Class antagonism and the limits of utopia in Matthew Lewis and Robert Owen

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The distinctive mark of the utopian imagination, as first outlined by Thomas More in 1516, is perhaps not so much its negative spatial quality, its self-presentation as a non-place or *ou-topos*, forever rivalling in More’s playful etymology with the *eu-topos* or good place of its more openly political declension, but rather what Fredric Jameson has named utopia’s “constitutive secessionism” (2005, 23). According to Jameson, “the modification of reality” that utopia proposes “must be absolute and totalizing”: “the mark of this absolute totalization is the geopolitical secession of the Utopian space itself from the world of empirical or historical reality: the great trench which King Utopus causes to be dug in order to “delink” from the world, and to change his promontory into an island” (2005, 39). This latter operation is crucial, for it not only establishes a spatial and geographical paradigm for the textual genre inaugurated by More, but also brands the island, itself such a central trope to the historical constitution of European modernity, with a transcendent, and indeed redemptive, vocation. And yet, as a modern literary motif and setting, the island also emerges as a locus of fundamental contradiction and tension between this separatist impulse, forever inscribed with its *eu-topian* principle, and the fact of its historical integration into a fabric of economic, political, and, to be sure, cultural interrelations as part of what Immanuel Wallerstein (2011) calls the “modern world-system” of capitalism.

In this article, I want to begin by revisiting Matthew Lewis’s *Journal of a West India Proprietor*, a significant early nineteenth-century island narrative (written 1815–1818 and only published posthumously in 1834) that is not only an important account of slavery and plantation life on the eve of emancipation, but also a text that can be read as exploring the limits of the utopian hypothesis articulated in the Jameson quotation above, namely its assumption of “delinking” as a fundamentally spatial or topological correction of actual historical conditions.¹ I want to argue that Lewis’s text identifies a central conflict between labour and property which ultimately proves excessive and therefore inassimilable for its paternalist strategy. As I will show in the second half of the article, this amounts to a destabilising discovery of class antagonism that is actually shared by such a famous paternalist utopian as Robert Owen, whose classic *A New View of Society* was published between 1813 and 1816. The similarities between these two authors, I will argue, far outweigh the (otherwise obvious) differences between their industrial and colonial-plantation contexts.

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Slavery emerges in Lewis’s *Journal* as a slippery category of definition. It is not so much normalised in an attempt to justify its increasingly questioned moral status at this late juncture,2 as inserted into a continuum of exploitative labour practices in a way that both diminishes its relative exceptionality in the early nineteenth century and articulates it with an emerging continent of labour struggles and antagonistic subjectivities. I contend that this is by no means a representational *a priori* of Lewis’s narrative, but rather an unwilling discovery of its reconstruction of plantation life with ultimately far more destabilising hermeneutic effects than those generically enabled by the Gothic paradigm from which Lewis, the author of the notorious 1796 novel *The Monk*, departs.

It is important to emphasise the discursive contrast between Lewis’s expectations and his actual experience of the arrival in Jamaica. The *Journal* includes a lengthy narrative poem entitled “The Isle of Devils”, which Lewis composed during the outward voyage and which can be read as offering a synthesis of the author’s ideological and aesthetic preconceptions and anxieties. Having inherited two plantations a few years prior to his first of two journeys in 1815, it is not difficult to see how his recently acquired status as a slave owner had put the (in principle) anti-slavery Lewis in a conflicted position which certainly would not abate through first-hand experience of plantation life. Nor is it difficult to understand, from this basic perspective, “Monk” Lewis’s preliminary choice of a heavily Gothicised verse narrative as a literary frame to his “colonial encounter”. “The Isle of Devils” superimposes a conventional deployment of Gothic alterity onto a plot echoing Shakespeare’s *Tempest*. The intersection of these textual parameters reinforces a colonial hermeneutic predicated on radical geographical and symbolic separation. Indeed, the “isle” in question emerges as an outside accidentally stumbled upon by a group of travellers, including lovers Irza and Rosalvo, en route to Lisbon from the Portuguese colony of Goa, on a homeward journey that evokes an older phase of colonial expansion:

> From Goa’s precious sands to Lisbon’s shore,
> The viceroy’s countless wealth that vessel bore:
> In heaps there jewels lay of various dyes,
> Ingots of gold, and pearls of wondrous size;
> And there (two gems worth all that Cortez won)
> He placed his angel niece and only son. (Lewis [1834] 1999, 163).

The ominous island is named after the Caliban-like “fiend” who inhabits it and whose curse results in the protagonists’ shipwreck. The Gothic exoticism of the setting is punctuated not only by its monstrous associations and outward beauty but also, as Lisa Nevárez has pointed out, by its intermediate – and indefinite – location off the African coast, “between colony and motherland” (2008, n.p.). Significantly, this liminal position “bisects the trade route … between wealth (Goa) and the desire for wealth (Portugal)” (Nevárez 2008, n.p.), in effect interrupting the flow of accumulation from colonial periphery to imperial core. The symbolic link between the African setting (whose vagueness only serves as an emphatic confirmation of its perilous status) and the traumatic as well as external quality of this interruption is central. By revisiting a standard Gothic trope and recurring racist fantasy of rape and miscegenation, laced with a tragic finale,3 Lewis does not so much “allegorize his Jamaican experiences in terms of death” (Macdonald, quoted in Nevárez 2008),4 as invoke a frame of interpretation of
the encounter with blackness in terms of inassimilable exteriority. The irruption of Africa is inscribed as necessarily supernatural, an otherworldly force intruding upon the seamless flow of merchant capital, and thus conveniently insulated from any connotation of actual social agency. The contrast between this representational logic and the experience of pervasive interiority that Lewis sets out to record in the Journal is remarkable.

Having completed the crossing from England, and indeed surmounted its real and imagined obstacles and threats, Lewis’s arrival at his plantation home in the west of the island is described as a resounding success. Far from incarnating the Gothic fears of his poem, Jamaica emerges instead as a eu-topia of natural and human warmth against which Britain stands in sharp, and effectively rather bleak, contrast.

Indeed, every thing appears much better than I expected; the negroes seem healthy and contented, and so perfectly at their ease, that our English squires would be mightily astonished at being accosted so familiarly by their farmers. This delightful north wind keeps the air temperate and agreeable. I live upon shaddocks and pine-apples. The dreaded mosquitoes are not worse than gnats, nor as bad as the Sussex harvest-bugs; and, as yet, I never felt myself in more perfect health. (Lewis [1834] 1999, 43).

The weather seems to register here as an extension of the “healthy” relations entertained between planters and slaves and, more generally, of a “temperate and agreeable” climate in productive relations on the island. Lewis’s description of “the negroes” as “happy” (“I never saw people look more happy in my life” ([1834] 1999, 42)), which he immediately rationalises in terms of a contrast between their present condition, following the abolition of the slave trade, and “that of the labourers of Great Britain” ([1834] 1999, 42) is of course central to a discursive strategy that will gradually abandon its spontaneous optimism for a more strained and, as we will see, socially qualified inflection. In a sense, Lewis’s early emphasis on the historical caesura of 1807, his defence that “slavery, in their case, is but another name for servitude, now that no more negroes can be forcibly carried away from Africa” ([1834] 1999, 42), functions as an anxious foreshadowing of a far less benign and conflict-free interaction between slaves and slaveowner. For all his initial insistence that it is “almost worth surrendering the luxuries and pleasures of Great Britain, for the single pleasure of being surrounded with beings who are always laughing and singing, and who seem to perform their work with so much nonchalance” (Lewis [1834] 1999, 65), the feeling that “here nobody appears to work at all” ([1834] 1999, 65) will soon be reinterpreted as less of an occasion for relishing and more of a direct threat – of a novel kind, as we will see – not just to the economic interests of the planter, but also to his projection of a fully operative social body. Thus, barely a few pages after his seemingly candid celebration of the slaves’ conduct, we witness the emergence of a stern managerial idiom where frustration gradually replaces the initial optimism and appreciation. From his remark that the “hospital has been crowded, since my arrival, with patients who have nothing the matter with them” (Lewis [1834] 1999, 77) to the more anxious observation that “there are some choice ungrateful scoundrels among the negroes” (Lewis [1834] 1999, 81), Lewis’s response to life on the plantation (and Jamaica more generally) begins to display the features of a conscious – and even militant – paternalism that is the natural offspring of his ideological preconceptions regarding slavery, but also, perhaps more crucially, a product of more dynamic and less predictable interactions with the slaves. For the discursive matrix of Lewis’s
paternalism in the *Journal* rehearses, as we will see, a fundamental contradiction between the ideologically requisite infantilisation of his slaves⁵ and the discovery of a complex range of actions and behaviours invariably pointing to the possibility – and sometimes the undeniable actuality – of resistance. The opening contrast between a fantasised Gothic horror and a no less fanciful utopia of spontaneous natural and social harmony is effectively replaced by a relation of power. As Michel Foucault famously points out: “what defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead, it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or the future” ([1834] 1999, 789). Lewis’s interventions and their narrative justification are thus dynamically – or as Foucault would say, strategically – connected to and modulated by the slaves’ pervasive gestures of non-cooperation and occasional outbursts of open confrontation. We can sense the urgency of Lewis’s insistence that his presence in Jamaica is entirely justified by a determination to “give up my whole time to my negroes” ([1834] 1999, 87), a programmatic declaration of active, interventionist paternalism which is immediately followed (as a sort of conscious reminder of the true nature of the power relation unravelling before his eyes) by the remark that “Every morning my agent regales me with some fresh instance of insubordination” ([1834] 1999, 87). Gone seem the days of utopian harmony and spontaneous celebration of Lewis’s initial encounter with Jamaica. But also, more intriguingly, gone is the narrative consistency and symbolic coordination in the Gothic prefiguration of this encounter. For this colonial setting is no otherworldly phantasmagoria, no site of sublime alterity featuring an extraneous interruption of capitalist modernity, but a locus of antagonism, fully inscribed within and immanent to its social logic. Its defining elements, in spite of the backward economic credentials of slavery, offer no transcendence of capitalism, but rather speak its language with an intensity and attention to conflictual detail that make their generalisability beyond their immediate context, all but self-evident.

The recursive, insidious, and quotidian quality of resistance on the plantation contrasts with the romanticised episodes of past rebellion, which Lewis often shapes into a Gothic mould peopled by maroon slaves hiding in the mountains as “banditti”,⁶ who “robbed very often, and murdered occasionally” while, as in the case of one “runaway negro” whose adventures Lewis relates with undisguised gusto, “gallantry was his every day occupation” ([1834] 1999, 59). There is of course no room for gallantry or exoticism in the insistent *refusal* performed by his slaves, just a sense of obstinacy and regularity that necessarily short-circuits any insinuation of transcendence: “It seems that this morning, the women, one and all, refused to carry away the *trash* (which is one of the easiest tasks that can be set)” (Lewis [1834] 1999, 87); “Another morning, with the mill stopped, no liquor in the boiling-house, and no work done” ([1834] 1999, 88). To this temporal disruption from within, characterised by its recurrent ordinariness, Lewis responds with a decidedly *modern* (that is, fully attentive to the eminently measurable temporal logics of capitalism)⁷ reapportioning of the distribution between work and leisure which not only consolidates the reformist rhetoric of the *Journal*, but also, to some extent, re-inscribes slave labour within the *ordinary* conceptual parameters of free labour. Thus, when the minister at the local parish presents Lewis with “a plan for the religious instruction of the negroes”, including a recommendation that the slaves be “ordered to go to church on a Sunday”, he rejects it, proclaiming that “Sunday is now the absolute
property of the negroes for their relaxation, as Saturday is for the cultivation of their grounds; and I will not suffer a single hour of it to be taken from them for any purpose whatever” ([1834] 1999, 89).

The conceptualisation of leisure, as much as its implementation, is of course central to the historical emergence of industrial capitalism. For leisure is, as Foucault reminds us in his 1973 lectures on The Punitive Society, “how idleness has been codified, institutionalized, as a certain way of distributing non-work across the cycles of production, integrating idleness into the economy by taking it up and controlling it within a system of consumption” (2015, 189). And while “the nineteenth century did not invent idleness”, Foucault insists that what emerges in this period (beginning in the second half of the eighteenth century, with industrialisation and the rise of modern political economy) is a fresh conception of “laziness” as “dissipation” rather than “depredation”. The attack on property that is necessarily implicit in any refusal of work (Lewis’s fundamental problem) is no longer to be considered primarily in terms of “a relationship of desire to the materiality of wealth, but one of fixing to the production apparatus” (Foucault 2015, 188). Foucault thus describes the emergence of an internal, immanent logic of resistance on the part of labour, a “figure of illegalism” that will haunt industrial production by taking “the form of absenteeism, lateness, laziness, festivity, debauchery, nomadism, in short, everything that smacks of irregularity, of mobility in space” (2015, 188). That this will be an increasingly non-transcendable space, indeed that the capitalist machine (whether literal or figurative) will gradually subsume the totality of productive relations, is hardly reassuring for the proprietor, whether in the colonies or in the metropole. For just as the threat of class antagonism abandons its romantic incarnations, revealing a more familiar and unexceptional façade, its inevitability too becomes apparent.

This shift is assumed and at some level negotiated in the Journal. The remarkable displacement of marronage as a central problem in favour of a range of insidious but nonetheless bitterly resistant behaviours is telling. Lewis’s earlier concentration on the slaves’ laziness and propensity to lie as two central aspects of their “character” eventually gives way to a more open field of subversive practices: “There are certainly many excellent qualities in the negro character; their worst faults appear to be, this prejudice respecting Obah, and the facility with which they are frequently induced to poison to the right hand and to the left” (1999, 93).

The emphasis on the complex of beliefs and practices known as Obah is particularly significant, for it not only implies (despite a recurring dismissal of “prejudice” and “superstition”) a recognition of complexity in the cultural dynamics of the slaves, but also stresses the insidious and indeed – to reiterate Foucault’s term – dissipative nature of their resistant strategies, their potential for relentless, internal erosion of the disciplinary order instituted by the benevolent master. As J. Alexandra McGhee has pointed out, Obah was “situated by Europeans between a material practice and a contagious discourse … undermin[ing] the health of the colony in ways similar to tropical diseases” (2015, 180). The metaphorics of contagion are central to Lewis’s articulation of the problem of resistance as an immanent feature of colonial life and are ultimately expressive of his eventual failure to reform the system. In effect, as McGhee suggests, “Lewis’ struggle to stop the spread of obah on the plantation parallels his continual attempts to overcome the challenges he faces in the tropical environment, including
yellow fever, which, despite his projection of confidence and self-assurance in the face of a hostile landscape, would eventually kill him” (2015, 189).

Prone to periodic outbreaks, often latent but invariably pervasive, resistance cannot be eradicated or suppressed. This is, of course, the defining characteristic of what Foucault refers to as “illegalism” and the fundamental insight upon which the rise of the disciplinary system rests. The model, as he famously argues in Discipline and Punish, is that of the plague-stricken town:

The plague-stricken town, traversed throughout with hierarchy, surveillance, observation, writing; the town immobilized by the functioning of an extensive power that bears in a distinct way over all individual bodies – this is the utopia of the perfectly governed city. (Foucault [1975] 1991, 198).

This figure of social immobility is correlative to the topological function of separation upon which utopia is predicated; and neither, it is important to insist, is available to Lewis in the Journal. Indeed, his disciplinary intervention runs up against a practical failure of management and surveillance, perhaps a decisive confirmation of the impossibility of separation required by the utopia of modern power. Lewis’s text is crucially haunted by the spectre of reversal – reversal of the spatial arrangements and panoptical distributions of the disciplinary gaze:

The houses are absolutely transparent; the walls are nothing but windows – and all the doors stand wide open. No servants are in waiting to announce arrivals: visiters, negroes, dogs, cats, poultry, all walk in and out, and up and down your living-rooms, without the slightest ceremony. (1999, 94)

As Maureen Harkin notes: “Instead of the silent surveillance of an obscure and shadowy master” theorised by Foucault, “in Lewis’ Jamaica, ‘massa’ is at the center of all eyes, his privacy easily penetrated by any passing slave’s gaze” (2002, 144).

Even more decisively, the productivity of disciplinary power is intimately conditioned by what could be described, this time following the later Foucault, as a biopolitics of the (enslaved) subject. By this I mean an understanding of subjectivity – the subjectivity, in this case, of enslaved workers – as productive and expansive, immanent to the force-field of power but also excessive and inassimilable to its disciplinary logic. This is a crucial aspect of Lewis’s colonial encounter and subsequent experience of failure. For, in effect, what ultimately determines the impossibility of his reformist-disciplinary utopia is not so much the collapse of spatial and temporal striations as the encounter with a countervailing force endowed with self-determining and agential properties: the discovery, by the coloniser, of a colonised life structurally subordinate but ontologically irreducible to him and thus capable of subjectivation.

The notion of subjectivation, as developed by the later Foucault, is not a mere reassertion of modern liberal individualism, but an enabling theoretical artefact for the recognition of spaces of autonomy and constitutive resistance in the social field. Lewis’s attention to individuality (his insistent acknowledgement of the slaves’ names and individual stories, in sharp contrast to his white employees, who remain anonymous and obscure in the narrative), precisely because it functions as a discursive operation of power in the early nineteenth-century disciplinary mould, follows in a sense this Foucauldian trajectory in that it cannot extricate itself from the oppositional force-field it
uncovers, all pretensions of topological secession gone and all hopes of ontological transformation dashed. Again, the symbolic role of Obeah is paramount insofar as it signals an area of subjective constitution and autonomy which the master cannot adequately pacify, let alone suppress, but only aspire to manage. Since there is no lasting sense of control in this managerial intervention, the possibility of subjectivation among the slaves continues to present the master with a monumental challenge. The shadow of failure looms large over Lewis’s treatment of individual slaves such as Adam, whose particularly recalcitrant commitment to both Obeah and insubordination keeps flaring up throughout the Journal. Described as “a most dangerous fellow, and the terror of all his companions, with whom he lives in a constant state of warfare” (Lewis [1834] 1999, 92), this slave comes to function in the text as an emblem of the sort of internal division that Lewis’s reformist agenda strives to and yet ultimately fails to neutralise through discipline. For Adam is “a creole, born on my own property” (Lewis [1834] 1999, 92), whose proven unreformability and commitment to practices beyond the sanction and control of the master constitute a deeper, and in a sense more unsettling, failure of power than those more spectacular plots of rebellion on the Haitian model to which the Journal occasionally refers.

I want to argue that there is a fundamental contradiction between the paternalist utopia of production pursued by an author like Matthew Lewis and the social configuration of irreducible antagonisms and resistant dynamics of subjectivation it uncovers. This is a structural conflict that becomes particularly pointed and politically significant, beyond the immediate contexts of slavery and the West Indian plantation economy, in the early nineteenth century. Mutatis mutandis, it is to be observed in the contemporaneous utopianism of Robert Owen, whose reformist agenda (although undeniably more “advanced” than Lewis’s attempt at slaveholding paternalism) builds upon a similar negation of the social autonomy signalled by subjectivation – in this case, that of British industrial workers. Owen’s journey from benevolent managerialism to what would eventually become known as “socialism” (originally an abbreviation of the reformist programme he called “the social system”) never really saw him depart from profoundly utilitarian and paternalist premises. As E. P. Thompson remarks in a classic – and highly critical – account, despite the undeniable merit of his experimental actions as a leading industrialist at places like New Lanark, “He was in one sense the ne plus ultra of Utilitarianism, planning society as a gigantic industrial panopticon” ([1963] 1991, 859). As a result, “the notion of working-class advance, by its own self-activity towards its own goals, was alien to Owen” (Thompson [1963] 1991, 859).

Owen’s approach to the working class and its dire condition at the dawn of the nineteenth century in seminal interventions such as A New View of Society is guided by a determination to neutralise its potential agency as a social subject, on the grounds that the state of moral dereliction in which the working poor find themselves (an offshoot and reflection of their material destitution) can only lead to criminal violence and destruction. Owen’s point of departure is thus far less eu-topian than Lewis’s, for there is no rose-tinted concession to the current state of affairs in the world of labour and no fanciful (although momentary) island retreat in which toil may seem to disappear under the echoes of song and revelry. But there certainly is an undertone of angst and fear that betrays more than moral exasperation in the presence of human suffering.
First, there is the acknowledgment (which would have resonated immediately with a West Indian slaveholder such as Matthew Lewis) of sheer numerical superiority: “According to the last returns under the Population Act, the poor and working classes of Great Britain and Ireland have been found to exceed fifteen millions of persons, or nearly three-fourths of the population of the British Islands” (Owen 1991, 10). The inherent monstrosity of this demographic imbalance is compounded by the observable fact that the “characters of these persons are now permitted to be very generally formed without proper guidance or direction”, making them prone to “extreme vice and misery” and “rendering them the worst and most dangerous subjects in the empire” (Owen 1991, 10). The entry-point into the paternalist argument is thus neither an abstract vindication of social utility nor a moral response prompted by a sense of indignation (although both aspects are central to its discursive configuration), but the identification of a concrete and major threat in the actual social conduct and life of the working classes. Thus, when Owen writes, ventriloquising a defeatist position his own proposals seek to refute, that the “evil is now of a magnitude not to be controlled” (1991, 11), what makes itself heard is a language of fear, fluently spoken, as we have seen, by late participant-observers of the slave-driven regime of production, in the face of resistant social alterity. The impulse for reform is to be found, as a result, in the prospect of preventing (and thus offering a plausible pathway to effective control of) those “crimes” and “innumerable evils” which may otherwise define this potentially uncontrolable reality.

The focus of Owen’s intervention rests precisely on the controlling possibilities of education and is driven by an emphatic conception of the malleability of the human character during childhood – without a doubt the temporal and strategic axis of the Owenite programme:

Children are, without exception, passive and wonderfully contrived compounds; which, by an accurate previous and subsequent attention, founded on a correct knowledge of the subject, may be formed collectively to have any human character. And although these compounds, like all the other works of nature, possess endless varieties, yet they partake of that plastic quality, which, by perseverance under judicious management, may be ultimately moulded into the very image of rational wishes and desires. (1991, 19)

Of course, the basic tenet underpinning this vision, which Owen insistently repeats throughout A New View of Society, builds on a strident repudiation of the liberal individualist credo then making strides towards complete ideological hegemony: “the character of man is, without a single exception, always formed for him; that it may be, and is, chiefly created by his predecessors; that they give him, or may give him, his ideas and habits, which are the powers that govern and direct his conduct. Man, therefore, never did, nor is it possible he ever can, form his own character” (1991, 43; italics in the original). The theoretical formula guiding the project is simple: humanity is redeemable because it is malleable; and it is malleable because it is incapable of autonomous agency and subjectivation. Whenever the latter is allowed, not to occur, but merely to be contemplated as a possibility, a decidedly monstrous outcome is to be expected, both from an anthropological point of view and from a socio-political one. Thus, the notion that subjects may be consciously present and even active in their formation is to be regarded as a “hydra of human calamity”, indeed a “monster” characterised by “deformity” (Owen 1991, 65). Of course, this
trope of monstrosity was soon to be accorded myth-making credentials with the publication in 1818 of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, a text that has often been read against the turbulent social contexts to which Owen directly addresses his intervention. As some of the best historical interpretations have suggested, Shelley’s novel is not only generally invested in the spectacular unravelling of class conflict throughout the 1810s, beginning with the Luddite revolts of 1811–1813, but is also specifically concerned with the threat represented by the prospect of an autonomous production of subjectivity among the nascent industrial proletariat. As with Owen’s analysis in *A New View of Society*, the strategic emphasis in *Frankenstein* may also seem to fall on the question of education. Patrick Brantlinger, for example, writes that this is “among other things, a novel about two educations or, rather, miseducations, Victor’s and the Monster’s” (1998, 60). Both are autodidacts, makers of their own characters, and herein lies the central transgression. Of course the difference between the two is also substantive, for while Frankenstein chooses a path of isolation and hubristic experimentation, “the Monster is perforce an autodidact, in some respects similar to the working-class autodidacts whose autobiographies serve as a rich source of evidence in E. P. Thompson’s *Making of the English Working Class*” (Brantlinger 1998, 60). As Brantlinger further argues:

> What has seemed ultimately most monstrous and therefore most difficult for readers of *Frankenstein* over the years to accept is precisely the Monster’s literacy. The key to the obsessive erasure of that literacy in retellings of *Frankenstein* on stage, in film, and in other popular cultural forms seems to reside in the Monster’s evident likeness to that other, collective monstrosity, Burke’s “swinish multitude” – that is, to the working-class masses. (1998, 63)

That this resistance is rooted in a generally snobbish class prejudice is not to be doubted, but it is necessary to insist that the central emphasis in this cultural response (an emphasis which Burke’s infamous coinage managed to capture with particular rhetorical acumen) has more specifically to do with the fear provoked by the perception of an autonomous cultural and social practice of and by the working class. In other words, the true “monster” is not the unlikelihood of proletarian self-making, but its opacity – and therefore its uncontrollability. As Thompson writes about the Luddites’ “secret tradition”: “Here the authorities were faced with a working-class culture so opaque that (unless a Luddite prisoner broke down under questioning and in fear of the scaffold) it resisted all penetration” (1991, 540). Isn’t this precisely the problem that Lewis had to negotiate in relation to Obeah? More than a distorted reflection of the unspeakable practices of colonial slavery and early industrial labour, the monstrous discovery at the heart of capitalism’s “workshop of filthy creation”, in Shelley’s evocative phrase (1994, 36), is that of a subjective opacity that its world-systemic light is unable to penetrate. At this point both panoptical technique and utopian illusion fall apart, replaced with a Gothicism of actual, living, labouring, and fighting class monsters.

Against this background, Owen’s intervention does not conceal its counter-revolutionary credentials. His opposition to political reform is explicit, since “without preparing and putting into practice means to well-train, instruct, and advantageously employ, the great mass of people”, it “would inevitably create immediate revolution”. In such a context, “violence would follow … and all Europe and the Americas, would be plunged in one general scene of anarchy and dreadful confusion, of which the late French
Revolution will give but a faint anticipation” (Owen 1991, 188). The Owen of the 1810s was thus not only complacent and accommodating towards the political establishment, echoing a fundamental fear of Revolution among the ruling classes, but his projected vision actually looked, to radical commentators, like a practical scheme for generalised slavery: “Mr Owen’s object appears to me to be to cover the face of the country with workhouses, to rear up a community of slaves, and consequently to render the labour part of the People absolutely dependant upon the men of property” (quoted in Thompson 1963, 1991, 861).

Thus, the slaveholding Lewis, whose criticisms of Wilberforce and the emancipationists recur through the pages of the Journal, and Owen the social reformer, who dedicates his foundational tract to Wilberforce himself, meet unexpectedly on this common anti-revolutionary and conservative ground. But the reasons for this encounter are less haphazard than fundamental. As I have been trying to argue, what surfaces in the post-insular, post-secessionist configuration of paternalist utopia which both authors, despite their obvious differences, endorse is a negation of subjectivity and agency in a social field defined by resistance from below rather than by productive discipline and perfect government from above. As Owen rightly points out, the French Revolution, with its subjective figure of the empowered multitude, the sans culottes, had recently offered an experimental glimpse of this alternative articulation of the social field through an unmediated, and necessarily revolutionary, exercise of sovereignty. In France, but also in Saint Domingue, a radically new experience of social and political time had been unlocked; a temporality rooted in what Antonio Negri has theorised as “constituent power”:

Through the acceleration of revolutionary time is formulated the idea of time as strength – of a time that is “other” … Of an “other” time, that is, the discovery of a social space traversed by strength, and by this ordered and configured according to the instances of liberation. The time of the sans-culottes subverts the concept of political space because it defines it not as space of representation, but as the place of the mass exercise of power; not as constituted and fixed space, but as continuous space of constituent power. (2009, 198)

This temporal-ontological dimension is also at the root of the central revolutionary discovery which Marx was to make just a few decades later, when the concept of “living labour” would be invoked to name, as Negri reminds us, precisely that “intransitive potentiality in the capital relation” (2016, 194), that “fire” in which the capitalist universe of value is bathed, “appropriated as part of its organism, and infused with vital energy”: “Living labour must seize on these things, awaken them from the dead, change them from merely possible into real and effective use-values” (Marx 1867 1990, 289).

While the emergent tension of revolutionary agency is clearly acknowledged by Owen in his explicit allusions to the French Terror, it would not be accurate to claim that Lewis’s Journal merely registers a marginal treatment of revolution through its occasional references to Saint Domingue/Haiti. On the contrary, there is a fundamental recognition of its open temporal ontology in those intractable and ultimately unrepresentable practices of freedom among the slaves. In their obstinate refusal of labour, in the (sometimes elaborate) performativity of idleness, and in Obeah, the transitivity of traditional forms of
resistance such as marronage is replaced by a constituent openness which ultimately transforms the logic of power and which discipline may only aspire to engage without ever suppressing or effectively controlling.

In effect, this intransitivity is the determining and differentiating criterion of the revolutionary process and its subjectivising dimension, and what marks off the historical limits of the paternalist strategy of transcendence. However “radical” in practice (after all, Owen’s proposals are radical in many respects), paternalism can only imagine an “island” of secession and abstraction from the messy continuities of social antagonism. Yet precisely what erupts at the turn of the century, and what both Lewis and Owen discover is a “making” in E. P. Thompson’s sense of the term, a process of subjective constitution that cannot be confined within the insular bounds of the utopian imagination.

Notes

1. For the original politico-theoretical formulation of the strategy of “delinking”, see Amin (1990).
2. The slave trade was formally abolished across the British Empire in 1807, while emancipation was made statutory in 1833.
3. Confined to the Fiend’s cave, Irza becomes pregnant twice, giving birth to two mixed-race children. While the first, who bears the monstrous features of its father, repels her (although seemingly awakening tender feelings in the Fiend), the more human-looking second child brings a momentary reprieve from her ordeal. The latter, however, is brought to an abrupt end when the abbot who had chaperoned Irza and her lover on the doomed journey returns to rescue her, and the Fiend consummates his revenge by killing both children and himself.
4. After all, it is worth insisting that this poetic vision corresponds to Lewis’s anticipatory imagination rather than elaboration on his experience in Jamaica, since the text was composed during the outward journey.
5. As Judith Terry points out in her Introduction to the Oxford edition of the Journal: “Such infantilizing was the norm, of course, but, in the case of a slave-holder, surrounded and totally outnumbered by those he held in subjection, it was also a discursive strategy essential for survival” (1999, xxix).
6. For a classic study of the Jamaican maroons, see Robinson (2007). See also Craton (1982).
7. See the classic discussion of “Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism” in Thompson (2010).
8. As he puts it in Discipline and Punish: “We should think of a penal system as an apparatus for managing illegalisms differentially, and not for suppressing them all”. This is an improved translation by Alex J. Feldman (2020, 447) of the standard English version (Foucault [1975] 1991).
9. There are numerous examples of this, but Lewis’s discovery of “confinement” as a form of punitive management is one of the most explicit ones: “I am more and more convinced every day, that the best and easiest mode of governing negroes (and governed by some mode or other they must be) is not by the detestable lash, but by confinement, solitary or otherwise; they cannot bear it” ([1834] 1999, 238).
10. See, for example, O’Flinn (1983), and more recently Smith (2019).
11. According to Abensour, Owen responds, in A New View of Society, to “a state of crisis which dangerously affects global society. At the heart of this crisis [there is] the extremely rapid growth of the working class and its proletarianization. The equation working class/dangerous class is neatly posed. Present society produces criminals. What is to be done so that it produces industrious proletarians, temperate and subordinated to the existing order?” (2016, 122; my translation).
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