigger Question', as a Stick to Beat 'Uncle Tom', and 'Uncle Tom' as a Cross for Carlyle to Bear

once this malodorous melancholy '*Uncle Tommery*' is got all well put by!

(Carlyle, *Letters*, xxviii. 137)

The publication history of the 'Occasional Discourse' is significant: it appeared twice in England, in very different forms. Carlyle wrote the piece initially as an essay for *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country*, where it bore the more polite title 'Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question', and summarized Carlyle's mounting nihilism concerning the present state of Britain, in relation to the sugar colonies. Yet Carlyle then expanded and revised the work substantially and published it as an independent pamphlet in 1853. The two editions have

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, Appendix 10, pp. 9–10.

never been seen as very different, but they are.<sup>81</sup> The second publication was a strategic anti-abolition intervention, and the substantial alterations and additions had two main aims. First, it was explicitly designed as an assault on the popularity of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Secondly, it was designed to create an image of Carlyle himself as martyr to the pro-slavery cause, a figure 'crucified' by the philanthropists.

The 1853 publication has not been linked to the sensational success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but Carlyle's letters reveal an increasingly violent obsession with the popularity of Stowe's anti-slavery classic. I want to finish this discussion of Carlyle by looking first at the manner in which he approached, and compulsively denied Stowe's popular success, and secondly at the way this led him into the world of martyrology. The desire to usurp the slave as suffering victim, which is such a recurrent theme in this book, finds perhaps its most perverse manifestation in Carlyle.

In 1853 when Stowe visited England Carlyle's fury erupted. The mass interest in her book, and the cult surrounding its author, confounded even Carlyle's rigorous attempts to shut the black slave out of his serious writing. In a letter to Arthur Hugh Clough, Carlyle fulminated about what became for him the literally asinine nature of the craze. Even for Carlyle the attack is a wild one; Stowe and her book are turned into a huge dead donkey, while the public appear as sewage workers, poking the ass's corpse about with long poles in a tank of excrement: 'The Beecher-Stowe concern is bumbling along. I believe, amid the May Meetings, like the carcass of a big ass in a dunghill tank which many men are stirring with long poles. . . . It is a fact, however, that the great body of rational people are indifferent to it or more, and only the weak-minded and strong-lunged are concerned in these phenomena.'<sup>82</sup> The mass circulation of Stowe's novel, and her celebrity, came to define for Carlyle the essentially sentimental and hypocritical nature of popular abolition, and all 'Exeter Hall philanthropy' of any sort. In another letter Carlyle makes explicit the connection between the rewriting and reprinting of the 'Occasional Discourse' 1853, and the effect of Stowe's writing on him: 'There is some proposal to reprint just now, for the benefit of Uncle Tom and *Co*, that *Lecture on the Nigger Question*, which distressed the world, thro' *Fraser*; a couple of years ago . . . Uncle Tom's flat nose would really be much better for a seasonable fillip in these extravagant days: but I could wish any other than I had been appointed for that outpost duty!—'<sup>83</sup> If Carlyle felt increasing delight over re-forming the 'Occasional Discourse' as a

<sup>81</sup> The best consideration of the Mill-Carlyle dialogue over the 'Occasional Discourse' is Goldberg, 'Liberalism's Limits', 204–10. Goldberg sees no major alterations in the two versions of Carlyle's piece.

<sup>82</sup> *Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Walsh Carlyle*, ed. Charles Richard Sanders, 29 vols. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1970–2001), xxviii, 134.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, xxviii, 144–5.

tool to beat Uncle Tom over the head with, he also became increasingly uneasy over placing himself in the role of self-appointed martyr to the pro-slavery cause. This comes out in subsequent letters, as does his unease over the quality of argument in the 'Occasional Discourse': 'Bosworth, at present, want to print the "Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question" (to astonish the *Uncle Tommery* a little); but that I find questionable hitherto,—the Piece itself (as I see today) is very imperfect, in parts bad; and the "cry of stuck pigs" which is sure to follow from it (and is not a musical thing) will be great. I doubt, I doubt.—'<sup>84</sup>

Carlyle did not, however, doubt for long and the piece duly appeared, as a slap in the face for 'these dim unbeautiful millions all chanting Uncle-Tom'.<sup>85</sup> His desire to write out, or to overwrite, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* through the act of republishing the 'Occasional Discourse' is strangely literalized in another letter where he delightedly alludes to a crude propaganda exercise perpetrated by the Duke of Argyll: 'The best thing I have heard was that of the Duke of Argyll, buying *Nigger Questions*; scratching out my name, putting in "by Mrs. Beecher Stowe"; and sending them to select parties!—'<sup>86</sup> As his response matured Carlyle increasingly saw the Uncle Tom 'mania' as a form of diabolic possession. This naturally leads him into his own metaphorical extension of Burke's notorious phrase the 'swinish multitude', via a return to their origin in the Gospel: '*Uncle Tom's Cabin* is the mania of *this* season; what will that of the *next* be? Perhaps a worse even! The present generation often seems to me like *Gadarenes Swine*, rushing all with one loud accord "down steep places", the devil *being* in them!'<sup>87</sup> Carlyle sees the phenomenal success of Stowe's *Uncle Tom* as typical of the false philanthropy of the day. The typological application of the 'Gadarene swine' in this letter seems to be the first time Carlyle thought of associating abolition popular sentiment through this particular analogy. When Carlyle decides to channel his paranoia over the *Uncle Tom* mania in England into the rewriting and reissue of the 'Occasional Discourse' the 'Gadarene swine' metaphor becomes a central one in the material he inserts. The 'Gadarene swine' comes to stand for a general philanthropic anarchy that is presented, first as destroying Carlyle, and then itself.

The main change to the 'Occasional Discourse' of 1853 involved the incorporation of a long passage that constitutes the bulk of 'Chapter two' and that is headed by the question 'Do I, then, hate the negro?' Carlyle begins his strange journey into suffering by celebrating himself as an empathetic humanitarian and by asking, and then answering, another question: 'Am I gratified in my mind by the ill usage of any two or four-legged thing; of any horse or dog? Not so, I assure you.'<sup>88</sup> As this bizarre passage continues, Carlyle then proceeds to

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, xxviii. 153.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, xxviii. 195.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, xxviii. 195.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, xxviii. 15.

<sup>88</sup> *Occasional Discourse*, 1853, 15.

produce his own very special take on black suffering, and its role in displacing white. Carlyle not only refuses to believe the abolition propaganda describing the slave suffering, but begins to set himself up as a martyr victim to this material. The process begins when he decides that suffering is an inevitable aspect of human life: 'Frightful things are continually told us of negro slavery, of the hardships, bodily and spiritual, suffered by slaves. Much exaggerated, and mere exceptional cases, say the opponents. Exceptional yes; and universal ones! On the whole, hardships, and even oppressions and injustices are not unknown in this world; I myself have suffered such.'<sup>89</sup> As the passage progresses, Carlyle sees himself, again in a minority of one, as the ultimate victim, persecuted for his objection to 'the flunky world' as it manipulates 'its ballot boxes, negro suffrages . . . and other satisfactory Gospels and Talmuds, into the throat of the devil', not bothered by the importunate minority on the road. Did you never hear of "Crucify him! Crucify him!" That was considerable feat in the suppressing of minorities.<sup>90</sup> Carlyle, standing out for slavery, in the 'Occasional Discourse' of 1849, was widely criticized. The criticisms give him the opportunity to reinvent himself in the second edition as Christological martyr. This book has presented many examples of the ingenious ways in which abolitionists constructed themselves as martyrs in a compulsive desire to simultaneously displace and possess the suffering of the slave. Carlyle is the only pro-slavery publicist to present himself as a martyr to the uncontrolled fury of abolition.

With Carlyle 'crucified' for his views, the interpolation in the 1853 edition then mounts to a climax, in which animalized 'Equality' is shown as demonically and suicidally possessed. The concept of universal human equality, 'millionfold folly' with black and white commingled, is a monster which rapidly runs out of control and threatens first to stampede the, presumably crucified, Carlyle, and secondly to destroy itself. It is as a climax to this horrific vision of black mingling with white on terms of political equality that Carlyle reintroduces the Gadarene swine:

Let no man in particular be put at the top; let all men be accounted equally wise and worthy . . . among two legged animals of the unfeathered class . . . decide by count of heads, the vote of a Demerara nigger equal, and no more, to that of a Chancellor Bacon: this, I perceive, will . . . give the *minimum* of wisdom in your proceedings . . . Were it beautiful think you? Folly in such millionfold majority, at length peaceably supreme in this earth. Advancing on you as the huge buffalo-phalanx does in the western deserts; or as, on a smaller scale, those bristly creatures did in the Country of the Gadarenes. Rushing, namely, in wild *stampede* . . . so could Folly rush; the enlightened public one huge Gadarenes swinery, tail cocked, snout in air, with joyful

<sup>89</sup> Occasional Discourse, 1853, 15.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. 18.

animating, short squeak; fast and ever faster; down steep places, to the sea of Tiberias, and the bottomless cloacas of nature: quenched there, since nowhere sooner. My friends, such sight is *too* sublime, if you are out in it, and are not of it!<sup>91</sup>

Carlyle's animalization takes a sublime turn, and enfolds both black and white, casting them into a universal shit heap, the 'bottomless cloacas of nature'. His horror at the popular success of *Uncle Tom* inspires a vision of demonic possession. Yet Carlyle's fanatical disgust at the idea that white people could feel sympathy for Blacks, his conviction that this sympathy had tortured him to death, and his conviction that slavery was not only necessary but inevitable, found a highly influential supporter. John Ruskin was to take Carlyle's ideas on slavery and run with them in some peculiarly original directions.

### Ruskin and the Aestheticization of Carlyle's Slave Theory

My friends, I have come to the sad conclusion that *slavery*, whether established by law, or by law abrogated, exists very extensively in this world, in and out of the West Indies; and, in fact, that you cannot abolish slavery by act of parliament, but can only abolish the *name* of it, which is very little!

(Thomas Carlyle, *Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question*)

The fact is that slavery is not a political institution at all, *but an inherent, natural an eternal inheritance* of a large portion of the human race—to whom, the more you give of their own free will, the more slaves they will make of themselves.

(John Ruskin, *Munera Pulveris*)

I had heard nothing of that terrible slave affair, till your letter came. I can understand the effect it may have—but here in Europe many and many a martyrdom must come before we shall overthrow our slavery.

(John Ruskin, *Letter to Charles Eliot Norton*)<sup>92</sup>

John Ruskin engaged with slavery as a phenomenon in Western culture throughout his mature works. One of the set-piece descriptions with which he first made his name in *Modern Painters* was the unparalleled analysis of the Turner masterpiece *Slavers throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying Typhon Coming on*. Ruskin owned this painting and returned to it again and again in his work. The accumulated writings he generated around his responses to the *Slave Ship* might arguably be said to constitute both the most effective and the most pathological nineteenth-century art theory to confront the inheritance of

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. 19–20.

<sup>92</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, xxxvi. 329–30.

the Atlantic slave trade.<sup>93</sup> Leaving aside Ruskin's writings on the *Slave Ship*, which are a special case that I have dealt with extensively elsewhere, I now want to turn to Ruskin's socio-political analyses of the concept of slavery. When trying to understand why Ruskin took the positions he did on slavery, the influence of Carlyle is everywhere. Ruskin and Carlyle together probably had a bigger impact, as intellectuals telling people in England and North America what was wrong with the society they lived in and how it should be changed, than any other nineteenth-century British authors, with the possible exception of Dickens. The fact that both men were continual, passionate, and public defenders of slavery systems matters a lot. Ruskin has remained the most neglected of all major Victorian authors when issues of slavery, race, and empire are on the agenda.<sup>94</sup> Yet developing Carlyle's views on wage and chattel slavery, Ruskin evolved a hybrid, and typically ingenious, aesthetico-labour theory that has been hugely influential for one hundred and fifty years. While appearing to be a passionate argument relating to the aesthetic liberation of the English factory labourer, his theory was also a passionate defence of the appropriateness, in fact necessity, of slave labour in the colonies. As ever, one part of the argument has been taken up and celebrated as part of the English radical labour tradition, the other has remained invisible.

### 'Do you know what slavery means?': Ruskin Redefines Slavery

Ruskin was a compulsive definer, and comes at slavery with a typical desire to make things appallingly clear. His assault on the theory and practice of Political Economy, *Munera Pulveris*, contains a protracted discussion of the theory and definition of slavery within Western culture. This discussion ends with the statement: 'I should dwell . . . at more length on this subject of slavery, had not all I would say been said already . . . by Carlyle, in the first of the *Latter Day Pamphlets* . . . together with that as much neglected, and still more immediately needed, on model prisons, and with the great chapter on "Permanence" (fifth of the last chapter of *Past and present*).'<sup>95</sup> The latter day pamphlet that Ruskin singles out, is, needless to say, the same one that contains Carlyle's final reduction of the black to an animal.<sup>96</sup> All Ruskin's later major works of social commentary including *The Stones of Venice*, *The Cestus of Aglaia*, *Fors Clavigera*,

<sup>93</sup> For an extended critique of all Ruskin's writings on this painting, see Wood, *Blind Memory*, 41–68.

<sup>94</sup> Ruskin is barely mentioned in Lorimer, *Colour, Class and the Victorians*; Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness*; Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); and is comprehensively shut out of post-colonial discourse. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 123–6 proves, as so often, the vital exception.

<sup>95</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, xvii. 260–1.

<sup>96</sup> For the discussion of slavery in 'The Present Time', see pp. 369–70 above.

*The Crown of Wild Olive*, *Munera Pulveris*, and *Time and Tide* contain discussions of slavery, in relation to labour systems. There are also countless disquisitions in the letters, and finally the open letter to *The Daily Telegraph* and the public lecture defending, under Carlyle's instigation, Governor Eyre, during the outcry following the Morant Bay rebellion. A subject to which I will return.<sup>97</sup> All of these discussions are, at one level or another, commentaries upon, or extensions of, Carlyle's slavery theory as outlined in *Past and Present* and *Latter Day Pamphlets*. Yet Ruskin's approach differs from Carlyle's in one great respect. For Ruskin slavery is an entirely relative and fluid phenomenon, which depends upon the imaginative make-up of the labourer and the work s/he is set to do. Ruskin is far more concerned with a precise social definition of slavery, and with master/slave relationships within the behavioural contracts he sees underlying slave systems, than Carlyle. He is also, at least up until *Munera Pulveris*, consistently different in tone; and he eschews the crude race humour that typifies Carlyle's writing on blacks. It is the high seriousness of his tone, combined with the ingenious indirectness of his approach to the justification of chattel slavery, which finally make him a dangerous, because sympathetic, cultural critic.

The ability of his *critique* to move into Carlylean brusqueness, and then out into an obliqueness and neo-abstraction that is very different, come out forcefully in *Munera Pulveris*, where several definitions of slavery are set up. The first definition relates to physical restraint and punishment, and leads Ruskin to compare plantation slavery and European war, and to adopt a stance of Carlylean brutalism. The basic argument is that as long as masters are good masters and slaves are good slaves, and both understand that they are naturally cut out for these roles, then 'compulsion', although the ultimate basis of slavery, fades from the equation.<sup>98</sup> As with Carlyle, the argument is that slavery is simply a societal relation where certain rules must be obeyed. It is only when they are not obeyed, either through abuse by the master or through disobedience by the slave, that physical force becomes not only visible but necessary. Ruskin then moves into familiar ground, comparing naval impressment or military conscription in England with black enslavement in the colonies. He concludes that: 'it is better and kinder to flog a man to his work, than to leave him idle till he robs and to flog him afterwards. The essential thing for all creatures is to be made to do right; how they are made to do it—by pleasant promises or hard necessities, pathetic oratory, or the whip—is comparatively immaterial.'<sup>99</sup>

<sup>97</sup> For an exhaustive cross-referenced inventory of every treatment of slaves and slavery throughout Ruskin's oeuvre, see the entries 'Slave', 'Slave Trade', 'Slavery' in the Cook and Wedderburn index volume, Ruskin, *Works*, xxxix.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, xvii. 254–5.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, xvii. 255.



This is Ruskin mimicking Carlyle but without the sick jokes. Provided the masters, whether naval officers, army officers, or plantation owners, are seeking to compel their subjects to 'do right' the use of any form of violence is permissible. Ruskin basically elaborates Carlyle's gospel of the necessity of slave labour as expressed in 'The Present Time', the essay that Ruskin singled out at the start of the analysis as particularly valuable: 'To each of you I will then say: Here is work for you; strike into it with manlike, soldierlike obedience . . . Refuse to strike into it; shirk the heavy labour, disobey the rules,—I will admonish and endeavour to incite you; if in vain I will flog you; if still in vain I will at last shoot you,—and make God's Earth, and the forlorn-hope in God's Battle, free of you.' Carlyle's perverse humour is at its sardonic extreme here. His act of fascistic murder, the execution of the slave who will not 'obey the rules', is set out as a divinely sanctioned act of liberation, 'God's Earth' is made 'free' of the recalcitrant slave.<sup>100</sup> Yet the message of this passage was to stay with Ruskin, and he performs variations on it at other points in his work. It is almost as if he wants to make sure that for all his fossicking around with objects and theories of beauty, he can convince us that he is as 'hard' as Carlyle if required to be.

Having dealt with the physical force argument, and come down heavily on the side of Carlyle, Ruskin's next task is to consider relative forms of slavery. Like Carlyle he believes in good forms of slavery as well as bad. Ruskin's central premiss, which is that slavery is not relative, but depends entirely on the quality of the person enslaved and of the person enslaving. It is the enslavement of elevated spirits to debased forms of labour that constitutes the worst form of slavery. For Ruskin, as for Carlyle, the black is a debased being suited to the work s/he is put to on the plantation. The white European is an elevated soul, who is debased by being forced to work as a wage labourer in a factory: 'If . . . slavery mean not merely the purchase of the right of compulsion, but the *purchase of the body and soul of the creature itself for money*, it is not, I think, among the black races that purchases of this kind are most extensively made, or that separate souls of a fine make fetch the highest price.'<sup>101</sup>

Carlyle's work ethic, which functions as the basis for a compulsive enslavement, at this point undergoes a process of typically Ruskinian refinement. The different constructions of human character lead to different sorts of slaves and slavery. For Ruskin, ever on the lookout for aesthetically elevated models for his thought, the paradigmatic exposition of this insight is to be found in Shakespeare's *Tempest*: 'In common parlance, we idly confuse captivity with slavery, and are always thinking of the difference between pine-trunks (Ariel in the pine), and cowslip-bells ("in the cowslip-bell I lie") or between carrying wood

<sup>100</sup> For the continued power of this passage to shock, see Levy, *Hard Times*, 28–9, where this passage is read as a 'defense of Genocide', and 'a slogan to be inscribed on the entrance to Hell'.

<sup>101</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, xvii. 255–6.

and drinking (Caliban's slavery and freedom), instead of noticing the far more serious differences between Ariel and Caliban themselves.<sup>102</sup>

Ruskin then argues that Ariel, as the fine-spirited, dutiful, and honest servant represents a good type of slave, so committed to their happy bondage that they do not see their state as servitude at all. While Caliban represents a brutish form of slave, who deserves all he gets because of his debased nature: 'Ariel and Caliban are respectively the spirits of faithful and imaginative labour, opposed to rebellious, hurtful and slavish labour.'<sup>103</sup> The system works because Prospero is the ideal master and hero (a Ruskinian development of the Hero in Carlyle's thought) who treats his slaves precisely according to their merits. He exists in contradistinction to Caliban's mother Sycorax who is read as a brutal tyrant: 'Prospero ("for Hope"), a true governor, is opposed to Sycorax, the mother of slavery her name "Swine-raven" indicating at once brutality and deathfulness.' When Prospero arrives Ariel is the victim of a bad system of slavery because the subject of a bad owner: 'Ariel is the spirit of generous and free-hearted service, in early stages of human society oppressed by ignorance and wild tyranny; "venting groans as fast as mill wheels strike".'<sup>104</sup> Ruskin does not of course deal with the passages in the play where Prospero threatens and taunts Ariel with the reimposition of the tortures that Sycorax had imposed.<sup>105</sup> He also does not think about why Caliban speaks to Prospero in courtly iambic pentameters, and is given some of the most imaginative and refined language in the play.<sup>106</sup> It was not until the twentieth century that African, American, and Caribbean authors presented a series of strikingly different and politically engaged readings of the play. George Lamming was to go so far as to see in Ariel's delighted servitude the mark not merely of the hybrid political middle man, but of the corrupt political spy, working for Prospero, and betraying the libertarian energies of Caliban. But there is not time to review this counter mythology here.<sup>107</sup> The important point is the extremity of Ruskin's reading. Prospero is the utterly fair and elevated colonizer, the European who can see within subject peoples exactly what capacity they have for improvement and

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., xvii. 256-7.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., xvii. 258.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., xvii. 258-9. For Ruskin's subsequent construction of himself as the Prospero figure and his domestic servants as Ariels or Calibans, see his series of 'Letters on Servants and Houses' sent to the *Daily Telegraph*, in 1865; Ruskin, *Works*, xvii. 519-27.

<sup>105</sup> *Tempest*, I. ii. 262-92.

<sup>106</sup> *Tempest*, II. ii. 167-72; III. ii. 135-43.

<sup>107</sup> For post-colonial construction of *The Tempest*, see Robert Marquez (ed.), 'Caliban: Towards a Discussion of Culture in our America', Special Issue, *Massachusetts Review*, 15 (1974). 7-72; for the classic new historicist take Stephen Greenblatt, 'Learning to Curse', in *Learning to Curse* (New York: Routledge, 1990); for an African radical reappropriation, Taban Lo Liyong, 'Uncle Tom's Black Humour', in *Frantz Fanon's Uneven Ribs* (London: Heinemann, 1971). The best survey of the shifting cultural interpretations within the context of colonialism is Aldent T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason, *Shakespeare's Caliban: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

knows how to act accordingly. This is a world of clear-cut behavioural absolutes, which are dictated by, and exist in relation to, white European behavioural norms founded in the system of domestic servitude.<sup>108</sup> Prospero can see that Ariel is ‘delicate’ and so treats him with delicacy, he can equally see that Caliban is brutish and so treats him with brutality.<sup>109</sup> The reason that Ruskin draws this comparison out at such length lies in his desire to establish an absolute distinction between the colonial slave’s suitedness for slavery, and the European labourer’s necessity for working at the right sort of imaginative task, in order to bring out his or her fine and ‘delicate’ spirit.

**‘[It] is a very profound state of slavery to be kept, myself,  
low in the forehead, that I may not dislike low work’:  
Ruskin and Wage Slavery**

if you mix with low foreheads you become a low forehead.  
(Arnold Schwarzenegger (interesting name) in *Pumping Iron*)

What infuriates Ruskin throughout his slavery writings is the idea that the white labourer in industrial Europe can be treated with disdain and forced to do labour as difficult as that of the colonial slave. He finds the necessity for constructing a defence of the European labourer outrageous. This is made explicit at several points; the following passage in *Time and Tide* is very clear on the matter:

You [the privileged classes] imply that a certain portion of mankind must be employed in degrading work; and that, to fit them for this work, it is necessary to limit their knowledge, their active powers, and their enjoyments, from childhood upwards . . . And by their labour in this contracted state of mind, we superior beings are to be maintained . . . Mind, I do not say that this is *not* the right state of things. Only, if it be, you need not be so over-particular about the slave-trade, it seems to me. What is the use of arguing so pertinaciously that a black’s skull will hold as much as a white’s, when you are declaring in the same breath that a white’s skull must not hold as much as it can, or it will be the worse for him? It does not appear to me at all a profound state of slavery to be whipped into doing a piece of low work that I don’t like; but it is a very profound state of slavery to be kept, myself, low in the forehead, that I may not dislike low work.<sup>110</sup>

<sup>108</sup> See Ruskin, *Works*, xvii. 516–27, ‘Letters on Servants and Houses’, a series of despairing and petulant letters to *The Times* concerning the sacred nature of his relationship with his servants and the difficulty of finding good servants in the present day. Letter 3, ‘Domestic Servants—Sonship and Slavery’, is particularly clear.

<sup>109</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, xix. 88–9.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, xix. 438.

This is clever writing, teetering on the edge of the crude racism that Carlyle so boisterously embraces, but always backing off from it. In defending the superiority of the white Ruskin edges towards celebrating the inferiority of the black. He constantly argues that the white's state of mind has been 'contracted'; the possibility of such contraction does not exist for the black. Ruskin does not say outright that a black's skull will hold less than a white's but he implies it, and so recalls the measurements and volume testing experiments detailed by Charles White in his *Account of the Regular Gradation* to prove the massive intellectual inferiority of the black, and repeated in the manuals of scientific racism throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>111</sup> Similarly he does not expressly say that blacks are low in the forehead, another commonplace of the emergent scientific racism, and a commonplace that, as we have seen, Carlyle took up wholeheartedly in the 'Occasional Discourse', but again he does imply it. He does not say that idle blacks should be compelled to work, by use of the 'beneficent whip', to use Carlyle's phrase, but again leaves a lot of space for this interpretation. The point around which the entire disquisition revolves is the basic proposition that in treating 'our' labouring classes the way 'we do' we are reducing their human potential to that of black slaves. The black slaves (the Calibans) have no capacity for aesthetic delicacy or imaginative achievement, the whites (the Ariels) do. If you accept this premiss, then you can erect a white slave victimhood upon the body of the black; slave suffering is yet again a competition. The very worst forms of slavery involve treating whites like blacks, because this is to treat them, due to their capacity for 'delicacy', worse than blacks. This is not merely blind envy at the slave's suffering, but blind fury that the slave's plight should be taken seriously, when the suffering of refined European labour victims is not. His defence of slavery is developed out of the belief that some people, because of their natures and colour, are born to be slaves, and some for the same pre-ordained reason, are born to be masters. In this sense his slavery theory is evolved primarily out of Carlyle but via Plato and more precisely Aristotle.<sup>112</sup>

If you believe that some people are natural-born slaves, and some are not, then nineteenth-century London can be a dangerously catalytic environment. Ruskin walks around in a world where his sensibility is consistently assaulted by seeing the visible signs of a white slavery, in his words 'much more cruel' than black chattel slavery. Even worse the rest of white society seems to be blind to these trip wires. For the increasingly tremulous Ruskin there are semiotic

<sup>111</sup> Charles White, *An Account of the Regular Gradation in Man, and in Different Animals and Vegetables and from the Former to the Latter* (London, 1799), repr. in Robert Bernasconi (ed.), *Concepts of Race in the Eighteenth Century*, 8 vols. (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 2001), viii. 1-146.

<sup>112</sup> See the precise discussion in David Brion Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 25-6.

triggers everywhere and even his library is booby-trapped. There is an extreme enactment of how these mechanisms go off in Ruskin's hypersensitive, indeed pathological, consciousness, within the late work *The Cestus of Aglaia*. This is worth looking at in detail because it shows the subtlety, and totality, with which Ruskin could move from aesthetic contemplation and judgement, to the social analysis of slavery systems, and finally into a disbelieving contempt for black emancipation as a project. It is Ruskin's intellectual triangular trade: he opens a book and looks at the pictures:

costliest engravings—large, skilful, appallingly laborious; dotted into textures like the dust on a lily leaf,—smoothed through gradations like clouds,—graved to surfaces like mother-of-pearl; and by all this toil there is set forth for the delight of English women, a series of the basest dreams that ungoverned feminine imagination can coin in sickliest indolence,—ball-room amours, combats of curled knights, pilgrimages of disguised girl pages, romantic pieties, charities in costume,—a mass of disguised sensualism and feverish vanity—impotent, pestilent, prurient, scented with a venomous elixir, and rouged with a deadly dust of outward good . . . all common human wit and sense extinguished in the vicious scum of lying sensation.<sup>113</sup>

I do not think he liked what he saw—modern art is personified as a diseased, but highly decorated whore. Technical refinement directed towards the description of unworthy subjects, mainly as ever for Ruskin sexual depravity, is disgusting. Yet in these pictures Ruskin sees a good deal more—the most terrible of all forms of slavery. Ruskin moves immediately to state that for all these modern engravings of debased subjects the works of the great Italian masters lie neglected. From here he moves directly into a discussion of the abolition movement.<sup>114</sup> Why he does this only comes out if the passage is quoted at some length, although not in anything like its heartfelt, and quite mad, entirety:

Friends, there have been hard fighting and heavy sleeping, this many a day, on the other side of the Atlantic, in the cause, as you suppose of Freedom against slavery; and you are all, open-mouthed, expecting the glories of Black Emancipation. Perhaps a little White Emancipation on this side of the water might be still more desirable, and more easily and guiltlessly won.

Do you know what slavery means? Supposing a gentle-man taken by a Barbary corsair—set to field-work; chained and flogged to it from dawn to eve. Need he be a slave therefore? By no means; he is but a hardly treated prisoner. There is some work which the Barbary corsair will not be able to make him do; such work as a Christian gentleman may not do, that he will not, though he die for it. Bound and scourged he may be, but he has heard of a Person's being bound and scourged before now, who was not therefore a slave. He is not a whit more slave for that . . . A man who has been sold by another, may be but a half a slave or none; but the man who has sold himself! He is the accurately Finished Bondsman.

<sup>113</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, xix. 102.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, xix. 102–3.

And gravely I say that I know *no* captivity so sorrowful as that of an artist doing, consciously, bad work for pay! It is the serfdom of the finest gifts—of all that should lead and master men, offering itself to be spit upon, and that for a bribe . . . *you*, with your painfully acquired power . . . To bite permanent mischief in with acid; to spread an inked infection of evil all your days . . . One would get quit of *this* servitude.<sup>115</sup>

This book has laid bare a variety of impassioned and ingenious set pieces that show the white author in competition with the suffering black slave. Here Ruskin has achieved an unequalled aesthetic extreme. He begins with a piece of paradoxical perversity. If the white slave will not do the bidding of the black slave master, or ‘Barbary Corsair’, and is punished for it, he immediately gains Christological status. A black slave who does not obey the white master’s rules gets a different narrative verdict from both Carlyle and Ruskin. Yet the Barbary Corsair is a mere aperitif before the main rhetorical meal. While the white Christian gentleman will die for his principles in a state of slavery in Africa, the white English artisan has been made not merely into a slave, but into a sex-slave by *laissez-faire* in London. Art is quite literally prostituted, the artisan become a right tart.

The respectable and well-paid Victorian jobbing steel engraver, producing plates for the expanding leisure market, is appropriated by Ruskin, and reinvented as a figure more wretched, emasculated, and degraded than the most miserable plantation slave. The etching process itself, the biting, the inking, the printing of multiple copies, becomes an act of prostituted, and diseased, intercourse. The etchings have moved on: they began as being an enticement to prostitution, ‘pestilent, prurient, scented with a venomous elixir, and rouged with a deadly dust of outward good’, but now they have drawn Ruskin into their dark secret; each time the etcher makes a print and sells it, it is the equivalent of a prostituted slave giving a client venereal disease: ‘to spread an inked infection of evil all your days’. Ruskin gives a new sexual charge to the well-trying catch-phrase ‘come up and see my etchings’.

### ‘The Nature of the Gothic’: Ruskin’s Final Solution to the Wage-Slavery/Chattel-Slavery Debates

The enslavement of Africans within the Atlantic slave trade, and the plantation systems of the Americas, emerges as enmeshed in Ruskin’s work in a number of ways. Behind every new departure into breaking down and uncovering the causes and nature of the suffering of the wage labourer in England lurks the emanation of plantation slavery as a shadowy but threatening domain. Ruskin’s central confrontation with the theme in his work as an aesthician occurs in

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, xix. 104–5.

volume two of *The Stones of Venice*, entitled 'The Nature of the Gothic'. This writing at one level constitutes a particularly brilliant, and for his contemporaries persuasive, re-rendering of the old pro-slavery platitude that the lot of the plantation slave is superior to that of the industrial labourer in Britain. Yet, because of its centrality to proto-socialist thought, and its position as the theoretical bedrock of the Arts and Crafts movement, this discussion has never been seen for what it is.<sup>116</sup> There is also the irresistible beauty in which the theory is framed: Ruskin emerges as the most seductive pro-slavery theorist to come out of England.

'The Nature of the Gothic' is one of the most influential pieces of socially motivated aesthetic criticism ever written. It is a passionate attack on capitalist wage slavery. The attack, however, is carried through at the deliberate expense of the African plantation slave. The influence of 'The Nature of the Gothic' on current definitions of art and creativity is pervasive. Ruskin's chapter was notoriously seized upon by William Morris, reprinted as a separate volume on handmade paper by his Kelmscott press, and became the manifesto of Morris and his followers in the Arts and Crafts movement.<sup>117</sup> It informed the life and work of Eric Gill and his disciples including David Jones. It stood out as the most intelligent and heartfelt assault of the effects of industrial mass production on the artistic sensibilities of England. It defines artistic expression (as typified in the work of the Gothic craftsmen who in Ruskin's vision made the Cathedrals) in contradistinction to, in fact as anathema to, the labour operations of industrial capitalism. It has been accepted as an unproblematic and passionate expression of the right of every labourer to absolute imaginative freedom (in Ruskin's terms 'invention') in the execution of their work. It is read as a prophetic sermon against the reduction of humans to elements within the dynamic mechanisms of factory production, a noble assault on the terrifying limitations, and destructive implications, of laissez-faire and capitalist modes of production. It takes Carlyle's hatred of political economy and hangs those arguments in a gorgeous diction.<sup>118</sup>

<sup>116</sup> See for example the total absence of slavery as a topic in Linda M. Austin, *The Practical Ruskin: Economics and Audience in the Late Work* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991). There is also very little in this book on Carlyle's massive influence on Ruskin's economic theory.

<sup>117</sup> For a particularly oleaginous analysis of the Ruskin-Morris relationship and the influence of *The Stones of Venice*, see David Gerard, *John Ruskin and William Morris: The Energies of Order and Love* (Andoverford: The Nine Elms Press, 1998), 6-9, for 'The Nature of the Gothic'.

<sup>118</sup> For the continuing obliviousness of critics to the race and slavery agenda underpinning 'The Nature of the Gothic', see Christopher Jon Delogu, 'On the Nature of the Gothic and the Lesson of Ruskin', *Caliban*, 33 (1996), 101-10; Judith Stoddart, *Ruskin's Culture Wars: Fors Clavigera and the Crisis of Victorian Liberalism* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 110-15, a book which does not posit race or slavery as significant loci in Ruskin's 'culture wars'; Willie Henderson, *John Ruskin's Political Economy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000); John Batchelor, *John Ruskin: No Wealth but Life* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2000), 111-17.

'The Nature of the Gothic' is all these things, but it is something far more sinister as well. Ruskin's argument is also the culmination of a certain line of anti-abolition, pro-slavery, and brutally Negrophobe theory. The argument was not the preserve of the slave power, but had also existed within English Radical and proto-socialist thought since the eighteenth century. Ruskin's passionate case for the liberation of the English worker is not as innocent as its theoretical accretions and aesthetic encrustations have made it appear. Its absorption also manifests, and still enacts, an effacement. The British labourer is to be liberated from capitalist enslavement, and this form of enslavement is set up as an absolute; as economically and historically the worst form of slavery to have existed. The definition of the slave status of the factory worker is predicated upon a theory of slavery that operates yet again through comparatives: if British industrialism has produced the worst form of slavery, all other forms of slavery must be less bad, or in fact better. It is a very short step from this premiss to another one: *Argument, That the Colonial Slaves are better off than the British Peasantry*, or than the British factory labourer.<sup>119</sup>

As 'The Nature of the Gothic' proceeds, the suffering of the English factory worker is set off against a variety of slave systems that finally, climactically, include African-American and African-Caribbean plantation slavery. The plantation slave joins the enormous club of slaves who are 'better off' than the British factory worker. As we have seen, this argument, perhaps surprising within an aesthetic context, was the foundation of Cobbett's anti-abolition polemic.<sup>120</sup> It was then expanded with a gargantuan and almost lunatic enthusiasm by Carlyle, before being transformed within the realm of visual aesthetics and the decorative arts by Ruskin.

When addressing the central question of the intellectual and rhetorical mechanisms that informed British reactions to slavery and the slave trade, this particular historiography is terribly powerful. The invention of a theory of enslavement focused upon the white labourer, within the context of British capitalist expansion, was achieved at the expense of, indeed demanded the displacement of, the European memory of black African slavery within the Americas and the Caribbean. If the impossible guilt of eighteenth-century British domination of the Atlantic slave trade, and of colonial Caribbean slavery, was to be evaded, or simply blanked out, then a greater domestic evil had to be mythologized and substituted. Ruskin's sinister and frequently brilliant articulation of this historiographic reinscription is the subject of this concluding discussion.

<sup>119</sup> This is a partial quotation from a pamphlet by Thomas Clarkson, *Negro Slavery Argument, That the Colonial Slaves are better off than the British Peasantry, ANSWERED FROM THE ROYAL JAMAICA GAZETTE BY THOMAS CLARKSON, M. A.* (London, 1824).

<sup>120</sup> See pp. 165–9 above.



Ruskin's attack upon the imaginative and physical enslavement of white English factory workers in mid-nineteenth-century Britain is conducted through a series of sophisticated comparisons with other forms of slave labour. Ruskin 'reads' the relative strengths and weaknesses of these systems by analysing the conditions of cultural production. Ruskin activates a series of historical perspectives, which include the consideration of slave labour within Egyptian, Greek, and New World systems.

He settles upon architectural ornament as the test site for the imaginative health of a society's labourers, and it is the degree of imaginative invention in their work that indicates their relative approach to the condition of slavery. Architectural ornament is divided into three elements, which establish an aesthetic sliding scale defined at one end by absolute slavery, and at the other, by 'revolutionary' imaginative freedom. The three elements are defined as follows: '1. Servile ornament, in which the execution or power of the inferior workman is entirely subjected to the intellect of the higher;—2 Constitutional Ornament, in which the executive inferior power is, to a certain point, emancipated and independent, having a will of its own, yet confessing its inferiority and rendering obedience to higher powers;—and 3. Revolutionary ornament, in which no executive inferiority is admitted at all.' Ruskin is using the adjective 'Servile' in a special sense, which relates to his Carlylean theory of the inevitability of slavery for certain classes within any human society.<sup>121</sup> 'Servile ornament' is explicitly the product of slave societies, and exists in precise contradistinction to the complete imaginative freedom which is projected as existing within the context of a Christian medieval world:

The Greek gave to the workman no subject which he could not perfectly execute. The Assyrian gave him subjects which he could only execute imperfectly, but fixed a legal standard for his imperfection. The workman was, in both systems a slave.

But in the mediaeval, or especially Christian, system of ornament, this slavery is done away with altogether; Christianity having recognised, in small things as well as great, the individual value of every soul.<sup>122</sup>

Christianity emerges as the religion of universal spiritual emancipation. Greek and Assyrian societies are slave societies not because they legally enslave

<sup>121</sup> The noun 'servant', coming out of the latin 'servus' for slave, was a standard word for slave in English usage until the sixteenth century, *OED*, 3a, was in common usage to denote a black slave in American in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, *OED*, 3b, and had maintained the meaning of slave in English through its currency in the King James Bible. The phrase 'servant of servants', to mean a slave of slaves, the lowest of the low, was of course used in Gen. 9: 25. For Ruskin's remarkably refined distinctions in using this word in the context of Shakespeare's *Tempest*, see my discussion, pp. 382–4 above.

<sup>122</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, x. 189.

people, but because their aesthetic systems creatively enslave their labourers. Ruskin does, however, elsewhere see Plato as supporting the inevitability of slavery among the servant class, in a manner that is contrasted to the 'levelling' (another of Carlyle's big words of disapprobation) approach of nineteenth-century abolitionists. Consequently, in the following passage the black slave and the Greek slave are implicitly placed together:

Plato . . . the Greek never imagined that the blessings of education could be extended to servants as well as to masters . . . Mr. Wilberforce and Mrs. Stowe, in *their* imagination [thought] that there should be no servants and no masters at all . . . education [is] a means of discrimination between what is worthless and worthy in men; that the rough and worthless may be set to the roughest and foulest work, and the finest to the finest; the rough and rude work being; you will in time perceive, the best of charities to the rough and rude people.<sup>123</sup>

So slavery, in the form of good mastership, can be a manifestation of love (charity), and the rougher the person the more roughly you treat them, that is a manifestation of your love.

In 'The Nature of the Gothic' Ruskin sees a total breakdown in this essential formula whereby the labour is suited to the labourer's potential. The argument moves on to consider the work of the modern English labourer who is, by comparison with his English medieval predecessor, enslaved. This is to take Carlyle's celebration of the relative freedom of the Saxon serf in *Past and Present* and to give it an inspired aesthetic twist. The form of this slavery lies in its eradication of creative thought and not in the prescriptions of any formal legal code or system of ownership. As Ruskin says in the epigram to this chapter 'The fact is that slavery is not a political institution at all':

You can teach a man to draw a straight line and to cut one; to strike a curved line, and to carve it; and to copy and carve any number of given lines or forms, with admirable speed and perfect precision; and you find his work perfect of its kind: but if you ask him to think about any of those forms, to consider if he cannot find any better in his own head he stops; his execution becomes hesitating; he thinks, and ten to one he thinks wrong; ten to one he makes a mistake in the first touch he gives to his work as a thinking being. But you have made a man of him for all that. He was only a machine before, an animated tool.<sup>124</sup>

It is ultimately a straightforward missionary argument; Ruskin preaches religious transfiguration through creativity. The very failure of the artist in his or (presumably) her aspiration is an expression of their freedom:

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., xxx. 230.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., x. 191–2.

if you will make a man of the working creature you cannot make a tool . . . Let him but begin to imagine, to think, to try to do anything worth doing; and the engine turned precision is lost at once. Out come all his roughness, all his dullness, all his incapability; so too shame, failure upon failure, pause after pause: but out comes the whole majesty of him also; and we know the height of it only when we see the clouds settling upon him.<sup>125</sup>

The creative labourer is transfigured, an aesthetic transfiguration of a quite literal sort, via metaphor, into the cathedral, rising into the clouds. Up to this point the theory does not seem to have been inflected by a race agenda, and might equally well apply to the plantation slave, forced to repeat the same actions in the cane field or sugar refinery with endless precision. Yet at this point Ruskin demands that the reader be forced to draw a line, and to place the African labourer outside the terms of the discussion. As we have seen, when Ruskin attempted to define the limits of the white engraver's enslavement in the *Cestus of Aglaia* he felt compelled to bring in a dismissive comparison with African and African-American slavery. Exactly the same mechanism goes off at this point in 'The Nature of the Gothic'. Again Ruskin, the forensic aesthetician, looks at the products of industrial labour as they lie about the homes of the increasingly affluent middle classes and sees a semiotic landscape of horror:

And now, reader, look round this English room of yours, about which you have been proud so often, because the work of it was so good and strong, and the ornaments of it so finished. Examine again all those accurate mouldings, and perfect polishings, and unerring adjustments of the seasoned wood and tempered steel. Many a time you have exulted over them, and thought how great England was, because her slightest work was done so thoroughly. Alas! if read rightly, these perfectnesses are signs of a slavery in our England a thousand times more bitter and more degrading than that of the scourged African, or Helot Greek. Men may be beaten, chained, tormented, yoked like cattle, slaughtered like summer flies, and yet remain in one sense, and the best sense, free. But to smother their souls within them, to blight and hew into rotting pollards the suckling branches of their human intelligence, to make the flesh and skin which after the worm's work on it, is to see God, into leathern thongs to yoke machinery with,—this is to be slave-masters indeed.<sup>126</sup>

The 'scourged African' (who may be enslaved within Africa, or the enslaved within the Americas, Ruskin is not clear on this point, in fact he does not really care) operates here as a dramatic background to set off the lurid hues of British enslavement of the factory worker. The rhetorical moves have an irresistible power; this is Ruskin at full volume as a social prophet, testing the communicative limits of language. Ruskin opens by theatrically mimicking the complacent admiration which the Victorian bourgeois feel for their homes, their

<sup>125</sup> Ruskin, x. 192–3.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, x. 193.

solid and symmetrical interiors, and against this sets two slave systems, Greek Helot and African/New World, which are called up formulaically, they exist almost as abstractions. These share a precise equality in their advantages when set against the condition of the English worker which has been required to produce the interior. The degraded state of the English worker then takes centre stage and is elaborated through a bizarre set of metaphorical shifts. First, the English worker is envisaged as the dying and mutilated branches of a young pollarded tree, from this image of tortured nature he is taken into the realm of Christian martyrology. The bodies of the workers ('flesh and skin') which should, after death and corporeal corruption ('the worm's work'), be resurrected and appear perfect before God, are imagined, instead, as flayed. The skin itself is converted into 'leathern thongs to yoke machinery with.' In this weird imagistic shift, freedom and Christianity are inevitably, if peculiarly, fused. If imaginative fulfilment is denied, then the soul is destroyed and the body, rather than being transmogrified through resurrection lives on as a flayed and cured leathern thong 'yoked to machinery'. The labourer is turned into a bond, a literal bond-man. The combination of the agricultural and the industrial in this phrase is completely illogical, why would machinery be yoked with leather thongs? If we want to make sense of the image, then we must read on, for the passage continues with a comparison where the words 'yoke' and the slightly antiquated 'leathern' for 'leather' appear perfectly natural. It is at this point that Ruskin moves back to Carlyle again, and the celebration of the Saxon serf:

there might be more freedom in England, though the feudal lords' lightest words were worth men's lives, and though the blood of the vexed husbandman dropped in the furrows of her fields, than there is while the animation of their multitudes is sent like fuel to feed the factory smoke, and the strength of them is given daily to be wasted in the fineness of a web, or racked in to the exactness of a line.<sup>127</sup>

Ruskin is playing a variation on *Past and Present*, and, as we have seen, *Past and Present* is playing a variation on *Ivanhoe*. Yet in turning back to the Saxon context, and in shutting out plantation slavery with what is ultimately a simple disconcert, Ruskin shows what ingenious forms 'imperial complicity' can take within his aesthetic system.

The nobility of servitude within a feudal system, which despite the yoke allows a certain degree of liberty, and the boon of certainty about one's social position, is the mainstay of Carlyle's nostalgic medievalism in *Past and Present*. Ruskin is paraphrasing Carlisle's notorious 'Gurth born thrall of Cedric' passage. This move erases the history of slavery which abolition created. Slavery is removed from its exotic location within the Caribbean and the

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., x, 193.

Americas, and within the bodies of black Africans, and is literally sent back home, both in terms of time, and place, and whitened. Then it is shown that the master/slave relationship as it existed within the Christian Middle Ages in England is not necessarily a bad thing, but in many ways beneficial to both parties.

Ruskin cannot, however, leave the memory, and mythology of the abolition movement alone. The literatures generated around Atlantic slavery had been too pervasive, the suffering black, even within the passive and sentimentalizing structures of abolition discourse were too threatening. Ruskin is consequently constantly circling round the inheritance of abolition, subverting and reconstituting this history in ingenious ways, which attempt to deny it validity, but which in the process reveal the hold of plantation slavery over his own imagination. The following paragraph is exemplary in this respect:

Glass beads are utterly unnecessary, and there is no design or thought employed in their manufacture. They are formed by first drawing out the glass into rods; these rods are chopped up into fragments of the size of beads by the human hand, and the fragments are then rounded in the furnace. The men who chop the rods sit at their work all day, their hands vibrating with a perpetual and exquisitely timed palsy, and the beads dropping beneath their vibration like hail. Neither they, nor the men who draw out the rods or fuse the fragments, have the smallest occasion for the use of any single human faculty; and every young lady, therefore, who buys glass beads is engaged in the slave-trade, and in a much more cruel one, than that which we have so long been endeavouring to put down.<sup>128</sup>

There are some horrifying ironies shooting through this work. Glass beads were of course a notorious mainstay of the slave trade; unnecessary they may be, yet a lot of African bodies were purchased with them. It is not, however, this trade relation of the glass bead which animates the prose. The invisible black bodies bought with these beads are replaced by the trembling white bodies, enslaved by a method of production, the very motion of which is described through the metaphor of disease. The beads themselves are transformed within the feverishly typological imagination of Ruskin into one of the seven plagues of Egypt, hailstones. The plagues were of course God's punishment upon the Egyptians for enslaving the Israelites, and Ruskin is here taking his own imaginative revenge on the factory owner, the very products of his system are transformed into a sign of God's fury at industrialism. Ruskin's final move is a typically canny one. As his beady eye looks on a young lady wearing a necklace all he can see is a slave driver. Yet again, however, this slavery cannot be criticized in isolation, its cruelty can only exist at the expense of Atlantic slavery.

<sup>128</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, x. 197.

Ruskin has taken the old competition between wage labour and chattel slavery, between white labour at home, and black labour abroad, to new extremes. The strategic brilliance of what he has done is finally demonstrated in the way William Morris, his followers, and indeed subsequent generations, did not, and have not, even seen the presence of Atlantic slavery as a subject that is brutally traduced within this text. All that Morris, and subsequent social and cultural commentators have seen, is an overpowering, and admittedly rhetorically gorgeous, defence of the right of the industrial labourer to human fulfilment in their work.

### ‘This is too bad’: Ruskin, Carlyle, and the Eyre Affair

At the end of the day, however, the beautiful edifice of Ruskin’s defence of the right of the English labourer to work creatively is constructed out of, and around, his saturation in Carlyle’s white suprematism. As I have argued Carlyle’s Negrophobe obsessions lie deeply disguised within the arguments and tremendous passages where Ruskin attacks the effects of mass industrialization on the English people. Yet he got bored with disguises, and a Carlylean vulgarity was to break out increasingly as Ruskin grew older, and as his personal discipleship deepened. The clearest demonstration of this came with the Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica and the notorious Governor Eyre affair which followed and which split the London cultural elite down the centre. Ruskin, under Carlyle’s influence, took a leading role in organizing the Eyre Defence Committee, and immediately contributed £100. He made speeches, wrote letters to the press, and went canvassing on the campaign trail.<sup>129</sup> He wrote one letter to the *Daily Telegraph* that nicely encapsulates the extent to which, at the end of the day, he swallowed Carlyle’s crudities whole and regurgitated them:

I . . . believe that white emancipation not only ought to precede, but by all law of fate must precede, black emancipation. I much dislike the slavery, to man, of an African labourer, with a spade on his shoulder; but more dislike the slavery to the devil, of a Calabrian robber with a gun on his shoulder. I dislike the American serf-economy, which separates, occasionally, man and wife; but I more dislike the English serf-economy, which prevents men from being able to have wives at all. I dislike the slavery which obliges women (if it does) to carry their children over frozen rivers; but I more dislike slavery which makes them throw their children into wells. I would willingly

<sup>129</sup> See Ruskin, *Works*, xviii, Intro., pp. xlv–xlvi; Froude, *Carlyle’s Life in London*, ii, 330–33. For a summary of the Eyre affair’s effect on the cultural life of London and Ruskin and Carlyle’s roles, see Lorimer, *Colour, Class*, 178–201; for Carlyle’s input Gillian Workman, ‘Thomas Carlyle and the Governor Eyre Controversy: An Account with some New Material’, *Victorian Studies*, 18 (1974), 77–102.

hinder the selling of girls on the Gold Coast; but primarily, if I might, would hinder the selling of them in Mayfair. And finally, while I regret the need that may exist among savages in a distant island for their governor to do his work sharply and suddenly on them, I far more regret the need among men of race and capacity for the work of governors when they have no governor to give it them.<sup>130</sup>

The phrase ‘all law of fate’ is a give-away. The compound is pure Carlylese: bombastically framed but vacuous generality posing as supreme authority. Those white-slavery/black-slavery parallelisms which appear like a recurrent nervous tick in ‘The Nature of the Gothic’, constantly thrusting forward the superiority not just of the white, but of the white’s capacity to suffer, here burst into the open and drive the argument. Basically Ruskin wants to forget about the troubles of the black. On every charged issue of abolition propaganda—the separation of families through enforced sale, the cruelty of forced labour, female escape and infanticide, female slave prostitution—the white is shown as the superior or deeper victim. The claims become increasingly preposterous. In those chilling final words Ruskin at last gives up the pretence and tells it like it is. The victims in Morant Bay are something else (savages) and somewhere else (a distant island). When Eyre’s enraged militia destroyed the homes of the supposedly emancipated slaves, and summarily strung up a good number of them via a military court which dealt in thinly disguised lynch law, Ruskin has a language of euphemism for the atrocities which rivals that of the Pentagon during the Gulf War.<sup>131</sup> Carlyle’s work ethic comes in very handy here: there was no military murder, and no revenge looting, simply Governor Eyre doing ‘his work sharply and suddenly’ on some ‘savages’.

Carlyle did not approve of a lot that Ruskin did and stood for but on this occasion he loved it. He responded to the letters and speeches Ruskin generated around the Eyre affair in typical manner: they are ‘a right gallant thrust, I can assure you. While all the world stands tremulous, shilly-shallying from the gutter, impetuous Ruskin plunges his rapier up to the very hilt in the abominable belly of the vast blockheadism, and leaves it staring very considerably’.<sup>132</sup> There is a horrible and ironic truth buried in a descriptive vignette that Anne Gilchrist left: ‘No one managed Carlyle so well as Ruskin; it was quite beautiful to see him. Carlyle would say outrageous things, running like to all Ruskin valued and cared for. Ruskin would treat Mr. Carlyle like a naughty child, lay his arms around him and say, “Now, this is too bad!”’<sup>133</sup> Ruskin may have addressed his letters to Carlyle ‘Dear Papa’, but here ‘the child is father to

<sup>130</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, xviii, 551.

<sup>131</sup> Gad Heuman, *‘The Killing Time’: The Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica* (London: Macmillan, 1994).

<sup>132</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, xviii, Intro., p. xlvi.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, xviii, Intro., p. xlvi.

the man'. In that sick embrace lies the truth that as far as the 'Nigger Question' was concerned it is true that 'no one managed Carlyle so well as Ruskin'. One thing is for sure, Carlyle would not have been talking about free Jamaicans when Ruskin gave him a big hug and told him he was 'too bad', because the free Jamaican black, male, female, young or old, had no place in what either man 'valued and cared for.'



## Conclusion

### Slavery and Memory, What Happened, What's Happening? Fetish, Bondage, and Slave Bodies

he understood fetish. He knew how to take something that could be considered disgusting and make it hot.

(Jack Fritscher, on Robert Mapplethorpe<sup>1</sup>)

The question is not, can they reason? Nor, can they talk? But *can they suffer?* Why should the law refuse its protection to any sensitive being?

(Jeremy Bentham, *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, 1789)

The degradation which characterizes the state into which you plunge him by punishing him pleases, amuses, and delights him. Deep down he enjoys having gone so far as to deserve being treated in such a way

(Sade, *One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom*, 1789)

Here is an obscene example of what the cultural inheritance of Atlantic slavery can mean for twentieth-century sado-masochistic bondage culture, not to mention the casual reader of pornography. In order to aggrandize the publication of the bondage classic *Story of O*, in English paperback form, an essay entitled 'The Slave's Revolt' by 'Jean Paulhan of the Academie Française' was appended. The essay considers the following historical event as a useful parallel for thinking about the operation of power in *Story of O*:

in the course of the year 1838, an unusual rebellion bloodied the peaceful island of Barbados in the West Indies. Some two hundred Blacks, women as well as men and all of them promoted to freedom by the decrees promulgated in March of that year, one morning presented themselves at the door of their former master, a certain Glenelg, and besought him to take them back into bondage. In the name of the group, an Anabaptist minister had drawn up a list of grievances; they were read out to Glenelg and then the discussion began. But whether because of distrust, or scruples, or simple fear of the law, the former slave owner refused to be convinced whereupon he was first of all, mildly pushed about, then, together with his family, massacred by

<sup>1</sup> Interview, Owen Keehen, 'Artist Robert Mapplethorpe's Biographer and Bi-Coastal-Lover: An Interview with Jack Fritscher', *Honcho Magazine*, April 1995.

the Blacks who that same evening went back to their cabins, their palaverings, their labours and all their accustomed activities. Governor MacGregor quickly took matters in hand, the affair was brought to a swift conclusion, and the Emancipation resumed its forward march. As for the little notebook in which the list of complaints was entered it has never been recovered.

I sometimes think of that notebook. In all likelihood it included—apart from just charges relating to the organization of the work-houses the substitution of the prison cell for the lash, and the prohibition forbidding the ‘apprentices’ (as the newly freed labourers were called) to fall ill—at least the sketch of an apology for slavery. The remark for example that the only freedoms we really care about are those which directly cast others into an equivalent servitude. He is not man who rejoices at being able to draw a breath of free air.<sup>2</sup>

What is being celebrated is the notion that the choice to live in a state of enslavement constitutes an ultimate form of freedom. The state is desirable, ideal, because the more exploited and abused you are, the less you have to take responsibility for your exploitation and abuse. Abuse is a proof of freedom and the more conscious you are of this freedom from responsibility, the more you need to have the state of enslavement affirmed. The enslaved consciousness is presented as incapable, as dysfunctional, if placed outside the structures of enslavement it has decided to make itself familiar with. Within this topos of topsy-turvydom revolt is perversely redefined as the achievement of liberty through voluntary re-enslavement rather than the more conventional option of emancipation.

Outside plantation slavery, two contexts are isolated in Paulhan’s essay as exemplary sites for demonstrating the will to serve, sex and mystical religion: ‘there is a grandeur and there is a joy as well in abandoning oneself to the will of another (lovers and mystics are familiar with the sense of grandeur, this taste of joy) and in finding oneself, at last! rid of the weight of one’s own pleasures, interests and personal complexes. In a word, that little notebook would, even more so today than a hundred and twenty years ago, have the flavour of heresy: of a dangerous book.’ A triangle is effortlessly formed between the cultures of Atlantic slavery, erotic love, and ascetic Christianity; they are fused to achieve the composite slave-lover-martyr, the essential bondage complex.<sup>3</sup> The crucial move, the annexing of Atlantic slavery, as an ideal model for sexual bondage slavery, is a troubling gesture. The trouble lies in the unproblematic manner in which the connection is engineered: an unsubstantiated anecdote reporting the voluntary re-enslavement of a group of

<sup>2</sup> Jean Paulhan, ‘A Slave’s Revolt: An Essay on *The Story of O*’, appendix to Pauline Réage, *The Story of O* (London: Corgi Books, 1998), 267–8.

<sup>3</sup> Paulhan’s intervention has, amazingly, been developed quite seriously by Octavio Paz, *An Erotic Beyond Sade* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace and Co., [1993] 1998), 77–80.

nineteenth-century plantation slaves justifies the pornographic fantasy of O's total abandonment to her voluntary sexual exploitation. Slavery is no longer historically, socially, or economically contingent, a slave is a slave is a slave. It is this absolute confidence that slavery remains in definitional terms a constant, that it is transhistorical, abstract, transcultural, which allows for the absurd yet sinister marriage of O and the plantation slave in Paulhan's concluding statement: 'the truth: [is] that Glenelg's slaves loved their master; they could not do without him. The same truth, after all, from which the *Story of O* derives its incisiveness, its incredible decency and that strong fanatical wind that blows through it without pausing once.'

To connect the subjects of pornography, and slavery is, in the first year of the new Millennium, the most natural thing in the world. Bondage, fetishism, sexual slavery, body piercing, cutting, beating with clubs and paddles, kicking, stamping, whipping, genital mutilation, restraint, with ropes, chains, pulleys and hooks, strangulation, branding, burning, water tortures—are all incorporated into the performance and marketing of domination and submission relationships across gender and race.<sup>4</sup> What used to be called the S & M 'underworld' is now mainstream and global; it incorporates a multi-billion-dollar pornographic industry that is exploding across the World Wide Web. It has impregnated *haute couture*, and it has generated very big clubs, with cult followings across Europe, North America, and Brazil.<sup>5</sup> There is no form of sexual fetishism so extreme or unlikely that it will not have at least a couple of websites devoted to it. But where do the rules, the costumes, the physical paraphernalia of BDSM pornography, as a highly evolved theatre of cruelty, come from? The conventions, theotics, even the material objects of collars, chains, restraints, whips, paddles, shackles, brands, and punishment masks, have evolved primarily out of three European contexts for the representation of, frequently sexualized, pain and torture. The first is Christian Martyrology, Catholic and Protestant. The second is punishment and torture sanctioned by the criminal law. The third is Atlantic slavery, or the fictions of torture and punishment generated in the minds of English and North American abolitionists, by Atlantic slavery. All three have generated a big archive that reaches across literature and the visual

<sup>4</sup> The popular literature generated by BDSM and slavery subcultures is now too massive to catalogue and runs riot on the World Wide Web. For bibliographies of the field, see *The Dominatrix in Print and Other Media An Annotated Bibliography and Detailed Subject Index*, prepared by Mistress Blanca and Peter (Green Way), <http://www.viaverde.com/sex/>. For a comprehensive visual archive of the state of play in the 1990s, see *The Torture Garden* (London: Creation Books, 1996). For an aural archive, Deborah Jaffe, *Master/Slave Relationship Audio Recordings* (available from P.O. Box 191211, San Francisco, CA 94119-1211).

<sup>5</sup> The best scholarly work on bondage, fetishism, and fashion is Valerie Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex and Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

arts. One question this book has constantly addressed is, how has the black slave body been incorporated into the Western cultural archive? In this conclusion I make some direct comparisons between slavery and fetishism in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. The three concluding case studies suggest that the ways in which the memory of Atlantic slavery has worked, and is working, its way out into European and North American cultures are not easy to identify or to assimilate. As a cultural inheritance Atlantic slavery is indefinable and uncontainable. This book has argued that the art and literatures generated by slavery appear to be consistently fuelled by a desire, on the part of the creator, to subsume the traumatic experience of the slave. That these appropriative processes extend to include pornography and the fetish is a disturbing fact, but also an inevitable process given the convoluted operations of empathy which provide a constant undertow within the literatures of slavery.

### The Limits of Fetish

*Webster's Dictionary* gives three primary definitions of 'fetish': 'Any object believed by superstitious people to have magical power. Any thing or activity to which one is irrationally devoted. Any non-sexual object such as foot or glove, that abnormally excites erotic feelings.' If you put those three together the word 'fetish' carries such wide potential applications as to have no practical meaning. As it stands today, fetishism is ideologically seen to straddle, often most uncomfortably, three separate theoretical arenas, and each has generated its own field of discussion to the extent that it might be said to constitute a separate discourse. First, there is sexual pathology and psychoanalytic theory, which originates in the late nineteenth century and extends to the present. The signal figures are Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Sigmund Freud. Contemporary work has fanned out into a variety of areas including Lacanian theory and even post-modern, notably Baudrillardian, elaborations of erotic fetish theory. In its widest and most performative manifestations, this area of fetishism bleeds into fetish fashion and BDSM in its limitless contemporary commercial manifestations.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, there is a post-Marxist tradition that has worked on the

<sup>6</sup> There are a number of overviews of the field, the most sophisticated is William Pietz, 'The Problem of the Fetish I', *Res*, 9 (Spring 1985), 5-17, 'The Problem of the Fetish II', *Res*, 13 (Spring 1987), 23-46 'The Problem of the Fetish IIIa', *Res*, 16 (Autumn 1988), 105-24. See also Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, and BFI Publishing, 1996), 1-19; Steele, *Fetish*, 11-33; Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (London

extended interpretation of Marx's renowned theory of commodity fetishism.<sup>7</sup> Thirdly, there is European projection of the African fetish through anthropology, the historiography of world religions, and European travel literatures, the first and last of these are focused largely on the slave coast of Africa.<sup>8</sup> Yet when looking at the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century fetishization of African ritual and the slave body, these apparently disparate, discrete fields do not stand so clearly apart. Nothing shows up the complexity of contemporary fetish theory fusions in the context of race and slavery more dramatically than the survey of contemporary international fetish art that concludes the catalogue to the South Bank Centre's 1995 exhibition *Fetishism: Visualising Power and Desire*.<sup>9</sup>

I do not want to survey the proliferating discourses of the fetish here. What is generally important about recent theoretical work on the fetish, in terms of my work, is that it has placed the European construction of the fetish in a new and highly unstable cultural space.<sup>10</sup> It is becoming evident that it is the European ability to misrepresent and to fantasize around its own myths of the 'primitive' fetish that has enabled the bizarre theoretical fusions that are now understood as 'fetishism' in the second millennium. Yet up to this point Atlantic slavery and the representation of the slave body have not been thought about as sites for Western fetishistic representation and sexual fantasy.

and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1993). For the obscure etymology and ultimately suspended meaning of the word 'fetish', Dawn Ades, 'Surrealism, Fetishism's Job', in Anthony Shelton (ed.), *Fetishism: Visualising Power and Desire* (London: The South Bank Centre and the Royal Pavilion Art Gallery and Museums, Brighton, in association with Lund Humphries, 1995), 67–71. For an economic articulation of the severe limitations of Freudian fetish theory as focused exclusively in male castration anxiety, Roger Malbert, 'Fetish and Form in Contemporary Art', in Shelton (ed.), *Fetishism*, 89. For a contemporary overview of female fetishism, Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 133–73.

<sup>7</sup> For Marx and 'capital' as fetish, William Pietz, 'Fetishism and Materialism: The Limits of Theory in Marx', in Emily Apter and William Pietz (eds.), *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), 119–52; for a tight summary of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, Jack Amarilio and Antonio Callari, 'Marxian Value Theory and the Subject', in Apter and Pietz (eds.), *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, 203–8. Also Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London and New York: Verso, 1989), 11–53; and for an extended analysis of the fate of commodity fetishism in the current theoretical climate, Žižek, *Plague of Fantasies* (London and New York: Verso, 1997), 78–109.

<sup>8</sup> Shelton (ed.), *Fetishism*, has several essays which deal with anthropology and the fetish; see also Ioan Davies, 'Negotiating African Culture: Towards a Decolonisation of The Fetish', <http://www.yorku.ca/faculty/academic/idavies/teaching/articles/fetish.htm>; for a continually playful and subversive set of takes on European assumptions about the fetish and 'primitivism', see Michael Taussig, 'Maleficium: State Fetishism', in Apter and Pietz (eds.), *Fetishism*, 217–51.

<sup>9</sup> Shelton (ed.), *Fetishism*, 88–119.

<sup>10</sup> For problematizations of the 'Colonial Other' as fetish in the context of Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, and Bhabha, see Henry Krips, *Fetish: An Erotics of Culture* (Ithaca, NY and New York: Cornell University Press, 1999), 45–73. For a sensitive reading of how European aesthetic assumptions have been imposed upon the interpretation of nail fetishes, see John Mack, 'Fetish? Magic Figures in Central Africa', in Shelton (ed.), *Fetishism*, 53–65.

## {} Collaring Slaves, Dogs, and Mistresses: The Trans-Historical Ubiquity of the Collar as Bondage Fetish {}

some have already discovered that the blackness of skin is no reason why a human being should be abandoned without redress to the caprice of a tormentor. It may come one day to be recognized, that the number of legs, the villosity of the skin, or the termination of the *os sacrum*, are reasons equally insufficient for abandoning a sensitive being to the same fate.

(Jeremy Bentham, *Principles of Morals and Legislation*)

By his side stood a black of small stature, in whose rude face, as occasionally, like a shepherd's dog, he mutely turned it up into the Spaniard's, sorrow and affection were equally blended.

(Herman Melville, *Benito Cereno*)

Sites of absolute power and exploitation—whether economic, sexual, or physical—pose certain problems as the subject for sentimental narrative. In historical terms Atlantic slavery was consistently narrativized in relation to European and American capacities for empathetic display. In this context the sudden popularity of, and extreme emotional commitment to, domestic pets within eighteenth-century Europe is significant. The comparison of slave body with animal body has often been considered in terms of the manner in which it legitimated inhuman behaviour on the part of the slave owner. As Keith Thomas economically summarizes: ‘Once perceived as beasts, people were liable to be treated accordingly. The ethic of human domination removed animals from the sphere of human concern. But it also legitimised the ill treatment of humans who were in a supposedly animal condition. In the colonies slavery, with its markets, its brandings and its constant labour, was one way of dealing with men [women and children] thought to be beastly.’<sup>11</sup> Yet perhaps of more sinister cultural import is the manner in which the slave–animal comparison, within the context of the domestic pet, opened up areas of positive emotional identification. This development provided a useful set of models for the metaphorical ‘petting’ of the black slave within a variety of artistic contexts.<sup>12</sup> Black slaves, particularly children, became common, almost necessary, accoutrements of European aristocrats. They consequently came to constitute a staple element

<sup>11</sup> Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World* (New York: Pantheon, 1983), 44. Thomas is discussed in Marjorie Spiegel, *The Dreaded Comparison: Human and Animal Slavery* (London: Heretic Books, 1988), 25–6. Spiegel’s short book remains the only serious attempt to set up elaborate comparisons between the treatment of blacks in Atlantic slavery and the treatment of domestic animals under the factory conditions of farming in the modern period.

<sup>12</sup> Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans*, 33–70. For the rise of pet-keeping in late seventeenth-century England, Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, 117–20.

in the erotic portraiture of Europe throughout the Baroque. They were introduced into portraits, quite frequently alongside domestic pets, in order to set off the beauty, and emphasize the wealth and power, of the sitter.<sup>13</sup> The usefulness of the slave-child-pet parallelism for European whites lay in the manner in which it provided a space for a non-threatening but intense emotional relationship with the black body. A carefully controlled form of 'love' could flow from white to black. To love a black slave child as if it were your own child was unthinkable, to love a black slave child like your favourite dog, was the most natural thing in the world, and enforced the identification of blacks with animals in a gesture of sinister benignity.

A succession of rich oil paintings brought together beautiful young white women, and beautifully turned out black children and animals, in ways that could be sexually charged. The erotics evolve out of the combinations of power, domination, and cruelty with which the white noblewoman reigns over her slave-pets and pet-slaves. The animals and the slaves show their devotion through their passivity and 'good' behaviour.<sup>14</sup>

Central to the iconography of sexually charged degradation that runs through these works is the collar. Collars had of course been symbolically employed in classical, medieval European and modern European literatures to denominate bondage for a long time. What is new in the Baroque portraiture is the increasingly total identification between black slave body and pedigree pet. The competitive approach to the acquisition of slave pets, whereby the purer their blackness the more they were prized, and the more they cost, evolves out of the aristocratic compulsion with breeding the finest, and owning the purest, of thoroughbreds.

The equation between pet slaves and pet dogs could not be more absolutely articulated than in the kinky portrait that Benedetto Gennari produced of Charles the second's relatively short-term mistress Hortense Mancini, Duchess of Mazarin (Fig. 16).<sup>15</sup> As the suitably predatory huntress Diana the statuesque white beauty floats at the centre of the picture. A tantalizingly thin cord holds up the loose undergarment that topples from her upper body to reveal a single lovely breast. One sandled foot and ankle emerges from beneath her rich gown. Poised and calm one of her attenuated index fingers caresses the shaft of her hunting spear, the other curves out towards the muzzle of an enormous hunting

<sup>13</sup> See David Dabydeen, *Hogarth's Blacks: Images of Blacks in Eighteenth Century English Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), 17–32. For the treatment of black children as 'pets' in aristocratic portraiture, Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans*, 33–8.

<sup>14</sup> For a detailed comparison of the behavioural codes imposed on slaves and domestic pets, see Spiegel, *Dreaded Comparison*, 36–9.

<sup>15</sup> The painting is discussed in Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans*, 37. The picture is described as 'replete . . . with the erotics of bondage', although, intriguingly, this is the only suggestion of the presence of bondage pornography in the book, and the subject is not followed up.



16. Benedetto Gennari, *Hortense Mancini, The Duchess of Mazarin* (oil on canvas, c.1680)

dog. Against the smooth white spaces of the woman's upper body, unblemished neck and face, is set a visual cacophony of slave-child and animal bondage. Black and animal bodies tumble about, conflated in ingenious ways. Even for a Baroque portrait of a royal mistress this picture has to possess one of the most agoraphobic left foregrounds in late seventeenth-century art. Two dogs and three black slave children, all five in conspicuous metal collars, revolve around each other in their attempts to gain the attention of their mistress. Only the older boy, top right and also in a collar, is separated from the mêlée. Hortense points at the scene, but stares at us, with an expression that cannot be deciphered. Yet, despite the teeming activity and the clutter, the actions of her dogs and the actions of her slaves are carefully counter-balanced. The smaller dog holds out its paw to beg, the smaller black child, who sits on the



big dog's back, does the same. The huge hound sets its head in an expectant expression that is precisely mimicked by the small boy directly above it.

The painting sets up erotic tension between the woman, the animals and the slaves, an articulation of potential violence founded in an implacable power. But the power is expressed indirectly, and the collars, which are its central icon, constitute a special kind of control. Unlike the terrible elaborately spiked iron punishment collars, which were placed on runaway or recalcitrant slaves in the plantations, the collars in the Mancini portrait are decorative and symbolic.<sup>16</sup> Made of precious metal, unattached to chains, they indicate ownership and in this sense relate far more closely to today's deployment of the collar in bondage relationships. Both collars and branding are very widely used in BDSM relationships to symbolize the slave's total submission to the master or mistress (Fig. 17).<sup>17</sup> These collars are frequently elaborately constructed, either of precious metal or with metal studs. Again they are modelled not on slave collars but elaborate dog collars, there is a huge variety, and they can be bought in any upmarket bondage shop. Beyond this it is worth pointing out that there are many cross-indexed web sites devoted to the theory, and practice, of the dog-slave or slave as dog. The 'Bottom', or slave, not only wears a dog collar but is trained and treated as a dog by the 'Top', or Master, in all areas of behaviour. The rules on how to train the dog-slave in eating, defecation, begging, play, are all set out in detail.<sup>18</sup> There are also, incredibly, web sites that deal with the child-dog-slavery equation.

In allowing the slave collar to slip out of its explicit slave contexts, where it was used either as punishment or for restraint, and to slip into the area of the domestic animal, Mancini's portrait makes a move that would have been completely familiar to today's BDSM communities. Collaring has many significations as 'Tiana' explains in her article 'The Collar': 'There are no hard and fast rules within the BDSM community about the exact meaning of a collar . . . I do have a leather dog type collar which is inscribed and caused a great deal of amusement to the man in Mr. Mint when Master made me take it to be engraved; and a steel collar that Master made himself especially for me. I love the feel of the metal encasing my neck.'<sup>19</sup> Tiana goes on to explain that within

<sup>16</sup> For a detailed discussion of the iconography of the punishment collar, see Wood, *Blind Memory*, 219–23.

<sup>17</sup> The last time I typed the words 'slave-dog-collar' into the web I was given over 2,000 sites the majority exclusively devoted to BDSM; Hortense Mancini would have found herself at home. Globally there is now an inestimable number of sites devoted to collars and collaring; some of the larger ones are: 'Posture collars' at Flogerz.com/posture; 'For M'Lord's and Lady's Pleasure Collars, Leather Bondage Collars for Fetish Play' at msapien.com/pleasure1.html; 'dog collars slave collars' at <http://www.eatleather.com/images/Collars>; 'Collars and Head Gear' at <http://www.affordablebondagegear.com>.

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.informedconsent.co.uk>

<sup>19</sup> Tiana, 'The Collar' at [http://www.informedconsent.co.uk/articles/001\\_coll.html](http://www.informedconsent.co.uk/articles/001_coll.html)



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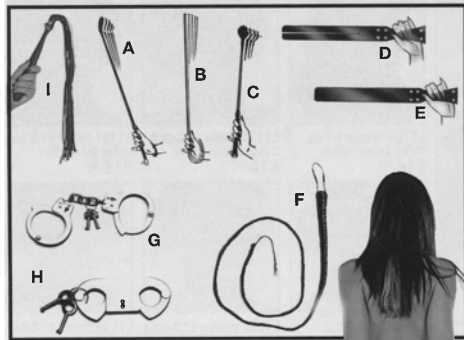


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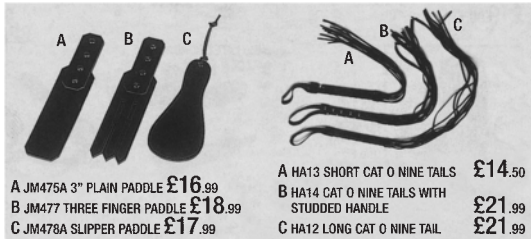


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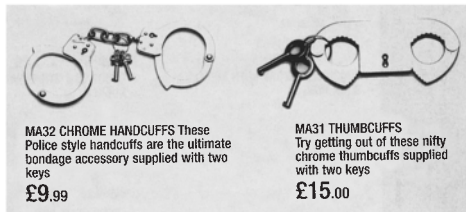
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17. From *Honour Future Fetish Wear, The Gentle Art of Seduction*, Bondage Catalogue, 2002

BDSM email relationships there is even a typographic use of the collar which emphasizes its abstract role in defining submission: 'Many people get to the stage where they feel they want to enter a BDSM relationship, and show their commitment to each other online by the Dom placing {} after the subs name.

The {} symbolises the collar.<sup>20</sup> Finally, in terms of bondage relationships, the {} whether real or imagined relates to ownership, and consequently to property. The collars on the dogs and slave boys perform a similar function, they tell us that they are both equally the property of their voluptuous mistress. The fact that the boys are so energetically enthusiastic about their role as enslaved property takes the fantasy relationship between the mistress and her slaves/pets a stage further. They are ‘good’ slaves because they are willing slaves. In this world the slave is explicitly not allowed above the level of the brute creation. It is the function of the fetish collar to insist that the dogs and the black children are, ironically, the only equals around.

### Slavery, Martyrology, and the Erotics of the Nail Fetish

Let us remember that the ‘fetish’ is an entirely European term, a measure of persistent European failure to understand Africa.

(Anthony Shelton)

In an astonishing piece of work Anthony Shelton points out that at the very heart of that part of the Congo, which fascinated the European imagination as the centre of ‘primitive’ fetishism, Christianity had been introduced as early as 1482.<sup>21</sup> Citing a mass of evidence from Christian missionaries relating to the incorporation of the imagery of the passion into native Congo religious thought and art, Shelton goes so far as to suggest that the nail fetishes were the result of ‘a synthesis of Kongo and Christian beliefs’. Following up this huge assertion Shelton goes on to read a series of representations of martyrdom from the Middle Ages and early Renaissance in terms of their obsession with body piercing and the implements of body piercing. Swords, knives, hammers and nails, pins, pokers, hooks, ropes, chains, cages, and whips emerge as a fetish vocabulary within the Christian martyrological imagination. Christ and St Sebastian emerge as the primary corporeal manifestations of the European nail fetish. St Sebastian in particular appears to possess a transcultural homoerotic appeal. Yokio Mishima states in his *Confessions of a Mask* that he achieved his first ejaculation through a fantasy focused on Guido Reni’s *St. Sebastian*.<sup>22</sup> As icons Christ and St Sebastian were also introduced to Africa and subsequently developed into the hybrid Congo nail fetish.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Tiana, ‘The Collar’.

<sup>21</sup> Anthony Shelton, ‘The Chameleon Body: Power, Mutilation and Sexuality’, in Shelton (ed.), *Fetishism*, 11–51.

<sup>22</sup> David B. Morris, *The Culture of Pain* (Los Angeles and Oxford: University of California Press, 1991), 130–31.

<sup>23</sup> Shelton (ed.), *Fetishism*, 16–26.

Those very objects that came, for late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century anthropologists, to signify the dark and ignorant arts of the barbaric African imagination, were, in fact, strange mutations. The Congo fetishes grew out of the weird fetishization of pain lying at the heart of Christianity, or at least of those sects fixated on the persecutory imagination. Indeed the mythologies, or should we say theologies, surrounding a European God who proved his love for humankind by torturing his own son to death, in what is at one interpretative level a fetishized set of bondage rituals, might be seen to have introduced sadomasochistic fetish practices into the art and thought of the Congo. The true sadomasochists, and source of eroticized religious torture, were, and continue to be, Europeans. Yet anyone even vaguely aware of the grip which illustrated editions of John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments* exerted on the Protestant imagination, on both sides of the Atlantic, for three centuries, or who has taken the time to examine the Catholic altarpieces in European churches showing the multiple and excruciating deaths, and unending resurrections, of obscure Saints, should not find that to be a peculiar phenomenon. What is peculiar is the manner in which the fetishized slave body as site of torture was absorbed into the conventions of pornographic martyrology.

### Advertising Agony: Goossen van der Weyden, Thomas Clarkson, and the Bondage Boutique

Having cleared some theoretical space I now want to take some examples. I will begin with three images: first, the central panel of Goossen van der Weyden's Passion triptych of 1507 (Fig. 18); secondly, the sheet of engravings produced by Thomas Clarkson to describe the implements used to torture slaves during the middle passage, which appeared in his *History . . . of Abolition* 1807 (Fig. 19); and thirdly, catalogue pages for the BDSM Internet bondage superstore [www.honour.co.uk](http://www.honour.co.uk) (Fig. 17), which I downloaded in August 2002. Roughly two hundred years separates this series of pictures, but what, it must be asked, admitting some obvious differences in reproductive medium and in the style, separates the fetishized representation, indeed display, of the torture implements?

It is difficult to argue against a reading of van der Weyden's painting as both erotic and fetishistic in terms of its treatment of the passion. The slender Christ stands elegantly, streaming blood from the stigmata, and sporting a crown of thorns like a fashion accessory. He is literally framed by an assemblage of torture implements: hammers, knives, spiked clubs, and pincers, stand out on the gold background in elegant display; it is a veritable shop window. To the left a whipping post, itself bound with rope in elaborate patterns and knots, stands erect.



18. Goossen van der Weyden, *Antonius Tsgrooten Triptych* (tempera on wood, 1507)

A good knowledge of the art of tying knots is of course central to contemporary bondage and knots can work as fetish objects.<sup>24</sup> To the right a ladder leads the eye up to the cross, which rises from the crown of thorns in a perfect black T-square. On the ground a selection of whips lies scattered, to the right a strikingly complacent bishop kneels, while next to him a highly erotic Mary Magdalene beams with satisfaction, gazing out towards Christ while she strokes an exposed breast and nipple with her tapering fingers.

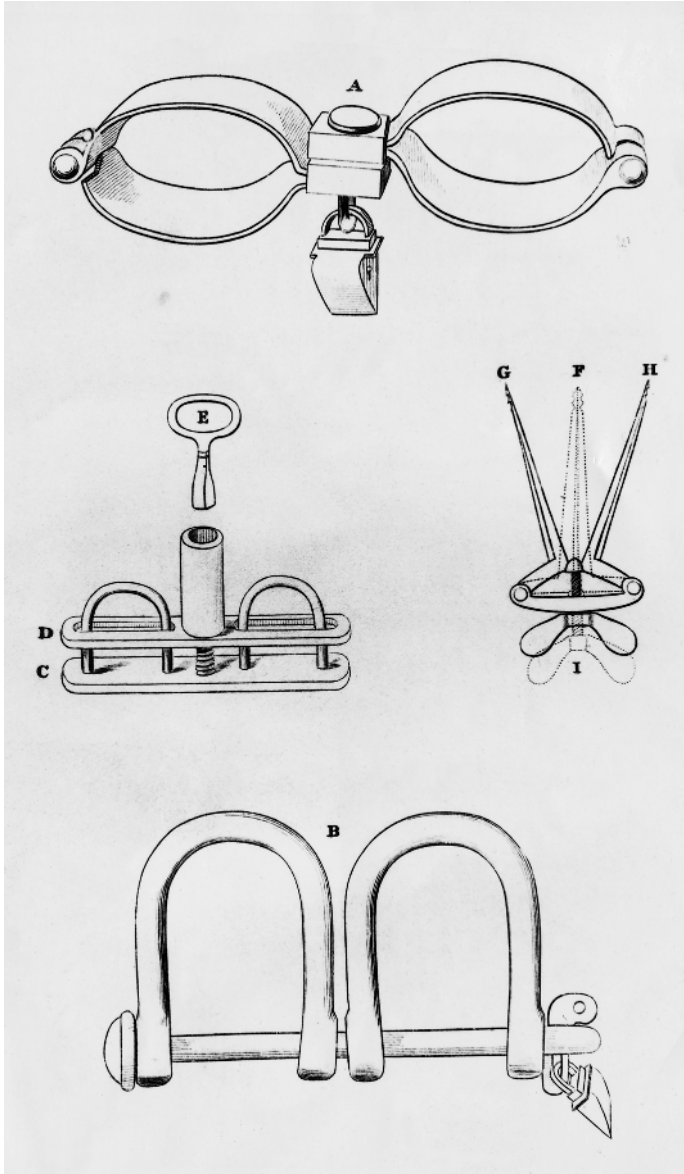
The presence of the torture victim, and the voyeuristic pleasure of the spectators, adds a new level to the narrative operation of the torture implements. The viewer is invited to imagine how the objects were used, and how they will be used, on the vulnerable white flesh of the Son of God, as he stands poised between the objects of flagellation and the crucifixion. But there is also an invitation of a sadistic kind, to look at the scene through the smiling and sexually charged figure of the young woman. Of course it is a holy activity to meditate on Christ's suffering, but here it is an overtly sadistic and pornographic one as well.

The pornographic basis of much evangelical abolitionist work that focuses on the torture of the slave body is closely related to the eroticization of pain in Christian martyrology. It is vital to remember that for the late eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century Evangelical mind the commonplace distinction between mental pain and physical pain did not exist. Neither was pain seen as necessarily a negative experience. To the Evangelical, especially to a Calvinist, pain was constructed as a sign of God's special favour. The recipient had been picked out to suffer, to have faith tested through pain, and as such to walk the same path as Christ and the holy martyrs. For the Evangelical ecstatic pain has the potential to lift one out of the normal world and bring one into contact with God. This consequently makes the extreme suffering innocence of the slave body a particularly charged object, and consequently makes the objects used to torture that body equally if not more charged.<sup>25</sup>

From such a perspective Thomas Clarkson's torture display emerges as fetishistic, and even has a certain pornographic potential depending on the viewer's proclivities. To the committed fetishist the entire world is a gallery of pornographic sign systems, depending on the nature and level of the fetishism involved. To the persecutory imagination of the martyr, as is spectacularly brought out in the medieval virgin martyr saints' plays, the wounds of Christ

<sup>24</sup> See bdsm.online.com, *Dominance-Submission-Slavery Recommended Reading*, which places Guido Regazzoni, Mario Bigon, and Kennie Lyman, *The Morrow Guide to Knots* prominently on its list.

<sup>25</sup> For a brilliant and sensible analysis of the historical and cultural relativity of pain, both as theory and as experience, see Morris, *Culture of Pain*, and for visionary pain within the context of Christian Martyrdom, 125–51.



19. Anon, 'Items used in the slave trade' (copper engraving, 1808)

and the nails are sexualized fetish objects.<sup>26</sup> To the martyrological abolitionist, committed to the process of fantasizing the slave's pain, chains, whips, paddles,

<sup>26</sup> Robert Potter, 'Pornography and the Saints Play', paper delivered at Ninth International Colloquium, S.I.T.M. Odense, Denmark 1998, reproduced [http://www.sdu.dk/hum/midlab/theatre/papers/Robert\\_Potter.html](http://www.sdu.dk/hum/midlab/theatre/papers/Robert_Potter.html).

shackles, and thumb screws are the objects around which the torture fantasy is fixed.<sup>27</sup> It is useful here to bear in mind Valerie Steele's insights into the ubiquity of fetishism, which, as a branch of human pathology, extends out both chronologically and experientially across a potentially limitless domain. Quoting George Canguilhem, Steele asks "Is the pathological state merely a quantitative modification of the normal state?" To which she replies: 'Yes and no. Fetishism probably needs to be conceptualised along a continuum of intensities.' She then sets out four levels at which the fetish object generates emotional arousal, one, where 'a slight preference exists' for certain types of person or object, secondly 'a strong preference exists (Lowest intensity of fetishism); thirdly specific stimuli are necessary for imaginative or sexual arousal; lastly specific stimuli take the place of a human participant (High level fetishism).'<sup>28</sup> Let us pass over the moot point as to whether Clarkson, or anyone who has ever looked at his fetish collection, has used it explicitly for purposes of sexual stimulation. What can be advanced is that in removing the slave body from the exhibition of implements used to torture that imagined body, Clarkson is engaged in a version of Steele's high-level fetishism. The plate is an invitation to pure fantasy, focused on the absent flesh of the black slave body. In this sense it is an invitation to sadistic, or if the viewer is an Evangelical Christian like Clarkson, sadomasochistic thought. In fact when Clarkson comes to talk of the plate he gives a methodical and unenthusiastic account of how these objects work. Yet in the very coldness and detachment of his tone there is a Sadean delight in the efficiency of the equipment and in the absolute power of the master to use it with brutal detachment.<sup>29</sup> Clarkson is soon to tell us that the inhabitants of Liverpool could describe horrific details connected with the slave trade with an utter coldness, familiarity breeding contempt: 'Horrible facts concerning it [the slave trade] were in everybody's mouth . . . The people too at Liverpool seemed to be more hardened, or they related them with more hardness and less feeling.'<sup>30</sup> Clarkson has either caught this casual disdain in his tone, or is deliberately mimicking it. Clarkson gives the following account of walking into a Liverpool shop:

There were specimens of articles in Liverpool, which I entirely overlooked at Bristol, and which I believe I should have overlooked here also had it not been for seeing them

<sup>27</sup> The classic and most wide-selling inventories of slave torture are [Thomas Clarkson], *Substance of the Evidence of Sundry Persons on the Slave Trade Collected in the Course of a Tour Made in the Autumn of the Year 1788* (London, 1789), and [Theodore Dwight Weld], *American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (New York, 1839).

<sup>28</sup> Steele, *Fetish*, 11–12.

<sup>29</sup> For de Sade's obsessive ingenuity in creating machines of torture, frequently sexualized torture, see Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), 152–3.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of The Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament*, 2 vols. (London, 1808), i. 377.



at a window in a shop; I mean those of different iron instruments used in this cruel traffic. I bought a pair of the iron hand-cuffs with which the men slaves are confined. The right-hand wrist of one and the left of another, are almost brought into contact by these, and fastened together, as the figure A in the annexed plate represents, by a little bolt with a small padlock at the end of it. I bought also a pair of shackles for the legs. These are represented by the figure B. The right angle of one man is fastened to the left of another, as the reader will observe, by similar means. I bought these not because it was difficult to conceive how the unhappy victims of this execrable trade were confined, but to show the fact that they were so . . . I bought also a thumb screw at this shop. The thumbs are put into this instrument through the two circular holes at the top of it. By turning a key a bar rises up by means of a screw from C to D, and the pressure upon them becomes painful. By turning it further you may make the blood start from the ends of them. By taking the key away, as at E, you leave the tortured person in agony, without any means of extricating himself, or of being extricated by others. This screw, I was then informed, was applied by way of punishment, in case of obstinacy in the slaves, or for any other reputed offence, at the discretion of the Captain. At the same place I bought another instrument which I saw. It was called a *speculum oris*. The dotted lines in the figure on the right hand of the screw, represent it when shut, the black lines when open. It is opened, as at G H, by a screw below with a knob at the end of it. This instrument is known among surgeons, having been invented to assist them in wrenching open the mouth as in the case of a locked jaw. But it had got into use in this trade. On asking the seller of the instruments upon what occasion it was used there, he replied, that the slaves were frequently so sulky, as to shut their mouths against all sustenance, and this with a determination to die; and that it was necessary their mouths should be forced open to throw in nutriment, that they who had purchased them might incur no loss by their death.<sup>31</sup>

In its peculiar narrative movements this passage can be read as classic SM fantasy. Clarkson plays a series of power games with our ignorance, with his feigned ignorance and with the absent voice of the torturer/slaving sailor. The sequence of acquiring and then ‘reading’ these objects is multi-layered but must have been as follows. Walking in Liverpool, Clarkson saw an advertising display, setting out the implements of torture and bondage used in the slave trade. He entered the shop, and bought examples of the objects he has seen in the window. He then requires the salesman to explain their function, one by one, as if to an initiate into the mysteries of slave torture. In a dialogue of supreme detachment he then uses these explanations to allow himself to meditate upon each torture implement. He talks about them, and thinks through for the first time how they work on the slave body. He then takes the objects away, gets the objects engraved, beautifully set out on a copper plate, presumably arranged as they were in the shop window. Around this visual parody of the original sale

<sup>31</sup> Clarkson, *The History of . . . The Abolition of the African Slave-Trade*, i. 375–7.

display he then composes a text that leads us through how and why each object is used on the slave body. He asks the same questions a slave captain would, if he did not know his trade. This reported speech is important because it allows the objects to function not just as visual fetishes, but as auditory ones as well.<sup>32</sup> As Clarkson moves methodically through the instructions for use, the objects hang there in space, exactly as the masks, speculums, paddles, and whips hang in space in the virtual reality of the Bondage Boutique catalogues, with their rather more enthusiastic descriptive copy. Yet in both cases the implements await the gaze of the viewer to imagine the pain they can inflict, they wait empty. Their ghastly potentiality sets out a challenge for us to humanize them, for us to get inside them and adopt, in a grotesque gesture, simultaneously the position of the suffering of the slave and the actions of the torturer. These torture implements are icons, commodities, abolition fetishes.

**‘[A]ll the Signs . . . of Subjection, Servitude and Submission  
imaginable’: Crusoe in Furs and Friday’s Podiatry—Safe, Sane,  
and Consensual?**

Here are two black and white images of slavery and foot fetishism (Fig. 20). The first shows a man, naked except for a bondage harness. He kneels in prostration before the figure of a standing blond white woman. He turns his head up to kiss her boot, or more precisely the heel of her boot. She is exotically dressed in black-leather peaked cap, black-leather lace-up vest/jerkin, fishnet-tights, and high-heeled black-leather buccaneer-style thigh-length lace-up boots. The woman is relaxed; she holds a can of Pils beer and stares straight down the throat of the camera.<sup>33</sup> The second image shows a naked black, or dark, man (Fig. 21). He kneels in prostration before the figure of a standing white man. He holds the white man’s naked foot, which he surveys intently, as he prepares to kiss it. The white man is exotically dressed in a towering phallic hat of animal fur, he also wears an animal fur overcoat and fur trousers. Beneath the trousers he is wearing leather chaps, which reach down half way over his naked feet. He has enormous mustaches growing from his upper lip, at least a foot in length. The white man is relaxed, his left hand drooping over the barrel of a rifle. A decapitated black head, with open mouth, as if in the act of screaming, lies on the ground directly below the scene of fellatral podiatry. The first image was made by the bondage scene-photographer Jeremy Cadaver in ‘The Torture

<sup>32</sup> For the medical classification of olfactory, auditory, and visual fetishes, see Robert A. Nye, ‘Medical Origins of Sexual Fetishism’, in Apter and Pietz (eds.), *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, 24–6.

<sup>33</sup> *Torture Garden from Bodyshocks to Cybersex: A Photographic Archive of the New Flesh* (London: Creation Books, a Velvet Special Publication, 1996), 39.

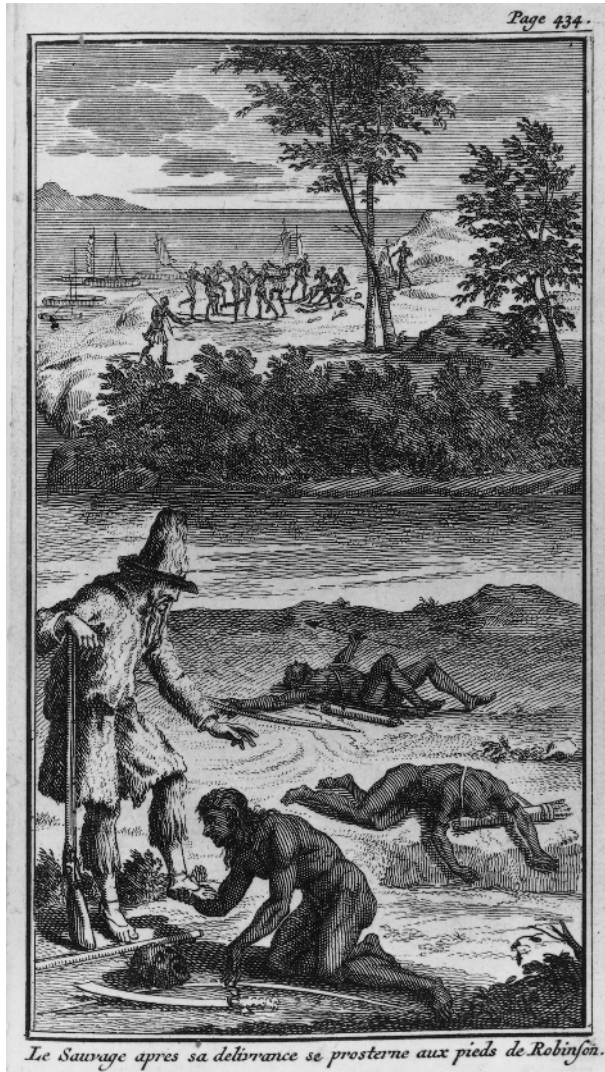


20. Jeremy Cadaver, *Portrait, the Torture Garden* (photograph, 1996)

Garden' in London, in 1996; the second image was made by an anonymous French engraver for the first French edition of *Robinson Crusoe*, a few weeks before the end of 1720.<sup>34</sup>

Somehow or other Crusoe has constructed a fetish outfit to die for. By the rules of contemporary bondage play Crusoe and Friday are pretty well up to the mark. In fact the text presents Friday's initial reaction to Crusoe as far closer to the actions of the male in the 'Torture Garden' photograph, than the Friday who is shown in the French engraving. In the text Friday 'kneel'd down again, kiss'd the Ground, and laid his Head upon the Ground, and taking me by the Foot, set my Foot upon his Head; this it seems was in token of swearing to be

<sup>34</sup> The authoritative account of the imagery generated around Crusoe from its publication to the early twentieth century is David Blewett, *The Illustration of Robinson Crusoe 1719-1920* (Gerard's Cross: Colin Smythe, 1995). For the first French edition, 30-2.



21. Anon, *Friday prostrating himself at Crusoe's feet* (copper plate engraving, 1720)

my Slave for ever'.<sup>35</sup> That is one of the biggest 'it seems' in the European fictionalization of enslavement. Yet, as if it needed reiterating and really forcing home, Defoe has the scene of submission repeated even more elaborately.

<sup>35</sup> Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe: An Authoritative Text, Context, Criticism*, ed. Michael Shinagel (New York: Norton, 1994), 147.

Friday falls asleep, and Crusoe gives a detailed and eroticized description of Friday's naked beauty as he sleeps. As soon as Friday wakes:

he came running to me, laying himself down again upon the Ground, with all the possible Signs of an humble and thankful Disposition, making a many antick Gestures to show it: at last he lays His Head flat upon the Ground, close to my Foot, and sets my other Foot upon his Head, as he had done before and after this; made all the Signs to me of Subjection, Servitude and Submission imaginable, to let me know he would serve me as long as he lived.<sup>36</sup>

Friday seems to have an encyclopedic gestural vocabulary for the expression of 'all the Signs . . . of Subjection, Servitude and Submission imaginable'. This bizarre phrase is overbalanced with the massive and hissing sibilants of bondage key words, all initially capitalized. Defoe presents the very first exchange of Crusoe and Friday as an exhaustive ritual of enslavement. Perhaps more crucially in terms of sado-masochism, Crusoe does not enslave, but Friday demands to be enslaved. Although, of course, we only have Crusoe's interpretation of the 'Signs' that give expression to this willing bondage.

This willing delight comes out powerfully, together with an increasingly eroticized take on the scene, in the remarkable adaptations of the moment of Friday's enslavement which have evolved in the illustrated editions. I will just take another French and then a German example. The 1786 French edition of *Crusoe* contained a plate executed by one of the most celebrated engravers in France, Marillier-Delvaux (Fig. 22).<sup>37</sup> In this image a very white and feminized Friday kneels stark naked, with his buttocks tensed and raised. He is openly displayed, or rather displays himself openly to the feminized naked Indian who sits in the background. He is shown with a voluptuous physique, he has rippling subcutaneous fat, and a left knee protruding beneath the right armpit like a pendulous breast. In physical terms he is more reminiscent of one of Rubens's frolicking 'victims' in the rape of the Sabine women, than a Carib male of 22. Friday gazes longingly up at a stern visaged, stiffly erect, and dominant Crusoe, and delicately grasps the horizontally extended left leg, while he places Crusoe's foot on his head. Like the individual in the Torture Garden, his servitude is bedded in delighted consensuality. As the nineteenth century progressed, the sexual subtext seeped ever more strongly into graphic interpretations of the scene.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps the most openly homoerotic bondage fantasy of them all is Fesquet and Leginisel's 1877 steel engraving (Fig. 23). In this high camp extravaganza Crusoe has changed into a composite nude classical God.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 149.

<sup>37</sup> The image is reproduced in Blewett, *Illustrations*, 39.

<sup>38</sup> *Punch*, vol. 3, p. 169.

<sup>39</sup> Reproduced and discussed in Blewett, *Illustrations*, 126–7.



22. Marillier Delvaux, *Il prend un de mes pieds et le pose sur sa tête, pour me faire comprendre sans doute qu'il me feroit fidélité* (etching with engraving, 1786)

The homemade outfit has gone to be replaced by the traditional lion's skin of Hercules, the back paw of which tactfully acts as a modesty veil, while he holds an orb, or a globe, a traditional attribute of Jove. Friday, shown as orgasmically expiring colonial victim, lies flat out in a state of delighted lassitude while Crusoe steps on his head. It is hard to know what to say about this preposterous image, which anticipates academic Nazi art with uncanny precision, but it can hardly be coincidental that it was made right at the height of the so-called 'Scramble for Africa'. Like those little black boys in the Mancini portrait, not to mention the individual in the Torture Garden, Friday's servitude is bedded



23. J. Fesquet and A. Legenisel, *Crusoe and Friday* (steel engraving, 1877)

in delighted consensuality.<sup>40</sup> What lies behind this excessive and obsessively repeated display of utter subservience?

<sup>40</sup> For the necessity of consensuality in BDSM master/slave relationships, see the account of dominatrix K. C. Rourke quoted in Brenda Love, *Encyclopaedia of Unusual Sex Practices* (London: Abacus, 1992), 265–7; also Liz Highleyman, ‘Playing with Paradox: The Ethics of Erotic Dominance and Submission’, <http://www.black-rose.com/articles-liz/bitchgoddess.html>; Mark Thompson (ed.),

Feet, of course, run through *Robinson Crusoe* at crucial moments. Maybe the most famous foot fantasy in Western literature occurs at the moment when Crusoe first sees a human footprint on the sand. The image mesmerizes and terrifies him and he dreams and hallucinates over it, returns to it, puts his own foot in the print only to find it is not his but that of an unidentified other. This scene dominates illustrated editions of Crusoe from the late eighteenth century onwards.<sup>41</sup> It is the moment of the discovery of the foot that formed the focus for William Blake's remarkable and little known pair of drawings which link the discovery of the imprint with Friday's ritual enslavement.<sup>42</sup>

For the foot fetishist pleasure emanates from the feeling of disempowerment, the sense of smallness and vulnerability that results from placing oneself in an abject position beneath the foot. In the contemporary BDSM world this has taken some extreme forms, including the 'crush fetishists'. There is a thriving market in books and videos showing feet crushing insects or invertebrates. The crush fetishist channels emotion into the fantasy of being stepped on: 'The feeling is that of letting go, powerless, helpless, tiny, small, and bug-like . . . longing to be a helpless insect as you squirm around under the foot-sole', the sacred text of the movement is inevitably Kafka's 'Metamorphosis'.<sup>43</sup> When Friday demonstrated 'all the Signs . . . of Subjection, Servitude and Submission imaginable' did that include a crush fetish fantasy? We will never know, yet within the ritual dynamics of bondage slavery Crusoe is an indisputable 'Top', and Friday an archetypal 'Bottom'.

The next question might be: is it useful, beyond the desire to be provocative, to compare a single moment, yet never the less the moment, when the enslavement of the colonial subject was semiotically codified as legitimate mercantilism, with one arbitrary and culturally liminal moment, when a bondage-photographer made an image in a club in belated, predated, twentieth-century London? To put it another way, how trans-historical are podiatry and retifism, and how embedded in the histories of enslavement?<sup>44</sup>

Ever since the inventories set out by Krafft-Ebing in *Psychopathia Sexualis* fur, leather, and feet have emerged as the central sites for the sexual fetish in

*Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics and Practice* (Boston: Alyson, 1991); Carole Vance (ed.), *Pleasure and Danger* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984).

<sup>41</sup> See Blewett, *Illustration*, 43, 47, 54, 69, 73, 83, 94.

<sup>42</sup> See Martin Butlin, *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake*, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), vol. ii, plates 156, 157, 158.

<sup>43</sup> For a professional entomologist's approach to the crush fetish phenomenon, see G. A. Pearson, 'Insect Fetish Objects', [http://www.bugbios.com/ced4/crush\\_freaks.html](http://www.bugbios.com/ced4/crush_freaks.html); see also W. A. Rossi, 'Foot and Shoe Fetishism: Part One', *Journal of Current Podiatric Medicine*, 39/9 (1990), 9-23; for crush fetish videos, see the *Squish Playhouse* series particularly no. 3 'Starring Debbie the Crush Queen and Co-Starring Dozens of Crickets and Meal Worms'.

<sup>44</sup> The image is reproduced and briefly discussed in Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans*, 74-5. For Aravamudan the act of kissing the foot is interpreted in cult terms, as the act marking 'the beginning of the cult of Crusoe'.



Europe and America.<sup>45</sup> Crusoe with his huge leather chaps, animal skins, and bare feet is both fetishist and fetish. Friday's worship of Crusoe as absolute master is focused on the naked foot. Crusoe's construction of himself as savage other is focused upon animal skin, fur, and upon his own facial hair. The fetishism in this text is exclusively male; *Robinson Crusoe* is a text that provides no detailed consideration of women, as they dress, or undress, as they 'appear'. Whether they are desirable, or not, they do not come to be seen, in any set piece descriptions; not Crusoe's wife, or mother, not the women sent out with the cows to service Crusoe's new labour regime in the penultimate paragraph of the book. Men are not treated with any more discrimination in terms of fashion and the fetish. The erotics of what is concealed: revealed, or emphasized are sidelined. Yet there are two great exceptions: Crusoe's anti-descriptive prescription does not hold for himself and for Friday.

*Robinson Crusoe* contains two detailed set piece descriptions of individuals in terms of the minutiae of appearance from head to toe. The first formal description of a man's appearance runs as follows:

had any one in *England* been to meet such a Man as I was, it must either have frightened them, or rais'd a great deal of laughter; and as I frequently stood still to look at myself, I could not but smile . . . I had a great high shapeless Cap, made of a Goat's Skin, with a flap hanging down behind . . . I had a short Jacket of Goat-Skin, the Skirts coming down to about the middle of my Thighs; and a Pair of open-knee'd Breeches of the same, the Breeches were made of the Skin of an old *He-Goat*, whose Hair hung down such a Length on either Side, that like pantaloons it reached to the middle of my Legs; Stockings and Shoes I had none, but had made me a Pair of somethings, I scarce know what to call them, like Buskins to flap over my Legs, and lace on either Side like Spatterdashes; but indeed of a most barbarous shape, as indeed were all the rest of my Cloaths.

I had on a broad Belt of Goat's-Skin dry'd, which I drew together with two thongs of the same, instead of buckles and in a kind of a Frog on either Side of this. Instead of a Sword and a Dagger, hung a little Saw and a Hatchet, one on one Side, one on the other. I had another Belt but not so broad, and fasten'd in the same manner, which hung over my Shoulder; and at the End of it, under my left Arm, hung two Pouches, both made of Goat's-Skin too; in one of which hung my Powder, in the other my Shot: At my Back I carry'd my Basket, on my Shoulder my gun, and over my Head a great clumsy ugly Goat-Skin Umbrella, but which, after all was the most necessary

<sup>45</sup> Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia*, 23–250; Love, *Unusual Sex*, 109–11, 211–15; W. A. Rossi, *The Sex Life of the Foot and Shoe* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972); *Barefoot Digest Annual*, 1990. Also Clavel Brand, *Fetish* (Tiptree: Anchor Press, 1976), for fur, 94–110, for feet and boots, 69–91. The most complete cultural survey is probably to be found at Curtin University's Podiatry web site, see Cameron Kippen, 'Podiatry the History of Footwear: Foot Fetish and Shoe Retifism', Curtin University of Technology, Perth, WA: <http://www.curtin.edu.au/curtin/dept/physio/podiatry/fetish.html>.

thing I had about me next to my Gun: As for my Face, the Colour of it was really not so *Moletta like as one might expect from a Man not at all careful of it, and living within nine or ten Degrees of the Equinox*. My Beard I had once suffer'd to grow 'til it was about a Quarter of a Yard long; but as I had both scissors and razors sufficient, I had cut it pretty short, except what grew on my upper Lip, which I had trimm'd into a large pair of *Mahometan Whiskers*, such as I had seen worn by some Turks, who I saw at *Sallee*; for the *Moors* did not wear such, tho' the *Turks*, did, for the *Muschatoes* or Whiskers, I will not say were long enough to hang my Hat upon them; but they were of a Length and Shape monstrous enough, and such as in *England* would have pass'd for frightful.<sup>46</sup>

In order to highlight the uniqueness of this vignette Crusoe, as narrator, immediately launches into an elaborate occultatio 'But all this is by the by; for as to my Figure, I had so few to observe me, that it was of no manner of consequence; so I say no more to that Part.'<sup>47</sup> Of course this is not 'by the by' or of 'no manner of consequence' nothing in this weird text is. Crusoe may have few to observe him, but he has one, Friday, and Crusoe's appearance, his 'Figure', is all-important in this regard. The image Crusoe provides of himself is one of the lasting icons that the book contains (Fig. 24). The first edition of 1719 carried only one engraved plate, a frontispiece, a full figure portrait of Crusoe in his bizarre outfit, hung about with rifles, pistols, and swords. All the subsequent early editions repeat this plate, and the chapbook versions carried a woodcut adaptation on the front cover.<sup>48</sup> Crusoe's appearance has multiplied in pictorial form and been passed down the history of illustrated editions and film and television adaptations. Why has this costume assumed such enormous cultural valency?

### Crusoe, Marx, and the Commodity Fetish

A new take on Marx provides one answer. I used Marx's marvellous theory of the commodity fetish earlier in order to uncover the ironic vision of a tortured slave.<sup>49</sup> The theory is equally intriguing when considering the Crusoe-Friday relationship, particularly given Marx's celebrated interest in Crusoe's relation to labour and commodity. Marx argued that the development of commodity fetishism within capitalism is defined by the commodity's relation to labour and time. The time expended through labour to convert a raw material into an

<sup>46</sup> Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, ed. Michael Shinagel (New York: Norton, 1994), 108–9.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* 109. <sup>48</sup> See Blewett, *Illustration*, 26–9.

<sup>49</sup> See pp. 106–14 above. For the original theory: Karl Marx, 'The fetishism of commodities and the secret thereof', *Capital* trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1921), vol. 1, cap. 3.



24. Anon, 'Robinson Crusoe', frontispiece (copper plate engraving, 1719)

object with a 'use value' and an 'exchange value' imparts the magical quality of the fetish. Yet a slave constitutes a peculiar phenomenon within the dynamic of Marxian fetish theory because s/he is a commodity, yet a commodity capable of labour. Marx's theory attacked bourgeois addiction to the 'commodity' by applying the primitivist notion of the 'fetish' to the material products of capitalist labour. In other words Marx transferred the negative associations of the literatures of African 'fetish religion', which had been evolved by Western anthropology, onto the Western economic vision. Finally, however, it was the very power of these negative tropings of misrepresented African religion upon

which Marx's satire depended.<sup>50</sup> Marx is not arguing for a fetishistic relativism, whereby the Africans have their primitive religious fetishes and the Europeans their primitive economic ones. He is arguing that European commodity fetishism combines mysticism and brutality in a way that aligns it with savagery. Yet where does this leave an increasingly savage Crusoe and civilized Friday?

Marx, finally, is not concerned with the colonial slave body during the birth of capitalism, yet that body poses a set of unique problems for the theory of the commodity fetish. Crusoe's fashion statement is based in a paradox; in order to try to make himself civilized clothes he has manufactured a series of commodities—trousers, coat, shoes, umbrella, all exclusively for his own use. In terms of the Marxist theory of the commodity fetish, because these are produced outside the market place they have no exchange value; they have only a use value, to Crusoe. Yet he has created them with the input of various amounts of his own human labour so in this sense they have the aura of the Marxist commodity fetish, although for Crusoe alone. Until Friday arrives on the scene they constitute a special case of narcissistic commodity fetish, the costume has a fetishistic value for Crusoe more aligned to that which sculptor, or potter, or tapestry maker would feel for their work. Marx of course famously considered Crusoe as an example of an independent labouring individual who existed and worked completely outside the pressures of the capitalist market place, and consequently outside the operations of capitalist commodity fetishism.<sup>51</sup> Yet Marx's idealizing picture of the self-sufficient Crusoe shuts a lot out: aesthetics and sex are placed firmly outside the limits of the discussion, and the slavery relationship with Friday is not considered, particularly in terms of how it might affect Crusoe's relation to his labour and the commodity fetish. Marx only wants to think about Crusoe in isolation, and consequently ignores the majority of the text and the many approaches to slavery and labour it contains. Yet Marx's theory can be applied. What emerges is a text that combines a reconstitution of the commodity fetish within a colonial setting with the fetishization of body parts and clothing in a bondage relationship. After Friday's arrival, Crusoe's costume emerges as both commodity and sexual fetish, all in all a very exotic hybrid.

The main impact of Crusoe's assembled costume operates on gender lines. Crusoe's costume emphasizes male power. His jacket is made out of the skin of an old he-goat, time-honoured symbol of lechery, its hair hangs suggestively till 'it reached to the middle of my legs'. His footwear, that 'pair of somethings', are primitive leather boots lacing up at the sides but not covering the foot. There is a great deal of lacing, sewing, and binding in this costume, enormous belts

<sup>50</sup> Ades, 'Surrealism, Fetishism's Job', 69–71, for Marx's satiric intent in inventing the 'commodity fetish' theory.

<sup>51</sup> Marx, *Capital*, i. 88–91.

without buckles have to be elaborately bound with ties and knots. The erotics of constriction lies about Crusoe and ties him up, why does he need all this stuff?<sup>52</sup> It is as if the whole hirsute ensemble has been designed oppositionally in order to function against the other set-piece description of an individual in the book, that of Friday. While Crusoe, despite the heat of the island, perversely piles himself up with skin, furs, caps, boots, belts, knots, guns, and umbrellas, Friday appears completely naked. A voyeuristic homoerotics runs through the scene when he is first described.

Crusoe feeds Friday, and then instructs him to sleep, specifically in a place where he is used to sleeping himself. The description is prefaced by the statement that the ‘Creature laid down, and went to sleep’. Friday has not been dressed at this point, and as we go directly into the description we see the naked sleeping 26-year-old through the eyes of the fur-clad older man:

He was a comely handsome Fellow, perfectly well made; with straight strong Limbs, not too large; tall and well shap’d, and as I reckon, about twenty six Years of Age. He had a very good Countenance, not a fierce and surly Aspect; but seem’d to have something very manly in his Face, and yet he had all the Sweetness and Softness of an *European* in his countenance too especially when he smil’d. His Hair was long and black, not curl’d like Wool; his Forehead very high, and large, and a great Vivacity and sparkling Sharpness in his Eyes. The Colour of his Skin was not quite black, but very tawny, and yet not of an ugly yellow nauseous tawny, as the *Brazilians* and *Virginians*, and other Native of *America* are; but of a bright kind of a dun olive Colour, that had in it something very agreeable; tho’ not very easy to describe. His Face was round and plump; his Nose small, not flat like the Negroes, a very good Mouth, thin Lips, and his fine Teeth well set, and white as Ivory.

Crusoe surveys the beauty of the unconscious Friday, one man is completely, though bizarrely, overdressed, the other completely naked. While the more clothes Crusoe puts on, the more savage and ‘frightful’, yet comic, he becomes; it seems that Friday, artlessly naked, effortlessly approaches a European norm of beauty. Yet as opposed to Crusoe’s hairy masculinity Friday’s beauty is suspended between masculine and feminine adult and child, an ideal body to erect fantasies around, a beautiful, innocent, naked victim put out on display. Crusoe emerges from his own descriptions as a cultural nondescript; his racial and cultural status is effectively suspended. Consequently, there is a reiterated concern to state that despite the primitive and fetishistic style of his dress he has not lost his status as European male. He buttonholes his audience to stress that he is not as ‘moletta like’ as we might think. He grows his moustaches into a bizarre

<sup>52</sup> For the ubiquity of binding and sewing in clothing and of the body in the contemporary BDSM scene, see Love, *Unusual Sex Practices*; also Dr Hal, ‘Rope Harness and Other Simple Bondage Techniques’, San Francisco 1992, QSM lecture.

design, in order to emulate a Turk he remembers seeing; what is the sexual weight of this gesture? It is worth remembering that the huge moustache is the sign of the dominant male in contemporary male leather bondage relationships.<sup>53</sup> Crusoe is most careful, however, to point out that Moors (blacks) do not ever adopt this fashion. Why?

On the face of it Crusoe's text is very quiet about sex. He may be living on his own on the island with nothing but a parrot, a dog, and a herd of goats, but the lusts of the flesh do not figure as one of his main problems, in fact they are completely erased. There is no mention of masturbation, let alone of bestialism. Having seen no living being for 'above twenty five years', a young man, beautiful according to European norms of the masculine *and* feminine, comes to live with Crusoe, and is determined to be his slave. Again sex is not directly alluded to, yet in a set of compulsively reiterated bondage scenes (both focused upon the naked foot of the otherwise completely bound and fur-covered master, and the exhibitionistic subservience of the, self-appointed, naked slave) Defoe's text covertly approaches sexuality through the codified language of dominance and submission. For Defoe this constitutes an international and trans-cultural language, which immediately enables Crusoe and Friday to communicate in absolute terms. Crusoe as privileged witness to, and Defoe as keeper of, the secret of 'all the Signs . . . of Subjection, Servitude and Submission imaginable' allude to but finally conceal the precise nature of the bondage they crave.

What have we done with the memory of slavery, and where has this book ended up? One thing this book set out to show was the more you look into it, the more unsettling the English construction of Atlantic slavery becomes. Within the elevated portraiture of Benedetto Gennari, within the forensic engraving of torture implements arranged by Thomas Clarkson, within the text of *Robinson Crusoe* and the imagery generated around it and beyond it, suddenly it becomes difficult to see the point at which the literatures of slavery can be separated from the literatures of sadomasochistic pornography. The cultural archive generated by slavery in England exhibits a consistent and frequently furious desire to take over and to use the slave body within fantasies of subjection and pain. The curious desire of the oppressor to enter the mind of the oppressed has permeated this blind envy, and has emerged as a theme upon which English writers perform compulsive and almost limitless variations. In the fusion of slavery and pornography, which now saturates our popular culture, that envious, possessive, and penetrative desire reaches its ultimate fulfilment. What is to be done with this terrible fact?

<sup>53</sup> See Steele, *Fetish*, lower plate, opposite p. 118.

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