

A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave-Trade (1788)

TO THE RIGHT HON. AND RIGHT REVD. FREDERICK, EARL OF BRISTOL,
BISHOP OF DERRY,¹ ETC., ETC.

My Lord,

Being convinced that your ideas of justice and humanity are not confined to one race of men,² I have endeavoured to lead you to the Indian coast. My intention is not to cause that anguish in your bosom which powerless compassion ever gives; yet my vanity is flattered when I but fancy that your Lordship feels as I do.

With the highest reverence, I am,
My Lord,
Your Lordship's much obliged,
And obedient servant,

ANN YEARSLEY

Bristol, thine heart hath throbb'd to glory: slaves,
E'en Christian slaves, have shook their chains, and gazed
With wonder and amazement on thee.³ Hence,
Ye grov'ling souls, who think the term I give
Of Christian slave, a paradox! To *you*
I do not turn, but leave you to conception
Narrow; with that be blessed, nor dare to stretch
Your shackled souls along the course of freedom.

Yet, Bristol, list! nor deem Lactilla's soul
Lessened by distance; snatch her rustic thought,
Her crude ideas, from their panting state,
And let them fly in wide expansion; lend
Thine energy, so little understood

By the rude million, and I'll dare the strain
Of Heav'n-born Liberty till Nature moves
Obedient to her voice. Alas, my friend,
Strong rapture dies within the soul, while pow'r
Drags on his bleeding victims. Custom, law,
Ye blessings and ye curses of mankind,
What evils do ye cause? We feel enslaved,
Yet move in your direction. Custom, thou
Wilt preach up filial piety; thy sons

Will groan, and stare with impudence at heav'n,
As if they did abjure the act, where Sin
Sits full on Inhumanity; the church
They fill with mouthing, vap'rous sighs and tears,

TO THE RIGHT HON. AND RIGHT REVD. FREDERICK, ² i.e. the Irish.

EARL OF BRISTOL, BISHOP OF DERRY

¹ Frederick Augustus Hervey, 4th Earl of Bristol and 5th Baron Howard de Walden, Bishop of Derry (1730-1803), very active in Irish politics, was Yearsley's patron.

³ Bristol was deeply implicated in the slave trade. For years it had been one of the main ports which handled newly arrived slaves from abroad.

Which, like the guileful crocodile's, oft fall,
Nor fall but at the cost of human bliss.

Custom, thou hast undone us, led us far
From godlike probity, from truth, and heaven.

But come, ye souls who feel for human woe,
Though dressed in savage guise! Approach, thou son,
Whose heart would shudder at a father's chains,
And melt o'er thy loved brother as he lies
Gasping in torment undeserved. Oh sight
Horrid and insupportable, far worse

Than an immediate, an heroic death!

Yet to this sight I summon thee. Approach,
Thou slave of avarice, that canst see the maid
Weep o'er her inky sire! Spare me, thou God
Of all-indulgent mercy, if I scorn

This gloomy wretch, and turn my tearful eye
To more enlightened beings. Yes, my tear

Shall hang on the green furze, like pearly dew
Upon the blossom of the morn. My song

Shall teach sad Philomel a louder note,
When Nature swells her woe. O'er suffering *man*
My soul with sorrow bends! Then come, ye few
Who feel a more than cold, material essence;

Here ye may vent your sighs, till the bleak north
Find its adherents aided. Ah, no more!

The dingy youth comes on, sullen in chains;
He smiles on the rough sailor who aloud
Strikes at the spacious heav'n, the earth, the sea,
In breath too blasphemous — yet not to *him*
Blasphemous, for *he* dreads not either. Lost
In dear internal imag'ry, the soul

Of Indian Luco rises to his eyes,
Silent, not inexpressive; the strong beams

With eager wildness yet drink in the view
Of his too-humble home where he had left
His mourning father and his Inclanda.

Curse on the toils spread by a Christian hand
To rob the Indian of his freedom! Curse
On him who from a bending parent steals
His dear support of age, his darling child —
Perhaps a son, or a more tender daughter —
Who might have closed his eyelids as the spark
Of life gently retired. Oh thou poor world,

Thou fleeting good to individuals! See

How much for thee they care, how wide they ope
Their helpless arms to clasp thee! Vapour thou,
More swift than passing wind! Thou leav'st them nought
Amid th' unreal scene, but a scant grave.

I know the crafty merchant will oppose
 The plea of nature to my strain, and urge
 His toils are for his children; the soft plea
 Dissolves my soul - but when I sell a son,
 Thou God of nature, let it be my own!
 Behold that Christian! See what horrid joy
 Lights up his moody features, while he grasps
 The wished-for gold, purchase of human blood!
 Away, thou seller of mankind! Bring on
 Thy daughter to this market, bring thy wife,
 Thine aged mother (though of little worth),
 With all thy ruddy boys! Sell them, thou wretch,
 And swell the price of Luco! Why that start?
 Why gaze as thou wouldst fright me from my challenge
 With look of anguish? Is it *nature* strains
 Thine heart-strings at the image? Yes, my charge
 Is full against her, and she rends thy soul,
 While I but strike upon thy pitiless ear,
 Fearing her rights are violated. Speak,
 Astound the voice of Justice! Bid thy tears
 Melt the unpitying pow'r, while thus she claims
 The pledges of thy love. Oh, throw thine arm
 Around thy little ones, and loudly plead
 Thou *canst not* sell thy children. Yet beware
 Lest Luco's groan be heard; should *that* prevail,
 Justice will scorn thee in her turn, and hold
 Thine act against thy pray'r. 'Why clasp', she cries,
 'That blooming youth? Is it because thou lov'st him?'
 Why, Luco was beloved: then wilt thou feel,
 Thou selfish Christian, for thy private woe,
 Yet cause such pangs to him that is a father?
 Whence comes thy right to barter for thy fellows?
 Where are thy statutes? Whose the iron pen
 That gave thee precedent? Give me the seal
 Of virtue or religion for thy trade,
 And I will ne'er upbraid thee; but if force
 Superior, hard brutality alone
 Become thy boast, hence to some savage haunt,
 Nor claim protection from my social laws.
 Luco is gone; his little brothers weep,
 While his fond mother climbs the hoary rock
 Whose point o'erhangs the main. No Luco there,
 No sound, save the hoarse billows. On she roves,
 With love, fear, hope, holding alternate rage
 In her too-anxious bosom. Dreary main!
 Thy murmurs now are riot, while she stands
 Listening to ev'ry breeze, waiting the step
 Of gentle Luco. Ah return, return,

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Too hapless mother; thy indulgent arms
 Shall never clasp thy fettered Luco more.
 See Incianda - artless maid, my soul
 Keeps pace with thee and mourns. Now o'er the hill
 She creeps, with timid foot, while Sol embrowns
 The bosom of the isle, to where she left
 Her faithful lover: here the well-known cave,
 By nature formed amid the rock, endears
 The image of her Luco; here his pipe,
 Formed of the polished cane, neglected lies,
 No more to vibrate; here the useless dart,
 The twanging bow, and the fierce panther's skin,
 Salute the virgin's eye. But where is Luco?
 He comes not down the steep though he had vowed,
 When the sun's beams at noon should sidelong gild
 The cave's wide entrance, he would swift descend
 To bless his Incianda. Ten pale moons
 Had glided by, since to his generous breast
 He clasped the tender maid and whispered love.
 Oh mutual sentiment, thou dang'rous bliss,
 So exquisite that Heav'n had been unjust
 Had it bestowed less exquisite of ill;
 When thou art held no more, thy pangs are deep,
 Thy joys convulsive to the soul; yet all
 Are meant to smooth th' uneven road of life.
 For Incianda, Luco ranged the wild,
 Holding her image to his panting heart;
 For her he strained the bow, for her he stripped
 The bird of beauteous plumage - happy hour,
 When with these guiltless trophies he adorned
 The brow of her he loved. Her gentle breast
 With gratitude was filled, nor knew she aught
 Of language strong enough to paint her soul,
 Or ease the great emotion, whilst her eye
 Pursued the gen'rous Luco to the field
 And glowed with rapture at his wished return.
 Ah sweet suspense, betwixt the mingled cares
 Of friendship, love, and gratitude - so mixed,
 That ev'n the soul may cheat herself. Down, down,
 Intruding memory! Bid thy struggles cease
 At this soft scene of innate war. What sounds
 Break on her ear? She, starting, whispers 'Luco?'
 Be still, fond maid; list to the tardy step
 Of leaden-footed woe. A father comes,
 But not to seek his son who, from the deck,
 Had breathed a last adieu; no, he shuts out
 The soft, fallacious gleam of hope, and turns
 Within upon the mind. Horrid and dark

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Are his wild, unenlightened pow'rs; no ray
 Of forced philosophy to calm his soul,
 But all the anarchy of wounded nature.
 Now he arraigns his country's gods, who sit,
 In his bright fancy, far beyond the hills,
 Unriveting the chains of slaves; his heart
 Beats quick with stubborn fury, while he doubts
 Their justice to his child. Weeping old man,
 Hate not a Christian's God, whose record holds
 Thine injured Luco's name. Frighted he starts,
 Blasphemes the deity whose altars rise
 Upon the Indian's helpless neck, and sinks,
 Despising comfort, till by grief and age
 His angry spirit is forced out. Oh guide,
 Ye angel-forms, this joyless shade to worlds
 Where the poor Indian, with the sage, is proved
 The work of a Creator. Pause not here,
 Distracted maid! Ah, leave the breathless form
 On whose cold cheek thy tears so swiftly fall,
 Too unavailing! 'On this stone', she cries,
 'My Luco sat, and to the wand'ring stars
 Pointed my eye, while from his gentle tongue
 Fell old traditions of his country's woe.'
 Where now shall Inclanda seek him? Hence,
 Defenceless mourner, ere the dreary night
 Wrap thee in added horror. Oh despair,
 How eagerly thou rend'st the heart! She pines
 In anguish deep and sullen: Luco's form
 Pursues her, lives in restless thought, and chides
 Soft consolation. Banished from his arms,
 She seeks the cold embrace of death; her soul
 Escapes in one sad sigh. Too hapless maid! —
 Yet happier far than he thou lov'dst; his tear,
 His sigh, his groan avail not, for they plead
 Most weakly with a Christian. Sink, thou wretch,
 Whose act shall on the cheek of Albion's sons
 Throw shame's red blush; thou who hast frightened far
 Those simple wretches from thy God, and taught
 Their erring minds to mourn his partial love,⁴
 Profusely poured on thee, while they are left
 Neglected to *thy* mercy. Thus deceived,
 How doubly dark must be their road to death!
 Luco is borne around the neighb'ring isles,
 Losing the knowledge of his native shore

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Amid the pathless wave, destined to plant
 The sweet luxuriant cane.⁵ He strives to please,
 Nor once complains, but greatly smothers grief.
 His hands are blistered, and his feet are worn,
 Till ev'ry stroke dealt by his mattock⁶ gives
 Keen agony to life; while from his breast
 The sigh arises, burdened with the name
 Of Inclanda. Time inures the youth,
 His limbs grow nervous, strained by willing toil,
 And resignation, or a calm despair
 (Most useful either) lulls him to repose.
 A Christian renegade that from his soul
 Abjures the tenets of our schools, nor dreads
 A future punishment, nor hopes for mercy,
 Had fled from England to avoid those laws
 Which must have made his life a retribution
 To violated justice, and had gained,
 By fawning guile, the confidence (ill-placed)
 Of Luco's master. O'er the slave he stands
 With knotted whip, lest fainting nature shun
 The task too arduous, while his cruel soul
 Unnat'ral, ever feeds, with gross delight,
 Upon his sufferings. Many slaves there were,
 But none who could suppress the sigh and bend
 So quietly as Luco. Long he bore
 The stripes that from his manly bosom drew
 The sanguine stream (too little prized); at length
 Hope fled his soul, giving her struggles o'er,
 And he resolved to die. The sun had reached
 His zenith; pausing faintly, Luco stood,
 Leaning upon his hoe, while mem'ry brought,
 In piteous imag'ry, his aged father,
 His poor fond mother, and his faithful maid.
 The mental group in wildest motion set
 Fruitless imagination. Fury, grief,
 Alternate shame, the sense of insult, all
 Conspire to aid the inward storm — yet words
 Were no relief; he stood in silent woe.
 Gorgon, remorseless Christian, saw the slave
 Stand musing mid the ranks and, stealing soft
 Behind the studious Luco, struck his cheek
 With a too-heavy whip that reached his eye,
 Making it dark for ever. Luco turned
 In strongest agony, and with his hoe
 Struck the rude Christian on the forehead. Pride,
 With hateful malice, seized on Gorgon's soul,

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⁴ 'Indians have been often heard to say, in their complaining moments, "God Almighty no love us well; he be good to buckera; he bid buckera burn us;

⁵ *cane* sugar cane.

⁶ *mattock* tool for loosening hard ground.

By nature fierce, while Luco sought the beach
 And plunged beneath the wave. But near him lay
 A planter's barge, whose seamen grasped his hair,
 Dragging to life a wretch who wished to die.
 Rumour now spreads the tale, while Gorgon's breath
 Envenomed aids her blast. Imputed crimes
 Oppose the plea of Luco, till he scorns
 Even a just defence, and stands prepared.
 The planters, conscious that to fear alone
 They owe their cruel pow'r, resolve to blend
 New torment with the pangs of death, and hold
 Their victims high in dreadful view, to fright
 The wretched number left. Luco is chained
 To a huge tree, his fellow-slaves are ranged
 To share the horrid sight; fuel is placed
 In an increasing train, some paces back,
 To kindle slowly, and approach the youth,
 With more than native terror. See, it burns!
 He gazes on the growing flame, and calls
 For 'Water, water!' The small boon's denied.
 E'en Christians throng each other to behold
 The different alterations of his face
 As the hot death approaches. (Oh shame, shame
 Upon the followers of Jesus! Shame
 On him that dares avow a God!) He writhes,
 While down his breast glide the unpitied tears,
 And in their sockets strain their scorched balls.
 'Burn, burn me quick! I cannot die!' he cries,
 'Bring fire more close!' The planters heed him not,
 But still prolonging Luco's torture, threat
 Their trembling slaves around. His lips are dry,
 His senses seem to quiver ere they quit
 His frame for ever, rallying strong, then driv'n
 From the tremendous conflict. Sight no more
 Is Luco's, his parched tongue is ever mute;
 Yet in his soul his Incilanda stays,
 Till both escape together. Turn, my muse,
 From this sad scene; lead Bristol's milder soul
 To where the solitary spirit roves,
 Wrapped in the robe of innocence, to shades
 Where pity breathing in the gale dissolves
 The mind, when fancy paints such real woe.
 Now speak, ye Christians (who for gain enslave
 A soul like Luco's, tearing her from joy
 In life's short vale - and if there be a hell,
 As ye believe, to *that* ye thrust her down,
 A blind, involuntary victim), where
 Is your true essence of religion? Where
 Your proofs of righteousness, when ye conceal

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The knowledge of the Deity from those
 Who would adore him fervently? Your God
 Ye rob of worshippers, his altars keep
 Unhailed, while driving from the sacred font
 The eager slave, lest he should hope in Jesus.
 Is this your piety? Are these your laws,
 Whereby the glory of the Godhead spreads
 O'er barb'rous climes? Ye hypocrites, disown
 The Christian name, nor shame its cause; yet where
 Shall souls like yours find welcome? Would the Turk,
 Pagan, or wildest Arab, ope their arms
 To gain such proselytes? No. He that owns
 The name of Mussulman⁷ would start, and shun
 Your worse than serpent touch; *he* frees his slave
 Who turns to Mahomet.⁸ The Spaniard stands
 Your brighter contrast; he condemns the youth
 For ever to the mine, but ere the wretch
 Sinks to the deep domain, the hand of Faith
 Bathes his faint temples in the sacred stream,
 Bidding his spirit hope.⁹ Briton, dost thou
 Act up to this? If so, bring on thy slaves
 To Calv'ry's mount, raise high their kindred souls
 To him who died to save them!¹⁰ this alone
 Will teach them calmly to obey thy rage,
 And deem a life of misery but a day,
 To long eternity. Ah, think how soon
 Thine head shall on earth's dreary pillow lie
 With thy poor slaves, each silent, and unknown
 To his once furious neighbour. Think how swift
 The sands of time ebb out, for him and *thee*.
 Why groans that Indian youth, in burning chains
 Suspended o'er the beach? The lab'ring sun
 Strikes from his full meridian on the slave
 Whose arms are blistered by the heated iron
 Which, still corroding, seeks the bone. What crime
 Merits so dire a death? Another gasps
 With strongest agony, while life declines
 From recent amputation.¹¹ Gracious God!

⁷ *Mussulman* Muslim.

⁸ The Turk gives freedom to his slave on condition that he embraces Mahometism (Yearsley's note).

⁹ The Spaniard, immediately on purchasing an Indian, gives him baptism (Yearsley's note).

¹⁰ *him who died to save them* Christ, crucified on Calvary.

¹¹ A Coromantin slave in Jamaica (who had frequently escaped to the mountains) was, a few years since, doomed to have his leg cut off. A young practitioner from England (after the surgeon of the estate had refused to be an executioner) undertook the operation, but after the removal of the limb, on the slave's

exclaiming, "You buckera! God Almighty made dat leg; you cut it off! You put it on again?" was so shocked, that the other surgeon was obliged to take up the vessels, apply the dressings, etc. The negro suffered without a groan, called for his pipe, and calmly smoked till the absence of his attendant gave him an opportunity of tearing off his bandages, when he bled to death in an instant. Many will call this act of the negro's stubbornness; under *such* circumstances, I dare give it a more glorious epithet, and that is *fortitude* (Yearsley's note). Coromantin slaves came from the eastern coast of N

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Why thus in mercy let thy whirlwinds sleep
 O'er a vile race of Christians, who profane
 Thy glorious attributes? Sweep them from earth,
 Or check their cruel pow'r; the savage tribes
 Are angels when compared to brutes like these.
 Advance, ye Christians, and oppose my strain;
 Who dares condemn it? Prove from laws divine,
 From deep philosophy, or social love,
 That ye derive your privilege. I scorn
 The cry of Av'rice, or the trade that drains¹²
 A fellow-creature's blood; bid Commerce plead
 Her public good, her nation's many wants,
 Her sons thrown idly on the beach, forbade
 To seize the image of their God and sell it.
 I'll hear her voice, and Virtue's hundred tongues
 Shall sound against her. Hath our public good
 Fell rapine¹² for its basis? Must our wants
 Find their supply in murder? Shall the sons
 Of Commerce shiv'ring stand, if not employed
 Worse than the midnight robber? Curses fall
 On the destructive system that shall need
 Such base supports! Doth England need them? No;
 Her laws, with prudence, hang the meagre thief
 That from his neighbour steals a slender sum,
 Though famine drove him on. O'er *him* the priest,
 Beneath the fatal tree,¹³ laments the crime,
 Approves the law, and bids him calmly die.
 Say, doth this law that dooms the thief protect
 The wretch who makes another's life his prey,
 By hellish force to take it at his will?
 Is this an English law, whose guidance fails
 When crimes are swelled to magnitude so vast,
 That Justice dare not scan them? Or does Law
 Bid Justice an eternal distance keep
 From England's great tribunal, when the slave
 Calls loud on Justice only? Speak, ye few
 Who fill Britannia's senate, and are deemed
 The fathers of your country! Boast your laws,
 Defend the honour of a land so fall'n
 That Fame from ev'ry battlement is flown,
 And heathens start e'en at a Christian's name.
 Hail, social love! True soul of order, hail!
 Thy softest emanations - pity, grief,
 Lively emotion, sudden joy, and pangs
 Too deep for language - are thy own: then rise,
 Thou gentle angel! Spread thy silken wings

¹² *rapine* plunder, robbery.

¹³ *fatal tree* from which he is to be hung.

O'er drowsy man, breathe in his soul, and give
 Her godlike pow'r's thy animating force
 To banish inhumanity. Oh loose
 The fetters of his mind, enlarge his views, lift
 Break down for him the bound of avarice, lift
 His feeble faculties beyond a world
 To which he soon must prove a stranger! Spread
 Before his ravished eye the varied tints
 Of future glory; bid them live to Fame
 Whose banners wave for ever. Thus inspired,
 All that is great, and good, and sweetly mild,
 Shall fill his noble bosom. He shall melt -
 Yea, by thy sympathy unseen, shall feel
 Another's pang; for the lamenting maid
 His heart shall heave a sigh; with the old slave
 (Whose head is bent with sorrow) he shall cast
 His eye back on the joys of youth, and say,
 'Thou once couldst feel, as I do, love's pure bliss;
 Parental fondness, and the dear returns
 Of filial tenderness were thine, till torn
 From the dissolving scene.' Oh, social love,
 Thou universal good, thou that canst fill
 The vacuum of immensity, and live
 In endless void! Thou that in motion first
 Set'st the long lazy atoms, by thy force
 Quickly assimilating, and restrained
 By strong attraction - touch the soul of man;
 Subdue him; make a fellow-creature's woe
 His own by heartfelt sympathy, whilst wealth
 Is made subservient to his soft disease.
 And when thou hast to high perfection wrought
 This mighty work, say, 'Such is Bristol's soul.'

Reflections on the Death of Louis XVI (1793)¹

*Is it good
 For man to drain the sacred stream of life
 From his sad brother's heart? Oh 'tis a deed
 Unworthy such an immortal spirit! Where
 Shall meek neglected Mercy find a spot
 To weep in silence o'er her slaughtered sons?*

REFLECTIONS ON THE DEATH OF LOUIS XVI (1793)

¹ This poem was composed rapidly after the execution of Louis XVI in Paris on 29 January 1793; it was on sale by the middle of the following month.