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The Liberty of Fiction: Harriet Martineau's  
*Illustrations of Political Economy*

"L'exemple est un dangereux leurre"  
– La Fontaine, "Le pouvoir des fables"

In her *Autobiography* Martineau mentions, at one point, the strictures placed on her imagination by the regime of "facts" to which she had devoted herself for a number of years:

[...] for many years now my writing had been almost about fact; facts of society and of individuals; and the constraint of the effort to be always correct and to bear without solicitude the questioning of my correctness, had become burdensome [...] I longed inexpressibly for the liberty of fiction, while occasionally doubting whether I had the power to use that freedom as I could have done ten years before<sup>1</sup>.

In the nine volumes of the *Illustrations of Political Economy*, "fiction" tends indeed to be subordinated to "facts" and the question of "correctness", bearing heavily on the project as a whole, is never allowed to become secondary. Yet, as Valerie Sanders has persuasively demonstrated, Martineau's "inspiration [...] was essentially literary"<sup>2</sup>. Although she uses the economic doxa as a sort of allegorical pre-text by which the meaning of each

<sup>1</sup> Maria Chapman Weston (ed.), *Harriet Martineau's Autobiography*, 2 vols, Boston, James R. Osgood and Company, 1877, vol. I, p. 409.

<sup>2</sup> Valery Sanders, *Reason over Passion: Harriet Martineau and the Victorian Novel*, Brighton, The Harvester Press, 1986, p. 2. Harriet Martineau's "theory of fiction", as Sanders claims, anticipated many of the issues that were to become prominent in the debate on realism later on in the century: "[Martineau] took the lead on literary experiments, testing new methods, and suggesting approaches for other writers to try. Even when she had stopped writing fiction, she thought of fresh possibilities, was half inclined to emerge from full-time journalism and begin another novel" (p. 18).

story is to be regulated, the “liberty of fiction” operates in her tales in many surprising ways. I have chosen Martineau’s phrase (and longing) as my title because, as I hope to show, the interplay between facts and fiction, between scientific (and allegedly natural) laws and the rhetoric and ruses of narrative is what distinguishes Martineau’s hybrid intervention in the field of political economy.

The “liberty of fiction” is already at work in the initial stages preceding the actual composition of the series: while reading Mrs. Marcet’s *Conversations on Political Economy*, as Martineau recounts in her *Autobiography*, “groups of personages rose up from the pages, and a procession of action glided through its arguments, as afterwards from the pages of Adam Smith, and all other Economists”<sup>3</sup>. It is noteworthy that in her retrospective memoir Martineau chooses to emphasize the seemingly natural transition from abstract economic truths to their fictional embodiments: the imaginative potential of political economy seems, in her comment, truly unbounded.

There are also other passages in the *Autobiography* where Martineau insists on the seamless coincidence between fiction and economic principles: commenting on her method of composition, for example, she claims that, once the principles were neatly arranged in the “summary”, the “story went off like a letter”<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, such a spontaneous overflow of economic feelings was so powerful that it needed to be restrained or checked by a rigorous method:

I took down my books, and read the treatment of that particular subject in each of them, making notes of reference on a separate sheet for each book, and restraining myself from glancing even in thought towards the scene and nature of my story till it should be suggested by my collective didactic materials<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Chapman Weston, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 106.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 148.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 147.

Like all acts of self-repression, Martineau's act of self-restraint has its secret pleasures in store: the more fiction is subordinated to facts, the more pleasant will be its flow<sup>6</sup> — and also the more legitimate. The very ambitious project on which Martineau embarked at the start of her career — the “scheme of my Political Economy series”<sup>7</sup> — was arguably in need of some kind of legitimating narrative. The *Autobiography* provides the most complete retrospective account of how her ambition came to be realized and her “speculation” to prove successful despite all odds: “the whole business was the strongest act of will that I ever committed myself to; and my will was always pretty strong. I could never have even started my project but for my thorough, well-considered, steady conviction that the work was wanted, — was even craved by the popular mind”<sup>8</sup>. Judging by the commercial success of the series, Martineau showed no lack of business acumen when she identified a niche in the market for literature and undertook to write precisely that type of fiction that was most “craved by the popular mind”. Although it is debatable whether the popular demand for that kind of fictional writing actually preceded the offer or vice versa, what I wish to underscore is Martineau's firm commitment to producing an innovative type of work that would restore to literature a more active, less frivolous dimension<sup>9</sup>.

If we look at another legitimating account of her project, the literary ambition at the heart of the *Illustrations* comes into sharper focus. I am referring to Martineau's essay “The Achievements of the genius of Scott”, published in 1833 in the *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*. No explicit mention is made, in this essay, of the “Political Economy series” on which Martineau was working at

<sup>6</sup> “I never could decide whether I most enjoyed writing the descriptions, the narrative, or the argumentative or expository conversations. I liked each best while I was about it” (*Ibid.* vol. I, p. 148).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 122.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> As Sanders remarks, “Harriet Martineau began her career with a denunciation of all the improbable incidents spun into a fashionable novel by authors of the ‘silver-fork’ school: a disclaimer that was to become a familiar feature of much nineteenth-century fiction” (Sanders, *op. cit.*, p. 8).

that time; but the whole argument in defense of Scott's method of exemplification can be read as a gesture of self-authorization on the part of a young, ambitious woman writer who was about to enter the field of literary production. By aligning herself with the most authoritative fiction writer of the early nineteenth century and by celebrating the method she was already employing in her tales as Scott's most innovative and seminal contribution to the history of fiction, Martineau succeeded in indirectly legitimating her own experimental intervention in the literary field.

The achievements of Scott — the mark of his genius — turn out to be inextricably bound up with what Martineau considers his successful method of exemplification or illustration. He became highly influential because he was able to produce fictions that exemplified for an increasing mass of readers a given set of moral principles. The same method could also be applied, so the argument goes, to other fields of knowledge:

Scott might have written, as he declared he wrote, for the passing of his time, the improvement of his fortunes, and the amusement of his readers [...]: we are not bound to estimate his works as lightly as he did, or to agree in his opinions of their influence. *We rather learn from him how much can be impressed by exemplification which would be rejected in the form of reasoning, and how there may be more extensive embodiments of truth in fiction than the world was thoroughly aware of.* It matters not that the truth he exemplified was taken up at random, like that of all its predecessors in the walks of fiction. Others may systematize, having learned from him how extensively they may embody. *There is a boundless field open before them; no less than the whole region of moral science, politics, political economy, social rights and duties* (emphasis added)<sup>10</sup>.

The essay on Scott is a very interesting piece of literary criticism. Martineau praises Scott for the cultural work his novels perform — a work that has proved more effective and seminal than the

<sup>10</sup> Harriet Martineau, "The Achievements of the Genius of Scott", *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, II, 10 (January 1833), p. 458.

preaching of other professionals (e.g. the clergy, university professors). But she also berates him for the negative repercussions of his Toryism, namely, the unwillingness to include in his representations of real life, past and present, those underprivileged social classes that, by the early 1830s, were commanding the attention of an increasing number of social commentators, writers and reformers: "What is there of humble life in his narratives? What did he know of those who live and move in that region? Nothing. There is not a character from humble life in all his library of volumes". The conclusion of Martineau's essay is adamant about the need for serious works of literature that might emend Scott's omission. There is a gap in the market for literature that Martineau clearly identifies: what is needed is a new type of fiction that, like Scott's novels, would make the most of the exemplification method he championed (somewhat unconsciously, Martineau implies) and at the same time undertake to represent "humble life" with all its uncharted particularity.

The *Illustrations of Political Economy* fit such a description of the duty of literature in the modern world rather neatly. In the Scott essay, Martineau is implicitly tracing the literary genealogy of her own narrative experiment, locating her fictions under the powerful aegis of Scott's celebrated example. Most recent commentators, however, tend to read the *Illustrations* in one way or another as belonging primarily to the discourse of political economy by which the tales are regulated and to which they contribute a degree of dogmatism that many find unendurable<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> See Deirdre David, *Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy: Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1987; Linda Peterson, "Harriet Martineau: Masculine Discourse, Female Sage", in *Victorian Sages and Cultural Discourse: Renegotiating Gender and Power*, ed. Thais E. Morgan, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1990; Claudia Orazem, *Political Economy and Fiction in the Early Works of Harriet Martineau*, Frankfurt, Peter Lang, 1999 and Elaine Freedgood, *Victorian Writing about Risk: Imagining a Safe England in a Dangerous World*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000. On the other hand, Caroline Roberts (*The Woman and the Hour: Harriet Martineau and Victorian Ideologies*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2002) takes issue with the prevalent view of Martineau's valorization of 'masculine' economic discourse: "Although her tales articulated the political ideas of men, it was her use of narrative that made these ideas accessible to readers and that precipitated the series' extensive circulation" (p. 25).

It is undeniable that the *Illustrations* ring more dogmatic and doctrinaire than any novel by Jane Austen. Their manifest aim is to teach Political Economy and to divulge 'economically-correct' views of the social world. On the other hand, however, an exclusive concentration on the ideological framework of the *Illustrations* prevents us from appreciating other, more controversial features — especially those related to the importance of narrative, the "documentary effect" of realist fiction<sup>12</sup> and the potentially disruptive implications of its particularity.

Valerie Sanders refers to the dialogue between Lord F. and his wife Letitia, at the end of *For Each and For All*, as Martineau's "forceful declaration of her own ideas on the proper function of the novel"<sup>13</sup>. In that dialogue, Letitia claims that: "[t]he true romance of human life lies among the poorer classes: the most rapid vicissitudes, the strongest passions, the most undiluted emotions, the most eloquent deportment, the truest experience are there [...] and yet these things are almost untouched by our artists; be they dramatists, painters, or novelists" (p. 129)<sup>14</sup>. Letitia's argument for a more democratic politics of representation resembles very closely Martineau's own critique of Scott: there Martineau speaks disapprovingly of Scott's "faithful butlers and barbers"; in the tale, Letitia mentions "faithful butlers" and "gossiping barbers" as unsuitable representatives of "humble life in all its strong and strange varieties" (p. 129). At stake, in both texts, is the attempt to remap the borders of realism by including a broader spectrum of subjectivities and social realities. Such a project of democratic expansion of the scope of narrative realism is part and parcel of Martineau's experiment<sup>15</sup>. The question is: To what extent is this project compatible with the allegorical drift of the *Illustrations*, or with the strictures of the 'economically correct'? As I hope to show in this paper, the *Illustrations* are

<sup>12</sup> See Nancy Armstrong, *Fiction in the Age of Photography: The Legacy of British Realism*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 11.

<sup>13</sup> Sanders, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

<sup>14</sup> Page numbers refer to the 1859 edition of *The Illustrations of Political Economy*, (1832-34), 9 vols, London, Routledge, Warnes & Routledge, 1859.

<sup>15</sup> See Vineta Colby, *Yesterday's Woman: Domestic Realism in the English Novel*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1977, pp. 215-230 and Sanders, *op. cit.*, pp. 12-15.

structured upon the tension between two diverging tendencies: the generalizing and schematizing tendency of the "principles" and the complicating, pluralizing tendency of the play of writing. The collisions, the frictions between realism and demonstration, between the prodigality of fictional details and the disembodied doxa of political economy are more prominent (and more interesting) than has hitherto been acknowledged. "Can any example ever truly fit a general proposition?" Paul de Man asks in his essay on Kleist, "Is not its particularity, to which it owes the illusion of its intelligibility, necessarily a betrayal of the general truth it is supposed to support or to convey?"<sup>16</sup> My aim in this paper is to look for betrayals. If particularity always stands in an oblique relation to general propositions, the economic truths so palpably deployed in the *Illustrations* as the gold standard of narrative meanings might very well be complicated or even subverted from the inside by the particulars, the irrelevant detail concocted in order to render those general truths intelligible and readable<sup>17</sup>.

### *Past and Present*

The narrative structure of *The Hill and the Valley* follows a pattern that is fairly recurrent in the *Illustrations*: "prosperity", the product of industrialization, hard work and wise investments, inexorably gives way to "disasters", "discontents" and "uproar[s]"<sup>18</sup> when the state of trade declines, workers are laid

<sup>16</sup> Paul de Man, "Aesthetic Formalization: Kleist's *Über das Mariettentheater*, in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1984, p. 276.

<sup>17</sup> It is interesting to note that in her reading of James McCulloch's *Discourse on the Rise, Peculiar Objects, and Importance of Political Economy* (1825) Mary Poovey underlines the tension between "general rules" and "individual cases". For McCulloch, however, the economist "has to deal with man in the aggregate — with states and not with families — with the passions and propensities which actuate the great bulk of the human race and not with those which are occasionally found to influence the conduct of a solitary individual" (McCulloch, quoted in M. Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 300).

<sup>18</sup> The words between inverted comas are quotations from the titles of some of the chapters.

off, and the whole community is shown to suffer from the inherent instability and vacillations of a market economy. The narrator meticulously explains how this "change of times" has come to be and what dramatic consequences the falling in price of bar iron has had on those who own the means of production. The narrator's orientation is at its most apologetic when the crisis settles in and the social disruption brought about by the capitalist economy becomes obvious: many lengthy comments are necessary in order to justify economic laws that appear, to the many, unjustifiable. The doxa of political economy is profusely mobilized, especially in the central chapters of this tale, where the reader is coaxed into believing that economic rationality must and will in the end prevail.

There is however another side to this picture. The beginning of the tale and its winding-up coincide: the first scene and the last are set in the isolated cottage of John Armstrong, "a hale man of seventy-nine" (p. 2), leading a secluded and independent life, and stubbornly refusing to invest his capital or to circulate his "gold". The character whose perspective frames the narration is also the one who does not participate in the productive life of the community: "he had been in trade in early life, and had lost money through the knavery of his partner. He immediately took a disgust to business, turned all he had into hard gold, bought this lone cottage and two acres of ground, and laid by two hundred guineas in a chest which he kept under his bed" (p. 5). In Raymond Williams's terms, Armstrong's perspective is "residual"<sup>19</sup>: he has turned his back to productive modernity and has embraced the values of rural life, of a pre-industrial mode of existence. Armstrong's position is obsolete: other characters in the tale see this very clearly and try to induce him to participate more actively in the bustling life of the community<sup>20</sup>. What is surprising,

<sup>19</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, London, Oxford University Press, 1977.

<sup>20</sup> As Freedgood observes, Armstrong's position is initially represented as "unassailable and unobjectionable. Slowly but surely, however, this seemingly unarguable position is shown to be mistaken" (Freedgood, *op. cit.*, p. 33), especially in the conversations between Armstrong and Mr. Wallace, the manager of the ironworks, who gently but firmly, tries to correct Armstrong's negative perception of industrial progress. It must also be noted, however, that, regardless of how convincing Mr. and Mrs. Wallace appear to be as apologists of the "beauty" and



however, is the structural prominence the narrative confers on Armstrong's residual perspective by granting him the first and the last word. The story unfolds between two moments in which the pre-modern, pre-industrial past, whose emblem is Armstrong's cottage and plot of ground, graphically dominates the scene. Whatever else this story is supposed to exemplify, the narrative interest of a character like Armstrong is not something Martineau seems willing to foreclose.

The economic principle that *The Hill and the Valley* sets out to illustrate is that: "The interests of the two classes of producers, Labourers and Capitalists, are [...] the same; the prosperity of both depending on the accumulation of CAPITAL" (p. 140). However, two of the main characters — Armstrong and Paul — do not quite 'fit' the model of social and economic interaction delineated in the "Summary of Principles". They are, in different ways, bent upon their own individual projects of reparation and thus stand out from the rest of the community because they refuse to circulate their wealth and to participate, whether as producers (Armstrong) or consumers (Paul), in the economic life of their village. They are eccentrics, of course, and marginal to the ideological framework of the tale. They are not, however, marginal to the action of the story, the development of the plot, or the creation of narrative suspense: Armstrong's obsessive fear of a robbery provides much entertainment and the mystery regarding Paul's origins and upbringing is what keeps the reader's interest alive. Paul is a beggar who "has the speech and manners of a gentleman" (p. 60), a model worker turned "miser", and a persuasive preacher who needs to be instructed on the "uses of prosperity". He is perfectly fluent in the new jargon of political economy, but also unable or unwilling to apply abstract rules to his own particular case. In his frequent dialogues with Mr. Wallace, Paul shows a perfect command of economic theory and an equally unflinching desire

usefulness of industrial development, neither manages to persuade Armstrong to invest and circulate his savings, his two hundred guineas that "lie by as useless as pebbles" (*The Hill and the Valley*, p. 22). Had Armstrong invested his money in Mr. Wallace's concern, as Mr. Hollins at one point suggested, he would have presumably lost everything.

to remain a "miser", blindly pursuing his reparative project of gaining back the family estate.

One is led to wonder why *The Hill and the Valley*, a tale ostensibly arguing for the identity of interest between labourers and capitalists, should focus on a labourer that is hardly representative of the interests of his class, given his aristocratic origins and his solitary quest for the restoration of his family fortunes. Paul's and Armstrong's jealous attachment to "gold", their obsolete economic individuality, is curiously at odds with the kind of modernity represented by Mr. Wallace and his ironworks. Mr. Wallace is the upright capitalist with an impeccable business pedigree. His economically-correct views constitute the ideological fulcrum of this tale. Yet this type of exemplarity can hardly compete with Armstrong's and Paul's eccentricity in terms of narrative interest. These characters are remnants of an old order about to be superseded by the industrialized, modernized present. The past they represent, however, exerts a strong pull on the narrative as a whole: they will remain in the valley after Mr. Wallace's ironworks have been destroyed and the present those ironworks epitomize has been, in a sense, suspended.

The central action in *The Hill and the Valley* revolves around the discontent of the workers and their "vengeance" (p. 120): the destruction of the ironworks (Paul, needless to say, does not participate in this rebellious and futile attack on modernity). Once the attack is completed and the machinery destroyed, Martineau has Mr. Wallace pronounce his long, *ad hoc* speech on the common interests of workers and capitalists. Wallace's speech is meant to round up the story with an appropriate warning to the workers who, in their "vengeance", have destroyed every chance of prosperity. This speech, however, provides no *narrative* solution to the conflicts enacted in the previous chapters: Mr. Wallace takes his business elsewhere and the workers are left to their bleak fate. The advent of industrial modernity has produced no utopian space of reconciliation. The narrative remains silent on the uncertain future of this community. Mr. Wallace's "emerging" perspective, in other words, fails to become "dominant" in the symbolic economy of this tale, despite the heavy artillery of economic doctrines displayed in its support.

Freedgood remarks that Martineau's plots "are resolved by laws" and that "these laws operate according to the reliable and providential mechanisms of the market"<sup>21</sup>. This is true, generally speaking. However, the specific way in which these laws are integrated in the narrative microcosm of each individual tale is never as smooth or seamless as Freedgood's formulation might suggest. One inevitable effect of confining the exposition of economic laws to lengthy and improbable dialogues or speeches is to throw into relief precisely those scenes, characters and actions that are less easily amenable to the allegorical pre-text: e.g. to the "iron laws of political economy"<sup>22</sup>. In *The Hill and the Valley*, the irreducible particularity of Paul's solitary quest and Armstrong's anachronistic but enduring presence fail to be fully integrated into the demonstrative network. The reader is supposed to share Mr. Wallace's values and ideas and to reject Armstrong's and Paul's recalcitrant position: but this message comes across in a confusing way given the (purely fictional) interest the narrative takes in these figures, in their individualized stance, and in what they represent. Paul and Armstrong, like Silas Marner in George Eliot's novel, are remnants of a rapidly disappearing old world — the same world that will be remembered, mourned and re-created in much Victorian fiction. The literary recuperation of a past world fading away at a fast pace is an integral part of the realistic, mimetic vocation of Victorian fiction, providing novelists with a powerful cultural legitimization of their intellectual activity. Martineau's tale is no exception. What is exceptional, perhaps, is that in her story of capital and labour, ironworks and business efficiency, in which industrial modernity is also commended for its beauty, such an operation of retrieval should appear at all appealing.

*The education of circumstances*

The *Illustrations* are not reputed among the most gripping narratives in the tradition of nineteenth-century realism. But

<sup>21</sup> Freedgood, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p. 29.

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*Ireland* is, relatively speaking, a riveting tale: there is no lack of nocturnal adventures and mysterious dealings; there is plenty of narrative suspense and even a sketchy detective subplot. *Ireland* is also remarkable because the friction between Mr. Rosso's up-to-date economic doctrines on the subject of the poor-laws and the story of Dora Sullivan, the heroine of this tale and its shaky moral centre, has some interesting narrative repercussions. The plot traces the decline of a family of Irish cottiers, the Sullivans, from relative prosperity to utter destitution. The reason for their downfall lies ultimately in such antiquated Irish practices of land-letting as "partnership tenancies": the Sullivans lose all they have, at the onset of the tale, as a consequence of an agreement, signed by Dora on behalf of her father, in which he promises to pay "both for himself and partners, all that should be in arrears, as well as presently due [...] immediately after harvest, under penalty of seizure" (p. 10). Other practices are also submitted to sharp critical scrutiny by the narrator or by those characters in charge of promoting the economically-correct view of the matter at hand. Mr. Rosso, for example, argues eloquently with his son against establishing poor laws in Ireland:

"It is because I am convinced that a legal charity would only aggravate them, that I advocate other methods of rectification. We all know that a permanent state of comfort depends on character [...]; the mistake seems to me to lie in supposing that, as character and comfort are connected, we must produce character by giving comfort; whereas this is beginning at the wrong end; and the results have always been the direct reverse of what was expected. We must begin at the other end..."

"But, my dear father, how long it must be before education can work..."

"Remember, Henry, there is another kind of education always going forwards, besides that of our reading and writing schools — the education of circumstances [...]" (pp. 52-53).

It is ironic, to say the least, that both types of education, in the case of Dora, should produce negative outcomes. At the end of the story she is deported for a crime she has committed

unwittingly — she writes a threatening letter to Major Greaves dictated by her husband Dan (p. 77) — a crime in which she finds herself involved because, unlike Dan, she is not illiterate. Dora's literacy — she was “one the most promising” pupils in the school built by Mr. Rosso — is instrumental in determining the tragic outcome of her story: “If she had never been taught to write”, comments one of her neighbors while Dora is leaving the court, “this murderous letter could never have been brought against her” (p. 125). As for the “education of circumstances”, the whole tale might be read as an ironic gloss on the demoralizing effects of such an education: Dora's fall into insanity is the upshot of a long series of adverse “circumstances” exerting their influence on her character in a rather twisted way. When the tale begins, Dora is not just a promising pupil but also a most promising character: the reader might legitimately expect that the kind and thoughtful daughter of proud parents, who encourage her to pursue her schooling in the midst of poverty and uncertainty, might blossom into one of those heroines who stoically bear the moral burden of the tale, and whose authority, like Ella's in *Weal and Woe in Garveloch*, provides a safe anchorage amidst much destitution and desperation<sup>23</sup>.

To a certain extent, Dora is the moral center of this tale. She dutifully warns her husband, after they have fled to the coast, against committing any crime: “O, Husband, you would not doom your child before it is born! You will not wrap it about with crime as soon as it sees the light! This is not earned, Dan. It cannot be yours; and my child shall not be touched with that which is stolen” (p. 62). She does not share “his spirit of recklessness” (p. 63), nor does she approve of his outlaw dealings. But the rapid succession of harsh and unjust “circumstances” she and her family have to endure proves too tough an “education” for her:

Her form wasted, her spirits were hurried, and she  
seemed unable to control her temper by other means than

<sup>23</sup> For an interesting discussion of the character of Dora see Deborah Logan, *The Hour and the Woman: Harriet Martineau's 'Somewhat Remarkable Life'*, DeKalb, Northern Illinois University Press, 2002, pp. 125-128.

perfect silence. Instead of soothing her mother's complaints and patiently answering her incessant questions, as formerly, she heard the former in silence, and escaped as often as possible from the latter (p. 63).

The narrative focuses repeatedly, with much realistic accuracy, on Dora's anxieties, her gloomy apprehensions of danger and her increasingly deranged responses to a crescendo of adversities on which she has no control. That Dora's tragic fate is granted such a prominent position indicates that the narrative is as much interested in detailing the distressing repercussions of the "education of circumstances" as it is in arguing against the introduction of poor-laws in Ireland. Such ambivalence might signal a degree of uneasiness as regards the strict *laissez-faire* position on poor-laws expounded by Mr. Rosso — a position that Martineau was indeed to abandon a few years later<sup>24</sup>. But the disjunction between economic and fictional truths might also be the consequence of the narrative's oscillation between the endorsement of pre-packaged economic doctrines and the adhesion to the codes of realism. Some episodes in Dora's life are significant more as experimentations with the language of psychological realism than as exemplifications of any general proposition. Martineau, for example, devotes several pages to the description of Dora's thoughts after the imprisonment: the apprehensions she has for the declining health of her baby, Dora's own intolerance of the baby's constant wailing and her final resolution to part with the child:

There is a curse upon me, and upon you while you live on my bosom. You never caress me, my child: you struggle out of my grasp [...] You shall go, my child. I will bear to be haunted all my days with your screams and your throes; I will bear to lie down without you, and wake, feeling you in vain; I will bear to fold my empty arms when I see babes laughing in the sunshine, and wonder whether you are playing on the sod or lying beneath it, — if I can free you from my curse, and trust your little life to those who can

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* p. 38.

nourish better than I. O, hush my child. Bear with me this last night! (p. 121).

Whatever the effect this and other similar passages might have had on the mind of early nineteenth-century readers, it is worth noticing that Mr. Rosso and his sons, the exponents of economically-correct principles, never become the object of such an intense focalization (to the detriment of their credibility as realistic characters). In their case, it is obvious that ideas have to prevail over feelings. But in the narrative as a whole, it is Dora's perceptions and feelings — carefully detailed at every plot twist — that drive the story forward. So much so that the climax of the detective subplot, in which Dora is inadvertently involved, coincides with her most outspoken indictment of the "education of circumstances" and its legacy of oppression:

Is there no language to threaten in [...] but that which is spelled by letters? Overthrow every school in the country, empty all your ink into the sea, make a great fire of all your paper, and you will still find threats inscribed wherever there is oppression. There will be pictures traced in the sands of the sea-shore; there will be pikes stuck up on each side the doors; there will be mock gibbets for signals, and a multitude of scowling brows for warnings. Let those who are above us look within themselves, and as sure as they find traces of tyrannical desires, will they see round about marks of revengeful plots, though the people under them may be as brutish in their ignorance as slaves in their bondage [...] The school in which my husband and I learned rebellion was the beak rock, where famine came to be our teacher [...] (p. 126).

*Ireland* is a tale of oppression in which the victims of an antiquated system of tyrannical inefficiency turn either criminal (Dan, Mr. Sullivan) or well-nigh insane (Dora). The economic rationale of this story is spelled out with the usual degree of didacticism in the initial chapters. Yet the main plot is given over to the irredeemable misfortunes of those "character[s] from humble life", omitted in Scott's novels, but included in Martineau's

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fictional extension of the franchise<sup>25</sup>. By the end of the tale, the reader's sympathies have been enlisted on the side of Dora, whose fate, perceptions, fears, expectations, weaknesses and tribulations the reader has learned to appreciate throughout the narrative. It is Dora's role as victim that necessarily invites sympathy, regardless of the value her position has in the ideological framework. The demonstrative force of this tale is marred by the wealth of detail marshaled to characterize Dora: her story questions from the inside the mild optimism of the therapy of education invoked by Mr. Rosso. The "liberty of fiction", in other words, operates against the grain of that kind of optimism that Freedgood associates with "modern cosmologies":

J. R. McCulloch, in his *Statistical Account of the British Empire* (1837), and Harriet Martineau, in her *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832-34), use charts, tables and narratives to reassure their readers that England is in the safe keeping of both a deity who is providing abundant natural resources, and the invisible hand of the market, which is always working toward an equilibrium of 'natural' prices and wages. *Laissez faire* capitalism becomes a cosmology in their works, a structure of laws that guarantees the stability of the future<sup>26</sup>.

It is not difficult to see how the master narrative of the *Illustrations* might function as a cosmology, proffering "large-scale consolation and reassurance"<sup>27</sup>. What demands further attention, however, is the counter narrative of realism: the way in which, especially in certain tales, the "liberty of fiction" takes precedence over the problem-solving vocation of "modern cosmologies". In *Ireland* the plot hinges on the misfortunes of a family of Irish cottiers, the narration focuses on the moral and

<sup>25</sup> On the analogy between realistic, or symbolic, representation and the question of political representation see Catherine Gallagher, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form 1832-1867*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1988, pp. 187-217.

<sup>26</sup> Freedgood, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.



psychological costs, for individual characters, of a system of oppression that is undoubtedly in need of a reform, and by the end of the tale, the problems thus addressed do not find any plausible solution. The “large-scale consolation and reassurance” that economic laws seem to have in store are not foregrounded in the realistic narrative of Dora’s downfall, nor does economic rationality fully diffuse the sense of uncertainty and desolation pervading this tale<sup>28</sup>. Maybe Ireland, unlike England, doesn’t appear as a suitable candidate for a future of stability and equilibrium. More likely, stability and equilibrium are not easily imposed on the conflictual and bleak scenario portrayed in this story.

#### *Malthusianism and domesticity*

Another possible reading of Dora’s punitive fate is in terms of Malthusian retribution. Her hasty and incautious marriage to Dan is one perfect instance of that kind of union against which Thomas Malthus had eloquently argued in his *Essay*. Martineau faithfully enounces in the “Summary of Principles” the need to adjust “the proportions of capital and population” in Ireland “as in all analogous cases” in order to obtain “permanent relief” (p. 135). And the narrative seems to effect such an adjustment by balancing the number of births and the number of deaths (Mrs. Sullivan dies on the very same day when Dora’s baby is born, in one of the most uncanny scenes in the tale) and by dispersing the recently formed family — Dora, Dan and their baby — with the timely deportation of Dora. The heroine becomes, in a sense, a scapegoat for the Malthusian sin of early marriage committed by the whole community, while the consequences of overpopulation — “extensive and appalling indigence, and a wide spread of the moral evils which attend it” (p. 135) — are displayed, for the benefit of the incredulous reader, in a most undiluted way.

<sup>28</sup> Valerie Sanders has already emphasized the melancholic underside of Martineau’s tales, “surprisingly cheerless for one who believed as confidently as she did in the progress of society” (Sanders, *op. cit.*, p. 33).

The principle of population is more explicitly illustrated in *Weal and Woe in Garveloch* which shares with *Ireland* a similar peripheral setting and a central heroine that, like Dora, is intended as a paragon of domestic virtue but, unlike Dora, does not succumb under the burden of destitution, remaining the authoritative moral centre throughout the story. It is significant that the most overtly Malthusian tale in the *Illustrations* should also be firmly committed to celebrating the (middle-class) ethos of domesticity, the feminine authority of (working-class) mothers and the relevance of family ties. Much as the tale stresses, in private conversations (pp. 92-98) and public dialogues (pp. 41-51), the gloomy truths of Malthusianism, alerting the reader to their cogency, the choice of Ella — a mother of ten — as the fulcrum of the action stands out for its peculiarity. The anti-matrimonial *telos* of the principle of population is in a way contradicted by the exemplarity of Ella's role and "power".

The text addresses this contradiction at one point when Katie (the widow who abstains from remarrying heeding Malthusian warnings) asks Ella whether she did consider the problem of overpopulation before her "ten children were born" (p. 98). Ella's answer — "there seemed no doubt to my husband and me that our children would be well provided for" (p. 98) — rehearses Malthus's standard position, thus tentatively dispelling any lingering doubts concerning the appropriateness of a prolific mother as proponent of Malthusianism. Presumably conscious of the controversial impact of Malthus's doctrine, Martineau constructs a tale in which the idealization of domesticity is brought to the fore in order to offset the "fear of a family" inherent in Malthus's theorization of the preventive check and moral restraint<sup>29</sup>.

The population principle<sup>30</sup> came under attack as soon as it was

<sup>29</sup> Thomas R. Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population, or a View of its Past and Present Effects on Human Happiness; with an inquiry into our prospects respecting the future removal or mitigation of the evils which it occasions* (1803 with a variorum of 1806, 1807 and 1826), 2 vols, ed. Patricia James, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, vol. I, p. 305.

<sup>30</sup> In Malthus's own formulation: "Population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio [...]. By the law of our nature which makes food necessary to the life of men, the effects of

formulated and remained a very thorny truth of economic discourse throughout the nineteenth century. Malthus's indirect apology of the "merits of the childless"<sup>31</sup>, his negative vision of marriage and procreation, the statistics he was able to marshal in the second edition of his *Essay*, proving the validity of his calculations, precipitated a quandary over many issues related to such basic questions as "love", "death", "marriage", "morality", the "indulgence of the passions" and "family"<sup>32</sup>. As Hazlitt remarked in his indignant reply to Malthus: "It seemed [...] that the world was going to be topsy-turvy; all our ideas of moral good, and evil were in a manner confounded, we scarcely knew whether we stood on our heads or our heels"<sup>33</sup>. Despite Hazlitt's fears of moral and social anarchy, Malthus's repeated indictment of early marriages — "we must on no account do anything which tends directly to encourage marriage"<sup>34</sup> — did entail an ideal of social control based on self-restraint and the "regulated indulgence of the passions"<sup>35</sup>. What needs underscoring is that such an ideal did not capitalize on the "sexual contract" as a model of reconciliation (between the sexes and the classes) nor on domesticity as a utopia of harmonic integration between different subjectivities<sup>36</sup>, but on a form of ascetic withdrawal from the marriage market in which the "merits of the childless" far

these unequal powers must be kept equal. This implies a strong and constant operating check on population from the difficulty of subsistence. This difficulty must fall somewhere and must necessarily be felt by a large portion of mankind". If human beings multiply beyond the power of earth to the necessary subsistence, premature death must in some shape or other visit the human race". Thomas R. Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), ed. Antony Flew, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1985, p. 71 and p. 118.

<sup>31</sup> Malthus, *Essay*, 1803, cit., vol. II, p. 148.

<sup>32</sup> On the Malthusian controversy see Patricia James, *Population Malthus: His Life and Times*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979 and Rosanna Ledbetter, *A History of the Malthusian League, 1877-1927*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 1976.

<sup>33</sup> William Hazlitt, "A Reply to Malthus' *Essay on Population*" (1807), in *The Collected Works of William Hazlitt*, 6 vols, eds. A. R. Waller and Arnold Glover, London, Dent, 1902, vol. IV, p. 18.

<sup>34</sup> Malthus, *Essay*, 1803, cit., vol. II, p. 164.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* p. 105.

<sup>36</sup> On the logic of the sexual contract as "narrative paradigm" and "narrative process" see Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1987, pp. 28-58.

outweigh those of any *pater familias*, let alone the dubious merits of a "matron who has raised a family of ten or twelve children"<sup>37</sup>.

By choosing precisely one such matron, Ella, as the most prominent voice, Martineau is striving to diffuse the most disturbing social and cultural implications of Malthusianism<sup>38</sup>. Hence the insistent appeal to the rhetoric of domesticity and the careful construction of Ella's unparalleled authority. In *Ella of Garveloch*, the eponymous character is presented as a "proud spirit" (13) and a "woman of extraordinary energy" (8) who never loses "her dignity under the pressure of her cares" (54). She is equally capable of looking after her orphan brothers and of negotiating with the Laird the terms of her tenancy, to their mutual satisfaction. In *Weal and Woe in Garveloch*, Ella has become a wife and a mother and her power has proportionally increased. When troubles come, as they are bound to do in the *Illustrations*, Ella and Angus, her husband, can safely rely on each other to weather the adversities:

Angus's activity and cheerfulness never gave way. He ascribed their power to his wife's influence; while she found a never-failing support to her energies when he was present [...]. There was a lofty spirit of trust in Ella, as animating to her husband as his experience in life and devotion to his home were supporting to her. Katie looked with a generous sympathy on the enjoyment of a happiness of which she had been deprived, and wished no more for herself than that she might be as secure from trials with her children as she believed Angus and Ella to be (124).

It is significant that the happiness enjoyed by this couple should be pitted against the deprivation of which Katie speaks. The romantic subplot of Katie's and Ronald's missed marriage is in a way crucial in order to counterbalance the anti-Malthusian

<sup>37</sup> Malthus, *Essay*, 1803, cit., vol. II, p. 148.

<sup>38</sup> That they were truly disturbing is further confirmed by the hostility some of the reviewers showed towards Martineau, depicting her in indignant accents as an aberration: "A woman who thinks childbearing a crime against society! An unmarried woman who declaims against marriage", see "Miss Martineau's Monthly Novels", *The Quarterly Review*, XLIX, 107 (1833), p. 151.

connotations of Angus's and Ella's domestic bliss. Katie and Ronald are not young, they are certainly not destitute (Ronald has more money than he can dispose of and Katie remains unaffected by the famine), and their union would not appear condemnable in Malthusian terms<sup>39</sup>. Yet the narrative requires that they should zealously exemplify the choice of celibacy. The more insistent is the celebration of domesticity, family life and Ella's authoritative stance, the more necessary it becomes to envisage a subplot in which the anti-matrimonial logic of Malthus's proposals is (artificially) reasserted.

In the general preface to the *Illustrations*, Martineau claims that "the form of narrative [...] is the best in which Political Economy can be taught [...] we have chosen this method not only because it is new, not only because it is entertaining, but because we think it the most faithful and the most complete" (xiii). Narrative linearity and the logical exposition of principles — Martineau adds — will be instrumental in unraveling the "knotty points" (xiv) of economic doctrines. The problem with Malthusianism is that the kind of linearity encoded in the tragic narrative of the race between production and reproduction, subsistence and population is necessarily open-ended. Although Malthus claims that the problem of an overcharged population "far from being remote is imminent and immediate"<sup>40</sup>, his theory, as Blaug has pointed out, is structured upon "the habit of making predictions with open-ended time horizons"<sup>41</sup>. The "apocalyptic fallacy", as Blaug defines such habit, renders the theory of population non falsifiable within a specified period of time, and therefore arguably less stringent from a scientific point of view.

When this theory comes to be embodied in the shape of a

<sup>39</sup> It is not surprising that, in his review, William Empson wondered why Ronald was expected not to marry: "If Ronald is not to marry, who is? Are the burden and drudgery of population to be thrown on the thoughtless only? Are the charms of domestic life to be given by preference to those who will feel them least?" See W. Empson, "Illustrations of Political Economy: Mrs Marcet – Miss Martineau", *Edinburgh Review*, LVII, 115 (April 1833), p. 27.

<sup>40</sup> Malthus, *Essay*, 1798, cit., p. 120.

<sup>41</sup> Marc Blaug, *Economic Theory in Retrospect*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 75.

fictional story, a realistic tale in which the beginning presupposes the end, "open-ended time horizons", whether falsifiable or not, are bound to appear implausible. Open-endedness is not attuned to the "conditions of plausibility"<sup>42</sup> of early nineteenth-century culture, especially in the historicist tradition. As Peter Brooks remarks: "the very possibility of meaning plotted through sequence and through time depends on the anticipated structuring force of the ending: the interminable would be the meaningless"<sup>43</sup>. The open-ended linearity of Malthus's theory is therefore not easily resolved in the teleological linearity of realistic narratives. This friction might help explain why in *Weal and Woe in Garveloch* the main plot — with Angus and Ella as protagonists — is not the one that best illustrates Malthusian preoccupations, whereas Ronald's and Katie's doomed romance, with its more overtly didactic echoes, is confined to a marginal position. What drives the story towards its closure is not the exemplary and interminable celibacy of Ronald and Katie, but the far more appealing and solid happiness of a successful marriage and prolific family:

[Ella] had all she wanted in her husband's devotion to her and to his home, and she distributed benefits untold from the rich treasury of her warm affections. She had, from childhood, filled a station of authority, and had never abused her power, but made it the means of living for others. Her power increased with every year of her life, and with it grew her scrupulous watchfulness over its exercise, till the same open heart, penetrating eye, and ready hand, which had once made her the sufficient dependence of her orphan brothers, gave her extensive influence over the weal and woe of Garveloch (p. 139).

The final paragraph confers no small degree of eminence on Ella's moral authority<sup>44</sup>. Her influence extends well beyond the

<sup>42</sup> I borrow this definition from Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1992.

<sup>43</sup> Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Desire and Intention in Narrative*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 1992, p. 93.

<sup>44</sup> On the primacy of this form of authority in domestic fiction see Armstrong, *Desire*

domestic sanctum to the society at large, projecting the same benign, feminine, non despotic ideal of social control, based on gentle surveillance that was to become hegemonic in the industrial novels of the 1840s. The closure Martineau imagines for this particular tale owes its celebratory, almost triumphant, overtones to the difficulty of accommodating Malthus's apocalyptic predictions within the ideological terms of domestic fiction<sup>45</sup>. Rather than opting for a story of ill-fated love, ascetic celibacy and heroic self-restraint — all narrative elements that are consistent with the dystopian kernel of Malthusianism<sup>46</sup> — Martineau produces a compelling tale of faultless matrimonial bliss that does dispense consolations and reassurances, although not exactly the ones Malthusianism would envisage.

#### *Cinnamon and Pearls*

In my reading of *The Hill and the Valley, Ireland, and Weal and Woe in Garveloch* I have attempted to point out those fault lines in the texts that signal various degrees of disharmony or imbalance between the realist *récit* and the configuration of meanings and explanations provided by the economic subtext. Of course, the opposition between fixed economic "facts" and erratic "fictions" is itself a fiction, a misconstruction: for the intersection between economic and literary discourses in the *Illustrations* never leaves the alleged fixity of economic principles unquestioned. Martineau's illustration of the population principle is a gloss, an interpretation, a literary revision of the truths so correctly

*and Domestic Fiction*, cit., pp. 161-259.

<sup>45</sup> In her reading of this tale Roberts emphasizes Martineau's "disruption of the patriarchal status quo" which is effected "by advising against the domestic ideal" (Roberts, *op. cit.*, p. 25). Although it is obvious that Malthus's proposals run counter to the domestic ideal, Martineau's fiction goes a long way in order to endorse that very ideal.

<sup>46</sup> I have dealt more extensively with these issues in my article on the Malthusian plot. See Silvana Colella, "Intimations of Mortality: The Malthusian Plot in Early Nineteenth-Century Popular Fiction", *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, XXIV, 1 (2002), pp. 17-32.

enounced by the characters themselves. Similarly, the cheerless scenario evoked in *Ireland* does entail some dire comment on the applicability of abstract doctrines to particular cases. And the way in which industrial modernity quickly and efficiently arrives in a secluded valley and just as speedily departs, leaving behind more desperation than hope might legitimately appear devoid of economic sense. The gold standard of economic principles is intentionally the ultimate source of meaning in the *Illustrations*; but, on the other hand, the multifarious polysemy of each fictional story can never be automatically or unambiguously converted into the bullion of univocal signification. Examples and illustrations may also serve “not as confirmation of a rule but as an instrument of testing, of possible revision”<sup>47</sup>. Even narratives whose orientation towards one predominant meaning is self-evident do contain elements that complicate the intelligibility of the principle demonstrated.

The last tale I would like to look at — *Cinnamon and Pearls* — slightly differs from the others in that the principle illustrated (the disadvantages of monopoly colonialism and the advantages of free trade) is not contradicted in any significant way by the fiction created to explain it. The tale is nevertheless relevant to my argument because it shows to what extent popularizing political economy through the powerful channel of fiction involves reinterpreting and reorienting the authoritative utterances of economic discourse. In this tale the fictional framework has the immediate effect of reversing the traditional perspective of the narratives of economic anti-colonialism. In his critical account of the history of European colonialism, Smith traces the many disadvantages of monopoly colonialism both for the mother country and for the colonies; but the interests of the natives, the colonized (and sometimes even the colonists) are not — in all fairness — one of his top priorities<sup>48</sup>. They are arguably more

<sup>47</sup> See Alexander Gelley, “Introduction” in *Unruly Examples: On the Rhetoric of Exemplarity*, ed. A. Gelley, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1995, p. 12.

<sup>48</sup> Adam Smith argues that the colony trade based on monopoly is as profitless for the mother country as it is for the colonies; the cost of conquering and maintaining colonial possessions is too high; trading with the colonies is beneficial only to a



relevant in Bentham's *Emancipate Your Colonies* (1792) given the ideological and political goal of this pamphlet, but those interests — "inclinations", "wants" — are not explicitly named or imagined; they remain unapproachable and impenetrable, as distant and alien as the very dominions France is urged to relinquish precisely because of their spatial and cultural remoteness<sup>49</sup>.

*Cinnamon and Pearls* is set in Ceylon and although the narrator vaunts a recognizably British voice the story 'sympathetically' traces the adventures of two Ceylonese, Rayo and Marana, "outcasts in their own land" (p. 81). Their interests, wishes and aspirations are constructed as the main textual focus. The technique of free indirect speech is efficaciously employed to represent Rayo's fears, disillusionments and confusion in a way that sets this text apart not just from the economic and political treatises that constitute Martineau's ideological starting point, but also from the early nineteenth-century *prima mano* "accounts" of the island of Ceylon she might have consulted when writing the *Illustrations*<sup>50</sup>.

One prime example is offered by the description of the pearl

small minority of merchants, whereas it is "hurtful to the general interest of the country" and injurious to the internal, harmonious development of British industry. See Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), London, Oxford University Press, 1979, p. 613. On the (anti)-colonialist pronouncements of early-nineteenth century economic discourse see Klaus Knorr, *British Colonial Theories, 1570-1850*, London, Frank Cass & Co., 1963 and Bernard Semmel, *The Rise of Free Trade Imperialism: Classical Political Economy, the Empire of Free Trade, and Imperialism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1970.

<sup>49</sup> Jeremy Bentham, *Emancipate Your Colonies!* (1792), in *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, Edinburgh, William Tate, 1843, vol. IV.

<sup>50</sup> See J. Cordiner, *A Description of Ceylon*, London, Longman, Hurst, Rees and Orme, 1807 and R. Percival, *An Account of the Island of Ceylon*, London, C. & R. Baldwin, 1803. In her autobiography, Martineau mentions Maria Graham's *Journal of a Residence in India* (1812) and Reginald Herber's *Narrative of a Journey through the Upper Provinces of India* (1827) as disappointing sources of information. She also recounts that Sir Alexander Johnstone "just returned from governing Ceylon" provided her with all the relevant material she then used in her novel: "he was soon at the door again, with his carriage full of books, prints and other illustrations, affording information not to be found in any ordinarily accessible books". It is very likely that Percival's and Cordiner's accounts were among those books. There are in fact strong intertextual echoes of both accounts in her fiction.

fishery, a staple in Percival's and Cordiner's narratives. Both devote much attention to the divers, the actual protagonists of the fishery, describing in detail their social provenance, their religious beliefs or "superstitions", the amount of time they are able to remain under water, and other, more spectacular aspects such as the blood oozing from their ears and nose after diving. The pearl fishery, writes Percival, offers a most "striking" spectacle to a European, "which exceeds in novelty and variety almost any thing I ever witnessed"<sup>51</sup>. After depicting, with much realistic aplomb, the incredible exertions involved in the business of diving, Percival is happy to conclude: "The business of a diver, which appears so extraordinary and full of danger to an European, becomes quite familiar to an Indian, owing to the natural suppleness of his limbs, and his habits from his infancy"<sup>52</sup>. Nothing comes more naturally to the Ceylonese, in other words, than diving continuously over fifty times a day, scooping up pearl oysters for the English to trade. Cordiner is even more reassuring in his report: "They seem to enjoy the labour as a pleasant pastime, and never murmur nor complain, unless when the banks present a scarcity of oysters; their fatigue is then the same and their profit is greatly diminished"<sup>53</sup>.

Like the descriptions of child labour as an entertaining and instructive "pastime" that were being produced in England at about the same time, these colonialist accounts of the business of diving are patently mystifying. The pain and exploitation, involved in this business, are deleted in Percival's and Cordiner's descriptions of it. But they do crop up in Martineau's fiction where the focus shifts to Rayo's own perceptions. Initially, we are told, "Rayo made light, as he had done for some past time, of the achievement of diving for chanks" (p. 4); and Martineau's fiction seems, consequently, to endorse Cordiner's or Percival's light-hearted perspective. Things change, however, when Rayo finds himself joining "the human population at the bottom of the sea" (p. 28). His plunge is a veritable descent to hell: the rope is a devil

<sup>51</sup> Percival, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* p. 65.

<sup>53</sup> Cordiner, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

slapping his face, a “large gaping oyster” is a shark swallowing him; space and time expand indefinitely, one minute is a hundred years of sleep or death. The extended description of Rayo’s first plunge, located at the beginning of the narrative, is no doubt efficacious in enlisting the reader’s sympathy on the side of the natives: “Rayo [...] was in despair at the prospect before him. Forty or fifty such plunges as this to-day! [...] Forty or fifty life-times a-day for six weeks! This is not the sort of eternity he had ever thought of desiring” (p. 31). Who could blame him, then, when in the following scene, he is caught in the act of stealing a pearl? It is unclear whether this theft is to be reprimanded, according to the ethical (and commercial) system of the colonizers, or alternatively whether the stolen pearl should be considered a just reward for the dreadful business of diving: “Such a pearl as this was no more than Rayo believed the proper payment of his labour, considering that strangers carried away all the profits from the country people” (p. 33). Needless to say, this question is soon settled in the most traditional way, and Rayo finds himself out of work. But it is remarkable, nevertheless, that the attack on monopoly colonialism, in *Cinnamon and Pearls*, should be launched in those terms: by unmasking the high human cost of economic activities pursued solely in the interest of the colonizers; by foregrounding the point of view of the Ceylonese (although this too is a mindfully orchestrated construction), and by exposing the disorienting clash between colliding systems of values that generates confusion among the natives.

The negative repercussions of British rule are, in fact, a pressing concern in this text. The difference between Martineau’s fiction and early nineteenth-century colonialist accounts resides in the fervor with which she denounces those repercussions, bringing to light (what she represents as) the discontent of the natives — “Why then did the English come? And why now do they not go away” (p. 110); “From what do they protect us [...] if they will go away we will protect ourselves against their returning” (p. 111) — and even insisting that the Ceylonese are the “natural proprietors” of the “wealth” produced in their island (an idea that did not have wide currency in early nineteenth-century colonialist discourse):

The fragrance of spices was borne on every breeze; shells of various beautiful forms were thrown up by every tide [...]; arrack flowed for any one who would set it running from the tree; canes to make matting and baskets were trodden down from their abundance; the topaz and the amethyst, the opal, the garnet, the ruby, and the sapphire, jet, crystal, and pearls, were strewed as in fairy-land [...]; yet the natural proprietors of this wealth, to which the world looked with longing eyes, were half-fed and not clothed (p. 79).

The representation of Ceylon as a paradise of natural beauties is anything but original<sup>54</sup>. In his *Treatise on the Wealth, Power and Resources of the British Empire* (1815), Colquhoun singles out this colony "for its immense physical resources" and presents it as a place "where nature has been so bountiful as to require only the arm of industry, in order to produce from the proper cultivation of the soil almost every article of commerce, which has been considered of the greatest comparative value in the different markets of Europe"<sup>55</sup>. All the more noteworthy, then, is Martineau's contention that Ceylon's abundant natural riches belong just as naturally to the natives and should therefore be freely managed by them: "let the Cingalese gather their own pearls, exchange their own timber, sell their own dyes wherever and in whatsoever manner they like" (p. 22). Colquhoun's treatise and Martineau's fiction share a similar interest in the battle against the demon of monopoly. But whereas Colquhoun is concerned with estimating the potential profits for the mother country of the adoption of free trade policies, Martineau's stance brings into sharper focus the unjust impoverishment imposed upon the natives by colonial rule (British or otherwise). The story of Rayo and Marana, originally intended as an illustration of the disadvantages of monopoly and the benefits of free trade, slowly

<sup>54</sup> See Kate Teltscher, *India Inscribed: European and British Writing on India, 1600-1800*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1995.

<sup>55</sup> Patrick Colquhoun, *A Treatise on the Wealth, Power, and Resources of the British Empire, in Every Quarter of the World, Including the East Indies*, London, Joseph Mawman, 1815, p. 406.

derails turning into a rather more disturbing tale in which the very legitimacy of British rule is subjected to critical scrutiny. How can British rule claim any legitimacy, well into the 1830s, since its foundations lie in the repeated robbery of the Ceylonese's natural riches, as the narrative demonstrates?

It is but fair to add, at this point, that such a scenario of colonial antagonism and self-questioning also smacks of paternalism straight from the beginning, and it would indeed be surprising if it were otherwise. In no way could this narrative be rightfully read along post-colonial — late twentieth-century — lines, since it was most certainly not uttered from that perspective. The representation of otherness is a case in point: although the primacy of Rayo's and Marana's claims is never questioned, their wishes and aspirations are the result of a sympathetic construction of alterity which simultaneously makes room for and silences the reasons of the Ceylonese. What Rayo, Marana and their countrymen really wish for, so it turns out, is the liberty to trade in the products of their own land in the manner which they find most congenial. That the natives should become advocates for free trade is, no doubt, suspicious from an ideological point of view. But it is precisely this insistence on the idea of "freedom — and on the concomitant negative image of the British oppressive dominion — that renders this narrative so very discordant with respect to the 1830s views of colonial alterity that were being articulated in Macaulay's and Trevelyan's "civilized" revision of the imperialist project<sup>56</sup>.

The ideology of the "civilizing mission" of British imperialism is interwoven in the plot of *Cinnamon and Pearls* in such a way as to render it almost ineffectual. It is explicitly addressed towards the end when two new characters are introduced, Mr. and Mrs. Searl, North-American missionaries. These characters embody not only the new, more "genteel" facade of imperialism but also the dream of independence from the mother country which is part

<sup>56</sup> See Thomas B. Macaulay, "Government of India", 1833, in *Macaulay: Prose and Poetry*, ed. George Young, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 1967 and Charles Trevelyan, *On the Education of the People of India*, London, Longman, Orme, Brown, Green & Longman, 1838.

and parcel of their own American identity. They are the representatives of the new "civilizing mission" — their role is to bring the "light" of Western culture and religion to the Ceylonese — but at the same time, it is through their proud American voice that the connection between liberalism and independence, free trade and political liberties, is uttered: "Which is worth the most to England at this moment", asks Mr. Searle, "Ceylon, her servile dependency, or any province of her band of commercial allies, — our United States?" (p. 91).

I am not disputing the presence in *Cinnamon and Pearls* of the ubiquitous ideology of the "masks of conquest" which was gaining wide currency at the time when this novel was written<sup>57</sup>. But this ideology cannot fully account for, and therefore invalidate, the antagonistic stance of Rayo's and Marana's story. Martineau's text hovers uneasily between the past narrative of economic anti-colonialism and the present preoccupation with the civilizing aspects of the colonial conquest. The doctrine of free trade is the historical discursive limit through which a degree of hostility towards the British style of dominion can effectively be expressed even as the narrative enacts a final reconciliation between the conflicting demands of the Ceylonese and those of the colonizers (in the end, Rayo is offered a job and his marriage to Marana finally becomes possible).

Another example of the critical outlook Martineau adopts in this text is the fictional treatment of resentful and rebellious otherness. Not unlike other working-class characters in British social fiction, Rayo dreams incendiary dreams of colonial revenge and even acts upon them. One night, during an ominous storm, he sets fire to the cinnamon crops, clearly identifying his "enemy" in the system of economic exploitation perpetrated by the agents of the East India Company. Sure enough he is punished for this rebellion; not, however, as one would expect, with a public and exemplary retaliation, but only indirectly through the smug satisfaction he reads in the countenance of Mr. Carr (an agent of

<sup>57</sup> For an interesting analysis of the pervasiveness of this ideology see Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1989.

the “honourable Company”), when the latter expresses his joy upon discovering that the over-abundant crop had been fortuitously destroyed. The practice of destroying crops in order to keep the price of cinnamon artificially high (which Adam Smith had already condemned) was quite common, and here Martineau relies on the outrageous injustice of such a waste to mitigate the reader’s response to Rayo’s active anger. His resentment turns out to be, for all practical purposes, so disappointingly ineffectual and counterproductive, that it is hard not to commiserate with Rajo despite the potential threat posed by his desire for colonial revenge.

Such a desire, furthermore, was very likely to be perceived as a threat given the fierce anti-British insurrections that had been raging in Ceylon in the first two decades of the nineteenth century. In the Great Rebellion of 1817-1818 all sectors of the local population had shared in the attempt to get rid of the British dominion once and for all<sup>58</sup>. In this sense, Rayo’s nocturnal and isolated revolt, as well as the recurrent expressions of discontent at the unwanted presence of the British on the island, acquire important historical connotations: Rayo’s anger may be easily re-contained, in narrative terms, but it still bears the impress of other rebellions, other conflicts that cannot be as smoothly absorbed (and neutralized) in the commercial utopia of free trade. Making room for the expression of Rayo’s rage at the injustice of the system of dominion imposed upon him, in other words, is relevant in itself regardless of the effects — blatantly counterproductive — that his militant gesture has produced.

There is also another important historical factor that one should bear in mind when reading Martineau’s text. In the late 1820s and early 1830s the economic and political war against monopoly had been reignited, and Ceylon was, this time, at the heart of the controversy. A commission of inquiry had been established in 1825, under the direction of Colebrooke and Cameron, to investigate into the situation of this island. The Report, produced a few years

<sup>58</sup> See Asoka Bandarage, *Colonialism on Sri Lanka: The Political Economy of the Kandyan Highlands*, New York, Mouton, 1983, p. 51.

later and clearly imbued with the emerging “spirit of reform”, advocated, among other measures, the immediate relinquishment of the Government monopoly of salt and cinnamon. This proposal was accepted by the Secretary of State despite the negative opinions expressed by local administrators (William Horton and Edward Barnes). Their resistance to the introduction of such a measure and, more generally, to the work of the Commission is revealing: Horton’s and Barnes’s point of view as regards the “prosperity” of Ceylon and the contentment of its inhabitants chimes with the colonialist perspective of Percival and Cordiner. Barnes objects to the Commission of Inquiry that he is not aware “that any individual representations of dissatisfaction either openly or anonymously have been made to [the Secretary of State]”; on the contrary, in his opinion, “the natives are perfectly content”<sup>59</sup>. Horton, likewise, is eager to reassure the commissioners that the “present state” of Ceylon is “progressive and flourishing”<sup>60</sup>.

Against the backdrop of these official voices, Martineau’s fiction stands out not just as a reformist text — which it is, of course, given the topical character of the cause it is championing — but also, to a certain extent, as an oppositional narrative, reviving fifty years later the indignant accents of Smith’s and Bentham’s anti-colonialist pronouncements and displacing them in the conflictual scenario of the colonial periphery. If the crusade against monopoly was no longer new in 1833, the process of critical scrutiny of British colonialist pretensions, which was an integral part of that crusade, was anything but obsolete. *Cinnamon and Pearls* articulates a discourse of hostility towards British rule in Ceylon that is all the more interesting for being uttered at a time when novel forms of consensus as to the present and the future of British imperialism were being proposed, by James Mill, Trevelyan and Macaulay among others.

In the 1830s, Macaulay was defending, with fresh arguments,

<sup>59</sup> See Garrett C. Mendis (ed.), *The Colebrooke-Cameron Papers: Documents of British Colonial Policy in Ceylon, 1796-1823*, 2 vols, London, Oxford University Press, 1956, vol. II, p. 24 and p. 31.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 40.



the “noble” heroism of the East India Company; he was trying to rehabilitate the figure of Clive from the slander it had suffered in the past and was championing the expediency of establishing a linguistic, cultural and literary empire in India. Similarly, Charles Trevelyan was devising novel strategies, based on ambitious educational projects, for amending the embarrassing shortcomings of British rule in India. There is, I believe, a significant difference between such positions of instrumental revisionism and Martineau’s rather more passionate revival of the late eighteenth-century narratives of economic anti-colonialism.

Four tales out of twenty-four do not comprise a sufficiently large sample to draw any definite conclusion regarding the *Illustrations* as a whole. I have aimed in this paper at sketching some tentative guidelines for a reading of Martineau’s tales that problematizes the open show of authority and the hierarchy of truths implicit in the very concept of the “illustration”, by drawing attention to the textual mechanisms regulating the production of meanings through the rhetoric of exemplarity. The binary structure I have imposed, rather than detected, in these texts — the “liberty of fiction” versus the “economically correct” — should be intended as a fiction in its own right. It is a critical construction that has been useful, however, in delineating the ways in which the demands (and the allure) of realism contribute to shifting the emphasis of the narrative away from too strict an adherence to the codes of economic rationality.

That rationality, in fact, provides the general laws, the providential or optimistic orientation and the ideological framework. But none of these components can fully account for the seeming randomness of certain narrative choices (*The Hill and the Valley, Ireland*) or explain away the swerves of the plot from an economically coherent linearity (*Weal and Woe in Garveloch, Cinnamon and Pearls*). My intention is not to demonstrate that these tales deconstruct the primacy of economic theories and explanations, thereby defeating their own elucidatory purpose. Rather, what I wish to underscore is the very interesting interplay between the macro-narrative of the *Illustrations of Political Economy*, with its cosmological orientation and problem-solving vocation, and the micro-narratives unfolded in each tale, more closely

engaged with the prodigality and expansiveness of the realist project and therefore allowing for the entry of other, divergent meanings.

The tension between these two levels is not a balance: dogmatism, didacticism and the wish to instruct have a higher degree of visibility. They tend to obfuscate the play of particularity. Yet paying attention to the micro-narratives, with their incongruities, surprises and unresolved conflicts, is a reading strategy that might help question the cogency and compactness of the ideological project of liberalism that, as Freedgood claims, the *Illustrations* wholeheartedly embrace. Why, in *Briery Creek*, does Arthur, the good liberal and perfect capitalist, have to die in the end? Why does Ella, in *Ella of Garveloch*, jealously guard her little brother from coming into contact with the fallen world of "gold and silver"? Why does *The Farrers of Budge-Row* end on a nostalgic note, evoking the "wild fields of sweet thyme" lying at a safe remove from the productive traffic of the city? What is the function of the Indian boy who, in *Berkeley the Banker*, joins the banker's family to be educated in England? The "liberty of fiction" is responsible for some of these odd choices, and although the texts do encourage the reader to submit, like Katie and Ronald, to the "discipline of the teachable" they also produce contradictory meanings that blur the limpidity of their own thesis.