

ROMANTICISM AND  
SLAVE NARRATIVES

*Transatlantic Testimonies*



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## CHAPTER ONE

### *The English slave trade and abolitionism*

Although it would be a further one hundred years before England had successfully wrested the body of the slave trade from Spain and Portugal, and a further seventy years before it succeeded in dominating the European slave market, John Hawkins' voyage from England to Africa in 1562 marked England's entrance onto the world market of transatlantic slavery and its subsequent ascendance as a global power supported by colonial expansion. During this 'historic' voyage, some 300 slaves were taken from Sierra Leone on the Guinea Coast and transported to the Caribbean island of Hispaniola (now Haiti and the Dominican Republic) where they were sold to the Spaniards for £10,000 worth of pearls, hides, sugar and ginger.<sup>1</sup> In 1607 England founded its first colony at Virginia and in the 1620s Barbados and the Leeward Islands in the West Indies were appropriated for this expanding empire.<sup>2</sup> Just over a decade later, in 1633, the English 'guinea' coin was struck to commemorate the foundation of the slave-trading company known as the Royal Adventurers and by the 1650s, demand for slave produce such as sugar, coffee and tobacco had reached an unprecedented intensity. In the period 1673–1689, over 70 per cent of the slaves imported by the Royal African Company (formerly the Royal Adventurers) came from the Guinea Coast, the remainder from the Senegambia region further north and from Angola in the south. The majority of slaves in the Caribbean originated primarily from the Windward Coast (modern Liberia), the Gold Coast (Ghana) and the Slave Coast (Togoland, Dahomey and Western Nigeria).<sup>3</sup> By 1770, Britain's status as one of the most powerful and dynamic states was established – its commercial vigour having created some of the most productive slave colonies in the world, with a total population of 878,000 slaves (450,000 in British North America and 428,000 in the British Caribbean).<sup>4</sup> By 1760, the British and French slave colonies were producing 150,000

tons of sugar per year, an amount which had almost doubled by the years 1789–1790.<sup>5</sup> The annual rate of slaves shipped by Britain to the West Indies and America during the latter half of the eighteenth century reached 45,000 per year, with Liverpool, Bristol and London functioning as England's most important slave ports. In the decade between 1783 and 1793, slave ships departing from Liverpool completed a total of 878 trips to the West Indies, resulting in a net profit of £15 million.<sup>6</sup> By 1807 the slave population of the British Caribbean had reached a total of 750,000 and by 1832 there were over 500 coffee plantations in Jamaica.<sup>7</sup>

By the end of the eighteenth century, the system of representational government and the system of slavery were firmly established in law and custom in the British Caribbean – the former based upon a monopoly of political power in the hands of a white elite dependent on the English Crown, and the latter, a slave system dependent on the legal concept of property on persons.<sup>8</sup> Yet despite the legal rationalisation of this economic system and its extension via subsequent West Indian Slave Codes, hostility towards the institution of slavery from a section of opinion in England continued to make itself heard. The decision of the Court of the King's Bench in 1772 over the rights of the escaped black Virginian slave, James Somerset (a slave who refused to serve his master while in England and who as a result was imprisoned on board a ship to be sold away to Jamaica) signalled an historic moment in the British abolition movement, in its identification of blacks as free individuals rather than slaves. In his *Commentaries on the Laws of England in Four Books* (1779), William Blackstone commented on the rights of man as follows:

If neither captivity, nor the sale of one's self, can by the law of nature and reason reduce the parent to slavery, much less can they reduce the offspring. Upon these principles the law of England abhors, and will not endure the existence of, slavery within this nation . . . And now it is laid down (Salk. 666), that a slave or negro, the instant he lands in England, becomes a freeman; that is, the law will protect him in the enjoyment of his person, and his property.<sup>9</sup>

The origins of the abolition movement were, however, heavily influenced by the appropriation of Enlightenment ideology and the emergence of a network of non-conformist religious groups informed by radical dissenting Protestantism, the central features of which I shall discuss below.<sup>10</sup> Although misconstrued as determining the

illegality of slavery, Lord Mansfield's ruling in the Somerset case prescribed that the slave in question could not be removed from England against his will:

The power of a master over his slave has been extremely different, in different countries. The state of slavery is of such a nature, that it is incapable of being introduced on any reasons, moral or political; but only [by] positive law, which preserves its force long after the reasons, occasion, and time itself from whence it was created, is erased from memory: It is so odious, that nothing can be suffered to support it, but positive law. Whatever inconveniences, therefore, may follow from a decision, I cannot say this case is allowed or approved by the law of England; and therefore the black [James Somerset] must be discharged.<sup>11</sup>

Mansfield's judicial decision was not well received by planters, as demonstrated by Edward Long's satirical response, *Candid Reflections Upon the Judgement Lately Awarded by the Court of the King's Bench* (1772):

The invention of printing has been ascribed to a *soldier*, of gunpowder to a *priest*; perhaps the longitude may be discovered by a *taylor*; but the art of *washing the Black-a-moor white* was happily reserved for a *lawyer*. . . The name of \*\*\*\* M—[Lord Mansfield] shall henceforth become more popular among all the *Quacoes and Quashebas of America*, than that of patriot *Wilkes* once was among the porter-swilling swains of St. Giles.<sup>12</sup>

Long emphasised the fact that in the past Parliament had implicitly encouraged expansion of the slave trade as a traffic 'highly beneficial to the kingdom, and the colonies and plantations thereon depending' and had provided a definition of negro labourers as 'fit objects of purchase and sale, transferable like any other goods or chattels':

No blame can deservedly rest on the planter, who is ignorant of the means, and innocent of the guilt. That trade . . . has been carried on by this nation from time immemorial. Kings, Lords, and Commons, have shared in its profits, and concurred in various laws for supporting, regulating, and firmly establishing it.<sup>13</sup>

Others associated the consequences of the Mansfield decision with an unprecedented escalation in the number of black citizens in England and viewed it as a pernicious threat to national purity in terms of the resulting intermixture of 'racial blood':

It is therefore humbly hoped the Parliament will provide such remedies as may be adequate to the occasion, by expelling the Negroes now here, who are not made free by their owners, and by prohibiting the introduction of them in this kingdom for the future; and save the natural beauty of Britons from the Morisco tint.<sup>14</sup>

Jurists and moral philosophers had justified the legal basis of slavery according to the doctrine enunciated in Aristotle's *Politics*, a work which provided a detailed examination of the origins of society and government and included an analysis of the nature of servitude between master and servant. For Aristotle, the domestic slave was defined as 'merely the possession and property, or, as it were, the separable part of that master' to be used, not according to his own interest or caprice, 'but in subserviency to the general good, and suitably to reason'.<sup>15</sup> Likewise Aristotle defined the slave as a person 'naturally' fitted to such status:

Those men, therefore, whose powers are chiefly confined to the body, and whose principal excellence consists in affording bodily service; those, I say, are naturally slaves, because it is their interest to be so. They can obey reason, though they are unable to exercise it; and though different from tame animals, who are disciplined by means merely of their own sensations and appetites, they perform nearly the same tasks, and become the property of other men, because their safety requires it.<sup>16</sup>

Conversely, in his 'Essay Concerning the True Original, Extent, and End of Civil Government', the philosopher John Locke defined political power as a direct derivative of that state in which all men exist naturally, that is, 'a State of perfect Freedom to order their Actions, and dispose of their Possessions, and Persons as they think fit, within the bounds of the Law of Nature'.<sup>17</sup> According to Locke, man's natural state was one of equality, 'wherein all the Power and Jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than another'.<sup>18</sup> Slavery was 'so vile and miserable an Estate of Man' and so directly opposed to the benevolent temper and spirit of the nation that it was 'hardly to be conceived, that an *Englishman*, much less a *Gentleman*, should plead for't'.<sup>19</sup> Since man, 'not having the power of his own life' could not enslave himself *to* any one, it followed that the natural liberty of man represented an inalienable freedom from absolute, arbitrary power.<sup>20</sup> No man had complete control over his own life, Locke argued, therefore no man could voluntarily deliver himself to the absolute power of another:

For a Man, not having the Power of his own Life, cannot, by Compact, or his own Consent, enslave himself to any one, nor put himself under the Absolute, Arbitrary Power of another, to take away his Life, when he pleases. No body can give more Power than he has himself; and he that cannot take away his own Life, cannot give another Power over it . . . This



is the perfect condition of Slavery, which is nothing else, but the State of War continued, between a lawful Conquerour, and a Captive.<sup>21</sup>

However, as an investor in the Royal African Company and as a draftsman of the 1699 Constitution of Carolina, a text which prescribed the power of freemen *over* that of slaves, Locke's position was deeply ambiguous. Indeed, it was only by locating slavery *outside* the social contract that Locke could reconcile his belief in man's inalienable rights over his person to concepts of cultural inferiority.<sup>22</sup>

In 1748, the French philosopher Baron Montesquieu, Charles Louis du Secondat, published his *De l'esprit des lois* (1748), a work which ridiculed many of the conventional justifications for the enslavement of Africans.<sup>23</sup> The premise of Montesquieu's thesis, published in London in 1750 as *The Spirit of Laws*, was founded upon a deep rooted conviction in the existence of some underlying order (or 'law') within the social world, a system which paralleled the laws of nature. According to Montesquieu, the 'spirit' of a given system – that is, its common character or general disposition – was essentially interrelated to the complex conditions which allowed such laws – political, international, religious and otherwise – to arise. In the posthumous edition of 1756, the antislavery element of Book xv of *The Spirit of Laws* was reinforced and extended by means of an additional chapter. Slavery was classified as 'contrary to the spirit of the constitution', contravening the doctrines of natural law and liberal democracy in the sense that it served merely to give citizens a power and a luxury to which they were not entitled and deprived slaves of the opportunity to act independently. Yet even in the 1750 edition the antislavery momentum was clearly identifiable:

The state of slavery is bad of its own nature: it is neither useful to the master nor to the slave; not to the slave, because he can do nothing thro' a motive of virtue; not to the master, because he contracts all manner of bad habits with his slaves, he accustoms himself insensibly to the want of all moral virtues, he grows fierce, hasty, severe, choleric, voluptuous, and cruel.<sup>24</sup>

Although Montesquieu's remarks fell short of an unmitigated demand for abolition and suggested rather that in some circumstances slavery was a necessary evil, his work provided a suitable prototype for other eighteenth-century abolitionist texts. Furthermore, it hinted at the threat of rebellion presented by the slaves

themselves and juxtaposed the deprived state of the slave's soul with the slave master's political and civil liberty:

He sees the happiness of a society, of which he is not so much as a member; he sees the security of others fenced by laws, himself without protection. He sees his master has a soul, that can enlarge itself; while his own is constrained to submit to a continual depression . . . Nothing more assimilates a man to a beast, than living among freemen, himself a slave. Such people as these are the natural enemies of society, and their number must be dangerous . . . I would as soon say, that the right of slavery proceeds from the contempt of one nation for another, founded on a difference of customs.<sup>25</sup>

One of the most important, and indeed, the most persuasive counter-arguments to rational justifications of the slave trade resided in claims which advocated the *spiritual* potential of blacks. Whereas sociopolitical systems had defined slaves in terms of property and resisted the idea that slaves could obtain freedom by becoming Christians, others argued that since the Christian gospel was intended to be made available to *all* men, then blacks, although possibly culturally disadvantaged, were susceptible to the principal tenets of Christianity and, most importantly, to the workings of the spirit.<sup>26</sup> The dynamics of antislavery discourse thus emerged from a framework of spiritual salvation – a narrative which was used to prioritise a concern for the slaves' spiritual welfare and emphasise the potential spiritual deterioration of slave owners. Inspired by the arguments against slavery which had appeared in *The London Magazine* during the late 1730s, by Sir Hans Sloane's *A Voyage to the Islands Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers and Jamaica* (1707) and the Royal Navy Surgeon, John Atkins' *A Voyage to Guinea, Brasil, and the West Indies in his Majesty's Ships the Swallow and Weymouth . . . With Remarks on the Gold, Ivory and Slave Trade* (1735), in 1755 the Scottish philosopher Francis Hutcheson published his *System of Moral Philosophy* (1755).<sup>27</sup> In this text, designed to 'unfold the several principles of the human mind as united in a moral constitution', Hutcheson declared that the aim of moral philosophy was to 'direct men to that course of action which tends most effectually to promote their greatest happiness and perfection'.<sup>28</sup> Hutcheson's *System* provided a detailed account of the ways in which slavery violated all sense of natural justice, Christian morality and any proper sense of liberty. Since no man was devoid of moral sense, nor of the desire for liberty, property and happiness, Hutcheson maintained that the slave trade

contravened those very principles which had established each man as the ‘natural proprietor of his own liberty’:

*The natural equality of men* consists chiefly in this, that these natural rights belong equally to all . . . Every one is a part of that great system, whose greatest interest is intended by all the laws of *God* and nature. These laws prohibit the greatest or wisest of mankind to inflict any misery on the meanest, or to deprive them of any of their natural rights, or innocent acquisitions, when no publick interest requires it.<sup>29</sup>

Furthermore, Hutcheson identified the natural rights of each individual as a right to life, ‘the connate desire of life and self-preservation’ which existed alongside man’s natural desire for happiness and an instinctive condemnation of any cruelty directed towards his fellow men.<sup>30</sup> In opposition to Aristotle’s theory of innate principles, therefore, Hutcheson argued that since *all* men possessed an overpowering desire for liberty and a profound understanding of the concepts of property and justice, then neither natural nor acquired rights could give one the right to assume absolute power over others:

We must therefore conclude, that no endowments, natural or acquired, can give a perfect right to assume power over others, without their consent . . . This is intended against the doctrine of Aristotle, and some others of the antients, ‘that some men are naturally slaves, of low genius but great bodily strength for labour’.<sup>31</sup>

According to Hutcheson, no men were born ‘natural slaves’, since despite their difference from each other in terms of wisdom, virtue, beauty or strength, ‘the lowest of them, who have the use of reason, differ in this from the brutes, that by forethought and reflection they are capable of incomparably greater happiness or misery’.<sup>32</sup>

Five years later, in 1760, the Scottish jurist George Wallace published his *System of the Principles of the Law of Scotland*, a radical text which identified the doctrine of slavery as being ‘so contrary to the feelings of humanity’ as to make it incompatible with the Law of Scotland: ‘I take it to be undeniable, that every man is born equal to every other . . . Hence Liberty is said to be a *natural* faculty, *naturalis facultas*; and slavery is said not only to owe its original to the arbitrary constitutions of men but to be *contrary to nature*’.<sup>33</sup> Wallace’s text, published twelve years before Lord Mansfield’s famous verdict of 1772, identified slavery as an inhuman and unlawful institution and called for its abolition. Slavery, he argued, was neither essential to the subsistence of society, nor conducive to the happiness or well-

being of society; rather, it introduced 'the greatest possible inequality among mankind' by stripping innocent members of society of all the property they owned and denying them spiritual potential:

It subjects them entirely to the dominion of their masters; it exposes them to all the insults, torture, cruelty, and hard usage, which inhumanity, avarice, pride and caprice can suggest: It makes the bulk of mankind dependent on the few. . . Are not slaves, as well as others, men? Have they not human souls, human faculties, and human passions? . . . I abhor the principles, upon which it [slavery] is either justified or founded.<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, Wallace suggested that Britain's continuing support of the slave trade was detrimental to its progressive (and hence spiritual) development: 'Set the Niggers free, and, in a few generations, this vast and fertile continent [Africa] would be crowded with inhabitants; learning, arts, and every thing would flourish among them'.<sup>35</sup>

Wallace's denunciation of slavery was later reiterated in the pamphlet published by the English-born Quaker, Antony Benezet. Benezet's *A Short Account of That Part of Africa Inhabited by Negroes* (1762), a text reprinted on both sides of the Atlantic, presented a series of essays directed exclusively towards the discourse of slavery, which contested the prejudiced misrepresentations of Africa advanced in the works by Michel Adanson, William Bosman and William Smith.<sup>36</sup> In his subsequent, comprehensive work, *Some Historical Account of Guinea* (1771), Benezet endeavoured to expose the iniquity of the slave trade and its 'inconsistency with every Christian and moral virtue'.<sup>37</sup> Heavily influenced by his Quaker upbringing, Benezet insisted upon the spiritual and intellectual equality of the Africans and criticised the devastating impact of Europeans upon the African continent:

Let the opulent planter or merchant prove that his Negroe slave is not his brother; or that he is not his neighbour, in the scripture sense of these appellations; and if he is not able to do so, how will he justify the buying and selling of his brethren, as if they were of no more consideration than his cattle? . . . Let him diligently consider whether there will not always remain to the slave a *superior* property or right . . . [that] which was given him by God, and which none but the giver can justly claim.<sup>38</sup>

In the introduction to his text, Benezet identified the purpose of his *Short Account* as a counter-argument to common vindications of the trade which had claimed that slavery had arisen from a natural desire to save the lives of African prisoners of tribal warfare who would otherwise have been 'sacrificed to the implacable revenge of

their conquerors'.<sup>39</sup> In his *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain and Her Colonies, in a Short Representation of the Calamitous State of the Enslaved Negroes in the British Dominions* (1766), a work which collated the antislavery agenda of various authors and reiterated the claims made by George Wallace in his *System of the Principles of the Laws of Scotland* concerning the inalienable rights of liberty – 'To declare him[self] free – this is the law of nature, which is obligatory in all men, at all times, and in all places' – Benezet extended his narrative of spiritual development to produce a critique of the influence of slavery upon the spiritual status of planters and colonialists alike.<sup>40</sup> In this text he listed some of the most undesirable consequences of the trade, including the destruction of natural bonds of affection, 'whereby mankind in general love are united', the debauchment of morals and most importantly, the deterioration of the institution of marriage amongst Europeans resident in the British Dominion: 'Europeans forgetful of their duty, as men, and Christians . . . have led them [the negroes] into excess, into drunkenness, debauchery and avarice'.<sup>41</sup>

In his work, *A Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies* (1776), Benezet's friend and correspondent, Guillaume Raynal, condemned slavery's denial of the tenets of humanity, reason and justice:

He who supports the system of slavery is the enemy of the whole human race. He divides it into two societies of legal assassins; the oppressors and the oppressed. It is the same thing as proclaiming to the world, If you would preserve your life, instantly take away mine, for I want to have yours . . . My blood rises at these horrid images. I detest, I abhor the human species, made up only of victims and executioners, and if it is never to become better, may it be annihilated!<sup>42</sup>

Drawing on drafts from several authors, including the radical utopian abolitionist and socialist, Jean de Pechmeja, Raynal's text went through fifty-five editions during the first thirty years of publication and was translated into five languages. His condemnation of slavery skilfully combined a detailed critique of Anglo-American territorial expansionism and British imperialism:

Slaves are to the commerce of Europeans in Africa, what gold is in the commerce we carry on in the New World. The heads of the Negroes represent the stock of the state of Guinea. Every day this stock is carried off, and nothing is left them, but articles of consumption.<sup>43</sup>

In anticipation of the mass slave revolt in St Domingue in 1791, Raynal's text identified the slaves' potential to precipitate a radical transformation of their condition and determine their own historical 'narratives':

Sooner or later, will any people, made desparate by tyranny, or the oppression of conquerors, always get the better of numerous and well-disciplined armies; if they have but resolution enough to endure hunger rather than the yoke, to die rather than live in bondage, and if they chuse to see their nation extinct rather than enslaved.<sup>44</sup>

Indeed Raynal's call was not without precedent: slave conspiracies and revolts, especially on the large estates of Jamaica, had already begun to unsettle the imposed social order of the slave colonies. In 1760–1761, during what became known as 'Tacky's Revolt', 400 slaves rebelled in St Mary's Parish on the north coast of Jamaica, an uprising which resulted in the execution of about 400 suspected slave rebels and the deportation of 500 others to British colonies.<sup>45</sup> Later slave insurrections included Gabriel Prossere's revolt in Virginia (1800), Bussa's rebellion in Barbados in 1816, Denmark Vesey's revolt in South Carolina (1822), the slave rebellion in Demerara (1823) and Nat Turner's revolt in Virginia (1831).

In the same year that witnessed the publication of Raynal's influential text and the American Declaration of Independence, Adam Smith's *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776) presented a powerful challenge to colonial slavery, premised on an argument which prioritised the productive superiority of free labour. According to Smith, slavery was an inefficient system of production: since slaves had no prospect of acquiring property, they possessed no real incentive to work. According to Smith, the establishment of international commerce, and hence the abolition of slavery, would augment the wealth of the British nation to unprecedented proportions:

The rulers of Great Britain have for more than a century past, amused the people with the imagination that they possessed a great empire on the west side of the Atlantic. This empire, however, has hitherto existed in imagination only. It has hitherto been, not an empire, but the project of an empire; not a gold mine, but the project of a gold mine; a project which has cost, which continues to cost, and which if pursued in the same way as it has been hitherto, is likely to cost immense expence, without being likely to bring any profit; for the effects of the monopoly of the colony trade, it has been shewn are, to the great body of people, mere loss instead of profit.<sup>46</sup>

John Millar's *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* (1771) similarly presented a systematic denunciation of the slave trade, focused specifically upon the unprofitability of the institution and its incompatibility with industry, population and moral integrity. In the third edition of 1779, Millar condemned the slave trade as inconvenient and retrograde: 'No conclusion seems more certain than this, that men will commonly exert more activity when they work for their own benefit, than when they are compelled to labour for the benefit merely of another'.<sup>47</sup> Extending his analysis to the effects on slave owners, Millar further suggested that slavery was harmful to the 'good morals of a people', since the debasement of servants had a direct influence upon the 'temper and disposition' of masters.<sup>48</sup> This focus upon the relation between slaves and their masters, and indeed, between Africa and Europe, was an important step in acknowledging the relationship between the two races.

Heavily influenced by the ideas of Montesquieu, *An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth, in Opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism* (1771) by James Beattie, Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Aberdeen, exposed the fallacies inherent in Aristotle's and Hume's theories of racial inequality.<sup>49</sup> Countering both Hume's assertions that 'there *never was* a civilised nation of any other complexion than white, *nor even any individual* eminent either in action or speculation', and Aristotle's claims that 'men of little genius' were 'by nature destined to serve', Beattie attempted to close the cultural gap between Africa and Britain, claiming that the former was merely at an earlier stage of development:

The inhabitants of Great Britain and France were as savage two thousand years ago, as those of Africa and America are at this day. To civilise a nation, is a work which it requires a long time to accomplish. And one may as well say of an infant, that he can never become a man, as of a nation now barbarous, that it never can be civilised.<sup>50</sup>

In keeping with this vindication Beattie argued that African cultural artifacts demonstrated a high level of creative invention which 'even Europeans would find . . . no easy matter to imitate'. More importantly, he celebrated the 'unwearied perseverance' of those enlightened persons who had vindicated the 'sacred rights of mankind':

Let it never be said, that slavery is countenanced by the bravest and most generous people on earth; by a people who are animated with that heroic

passion, the love of liberty . . . [and] the unwearied, perseverance, in vindicating, at the expence of life and fortune, the sacred rights of mankind.<sup>51</sup>

Arguments outlined by moral philosophers such as Beattie, Hutcheson and Raynal disclosed the increasing antagonism between discourses founded upon concepts of slavery and those which emphasised man's natural rights to freedom. A key component of liberationist ideology, however, was the prioritisation of a narrative of individual autonomy alongside declarations of the *spiritual* equality of masters and slaves. The following section explores the multifarious development of the 'discourse of the spirit' within the sociopolitical context of England during the mid-eighteenth century; from its origins as a principal factor of radical dissenting Protestantism, its influence upon abolitionist and liberationist ideology, its mutant transformation via the literary works of slave narrators, Romantics and prophets alike and its success as a viable challenge to the legal and political agents of slave ideology.

#### ABOLITION AND RADICAL DISSENTING PROTESTANTISM

While condemnations of slavery were premised upon inalienable rights of liberty and concepts of spiritual equality, the Church of England as an institution remained defiantly impervious to growing antislavery agitation. Consequently, during the early phase of abolitionist propaganda, religious protest in England and America emerged mainly from nonconformist groups such as the Quakers and Evangelical Methodists. The discourse of spiritual salvation and radical dissent advanced by these groups provided a powerful rhetoric of liberation, the central features of which strategically influenced the success of the abolitionist movement during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As David Bebbington notes in his study of the development of Protestant Christianity in modern Britain and America, 1734 witnessed one of the most important developments in the history of dissenting Protestantism, with the emergence of Evangelicalism and the success of the conversion and pastoral work of Jonathan Edwards at Northampton, Massachusetts during the spiritual revival of 1734–1735.<sup>52</sup> Linked with the Puritan movement of the sixteenth century, this form of religious dissent emphasised the dynamics of conversion (the concept of 'new' birth), biblicism (a reliance on the Bible as the ultimate



religious authority), crucicentrism (a focus on Christ's redeeming work) and activism (an energetic approach to religious duties and social involvement), and ultimately became known as Evangelicalism.<sup>53</sup> Amongst its chief proponents were the American theologian and philosopher, Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), the English clergyman and founder of Methodism, John Wesley (1703–1791) and the English evangelist and itinerant revivalist, George Whitefield (1714–1770).

From the earliest stages of its history, Methodism was a transatlantic phenomenon. Representatives of the evangelical movement, including John Wesley and George Whitefield, crisscrossed the Atlantic during a fertile period of exchange and reassessment. In 1729, Jonathan Edwards became a full minister in Northampton, New England. During the winter of that year his congregation experienced an extraordinarily intense crescendo of religious zeal, accounts of which spread to other communities throughout the American colonies and to Great Britain.<sup>54</sup> This religious fervour, which made Edwards something of a celebrity, was, however, short-lived. Its revival was reinstigated with the arrival of the enigmatic preacher, George Whitefield, who received his ordination in England in 1738 and who was inspired by the missionary labours of the Wesley brothers (John and Charles) in the newly founded colony of Georgia, North America. Preaching in open fields, Whitefield criticised the national clergy and claimed that he himself was a recipient of direct guidance from the Holy Spirit. Whitefield's mode of itinerant preaching and persuasive powers of oratory influenced scores of ministers and established the revivalist period of 'Great Awakening' wherein emotional outbursts were identified as the work of God's spirit and the harbingers of a millennial age. Whitefield, however, approved of black slavery and kept slaves himself. In 1748, he with others, urged the trustees of Georgia to introduce slavery into the colony, arguing that without it, Georgia would 'never prosper'.<sup>55</sup>

John Wesley, ordained in 1725, had served as his father's curate in Lincolnshire before taking over the leadership of a religious study group known as the 'Methodists'. In 1735 he agreed to assume spiritual leadership of the new colony of Georgia and from the time of his own spiritual experience of May 1738, a moment during which he claimed he felt his heart 'strangely warmed' ('An assurance was given me that He had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*,

and saved *me* from the law of sin and death'), Wesley's wide-ranging missionary zeal took him to Oxford, London and Bristol, Wales, Cornwall and Scotland and Ireland.<sup>56</sup> Although Wesley claimed that he had set out to *revive* the spiritual life of the Church of England, his 'Methodism' quickly took on a character of its own and his preaching of 'salvation by faith' succeeded in establishing an independent 'connexion' of itinerant preachers and churches.<sup>57</sup> Wesley's style of preaching transgressed eighteenth-century taboos against extemporary prayer and lay-leadership and promoted a 'plain-style' of oral preaching.<sup>58</sup> As he commented in a sermon of 1746, this mode of plain-speaking translated into text was an attempt to write 'as I generally speak, *ad populum*, to the bulk of mankind'.

I design plain truth for plain people . . . I labour to avoid all words which are not easy to be understood, all which are not used in common life . . . I am persuaded that, on the one hand, this may be a means of enabling me more clearly to express the sentiments of my heart . . . without entangling myself with those of other men . . . I am not afraid to lay open what have been the inmost thoughts of my heart . . . I am a spirit come from God and returning to God.<sup>59</sup>

In terms of its immediacy and accessibility, Wesley's emphasis on plain oracy and self-reflection provided an important model for literary expressions of identity employed by Methodists, Romantics and slaves alike.

#### QUAKERS AND SHAKERS

The Religious Society of Friends, or 'Quakers' as they were called by their first leader, George Fox, emerged in seventeenth-century England and America, during the Puritan Commonwealth under Oliver Cromwell, as an inward intensification of the radical and spiritual forms of Puritanism. According to Fox, within all men, including heathens, there resided a principle of God capable of leading one to salvation. A central feature of Quakerism therefore was its concern with personal conviction and the possibility of 'truth' inwardly revealed. For Fox, Quakerism embodied a 'spiritual movement', a movement which highlighted the innate capacity of the human soul and advocated a belief in the purely inward nature of true baptism and communion, and the fulfilment of biblical events within the duration of an individual's lifetime. Influential Quaker

theological texts included George Fox's *Journal, or an Historical Account of the Life, Travels, Sufferings, Christian Experience and Labour of Love in the Ministry of George Fox* (1694); John Woolman's *Journal of the Life, Gospel Labours and Christian Experience* (1776); William Penn's *No Cross, No Crown* (1669) and Robert Barclay's *Apology for the True Christian Divinity, As the Same is Held Forth by the Quakers* (1678).<sup>60</sup>

Across the Atlantic, the Philadelphian Quakers John Woolman and Anthony Benezet played a crucial role in persuading the Friends to disassociate themselves from both the slave trade and slaveholding itself. In 1753, the tailor and scribe Woolman made the assertive gesture of refusing to transcribe wills for those Quakers who intended to bequeath slave property. In a letter to the Philadelphia Society Yearly Meeting, Woolman rearticulated his concern over the Quakers' increasing involvement in slavery and published his text, *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes* (Philadelphia, 1754) accordingly. In this tract, Woolman extended the Quaker concept of the brotherhood in Christ to a critique of slavery – 'To consider Mankind otherwise than Brethren . . . plainly supposes a Darkness in the understanding' – and in an even more radical gesture, coalesced the concept of salvation with that of the Divine's imminent deliverance of the slaves: '*Negroes* are our Fellow Creatures . . . The Parent of Mankind . . . gives deliverance to the oppressed'.<sup>61</sup> As a response to Woolman's text and his criticism, the Philadelphia Society sanctioned a motion prohibiting slaveholders from acquiring positions of authority within the Church, a move that was similarly supported by the London Quakers in 1761. This strategic severance from slave ideology in the context of spiritual guidance played an important role in Woolman's autobiographical *A Journal of the Life, Gospel Labours and Christian Experience of that Faithful Minister of Jesus Christ, John Woolman* (1776), a text in which the expression of identity was fused with literary and polemical tactics. In this text, Woolman described his personal spiritual development, including the visitations of what he termed his blessed 'experience of the goodness of God', and elucidated his ultimate rejection of the slave trade in terms of its incompatibility with Christianity – 'I said . . . that I believed Slave Keeping to be a practice inconsistent with the *Christian* religion'.<sup>62</sup> More importantly perhaps, the author ascribed the Pennsylvania and New Jersey Friends' resolution to actively withdraw themselves from the trade as a direct manifestation of spiritual guidance:

We . . . have found it to be our duty to cease from this national Contest productive of misery and Bloodshed, and submit our Cause to him . . . And we, through the gracious Dealings of the Lord our God, have had Experience of that Work which is carried in, 'not by *earthly* Might, nor by Power, but by my Spirit', saith the Lord of Hosts.<sup>63</sup>

In his tract, *The Case of Our Fellow-Creatures, the Oppressed Africans, Respectfully Recommended to the Serious Consideration of the Legislature of Great Britain* published in London in 1784, Anthony Benezet, speaking as a representative of the 'People called Quakers', similarly stressed the Society's obligation to 'bear a public testimony' against a species of oppression 'long exercised upon the natives of Africa'.<sup>64</sup> Benezet condemned the commercial motives of the English nation's 'system of tyranny' and argued that it would have been more in keeping with the 'avowed principles of Englishmen' had they advanced a national programme aimed at establishing the heathen's conversion to Christianity: 'to incline them to receive the glad tidings of the gospel'.<sup>65</sup> Although the underlying suggestion of Benezet's work prescribes an advancement of expansionist colonialism these 'Quaker' texts demonstrate the emergence of a significant strain of antislavery ideology set within the framework of radical dissenting Protestantism. In May 1783, Quakers in London presented a petition against the trade to the Houses of Parliament. In 1787, with the aid of members from other dissenting groups, the Quakers founded the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, possibly because many Quaker families had profited substantially from their involvement in the trade and considered their participation in the abolitionist campaign a means of alleviating their guilt.<sup>66</sup>

One splinter group of the Quakers, known as the 'Shaking Quakers' or 'Shakers', highlighted a more enigmatic form of the Quaker commitment toward 'spiritual' regeneration. Led by two Quakers, Jane and James Wardley, who embraced the millennial teachings of the biblical prophets, the Shakers were established in Manchester in 1747. As their name implied, the Shakers encouraged uninhibited participation in their unstructured, emotional forms of worship and interpreted the spiritual visitation experienced during such meetings as confirmation of Christ's imminent second coming. Heralding celibacy as an essential requirement of salvation, the nucleus of the Shaker community moved to America in 1774. There, under the charismatic leadership of Anne Lee, a former Manchester

factory worker who had joined the Shakers at the age of twenty-three, the Shakers set up a self-contained community in Watervleit, New York. Although they never specifically aligned themselves to any overt demands for abolition, the philosophical and practical ideologies of the Shaker communities were essentially founded upon a belief in sexual and racial equality and their belief in prophetic forms of spiritual manifestation provided a more extreme articulation of the self-conscious expression characterised by radical dissenting Protestantism. Anticipating feminist critiques of religious institutions, in 1778 Lee declared herself to be ‘the first *Mother*, or spiritual parent in the line of the female’ within whom the ‘Word’ dwelt spiritually, the ‘second Eve’ and second heir in the ‘covenant of life’: ‘I am *Anne the Word!*’. During the 1780s and 1790s, Shakerism developed from being a charismatic movement to a structured organisation, characterised by the tenets of communal ownership, celibacy, pacifism and the establishment of parallel men and women’s orders.<sup>67</sup> By the time of the sect’s peak in the 1800s, the number of Shaker communities in America reached a total of eighteen, each with approximately 6,000 members.<sup>68</sup>

#### THE SOCIETY FOR THE ABOLITION OF THE SLAVE TRADE

In August 1782, acting on behalf of the Quakers in that state, the Philadelphia Meeting for Sufferings dispatched a letter to its London counterpart, urging it to use its influence to bring about a cessation of the slave trade. In the summer of 1783, the London Meeting for Sufferings approved a petition calling on Parliament to declare the slave trade illegal. In an effort to advance this cause, the London Quakers set up two embryonic antislavery societies whose main task over the next four years was to promote the antislavery campaign. This they achieved through the distribution within the metropolis and the provinces of abolitionist material and the circulation of petitions and tracts, including Joseph Wood’s *Thoughts on the Slavery of the Negroes* (1786), Anthony Benezet’s *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain and her Colonies* (1766) and the London Meeting for Suffering’s own text, *The Cause of Our Fellow Creatures the Oppressed Africans* (1784).<sup>69</sup>

Strategically limiting its attentions to the abolition of the slave trade rather than the abolition of slavery itself, the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade sought to establish active auxiliary

organisations throughout the country in order to supplement the financial support it received from the Quakers.<sup>70</sup> This strategy was championed by Thomas Clarkson's series of lecture tours during 1787–1788 and his collation of extensive information about the slave trade. Having interviewed over two thousand seamen and examined numerous shipholds and naval records, Clarkson presented his evidence to the Privy Council on 27 July 1788, thereby endeavouring to persuade the government to establish other forms of commerce in Africa.<sup>71</sup> Clarkson's lectures, together with the publication of *An Essay on Slavery and the Commerce of the Human Species* (1789) and *An Essay on the Impolicy of the African Slave Trade in Two Parts* (1788), launched the Abolition Society as a significant public campaign.<sup>72</sup> In his *Essay on Slavery*, Clarkson denounced the African trade as 'injustice and inhumane' while his *Essay on Impolicy* undertook to demonstrate that such a trade was as 'impolitick' as it was inefficient:

I shall shew first, that it is in the power of the planters, if they please, to do without fresh supplies from the coast: I shall then shew, that if the importation of slaves is prohibited, no such want will be found, but on the other hand, that the number of cultivators will *increase*; and, lastly, that both the planters, the slaves, and the islands, will be *benefited* by the change.<sup>73</sup>

Two essential elements informing the success of the Society's campaign were firstly, its *internationalist* agenda and secondly, its links with the increasingly popular tenets of radical dissenting Protestantism. The informal relationship which already existed between British and American abolitionists were consolidated by the Society's correspondence with the leading antislavery groups in Philadelphia and New York, and subsequently with the establishment of Les Amis des Noirs in Paris in 1788.<sup>74</sup> Hence the strength of the Society's parliamentary campaign lay essentially within its 'international' spiritual agenda as advanced by well-educated religious enthusiasts and political philanthropists, such as the Clapham Sect. These 'Saints', as they were also known, consisted of a group of Evangelical Anglicans led by William Wilberforce, who dedicated themselves to the urgent moral and spiritual issues ignored by institutionalised Anglicanism. Wilberforce's own religious conversion, inspired after his reading of Philip Doddridge's *Rise And Progress of Religion in the Soul* (1745), had occurred during his grand tour of the Continent in 1783. In that tract, Doddridge had defined religion as a spiritual 'sense of God on the Soul', an aspect of conscious self-reflection which

Wilberforce was to fuse with political activism.<sup>75</sup> Soon after his conversion, Wilberforce was introduced to Clarkson, a meeting which inspired Wilberforce's collaboration with the abolition committee and culminated in his representation of the African cause to Parliament. On 12 May 1789, therefore, having recovered from a serious illness, Wilberforce presented his first motion for abolition. During his three-hour long presentation, Wilberforce concentrated on the damnation effected by England's participation in the slave-trade, and thereby suggested that the nation's spiritual regeneration might be achieved by its severance from the trade:

We are all guilty – we ought all to plead guilty, and not to exculpate ourselves by throwing the blame on others . . . When we reflect it is we ourselves that have degraded them [the Africans] to that wretched brutishness and barbarity which we now plead as the justification of our guilt . . . What a mortification must we feel at having so long neglected to think of our guilt, or to attempt any reparation!<sup>76</sup>

This extension of the 'discourse' of spiritual renewal, on both national and individual terms, was fundamental to the success of the abolition campaign. It formed a sophisticated progression of the focus upon self-examination and articulation popularised by radical dissenting Protestantism, yet maintained an infectious, zealous stance. It was, therefore, a complex strategy; and one consequence of this fusion of spiritual and liberationist discourse within a nationalist framework (a kind of national self-authentication) was the inauguration of a renewed zeal for missionary ideology.

#### JOHN WESLEY, METHODISM AND ABOLITION

As the son of the Anglican vicar, Samuel Wesley, and grandson of the famous Presbyterian divine, Samuel Annesley, John Wesley's birth-right metaphorically reunited the severance between Anglicans and Dissenters which had occurred at the beginning of the eighteenth century.<sup>77</sup> Raised by his mother as an *elect* son of the Puritans and instilled with his father's Anglican fear of the excesses of enthusiasm, John Wesley was sent to Charterhouse, then Oxford, and was finally ordained as a priest of the Church of England in 1728. At Oxford, Wesley became a member, and subsequently the leader, of a religious society which assembled on a regular basis to read the Greek Testament. Because of the rigorous intensity with which these

individuals pursued their studies and performed their religious observances, this group of individuals became known collectively as the 'Methodists'. As a group, these Oxford Methodists did not advance any drastic reformation of the doctrines of the Church. They were, however, strongly opposed to the Calvinist doctrines of predestination and election. Moreover, and most important to the dissemination of the language and ideology of radical dissenting Protestantism, these Methodists placed a vital emphasis upon their belief in the individual's *personal* experience of God's perfecting grace, a trait which was to become a major structural feature of narratives (by slaves and others) which combined polemical tactics with literary expressions of identity.

Wesley's travels amongst the Moravians during a two-year trip to Georgia between 1735 and 1737 highlighted the fact that the English clergyman's own ministry had lacked the dynamic spark of personal salvation. On his return from a visit to the Moravian headquarters in Germany, therefore, Wesley succeeded in persuading other dissenting religious societies in England to adopt a modification of Moravian practice, which involved intense moments of spiritual experience witnessed by 'choirs' or units of around six people of the same sex and marital status.<sup>78</sup> In his essay 'On the Causes of Methodism' (1817), the essayist and critic William Hazlitt satirised the Methodist movement as a form of religion equipped with its own 'slobbering-gib and go-cart'. According to Hazlitt, the 'jargon and nonsense' of Methodism held a peculiar charm for all those who had an 'equal facility in sinning and repenting': 'It is a *carte blanche* for ignorance and folly!'<sup>79</sup> In addition, its proponents were characterised by their ability to 'soar' on the 'wings of divine love' and revel in 'a spiritual sea of boundless nonsense': 'To speak of them as they deserve, they are not well in the flesh, and therefore they take refuge in the spirit'.<sup>80</sup> As Hazlitt's satirical diatribe ironically suggests, the primary emphases of Methodist preaching lay upon the witness of spiritual visitation, the experience of salvation through faith and a belief in the possibility of personal triumph over temptation.<sup>81</sup> In his work, *The New Birth: A Sermon on John 3.7* (1784) Wesley described such a process as an instantaneous transformation of the soul wherein 'we are justified by the grace of God' and '*born of the Spirit*'.<sup>82</sup> Accordingly, his concept of the 'new birth' revolved around Pentecostal images of the descent of the mercurial, indeterminate, nebulous 'breath' of the spirit of God upon his chosen ones: