STUDIES IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY CULTURE

Volume 1: The Modernity of the Eighteenth Century
Volume 2: Irrationalism in the Eighteenth Century
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RACISM IN
THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

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Preface

All but one of the following essays—Robert Darnton’s “The High Enlightenment and the Low-Life of Literature in Pre-Revolutionary France”—were presented at the third annual meeting of the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, held in Los Angeles at the University of California, in March, 1972. The Society owes a debt of gratitude to G. S. Rousseau, who was chairman of the program committee for the annual meeting; he commissioned a wide-ranging set of papers from many disciplines, including French, German, Spanish, Russian, and English literature, as well as from history, philosophy, musicology, cultural geography, and history of science. Professor Darnton’s article, which earlier appeared in *Past and Present* for May 1971, was awarded the first annual ASECS prize for a scholarly article in eighteenth-century studies; it is here reprinted, as will be future prize-winning articles, to bring it to the special attention of members of the Society. Though only about a third of the papers in the present volume fall within the limits of the meeting’s one symposium—its subject was racism in the eighteenth century—the Publication Committee of the Society has decided to continue the practice of adopting the subject of the symposium as the title of the Proceedings so that the annual meeting and its printed record may be linked together, despite the partial inaccuracy that results from so doing.

With the possible exception of A. Owen Aldridge’s article on Feijoo, the essays on racism in the present volume indicate clearly that in the eighteenth century groups of whites—and individual whites as well—whenever they were faced with the social necessity for regarding persons of color en masse, found ways of denying them equality with whites and found theoretical support for such denial. Like the ways, the theories now seem unacceptable: they
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reveal more the need of the whites to rationalize a preestablished policy than they do objectivity. Whether these formulations couple white skin and Christianity, black skin and non-Christian religions; or white skin and intelligence, black skin and dullness; or white skin and energy, black skin and torpor, they all turn on the need to justify and thus help perpetuate sets of mind or social practices already in existence.

In certain circumstances, the "white" European imagination might both sponsor and receive persons of color. The "noble savage," Chinese and other eastern sages, Crusoe's clear-headed and loyal Friday, Johnson's Francis Barber, and Blake's Little Black Boy all enjoyed a special beneficence from the minds that begot them—I believe that in one obvious sense, at least, Johnson fathered the Francis Barber we know—and all were met in a kindly way by the world that first received them, though time saw variations in this initial response, at least in some cases. But it is nevertheless true that the "white mind" of the eighteenth century, very much like our own in this regard, executed such maneuvers of the psyche as would allow it to prove to its own satisfaction its superiority to "minds of color" and to justify whatever social advantages it might have gained over those minds as entirely natural.

In a discussion following the presentation of papers during the symposium on racism—part of the discussion is recorded below—Richard H. Popkin, Herbert Marcuse, Magnus Mörtner, and Whithrop B. Jordan attempted to cope with a fundamental problem in the objective treatment of racism: that of defining racism itself. I believe their remarks will suggest several conclusions about the task they set themselves and about the subject of racism. Most obvious among these conclusions is that a definition is hard to reach. Closely related is the fact that the experts are cautious in what they say, less because they are unwilling to risk a tentative generalization than because they know the subject too well to be satisfied with formulations that come readily to mind. Perhaps the most important thing to be noted in their speculations, however, is that they are drawn inevitably to expressions of racism—to acts that may be thought of as racist—as they attempt to frame a definition. At the same time they seem to hesitate as they point to external evidence alone, probably because such evidence—acts or expressions—amounts to no more than symptoms of an interior set of psychic energies that eludes the definer's probing eye. Though I understand the reticence of the experts and the very good reasons for it, I shall over the next few pages presume on the reader's indulgence with a handful of speculations about racism, not because I believe that they will survive a scientific investigation of the subject—they will not, I am sure—but because they may stimulate the reader to conclusions of his own, as he rejects or modifies my suggestions, which I regard much more as means to set the theme of this volume than as theories useful in themselves.

Surely it is true of any human expression or act that it is the symptom or culmination merely of an interior set of energies, which are themselves hidden from observation. What then is the special value of distinguishing between the symptoms and their interior origins in the matter of racism? What is the value of trying to infer that which by definition cannot be observed? My answer would be that there exists no special value, not absolutely, at least. But the distinction may be important here, as it might be elsewhere, depending on the quality or level of understanding of the subject hoped for. For the purposes of defining racism legally, say, it might remain expedient or necessary to treat it simply in terms of the actions it begets. For the purposes of defining it socially, it may be enough to treat it in terms of the urban ills it produces (though here questions abound as to what ills one may lay at the door of racism). But for the purpose of defining its psychological effects on the exploited, one surely would want to know as much as possible about its psychic origins in the racist mind.

As I have intimated, Professor Popkin and his panel of distinguished experts are under no illusion that they have yet struck close to the heart of the matter. Nevertheless, their comments and one or two of the points adduced in the papers on racism presented here may be taken to indicate something about the nature of the interior process that begets racist expressions or actions. For one thing, the actions seem to be psychologically self-defending, and the self-defender's comments on those actions are often rationalizations; as I have earlier suggested, they generally seek to justify and thus per-
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petuate sets of mind or social practices already in existence. If the relationship between the hidden process I have posited and the gesture, in the form of conduct or rationalization, were constant, there would be little basis for speculating about the problem beyond its external symptoms. But such, I believe, is not the case. Rationalizations and preconceptions appear in a thousand disguises. For example, Professor Aldridge’s essay makes it quite clear that Fejoo, for all his broad-mindedness and humanity, argues out of an enlightened but nonetheless fixed religious position, that he is more concerned to preserve the word of God as he conceives it than he is to learn the truth about the origins of black peoples, his nominal concern. And yet despite such unintentional indirections, which may put one on the qui vive to find preconceptions and rationalizations—racial prejudice, if you will—everywhere, occasional exceptions occur. They seem to me less notable for humanitarian reasons—less notable, that is, because they promise humankind’s ultimate deliverance from the confining need for racial prejudice and all that this need implies—than they do for the fleeting glimpse they provide of the psychic mechanism beneath the surface of things.

David Lowenthal’s article “Free Colored West Indians: A Racial Dilemma” makes the point that the white fathers of children of color almost uniformly sought ways of circumventing the laws and practices that might have disadvantaged their offspring, even though these very fathers upheld racist institutions as they operated against other persons of color. One might explain the inconsistency by saying that parental love is stronger than racial prejudice. But it seems more useful here to point out that in certain circumstances, probably not unique, the awareness by a white, when the white had the initiative, of another as a person of color did not simply preclude a constructive and abiding relationship between them. Such relationships probably had their destructive sides, but most relationships, however close, are to a considerable extent destructive. Finally, it seems to me important that something in the way of a human relationship beyond prejudice, if not without it, was possible, and possible not only in isolated instances, say through the special sensitivity and power of rare whites to identify themselves with persons of color, but generally, in a culture of considerable magnitude.

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The perception by a white of a person of color as different—even overwhelmingly different, to judge from the general response—ordinarily produces defensive reactions and rationalizations. Such a process argues initial fear in the white perceiver, and the reaction or expression that follows the perception seems to be a means of coping with it. It may be that this initial response is ineradicable, but the evidence suggests that it is at least subject to modification, even though for most such modification something as nearly absolute as parenthood may be required. But occasionally even someone not so obviously related as a parent may accept the idea that someone “clearly other” than himself is somehow related to him. It seems to me, as I shall try to show soon, that Samuel Johnson and William Blake were such persons.

I should like to offer one or two more suggestions about the perhaps ineradicable initial response. As I have said, the response likely includes a very strong sense of the object as alien: it must appear to be entirely other, inadmissible as an extension of the observer. To some extent such responses, I suggest, mark the appraisal of every person by another, and are not peculiar to racial encounters. (Profound personal needs common to almost all men and women have given shape to conventions or social structures that attenuate this reaction, which makes itself fully felt only when the supportive structures are in danger; generally we “like” or “love” or “accept” or “respect” each other despite our fright, because these conventional attitudes—natural or not—allay primary fear, or make it possible to get the world’s work done despite it.) Of course, we need not regard others as alien and dangerous, but such appraisals seem likely to have a prominent place in our view of the world. Thus, the interior process that accounts for racist expressions or attitudes may result from the primary appraisal of others, uncorrected; or, if some modification of the initial appraisal occurs—as generally it must, I would imagine—the result would be a conventional attitude, some form of racial prejudice, an expression or attitude we recognize as “racist.”

If such a reaction to the alien object is indeed the root cause of racism, the problem may never be effectively dealt with. Not only may the reactive process itself be inaccessible, but it may be the
root cause of other problems as well. Perhaps our proneness to adopt roles or identities that predetermine, as it were, our way of coping with the world is a function of a process that sees the enemy—alien others—all around. Do we not after all unconsciously structure and maintain such identities as will guarantee our survival socially, economically, domestically, amorously? It may even be that the intellectual structures we allow to enter consciousness as "meaning" are also a function of the process that sees a ubiquitous enemy, so that we understand only to the degree that we can either escape fright or accept fear. Moreover, it may be that we allow only such meaning as will reinforce the elements of our prestructured identities, with the result that we are bound in the endless mills of our doubtfully wrought selves, with only occasional intimations that we are so bound. If it is true that the ineradicable process I have postulated is the cause not only of racial prejudice, but of our way of appraising, behaving, and understanding generally, then it is likely that any serious effort to cope with the one difficulty would involve us in the other related matters, and thus it seems reasonable to suggest that only the spiritual renovation of every man and woman would eliminate racism. I make the point not to prescribe the cure, but to indicate what I take to be the scope of the illness.

A less radical solution to the problem would be the shaping of constructive conventions of acceptance, which might be made so available to the generality of whites as to be unself-consciously adopted by them. About such a solution one may feel a momentary confidence. It seems easier to change a sculpture with a hammer and chisel than with telepathy or prayer. But the analogy is false. A moment's thought brings the realization that for the reform of such an institution as racism, except momentarily and superficially, fundamental changes in human attitudes would still be essential. So one awaits the permeation of society by the benign fair-mindedness of theoreticians of the subject. Or one looks to one's own feelings and thoughts in the matter, ever more closely. Or one considers the example of the persons one has known in whom the forces of racial prejudice were allayed, if not eradicated.

Our own century has made several large efforts to overcome the problem, efforts that have been given shape as laws, and less for-
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is in order, but to stress a consistency of attitude that argues a considered repudiation of white society's way of doing things and very likely repudiation of his own basic prejudice as well. Johnson's knowledge of himself and his sense for humanity moved him to behave towards Barber not quite in the way that he behaved towards every one else—to what two persons did he behave in just the same way, after all?—but in the way appropriate to Barber's predicament, given Johnson's ethic. I suggest that in this relationship Johnson showed a consistent sensitivity to another that alone can mitigate the otherwise destructive elements in human confrontations.

Blake's Song of Innocence "The Little Black Boy" clearly assumes racial prejudice in England, presumably at the date of composition of the poem sometime before 1789. Indeed, there had been during the decade of the 1780's a good deal of antislavery agitation, which doubtless contributed to Blake's feeling on the subject. But it hardly needs observing that, like Johnson, Blake had from his early years been passionately opposed to slavery. As every reader knows, the poem itself does not oppose slavery, at least not directly. What it does is to present the attitude of the Little Black Boy—both what he takes it to be and what despite himself he reveals it as being—as he considers his predicament in English society.

My mother bore me in the southern wild,
And I am black, but O! my soul is white;
White as an angel is the English child
But I am black as if bereav'd of light.

My mother taught me underneath a tree,
And sitting down before the heat of day,
She took me on her lap and kissed me,
And pointing to the east, began to say:

"Look on the rising sun; there God does live,
And gives his light, and gives his heat away;
And flowers and trees and beasts and men receive
Comfort in morning, joy in the noon day.

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"And we are put on earth a little space,
That we may learn to bear the beams of love;
And these black bodies and this sun-burnt face
Is but a cloud, and like a shady grove.

"For when our souls have learn'd the heat to bear,
The cloud will vanish; we shall hear his voice,
Saying: 'Come out from the grove, my love & care,
And round my golden tent like lambs rejoice.'"

Thus did my mother say, and kiss'd me;
And thus I say to little English boy:
When I from black and he from white cloud free,
And round the tent of God like lambs we joy,

I'll shade him from the heat till he can bear
To lean in joy upon our father's knee;
And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair,
And be like him, and he will then love me.

Having received and repeated his mother's lesson verbatim, a fact that in itself suggests his naïveté, a lack of self-awareness really, the Little Black Boy expresses confidence in the notion that he has endured more in the way of the world's experience than has the white. Accordingly, he expects that when they get to heaven, he will be in a position to help the white boy to cover the spiritual ground the Black Boy has traveled while still on earth. This conscious view of the matter is displaced, however, first by means of uncertain clues, and then by means of the last line the Black Boy speaks, the last line of the poem. Early indications that the Little Black Boy is uncertain of his feelings about his social predicament despite his mother's clear lesson are his uses of the terms "black" and "white" so that both mean both "good" and "bad." But the evidence that absolutely undercuts his declared opinion that he is spiritually better off than the white boy is his unconscious revelation that he does not expect the white boy to come up to his standard—though that effect will be achieved—so much as he anticipates their being alike, with the crucial consequence for the Little
Black Boy that the English boy will love him: "And be like him and he will then love me."

Blake's identification with the Black Boy is different from Johnson's with Francis Barber. Yet both eighteenth-century authors responded profoundly to the needs of a fellow human—a black fellow human. Like Johnson, Blake had a prejudice as to the intelligence of blacks: "O African! black African! (go winged thought widen his forehead)." But instead of building some irrelevant self-serving construction on that prejudice, Blake moved beyond it with abiding sympathy, and wrote a poem that simultaneously reveals the Black Boy's cruel plight and defines him as a fellow human, emotionally indistinguishable from whites. Though in my opinion whites accord whites no greater respect, examples of such respect between blacks and whites are infrequent, to say the least. Nor do they seem to be more frequent now than they were in the eighteenth century. Then and now generosity between the races has required a knowledge of oneself and a stamina for acting sympathetically out of that knowledge. Perhaps a change will be brought about by institutional means, from the outside of men and women to the inside, instead of the other way around. So far the signs that it may be so seem few indeed.

I wish to thank the colleagues who have read and commented on many of the essays in this volume. They did a large share of the editor's work, and I am grateful to them: Professors Thompson Bradley, David Cowden, James D. Freeman, Hugh M. Lacey, Jean A. Perkins, Hoyt Trowbridge, and P. Linwood Urban. I also owe thanks to Mrs. Thelma Miller, secretary of the Department of English Literature, Swarthmore College, for typing and keeping track of the rather large correspondence connected with the gathering of these essays for publication, and for her help in typing sections of the manuscript as well. Her patience and care were enormously helpful to me.

No effort has been made to normalize either the style of the essays presented here or the form of documentation. It seemed more reasonable, given the varied practices among the many disciplines represented in these Proceedings, to leave such matters to the discretion of individual scholars.