

Paradigms of the Slave Trade in Two British Novels

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*Sacred Hunger*¹ by Barry Unsworth (born 1930) was co-winner of the Booker Prize in 1992, sharing the award with *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje. Covering the period 1752 to 1765, the story is of a slave ship beset by bad weather and disease. Nearing the Americas, the captain decides to throw the surviving slaves overboard, calculating that he can get more money from insurance than from the sale of sick and dying slaves. Intervention by Matthew Paris, a doctor and nephew of the ship's owner, precipitates a mutiny; the (white) crew members and the remaining slaves establish a little cooperative community which survives twelve years until Erasmus, the shipowner's son, succeeds in wreaking his destructive revenge. *The Black Cook's Historian*² by Graeme Rigby, a younger writer,³ a published poet and playwright, is the story of a black cook on a slave ship who poisons almost the entire crew and sails away to found a new empire in the New World. The narrative is the record of events by William Bone, who was pressed-ganged when a boy into being "the Black Cook's" assistant. In both novels, the slave ships play an important role. More than timbered transporters, they are repositories of commercial hope, and carriers of human despair: as Fredric Jameson observes, often "the underside of culture is blood, torture and terror."⁴ *Sacred Hunger* describes the whips, thumbscrews and branding irons, the excrement and moral "stench" (SH 373) surrounding the misnamed "trade." The slaves are permitted no escape, not even through suicide: "They must not believe they have the disposal of themselves" (SH 275). In *The Black Cook*, a slave who manages to throw himself overboard is retrieved, and flogged: "No more screams. No more water from his lungs. No movement . . . just the lash making his body jerk and the blood trickling" (BC 51-2). The trade, one of the worst blots on human history, cannot be reduced to a palimpsest and inscribed anew, ignoring the reality of that experience. These two novels take full measure of the worst but, at the same time, develop in very different directions, and it is this divergence which is addressed here.

Sacred Hunger, for all its realism built leisurely over six hundred pages, is a philosophical meditation. Set in the eighteenth century, it continues the

¹ Barry Unsworth, *Sacred Hunger* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1992). All references appear in the text after the abbreviation SH.

² Graeme Rigby, *The Black Cook's Historian* (London: Constable, 1993). Abbreviated hereafter as BC.

³ Having met him, I would think he is in his early forties.

⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism* (New York: Duke University Press, 1991) 5.

reflections of writers of that period who, though skeptical of a Utopia, were preoccupied with the quest for the happiness, bearing in mind that we are social beings and live not in isolation but within "communities." This was an age which reposed confidence in what reason could do to ameliorate human existence. John Locke (1632–1704) perceived a harmony between private and public interests, and reposed his faith in the controls which, flowing from knowledge, would lead to happiness. Earlier, Thomas Hobbes saw life in nature as solitary, nasty and brutish, and argued that individual freedom is possible only through community.⁵ Eighteenth-century men, the ex-slavers and slaves in *Sacred Hunger* also make their Hobbesean "covenant," and initially live in a harmony as serene and beautiful as their environment (see, for example, *SH* 523). In their new world, the colonists fashion a "dream community living without constraint of government or corruption of money" (*SH* 536). The incipient nation already has its history and heroes, and has appropriated the former in its need to build legends and myths (*SH* 511–5). History begets geography: the place where some native Americans were fought for and freed comes to be known as "Red Creek." Conrad saw conquest (as had Swift earlier) as the subjugation of those who were different and weaker, but here was "a society, without victims and without injustice, where the weakness of one was not an invitation to the strength of another, except to succour or protect" (*SH* 449). If the present sad state of human beings is the result of accident or error, then it follows that circumstances can also alter the species positively. The removal of coercion will lead to happiness, and happiness to goodness (*SH* 617).

However, if fear and the survival instinct are the twin bases of human cooperation, then as the one is eliminated and the other assured, different drives will surface and assert themselves. This raises the nurture/nature debate, the question whether human nature is finally a product of chance and alterable circumstances or whether it is inherent, beyond modification. The impulse to develop oneself demands space which can be obtained only by denying or shrinking that of others. Ex-slave Kireku accumulates land and possessions, and needs constantly available and exploitable labor. The strong get rich, argues Kireku, and then the lot of his slaves will also improve (*SH* 581), in a trickle-down effect. Matthew Paris's appeal for action to be guided by duty and tested by the categorical imperative of Kant is rejected as another attempt at influence and domination by the white man. Kireku's argument is that everyone is not the same; inequality and injustice are the natural and inevitable order of things, and must be so accepted.⁶ Profit and power are simple but very powerful motives

⁵ It is ironic that the trade flourished at this time, but elevated principles are not incompatible with very sordid practice: see, R.H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (London: J. Murray, 1926) 11.

⁶ In the 1980s, presumably when Unsworth was writing *SH*, some of these attitudes were labeled "Thatcherism" in the UK, and "Reaganism" in the USA.

(SH 382), and so the sacred hunger which bums in the likes of Paris cannot be assuaged because it is frustrated by profane and destructive drives.⁷

The grim inevitably is reminiscent of Malthus and his *Essay on Population* (1766), and pessimism in the novel appears to be reinforced by the latter's Prologue and Epilogue, both of which describe old Kenka, son of Matthew Paris and an African slave. Once a happy child in a near-perfect society, he is now blind and alcoholic, an object of pity and cruelty. "We can chart the course of the planets, but not that of our own ship [Earth] in a little stretch of water" (SH 155).⁸ Nietzsche argued in *The Birth of Tragedy* that Hamlet did not act because he believed action cannot change anything, and here we have "the evening clamor of the marsh birds shrieking at the touch of the dark with a sound harsh and sorrowful like a fanfare of defeat" (SH 528; emphasis added).

Sacred Hunger suggests a Sisyphean perspective, one where attempt and failure are unceasing and cyclic (SH 527): the mistake is to reach for a thousand-year *Reich* of happiness. The twelve years of peace and contentment the community enjoys are, and remain, twelve years of happiness. To the taunting question of whether his hopes had been realized, the dying Paris answers "'As much as any hope can be' . . . doubt is the ally of hope, not its enemy" (SH 625). The novel re-presents the thought, aspirations, and deep contradictions of the eighteenth century (even parodying its vocabulary and syntactic structures), but it is also a contemporary work in the realism of its limited hope. There is neither the dream of a Utopia—of a withering away of the state under an idyllic Communism—nor an easy euphoria over some brave new post-Cold War world order.

The Black Cook, a slim novel of hundred and sixty-five pages, does not provide a comfortable reading practice. Rather, it is a text of *jouissance* (to continue Barthes's terminology) which imposes discomfort and a sense of loss. The novel is carnivalesque in that it is situated in places such as brothels and prisons, and reverses conventional hierarchies. An African commands and tutors an illiterate European (William); the slave becomes an emperor, having conquered not only the white man's language but also his discourse. He bestows names, as Columbus and others did, for giving names is a declaration of possession and power. The novel may be described as representing violence violently.⁹ Bone's father allegedly chopped up his wife and baked the finest pies in her own jelly (BC 11), and to the narrator, his "father's eyes became the eyes of

⁷ As in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (London, 1954), there is the escape from violence, the finding of a new place, initial euphoria, cooperation, and happiness. The skull in Golding's novel finds replication in the Governor's face—"a mask of death" (SH 326)—and its conch is substituted for by the cane: "No one could address the assembly unless he was holding the cane" (SH 565).

⁸ Perhaps this comment glances at Isaac Newton and his work on astronomy.

⁹ See Nancy Armstrong, ed., *The Violence of Representation* (London: Routledge, 1989).

God" (BC 14), powerful and cruel, in a totally amoral and violent world. The slave, referred to as "the Black Cook," burns down a shack with drunken men inside, "the flames burning their hair and faces until their eyeballs exploded and their screams were trapped behind their roasted tongues" (BC 63). Later, after murdering almost the entire crew,¹⁰ he takes his cleaver to two sailors, and William remembers the "blood and the gobbets of their brain" (BC 64). William's own actions are ambiguous. For example, a man shot by him "tries to accommodate the pain that cannot be accommodated. I lift a rock and crush his head" (BC 167): mercy in murder; the pleasure of killing and the virtue of compassion.

In a novel of contradictions and resulting tensions, William is sensitive, and capable of deep and caring love. He attempts to end the past, with its degradations and suffering through an honest acknowledgment, remembering even passing scenes such as the eyes of a prostitute, vacantly staring, while the drunken sailor with whom she is copulating, vomits over her (BC 28). The novel's title is ambiguous: is it about the Black Cook or his historian? Is it biography or autobiography, or both interwoven? Other questions arise in terms of content, the narrator and his recording. History, William Bone asserts, is destiny in retrospect and, in writing it, a certain latitude (his euphemism, BC 9) is granted. One can "supply gaps with plausible fictions" (BC 19) because the satisfaction of closure is more important than accuracy. Since the Black Cook in telling his story to William disregarded chronology and gaps, William tidily orders events and even writes the unsaid on the grounds that "the argument was visible within him" (BC 26). To that extent, it is finally William's story and not the Black Cook's. Indeed, William claims to have written different versions to suit three very different addressees, and a fourth version to be rid of writing, and so be "free from [the compulsion of] meaning" (BC 172).

The subject of this "history" is a self-taught slave, the Black Cook, alias Scipio,¹¹ who ends up the emperor of a half-naked rabble (BC 64) in a forest clearing with a few thatched huts. The original Scipio¹² was accorded the name "Africanus" because of victories over Africans, and so the Black Cook's name signals defeat. From another perspective, as "the conqueror" (BC 71) of his servile condition, it is triumphalism. In Foucauldian terms, *The Black Cook* is madness speaking on the basis of its own experience and authority, validating itself. It is partly the narrative of a narrative, "the story he told me" (BC 23), and all voices are voiced through that of William Bone, including those of the two women slaves. (Very much a male text, "the power of naming is men's."¹³) The

¹⁰ Herman Melville's story "Benito Cereno" comes to mind.

¹¹ Bought when a child, he was dressed as a little Roman general, placed in a large box decorated with a bow, and presented to the amused family as their Scipio Africanus.

¹² He defeated Hannibal at the battle of Zama and forced Carthage to accept a humiliating peace.

¹³ See Susanne Kappeler, *The Pornography of Representation* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1986) 53.

narrator-historian has spent seven thousand days in silent incarceration, except for his conversations with the rats, and what he possesses is only the contents of his consciousness. But, being deranged, the last is very much an unreliable and suspect faculty. In short, what we have is a history of the Black Cook, who has lost control and sight of reality, told by a historian who himself is fractured. William's writing is anguish experienced in solitude,¹⁴ and as he acknowledges, we are "ill served" (28) by our narrator: "homodiegetic," as used in Genette's *Narrative Discourse*, meaning a narrator who is also a participant in the story, rather than being separate and "superior" to it.

At times, the narrator valorizes history and accepts his responsibility as scribe, though acknowledging that narratives, both historical and fictional, only cause trouble (BC 136): after all, it was by reading secretly in his master's library that "Scipio" encountered the Latin historians and Hannibal, and so was kindled in him the wild and violent dream to found another kingdom, not by the River Ebro, but in the New World. (We need protection from "the imagination of our neighbours" [BC 99] and, one may add, from our own.) Himself knowing all too well the potency of narratives, the Black Cook, wise in his madness, has a woman (Alice) flogged for telling stories. However, William Bone at other times rejects his role of scribe, dismissing the value of inscription, contradicting the assertion that it is writing which confers meaning; he affronts history's attempt at specificity and frustrates the human desire to know by deliberately withholding information: "I was born in A—, in the County of B—. By my best calculations, the year was 17—" (BC 9); "I served him on the D—and on the E—. I went with him on the F—" (BC 27), and thus through the alphabet and to its final letter on the novel's final page: "I am imprisoned on the island of Z—." Running out of letters of the alphabet, the work ends, and so does history.

The Black Cook is not a linear history but a spatial and experiential record. The slabs and bricks of the cell represent to William incidents in his life, and he walks, uniting concrete and memory, moving through time, sometimes trying a narrational hop, skip, and a jump (BC 37). This partly accounts for sentences which violate both tense and aspect: "It is happening so long ago" (BC 133). Being incarcerated, there is nothing in the narrator's present; remembering and recording the past is his present. Imprisoned in a cell, further trapped in autobiography and biography, he obeys an inner order to record, even though "there is no purpose" (BC 39). As the slave ship dragged onto an elevation to be "a sign of greatness" (BC, 113) becomes, at the end, a symbol without substance, so history becomes gestures without meaning, a tale full of sound and fury devoid of edification or meaning. But when language runs out, so will history, and the rats (of time) wait patiently to eat the manuscript. Imprisonment itself is but an incomplete death (BC 21); complete death is "being unable to narrate" (BC 22) and so ending history. History depends on narration which, in turn, depends

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1978) 9.

on language and a narrator. As Jameson observes, the problem of the representation of history is essentially a narrative problem.¹⁵

Unsworth sets his work in a context of gross cruelty and great suffering to explore notions of humanity, justice, and happiness. Rigby's work, also dealing with the slave trade, confronts the causes and consequences of history; the validity and value of historical and fictional narrative; and the nature of language itself. In using language, we employ falsifications such as similes, which compare logically dissimilar objects, and metaphors, which bring two incompatible elements together so that there is spontaneous combustion, and a light which burns fiercely (BC 33–4). Both language (the very instrument of historical and fictional narration) and the narrator are suspect. However, language is powerful and inescapable: William expresses this fact by wryly admitting he is outnumbered, for there are twenty-six letters in the alphabet and "only one of me" (BC 38). A postmodern (more specifically, a Lacanian) text, language is given primacy, for it at once both constitutes and alienates the individual.

In conclusion, these two novels describe in detail the mechanism of the slave trade which cannot be forgotten—the ships and the voyages, the violence, brutality, and extreme suffering—but each novel diverges to address very different concerns. The trade, like all momentous events, not only continues to be remembered, but also to provoke thought, and thus to be enabling. This particular shard of history is present, in many senses.

¹⁵ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (London: Methuen, 1981) 49.