

**ABOLITIONISM AND BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS:
COMMON ROOTS IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY.**

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**“What happens when we consider the eighteenth century as the century of slavery,
rather than as the century of ‘Augustan values’...?” (Donna Landry, 1992)**

In 1789, among other great events taking place in Paris in the heat of the summer, two or three apparently minor circumstances ought to retain our attention for the purpose of our essay. In London, former black slave and abolitionist agitator Olaudah Equiano publishes his *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, which will go through eight more editions in the next five years, with an American reprint in New York in 1791. Exactly in the same year, but in Paris, Joseph Lavallée, marquis de Bois-Robert, publishes *Le Nègre comme il y a peu de Blancs*, two more French editions up to 1795, promptly translated in English and included in the 1790 issues of the *Lady's Magazine* and the *Hibernian*, while in New York it is reprinted in ns. ix-x, 1791, of *The American Museum*.¹

Rarely, in literary history, have we been able to retrace such an extraordinary concurrence of intents, as if a magic password in an improbable late eighteenth-century "internet" plugged in our two authors — so very different: one black, slave, English speaking, the other white, rich, French speaking — on a common program, a shared set of

¹ In the same epochal year the *Journal* of former American slave John Monant was published, while *Zeluco* by Dr. John Moore contains, according to Gary Kelly, a strong attack against the “slave system” among other “unnatural and arbitrary social codes and institutions” (1989, p. 26). In France, Lecoigne-Marsillac publishes *Le More-Lack*, a text well within the current of *littérature négrophile*, and Olympe de Gouges adapts for the stage her *Zamore et Mirza* into *L'Esclavage des noirs, ou l'heureux Naufrage*, while J.M.C. voices out for all mulattos the *Précis des gémissements des sangs-mêlés dans les colonies*, to which seem to respond in the agitated parterre of the National Assembly *Les Déclamations des Nègres libres américains* (cf. Pluchon, 1984, 238).

values based on identical software. The password might be: *abolish the infamous slave trade*, while the set of values can certainly be described as the "humanitarian revolution" (Sandiford, 1988, 67) brought about by the Enlightenment sweeping over Europe and the New World, and reaching the "heyday of abolitionist agitation" (79) between 1782 and 1803.²

Reception theory has taught us that no text appears in a vacuum, rather, it exists materially through the verifiable figures of its circulation as an item of consumption, as it has been bought, sold, lent and read - publicly or privately - by a reading public constituting itself as an historical audience with its own "horizon of expectation".³ Now then, well over half a century before the appearance in the United States of Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* (1845) and Harriet Beecher Stowe's epochal best-seller *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) which ran through 120 editions during the first year of its publication together with eleven different instantaneous French translations, we can undoubtedly

² The equation between sensibility and antislavery feelings is one of the shaping forces of Eighteenth century English poetry, as is underlined by Janet Todd in her study: "the slave was 'fair game' for poets, an absolute 'mine of sentiment'" (1986, 23). From the early potent image of the shark following the slave ship in Thomson's "Summer" (1727), ll. 1016-21, the climax is reached in the "Dying Negro Poems" by Cowper (1788), which will be included as late as 1814 in the radical sheet written by land reformer Thomas Spence, *The Giant Killer* (cf. Mc Calman, 1988, 69), and in the famous ballad "The Negro's Complaint" included in the October, 1793, issue of *The Lady's Magazine*, "The Words by a Gentleman; inscribed to Granville Sharp, Esq. Music by a Female Correspondent — an Amateur", whose first stanza goes as follows:

Forc'd from home and all its pleasure,
Afric's coast I left forlorn,
To increase a stranger's treasure
O'er the raging billows borne, o'er the raging billows borne.
Men from England bought and sold me;
Paid my price in paltry gold,
But, though theirs they have inroll'd me,
Minds are never to be sold, minds are never, minds are never to be sold.
[...]

(music sheet inserted between pp. 552-553 of vol. XXIV, in my possession).

³ I am inspired by a recent definition of Robert Darnton on what he terms "a communications circuit": "[it] runs from the author to the publisher (if the bookseller does not assume that role), the printer, the shipper, the bookseller, and the reader. The reader completes the circuit, because he influences the author both before and after the act of composition. *Authors are readers themselves*. By reading and associating with other readers and writers, they form notions of genre and style and a general sense of the literary enterprise, which affects their texts, whether they are composing Shakespearean sonnets or directions for assembling radio kits. A writer may respond in his writing to criticisms of his previous work or anticipate reactions that his text will elicit. *He addresses implicit readers and hears from explicit reviewers*. So the circuit runs full cycle. It transmits messages, transforming them en route, as they pass from thought to writing to printed characters and back to thought again. Book history concerns each phase of this process and the process as a whole, in all its variations over space and time and in all its relations with other systems, economic, social, political, and cultural, in the surrounding environment" (1989, 30, my emphasis).

assert that in the era of the Great Revolutions —Anglo-American-French— "le thème de l'esclavage et de la traite était à l'ordre du jour" (Stackleberg, 1989, 237).

“...but we are bought and sold like Apes or Monkeys...” (Oroonoko, 1688)

I shall then discuss in my essay how eighteenth-century abolitionist thought, scattered through the pages of evangelical tracts, philosophical pamphlets, parliamentary speeches, militant actions and radical agitation, is linked to something new in modern history called "black consciousness" which is responsible, in the last instance, for the “emergence of a literature written by Blacks about themselves”, a “distinctly revolutionary event” (149) in the words of Caribbean born author and scholar Keith Sandiford, to whose important and pioneering study I am indebted to for much of what follows.

But let us go back briefly to 1789 and precisely to the 12th of May when William Wilberforce, the Methodist "saint", opens in Parliament the debate on abolition with his highly acclaimed three and a half hours long speech demanding "... total abolition: you owe it to Africa, you owe it to your moral conscience" (Deschamps, 1974, 190-91); about a year before, on February 19, 1788, Jean-Pierre Brissot, returning home to Paris from London, founded with a few other close associates "la Société des Amis des Noirs" (Biondi, 1989, 1756) which was to be modelled after the "British Abolition Society" founded yet a year before, on 22nd May, 1787, by Thomas Clarkson and Granville Sharp, the two great champions of antislavery and liberty,⁴ together with a group of religious enthusiasts, mostly Quakers.

By a sort of parallel with the infamous “circuit” of the slave trade — from Europe to Africa and then from Africa to the Americas and back to Europe (Deschamps, 91) — it has been hypothesized by many scholars that abolitionism itself developed as a

⁴ Both were close friends and associates of Olaudah Equiano, see Sandiford, 141. Granville Sharp was the brother of William Sharp, a medical doctor who cured the poor for free, himself a clerk and an amateur musician; in 1777 he resigned from his humble post for refusing to sign an order sending weapons against the american insurgents, saying: “It is not fit for a man to be afraid of the world”; in 1787 he founded the future “Freetown” on the African coast of Sierra Leone. Thomas Clarkson was the son of a poor clergyman and while attending on a scholarship Cambridge University he won in 1785 the latin contest by successfully answering the topic *Anne liceat invitos in servitudinem dare? (Is it lawful to enslave [men] against their will?)* While returning to London on horseback and meditating on what he had written, he is suddenly struck - like Saint Paul - by the enormous scandal of the slave trade and decides to dedicate the rest of his life - he was then twenty-four - for its abolition, saying: “If all that I have written is true, then it must cease immediately”; cf. Deschamps, 181-185, *passim*.

“triangle”: from French “philosophes” like Montesquieu, “the most pervasive influence on antislavery thinking on both sides of the Atlantic” (Sandiford, 48), and abbé Raynal whose *Histoire des Deux Indes* (1770) “ran through some 38 French and 18 English editions” (51),⁵ egalitarian and humanitarian attitudes were taken up by Scottish intellectuals, like Adam Smith and Jeremy Bentham, from where they “migrated” to the American colonies — for example, through John Wesley⁶ — where they found fertile ground in the Methodist and Quaker communities who were most active against the slave trade ever since George Fox’s *Letter to American Quakers* (1657). From Philadelphia, Anthony Benezet, a French Huguenot who had become a Quaker and opened up the first schools for blacks, “sends back” to the Society of Friends in England his famous pamphlet *Some Historical Account of Guinea...*(1771) where, for the first time, the plundering of Africa by rapacious white merchants is seen as the horrifying effect of the slave trade.⁷

But I must now take a step backward and refer to an essential text within the abolitionism debate, Mrs. Behn’s *Oroonoko, or the Royal Slave*. In 1788, the fifth edition

⁵ According to Anthony Strugnelli, “c’était l’oeuvre de Raynal, qui, le premier à l’échelle européenne, a placé l’opposition à l’esclavage au premier plan des Lumières, en réunissant tous les éléments de la pensée française en un manifeste anti-esclavagiste radical” (1989, 1760). Peter Hulme (1992) has drawn attention to Abbé Raynal’s “powerful critique of slavery and the slave trade” (231) and in particular to the plate that illustrates the 1780 French edition (“Un Anglais de la Barbade vend sa Maîtresse”) and which relates the tale of Inkle and Yarico, perhaps the most famous anti-slavery story circulating alongside Mrs. Behn’s *Oroonoko*, gone through 45 different versions in three languages over the seventy year span from its first appearance on the *Spectator*, n. 11 of 1711, to 1810. The close association with Raynal’s essay “ensured that Inkle and Yarico would from then on be seen as an illustration of the evils of slavery” (231). On the other hand, Carminella Biondi considers the *Réflexions sur l’esclavage des nègres* (1781 and 1788) by Condorcet “il primo importante, specifico, articolato saggio scritto in Francia contro la schiavitù negra” (pp. 266-275 of *Ces esclaves sont des hommes, lotta abolizionista e letteratura negrofila nella Francia del Settecento*, 1979, in Bandiera, 1987, 126-127).

⁶ In 1774, John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, upon returning from America publishes his *Thoughts upon Slavery* that will confirm him throughout his life as a “fierce and persistent critic of slavery” notwithstanding his politically moderate views (cf. Mc Calman, 55); for a pertinent discussion of the abolitionist context in Scotland, see Laura Bandiera’s analysis of Mackenzie’s *Julia de Roubigné* (1777) and the “the Martinique interlude” (1987, 122-129).

⁷ Olaudah Equiano mentions having read *Caution and Warning* by Benezet, among other edifying authors; see Sandiford, n.4 to ch. 5, 165. The determining role of Quakers in organizing and diffusing abolitionist propaganda through the practice of “mutual correspondence” dates back to 1675 when the “Meeting for Sufferings” was founded and it was still their Committee that published and actually printed *The Case of our Fellow-Creatures, the oppressed Africans* in 1784 (cf. Briggs, 130-131 and n. 75, 147). According to Margaret Ezell, of the almost 40,000 Quakers existing on British soil in 1660 it was especially the women that became “the most prolific publishers during the seventeenth century” (1993, 85) producing up to 2,500 original titles by 1700 (136). The historical importance of the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 which led to the exile of many French protestants who thus contributed to the rise of a cosmopolitan, enlightened spirit well before the chronological beginning of the Eighteenth century has been stressed by the late Professor Robert Shackleton (1985).

of the French translation by Laplace (1745) of Mrs. Behn's novel (1688) appeared, placing it "among the nine most read English novels in France at the middle of the eighteenth century" (Seeber, 1936, 955). According to Edward Seeber, Laplace's early translation which drew also from Southerne's dramatic adaptation for the theatre in 1695 marks the extent to which "a strong current of English abolitionist thought pass[ed] into France three years before Montesquieu published in his *Esprit des Lois* the first formal and concise arraignment of slavery in the French language" (953).⁸

On the other hand, a recent contribution by Jurgen von Stackelberg establishes a different interpretation of Mrs. Behn's novel by referring to an anonymous text published on the 1735 issue of the *Gentleman's Magazine* and translated by Prévost the same year for his review *Le Pour et Contre*, relating the speech delivered by black chief Moses Bom Saam upon his liberation. Here we find "un plaidoyer bien plus substantiel en faveur des noirs ... [et] une dépréciation fondamentale de la race blanche (ce dont il ne saurait être question dans *Oroonoko*)" (Stackelberg, 1989, 245).⁹ More important still, and we shall shortly see why, "Moses Bom Saam dénonce l'esclavage également au nom du *christianisme*, ce qui apparaît aussi peu chez Mrs Behn que chez son traducteur La Place" (246, my emphasis).¹⁰ Therefore, although Aphra Behn's "attack on slavery and her defense of human rights was 'the first important abolitionist statement in the history of

⁸ Recent scholarship has considerably dwelled on the crucial role played by *Oroonoko* in abolitionism: for Heidi Hutner *O.* is "one of the first works to cry out openly against slavery" and it "remains an important feminist and abolitionist novel" (1992, 49); for Jane Spencer, *O.* is "an important stage in the history of women's quest for literary authorship" (1993, 47), allowing for "similarities between the slave's and the woman's position" (51). The significant link between women, feminism and abolitionism is voiced at one point by Ingénue Saxancour against her imposed husband in Restif de la Bretonne's homonymous novel (1789, incidentally!): "J'étais au gré de ses passions, avec plus de despotisme, que le Colon le plus cruel du Nouveau-Monde, ne dispose d'une Nègresse" (cf. Galli Mastrodonato, 1991, 140-41).

⁹ Laura Bandiera has also acutely observed the "uniqueness" and "l'assoluto anticipo rispetto ai tempi" of Bom Saam's discourse which articulates something new and subversively dangerous to the white dominant classes, "che si estrinseca nel confronto demitizzante con i padroni bianchi, nel rifiuto della passività, nell'incitamento alla rivolta ma anche all'autoformazione e all'autodisciplina" (1987, 126). We must remember, however, that *Oroonoko* himself tries to stir up a rebellion among the slaves in Surinam but is forsaken and put to death by the colonizers: Prévost probably attended one of the dramatic renderings of *O.* at Haymarket Theatre around 1730 (cf. Piva, 1981, 90).

¹⁰ The reliance of eighteenth century British abolitionism on Christian Evangelical ethics is represented by the crucial Parliamentary role played by William Wilberforce for whom "le fondement de la liberté était essentiellement la libération du péché": thus, slavery was for man a "métaphore de son propre esclavage au péché" and emancipation should also result in a general "renouveau moral et spirituel de la nation" (Strugnell, 1989, 1761). On Wilberforce and the "Clapham Sect", see also Deschamps, 188-191.

English literature” (Hutner, 1992, 42), it is within the international web of reception spanning over a century that we must look for the everlasting impact of its message.¹¹

It is then a variegated, composite, cosmopolitan audience, *on both sides of the Atlantic*, that will "receive" in 1789 Olaudah Equiano's *Narrative*, whose "success ... was largely due to the timeliness of its publication, the topicality of its subject matter, and the popularity of its literary form" (Sandiford, 124). But, as we shall see, Equiano's *Narrative* represents also, like Bom Saam's discourse, a radical break in the acceptance of abolitionist ideas by a mature revolutionary reading public and a valid experiment in what K. Sandiford has termed the growth of a "troubling self-consciousness" (126).

Although, at first sight, Equiano's *Narrative* seems to conform exactly to the sort of "Evangelical spiritual autobiography" represented by John Newton's *Authentic Narrative* (1763-64) — a "classic" (Sandiford, 55) of its kind by a former slave-trader converted to Methodism — certain distinctive features stand out. Within a general framework shaping Equiano's *Life* as a "metaphor of a theological journey" (Lowance, Jr., 1990, 67) — from abduction into slavery in his native Nigeria to his manumission in 1766 — there is striking evidence that he conceived a much more elaborate rhetorical plan for ensuring a widespread acceptance of the controversial argument of abolitionism.

In Michael McKeon's *magnum opus* on the *Origins of the English Novel*, I have come across a travel narrative written about 1690, *Adventures by Sea of Edward Coxere*, where the young apprentice-merchant is at one point enslaved by the Turks and "after many trials" converts to Quakerism — which signifies "a subtle and comprehensive rebirth in character and behaviour" (1987, 253). As a result of this ethical capsizing, Edward embarks on a pacific "war" against prejudice which produces in turn oppression, persecution and finally imprisonment at Yarmouth for seven months where he is given "nothing but water", a "sharp trial" indeed at the hands of fellow Christians which makes him wonder at the relative benignity of the "Infidel" Turks, discovering "at home the

¹¹ The February 1749 issue of *The Gentleman's Magazine* reports of a foreign visitor, black "Prince" Sesarakoo, attending a performance of *Oroonoko* at Covent Garden and being struck by "the same distress" (i.e. the treacherous sale of O. into slavery by the white captain); significantly, Inkle and Yarico's "cult" dates from 1734 and Coleman will produce a successful dramatic version of it in 1787, cf. Hulme, 1992, 232, 241).

savagery that once was to be found in exotic travel" (ibid.).¹² If life, then, is to be seen allegorically as "a voyage, beset by raging tempests that persecute the innocent", Edward, because of his new sense of belonging to a "utopian community of like-minded 'friends'", is able to oppose an "inner serenity at the eye of the storm" (254). If, in the last instance, the "world" with its mercantile ruthlessness is nothing short of a "prison", Quakers are "like castaways imprisoned on a desert island" (ibid.), happy to relieve suffering through the solidity of an unswerving counter-culture: *by 1780 no Quaker, in England or America, will own slaves* (Sandiford, 52).

The intriguing tale of Edward Coxere's spiritual awakening — with all its millennial overtones — might be taken as a *model* of what appears simply to be Olaudah Equiano's narration "of an engaging human story" but which is to be read instead as a peculiar quest for the roots of "blackness" in order to recreate ex-novo a blasted "identity" (Sandiford, 125-126). Quakerism, then, as a body of faith but also of writing represents for a black slave such as Equiano the single most effective doctrine capable of mobilizing — through the universalizing pathos of the Enlightenment — antislavery opinion across three continents.¹³

Therefore, the "story of his soul's progress towards salvation", with a keen eye on "the whole audience of Methodist and Calvinist Evangelicals", is aptly joined to "the earliest defense of African social order to be written by an African" (in Sandiford, 132-33). Through the double narratological device of "suffering" and "seafaring" (Ibid.) as exemplified by Coxere's Quaker narrative, Equiano proceeds to tell us the story of his life from the viewpoint of 1789.

¹² Equiano relates his dealings with the Turks in the *Narrative* and comments extensively on them ("I really thought the Turks were in a safer way of salvation than my English neighbours", in Sandiford, 131), ironically "forcing the Europeans to reexamine their prejudices" (ibid.).

¹³ Margaret Ezell has analyzed "early Quaker persecution narratives" written mostly by women and explicitly modelled after the Epistles of Saint Paul; their aim was to "shock" the audience with their argumentative power and their vivid description of atrocities, soliciting faith in the "Inner Light" and the "otherness" of Quaker experience, cf. ch. 5, "Breaking the Seventh Seal: Writings by Early Quaker Women", 1993, 132-165. Sandiford mentions "how the act of converting experience into narrative allows Equiano to invest his past activities with their proper spiritualized value" (133), producing "an intense personal history not unlike those which Saint Paul brought to his work in the early Christian Church" (148), while Angelo Costanzo confirms my approach: "Equiano followed the spiritual autobiographical tradition of his day derived from Augustine and Bunyan and adapted by Puritans and later by his Quaker contemporaries" (1990, 695).

“To my unfortunate origins I owe all my subsequent miseries...”

(*The Horrors of Slavery*, by Robert Wedderburn, 1824)

In the light of what I have said so far, I suggest considering Equiano's *Narrative* as an *Historia calamitatum*, the prose rendering of a spiritual Odyssey steeped in blood, sweat and tears. Like Abelard's long epistle is centered on the terrible "accident" of his castration and the ensuing effort to explicate its theological immanence, so the black slave now liberated and a fighter for abolition explains to his fellow sufferers and a widening white audience how his ordeals resulted nevertheless in a cathartic conversion and the rise of a new awareness.¹⁴

The first and foremost "opposing system" confronting his waking consciousness is the one represented by the white slavers he sees for the first time on board the ship. The parameter is of *total estrangement*: white men seem to belong to "a world of bad spirits"; enslaved blacks fear lest they are "to be eaten by those white men with horrible looks, red faces, and long hair" (*Narr.*, 10-11).¹⁵ The Africanist W.G.L. Randles reports an oral traditional tale describing the first sighting of the Portuguese in the XVth century by the people on the coast of Luanda (I am translating from my Italian edition):

"Our fathers lived comfortably on the plains of Luabala. They had cattle and crops; they had salt mines and banana plantations. Suddenly they saw rising out of the great sea a great ship. This ship had wings which were completely white, shining like blades. Some white men came out of the water and spoke unknown words. Our ancestors took fright, they said they were Vumbi, the ghosts of the dead who had come alive". (1979, 112)

¹⁴ The fascinating story of Abelard's correspondence with Eloisa (1132) has long intrigued me, besides constituting one of the most relevant thematic nuclei of the Eighteenth century (I have consulted Nada Cappelletti Truci's edition of the *Lettere*, Turin 1979); Claire Nouvet has recently proposed an interesting reading of Abelard's mishap: "Victime de cette 'calamité' qu'est la castration, le philosophe porte désormais dans sa chair les traces d'un accident insensé qui le détermine à écrire un récit de ses malheurs destiné à consoler moins l'ami fictif auquel il prétend s'adresser que le malheureux qui l'écrit"; thus, just like slavery is beyond comprehension, A.'s castration "déstabilise la catégorie même du sens" and can be reintegrated within human discourse only when it will be accepted as "une punition divine juste" (1990, 260-261). Sandiford explicitly refers to "the calamity" evoked by Equiano as a rhetorical strategy "informed by the religious self-consciousness of his maturer years" (129, *passim*).

¹⁵ Gilbert Chinard reports a strange tale included in the t. XIII, 1777, of the *Voyages Imaginaires, Naufrage et Aventures de M. Pierre Viaud, capitaine de navire*: after a shipwreck whose only survivors are the captain, his "negro" and a Mme Lacouture, soon all destitute, naked and hungry, the lady decides to kill the negro and eat him, revealing "un réalisme assez atroce" (1970, 425).

The ominous, deadly impact of white colonialism against an "ancient warrior culture" (Mc Keon, 250) will be epitomized, well into the XXth century, by Malcolm X's oxymoron "*white devils*" in his justly celebrated *Autobiography* (1964), just like Alex Haley's *Kunta Kinte* epic of a common ancestry for Afro-Americans seems to replay before our eyes the very words used by Olaudah Equiano to describe how slaves were stacked as "cargo" under the ship's hold:

The closeness of the space, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. This produced copious perspirations, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died--thus falling victims to the improvident avarice, as I may call it, of their purchasers. This wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains, now become insupportable, and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable. (*Narr.*, 11-12)

The eighteenth century audience recognized immediately the shocking *Brookes* drawings by Clarkson¹⁶ and certainly remembered the 1783 "scandalous Zong case, in which 132 African slaves were willfully drowned at sea",¹⁷ just as they responded to another *common-place* of abolitionist sensibility, the "frequency of suicide among dejected slaves" (Seeber, 958), for example when Equiano, on board the ship, describes "preferring death to such a life of misery" (*Narr.*, 12). Conforming, nevertheless, to the ethical parable of salvation, Olaudah's narrative follows closely the pattern of redemption through suffering, touching the bottom of his ordeal in the West Indies—"...every part of the world I had hitherto been in, seemed a paradise in comparison" (*Narr.*, 25)—and undergoing another "sharp trial" in Georgia where he is left "near dead" from a beating, while "lawyers ... could do nothing for me as I was a negro" (*Narr.*, 29-30).

Some of the sharpest tones of protest against slavery are expressed by Equiano when he relates on the "moral wilderness" (Sandiford, 136) of the West Indies and the American South. Although he relies strongly on "eyewitness" reports (137), it is to be

¹⁶ During Parliamentary debate on abolition early in 1789, Clarkson decides to draw the vertical section of a middle-sized slave ship, the *Brookes*, measuring 100 feet by 23 width and 10 depth (33 m. by 8 m. by 3 m.), filled with its cargo of 454 slaves stacked according to Dolben's proposal which was in itself an improvement: "The *Brookes* drawing was widely diffused among the public, in England and in France, and it became a powerful argument against the slave trade. After almost two centuries its effect is still overwhelming although far from matching the horror of reality" (Deschamps, 191, my translation).

¹⁷ It was Equiano himself who brought news of the Zong case to Granville Sharp, as is shown from an entry in his diary for 19 March 1783 (Sandiford, 141).

reasonably assumed that he also drew heavily from abolitionist literature and propaganda. In 1695 the Père Labat had mentioned in his *Voyage aux Isles de l'Amérique* the case of the black slave shut up in an iron cage with birds of prey feasting on his flesh, an episode that will be reproduced in various prints, engravings and poems (Pluchon, 1984, 167). While taken to Virginia after abduction in his native Africa, young Equiano witnesses the use of the “iron muzzle” on a slave woman:

...when I came into the room ... I was very much affrighted at some things I saw, and the more so as I had seen a black woman slave as I came through the house, who was cooking the dinner, and the poor creature was cruelly loaded with various kinds of iron machines; she had one particularly on her head, which locked her mouth so fast that she could scarcely speak; and could not eat nor drink. I was much astonished and shocked at this contrivance, which I afterwards learned was called the iron muzzle. (*Narr.*, 14)

In describing the French colony of Santo Domingo, where in 1791 black slaves will revolt under the leadership of Toussaint Louverture, Pierre Pluchon remarks that “la société antillaise, que certains rêvent comme d’un paradis, est assimilée ici à une véritable jungle” (1984, 180).¹⁸ Besides the use of muzzles, dented collars and insects or salt poured over open wounds, slaves, especially the women often falsely accused of sorcery,¹⁹ are repeatedly tortured and maimed by masters and overseers, those “human butchers” (*Narr.*, 23), who delight in “sado-racisme”(167): a planter is known for his “habit” of tearing to pieces the slaves with his teeth (175).

Ever since the promulgation of the “Code Noir” in 1685 which established that “le Nègre qui frappera un Blanc sera pendu et rompu vif en cas de mort du Blanc” (182), disparity in treatment for the same “crimes” is what mostly appals abolitionists: “I

¹⁸ Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s *Paul et Virginie* (1788) should certainly attract more critical attention as an example of “colonial novel” than it has received: in Simon Davies’s well informed assessment study we are reminded that B. “was one of the rare champions of the abolition of slavery who had actually witnessed it” (1994, 243) but then all the studies reviewed seem to focus exclusively on the formal and stylistic features of the text leaving on the side a few passing remarks on the existence of “positive” black characters. I would like to draw attention to the sharp critique of colonialism voiced by B. himself in the “Préambule” to *P & V* with a clearly ironic and devastating intent: “... Ces temps anciens, si vantés pour leur innocence et leurs vertus héroïques, ne sont que des temps de crimes et d’erreurs dont la plupart, pour notre bonheur, n’existent plus. L’absurde idolâtrie, la magie, les sorts, les oracles, le culte des démons, les sacrifices humains, l’anthropophagie, les guerres permanentes, les incendies, les famines, l’esclavage, la polygamie, l’inceste, le mutilation des hommes, les droits de naufrage, les droits d’aubaine, etc., désolaient alors nos malheureuses contrées et sont relégués aujourd’hui sur les côtes de l’Afrique inhospitalière, ou dans les sombres forêts de l’Amérique” (ed. R. Mauzi, Paris, Garnier, 1966, 65).

¹⁹ The mulatto Robert Wedderburn, born in Jamaica of a white planter and an African slave woman, Rosanna, narrates in *The Horrors of Slavery* (1824) that he has assisted to the flogging of his maternal grand-mother unjustly accused of being a powerful sorceress capable of poisoning her master; this episode laid bare the “capriciousness and brutality of European slave owners” (Mc Calman, 1988, 53).

have seen [in Montserrat] a negro man staked to the ground, and cut most shockingly, and then his ears cut off bit by bit, because he had been connected with a white woman, who was a common prostitute”, while it was a common practice for whites to “commit violent depredations on the chastity of the female slaves” (*Narr.*, 23). In 1708 a white woman who had begotten three children from the black slave Jeannot is accused of adultery by her husband: he will be tortured, maimed and then put to death, while she is sent to a convent in France (Pluchon, 218). And again, rebellion is punished in an exemplary manner: in 1741 the leader of a group of slaves who had murdered their master “aura les ‘cuisses, bras et gras de jambes travaillées d’un fer chaud et dans chacune des dites plaies sera versé du plomb fondu, et ensuite jeté vif au feu’. Les complices seront rompus vifs, puis brûlés” (Pluchon, 223).²⁰ A document of 1785 relates of a “cachot [qui] a été défoncé pour en faire sortir un Nègre qui avait les fers aux pieds et le carcan au col” (236), another stock image of abolitionist literature.

Finding words for relating such horrors, such “crimes against humanity” (Sandiford, 61), must not have been easy for a former slave, just like Abelard found it shameful but necessary to mention the violence that had been done to him. The turning point in Equiano's spiritual autobiography and the unmistakable evidence of his rising black consciousness is represented by the episode of the sudden treachery of his master, accusing him of being a runaway and threatening to sell him:

The ship was up about half an hour, when my master ordered the barge to be manned; and all in an instant, without having before given me the least reason to suspect any thing of the matter, he forced me into the barge, saying, I was going to leave him, but he would take care I should not. I was so struck with the unexpectedness of this proceeding, that for some time I did not make a reply, only I made an offer to go for my books and chest of clothes, but he swore I should not move out of his sight, and if I did, he would cut my throat, at the same time taking his hanger. (*Narr.*, 19)

There is, at this very point, a sort of natural cohesion between the revolutionary dictate of the "rights of man" and Equiano's abolitionist agitation:

'...I have been baptized, and by the laws of the land no man has a right to sell me.' And I added that I had heard a lawyer and others at different times tell my master so. (*Ibid.*)

²⁰ Oroonoko's death must be just as exemplary: “First he is publicly whipped, and later, at the same spot, his body cut to pieces - quarters to be exact - and the ‘frightful Spectacles of a mangled King’ are parceled out to the plantations” (Hutner, 1992, 47).

Again, it is quite easy to see "through" the text and recognize the celebrated Somerset case that set new rights in 1769 for baptized blacks in England,²¹ just like the moment of the sale developed as a *treachery* on the part of the white master can be taken as the most symbolically charged instance of the whole *Narrative*. In the tale of Inkle and Yarico it is precisely "the moment of the sale" that is "the climax to the story"—when the English youth Inkle sells into slavery in Barbados his black lover Yarico who had saved him after a shipwreck— and rendered it "so amenable to the anti-slavery movement" (Hulme, 1992, 240).

Equiano's *historia calamitatum* is then consciously constructed so that his Quaker narrative of persecution—"...while I thus went on, filled with the thoughts of freedom, and resisiting oppression as well as I was able..." (27)— should lead to conversion and the final reward, his emancipation. It will be Mr. Robert King, Equiano's master in the Barbados, who, by being a Quaker —"he possessed a most amiable disposition and temper, and was very charitable and humane" (25)— enables the black slave, through industrious trade, to finally emancipate himself in 1766.

Equiano's *Narrative* must be seen as a success story in the dark recesses of European civilization and a step forward for all humanity. The audience that read it enthusiastically²² is the same audience that led to the historic vote for Abolition of the slave trade by the French National Assembly on 4 February 1794 and the passing of the bill on British Abolition on the "great night" of 23 February 1807, 283 votes for, 6 against: tears were streaming down Wilberforce's face while Clarkson exclaimed, "We have lived to see this day" (Deschamps, 211). Equiano's contact in 1785 with the "powerful" Quaker Committee for Abolition (Sandiford, 142) probably changed his life and made him aware of the need for militant, unrelenting agitation against the slave trade while at the same time conforming to an ideal of spiritual and humane rectitude and perseverance in the face of oppression. The "calamities" he had undergone as a slave are consciously rewritten as an adaptation of Saint Paul's ordeals who, like him, had been

²¹ Granville Sharp defended first the case of the black slave Jonathan Strong who had been beaten, maimed and thrown on the streets by his master, a planter from Barbados David Lisle. Strong is cured by William Sharp but is found by Lisle who constrains and sells him again for 30 pounds; Granville succeeds in freeing him and decides to appeal his case together with that of another slave called Somerset to the Court that is finally compelled in 1769 to rule in favor of blacks who had been baptized and thus aquired a free status on British soil (Deschamps, 182; see also Sandiford, 66). The case of black slaves Pampy and Julienne against their jewish master Mendès France has been admirably reconstructed by Pierre Pluchon: they were freed in 1776 together with other slaves who lived on French soil (257, *passim*).

²² John Wesley had passages from the *Narrative* read to him on his deathbed (cf. Sandiford, 134).

“shipwrecked several times, scourged, arrested, and imprisoned” (Sandiford, 147). The roots of black consciousness are therefore strongly embedded within the abolitionist movement of the Eighteenth century, a composite, heterogenous, religious and secular, international, multiracial and gendered²³ movement of opinion that cut across and finally destroyed history’s most shameful plight.

I must now come to my closing remarks and I would like to end where I started. Lavallée’s Itanoko, trusting a white captain, "s'endort dans le bateau pour se réveiller enchainé"; he then philosophizes to the captain's young son:

"Si les richesses qui portent avec elles le plaisir si doux à soulager, n'ont fait que vous endurcir; si les sciences et les arts, dont l'objet est d'éclairer et de polir les hommes, n'ont fait qu'accroître votre orgueil; si votre religion si douce, si compatissante, n'a point amolli vos coeurs de pierre, il falloit que vous fussiez parmi les hommes la race la plus dégénérée". (Cit. in Cook, 1988, 225)

A strong, unambiguous proposal to be put in the mouth of a black man by a representative of the white privileged classes! No doubt, Enlightenment values are still alive and well on the verge of the third millennium.

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²³ Mary Wollstonecraft herself fustigated her countrymen’s false sentimental conscience in regard to slavery: “Where is the dignity, the infallibility, in the fair ladies, whom ... the captive negroes curse in all the agony of bodily pain, for the unheard of tortures they invent?” (*A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, 1790, in Todd, 1986, 132).

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