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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.¹ At least ten have been published in the last two decades, four of them designed for a juvenile market.² 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.³ 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.⁴ 'Amazing Grace' is to popular music and the World Wide Web now, what *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was to the nineteenth-century leisure industries.⁵ 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

¹ 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.

² 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.

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

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

⁵ 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.⁶ 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 be⁷

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'.⁸ 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.⁹

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

⁷ http://www.paganlibrary.com/music_poetry/amazing_grace.php

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

⁹ 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'.¹⁰ 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.'¹¹ 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

¹⁰ <http://www.geocities.com/Hearthland/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/Hearthland/Pointe/4495/library10affliction.html>; <http://home.flash.net/~gaylon/jnewton.html>

¹¹ 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.¹² 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.¹³ 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

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

¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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.

¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶

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

¹⁵ 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).

¹⁶ *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.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸

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.¹⁹

¹⁷ Hindmarsh, *Newton*, 46–7.

¹⁸ For publishing details, *ibid.* 15–16.

¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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

²⁰ 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.²¹

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.²² 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.²³ 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

²¹ Newton, *Works*, i. 7–8.

²² 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).

²³ 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.²⁴ 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

²⁴ 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.²⁵ 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

²⁵ *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').²⁶ 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.²⁷ 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

²⁶ 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.

²⁷ 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.'²⁸ 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

²⁸ 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.²⁹

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.³⁰

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

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

³⁰ *Ibid.* 117–18.

of greed and racial theory, has been seen to share some very general external similarities with the Lagers.³¹ 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'.³² 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.³³ 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'.³⁴ 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-

³¹ 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.

³² Levi, *Drowned and the Saved*, 65.

³³ *Ibid.* 43.

³⁴ 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.’³⁵ 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’.³⁶ 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.’³⁷ 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?’³⁸ Is it appropriate to apply these questions to Newton? The externals

³⁵ *Dictionary of National Biography*, ‘John Newton’, 397.

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

³⁷ *Ibid.* 123. ³⁸ *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.'³⁹ 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'.⁴⁰

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'.⁴¹ The *Authentic Narrative* is now

³⁹ Ibid. 124.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ 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.⁴²

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.⁴³ As such Newton places himself directly in the tradition of the Puritan conversion narrative.⁴⁴ 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.

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

⁴³ 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.

⁴⁴ 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.'⁴⁵ 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.'⁴⁶ 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.'⁴⁷

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,

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

⁴⁶ Newton, *Works*, i. 81. ⁴⁷ *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.⁴⁸

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).'⁴⁹ 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.

⁴⁸ Newton, *Works*, i. 96-7.

⁴⁹ *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.'⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹

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

⁵⁰ Ibid. 42.

⁵¹ 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.⁵²

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

⁵² 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.⁵³

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.'⁵⁴ 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*.'⁵⁵ 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.⁵⁵

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)

⁵³ Ibid. 49.

⁵⁴ 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*.

⁵⁵ 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.'⁵⁶ 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'.⁵⁷ 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.⁵⁸ 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.'⁵⁹ 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

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

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

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

⁵⁹ 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.⁶⁰

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 1789.⁶¹ 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.

⁶⁰ Ibid. 3.

⁶¹ 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.⁶² 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-

⁶² 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.⁶³

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.⁶⁴

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

⁶³ Ibid. 8.

⁶⁴ 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.’⁶⁵ 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

⁶⁵ Newton, *Thoughts*, 33.

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

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.'⁶⁷ 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.⁶⁸ 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.⁶⁹ Yet it might be necessary to ask to what extent Phillips has managed to convert fact into fiction—where does

⁶⁶ Felman, 'After the Apocalypse', 124.

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

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

⁶⁹ 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.'⁷⁰ But whose is this Janus voice the reviewer

⁷⁰ 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?⁷¹ 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.⁷² 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.⁷³ (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

⁷¹ 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.

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

⁷³ Phillips, *Crossing*, 116.

smoked the ship thoroughly with tar and tobacco for 3 hours, afterwards washed clean with vinegar . . .⁷⁴ (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.⁷⁵ 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.’⁷⁶ (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.’⁷⁷ (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.⁷⁸ Is this change, the mani-

⁷⁴ Newton, *Journal*, 29.

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

⁷⁶ Phillips, *Crossing*, 104. ⁷⁷ Newton, *Journal*, 14.

⁷⁸ 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 7th 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 . . .⁷⁹ (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. . . .⁸⁰ (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

⁷⁹ Phillips, *Crossing*, 115.

⁸⁰ 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.⁸¹

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

⁸¹ 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.⁸² (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.⁸³ (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.'⁸⁴ 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

⁸² Phillips, *Crossing*, 112.

⁸³ Newton, *Journal*, 71.

⁸⁴ 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.⁸⁵ (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.⁸⁶ (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

⁸⁵ Phillips, *Crossing*, 109.

⁸⁶ 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.⁸⁷ 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

⁸⁷ 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 . . .⁸⁸ (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.⁸⁹ (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

⁸⁸ Phillips, *Crossing*, 118.

⁸⁹ 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.⁹⁰ 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.⁹¹ 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.⁹²

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.⁹³ 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.⁹⁴ A biographical cult flourished around the poet's memory and the majority of the early biographies are obsessed with Cowper's madness.⁹⁵ This

⁹⁰ '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'.

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

⁹² 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).

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

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* 17.

⁹⁵ 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*.⁹⁶ 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'.⁹⁷ 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.⁹⁸

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'.⁹⁹ Yet this external construction of enslavement to Newton is balanced

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

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

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

⁹⁹ *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.¹⁰⁰ 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.¹⁰¹

**'What are these things to me who am damned?':
Cowper's Crazy Slavery¹⁰²**

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

¹⁰⁰ King, *Cowper*, 69–71.

¹⁰¹ 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.

¹⁰² 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.¹⁰³

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.'¹⁰⁴ 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.¹⁰⁵

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

¹⁰⁴ Newton, *Works*, i. 18, 27.

¹⁰⁵ 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?¹⁰⁶

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.'¹⁰⁷ 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.¹⁰⁸

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

¹⁰⁶ Cowper, *Letters and Prose Writings*, iii. 106.

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

¹⁰⁸ 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.¹⁰⁹

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.¹¹⁰ 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

¹⁰⁹ Cowper, *Letters and Prose Writings*, iii. 106–7.

¹¹⁰ 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.¹¹¹

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.¹¹²

¹¹¹ Cowper, *Letters and Prose Writings*, iii. 172.

¹¹² *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.¹¹³

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'.¹¹⁴ 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.¹¹⁵ 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

¹¹³ See Wood, *Blind Memory*, 41–68.

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

¹¹⁵ 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.¹¹⁶ 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.¹¹⁷ If Liberty is to be prized as a cultural

¹¹⁶ 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.

¹¹⁷ 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.¹¹⁸ 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.

¹¹⁸ 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.¹¹⁹

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*.¹²⁰ 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

¹¹⁹ Cowper, *Poems*, i, 269.

¹²⁰ *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.¹²¹

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'.¹²² The poem opens by celebrating Captain Cook's atti-

¹²¹ Cowper, *Poems*, i. 195-6.

¹²² 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.¹²³ 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.¹²⁴ 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).

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

¹²⁴ 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*.¹²⁵ 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)

¹²⁵ 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.¹²⁶ 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.¹²⁷ 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.¹²⁸

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

¹²⁶ 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.

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

¹²⁸ 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.¹²⁹

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.¹³⁰

'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

¹²⁹ 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.

¹³⁰ 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'.¹³¹

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.¹³²

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.

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

¹³² 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 1888.¹³³

‘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.

¹³³ 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.¹³⁴

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.¹³⁵

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

¹³⁴ Cowper, *Poems*, iii. 15–16.

¹³⁵ *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.